
Editor's Column

VARIETY IS the spice of *PMLA*, as it is of life, and this issue offers yet another proof. Its contents cross national borders, straddle two centuries, scrutinize poetry and prose, apply diverse methods, converge on both text and context, honor ideology as well as creativity, search out tradition and innovation, and play out a range of concerns. The period, the area, the approach missing from this issue may be found in an earlier or a later one. At the same time, the collection of essays that follows reflects our efforts to give voice within each number to the internal dialogues that spring fortuitously from our backlog.

Such a happy conjuncture of accepted manuscripts allows us to celebrate a constituency whose presence in *PMLA* has not matched the prominence of its culture or of its impact on modern literary theory. We hope that the modest increase of submissions in the Slavic area represents a new trend and that the cluster of articles printed here will, like previous clusters and special topics, stimulate further contributions in the same field. These Russian voices should also help to dissipate any suspicions that hegemonic forces control *PMLA*'s pages. We are indebted to Gary Saul Morson for his collaboration with us in the preparation of this grouping and for the lucid introduction that accompanies it. Morson's review of the Slavic field, in which he situates the three essays on Russian literature, and his observations about the interface among social values, life experiences, and cultural expression are especially provocative in the light of recent political events in Eastern Europe. Along the way he invites careful reconsiderations of Bakhtin and of Slavists' unique confrontation with literary theory.

Joseph Brodsky, an MLA Honorary Fellow and a Nobel Prize winner, joins the Russian array with thoughts, strongly fastened to the artist's vantage point, about the relation of poetry to modern consciousness and about the play between poetic language and social responsibility. Brodsky introduces to his readers a Lithuanian author whose career is inseparable from the political vagaries and upheavals that have brought various Slavic cultures and languages into fusion. The scenario of a Russian writing in his own tongue in North America for the Polish translation of a Lithuanian poet seems to give testimony to the ravages of historical displacement. But writing a mere three years ago, Brodsky could not have foreseen

that the Baltic states would themselves, with astonishing speed, achieve the autonomy that he claims for the poet. We are deeply grateful to Joseph Brodsky for allowing us to print an English version of his introduction to Tomas Venclova's poetry. I would also like to express special thanks to Roslyn Schloss and to Ann Kjellberg for their mediating roles in our contacts with Brodsky.

If "ideology," in one sense or another and variously applied, often dominates today's literary discussions, it also makes its presence felt in this issue, having thrust itself into three of the titles. Benjamin figures prominently and Marx, Balzac, and photography sit in unexpected but productive juxtaposition in Lynn Wilkinson's article, which reaches far beyond *Le cousin Pons* as it examines the nature of representation and the very connotations of ideology. Whether or not readers agree with her thesis as they are invited to ponder varying kinds of interpretive activity, they are certain to find stimulating this conjunction of social history, mechanical reproduction, and the novel. "*Ideology* is one of the slipperier words in our political vocabulary," Wilkinson admonishes as she strives to divest it of negative implications. Applying the term rather than scrutinizing it, Elizabeth Langland shifts across the Channel, from French to Victorian fiction and from technology to domesticity. At the intersection of sociology and literary criticism, of class and gender, Langland returns with fresh baggage to the "Angel in the House" icon and offers interesting perspectives on how to read a nineteenth-century novel. She extracts from a series of texts, and from discursive practices in the widest sense, the character of female agency and the special significance of the private sphere that women of the time occupied. Readers might extrapolate from her observations about dress, etiquette, social conduct, and spatial arrangements conditions that apply to other national literatures as well.

Modernism, too, is a charged term, and it graces two of the titles in this issue. Fortunately, it doesn't fall to my lot to define the concept in this column, but both Helen Sword's "Leda and the Modernists" and William Lyne's "Signifying Modernist," along with forthcoming essays, such as one on Chinese modernism and another subtitled "Post/modernism, Gender, and the Canon," led one Editorial Board member to observe that writers and the critical community appear to be in the process of redefining modernism. Sword, after surveying the Leda-Zeus myth's iconography and literary variants, explores the effect of gender on the creative imaginations of several twentieth-century writers of various nationalities. How gender bears on the transmission of knowledge and how violation relates to inspiration are major concerns in her essay. Sword concludes that Leda, having become a troubled and troubling source of poetic inspiration, a site for male disquietude, has produced in modernist poets some unexpected responses, marked by the fragmentation in which modernism itself invests much power and meaning.

While Sword can confidently take the modernism of her case studies for granted, William Lyne enters into the debate over Ralph Ellison's

presumed “modernist proclivities.” In fact, Lyne bounces *Invisible Man* off James, Eliot, and Dostoevsky in order to uncover in the novel a disruptive subtext that reveals Ellison’s antimodernist stance. Where others have read allusion and homage, Lyne finds critique and resistance, a paradox that he attributes to the “double consciousness” of the black artist in white America. Lyne explains the tragic quandary of a writer like Ellison and simultaneously offers a lively and perceptive reading of *Invisible Man*. Kun Jong Lee discovers in the same novel, which he also reads with sharp insights, both an echo and a revision of the American thinker whose names Ellison shares, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Lee’s bold thesis is that the question of race lies at the heart of Ellison’s critical reinterpretation of Emerson and that readers have failed to grasp the novel’s ambivalence toward Emersonianism, a philosophy that Ellison both affirms and negates in an act of constructive subversion. The opportunity to unite in a single issue a pair of essays about Ellison is a measure of his importance on the contemporary American literary scene. The coincidence is also a product of the continuing flow of contributions on African American literature that *PMLA*’s special issue on that topic has spurred. We welcome this development and encourage further submissions in the African and African American areas.

This issue closes with an essay by the MLA Honorary Member Hans-Georg Gadamer, published here for the first time in English. Part of our occasional Criticism in Translation feature, “The Expressive Power of Language: On the Function of Rhetoric for Knowledge” inserts the traditional notion of rhetoric into the modern debates about language and touches directly on our trade as teachers. Gadamer’s piece speaks to all MLA members, regardless of their interests. The other essays are more specialized, but their authors clearly know enough about the expressive power of language to speak persuasively to a battery of readers. Recent submissions presage equally varied and stimulating fare in the future.

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