

Editor's Column

PROTESTING that the award would tag him as a writer who had become "safe, polite, obedient, and sterile," Sinclair Lewis declined the Pulitzer Prize in 1926. For different reasons, Jean-Paul Sartre later turned his back on the Nobel Prize. Perhaps heeding Samuel Johnson's dictum that "Those sweet rewards, which decorate the brave, / 'Tis folly to decline," no *PMLA* author, has, to my knowledge, refused the William Riley Parker Prize. Now in its twenty-fifth year, that honor is bestowed annually on the author of an outstanding article in the association's journal. (The full list of winners appears in the September issue.)

The idea for such recognition originated with the MLA's Committee on Research Activities, whose mandate it is "to encourage the production and the improvement of scholarship in English and the modern languages and literatures." "Over the years," the rationale states, "the Committee has expressed concern over the fact that mere encouragement of research tends to be indiscriminating. Any intellectual activity is good, but some is manifestly better than other. The CRA has felt that the Association needs some means of distinguishing that which is outstanding, so that we may all be led to take notice, debate, and perhaps arrive at a more general consensus concerning the qualities which mark scholarship and criticism as superior" (79.5 [1964]: A-2). And so was born the CRA Prize, which carried an emolument of \$300 (raised to \$500 in 1968 and now \$1,000) and an engraved citation. In 1968 the MLA Executive Council voted to attach to the prize the name of the man who had served as the association's executive secretary from 1947 until 1956 and as president in 1959 and who was instrumental in bringing the MLA into national prominence.

What was then known as the *PMLA* Editorial Committee was canvassed for nominations and supporting statements, which were pooled with the CRA's own nominees, and the CRA, on the basis of a point system, made the final choice, balloting until a single article received a majority of votes. After two years, the CRA empowered three association members to select the winner on its behalf. That group was later increased to five colleagues, who, as the William Riley Parker Prize Selection Committee, nominate and rank contenders and finally pick an outstanding article. The formal presentation takes place at the business meeting of the annual convention.

On delivering the 1965 citation, President Howard Mumford Jones said, "To single out one article, for its excellence, from a whole year of *PMLA* is only a gesture, perhaps. But it is at least a gesture in the exercise of discrimination and in praise of excellence." All who appear on the roster of *PMLA* authors have, in fact, survived considerable competition and convinced a sizable and discriminating jury of the excellence of their work. Those responsible for the extraction of that single article from the year's array of riches know that the first round invariably produces no unanimity but a list of nominees and apparently impossible choices. That seventeen articles have received an honorable mention (as many as four in one year) is statistical testimony to that dilemma of discrimination. Of course, honors and honorable mentions come to *PMLA* articles from a variety of sources. The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, for example, recently called attention to Joan Templeton's "Of This Time, of This Place: Mrs. Alving's Ghosts and the Shape of the Tragedy" (Jan. 1986) and Nancy Vogeley's "Defining the 'Colonial Reader': *El Periquillo Sarniento*" (Oct. 1987). Donald W. Foster's "Master W. H., R.I.P." (Jan. 1987) received wide press coverage as well as the Parker Prize. The Spenser Society's 1987 Isabel MacCaffrey Award for the best article on Spenser appearing in the year 1986 went to Gordon Teskey for his "From Allegory to Dialectic: Imagining Error in Spenser and Milton" (Jan. 1986). I doubt that any *PMLA* article fails to receive due recognition in one way or another.

It is tempting to ask if any consistent criteria governed successive prize committees in their determination of distinction. One wonders if they brought to their labor a preestablished list of desiderata or if they simply knew what they liked when they saw it. The first award—in a year that could boast of sixty-eight articles in the four blue issues—went to an assistant professor at the University of Texas who, twenty years later and no longer an assistant professor at the University of Texas, sits on the current Parker Prize committee. David J. DeLaura's "Arnold and Carlyle" was a meticulously researched influence study that illuminated the complexity of Arnold's intellectual debts and critical writings. A subject, a style, and a method of an entirely different order bested the competition the following year, when René Girard's "Camus's Stranger Retried" was cited for the admirable lucidity that "carries all the power of persuasion inherent in a personal approach to a universal topic." In rapid sequence, literary history and structural analysis had laid their claims on the annual prize.

Three years later, after Donald Rackin received the prize for "Alice's Journey to the End of Night" (1967) and when the time came to recognize Stanley B. Greenfield's "Grammar and Meaning in Poetry,"

President Otis H. Green could discern a common denominator among the consecrated essays: "All the articles combine criticism with factual scholarship. All combine knowledge of literature with other scientific or cultural manifestations. . . ." Greenfield's examination of linguists' voyages among poetic texts and of the scientific claims made for the latest methodologies was the broadest and most theoretical of the prize winners to date, and it impressed the selection committee as "a productive plea for an interdisciplinary collaboration energetically reconverging on the illumination of the poetic text." The 1969 winner, Rudolf B. Gottfried, commended for both his "detailed historical scholarship" and his "broad theoretical understanding" in "Our New Poet: Archetypal Criticism and *The Faerie Queene*," pitted a critical method against a specific text to level a sharp attack on Northrop Frye and his followers.

These last two selections produced long and vehement protests in the 1970 volume of *College English*. Wayne A. O'Neil, in "The MLA's MVE Award for 1968" (284–90), accused Greenfield of having written a pointless article, went on to impugn the motives of the MLA and its committee, and concluded: "Joe Namath may be a swaggering son-of-a-bitch, but he's also one helluva good football player. We ought to see that our awards go to the best players, for unless we do, we operate at a very invidious and self-serving political level. . . ." Carol Ohmann then took on Gottfried in "Northrop Frye and the MLA" (291–300), defending Frye as she defended her view that the Gottfried essay rested on irrelevancies and misunderstandings of *Anatomy of Criticism*. She, too, questioned the appeal of such an essay to the prize committee and found an answer: "The MLA prize . . . went to a 1968 essay that confirms the prevailing ethos of the organization that awarded it: professional specialization pursued apart from rather than integrated with a concern for the nature of the society in which it flourishes or at least occurs." As one might expect, the following volume of *College English* (1971) brought a heavy dose of attack and rebuttal. The battle lines were drawn between "professional specialization" and "a criticism of concern," as Ohmann put it. While the period's volatility both in the national political arena and in literary criticism had exploded within the MLA, the 1970 prize committee celebrated E. D. Lowry's "The Lively Art of *Manhattan Transfer*" for its "intelligent use of history," that is, for its explication of the social implications of Dos Passos's novel in the light of the machine age's visual arts. From the distance of the late eighties it seems logical that in the climate of the early seventies Fredric Jameson should have walked away with the 1971 blue ribbon for his "Metacommentary," in which, according to the citation, "an ironic inversion of conventional procedures . . . invites us to reexamine our fundamental assumptions regarding literary interpretation." Jameson's essay, along with Greenfield's and Gottfried's, also signaled that theory was now competing more heavily for space in *PMLA* with the dominant categories of prizewinning essays: studies of individual texts (such as Hopkins's *The Wreck of the Deutschland*) and thematic or stylistic analyses of single authors (R. A. Yoder's review of Emerson's poetic style is a good example).

The concession of the 1975 prize reflected the new editorial policy that had gone into effect in 1973. Walter J. Ong's much-quoted lead article produced the following citation: "'The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction' brings both a venturesome imagination and a broad command of the relevant scholarship to bear on a central problem of Modernism: the interaction between the reader and writer. Its argument ranges widely over literary areas and genres, both written and spoken, casting light wherever it turns. Father Ong limns new areas for scrutiny in a study which deftly combines learning, critical sophistication, and humor." A wide range also characterized several articles that garnered special accolades in the years that followed: R. G. Peterson's numerological investigation, "Critical Calculations: Measure and Symmetry in Literature" (1976), elicited approval for "drawing on examples from many periods of literature"; the readers of Evelyn J. Hinz's "Hierogamy versus Wedlock: Types of Marriage Plots and Their Relationship to Genres of Prose Fiction" (1977) applauded its "interdisciplinary approach to genre theory"; Morris E. Eaves's study, "Blake and the Artistic Machine: An Essay in Decorum and Technology" (1978), drew admiration for setting "his lucid exposition of Blake's attitudes toward technological change within the broad contexts of conceptual analysis, cultural history from the Renaissance to the present, and the influence of the machine on the human condition"; and David H. Miles's textual analysis of Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* in "Portrait of the Marxist as a Young Hegelian" (1979) was singled out for its blend of critical theory and literary history.

Both the contents of *PMLA* and the Parker Prize committees had begun to exhibit a certain predilection for the article of general appeal. Our colleagues' verdicts in the present decade should nevertheless come as reassurance to potential contributors of any bent. Even if what the 1964 winner called "influence" had become "intertextuality" by 1984, the connections between two writers still captivated committee members. And in each year of the contest, they could choose from an assortment of topics

and methodologies. Recent winners have scrutinized *Le misanthrope* (Roger W. Herzog, 1980), Shakespeare's plays and sonnets (George T. Wright, 1981; A. Kent Hieatt, 1984), and Boccaccio's *Genealogy* (Thomas Hyde, 1986). They have also stepped back from the text to consider its contexts and reception. Hans Eichner cast a sweeping eye on cultural history and helped to revise set positions in "The Rise of Modern Science and the Genesis of Romanticism" (1982). Paul B. Armstrong confronted the current critical debate and proposed his own criteria in "The Conflict of Interpretations and the Limits of Pluralism" (1983). Of Terry J. Castle's "The Carnivalization of Eighteenth-Century English Narrative" (1985), the panel said that it "carries wide-ranging implications for narrative theory and offers a significant new illumination of eighteenth-century culture. This ambitious and imaginative essay exemplifies what many readers would most like to find in the pages of *PMLA*." In 1987 the critical direction shifted yet again as the vote favored an essay—Foster on Shakespeare—that the committee commended as offering "a marvelous example of old-fashioned literary detective work drawing on the traditional—and, as many may have thought, passé—techniques of scholarship that everybody learned in graduate school."

There is no doubt that preconceptions and fashions don't carry the day with the Parker Prize committee and that its criteria are flexible and accommodating. The jurors expect an essay to be coherent and logically argued, they value a touch of elegance, and they use the word *lucid* more frequently than any other in their annual citations. Originality and imaginativeness, solid grounding, critical relevance, penetrating insights, broad significance—these are the traits that spur their praise. But then, these are the traits that readers expect to find in all *PMLA* articles. Small wonder that the prize is allotted not to *the* but to *an* outstanding essay in a given year. In the quarter century of the competition's history, English topics have received nearly half the honors; the foreign literatures have captured few. Poetry and narrative have carried equal weight, with drama lagging behind. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been the favored periods. Two MLA members, Elisabeth Schneider and George T. Wright, have received the prize twice; Marshall Brown has earned two honorable mentions. Almost all the laurels have gone to men and almost fifty percent to full professors. Only two of the recipients in the first nineteen years of the prize were assistant professors, but colleagues at this rank have produced five of the six most recent winning articles. I am as reluctant to interpret these data as I am to offer an explanation for the fact that the October issue has produced more prize articles than has any of the others, with January running a close second.

This first number of volume 104 offers a series of new readings of important texts from various cultures. James L. Rolleston brings to the attention of the reader of English a body of neglected writings by Benjamin that he locates within the modernist discussions of language, culture, and ideology. Joan Templeton returns to *PMLA* with a provocative subversion of Nora criticism and makes a strong case for Ibsen as a bona fide feminist. Benjamin, again, and others provide Christiane von Buelow with a methodological superstructure for an approximation to the avant-garde aesthetic of a key Latin American poet, César Vallejo. Kenneth Burke and Augustine both take on fresh life as Robert McMahan studies *The Rhetoric of Religion* from the vantage point of Platonist comedy. In equally original fashion Robert DeMaria's thorough examination of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* extracts multiple levels of political implication. One of these authors or another of the contributors to *PMLA* between October 1988 and May 1989 will be selected as the winner of the 1989 William Riley Parker Prize. I trust that none of them would follow the example of Lewis and Sartre in refusing the honor; but I also suspect that—instinctively sharing Emerson's perception of "the avarice of reward" as the epitome of vulgarity—none mailed their manuscripts to Astor Place with the expectation of receiving a check and an engraved scroll in their stamped, self-addressed return envelopes. The opportunity that these authors have found to speak from the pages of *PMLA* is in itself—if I may be allowed a touch of editorial hubris—a prize and a mark of distinction.

JOHN W. KRONIK