

## Editor's Column

CERTAIN POEMS and plays and novels, the ones to which we return again and again, seem inexhaustible. A hundred years from now, as our Association moves toward its bicentennial, *PMLA* will probably still be publishing essays on *Pantagruel*, *Don Quixote*, and *Faust*, on *Emma* and *Leaves of Grass*. And so it should. A primary function of academic criticism is, after all, to provide fresh interpretations of classic works, to reveal in favorite texts new meanings, unexpected resonance. But literary analysis should also serve to arouse our curiosity about less familiar books, those we have either left unopened or allowed to fade from memory. The essays in our May issue succeed, I think, in both objectives: they illuminate texts already well annotated and encourage reading (or rereading) some we have neglected or overlooked.

I must admit, though, that I approached Garrett Stewart's essay with considerable doubt that anyone could possibly cast new light on *Heart of Darkness*. The MLA bibliographies of the past ten years list scores of articles on this brief work, including a quite recent study in these pages (March 1979). The novel, moreover, is one of those ideal seminar texts, like *Billy Budd* and *The Great Gatsby*, that some of us have taught often enough to know almost by heart. Stewart, I thought, would be hard put to convince me of his originality. He won me over in only a few pages, and I ended up sharing our advisory editor's opinion: "The whole last section made me think about *Heart of Darkness* in a new way . . . what [Stewart] has to say is clearly interesting and important." The specialist reader found "a rich brew of profound insight into the imagination's working, subtle manipulation of linguistic tropes to reveal their burdens, and a broadly philosophical bent. The essay may well become a widely discussed entry in the long list of studies of this story." With the blessing of the Editorial Board, I take pride in presenting yet another word—surely not the last—on Conrad's endlessly fascinating tale.

Mary Poovey's approach to Mary Shelley's own private heart of darkness sent me "back" to *Frankenstein*. I suspect, however, that my sense of the novel was based not on an actual reading in some earlier incarnation but rather on the film versions that have troubled my sleep over the years. Having now devoted one entirely sleepless night to the book, I find myself impressed by its complexity and stylistic power, qualities that get flattened out on the screen, as well as by the intelligence (and lucidity) of Poovey's essay. I agree both with our specialist reader, who found the article "thoroughly engrossing and stimulating . . . sensitive to both the literary and psychological complexities," and with our advisory editor, who called it "fresh, provocative, and persuasive [with] far-reaching implications."

I have placed the essays on Molière and Browning together partly because both are comparative (one involving drama and stagecraft, the other poetry and the visual arts) but mainly because I like the implied discourse between those two deflators of hypocrisy and affectation. Some of Browning's self-important speakers, at least the bilingual ones, could strut into a Molière play without causing the actors to miss so much as a beat. It is these actors, specifically the first cast of *Le Misanthrope*, that engage Roger Herzog's attention. His essay, our specialist reader notes, "is both elegant and authoritative. It turns to good interpretive use what can be gathered from Molière's own casting of his most problematic comedy . . . the result is a truly fresh look at the play." The advisory editor concurred: "Other critics have paid attention to Molière as *homme de théâtre* and to the typical assignment of roles to actors, but no one has given so subtle and convincing an account of the interaction of the different roles and styles, the range from broad comedy to near seriousness, and the space thus created at the center for the principal comic role." Herzog's earlier *PMLA* essay on Molière (October 1978) attracted a good deal of interest. I expect this one to do so as well.

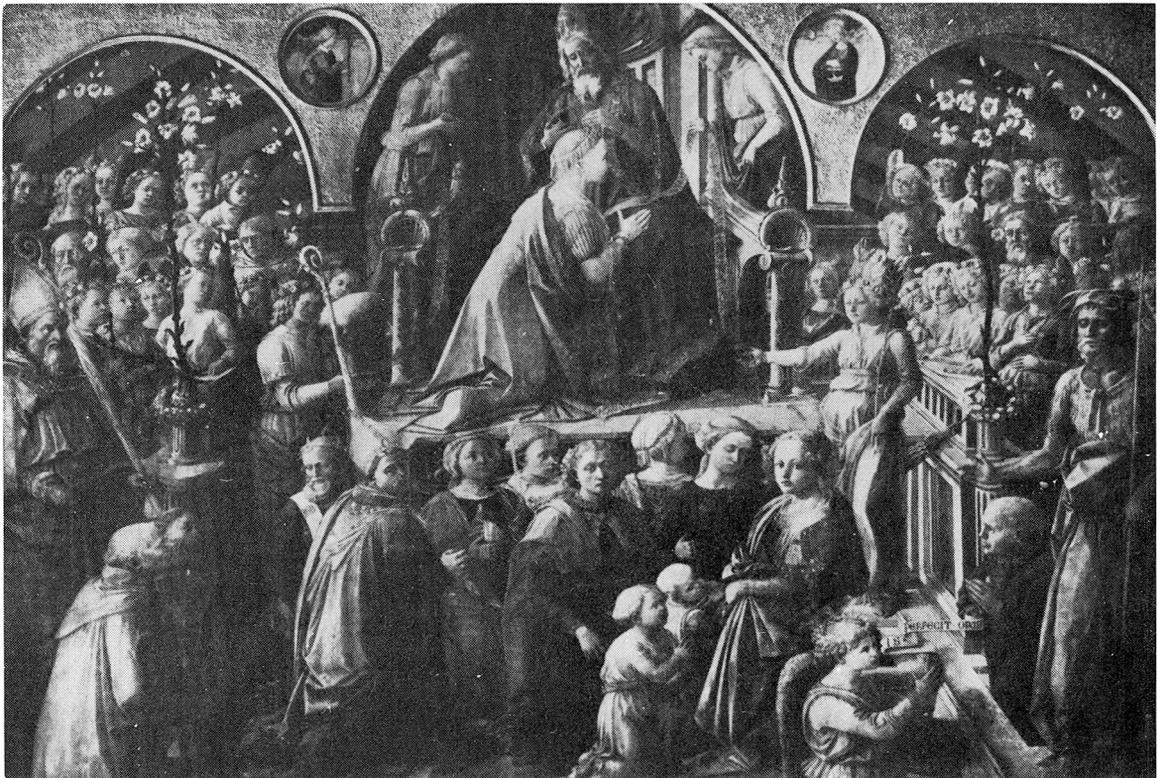
The essay on Browning also represents a return appearance: David J. DeLaura's "Arnold and Carlyle" was awarded our first William Riley Parker Prize, in 1964. His new essay, the only fully developed treatment of the controversy over Alexis François Rio and the Christian-art thesis in England during the 1840s, is the first study to see this aesthetic issue as the immediate context of Browning's painter poems. "What is advanced here," our advisory editor

wrote, "seems exactly right and is challenging . . . this is an important piece of historical and critical scholarship." Since, as David DeLaura's departmental colleague, I was required to abstain during the Editorial Board's vote, I am glad to record here my admiration for this richly learned essay.

Our final essay, by Barbara Foley, differs from the others in having as its subject not a text or an author but a genre, one that fuses the imaginative with the reportorial and thus presents difficulties with terminology, as the current debate over whether Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* is fiction clearly suggests. Other notable examples during the last two decades are Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Doctorow's *Ragtime* (this sort of writing is increasingly referred to—alas—as "faction"). Foley, however, contending that the "nonfiction novel" is not just a post-World War II phenomenon, shows that Afro-American literature has long borrowed from a documentary tradition stretching back to Nashe and Defoe. She indicates that an awareness of some generally ignored facets of American writing can help us understand how "fact" and "fiction" work together. The essay, in the words of our specialist reader, "is an apt demonstration of a mode . . . too little rehearsed in the pages of *PMLA* and exactly evaluated in Foley's closing sentences."

I am pleased, in my own closing sentences, to introduce Jean A. Perkins' presidential address, delivered at the San Francisco Hyatt in December. Following her presentation I shared with the audience my opinion that an unusually illuminating issue of my favorite journal would have a lead article "both eloquent and substantial." Now that I have read as well as heard her words I am convinced that I was correct. I hope you will agree that I am also correct in thinking that this May issue as a whole proves that there actually is something new under the sun, at least in the world of literary scholarship.

JOEL CONARROE



Filippo Lippi's *L'Incoronazione di Maria*  
Uffizi Gallery, Florence