

Editor's Column

IN THE FOUR years since *PMLA*'s current editorial policy was announced, we have received more than 2,000 submissions containing an estimated 50,000 footnotes that acknowledge perhaps 100,000 works by other scholars and critics. I have no way of knowing which scholars have been acknowledged most frequently in these footnotes, but I would hazard a guess that the name of Northrop Frye appears more often than any other. At times, in fact, it seems that authors feel their articles would not be given serious consideration without a quotation from Frye, preferably in the opening paragraph.

The reason for this is not, I think, simply that Frye has said many provocative and important things that demand to be acknowledged but that he has said them so very well, that he is, in everything he writes, eminently quotable. So much so that, in rereading the address he delivered as MLA President at the 1976 Annual Convention—an address that appears as the first item in this issue of *PMLA*—I get the impression that virtually any sentence might well provide the epigraph for a major article: "Scholarship is mostly a matter of continuous fumbling for a light switch in a dark room"; "The past is functional in our lives only when we neither forget it nor try to return to it"; "What we express badly we do not know; we have only the illusion of knowing it."

In his address, Frye ranges widely over a number of topics concerned with our profession. *PMLA*, for instance, in having to reflect the whole MLA conspectus, "tends to become something of what Marshall McLuhan would call a cool medium of low definition, a collection of prize essays rather than a journal with a specific shape." On teaching: "Trying to liberate students by increasing their power to articulate is a militant activity, carried on in the teeth of inertia, confusion, and ignorance." On students: "Everyone's scholarly fortunes are inseparable from those of one's colleagues and of the profession as a whole. Students emerging from graduate school with a genuine vocation and commitment are a part of my own scholarly life, and their frustrations and humiliations frustrate and humiliate me also." On past versus present: "The present cannot be an ideal object of knowledge like the past. . . . There is nothing liberating in merely seeing our own prejudices and stereotypes in a mirror, or in kidnapping the culture of the past to make it conform to them."

Frye's warmth and wit come through repeatedly: When he is being frivolous—"Scholarship depends on knowledge, and the advance of knowledge is an advance in becoming unintelligible to more and more people"—or, as in his comment on changing attitudes since the militant sixties, when he draws on one of many anecdotes—"There was once a critical magazine in Canada called *The Rebel*, and a couple connected with it named their daughter Rebel. When Rebel reached the age of seventeen she changed her name to Joy."

Above all, however, Frye comments on the importance of literary scholarship, noting that what has long sustained him is the feeling that, with the study of literature, he has "the best subject matter in the world, and a job to do with it that literature cannot do by itself"; it is therefore distressing "that literary scholars still tease themselves with the notion of criticism as failed creation." "Perhaps the real motivation in literary scholarship is a sense that literature is not a territory to be conquered by critics who divide it up according to the chance of preference but a common cause that unites all of us with all of it." "The scholar is concerned with the continuous accumulation of knowledge; yet all the time there is an underlying drive toward a more discontinuous kind of wisdom, an insight for which all knowledge is only a symbol and literature itself only a means." The address is here to be read by all; I devoutly hope it will be.

And there's more, eight articles, in fact, in a cool medium and of low definition. The first three treat nineteenth-century poets. In his article on Wordsworth, Andrew L. Griffin attempts to unravel "Simon Lee" as a means to discovering the tangle of cooperating interests that went into the *Lyrical Ballads* poems. "Simon Lee" has always struck me, and I suspect many others, as being a thoroughly dumb poem, but Griffin succeeds in convincing me that this is not so and that the poem probably does come closer in spirit to "Tintern Abbey" than any other poem in *Lyrical Ballads*. Balancing various critical perspectives in his article on

Keats, Leon Waldoff succeeds in joining "Ode to Psyche," that problem child of the great odes, to the others through the theme of mutability. And Gerhard Joseph, raising a set of new questions and providing a number of new insights into Tennyson's poetry, shows in a delightfully written essay the extent to which Tennyson exemplifies the Victorian attempt to reconcile particulars and universals.

Paul Delany takes a Marxist perspective on *King Lear*, suggesting that the play's "philosophy" becomes clearer if approached in terms of the political struggle it dramatizes, viewing that struggle in terms of its meaning for Shakespeare and his audience. Joan S. Bennett, using *Eikonoklastes* and the *Defences* as a literary gloss on *Paradise Lost*, demonstrates an extensive and complex consistency between Milton's interpretation of Charles I as tyrant and his portrayal of Satan's tyranny. And Susan Suleiman, revealing that Proust's use of parenthetical construction has long been somewhat of an unexamined commonplace in literary criticism, treats in impressive detail the use of parenthesis on the level of narrative sequence in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

This issue concludes with essays on two enigmatic and somewhat awesome works written nearly 400 years apart, Rabelais's *Quart livre* and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. Alice Fiola Berry, comparing Rabelais to the young Stephen Dedalus in his effort to awaken from the nightmare of history by forging new words and forms, shows how in the *Quart livre* Rabelais drew on a compendium of voyage literature as well as on two Old Testament myths, molding the material to his own purposes and fusing it with new meaning to project his vision of universal catastrophe. Jonathan Arac, employing approaches developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most interesting of the formalist/structuralist critics, reveals *Volcano* as less hybrid fiction and more unified whole than most critics have previously considered it to be.

Northrop Frye is no doubt correct in claiming that *PMLA*, in attempting to reflect the whole MLA conspectus, tends to become a collection of prize essays rather than a journal with a specific shape. I trust he is also correct, however, when he goes on to add that, no matter how large and miscellaneous the scholarship (from Simon Lee to Malcolm Lowry), it would be a mistake to undervalue the attempt to reflect that scholarship as a total community.

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