



## FROM NUGENT HALL

by President John Garvey

# Literature as Literature

In January the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (ALSCW) took up residence in the Department of English at The Catholic University of America (see story, page 9). This fall Professor of English Ernest Suarez will be named president of the association. It's a great honor for our English department and the University.

The ALSCW is a distinguished literary association, renowned for its serious commitment to studying literature as literature and fostering the art of writing. The association's residency at Catholic University will give our students remarkable exposure to some of the finest poets, critics, and imaginative writers of our day. And it will give our English department prominent recognition in the academic field of literature and the wider literary culture. This recognition is well deserved.

Over the last four or five decades many literature and English departments have approached their subject through the application of literary theory — decoding or deconstructing a text according to a given philosophy or perspective. Whether the theory is ecological, feminist, Marxist, or some other ideology, this approach reads literature as an expression of theory.

At Catholic University literature is read as literature. As other English departments turned to theory, ours built a faculty and a program focused on literary history and aesthetics. While literature has much to say about class and politics, gender and race, our department has emphasized that it cannot be reduced to these things. Our faculty take literature on its own

terms as a work of art. They seek to understand how the form and content of a text work together to convey meaning, to create something beautiful. And they teach our students to do the same. Undergraduate and graduate students in English graduate with a strong grasp of literary forms and history and an ability to read analytically and write clearly. As other English and literature departments begin to recognize the limitations of theory, our graduate students are well prepared to enter the field. Our department's excellent record of employment for its doctoral students testifies to this.

Our English department's approach to literature is not just unique. It poignantly reflects Catholicism's emphasis on the aesthetic and the search for truth. Many of our faculty study the role of belief, philosophy, popular piety, and theological concepts in shaping works of literature and their reception. More importantly, our faculty teach students how to encounter and appreciate beauty, whether it is found in Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Faulkner; in George Herbert or James Dickey.

When the reader encounters beauty, the philosopher Jacques Maritain explained, she experiences the "flashing of intelligence in matter intelligibly arranged." Beauty illuminates reality for the reader and draws him out of himself into the experience of another. Ultimately, it can draw the reader toward God, who is beauty itself. As Pope Benedict XVI observed, the most convincing demonstration of the faith is beauty. "Being struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ," he said, "is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction."