



## American Religion and Literature Society Newsletter

### ARLS Panels at 2005 American Literature Association Meeting

The American Religion and Literature Society sponsored two panels at the American Literature Association Meeting in Boston, May 26-29, 2005. Panelists' presentations, abstracts of which the newsletter presents, fostered lively discussion.

**Epiphany and Anti-Epiphany: Authorial Responses to an Ambiguous World**  
 Chair: Michael A. Brown,  
 Creighton University

**"Concealment and Anti-Epiphany in American Naturalism and Realism"**  
 Presented By Robert Murray,  
 St. Thomas Aquinas College

What is the opposite of an epiphany? There are two answers to this question, answers which respond to two distinct uses of the term. Its original meaning, from the Greek "to manifest," is the conventional Christian use of the word, referring to the manifestation of Jesus after his death, or as the OED puts it, "the manifestation or appearance of a divine or superhuman being." The other version of the concept is metaphoric: a sudden, and unexpected, manifestation of a revelation that brings new clarity. Both of these versions have interesting antonyms: the first would imply the appearance of a less than divine, less than superhuman being. It could be a mere mortal presence, but if the implication of "divine" is "good," then the implication in this opposite would point us toward the appearance of an evil being. The more secular meaning would point us toward a more complex idea of "sudden concealment," or more appropriately, "sudden awareness of concealment."

The texts of American Realism and Naturalism seem to present us with moments that can be described in both these ways, but the latter version is more prevalent. Works like Crane's "The Monster," or *Maggie*, Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*, or Norris's *McTeague* offer a number of moments when characters are suddenly confronted with an apparent solution to their problem, a balm for their suffering – and, simultaneously, the revelation of the deterministic unavailability of that solution.

The critical framework is provided by, from one perspective, the sense of "anti-epiphany" used by Ed Jewinski in his study of Joyce and Beckett, "James Joyce and Samuel Beckett: From Epiphany to Anti-Epiphany." Jewinski sees this concept of revelation and awakening to frustration demonstrated in the post-modern language of Beckett. Jewinski notes that, "Joyce, according to Beckett, is the author whose writing is, above all, a writing of 'epiphanies,' a writing that implies language can be constructed, syllable by syllable, to penetrate the welter of immediate experience and, thereby, reveal the 'reality' underlying it (166). However, for Beckett, language is not capable of producing such transcendent apotheosizing; it "remains opaque, impenetrable, unredeeming," and thus creates an "anti-epiphanic" moment in which the sudden manifestation or revelation of meaning contains the message of meaninglessness.

From a very different perspective, I refer to Jung's conception of the "anti-epiphany as revealed in his (Continued on Page 2)

#### Spring 2006

#### American Religion and Literature

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#### Special points of interest:

- ARLS Seeks Your Ideas and Talents. Contact Any Officer to Present Your Suggestions, Skills, & Other Resources. See page 2.
- Check Out Members' Scholarly Publications on page 7.
- Join ARLS! See page 2.

# ARLS Panelists' Abstracts from '05 ALA Meeting, Continued

somewhat controversial late-life memoir, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. In "Anti-epiphany and the Jungian Manikin: Toward a Theory of Prepsychotic Perceptual Alterations," Kyle Arnold makes the case that to Jung, the "anti-epiphany" is the by-product of a human psychological self-defense strategy, defending one against "annihilation anxieties related to psychological engulfment, penetration, and finalization." Like Jewinski's case about Beckett, Arnold's view of Jung describes a point in time in which revelation and concealment are commingled, not to cancel each other out, but to create an apt metaphor for the frustrating and inhibiting condition of modern (or post-modern) life.

Both of these critical perspectives create a framework through which to understand the difficulties of the industrialized, post-Darwinian human condition, as characterized by the writers at the end of the American 19th Century. In

Davis, Crane, and Norris, we see many characters presented in the throes of these "anti-epiphanic" moments, whether it is Hugh Wolfe's sudden awareness that money represents the difference between him and the mill owner class, or McTeague's sudden awakening to the complex changes money brings to his own life.

## Works Cited

Arnold, Kyle. "Anti-epiphany and the Jungian Manikin: Toward a Theory of Prepsychotic Perceptual Alterations." *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 33 (2): 245-275, September 1, 2002.

Jewinski, Ed. "James Joyce and Samuel Beckett: From Epiphany to Anti-Epiphany." In *Re: Joyce'n Beckett*, edited by Phyllis Carey and Ed Jewinski, New York: Fordham University Press, 1992. (Continued on Page 4)

## Call for Contributions to Future *ARLS Newsletter* Issues

The editors of the *ARLS Newsletter* welcome submissions from ARLS members. We seek article abstracts, brief book reviews, calls for papers, notice of members' publications, news of interesting journals, resources for researchers, and short creative pieces. Send your ideas and contributions to the editors:

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### Projected Contents for the Next Issue:

- ALA 2006 Panelists' Abstracts
- Recent Scholarly Books of Interest to ARLS Members
- Academic Journals of Interest to ARLS Members
- Members' Short Creative Works, Research Notes, Book Reviews, Recent Publications

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**Tell Us What You'd Like to See in the *ARLS Newsletter*.**

**Showcase Your Work!**

**Share Your Ideas and Discoveries.**

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You can also find a membership form—which you can download, print, fill in, and submit—at the ARLS website: [arlshome.org](http://arlshome.org) ∞

# ARLS Members' Poems Add to Our Field of Study

## **The Prophet**

By Esther Greenleaf Mürer

One day soon the sun  
will be blotted out by a flock  
of chickens the like of which  
hasn't been seen since the days  
of the passenger pigeon. The people  
will weep and wail and rend  
their garments. He alone  
will be calm: It's the chickens  
coming home to roost. And then  
they will alight, trillions of them,  
cadawking and cadoodling from every tree,  
bush, rooftop, windowsill and telephone  
wire, befouling the land; the stench  
and the din will be unbearable-  
but not for him: he will be able  
to say, I told you so.

And he'll strut around in his pride,  
a cruel fire in his eyes, and meanwhile  
the people will have left  
off wailing and will be dancing  
and singing, "Oh, we'll kill  
the old red rooster when he comes....,"  
and all over the land there will be  
bonfires and merriment and the aroma  
of roast chicken, and he alone  
will be aloof, stalking through  
the darkness with glittering  
haunted eyes, muttering:  
I told you so, I told you so....

## **Lao Tzu**

By Gary C. Wilkens

He did not preach.  
He did not heal.  
He preformed no miracles,  
raised no one from the dead.  
He formed no armies,  
conquered no lands,  
never shared a word  
with God.  
He did not sit around  
meditating under trees.  
He was not Enlightened.  
When he did not like how  
the empire was being run,  
he left.

## **Mother with Apple**

By Catherine A. Rogers

My son hands me an apple:  
*Cut it, he says,  
so I can see the star.*

My knife divides the flesh  
of Eve's desire.  
Cut crosswise, it reveals  
its five dark secrets.

Nested in the star-shaped blossom-trace,  
they speak of origin and end:  
roots branching into sleeping clay  
draw secret waters to the mouth  
of this imperious child,  
the latest shape of scattered light  
from the first-sown spiral of stars.

Who would not hunger  
for such knowledge-  
first things and last,  
the seed in the body,  
the mother's gift-  
as he devours this polished heart?

How can I keep him from learning  
how it is double,  
this knife-edge yearning-  
that jealousy is strong as death,  
and love and terror walk together  
in the cool of the evening?

He says, *The seeds are poison.*  
*Take them out.*  
I do,  
and give my child

the crosscut apple:

*Here, I say,  
here is your star.*

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# ARLS Panelists' Abstracts from '05 ALA Meeting, Continued

(Continued from Page 2)

**"Puritan Anagnorisis:  
Thornton Wilder's Dramatic Awakenings"  
Presented By Lincoln Konkle,  
The College of New Jersey**

The fourth chapter of my book manuscript "The Puritan's Progress: Thornton Wilder and the New England Origin of the American Literary Tradition" is entitled "Dramatic Jeremiads: Wilder's Revival of the Puritan Rhetoric of Crisis." In it I employ the analyses of the American jeremiad by Sacvan Bercovitch, Emory Elliott, and others to the three plays and screenplay Wilder wrote from the late 1930s to the early 1940s; these are *Our Town*, *The Merchant of Yonkers* (later slightly revised and retitled *The Matchmaker*), *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and *Shadow of a Doubt* (directed by Alfred Hitchcock). I argue that these four dramatic works are Wilder's response to a world in crisis; they are his attempt to dissuade the world from giving up hope in the face of two world wars and a widespread economic depression, all within the previous 30 years.

The climax of each of these works is not a resolution of dramatic conflict, but rather an epiphany analogous to the Aristotelian concept of *anagnorisis*, or, if you will, a "great awakening." In Act Three of *Our Town* (1938), for which Wilder won the Pulitzer Prize in drama, Emily realizes that people get so caught up in the minutia of daily life that they are blind to the wonders in ourselves, in nature, and in each other, no matter how bad things are on the global level. Since Emily awakens to this truth only after she has died, it is too late for her to benefit from this vision, but Wilder means for the audience to awaken, and, though Emily dies, yet we live.

In *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938) Dolly Levi recounts how she had retreated from life after the death of her husband, but then the sight of a withered leaf falling from a Bible led her to the existential choice to live again rather than to continue as one of the living dead, and in her role as matchmaker and matchseeker she effects an awakening in the other characters in this lovers' farce that has more depth to it than scholars have previously given it credit.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), which also won the Pulitzer, humankind faces crisis after crisis but manages to survive each time, whether the threat is an ice age (Act One), decadence and hedonism and a great flood sent to wipe out the race except for one family with whom to start again (Act Two), or war (Act Three). Mr. Antrobus and his wife, two

children, and maid periodically come to the brink of giving up, but each time one of them is inspired to start over and "build new worlds, and God has always given us that. And has given us [*opening the book*] voices to guide us; and the memory of our mistakes to warn us. . . . We've come a long ways. We've learned. We're learning. And the steps of our journey are marked for us here. (245) The "step" Antrobus refers to are the moments of progress and regress memorialized in the great books, so that when humankind does have to start over, it is not from scratch. Thus, if viewed from the long distance of history, there is progress overall; it is just excruciatingly slow and incremental. And there is the suggestion that our forward movement after decline may in fact be providential. Wilder tries to awaken his wartime audience to this macrocosmic perspective.

Finally, in the screenplay he wrote for the Alfred Hitchcock thriller *Shadow of a Doubt*, Wilder holds up the mirror to his earlier creation of the American small town, but it is a mirror warped by Hitchcock's darker view of the human psyche and society. Nevertheless, after the serial killer who comes from the typical American family is dispatched, the young woman who has been awakened to a more naturalistic view of herself, her family, and the human race, is told that the world only goes temporarily insane, implying that the chaos dominating the times would pass, as had all previous periods of decline and destruction.

Affirming stoicism, faith, even progress in the face of imminent global extinction was a bold and some would say deluded sermon, but Wilder preached it nonetheless with the voice of the jeremiad that calls for the continuation of the errand into the wilderness of the future. Wilder was trying to awaken people out of their cynicism and despair to "the thing with feathers"—hope.

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**Nontraditional Awakenings:  
Redemption through Fiction  
Chair: Kathleen Smith,  
Louisiana State University at Shreveport**

**"Grace Awakenings in Flannery O'Connor's  
'The River'"  
Presented By Rachel Payne,  
Baylor University**

Flannery O'Connor often uses unconventional, even grotesque, social outcast figures to awaken individuals trapped

God's grace for the sinner. The call to translate the language of grace for sinners lost in the world weighed heavy on O'Connor's life and work. She felt that her message must startle its hearers out of their complacency; it must be bold and captivating because no less than her readers' souls hung in the balance. She felt justified in her occasional use of "violent means" to communicate her vision of redemption to a "hostile" audience (805). O'Connor determined that a Christian writer must make his or her vision "apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling (even grotesque) figures" (805-6). In "The River," O'Connor sets out to "shock" her complacent readers into a grace awakening.

Flannery O'Connor's narrator describes the forlorn main character of the story, Harry Ashfield, as "mute and patient, like an old sheep waiting to be let out" (155). The reference to sheep calls to mind biblical parables about lost sheep and the "good shepherd" who rescues them and leads them to green pastures where they can graze peacefully beside "still waters." The boy falls into the model of a prototypical needy child hungry for redemption. Instead of allowing her readers gradually to follow indirectly the child's spiritual and emotional awakening from his words and actions, O'Connor's narrator forces us to see this child as someone ripe for baptism and salvation. Too quickly, he becomes a stereotypical "lost sheep."

This story is Flannery O'Connor's attempt to dramatize a child's spiritual awakening. She did not intend to write a realistic story; she meant to write one that would convey to her readers the radical transforming power of a Church sacrament, baptism. Although her single-minded focus is admirable, the literary devices that O'Connor employs to effect this awakening to grace may finally weaken and distort her message. O'Connor insists that her view of the world from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy helps rather than hinders her art, but she admits that the task of interpretation is a difficult one. She says that for her, "the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and...I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction" (805). O'Connor was convinced that this difficult task was her divinely ordained vocation. It was her personal mission to make the true "meaning of life" apparent to her audience through her fiction. This paper will judge the viability and effectiveness of O'Connor's vision through a careful examination of her use of biblical type-characters, narrative point of view, and simile constructions.

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Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical page citations refer to the Library of America edition of O'Connor's *Collected Works* (1988).

## "They Think They Know the Answers': Born Again Awakenings in Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe*"

Presented By Jonathan Little, Alverno College

Anne Tyler has often been mislabeled by her critics as hostile to religion and its representatives. In her best selling novel *Saint Maybe* (1991), however, she goes deeply into the state of being born again. Through her remarkable and memorable character of Ian Bedloe, Tyler explores the philosophical and religious questions associated with a religious awakening. Throughout this novel Tyler redefines doctrinaire religious pieties while maintaining Christianity's power to provide comfort and structure for redemptive action and atonement. In my paper I will show how Tyler draws from her Quaker background in creating the parameters for atonement in the novel, but also how she departs from Quakerism and redefines faith by deploying various literary or narrative interventions such as: irony, parody, self-reflexivity, and elegy. These strategies align her, finally, with a more postmodern version of being reborn. Tyler's conclusions about religion are similar in some ways to Jacques Derrida's meditation on belief in *The Gift of Death*, in which the emphasis is placed on uncertainty, ongoing revision, and the need to dwell in mystery. Although Tyler's conclusions about Christianity are ultimately more earth-bound, domesticated, reassuring, and rationalistic than Derrida's, who describes God as a terrifying and unknowable mystical force in *The Gift of Death*, Tyler shares Derrida's interest in re-evaluating Christianity in light of the apparent absence or unavailability of God.

In many ways Anne Tyler is a stealth postmodern philosopher, using her placid prose to test out philosophical and religious premises without resorting to flashy erudition and explicit theological debate. Remarkably, she appeals to a best-seller mass-market audience while interrogating the complex philosophical and spiritual issues that are involved in everyday, ordinary life. Perhaps because she is generous enough to privilege the ordinary, Tyler, unlike any other contemporary American author, is able to see all sides of living in faith. Instead of leading us to Christianity through the Southern gothic as Flannery O'Connor does, or negatively stereotyping born-again Christians as do satirists Lorrie Moore and T. Coraghesson Boyle, Tyler writes more in line with Eudora Welty and Leo Tolstoy by showing that Christianity comes in many forms and includes many exciting and unpredictable variations. Further, in her distrust of people who claim to have all the answers through religion, Tyler rescues born-again experience from fundamentalist pieties and depicts God's power without coupling it with intolerance and certainty.

Tyler's at times Olympian detachment from her characters is also a detachment from herself as a writer. For example, in one dizzying exchange between two (Continued on Page 6)

# ARLS Panelists' Abstracts from '05 ALA Meeting, Continued

(Continued from Page 5)

family members at a church get together Tyler even goes so far as to use her characters to question her own questioning.

"Want to hear what I hate most about churches? They think they know the answers. I really hate that. It's the people who don't know the answers who are going to heaven, I tell you."

"But!" his daughter said. "The minute you say that, you see, you yourself become a person who knows the answers." (177)

As this exchange shows, what is so remarkable and memorable about Tyler's writing (as illustrated in *Saint Maybe*) is that she creates a fictive universe in which being awakened or born again through religion is possible and even admirable without, at the same time, adhering to a strict or stable definition of what a born again awakening could possibly mean. *Saint Maybe* is ultimately a comforting novel in which the central character finds a kind of re-birth and atonement

through the teachings of scripture and through the support of his fellow parishioners, family, neighbors, and friends who seem to be a conduit for God's love and forgiveness. At the same time, none of Tyler's characters or conclusions about religion are immune from what she calls the "mist of irony" that characterizes her writerly stance.

**"Confabulating the Confessional: Tim O'Brien's Formal Strategies in *The Things They Carried*"**  
Presented By David McGlynn,  
University of Utah

In this essay, I explore Tim O'Brien's use of the confessional narrative in *The Things They Carried*. The very term, "confessional narrative" suggests a conspicuously religious utterance in which a speaker-confessor articulates wrongdoing or guilt in an effort to attain (Continued on Page 7)

## Researchers' Resource: The Noel Collection at LSUS

By Diane E. Boyd

With thanks to Martha Lawler, Head Archivist

The collection contains texts from early church fathers to current cultural studies figures. A first edition of *The Personal Narrative of Daniel Webster* (1825) is available, as is an edition of the *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*. Sewall's journal blends political and social commentary as he recants his involvement in the Salem witchcraft trials and details the minutiae of everyday life. The diary suggests a spiritual evolution that is more clearly evinced in his later *The Selling of Joseph* (1700), considered by many to be one of the first American abolitionist pieces.

Not limited to American literary figures, the collection holds a first edition of *Poems by Bliss Carman*, a Canadian poet (1861-1929) and descendant of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Carman's attachment to transcendentalism is clear in his "Veni Creator" in which he implores: "Body, mind, and spirit,/As thy voice may urge/From the wondrous twilight/At the garden's verge." Noel's curiosity and commitment to creating a collection with a broad scope is clear in the many texts dedicated to religions other than Christianity: Jainism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Mormonism, and Scientology to name but a few.

Martha Lawler, head archivist, suggests that the collection's greatest strengths for scholars interested in religion and literature lies in its secondary sources and its breadth. Some intriguing secondary and cultural studies sources include Robert Shaplen's *Free Love and Heavenly Sinners* (1954) about Elizabeth Tilton's 1870 confession of her affair with Henry Ward Beecher (brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe), and Elise Miller Davis' *The Answer is God* (1955) about a 1952 World Championship Rodeo performance of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. The couple chose this event to begin their extended public witnessing of Christianity. These and other secondary texts would be excellent sources for study of the uses of religion during periods of cultural, political, or social upheaval in America.

Fellowships are available in the amount of \$500 to help support scholars' travel to the collection. For information contact Dr. Robert C. Leitz, curator of the Noel Collection, at [rleitz@lsus.edu](mailto:rleitz@lsus.edu), or visit the Collection's website at: [www.noelcollection.org/noel/](http://www.noelcollection.org/noel/). A partial catalog of the collection's holdings is available there, along with information about travel stipends, upcoming special conferences, and an image bank of representations culled from texts in the archive.

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# ARLS Panelists' Abstracts from '05 ALA Meeting, Continued

(Continued from Page 6)

absolution, redemption, or salvation. Most discussions of confessional narratives, therefore, have typically centered on conspicuously religious texts such as Saint Augustine's *Confessions* or novels like Daniel Defoe's, *Robinson Crusoe*. It is the "narrative" aspect of the term, however, that allows for the confessional narrative to be expanded to non-theological texts like O'Brien's, for "narrative" indicates not just a simple statement of religious guilt, but a story that reorders and reconfigures the past in order to account for the circumstances of a sin and the process by which the confessor moves away from guilt and toward forgiveness. I will argue that O'Brien

exposes, through his formal choices, the limits of confessional language and the ambiguities of confessing and converting by working within an elliptical narrative to suggest the possibility of a greater "truth"-atonement and responsibility through the fracturing and dispersing of the narrative among different points of view, radical retellings and deliberate confabulations. Autobiography and fiction overlap in *The Things They Carried* to allow the author / narrator to account for his own sense of loss and confusion regarding the Vietnam War and to force the reader to participate with him in that confusion and to move through loss toward the possibility of a transcendent re-imagining. ∞

## Selected, ARLS-Themed Publications by ARLS Members

Susan Rushing Adams, "Interview with Alicia Ostriker" in *Sojourn* (2005): 70-84.

Lincoln Konkle, *Thorton Wilder and the Puritan Narrative Tradition*, (U of Missouri P, 2006). ∞

## Witnessing Religious Abuse: Joy Castro's *The Truth Book*

By Susan Rushing Adams

*The Truth Book: Escaping a Childhood of Abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses: A Memoir.* By Joy Castro. New York: Arcade, 2005. 230 pages. ISBN 1-55970-787-9.

"Moments of brokenness interest me," Joy Castro writes in *The Truth Book* (158), concluding a memory of working with her brother Tony to thaw frozen pipes under a metal trailer in ice and snow for an entire day. Near dark, she is unable to continue moving; her stepfather brings her inside and leaves her brother outside.

Castro expertly moves from memory to memory with skilled prose, breaking her own narrative of these terrible years with glimpses into her life after her escape—motherhood, graduate school, her father's death from suicide. She keeps her account in present tense and begins and ends it with second-person, unusual but effective choices that pull readers into the text.

The family, Castro tells us, are Jehovah's Witnesses, and her new stepfather indeed tries to break her and Tony, using religion as his authority. The two are forbidden to speak to their father, disfellowshipped from the Kingdom Hall for smoking, under the threat of separation from one another. She is punished when she does not place religious tracts

while witnessing door-to-door; her brother is frequently beaten. The behavior of Castro's mother is mystifying: she is more afraid of the congregation's censure if her premarital relationship with her husband is revealed than the danger to her children's lives.

Castro appeals to her church elders about the abuse she and Tony must endure, but is told that since she is "a child and a girl, she must submit" (147). Eventually she escapes to her father's home and organizes a successful campaign to bring her brother to their home, too. This is one of the many times that she rescues her daredevil brother, knowing that "our mother will let us bleed to death for Jehovah" (61).

Castro retells her past without lapsing into anger or condemnation; instead, she simply tells the story and lets readers make their own judgments and feel their own fear, sadness, and despair for them. Though Castro's prose is heartbreakingly well-written, the greatest strength of her book is its glimpses of her beautiful spirit—she is the kind of woman who years later worries that she did not allow her brother to pick up the plant he dropped as they escaped to their father's home. She does not leave readers behind, either, reminding us that, "You try to be decent and treat people gently, knowing that they, too, have their scars and madnesses that, like yours, do not show" (227). ∞

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## American Religion and Literature Society Newsletter

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## Panels at ALA Meeting in San Francisco, May 25-28, '06

### Rebel Characters: Rejecting or Nuancing Religious Orthodoxy

Chair: Susan Rushing Adams,  
University of Texas at Dallas

"Responses to Religious Orthodoxy in Contemporary  
Speculative Fiction," Eric Carl Link, North Georgia  
College & State University

"Laughter in Heaven: 'Orthodoxy' as Rebellion in  
Gilead," Peter Balaam, Carleton College

"Pilgrimages and Pictures: Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, 'In  
the Ruins of the Future,' and 'Baader-Meinhof,'"  
Linda Kauffman, University of Maryland, College Park

### Informal Business Meeting

T.B.A. at ARLS panels

### Moving East: American Writers and the Allure of Nonwestern Religions

Chair: Michael A. Brown,  
Creighton University

"From Oversoul to Underworld: Connecting West and  
East in Don DeLillo's Fiction," Richard Hardack, Inde-  
pendent Scholar

"Master-Student Zen Poetics: John Cage's Modernist  
Critiques of Traditional Buddhism," Douglas Kerr, Stan-  
ford University

"Why Doubles?: Their Religious Implication in Toni  
Morrison's *Love*," Myung Joo Kim, Chungnam National  
University

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