A literary scholar writing in 1900 would have had next to no idea which nineteenth century authors would retain their reputations or whether the headings under which literary scholarship was organized in 1900 would continue to be useful ones. Literary scholarship has been far more deeply and sturdily institutionalized in the intervening century, and would seem to be in a better position to influence the stability of reputations and the stability of ways of categorizing the subject than it was a hundred years ago. But the institutionalization of our subject has not, and probably will not, enable us to pass on a stable set of literary categories or favorite texts to our successors, because those institutional structures are designed to require each generation to rethink the texts and methods given to it by the previous one. So long as scholars cannot win fame simply by sharing the tastes and adopting the practices of their dissertation advisors, we will continue to have next to no idea what the future will hold for texts and authors that we love, or which texts will define the sense of our century for future centuries, or which methods of reading, which ways of dividing up the subject of literature, will continue to show promise. Indeed, the particular ways in which our profession is institutionalized practically ensure that whatever our guesses are, they will most likely be wrong, or right for the wrong reasons.

Consider the example Professor Hoberek gave us. “Will the categories ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ retain their usefulness?” Like Professor Berubé, I don’t think so, and like him, I also don’t lament the fact. Both names bear the marks of the oedipal quarrels with the preceding generation from which they emerged, names which wear thin as those who brandished them in their manifestoes gradually and unwillingly make the transition from being...
rebellious youths to imperious eminences. The ‘post’ in postmodern famously announces not only the turn away from modernism, but also the dependence upon it, the derivativeness of the works it picks out. Even “modern” is a polemical name, aimed first at dispossessing the Georgian poets of their place in the sun, and, more crucially, at repudiating the heritage of Romanticism, a heritage still very much alive in the poets who did the repudiating, for all their championing of a “hard dry style.”

Literary scholarship often uses terms that seem to be at once about genres and about periods. For instance when Americanists speak of “Realist Fiction,” they usually mean the dominant fiction of the period between Appomattox and the Crash of 1896. It’s important to remember that literary genres are not natural kinds (even biological species don’t seem fully to be “natural kinds”) but are heuristic constructions which at best have a regulative rather than a constitutive force. They have less reality than the works they group together have, and have what Eleanor Rosch would call a prototypical rather than a conceptual structure, measuring not whether the attributes of particular works place them in or exclude them from a formal category but only the relative distance of the work in question from the leading particular example in the critic’s mind. Because genres are prototypes rather than concepts, they are best seen as clusters of particular works locally engaged with each other rather than as sets with global features. It would perhaps be wiser not to speak of genres at all but rather of “circles” of authors who have read or responded to each other’s works, and whose works are tied together by what Wittgenstein called “family resemblances.” So we may speak of the school of T. S. Eliot, or the circles of Auden or Ginsberg, or (I hope) of the school of Elizabeth Bishop. Or we may speak of particular works that somehow engage particular other works in pointed ways.

In general, I think we cannot hope to predict the terms in which literature will be discussed in the coming century. If some version of our counterparts were to have met in 1900, and were to have been asked what American writers would be the names to conjure with in the twentieth century, they would certainly not have listed Melville among them. If they knew Whitman it was only as a scandalous Bohemian, and if they knew Dickinson it was only as a recently popular Nightingale. They might have predicted a solid future for Longfellow and Whittier and Holmes, Fireside poets whose reputations seem unlikely now to enjoy the recovery that their Victorian contemporaries have begun to enjoy. These poets cut a large figure in Edmund Clarence Stedman’s 1898 anthology Poets of America because they seemed to him
natural to include, but they cut a figure in John Hollander’s 1993 American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century chiefly as curiosities, as reminders of the kind of poetry that is no longer influential in our day.

Literary scholars of 1900 would have been as wrong about the methods that would prevail in the twentieth century as they were about the authors who would be read. They would have championed the bibliographic and philological scholarship of Skeat and Furnivall, and they might have noticed the hortatory belletrism of Brownell and Phelps. They certainly would not have predicted how a circle of literary amateurs in Middle Tennessee would whet the public taste for what we now call High Modernism in ways the scholars of Yale and Harvard could not have imagined. Nor could they have imagined that some of these same people, pulling together a pamphlet originally titled “Sophomore English Manual,” for use in the state university of the poorest state in the Union in the depths of the Depression, would transform how literature was taught everywhere for half a century.

It is the nature of events, particularly intellectual events, to be unpredictable; if they were predictable, many of those whom the course of things overturned would have been better able to keep their footing (in which case, the prediction would have been false after all). The history of ideas is always only made in retrospect, because no idea can ever be made to seem inevitable until it has already come into being and plausible hindsights can be constructed. Constructing such a plausible hindsight is one of the ways by which we naturalize an idea, and the explanatory power of these hindsights sometimes persuades us that that idea came into being in an inevitable way. But we almost never project those explanations forward reliably. Alasdair MacIntyre relates an anecdote about a cavedweller who says that people are not yet ready to invent the wheel, but will be ready to do so in a century. “Interesting,” the interlocutors reply, “but what’s a wheel?” “Well, you see, it’s a large disk that you can put on a pole called an axle, and you can use it to move heavy loads around.” “Oh. Whatever you say.” The belief, so common now, that ideas only arise within the confines of an ideology in which they make sense and whose authority they one way or another confirm, is probably credible only because retrospective accounts about ideas require them to be invested with an air of inevitability they could not have had when they happened. The notion that ideas are constrained by prior ideologies is an artifact of our habits of explanation. Because ideas have consequences that we cannot know when we first entertain them, the history of thought will always be radically contingent.
There are other reasons why the shape of twentieth century literature, as it will appear to the next century, is likely to appear strange to us, reasons which have to do with how literary study has been institutionalized. For the last thirty years, each literary generation has engaged in an unstable oedipal quarrel with the preceding one. This does not mean only that each generation overthrows the views, and the favored texts, of the preceding one. It means that each new generation turns away from the sets of problems that interested the previous generation, and invests itself in a new set of problems which did not declare themselves so clearly to the precursors. Further, each generation polemically re-reads the works of the preceding one, seeing them not as groping answers to the problems that generation was obsessed with but as incompetent or bad solutions to the problems of the newer age. In this way, the filial generation always blindsides the parental one, so that whenever the older critics said, “Above all, one must not neglect X,” they will be taken as arguing “You must only concern yourself with X, and must under no circumstances think too seriously about Y” (where Y is some leading concern of the younger generation).

This procedure has the advantage of enabling one to sweep aside an entire library (or at least an aisle of a library) unread, since the premises that motivated all those books can be cut off at the knees. Laius may have sought Oedipus’ life, but it was Oedipus who in fact did the killing; the ability to be wielded in a sweepingly bloodthirsty way is a property of new theories, not of old theories, which have long since squandered their substance in exceptions, qualifications, and doubtful extensions.

Our prospects of predicting the future of literary study are rendered all the more doubtful by the particular circumstances of the last few years. As recently as five years ago, I would have thought that the emergent critical style of that era would by now be firmly establishing itself as the reigning orthodoxy. But in fact we seem to be living now in the aftermath of a failed revolution, one which successfully did away with the ancien régime but was unable to establish a regime of its own. In the 1950’s, philosophy became possessed by a new method, which promised a new kind of rigor, and which, by successfully discrediting the existing ways of doing philosophy, caused philosophy to break its intellectual link with its past. The ultimate result, when the promise of rigor turned out to be unrealized, was that philosophy lost its standing in the curriculum, and only now is it beginning to recover. The results of this upheaval in philosophy for the prospects of our own discipline were at first happy ones, for the proscribed ways of doing philosophy found
a ready home a few doors down the hall, where they could be practiced in unlicensed forms under the banner of Literary Theory. But Literary Theory could not resist making the same kind of promise of superior rigor in literary study that Analytic Philosophy had made in philosophy, and perhaps only the fact that English departments have taken an important hostage in Freshman Composition has prevented them from suffering the fate Philosophy departments suffered thirty years ago. There is no going back to the ancien régime, which perhaps deserved its fate. But the literary revolution, like so many others, seems now to be eating its own children. Philosophy is recovering, although nobody in the thick of things in the 1970’s would have been able to see what would have emerged. Literary study will continue as well, but none of us has the slightest idea what it will look like.

Professor Hoberek’s second question asked which Twentieth Century authors’ reputations were most likely to suffer in the coming years. There’s a temptation in this question, a temptation to hope for a bad future for authors I already dislike. But being used as the demonic ancestor from which a new generation must separate itself has the merit of giving the author concerned an afterlife, if an afterlife of a rather dark and distorted kind. And having unsavory convictions might actually help keep an author in the public mind, given our natural if mistaken tendency to invest evil with a confected charisma. The worst fate would be that which overtook the Fireside poets, who are regarded at best now as highminded dullards. But “highminded” is not a word one would apply to many poets of our century, and I think their worst fate will be that their evils will seem to be stupid vices rather than the consequences of dark insights, and that their obsessions will come to seem hobbyhorses rather than transforming discoveries. I don’t think many future poets will define themselves by vilifying Pound as they do Eliot, and I don’t think that many critics are likely to feel that being haunted by Pound’s demons will at least give them the wisdom of the Dark Side. So, in the face of my own claim that we can’t know how anything will turn out, I will venture my guess that Pound’s is the reputation most likely to suffer, for exactly the same reason that so many others on this panel argue the same of Lawrence.

Wendy Steiner noted in the New York Times Book Review that postmodern fiction of Pynchon and Gass’s kind had lost its authority (and that she herself had lost the taste for it, preferring the human preoccupations of certain women authors she mentions to the elaborate denunciations of middle class life she attributes to postmodern novels by men). There’s no question that the cultural prestige of esoteric forms has declined some, whether it be
in fiction, in lyric poetry, in jazz, or in “modern classical” music. Whether this trend is for the long term I can’t say; esoteric forms regained their authority in the 50s after falling into eclipse in the 30s. *Invisible Man* might have redeemed modernist techniques in fiction from the charge of political irresponsibility. And Stalin’s death freed Shostakovich from having to include in everything he wrote some melody which the dictator could whistle. Perhaps a similar recovery will happen again. I cannot say, nor even can I say whether I think it a good or a bad thing.

Professor Hoberek’s third question asked which presently under-rated author would I like to see come to prominence in the coming years. I can’t predict a reputation for the future (although I have reason to hope that Robert Penn Warren’s reputation will prosper, and I hope Ralph Ellison’s does as well), but I can confess a private admiration, and that is for the poetry of Allen Grossman, who I think has done the most in recent years not only to reclaim the high style for poetry but also to reclaim the highest ambitions for poetry as a medium of theological and metaphysical speculation. I’m particularly eager to see how the odd comic turn of his most recent poems, which perhaps humanizes his point of view but sacrifices none of his intellectual reach, will impress itself into the sensibility of the coming generation.

One of the overarching aims of this symposium has been to ask, in the words of the title of Eugene Goodheart’s recent book, “Does literary study have a future?” The question is in some ways an open one. Does the failure of the revolution of the last twenty five years mean that there will be no reigning orthodoxy and that a thousand flowers will bloom? Or does it mean that our discipline, having become a laughingstock in the public mind and an emblem of the professorial tendency to unwitting self-parody, will lose its cultural importance entirely and with that lose its central place in the curriculum? The poet Gary Snyder gave a talk at the 1998 MLA which bears on this question. He noted that cave paintings have recently been discovered in France that are as far separated in time from the famous cave paintings of Lascaux as the Lascaux paintings are from our own time, and that those paintings have a freshness and beauty which even the most jaded of modern eyes cannot miss. Snyder concluded two things from this. The first is that no matter how much our sense of beauty is a function of our culture, and no matter how the collective tastes of cultures differ from each other, the sense of beauty is so deeply bound up with being human that no kind of beauty need be completely alien. Snyder’s second conclusion is that the hunger for beauty is so deep and so powerful that culture, although not perhaps
particular cultural forms, is sturdy, and no amount of human folly is likely to wipe it out. The ways in which we read poetry, and the poems we like, may indeed pass from view. But so long as people continue to write poems and tell stories, people will seek out ways of talking with each other about them. Literary criticism imagines that its work is the work of interpretation. But ultimately appreciation is a deeper thing than interpretation, and the fact that we will continue to look for ways to articulate and refine our appreciation will stand literary study in good stead no matter what the outcome of our current academic quarrels.