

Editor's Column

AT ITS MAY meeting the MLA Executive Council presented me with a farewell surprise, a leather-bound collection of the issues of *PMLA* published during my editorship. There is no gift, except perhaps a Gutenberg Bible, that could possibly have pleased me more; as my friends and colleagues on the staff know, the aspect of the executive director's job I am most sorry to give up is that involving *PMLA*, work that has provided hundreds of hours of pleasure and instruction.

On receiving my "collected issues," I did what any moderately self-regarding author would do—I browsed through the twenty or so editorial messages, recovering, in the process, some of the emotion and thought that went into each. Reading these statements from my current perspective—that is, with a certain degree of objectivity—I found some of them thoughtful, others trivial. It occurred to me that for my valedictory column I would reprint a few representative paragraphs composed during my editorial stint—and whether these passages are thoughtful, trivial, or both I leave for my readers to decide.

Here, to begin, is the opening paragraph of my first editorial, published in January 1979:

PMLA, where I now hang my hat, has something in common with the place I used to call home. Like Philadelphia, our venerable journal has a reputation for stuffiness it can't quite seem to live down. Those who have not explored Ben Franklin's city during the past few years still think of it as a village that closes at dusk—"A nice place to live but I'd hate to visit there." Similarly, those not familiar with the renovations of my predecessors, Stone, Fisher, and most recently, Schaefer, tend to dismiss *PMLA* as stodgy. The problems, I suspect, are basically those of identity. Boston, Chicago, Seattle, even Cleveland . . . all evoke specific adjectives, but what words can do justice to the radiant multiplicity that is Philadelphia? And if *Critical Inquiry* or *Glyph* or the *Hudson Review* can be characterized fairly specifically, it would take a far better poet than I to put words around the robust, protean nonagenarian that is *PMLA*.

May 1980:

Certain poems and plays and novels, the ones to which we return again and again, seem inexhaustible. A hundred years from now, as our Association moves toward its bicentennial, *PMLA* will probably still be publishing essays on *Pantagruel*, *Don Quixote*, and *Faust*, on *Emma* and *Leaves of Grass*. And so it should. A primary function of academic criticism is, after all, to provide fresh interpretations of classic works, to reveal in favorite texts new meanings, unexpected resonance. But literary analysis should also serve to arouse our curiosity about less familiar books, those we have either left unopened or allowed to fade from memory. The essays in our May issue succeed, I think, in both objectives: they illuminate texts already well annotated and encourage reading (or rereading) some we have neglected or overlooked.

May 1981:

You will also note in our editorial statement that contributors are now urged "to be sensitive to the social implications of language and to seek wording free of discriminatory overtones." The impetus behind this exhortation, though not the wording itself, was a recommendation to the Executive Council, drafted by the Delegate Assembly at its 1979 meeting in San Francisco, "that the MLA affirm in statements of editorial policy a commitment to the use of nonsexist language in its publications." The Council regards the language of the affirmation it ultimately adopted (after a very long discussion) to be both strong, in that even innuendoes of meaning are to be discouraged, and inclusive. The Assembly also recommended that the MLA develop guidelines for the use of nonsexist language, a project now being developed under the auspices of our Office of Publications and Research. Prose guidelines, whether they are prescriptive or merely exemplary, pose an extremely complex question, and I quote from the *Newsletter* editorial I wrote just after the heated San Francisco debate: "As an editor and an advocate of equality I am aware of the powerful tensions created by conflicting rights—by efforts simultaneously to preserve freedom of speech and to respect the dignity of all our members."

October 1981:

It is likely that the next issue of this journal will be made up entirely of essays on British and American literature. One could be disingenuous about this circumstance and stress the value that a "special number," with its particular focus and coherence, would have. It is not, though, a desire for thematic conformity that will produce such an issue but the lamentable fact that our backlog of essays on non-English-language subjects has, like reservoirs all across the country, dried up. And unless the Editorial Board, at its next few meetings, accepts not only studies of Hawthorne and Chaucer but some essays on French, Spanish, German, Slavic, and other literatures as well, *PMLA* will take on a decidedly Anglo-Saxon cast. Since this possibility distresses me, I am using this space to urge our members to send us studies on Goethe and Frisch, on Cervantes and García Márquez, Corneille and Char, Chekhov, Kundera, Calvino, and Borges. I hope we will be inundated, that our reservoir will overflow its banks. Nothing would please me more, in fact, than putting together an issue consisting entirely of papers on non-English literatures.

January 1982:

A title that provides an accurate sense of what follows is useful not only to a reader with a journal in hand but also to anyone looking through a bibliography for entries likely to contribute to a project in the works. Especially in our age of data bases and computer searches a scholar needs some idea of an essay's main issues; rare indeed is the too explicit title. Some titles, we all know, err on the side of allusiveness, revealing more about an author's taste than about his or her thesis. Some years ago I wanted to call a book about William Carlos Williams "The Measured Dance," a phrase lifted from the poetry, but my editor insisted, quite correctly, that this title would confuse and that the book would probably be cataloged under "Ballet." As it turned out, I put *Paterson* in the title and later saw the book shelved in a geography section, next to Hart Crane's *The Bridge*.

I end, with nonrecycled language, by saying how pleased I am that this final issue of my term is an unusually strong one. I am especially proud to be printing Kent Hieatt's important discovery and the essay by my University of Pennsylvania colleague Houston Baker, whose identity, of course, none of us on the Editorial Board knew until his essay had been accepted. I want to thank all those who served on the various boards I have worked with, as well as those who contributed so much as Advisory Committee members and as specialist readers. *PMLA* receives about five hundred submissions a year, each of which undergoes informed, often detailed evaluation from members of the Association who receive nothing in return save the satisfaction of participating in a scholarly community. Nothing during my years as executive director has given me more hope for the future of the humanities than these wonderfully intelligent evaluations. Finally, I want to extend to English Showalter my congratulations on his appointment and my hopes that his work as editor will be as rewarding as my own has been.

Within a couple of months I will once again hang my hat in Philadelphia, but my heart, I suspect, will remain in the editorial offices at 62 Fifth Avenue.

JOEL CONARROE

