

November 24, 2006

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your interest in our NEH faculty seminar, *Masters of Prose: Johnson, Lincoln, and Churchill*, which will take place at Boston University from **July 9 to July 27, 2007**. The seminar will be an opportunity to focus on key works of three of the greatest masters of the written and spoken word in English: Samuel Johnson, Abraham Lincoln, and Winston Churchill. We are looking forward to this unusual opportunity to bring people together who are interested in a wide range of topics related to the prose of one or more of these figures, especially in the context of close study and comparison of the written and spoken words of all three. *We welcome applicants who are experienced scholars in these areas as well as those who are turning to these subjects for the first time.* Tenure-track and tenured faculty, part-time and adjunct faculty, as well as independent scholars are welcome to apply. (Please note that NEH rules stipulate that no more than two NEH seminars or institutes can be applied to in any given year.)

We believe that the seminar will be a unique and stimulating occasion for comparative study and interdisciplinary discussion of these great and in some ways neglected figures. By combining Johnson, Lincoln, and Churchill in one seminar, we will benefit from discussion not only of their achievements as writers *and* speakers, but also from the opportunity to consider 1) the imaginative, stylistic, and moral resources they draw upon in their greatest persuasive prose, 2) the vital *interaction* of each man's speaking and writing in the public sphere, 3) the significant points of comparison that emerge from the study of each man's prose in proximity with the others', and finally, 4) the relation between these aspects of speaking and writing and each man's unsurpassed ability to engage and sometimes overcome, with deeply persuasive language, what seem to be overwhelming circumstances.

We will look for opportunities to connect and synthesize our study of these subjects, and we will consider, as well, their implications for the classroom. We believe the seminar will be a timely and productive way to question and deepen our understanding of the humanities.

At a time when traditional understandings of human nature, eloquence, and the power of well-expressed ideas seem to be disintegrating, we will look at the extent to which the greatest prose of these men manifests a common and persistent inheritance of the arts and practices of verbal persuasion. In the process, we will consider the viability of these men's understandings of human nature and the power of ideas, and the ways in which those understandings underpin their eloquence. Our seminar will create a vantage point from which we can reassess those achievements, and in the process reconsider scholarly approaches that have neglected or underestimated them and their value to the study of the humanities.

## Leaders

Each week will be devoted to one of the major figures, and will be led by an expert in that author's prose: Bruce Redford (BU) on Johnson, John Briggs (UC Riverside) on Lincoln, and Paul Alkon (USC) on Churchill.

The seminar's director, John Briggs, is the author of two books on nature of persuasion in the works of masters of English prose. The first, *Francis Bacon and the Rhetoric of Nature* (winner of Harvard University Press's Wilson Prize, 1989), is a study of Bacon's ideas of science, rhetoric, and the traditional philosophical/religious grounds for persuasion. The second is *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered* (Johns Hopkins, 2005), an extensive close reading of Lincoln's pre-presidential and presidential speeches that studies the grounds of persuasion in Lincoln's eloquent ideas of human nature, political persuasion, necessity, and the principles of the American founding. Briggs is the winner of the UC Riverside Distinguished Teaching Award.

Our Samuel Johnson scholar, Bruce Redford, of Boston University, the leading expert on Johnson's letters, and the editor of the authoritative *Life of Johnson* (volume 2), *The Letters of Samuel Johnson* (five volumes, Princeton, 1992-94), and *Boswell's Life of Johnson, An Edition of the Original Manuscript, Volume II* (Yale, 1998). His interest in the intersection of public and private worlds in Johnson's life and writings is evident in: *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (University of Chicago, 1986), and *Designing the "Life of Johnson"* (Oxford, 2002), a publication of the Lyell Lecturers at Oxford University.

The seminar's Churchill scholar, Paul Alkon, is also the author of a standard work on Johnson's moral reasoning. He has recently published *Winston Churchill's Imagination* (Bucknell, 2006), a study of how Churchill deploys the words and ideas that are the hallmarks of his political and literary imagination. Alkon is a member of the Churchill Center's international Board of Academic Advisers. Currently the Leo S. Bing Professor of English and American Literature at the University of Southern California, he is the author of *Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline* (Northwestern, 1967), *Defoe and Fictional Time* (Georgia, 1979), and several books on futuristic fiction: *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* ([winner of an NEH press grant and the Eaton Award] Georgia, 1987) and *Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology*, Routledge, 2002). His publications have won two USC Phi Kappa Phi Faculty Awards. In 1983 he was the winner of a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has been president of the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies (1989-90).

## General Schedule:

Our schedule will be intensive, full of opportunities for discussion and consultation, and conducive to independent work. We will meet in seminar each weekday morning, Monday through Friday, from 9:00-12:00. Most of these meetings will be opportunities for extensive discussion. After the morning meetings, we will have the opportunity to reconvene Monday through Thursday for an informal lunch in the Student Village dining hall. Discussion leaders will be available for individual conferences Monday through

Thursday afternoons. There will also be a number of evening meetings for films, readings, and participants' informal presentations of ongoing research. These activities will be complemented by the configuration of accommodations on the BU campus, where meeting space, accommodations, and dining services will be close to one another, and thus conducive to interaction.

### **Expectations and Projects**

Participants will be expected to attend regularly, engage in the scholarly exchange, and share some aspect of their relevant research activity by means of a brief presentation (around fifteen minutes, followed by discussion) at one of the evening meetings. We will also assume that by the time we begin meeting in July participants will be familiar with several books we will mail to them in April.

### **Detailed Schedule:**

After an introductory discussion of questions and issues (led by the seminar's director, John Briggs), we will move to a consideration of key texts by Samuel Johnson. The discussions will examine the relation of the spoken and written word in some of Johnson's most representative works. The morning sessions for this portion of the seminar will be led by Bruce Redford. In order to get a sense of the range of his achievements in prose while concentrating on specific works, we will begin with Johnson the essayist. After engaging selections from the *Rambler* and the *Idler*, we will move to Johnson the editor, lexicographer, and polemicist by discussing the prefaces to the *Dictionary* and *Shakespeare*, and then "Taxation no Tyranny." Johnson the biographer will enter last, with the help of selections from the *Lives of the Poets*. In all these discussions we will be concerned with Johnson's preoccupation with fusing matter and manner for persuasive didactic purposes. An important framing text for these discussions, in addition to our general use of Bruce Redford's scholarship, will be Paul Alkon's *Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline*. Alkon's book will help set the stage for Alkon's leading of the morning discussions on Churchill later in the seminar.

In the second week we will turn to Lincoln, with the idea of contributing to the resuscitation of high and broadly appealing oratory as a branch of the English and American prose tradition. Before moving into the close reading of some of Lincoln's speeches, this part of the seminar will pay attention to connecting Lincoln to some aspects of the eighteenth-century legacy that Samuel Johnson helped form. The focal topic will be Lincoln's ideas of human nature, providence, and necessity, and their relation to his understanding and practice of persuasion. Beginning with close readings of some widely ignored yet striking early speeches (the Lyceum Address and the Temperance Address), we will pass on to House Divided Speech and the Cooper Union Address, pausing to take in the Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions and the Milwaukee Address on agriculture and self-government. We will end with the First Inaugural, the Gettysburg Address, and the Second Inaugural. The discussion will include side trips into "The Meditation on the Divine Will," the letter to Mrs. Bixby, and selected passages of high interest in other works. The primary framing text for this portion of the seminar will

be Briggs's *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*, which stresses the importance of reading Lincoln's texts as layered interactions of form and substance that interact with other speeches and communicate persuasive understandings of complex ideas. Two speakers (James Engell of Harvard and Glen Thurow of the University of Dallas) will help us examine Lincoln's debt to eighteenth-century ideas.

The third segment of the seminar, in which the Churchill and Johnson scholar Paul Alkon will take a leading role, will lead up to Churchill's oratory just before and during the Battle of Britain. Our general concern throughout these sessions will be Churchill's understanding and practice of the statesman's art, particularly with regard to his ability to connect past and present in forms of prose that somehow forecast and help bring about victory over seemingly impossible odds. As the winner of the 1953 Nobel Prize for literature, won for "his mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values," Churchill demands to be read in multiple dimensions. We will begin with the seminal *My Early Life*, paired with Stuart Ball's brief and reliable biography, *Winston Churchill*, and Martin Gilbert's *In Search of Churchill*. Part 2 will focus on selected speeches from the years 1936 to 1941, along with Isaiah Berlin's brief yet unsurpassed essay "A Man of First Principles: Churchill in 1940." For historical background, we will make use of Stephen Bungay's *The Most Dangerous Enemy: A History of the Battle of Britain* as well as a superb piece of primary evidence from a Churchill ally: Air Chief Marshal Dowding. His letter, which compactly and lucidly characterizes Britain's perilous situation just before the battle was to begin, is a study in masterful yet compelling understatement that enriches our understanding of Churchill's style. In the last phase of these discussions we will move to Churchill's biographical and historical writings (selections from *Great Contemporaries* and *Thoughts and Adventures*), expanding our consideration of Churchill's embodiment of statesmanship in forms of oratory that recover and project Britain's powers of memory, resolution, and hope. For purposes of background and discussion, we will devote one evening to the recent PBS/BBC film on the Battle of Britain. We will make use as well of recordings of some of Churchill's speeches.

Besides leading the discussion of Lincoln, the seminar's director, John Briggs, will facilitate a number of sessions each week throughout the seminar for the purpose of identifying and examining bridging issues, questions, and textual resources that look beyond the discussion of a particular author. We will look at opportunities for synthesis and for discovering illuminating distinctions between authors. We will also look ahead, toward the formulation of topics for further research and discussion.

### **Individual Conferences:**

Each participant will have two formal conference appointments, one with the seminar director and one with the co-directors.

**Informal Outings:**

There will be informal opportunities for groups to explore the Boston area, including Concord, where there are a number of sites evocative of the Age of Johnson, the American Revolution, and the arts of eloquent expression.

**Academic Resources:**

Each participant will be appointed as a Visiting Scholar in the University Professor Program, which will grant them an ID card and the privilege of using the University libraries as well as receiving a 10% discount at Barnes and Noble at Boston University bookstore. The Student Village is equipped with Ethernet service. Printers are available in the campus's IT office.

**Stipends:**

Each participant will receive \$2400. A check for two thirds the total (minus housing and board costs that participants give their permission to have transferred to BU to secure their living space and meal plan) will be available on the first day of the seminar. The remaining third (minus whatever housing and board costs remain) will be paid at the end of the third week.

**Housing:**

One of our goals is to stimulate collegial interchange and optimize participants' opportunities to use the resources of BU and the seminar itself. Although it is possible for participants to arrange their own housing off campus, we strongly recommend that they plan to stay on campus, in the new high-rise Student Village where bedrooms in suites with kitchens, living rooms, and bathrooms are available for \$56 per night per person (\$1120 for twenty nights). Floor plans and other information are available at [www.bu.edu/studentvillage/](http://www.bu.edu/studentvillage/). Each suite contains multiple bedrooms. Suites will be available to be shared with other seminar participants.

The Student Village is next door to an even newer Fitness and Recreation Center where interested participants can buy short term memberships. The rooms are equipped with Ethernet, but not telephone service.

**Meals:**

We are planning for seminar members to lunch together during the week, and we hope that most members will wish to join one another for dinner as well. So that our seminar is given access to the dining service, everyone in the seminar must commit to a board plan. Some may choose a plan that covers one meal; others may prefer to commit to two or three. The price of an individual breakfast is \$5.95; of a lunch \$7.95; of a dinner \$10.15. Plans must be chosen in advance, and participants will be asked to allow us to transfer a portion of their stipend to BU for their chosen plan. Additional meals can of

course be purchased on a day-by-day basis.

### **Parking:**

If participants plan to drive and need an overnight parking pass, the cost of purchasing one is \$10 per night, or \$40 for 7 nights.

### **Applications:**

**Again, we stress our interest in applications from experienced scholars in our subject matter *as well as those who are just beginning to work in these areas.* Although the application process is somewhat arduous and involves a number of steps, please keep in mind that we welcome applications from both groups.**

A completed application consists of three copies of the following collated items:

- the completed application cover sheet (to be filled out online at [http://www.neh.gov/online/education/participants/.](http://www.neh.gov/online/education/participants/)) NEH guidelines ask you to be sure to **click on the “submit” button**. Print out the cover sheet and add it to your application package.
- a detailed resume (not to exceed five pages)
- an application essay of four double-spaced pages. The NEH guidelines say, “This essay should include any relevant personal and academic information. It should address reasons for applying, the applicant’s interest, both academic and personal, in the subject to be studied; qualifications and experiences that equip the applicant to do the work of the seminar or institute and to make a contribution to a learning community; a statement of what the applicant wants to accomplish by participating; and the relation of the project to the applicant’s professional responsibilities.”
- two letters of recommendation, which, according to NEH guidelines, should each be “written by someone familiar with the applicant’s professional accomplishments or promise, interest, and ability to contribute to and benefit from participation in the seminar.” The letters should “specifically address these issues.” The guidelines add that “[l]etters from colleagues who know the applicant’s teaching and from those outside the applicant’s institution who know his or her scholarship are often more useful than letters from college or university administrators. References should be provided with the director’s description of the seminar and the applicant’s essay. If an applicant has previously participated in an NEH summer seminar or institute, a recommendation from the director or lead scholar of that program would be useful.” Applicants should ask their referees “to sign their name across the seal on the back of the envelope containing their letter, and enclose the letters with [their] application.”

Your completed application should be postmarked no later than March 1, 2007, and should be addressed as follows:

NEH Seminar  
c/o John Briggs  
Department of English  
University of California, Riverside  
Riverside, CA 92521

One final word from the NEH guidelines: “Successful applicants will be notified of their selection on April 2, and they will have until April 15 to accept or decline the offer. Applicants who will not be home during the notification period are advised to provide an address and phone number where they can be reached. No information on the status of applications will be available prior to the official notification period.”

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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