

PMLA

Volume 96
Number 5

*Publications of the
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of America*

October 1981

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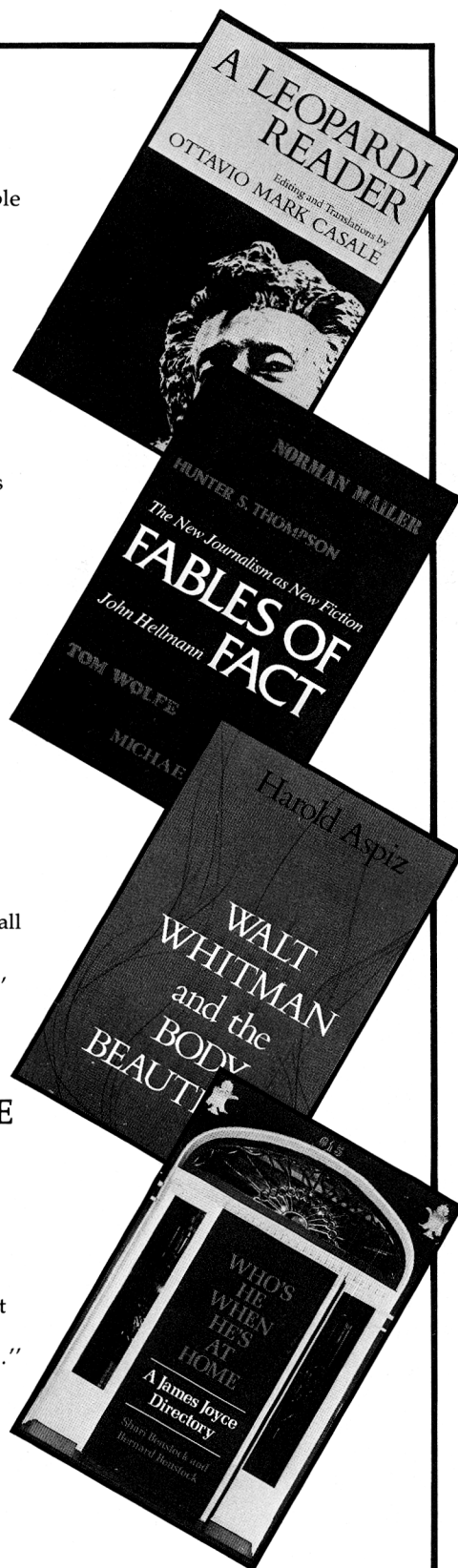
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Nabokov's *Invitation*: Literature as Execution. DALE E. PETERSON 824

Abstract. Although Nabokov enjoyed high acclaim as a serious artist, his work never pretended to the high seriousness of “moral fiction.” Yet he obviously intended, through his forbidding forewords and enticing texts, to invite his readers to reflect on the engagement with “reality” that serious fiction encourages. With principled wit, his compositions shatter the durable illusion that “realistic” characters and readers can somehow cocreate the structures that hold them captive. Nabokov's characteristic refusal to finish off his compositions frees both characters and readers to create a posttextual existence. His novel *Invitation to a Beheading*, although often misunderstood as a transparent allegory, is an opaque parable that resists the complicity of writer and reader, of leader and follower, to execute identities and meanings. Nabokov's modernistic narrative—as much as, if not more than, the conventional moral fictions of mimetic realism—is an ethical form that values the irreducible density of human experience. (DEP)

Seeing through *Macbeth*. STEPHEN LEO CARR AND PEGGY A. KNAPP 837

Abstract. When we create or interpret a text's meaning and genre, numerous and often conflicting historical concerns mediate our insights. Because of its historical situation, *Macbeth* imperfectly articulates its tragic dimensions and thus empowers later interpreters to draw on their historical situations to imagine Macbeth's motives. Two eighteenth-century illustrations of *Macbeth* radically reconceive Macbeth's troubling choice of action: both designs invite contemporary critics to define his inchoate yearnings, to identify the play's tragic vision. John Zoffany playfully appropriates the “Choice of Hercules” topos to represent Macbeth's predicament satirically, allowing us to see Macbeth's appalling regicide as a tragic product of now common entrepreneurial schemes. The melodramatic confusion of motive and motion in Henry Fuseli's watercolor reveals another kinship with *Macbeth*, a psychoanalytic linkage between our desires and his deed. Interpreting these interpretive illustrations enables us to see through the problematic surface of *Macbeth* to its tragic richness. (SLC and PAK)

Readers in Texts. W. DANIEL WILSON 848

Abstract. The failure to distinguish between Iser's “implied” reader (analogous to Booth's implied author and referring to the reading behavior a text demands of us) and the “characterized” reader (referred to directly or indirectly in the text) has promoted a good deal of critical confusion. Although the work of Wolff, Iser, Ong, Link, and Prince, among others, is crucial to our understanding of how fictional readers function in texts, it generates certain misleading conceptual categories. In part this confusion is due to a gap between continental and American reader-response theory. The “implied reader” is not a philosopher's stone that will objectify criticism, but it can be a useful concept to the newer communication-oriented theories of criticism. (WDW)

The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters. FRANK WHIGHAM . 864

Abstract. Renaissance courtesy theory helped organize the pursuit and repression of social mobility in Elizabethan England; the letters of supplication written by courtiers seeking preferment record the practice of this aristocratic ideology. Such letters were governed by codified epistolary theory and by the oppressive exigencies of political connection and distance in a newly centralized nation-state. A sample set of these letters, from Toby Mathew to Sir Christopher Hatton, reveals an implicit rhetoric. Mathew presents conspicuously little "objective" argument in support of his technical qualifications for the post he seeks. Instead, the letters focus on depicting the suitor's personal and political graces and the patron's magnanimous power. Though these persuasions embody coherent arts of modest ostentation and flattery, they also reveal anxiety, and we cannot easily assess the reception their depictive products met. The congruent forms of erotic seduction, prayer, and self-entertainment may offer important parallels. (FW)

Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe. PAUL SHERWIN . . . 883

Abstract. Much in *Frankenstein* suggests that the novel and classical psychoanalysis are meant for each other. The creation becomes a significant act, at once paradigmatic and intensely human, when viewed as a repetition of Frankenstein's primal-scene trauma, with the Creature emerging as a representation of the scene and the related oedipal complex. A psychoanalytic interpretation, however, requires a drastic secondary revision of *Frankenstein*, and not enough insight is purchased by so much blindness. The analyst repeats, yet fails to elucidate, the misreading of world, self, and Creature that renders Frankenstein a tiresome neurotic. But before this personal collapse Frankenstein achieved the sublime. His catastrophe of origination, engendering a creative self that anxiously pursues an impossible desire and an artifact that both represents and eclipses the creator, serves as a paradigm of the genesis of any sublime artwork, any uncanny re-animation project. (PS)

The Poem as Place: Three Modes of Scenic Rendering in the Lyric. BRIGITTE PEUCKER 904

Abstract. There are essentially three orientations toward landscape description in the lyric: the kind that describes an external place that serves as a backdrop, ornament, or illustration for the poet's thinking; the kind that transforms an external scene into a region of the poet's mind; and the kind that claims to be a habitable region in its own right. Each type has its own mode of assertiveness. In the first, the poetry of distance, description is made possible by claiming that it is impossible to enter the scene. The second features the topography of the inner eye, which results when the poet claims to absorb and become a space. The rhetoric of the third makes the text itself a "place." All three imply a staking out of poetic territory and the rhetorical domination of the scene. Since these modes transcend literary periodization, they furnish a loosely drawn typology of descriptive poetry. (BP)

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