Grammars of Approach Wins Eighth Annual Robert Lowry Patten Award
Rice University, Houston, 19 December 2019

The editors of SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 are pleased to announce that the eighth annual Robert Lowry Patten Award, this year for the most outstanding recent contribution to British literary studies of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century, will go to Grammars of Approach: Landscape, Narrative, and the Linguistic Picturesque by Cynthia Wall, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of English at the University of Virginia. Out of a daunting field of 147 qualifying publications, the judges for the 2019 award selected Grammars of Approach, published by the University of Chicago Press, praising it as an “adroit, intimate, and yet dazzlingly multidimensional book” and “searching in its scholarship and its implications.” Here are some further excerpts from the judges’ remarks:

“Wall shows how grammatical and typographical landscapes changed with the ‘decapitation’ of the noun and the emergence of lesser, indeed previously invisible, parts of speech such as the preposition. Wall brings the work of landscape theorists such as Humphry Repton, John Claudius Loudon, and Thomas Whately into dialogue with travel narratives, printers’ manuals, dictionaries, encyclopedias, grammars, and the writing of John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Frances Burney, Ann Radcliffe, and Jane Austen. The result is an exquisitely granular and deeply interdisciplinary approach to both perception and representation.”

“Literary scholars are currently obsessed with the praxis, phenomenology, and politics of reading. Eighteenth-century scholars are no exception. Grammars of Approach merits special recognition because it at once consummates this obsession—integrating the dimensions that other scholars consider in isolation—and specifies its object in exquisite, riveting detail. To that end, Wall maps ‘overlapping territory between the literal and the metaphorical’ (p. 6); the temporal and the spatial; the mind, the world, and the page. Best of all, Grammars of Approach is not just a book about reading: it reenacts it.”

“This monograph is for anyone—and everyone—who really wants to know and indeed experience how eighteenth-century writers wrote, how eighteenth-century readers read, how eighteenth-century persons looked at the world. Wall models a lexical praxis that comes far closer to its object than close reading ever did, zooming in on the smallest particles of speech—in, on—and unlocking their enormous power as horizons of meaning and agents of possibility. At once oblique and straightforward, suggestive and pellucid, this book realizes a fundamentally ethical project as it brings humble, hardworking things into the foreground—grammar books and prepositional phrases whose job it is to uphold, unpraised and invisible, the perceptual possibilities of any English sentence. Here, reading is ‘three-dimensional’ and perpetually generative, and the conditions of these possibilities are visible in Professor Wall’s singular combination of wit, imagination, erudition, and meticulous attention to what goes unnoticed by everybody else. It is a transformative work of scholarship and imagination.”

A panel of omnibus reviewers considered nominations for the Patten Award, with Frances Ferguson, Ann L. and Lawrence B. Buttenwieser Professor of English at the University of Chicago, serving as deciding judge.

The award, created in honor of the over forty-year distinguished scholarly and pedagogical career of Professor Robert Lowry Patten at Rice University, will be officially
presented to Professor Wall at a ceremony and reception hosted by *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* to be held in Seattle during the annual Modern Language Association Convention. *SEL* is a quarterly journal publishing scholarly articles on English literature and an omnibus review in each issue of recent studies in the field. For nearly thirty of his years at Rice, Professor Patten served as either editor or publisher and executive editor of the journal.

Upon learning of the decision, Prof. Wall stated she was “deeply honored, and very happy, to receive this award named for Bob Patten.”

Previous winners include Thomas Lockwood, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Washington; Simon Goldhill, Professor of Greek Literature and Culture and Fellow and Director of Studies in Classics at King’s College, University of Cambridge; Leah Price, Henry Rutgers Distinguished Professor at Rutgers University; Peter de Bolla, Professor of Cultural History and Aesthetics and Director of the Cambridge Concepts Lab at King’s College, University of Cambridge; the editorial team behind *Benjamin Disraeli Letters: 1868, Vol. 10*: Michel W. Pharand, Ellen L. Hawman, Mary S. Millar, Sandra den Otter, and M. G. Wiebe; Lucinda Cole, Visiting Associate Professor of English at the University of Illinois; and Yopie Prins, Professor of Comparative Literature and English at the University of Michigan.

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