

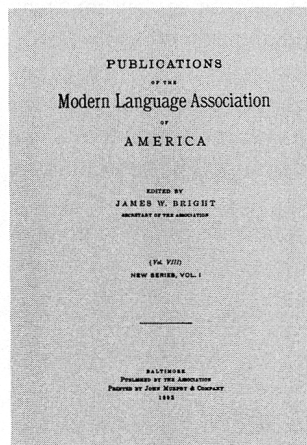
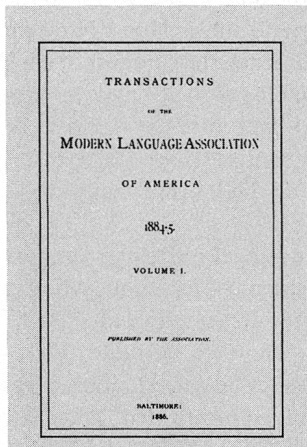
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# Editor's Column

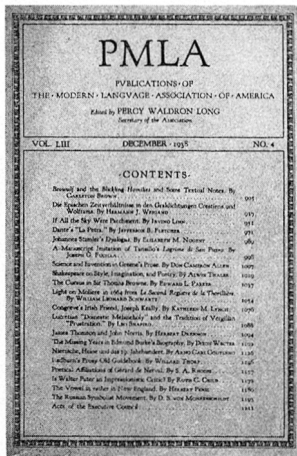
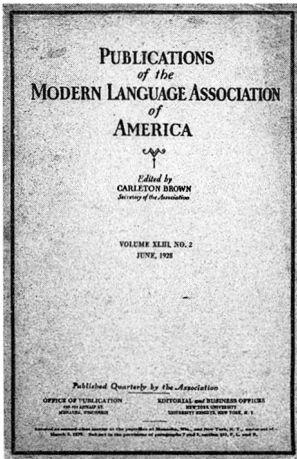
CAN one tell a journal by its cover? Do clothes make the magazine? Surely not. Readers of modern criticism who duly accept the inseparability of form and content are still likely to share Miguel de Unamuno's expressed predilection for the sculptor's art over the tailor's. But while *PMLA*'s intellectual respectability does not rest on its cover, typography, and interior layout, these factors can make a symbolic statement and contribute to readability. Most long-lived professional journals change their look occasionally, and if a centenarian is to remain attractive as tastes change, periodic cosmetic surgery becomes a necessity. The *PMLA* you are holding in your hands reflects the publication's first physical transformation in almost two decades.

Seven different designs have graced *PMLA*'s exterior during its long history; internal changes have been more frequent. Named *Transactions of the Modern Language Association of America* at its birth in 1884, the journal measured approximately 9 inches long by 5¾ inches wide and was wrapped in a simple light brown cover with a plain frame of double lines. The second volume, which included the program of the annual meeting, bore a correspondingly expanded title, *Transactions and Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America*. By the fourth volume the members had settled on *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. That year also saw a new typeface on the title page, heavier paper, and a slight rearrangement of the information on the cover. The new editor, who assumed his duties in 1893, changed the font once more, reformatted the table of contents and the title pages of the articles, chose a grainy olive brown for the cover, and sacrificed the decorative frame to sobriety. Most serious, he banished authors' names to small print at the ends of articles, where they were to languish until 1948. Authors achieved supreme elevation in 1971, when their names were lifted from below the titles to the superior positions they still hold. In contrast, the fourth number of 1890 (the year in which the publication became a quarterly) had begun to display the editor's name on the cover, a practice that persisted for sixty years, until modesty was once again imposed on editorial egos.

The cover statement throughout the 1910s that the journal is "Publisht Quarterly" and has its "Offis of Publication" in Baltimore cannot be attributed to careless proofreading, but the masthead designations of





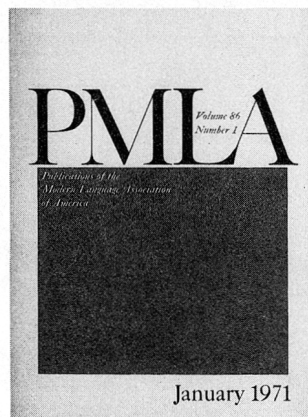
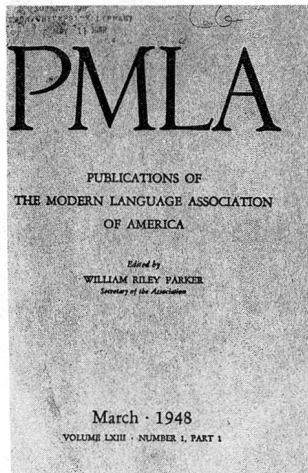


volume 39 as XXXVIX and volume 41 as XL—testify to the Roman Empire's failure to reach Menasha, Wisconsin, where the journal's printing operation was moved in 1922. The first notable change in the cover design came in 1925: blue characters were set on a grayish background, and both the lettering and the arrangement of information became more elaborate. No doubt in response to members' complaints that the association's journal looked dull, the double frame made its return and brought with it a typographic ornament. The annual supplement, containing the proceedings of the December meeting and the list of members, had the same layout and color combination as the other issues. The rubric "PMLA" appeared for the first time in 1928 at the head of the lead piece and became the journal's official name the following year, when the cover was significantly modified yet again. Inside a fancier frame stood two boxes, one with the acronym and the customary full name—now artistically rendered, as it was on the redesigned title page, with nonfunctional hyphens and classical touches: PUBLICATIONS-OF-THE-MODERN-LANGUAGE-ASSOCIATION. (Traditions die hard at the MLA, so the V didn't revert to U until December 1953, and the hyphens hung on through 1967.) In a radical move the other box listed the contents of each issue. The first of these covers was printed in blue on beige and the subsequent ones in brown on beige, a portent of the future but without the meaningful color coding that developed later. Unlike Lucky Strike green, *PMLA* brown did not go to war and remained the journal's only shade for almost twenty years.

Perhaps the restlessness of *PMLA*'s editor during these years prompted his successor to exercise a light hand on the journal's appearance during the following decade and a half. There were no further major alterations until the end of 1947, when the cover was streamlined, the table of contents was returned to the inside front matter, and the pattern of blue (essay) and brown (directory and program) issues was instituted. The most extreme format change in *PMLA*'s history came in 1958: the shift to a larger trim size, 10 $\frac{3}{8}$  by 7 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches, and to two-column pages. The cover design and the logo remained the same, but the new dimensions may have been the despair of librarians, who had to find higher shelf space for the new numbers or turn them on their sides. Ten years later the title page was again revamped, and the insertion of abstracts forced the revision of the table of contents. The desire to make *PMLA* ever more readable, clear, and "modern" led to the next to last change in design. The familiar cover and layout that the current issue replaces were introduced in 1971.

As the years passed, calls for renovation came once again, from both within and outside the Editorial Board. The deliberations of two successive boards produced a proposal to the Executive Council to authorize a new format. In its quick and positive response in May 1988, the council charged the editorial staff (1) to survey the board, the *PMLA* Advisory Committee, council members, and a sampling of readers and librarians to cull opinions about the journal's appearance; (2) to determine what improvements could be made with minimal expenses; and (3) to commis-





sion a number of designs for consideration by the Editorial Board. Several options were duly presented and, after lengthy discussions within the board and consultations between board and council, the *PMLA* of the 1990s emerged. The process involved juggling members' needs and tastes with design principles and economic factors. For example, since the double-column format had elicited some criticism, the board gave serious thought to a smaller trim size and an undivided page, ultimately deciding, however, that the advantages could not justify the 33% increase in production costs. We hope that the completely new cover, the restyled features, and the airier interior will please readers until the time is again ripe for a change, perhaps in the next century.

Unlike the Progressive Party after Theodore Roosevelt's defeat, *PMLA* is not "all dressed up, with nowhere to go." Its freshly donned finery signals new steps that the journal has already taken and new directions that it proposes to explore. In his editor's column in October 1981, Joel Conarroe wrote, "I like to think that by 1990 we will be able to look back to the 1980s and see significant incorporation of approaches previously unpublished or underrepresented. I offer this hope as an invitation and as a challenge." The invitation has been accepted and the challenge met: the past decade has indeed brought new subjects and approaches into our pages, and the effort continues. With this issue *PMLA* initiates the special-topics feature that was announced in May 1987, and it does so with a field that, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., says in his introduction, "had been systematically excluded" from the canon and that is now being "revoiced as a mainstream concern."

The response to our call for papers surpassed all expectations, and we are grateful to the many members, in the United States and abroad, who by submitting their work made the most meaningful possible gesture of support for the journal's new venture in general and for the topic of African and African American Literature in particular. The initiation of this feature has had the happy peripheral effect of attracting more members into the association and into convention activities. *PMLA*'s editorial staff deserves particular plaudits for managing the heavy flow of manuscripts that transformed a projected section of a regular number into an entire special issue. From the 118 essays submitted, consultant readers, Advisory Committee members, and the Editorial Board selected the seven that are included here. Varied in subject matter, scope, focus, and method, they stand out for the quality of their research and their insights; they are penetrating, instructive, and sometimes controversial. But because they were selected according to the same criteria and procedures that apply to all submissions to the journal, there are, inevitably, serious lacunae. Entire geographical areas of black literature and many pertinent issues are not touched in these pages. While I am tempted to conjecture about the reasons for these absences, it is more important to stress the opportunity to redress the imbalance in future issues. All of us hope that this important but limited sampling of the field will serve as but the first step toward a continuing presence of African and African American literature in *PMLA*.

For making this initial stage possible, my colleagues and I, as well as the constituency whose writings this issue exposes and analyzes, are indebted to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. His enthusiastic support of the project, his valuable suggestions, his tireless recruitment of potential contributors—in short, his committed services as coordinator—have been key factors in the success of this enterprise. I also wish to thank Wole Soyinka, MLA Honorary Fellow and Nobel prize winner, for his willingness to return to our pages on this appropriate occasion with the powerful address that forms part of this packet.

This issue, I remind readers, initiates a series of special-topic numbers. We invite and eagerly await your contributions on the two themes announced earlier, on which we are still receiving manuscripts, Theory of Literary History and Performance, and to the two new themes that have just been added, Literature and the Idea of Europe (for the description and deadline, see p. 6 of this issue) and Literature and Censorship (the description will appear in the March issue; the deadline is 1 February 1992).

The ultimate success of these topics, like the health of the association's journal, depends on the collaboration of members, not on *PMLA*'s cover, layout, trim, and type. Matthew Arnold defined the poet's muse as "Radiant, adorn'd outside; a hidden ground / Of thought and of austerity within." The notion of austerity, for all its ambiguousness, is troublesome, but I like to think that a thoughtful interior matched with a radiant facade is also an apt characterization of *PMLA*.

JOHN W. KRONIK