

ALSC NEWSLETTER

The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 1

SPRING 1995

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From the Editor:

Two items in this our first newsletter will answer some frequently asked questions: How did the ALSC come into existence? And: What is it planning to do next? No one is better qualified to tell the story of the Association's birth than Norman Fruman, who was there from the beginning. The Times Literary Supplement had already invited Norman to write on this subject when we approached him, and he kindly agreed to let us have this preview of his chronicle. Since the most important event in the ALSC's future is its first national conference, we asked program committee chair Jay Martin to set out for us where plans for the conference now stand.

Meanwhile Roger Shattuck's lively and provocative paper was the high point of the September 1994 Boston planning conference, arguably the most important ALSC event to date. Also included here is a notice (page eleven) designed for posting on a departmental bulletin board, or for photocopying to mail to friends who may be interested in joining the ALSC.

This newsletter is long overdue; organizing a new professional association from scratch has kept all of us very busy, but we now realize that a newsletter should always have been higher on our list of priorities. There is probably nothing that reassures people that an organization really exists as much as a newsletter.

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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ALSC

By Norman Fruman

"Beginnings are apt to be shadowy," wrote Rachel Carson of the birth of the sea around us, and this is certainly true of the origins of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. It was during the middle 1980's that alarm over the disintegrating state of literary studies threatened to reach a flash point. After a hegemony of at least three decades, the New Criticism had collapsed. The Deconstructive sparks that had been lighted at Johns Hopkins and Yale during the 1970's suddenly exploded into a firestorm across the nation. The astonishingly rapid rise of the New Historicism, Cultural Studies and extreme forms of Feminist criticism all contributed to an acutely painful sense that the study of literature was metamorphosing into a morally compromised and degraded branch of politics and the social sciences.

It was during the 1980's also that the Modern Language Association passionately embraced the politics of race, class, and gender, and aggressively championed wholesale revision of the canon, while at the same time drastically reducing commitment to traditional scholarship and criticism. Discontent was widespread, but isolated and unfocused. And dissent was becoming dangerous: dissenters were marginalized and in some cases disgraced.

John Ellis believes that it was in 1991 that he first heard it suggested that literary scholars unhappy with the prevailing orthodoxies should consider organizing a new society that would reflect their own values and concerns. He thought it an interesting idea, but unlikely to be acted upon. Who would willingly undertake the immense commitment in time and energy necessary to midwife the birth of a national association? Where would the money come from to get people together to discuss possibilities

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*Norman Fruman is Professor of English
at the University of Minnesota*

The President's Column

It is now over a year since a small group of committed scholars met on the Irvine campus of the University of California to found what was to be known as the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics--the ALSC. Curiously enough, the participants in that meeting had the conscious sense that what they were doing might amount to an event of some importance in American academic circles.

That group of eight (actually, we were in spirit eleven) has grown in the short span of one year into an organization with a total membership which by the time this reaches you will exceed 1000. Among its members the ALSC counts four active college presidents, two former presidents of the MLA, and many presidents of other literary organizations.

The original group that met in Southern California made a firm decision that the organization should bring back together in active communication academic scholars and professional writers, and also restore the links between classicists and modernists under the broad framework of literary studies. It is therefore a great pleasure to report to you that among the members of the ALSC are more than 60 prominent writers and an even larger number of classicists.

By any estimate it would appear that the ALSC has thus far been a rousing success. But much more needs to be done:

1) The most important event in the immediate future is our first national conference, to be held at the Radisson Metrodome, Minneapolis from September 22-24 of this year. The exciting program being developed by the program committee chaired by Jay Martin is described by Jay in a separate article. I urge you all to make every effort to attend this first gathering of the Association's membership. The high level of motivation and commitment on the part of everyone concerned should make this a memorable occasion. We have tried to make it easier for members to come by negotiating (and even partially subsidizing) the very attractive room rate of \$58 per night.

2) The Irvine meeting decided to remove any national designation from the group's title: we are **not** the *American* Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. The next big push of our membership drive must be international. On this matter the Steering Committee welcomes your suggestions.

3) We must intensify our efforts to bring more younger colleagues into the fold. While this will occur naturally with time and as the ALSC's purpose and program become more widely known, active efforts to reach and attract them are still needed. As you will see from the announcement on page 10, we are making special efforts to bring younger colleagues to the Minneapolis conference.

Let me close by saying how honored and privileged I feel to have served as President of the ALSC in its challenging first phase. As its membership continues to grow and its financial position becomes more solid, even better things must lie ahead.

And finally, our thanks are due to John Ellis for putting together and getting out to our rapidly growing membership this much needed newsletter.

Ricardo Quinones

ALSC NEWSLETTER

Volume 1, Number 1
Spring, 1995

ALSC NEWSLETTER is published quarterly as a service to the members of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, a non-profit, tax-exempt organization, and edited by the Secretary/Treasurer of the Association. Letters, news items and manuscripts should be addressed to:

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NINETEEN THESES ON LITERATURE

by Roger Shattuck

In September 1994, forty of the ALSC's early members met at Boston University to define the Association and chart its future. At a banquet that followed a long day of planning, our distinguished colleague Roger Shattuck lifted our spirits with this address. - Editor

A. Literature in General

- I. A real world of material things, sometimes called nature, exists around us. Nature includes us, and we share it imperfectly with one another through perception, action, memory, language, love, and wonder.
- II. Material nature has gradually helped shape human behavior and consciousness into patterns we recognize as cultures and as common sense. Across millions of years under a great variety of social behaviors, we have evolved a fairly stable socio-genetic compound we refer to as human nature. Human nature contains an elusive element of freedom: freedom from blind chance and determinism, freedom to choose our actions.
- III. There may be more than material nature and human nature. Words like "spiritual," and "transcendent" and "ineffable" may refer to more than mere yearnings. Much around us remains unknown.
- IV. Works of literature, through their amalgam of representation and imagination, of clarity and mystery, of the particular and the general, offer revealing evidence about material nature and human nature and whatever may lie beyond. This is why we read and study and discuss literary works.
- V. Literature ranges from simple songs and sayings to elaborate and extended tales of human deeds. The most compelling literature concerns persons whose feelings and thoughts and actions engage us in the lived time of mortality. Ideas and
- abstractions, which systematically separate themselves from persons and from time, do not form the essence of literature and do not surpass it.
- VI. Works of literature are written by individual authors using an existing language with reference to material nature and human nature. The doctrine known as textuality makes a triple denial of these entities. Textuality denies the existence of the natural world, of literature, and of authors.
- VII. No author has a claim to final authority. However, we do well to acknowledge, as all cultures do, sheer seniority. Works that have survived for centuries cannot be dismissed out of hand as stifflingly traditional, as part of the status quo needing above all to be usurped by the modern.
- VIII. In order to affirm literature in its full humanist sense, let us eschew the free-standing word text. Its indiscriminate use today provides evidence of deadening stylistic conformity. Let us rather take advantage of the full range of terms like book, work, poem, play, novel, essay, passage, chapter, and the like. There is no need to modify serviceable expressions like "the text of" a work, and "sacred texts." But let us refrain from endorsing, indirectly and inadvertently, the doctrine of textuality by chanting "text" in every other line of what we say and write.
- IX. Like our terrestrial environment, our literary, intellectual, and moral environment needs to be wisely cultivated and protected. We have as many strip miners and clear cutters operating in the areas of literature, philosophy, and history as we have operating on the planet Earth. You know their names and their schools. Some of them believe that we, who devote ourselves to literature and inquiry, are an endangered species—and should fade away. We, for our part, are resolved to survive and to flourish.

*Roger Shattuck is University Professor at
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B. Interlude—Partially Plagiarized

X. "Our lives are a fierce attempt to find an aspect of this world not open to interpretation." (David Mamet, Kafka's Grave.)

XI. In the fullness of time a poet-oracle came forth upon the mountain top, whence one could see a great distance in all directions. To the innumerable questions put to this fierce yet gentle seer, only two answers have come down to us:

1. "Everything exists in order to end up in a book."
2. "Nothing will survive unless it has been uttered."

XII. To those preparing to be shipwrecked on a desert island, I offer a miniaturized library of world literature that can be memorized in a few days. It consists of 3001 bulls—not Papal: Irish. Bulls combine succinct style, compacted logic, and a sharp edge:

At your age Mozart was dead.

Reader's report to a textbook publisher: "This book does nothing for the non-reading student."

No one goes to that restaurant anymore. It's too crowded.

We teach what we hope to learn.

Count no man happy till he dies.

Freedom is the absence of choice.

Stop it some more.

I can never kiss her properly. Her face always gets in the way.

He died cured.

XIII. The world scoffs at old ideas. It distrusts new ideas. It loves tricks.

XIV. Everything has been said. But nobody listens. Therefore it has to be said all over again—only better. In order to say it better, we have to know how it was said before.

XV. A friend in Missouri recently sent me a book-length manuscript. In the past she has written intense studies of the relation between German and French philosophy as it has influenced literary theory since 1950. In her letter my friend declared that she has undergone a profound change of heart. She now rejects the reigning schools of literary theory and attacks them in this manuscript. It is time for a more direct and less abstract approach to literature. Would I write an introduction to her book?

My friend's new book vehemently rebuts Heidegger and Adorno, Barthes and Derrida on their own ground. It reads like her earlier books—with all the signs changed. She has without question changed sides; she has not left the battlefield. As before, her discussions do not refer to any primarily literary works. The only authors she mentions from before 1950 are Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel.

I wrote my friend that I applaud her change of heart. When is she going to change her reading accordingly? I could not write an introduction to a book still transfixed by her earlier theoretical concerns, even though she has joined the other side.

I did not write to my friend that I would like to know the titles of the books she keeps within easy reach around her desk or work station. Does she still work surrounded by Saussure and Foucault? Or does she keep beside her again now the works she loved as a graduate student: Stendhal and Balzac, George Eliot and Dickens, Hawthorne and Melville?

XVI. In literary study as in everyday life, we have entered the Age of Appliances. More and more scholars and critics write and teach by applying an ideology or a methodology to a cultural "text." This reliance on appliances tends to eliminate the experience and the love of literature.

C. Literature in Education

XVII. We have brought ourselves to great perplexity about the basic role of education. Should education socialize the young within an existing culture and offer them the basic means to succeed in that culture? Or should education give the young the means to challenge and overthrow the existing culture, presumably in order to achieve a better life? Here I shall appeal to analogy.

Almost immediately after fertilization, the human embryo sets aside a few cells that are sheltered from the rest of the organism and from the environment. These cells retain a special ability to divide by meiosis into haploid cells needed for sexual reproduction. Our gonads represent the most stable and protected element in the body and are usually able to pass on unchanged to the next generation the genetic material we were born with. This way the sins of fathers and mothers during their lifetimes are not visited upon their children. Except for radiation and a few diseases, the life we live does not affect our gonads.

No such biological process is built into cultures. But all cultures have discovered something similar—an activity, sometimes developed into an institution, we call education. By education we pass on to the young the customs, restrictions, discoveries, and wisdom that have afforded survival so far.

There is good reason to maintain that, unlike many other institutions—political, social, and artistic—which criticize and rebel against the status quo, education should remain primarily a conservative institution, like our gonads. We are overloading education when we ask it to reform society, to redesign culture, and to incorporate the avant-garde and bohemia into its precincts. In a free society, original and disaffected minds will always find a platform. The university need not provide the principal home for political, social, and artistic dissidents. The primary mission of a university is the transmission of a precious heritage. As the heritage is passed along, both teachers and students will test it and criticize it and seek to improve it. That healthy modification should not supplant the essential process of transmission.

XVIII. Out of the 1960s and 70s one item we should not forget is the counter slogan to relevance. It reads: Curriculum kills. There was great merit in the 19th-century ground rule for college programs

that specified: no living authors. Students can read them perfectly well on their own. Why invite stuffy old professors in to paint contemporary authors over with interpretations and theories? We need scholars in the classroom to help students with the genuine otherness of the past. We need cultivated readers and discriminating critics to deal with contemporary literature. But not in the classroom. Curriculum kills.

XIX. In planning the day-to-day work of education we shall forever be selecting curricula and programs. In so doing let us desist from referring to "the canon," or canons or—God save us—canonicity. The term canon was smuggled out of theology into education and literature only a few years ago by those who desperately need something to attack and subvert, something to transgress and deconstruct. Otherwise what would they do? But they are talking about a figment of their own making. Who knows if Pilgrim's Progress or Parallel Lives or 20,000 Leagues under the Sea is in the canon? No one. We deal primarily with the curriculum that lies before us in the courses we teach. Here lies our path through knowledge, a path we may choose over and over again, like love in marriage. Our love of literature does not remain the same. Yet its constancy sustains us. ■

Fruman: ALSC History (*continued from p. 1*)

and practicalities? Wouldn't any such society immediately be attacked as conservative? right-wing? elitist? sexist? Junior faculty, especially those without tenure, might well regard participation in such a movement as putting their careers at risk.

I first began to think seriously about the need for alternative organizations when the Bernard Baruch branch of the City University of New York was threatened with loss of accreditation because its student body and faculty were judged insufficiently diverse by an accreditation committee. I had been a part-time instructor at Baruch for three years while pursuing a Ph.D. at New York University, and I knew that both its student body and faculty had always been among the most diverse anywhere, and especially since "open enrollment" arrived in the early 1970's.

Steve Balch, the president of the National Association of Scholars, was saying publicly that the time had come for academics to form alternative accreditation committees to provide a countervailing

power to those in place, which were laws unto themselves and increasingly oppressive. Reform of existing institutions from within was a visionary hope and would in any case take years to achieve.

Professor Ellis and I met for the first time about a year after I had glowingly reviewed his Against Deconstruction (always the basis of a warm friendship). We shared similar anxieties about the gloomy state of literary studies, as well as the growing menace political correctness posed to free speech and academic freedom. Clearly, a new literary society was needed, one whose primary focus would be on literature as literature and not as something else (surely the basic principle of the New Criticism), an organization that would provide those who had not lost faith in the unique value of literature with a sense of solidarity, mutual support, and a forum to exchange ideas and research results.

But the damage already done to literary studies seemed to us so severe, and those responsible so firmly in control of literature departments, that any challenge to their enormous power seemed futile. In any case, this was a task,

we agreed, for younger scholars to undertake. We were both nearing retirement and had many other commitments. If younger scholars were not going to defend their interests and principles, then so be it. They would suffer the consequences of their own inertia.

We began communicating regularly by letter and telephone, often to bemoan yet another affront to basic academic principles occurring somewhere in the United States, or to complain about some flaming fusillade against literature as complicit in the unique evils of Western society that had recently been published by a major university press. The subject of a new literary society kept coming up, always to be firmly put down by one or the other of us. Impossible! Let someone else do it! We were approaching retirement!

So I thought. But in fact John was gingerly testing the waters with a few friends in foreign languages and comparative literature, mainly on the west coast. He found a surprising degree of interest in the subject, especially from Gerald Gillespie of Stanford, then president-elect of the International Comparative Literature Association, and Ricardo Quinones, the director of the Gould Humanities Center at Claremont McKenna College. Meanwhile, several scholars I spoke to in Minnesota indicated they would eagerly join such an association. Some had given up longtime membership in the MLA out of anger and disgust. Dissatisfaction was clearly growing.

Still with some reluctance, John and I decided that the time had come to prepare a statement as to why a new literary society was needed so that we could float it more broadly among friends and colleagues and invite their participation. The first draft, written by him and dated 15 February 1993, set forth in comprehensive detail our reasons for dissatisfaction at the direction the profession had recently taken, and why continued membership in the MLA was causing distress to so many of us.

Gillespie, Quinones, Ellis and I began to pass this statement back and forth among us, redrafting as we went. A little more than a month later we had reached the sixth draft, shorter, less blunt, but still not a statement that satisfied us collectively. At about this time Professors Gillespie and Quinones circulated one of the drafts at a breakfast meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association and reported back to us a very positive response. They received a dozen or so commitments and the reaction to the draft convinced them that scores more would join if given the opportunity. By this point rumors about our efforts had begun to spread, and the circle of friends and colleagues who said they would join

was widening.

By May 6th we were at Draft 8, our best statement thus far, but still too long; a page and a half, single-spaced. And there was disagreement in our small group (communicating primarily by long-distance telephone and fax, with an occasional letter) as to the right balance between a positive agenda for the organization, and the negative tone that began to predominate when we expanded on all that was currently wrong with the profession. Nor were we satisfied with any of the names suggested for the organization. The American Association of Literary Scholars? (/for Students of Literature? /for Literary Studies?)

A breakthrough came abruptly when Ricardo Quinones decided to slash from the statement what everybody in the profession with their eyes open already knew. We all immediately agreed that the result was what we needed. The "Open Letter to Literary Scholars and Critics," now less than half a page long, declared simply that we had "no interest here in enumerating current deficiencies; they are all too much in evidence," and proposed to form "a new association that would reassert our general faith in the validity of the literary imagination and in the value of literary studies."

On August 23, 1993, Ellis, who was coordinating our widening circle of activity, wrote Gillespie, Quinones, and myself a long letter which began exuberantly: "At last we have agreed on a statement!" We now began to circulate the statement quietly among friends, and to collect endorsements. Nothing much happened over the summer, but with the beginning of a new academic year the tempo picked up and we soon had about fifty committed to the idea of a new organization. What we now needed was to get a group of us to meet to make some decisions that had to be made before we could go much further: we needed a physical home for the organization, some officers, and a means of financing a recruiting campaign.

On February 28, 1994 (a Saturday) after what seemed endless logistical difficulties, eight of us met on the Irvine campus of the University of California. Paul Cantor, who had now become one of the stalwart supporters of our collective efforts, jetted across the country from the University of Virginia. John Ellis flew down from Santa Cruz. I had arranged to spend the winter in Laguna Beach, just a twenty minute drive from Irvine, Ricardo Quinones lived only a few miles away, and the other four participants--Renee and Judd Hubert, Seymour Menton, and Myron Simon--were all Irvine faculty. Much to our regret, Gerald Gillespie had another commitment and could not be with us.

It was an all-day meeting, and decisions were made rapidly. We agreed that our name should be "The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics." Ricardo Quinones agreed to act as President, and John Ellis (who had just decided to take the financially distressed University of California's early retirement offer) took on the burdens of secretary/treasurer. But the most important decision we made was to move our recruiting into high gear; instead of quietly circulating a statement among friends, we would now begin a much more public letter-writing campaign. We decided that our statement of principles should be accompanied by a cover letter signed by many prominent scholars and that we should now go beyond our acquaintances to a much broader program of public solicitation, including (when we could find the money to do so) advertisements in national media.

In the process of writing the cover letter we also defined more clearly what the organization was to be, for it read in part: "The organization is open to all those with a genuine interest in the study of literature. It will thus welcome classicists as well as modernists, independent as well as academic literary critics. While accepting support from individuals, institutions, and foundations that share its concerns, it is not and will not be identifiable with any ideological position or political agency." This letter was eventually signed by 28 scholars from 21 universities in the U.S. and Great Britain, including a former president of the MLA, all well-known in their own disciplines and most beyond them.

The most difficult problem was how to finance the organization. We were all paying the relatively modest costs of our long-distance phone bills and travel, but widespread mailings would be expensive, and it would cost thousands of dollars to place advertisements in journals such as the *New York Review of Books*. We obviously needed support from a foundation, but it was crucial to keep the association free of political affiliation. Yet there was no way of getting around the fact that the sociology of academe today is such that any challenge to the ideologies now in place is automatically seen as conservative. Even asserting independence from politics would be taken as political in the prevailing climate of literary studies. For that reason we could expect no help from the overwhelming majority of philanthropic organizations, such as the Ford, Rockefeller and MacArthur Foundations.

John Ellis suggested that the Lynde and Harry Bradley foundation would be likely to help us, but that suggestion made me uneasy because most

people identified the Bradley foundation with conservative causes. Here was a tormenting dilemma. If there were really no politically neutral philanthropic foundations, and if it was futile to apply to the crowded left side of the foundation spectrum, we had no other option than to turn to what was perceived as the right. However, if our proposal emphasized our fixed determination to remain independent of political ideologies, we should be accepting support without strings attached--and that is what we did.

The next few weeks astonished us all. We soon assembled a distinguished group to sign the cover letter we had worked on in Irvine, and then all began to send out dozens of copies. Within a month of my sending out 41 copies of our open letter, 25 were returned with supporting signatures. The other "conspirators," as we sometimes called ourselves, were reporting similar success. Many to whom we mailed our letters sent duplicates to their colleagues; something like a chain letter reaction was taking place. On occasion we stumbled into already-formed pockets of resistance to the status quo; when we called Yale critic and poet John Hollander to ask him to join us, he immediately told us that his thoughts had been moving in the same direction, and that he would send us his own list of 110 likely prospects by the next mail. By the end of the academic year in mid-June we had about 250 signed pledges of commitment, and this before a single public advertisement had appeared.

Meanwhile, Rick Quinones had established a de facto ALSC office at Claremont-McKenna, and moved to incorporate the Association as a non-profit organization so that it could receive funds from foundations. On June 9th we were informed that the Bradley Foundation had awarded us \$67,000 to support the ALSC's general operations. We were, of course, thrilled and grateful. As Winston Churchill said, this was not the beginning of the end, but it was the end of the beginning. We now had the resources to fund a national advertising campaign. In late November a half-page letter of invitation to join the Association, signed by sixty prominent members, appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, and in December, we even ran a full-page ad in *PMLA*! We also had funds for a crucial national planning conference which took place the weekend of September 9-11 in Boston, attended by 40 scholars from all around the country. (After a gala opening night banquet of high spirits and joyous camaraderie, I went buoyantly up to my room, promptly had a heart attack, and spent the rest of the conference--and two weeks more--at Massachusetts General, alas.)

The national press began to notice that we existed. On December 7, 1994, the New York Times featured a long, unexpectedly balanced article on the Association, under the headline "An Upstart Alliance of Traditional Literati."

We upstarts, now over 1,000 strong and growing rapidly, include among us some of the most accomplished scholars, critics, and creative writers in the English-speaking world. An especially welcome development is the increasing number of junior faculty who are now signing on. We will hold our first national conference in Minneapolis on the weekend of September 22-24. It promises to be a memorable event. There is good reason to feel immensely heartened by what has thus far been achieved, and to feel confident that we can achieve a great deal more. ■

Editor (continued from page 1)

And in the case of a new organization like ours, which is just beginning and still has to define itself and what it wants to become, a newsletter is a crucial forum for discussion of the Association's goals. Accordingly, we hope that you will help to carry forward the business of defining the ALSC's agenda and charting its future development by sending us letters, articles, news items, announcements or simply your thoughts about what we should be doing. Roger Shattuck's essay should be just the beginning of a lively discussion of issues in the pages of the newsletter. We have always intended to start a journal as soon as we can, but perhaps the best way to do that is to let the newsletter grow into one.

One subject on which suggestions and advice are particularly welcome is the program for the upcoming conference; there is still time for Jay Martin's committee to use your ideas. Please make every effort to come to this first meeting of the ALSC. One of the thoughts which led to its inception was that we needed to gather together and provide a focus for individuals who might otherwise be isolated in the wasteland that so many of our college literature departments have become. All of the 40 who met at Boston for the planning conference experienced the intellectual stimulus and in fact the real joy of being in a room full of people who still care about literature. It is an experience you must not miss. And then there is also the fact that much is at stake in our having a really successful and well-attended first conference.

We have included a recruiting tool in the newsletter because the Association needs to grow if

it is to have the influence it should have. Some truisms can be anything but trivial, so try this one: if every member of the ALSC finds just one other new member, we should immediately double our size. Most of those who started off the ALSC were established older figures, and that could not have been otherwise. The Association needed the credibility that only well-known names could bring. But we were always very much aware that the point of the whole exercise was to provide a framework for the rebuilding of literary studies in the next generation. Now that the Association is off to a credible start, we need—as President Quinones stresses in his column—to recruit more young people. In point of fact, one of the most heartening signs that we have seen recently is a considerable increase in the inquiries we are receiving from graduate students.

Apart from being itself a new venture for the ALSC, this newsletter also marks a transition in our organizational arrangements. At the beginning, we were fortunate to have had the assistance of the Center for the Humanities at Claremont McKenna College of which our President is the Director. As our membership has grown to over 1000, we have outgrown this informal arrangement that has been so valuable to us thus far. Accordingly, we have now set up a regular office which can be reached by our new address, c/o Crown College, UC Santa Cruz. ■

LOWRY NELSON 1926-1994

We are sad to report the tragic death of one of our earliest members, Lowry Nelson, Professor of Comparative Literature at Yale University. We received the following message from his sister, Janet Nelson Friedell: "Your recent mailing came to me as administrator of my brother's estate. Unfortunately, Lowry Nelson died on November 12, 1994 in Tallinn, Estonia. He was doing research in the library there and slipped on the ice. The doctors repaired a fractured kneecap he sustained, but he suffered a pulmonary embolism two days later and died in hospital. Perhaps you will inform your other members of the ALSC."

The First ALSC National Conference: Minneapolis, September 22-24, 1995

By Jay Martin

The Program Committee (Paul Cantor, Denis Donoghue, Jay Martin, Mary Ann McGrail, Roger Shattuck) for the first national conference of the ALSC began its work in December 1994. Because the design of the conference had already been the subject of much discussion at the September 1994 planning conference in Boston, we were soon able to reach a consensus on a number of basic features of the program:

- We decided to design a "pre-congress" session that would be similar to those that occur at many scientific meetings—one with special relevance to the locale of the conference—and to make this a regular feature of our annual conferences.
 - We decided to open the conference with a Friday evening dinner talk on general issues important to criticism, scholarship or the literary scene at the present time.
 - We decided to schedule a panel on the issues that arise in the process of reading literature.
 - We felt it important to schedule a panel that would consider the discussion that has taken place during the last thirty years concerning the nature, growth, and significance of the "canon" or simply the "curriculum" of Western literature, which actually includes texts not written in the West. We decided to focus this discussion through concentration on a major text or author.
 - Being keenly aware that the ALSC is an organization of poets, novelists, dramatists, independent critics, translators, and editors as well as academic scholar/critics, we decided to represent this diversity immediately in the program of the first meeting.
 - We were equally mindful that the ALSC's members have specialized interests in a variety of foreign literatures in addition to English and American literature, and that they include classicists as well as medievalists and modernists. To the extent possible, the program should also reflect this diversity of interest.
- Finally, we wanted to give cohesion to our conference by involving younger scholars just as much as senior scholars, and also by avoiding panels scheduled so as to compete with other panels taking place at the same time.

It can well be imagined that agreement on these general principles still allowed a great variety of possible thoughts about the actual content of the program. Nevertheless, the structure and organization of the conference as a whole is now fully established, and we have already made arrangements for many of the panel chairs, speakers, and discussants.

We had no difficulty in finding a subject for the pre-congress panel scheduled for members who are able to arrive by midday Friday. During the period 1950-1965 there was a remarkable flowering of a Humanities program at the University of Minnesota. Under the general guidance of the philosopher Ralph Ross, several eminent scholars and critics fashioned a highly successful program; these included John Berryman, Saul Bellow, Joseph Frank, Al Stern, and Murray Krieger. We have asked Norman Fruman to organize a meeting that will include some of the original participants, and that will assess the contributions which this program made both to American education and to humanistic studies.

Here is an outline of the main program:

- Friday, September 22, 7:00: dinner with the appropriate greetings from the president, etc., followed by a talk at 8:00 by a distinguished critic/scholar.
- Saturday, 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon: a panel on "Intellectual Craftsmanship: How to read a Text." Four papers, about 25-30 minutes each, with adequate time for discussions between participants and audience. (In choosing the

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members of each panel we have attempted to ensure a lively discussion.)

- Saturday, 2:00 to 5:00: Panel on "Dante and the Western Canon," with the same format as the morning panel.
- Saturday evening: an after dinner talk by a distinguished author of prose fiction, possibly including a reading.
- Sunday morning, 9:00 to 12:00: Panel on "Poet and Critic." The format will be unusual and should promote active discussion. In advance of the meeting two or three poets will have given critics selected by the chair some of their new, unpublished (or even unfinished) poems. At the meeting, each poem will be read by its author. The critics will have prepared a 20 minute commentary on the poems, following which each poet will respond in an unrehearsed manner. Copies of the poems will be handed out at the meeting so that the audience can then join in discussion with the panel members.
- Sunday, 12:30-1:30. Two scholars, one senior and one junior, will give brief overviews and commentaries upon the character and achievements of the conference.
- A business meeting of the membership will also be scheduled.
- The program committee will invite interested members to a breakfast meeting to discuss the content of the program for future conferences.

More specific information on content and speakers for each panel will soon be published, but some things can already be said. The chair of the panel on "Intellectual Craftsmanship: How to Read a Book" will be Roger Shattuck, and the speakers Sven Birkerts, Robert Alter, and Rosanna Warren. The panel on "Dante and the Western Canon" will be chaired by Steven Botterill, and it will include papers on Dante and Twentieth Century Criticism, Dante and the Muslim Tradition (especially Averroes), and Dante translations. John Ellis and Lee Rust-Brown will be among the concluding commentators at the last session of the conference.

To help us make the program one which will appeal to the diverse interests of ALSC members, the program committee appointed a panel of consultants representing different fields to advise us on the choice of topics, panel chairs and speakers. These are Mary Lefkowitz (Classics), Stanley Stewart (English), Gary Saul Morson (Russian), Kenny Williams (American), Theodore Ziolkowski (German), Steven Botterill (Italian), Seymour

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Menton (Spanish), and Judd Hubert (French). We encourage you all to communicate your own suggestions to the consultants. And, of course, the program committee itself would also like to hear your ideas about this and subsequent programs. (C/o Jay Martin, 18651 Via Palatino, Irvine, CA 92715). Don't hesitate to volunteer your own participation in the program; the two members who have done this so far are both to be included in it.

We hope to publish the proceedings of the conference, but one possible alternative to the standard book of the conference might be to gather into one volume the debate on a single issue (for example, the canon) that takes place over perhaps three conferences, and the same for other issues. We should be interested in hearing your reactions to this idea.

The program committee hopes that this communication will be the beginning of a vital interchange with members, a foretaste of a fine inaugural conference in 1995, and the first of many future occasions for intellectual exchange. ■

TRAVEL STIPENDS FOR JUNIOR FACULTY

To help junior faculty to attend the conference in Minneapolis, we have set aside funds to provide travel stipends of up to \$250. We expect to make about ten awards. Applications should be accompanied by a vita and sent to Professor Ricardo Quinones, Bauer Center, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, California, 91711-6400. Senior faculty may also nominate junior colleagues for these awards.

ASSOCIATION OF LITERARY SCHOLARS AND CRITICS

The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics is a new organization that has been formed because of a deep and widespread concern about the present state of literary studies. Its purpose is to foster appreciation of the literary imagination, of the value of literary study, and of a shared literary culture. It will hold to broad conceptions of literature rather than the narrow, highly politicized ones often encountered today. It will serve as a forum for anyone with a serious scholarly or critical interest in literature, and it welcomes both classicists and modernists, independent and academic literary critics, as well as creative writers and publishers.

The Association has over a thousand members, and it is growing rapidly. Members include distinguished literary scholars and prominent writers such as Robert Alter, Joseph Brodsky, Robert Greer Cohn, Denis Donoghue, Victor Erlich, Karl S. Guthke, Donald Hall, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., John Hollander, Alfred Kazin, Edith Kern, Mary Lefkowitz, Richard Poirier, Ralph Rader, Christopher Ricks, Roger Shattuck, Walter Sokel, Theodore Ziolkowski, and many others. Many stories about the ALSA have appeared in the national press.

The first national conference will take place in Minneapolis, September 22-24. Details of the program will be announced in national advertisements.

The Steering Committee includes Felicia Bonaparte (CUNY), Paul Cantor (University of Virginia), Lorraine Clark (Trent University), John M. Ellis (University of California, Santa Cruz), James Engell (Harvard University), David Hertz (Indiana University), John Hollander (Yale University), Richard Lehan (UCLA), Ricardo Quinones (Claremont McKenna College), Roger Shattuck (Boston University) and Rosanna Warren (Boston University).

We invite you to join us by completing the membership application below and returning it to: The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, Crown College, University of California, Santa Cruz, California, 95064.

I would like to become a member of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics and enclose a check for \$25 to cover 1995 membership dues.

Name: _____

Position: _____

Mailing Address: _____

Telephone _____ E-Mail _____

The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics
Crown College, University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA 95064

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