

## The Mall of America, Through the Looking Glass

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By Nathan Hensley

My English 205 students and I spent the fall semester immersed in what goes by the name of theory: for us, that meant tracing “the problem of art” through Plato and Kant to queer theory and deconstruction, *Modern Family*, John Cage, and “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Does art liberate us, or hold us down? We were led furthest down the rabbit hole, I think, by masters of dialectical method like Hegel, Marx, and Theodor Adorno. In their inverted worlds, every idea is the seed of its own cancellation, nothing is what it seems, and the critic’s task is to plunge beyond

appearances to the paradoxical motors of contemporary life. It was Adorno’s critique of old-fashioned rationality that gave us something like a mantra for the term, our class bumper sticker. “The wholly enlightened earth,” he said, “is radiant with triumphant calamity.”

That was in 1944. A thousand years later, on December 9, 2010, the members of “Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory: The Problem of Art” piled into a repurposed school-bus to find out if he was right. Our pilgrimage led us to the largest indoor shopping facility in the Midwest, the Mall

of America®. It would be our culminating field trip and a kind of road test for many of the ideas we’d been tracing. What awaited us at the end of that short, bumpy drive? A cataclysmic theater of consumerism? A shrine to capitalism run amok? A sprawling monument to the me-first logic of postmillennial America? All of those things. But not even Adorno’s titanic pessimism—or our own cultivated skepticism—could smother our excitement (or at least mine?) at the prospect of visiting this cathedral of modern commodity culture.

We were met by Mall of America®

## One Good Bacon

Adam Louis Troidahl '09

“My grandpa is always happy after he has a good Speck,” Jonas proudly declared. Jonas, a bold twelve-year-old with a knack for English beyond his years and a mild behavioral problem, was a student of mine last year. He and his buddies constituted the rambunctious corner of the room

in my favorite class, and he looked much as you’d expect an alpine pre-teen to look – tall, pale, and very blond. His observations and off-hand quips were usually made in a desperate attempt for attention. They were, however, always in English, or at least mostly in English, so I couldn’t really knock him for

it. Getting my students to speak in English, after all, is sort of my job.

Upon graduating from Macalester I knew I wanted to come back to Austria, where I had studied abroad the spring of my junior year.

(Cont. Page 4)





Hensley's Class, in front of the El Círculo del Cielo Ferris Wheel with their MOA shopping bags.

*"Each year more people shop at the Mall than live in the nation of Canada."*

(Cont. from Page 1)

tourism representative Romy Ecker, who greeted us with official MOA shopping bags and coupon books worth \$5,000. ("You have to spend \$1,000 to save \$5,000," she said.) We also received certificates for a free amusement park ride, which later came in handy. As our tour began, someone stepped from a kiosk to sell us a magic trick. We declined, but a kind of enchantment built as we made our way through the Mall's four distinct "environments" – each wing, we learned, was designed to evoke a different set of architectural associations, from "a walk in a park" to "European train station." Romy disclosed staggering facts: that it costs \$10,000 a month to rent a kiosk; that the mall houses a high school and a wedding chapel, both fully operational; that the single barrier to living there full-time, without ever leaving, was, Romy said, that "there's no bank"; and that the mall is entirely unheated, but for the physical energy generated by the 40 million human bodies circulating through it every year, spending, on aver-

## Hensley Cont.

age, \$162 per visit. Each year more people shop at the Mall than live in the nation of Canada.

As we pondered these imponderables, our eyes were drawn to the unlikely beauty of the place. Charlie pointed out the massive Lego sculptures, hulking above us in multi-ton forms, helicopter and superhero. In the "Italian Piazza" I noticed the lights: cascading chandeliers whose strings of tiny crystals grabbed light and split it a hundred different ways—slices of fragile brilliance shimmering through the void. Was this the radiance Adorno referenced?

We said goodbye to Romy, and used our free tickets to board a themed roller coaster, which took us face-to-face with the Mall's glass ceiling and death—before plunging us at a hundred miles an hour back to earth. At the food court we used Crichtett Funds to buy Orange Juliuses and a pizza, retiring to a table for our last project: a collective reading of Walter Benjamin's dazzling, cryptic essay inspired by the early malls of Europe, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century." Over gooey slices we recited Benja-

min's fragments into the air, eleven pages containing worlds. I want to thank the Crichtett Fund, the English Department, Romy, and most of all my students for a transformative experience, one I'll never forget. But I'll let Benjamin speak last:

*From this [capitalist] epoch derive the arcades [i.e. early malls] and interiors, the exhibition halls and panoramas. They are residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its own end within itself [...]. With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.*

## What are we reading?

Delia Sie's '13 Top 5

1. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*
2. Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth*
3. Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*
4. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*
5. Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic*



Emma Colon '12

*Blood Dazzler* by Patricia Smith



# 2011 ACTC ENGLISH MAJORS' CONFERENCE

## The Literary Absolute

Are the humanities a thing of the past? When the future of English elsewhere seems in question, we celebrate the vitality of literary studies. This day long conference showcases the best English has to offer, featuring work in five categories by selected English majors from Associated Colleges of the Twin Cities

Critical. Creative. Interdisciplinary.  
Featuring nominated English majors from:

Augsburg College  
Hamline University  
Macalester College  
St. Catherine University  
University of St. Thomas

American Literature \* British Literature \* world & Multicultural Literature  
Literary theory & Film Studies \* Creative Writing

## Macalester College

Friday, February 18, 2011

1:30 pm

Weyerhauser boardroom

Details: [www.macalester.edu/english](http://www.macalester.edu/english)  
Questions: [nhensley@macalester.edu](mailto:nhensley@macalester.edu)

"[Literature] can alone become the mirror of the circumambient world, an image of the age. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognizes as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself."

-F. Schlegel, Athenaeum Fragments

## James Cihlar

The English Department welcomes James Cihlar, author of *Undoing*, as a visiting professor of Creative Writing.

Cihlar is a recipient of a Minnesota Arts Board Fellowship for Poetry, and his work has appeared in publications including *Prime Number Magazine* and the digital anthology *Two Weeks* (<http://linebreak.org/two-weeks/>). A former instructor at the University of Minne-

sota and at the University of Wisconsin, Cihlar's areas of study include Nineteenth Century British Literature, Medieval Literature, and GLBT Literature. He teaches an Introduction to Creative Writing course this spring and will read from his chapbook, *Metaphysical Bailout*, at ArtStart Gallery in March.



Look for details of Cihlar's reading at ArtStart in the March Waverly!

## Troldahl Cont.

*Cont. from page 1)*

Fearing that all Fulbright application requests for the big city would immediately be thrown out, I decided against specifying a location. As a result, for the first year of my Fulbright I was placed in what most Americans would consider Heidi country, the alpine crux of the German speaking world. There, four nations – Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the Costco parking lot-sized Principality of Liechtenstein – come together in a magnificent setting. Vorarlberg, where I taught, is the westernmost province of Austria, situated on the furthest precipice of the country's long panhandle. Its connection to the rest of Austria is culturally, linguistically,

and geographically tentative, reflective of the previously impassable Arlberg Mountain range that lies between it and the neighboring province of Tirol.

The people of Vorarlberg are largely introverts; their unique dialect is incomprehensible to even other Austrians and consequently very few ever leave the region. Like many largely rural communities, the importance of the extended family dominates. As I both taught at the local schools and ran my errands – running to the bank, grocery shopping, going to the post office – I began to feel as if I too were part of the larger familial fabric in the town of 30,000 where I lived. At my favorite café, the Swiss-born

waitress knew my order by heart, and always remembered to put extra ice cubes in my white wine spritzers. At the grocery store next to my house they carded me until one cashier finally remembered me as “the American guy.” Just like in a 1950s sitcom or a Sinclair Lewis novel, my students' parents worked at the bank, held down the reception of the local hotel, or owned the local watering hole. Jonas' dad owned the hippest clothing store downtown. One day, my students tried to set me up with one of the girls who worked there. “Has you a girlfriend?” Jonas queried one day. “No,” I said. “Then I take you to her.” Like an episode of *Cheers*, I felt as if everybody knew my name.

*(Cont. on next page)*

*“As I both taught at the local schools and ran my errands – running to the bank, grocery shopping, going to the post office – I began to feel as if I too were part of the larger familial fabric in the town of 30,000 where I lived.”*



I have moved east for the second year of my fellowship, away from Jonas and the echoing cow bells, to the capital Vienna. I spent the majority of my study abroad here, in conjunction with Macalester's own German Study Abroad Program. This Twin-Cities-sized baroque capital sparkles with the grandeur of Paris while managing to maintain a homey, neighborhood feel. Though my classrooms no longer boast sweeping views of snow-capped mountain peaks, I rather enjoy being on the pulse of the cultural and urban beat of Austria. On any given night there are performances at three major opera houses, numerous classical concert venues, and countless publically subsidized theaters. From the formerly royal to the avant-garde, high culture beckons you day and night. The ads you see around town, on bus stops and on billboards, are much more likely to feature the bust of a Rodin or the pen stroke of Picasso than the glistening new burger now offered at McDonald's.

*Speck*, the thing that makes Jonas' grandfather happy, means bacon in German. Over the last two years, much of my life has been carried out in this weird hybrid of English and German. If you have a sweet tooth, you are a *snacking cat*; when you commute, you *drive with* the bus; and when the conductor asks to see your ticket, you have been *controlled*. My expat friends and I have even replaced the *right?* at the end of our uncertain declarations with the German *or*, as in "We're going to the movies tonight, or?" Much like "a good bacon," you also say "a soup" in German. This raises the question, "Where does one soup end and another begin?"

I teach at Vienna's teacher-training college. Here, unlike in the United States, only high-school-level teachers must earn a proper university degree. To become an elementary or middle school teacher, you end up at the teacher-training college. One of the greatest ironies of my job is that I myself do not hold a formal teaching license, but I earn my living teaching people how to be good teachers. With some quick on the job training and a knack for thinking on my feet, which was honed through Macalester English courses, where I would often speak at length about a novel as if I had actually read it, things have gone very well. I am often put at ease when

beginning something new knowing that, because I went to Macalester College, I can pretty much do anything.

Last week I asked a group of my college students to translate Jonas' infamous sentence. These particular students are studying to become the middle school teachers who will one day teach future Jonases. Together, we came up with "my grandpa enjoys quality bacon." To be honest, I still like Jonas' version better. I make a habit now of writing down some of the most memorable quotes that I hear in the classroom. One day last April, after I had schlepped American-style pancakes to school, Jonas emphatically affirmed—mouth full—that, "Adam, you are our God now!"

And they say teaching is thankless work.

Adam Troidahl ('09) currently resides in Vienna, Austria, and blogs about his adventures at <http://unschuldigweisefromm.tumblr.com>



## English Honors Society

Alpha Rho Theta is Macalester's chapter of the international English Honors Society Sigma Tao Delta. Membership, determined by a major's cumulative GPA, perks up a resume and offers connections into national and international opportunities for internships, scholarships and publishing your work. You can also advertise your membership with a really classy pin and certificate! Events hosted by Alpha Rho Theta are open

to all students, majors and non-majors alike. In our first year, we have organized a "Sounds Like Shakespeare" movie series, hosted a reading of senior Creative Writing works and distributed many classy pins.

Marissa Bianco, Secretary-at-large, and Natalie Owens-Pike are looking for members to help organize events. We also need a Secretary to fill Marissa's position while she is

away from campus this spring. Email [nowenspi@macalester.edu](mailto:nowenspi@macalester.edu) if you're interested!

Look for us this Spring- announcing membership with an induction ceremony and dinner, hosting our 2nd annual Creative Writing senior seminar reading, and more "Sounds Like Shakespeare" movie nights!

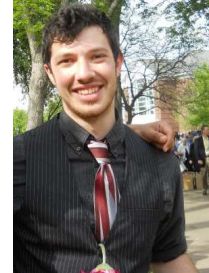
# Student News



Natalie Owens-Pike '11

Congratulations to Natalie Owens-Pike, senior English major, who has received a job at Teach for America! Starting in June, she will be teaching Spanish in the Mississippi Delta; it's a two year gig. Good luck Natalie!

Ben Voigt '10 English major and research assistant to Professor Kristin Naca has been accepted into the University of Alabama's MFA program. Congratulations, Ben!



Ben Voigt '10

## February Babes

- Feb 1 Langston Hughes (1902-1967)  
American novelist/playwright/short story writer/  
columnist "*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*"
- Feb 2 Ayn Rand (1905-1982)  
Russian-American author and philosopher "*Atlas Shrugged*"
- Feb 2 Charles Lindbergh (1902-1974)  
American author and aviator *O*
- Feb 2 Shakira (1977- )  
Columbian born pop star
- Feb 4 Rosa Parks (1913-2005)  
African-American civil rights activist
- Feb 6 Bob Marley (1945-1981)  
Jamaican singer-songwriter and musician  
"*Redemption Song*"
- Feb 7 Charles Dickens (1812-1870)  
English novelist of the Victorian era "*A Tale of Two Cities*" "*Great Expectations*"
- Feb 7 Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867-1957)  
American Author "*Little House on the Prairie*"
- Feb 9 Alice Walker (1944- )  
African-American author and poet "*The Color Purple*"
- Feb 26 Victor Hugo (1802-1885)  
French poet/playwright/novelist "*Les Misérables*"
- Feb 27 John Steinbeck (1902-1968)  
American writer "*The Grapes of Wrath*"



Alice Walker



Bob Marley

# Have a date this Valentine's Day

*This Valentine Coupon is good for:*  
**BREAKFAST IN BED**

From: \_\_\_\_\_

To: \_\_\_\_\_



*This Valentine Coupon is good for:*  
**DINNER AND A MOVIE**

From: \_\_\_\_\_

To: \_\_\_\_\_



*This Valentine Coupon is good for:*  
**BACK MASSAGE**

From: \_\_\_\_\_


To: \_\_\_\_\_



*This Valentine Coupon is good for:*  
**CANDLELIGHT AND WINE**

From: \_\_\_\_\_

To: \_\_\_\_\_



*This Valentine Coupon is good for:*  
 \_\_\_\_\_

From: \_\_\_\_\_


To: \_\_\_\_\_



*This Valentine Coupon is good for:*  
 \_\_\_\_\_

From: \_\_\_\_\_

To: \_\_\_\_\_



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### Mugs for your Mug!

We want your mugs, you want ours. The English Department signature coffee mugs, which feature the Duck and Hand pictured below, will be available for English majors who have submitted a picture for the department bulletin board. If you haven't done this already and really want a mug (which you do), send in your picture. Make sure to include your graduating year, your home town and a brief quotation. Email everything to [abrailov@macalester.edu](mailto:abrailov@macalester.edu), subject line: major photo.



**Newsletter  
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**Reminder about English Department Writing Contests!**

**The Academy of American Poets**

\$100 prize for the best 3 poems by a Macalester Student.

**Nick Adams Short Story Contest**

\$1000 prize for best short story throughout The Associated Colleges of the Midwest.

**Harry Scherman Writing Prize for Seniors**

Up to 4 \$250 prizes annually, awarded to the most outstanding works in the categories of literary essay, creative prose, and poetry. (Seniors only)

The deadline is **February 7th, 2011** so now's a good time to start working on them!

Full details at [macalester.edu/english/contest](http://macalester.edu/english/contest)

**Kinship of Rivers Lecture and Artistic Workshop Series  
Thursday, March 24 : Olin-Rice, Room 250**

Randy Thoreson, Outdoor Recreation Planner, and David Wiggins, National Park Ranger, will participate in the EnviroThursday series with lectures addressing "communities" and the need for public engagement in outdoor recreation projects, as well as methods for establishing meaningful connections between the public and the Mississippi River. There will be an emphasis on the role of communication in engaging diverse local, regional, and national audiences.



**We're back and so are the snacks. Come back to the English Department for treat days, Wed 5-7, Old Main 220!**

This semester we waved goodbye to Marissa Bianco and Maddie Disner, as they went away for spring semester. We wish them luck! We welcome our new cruise director Anna Waggener '12. Welcome Anna!

February is a cuddly month, not always with other *people*.



Jamie Lucarelli '13  
(and friend)



Graham Sutherland '13  
(and friend)



Anna Waggener '12  
(and friend...lizard)