Editor's Column

ALTHOUGH NATURE and art are no doubt here to stay, the nineteenth century has for some time now been getting on in years. In the lead article in this issue, Carl Woodring is concerned with all three—art, nature, and the nineteenth century—but from the perspective of our own decade, writing the kind of literary history that attempts, at least in part, to see ourselves as others have not yet seen us. Recognizing that "the road we are trying to repair passed through nineteenth-century travail," Woodring relates current attitudes to nineteenth-century concerns with art and nature, concluding that today both Wordsworth's environmentalism and the self-sufficiency of Oscar Wilde are still alive. Woodring is by no means the first to ponder such matters, but the range and lucidity of his recapitulation make the essay valuable to specialist and nonspecialist alike; we all have a vested interest in art and nature and all come trailing at least some clouds of glory from the preceding century. The essay has energy and philosophic insight in large measure, and abundant instances of Woodring's wit ("In their ignorance and folly, the Romantics missed a great opportunity to be as miserable as we are").

Although, under *PMLA*'s revised editorial policy, articles on the "big three" of English literature have not been wanting, this is the first time we have had articles on all of them in a single issue. Thus the three articles that follow Woodring's—Wimsatt on Chaucer, Matchett on Shakespeare, and Samuel on Milton—are grouped because they treat the classic authors, and do so in ways or with concerns that might themselves be described as classic. James Wimsatt explores that old chestnut, the idea that Chaucer's *Troilus* was the first modern novel, showing how Chaucer used irony to undercut the effects of the traditional literary modes while employing the elements and techniques of realism to create a work that is indeed much like modern fiction. It is an old problem with a new approach, of interest not just to Chaucerians but to anyone concerned with fiction and the notion of an English literary tradition. William Matchett's chestnut is even older than Wimsatt's, a concern with Shakespeare's imagination, with image clusters and the association of ideas, but again with a new slant. In arguing that Shakespeare's imagination was theatrical and that to understand how it worked we have to look beyond exclusively verbal terms, Matchett's article is controversial but productive. Whether or not we accept his idea that, at Shakespeare's most creative moments, association provided wide-ranging systems of intermeshing concepts, we profit from it. Irene Samuel's chestnut is poetics. Exploring the ways in which Milton's thinking about poetry developed—his concern with poetic inspiration, with relations between poet and audience, with questions about the utility of art—Samuel concluded that Milton's theory accords with what he achieved more fully than theories of poetics evolved by Sidney, Shelley, or Wordsworth accorded with their achievements. While this conclusion may, as with Wimsatt's and Matchett's, be debatable, it's a debate well worth holding.

The next two articles are concerned with Defoe and Auden, authors who, while not among the "big three" of English literature, no doubt lurk among the top thirty; in any event, I group the articles because I feel they superbly exemplify historical and literary analysis that centers on individual works but goes far beyond the works themselves in their scope and interest. Maximillian Novak sees Defoe as having created in the *Journal of the Plague Year* the first realistic fiction in which the narrator is sympathetic to both victim and survivor, and thus suggests that Defoe's "H. F." set a pattern for fictional narrators that has been central to the development of the novel. Peter Firchow, in his splendidly documented analysis of the "Auden group," shows the importance of the idea of the group in Auden's early poetry and the way in which that concept provides a key to the underlying sociopolitical structure of *The Orators*. As with many other articles we are currently publishing in *PMLA*, the article's value transcends the analysis of the particular poem in exploring and explaining the ways in which the 1930's poets thought and worked.

The first six articles in this issue, then, all involve traditional approaches to literary study, and they all treat something. Laura Barge on Beckett and John Coetzee on Achterberg are less than traditional and share a concern, or really their authors' concerns, with nothing—with being and nothingness, with the fascinating idea that nothing is more real than nothing. Beckett's

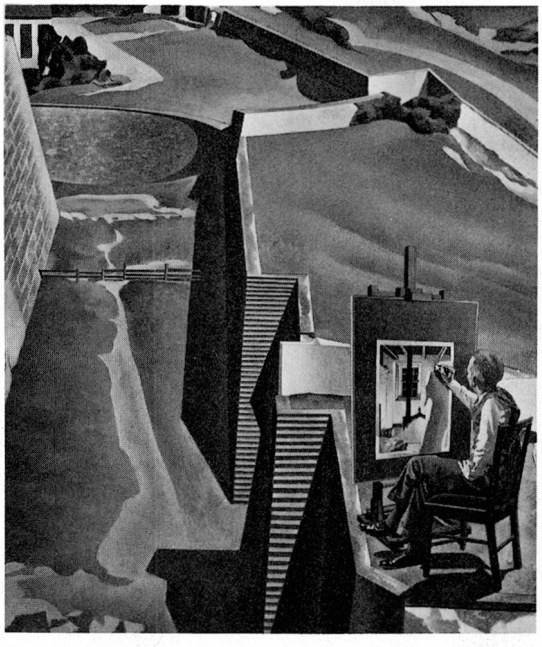
later fiction is, to say the least, enigmatic, but in detailing the Beckettian hero's withdrawal from macrocosm to microscosmic self, Barge shows how the later work is thematically united to the earlier. Her article, according to one of our readers, "comes closer to being a definitive statement of what Beckett's work is 'about' than anything of comparable length." For those of us who have long wondered what Beckett *is* about, the article is truly enlightening.

Few of us, I suspect, have spent much time wondering what Gerrit Achterberg's "Ballad of a Gasfitter" is about, for few of us have read, or perhaps even heard of, this intriguing work by one of the most important of the modern Dutch poets. Coetzee treats the "Ballad" in considerable detail and, in revealing how the poem works "at the borders of language, and sometimes absurdly behind them," also treats problems of translation (Coetzee translates the poem as he explicates it) and explores the "mystery" of the *I* and the *you*. In so doing, Coetzee suggests that many of our problems in reading certain poems arise from inadmissable translation of the *I* and the *you* into referential forms, and thus his analysis has application to many better-known works by poets such as Eliot or Stevens. In sum, this article is loaded; it demands close and careful reading (probably rereading), for Coetzee himself embarks on a kind of *I* and *you* dialogue with the poem he treats.

The issue concludes with Helene Keyssar's "I Love You. Who Are You?"—a timely and (once again) no doubt controversial analysis of the world of a play as differentiated from the world of the audience. Drawing in part on Stanley Fish's work with "affective" stylistics, Keyssar, while centering her analysis on recognition scenes, ranges far in her treatment of the dichotomy between "theater" and "drama"; her comments on film and on the modern theater, on what she sees as both ethical and esthetic misconceptions of those currently working in the theater, are as provocative as her title.

The illustration printed below is intended to accompany Carl Woodring's views on art and nature. I had wanted to print something from *The Yellow Book*, perhaps an illustration of Oscar Wilde holding a daffodil. Unfortunately, I was outvoted by staff colleagues who wanted what we are getting, an illustration painted by Charles Sheeler. I do not understand the painting at all and am sure that John Ruskin would not have approved.

WILLIAM D. SCHAEFER



Charles Sheeler, *The Artist Looks at Nature*, Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.