
Editor's Column

The End and Beyond

Great is the art of beginning, but greater the art is of ending.

Longfellow, *Elegiac Verses*

I'VE NEVER been very good at endings. Beginnings have a dawning promise, leading from here to an uncertain but potentially fulfilling there; endings smack of night-enshrouded limits, separation, termination. Inevitably, endings activate the compulsion to take stock, to list the debits and credits, to see how the balance sheet reads. And so it is with this column, my last as editor of *PMLA*.

To start with the positive, I take considerable satisfaction that the journal's four blue issues have appeared as scheduled in each of the past five years, with a set of admittedly few but important essays. For there were times after Editorial Board meetings when the low number of acceptances and the lack of backlog made it seem as if *PMLA* would turn into a Mallarméan journal, full of blank pages.¹ Beyond the regular issues, some of which contained clusters of essays on subjects ranging from early modern women to notions of the poetic, the special-topic issues that were produced since 1993, like those published earlier, focused attention on timely or underexamined areas and often generated thoughtful criticism from the journal's readers. The special topics included Literature and Censorship, Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition, The Status of Evidence, The Teaching of Literature, and, forthcoming in January 1998, Ethnicity.²

I consider the Forums on preannounced topics to be the most important innovation during my tenure, for as I had hoped, this new feature has opened the pages of *PMLA* to scores of additional contributors. Even more important, it has helped to make the journal a site where dialogue can occur on issues of contention and concern in the profession, such as

interdisciplinarity, the place of the personal in scholarship, cultural studies and the literary, and, in the present number, the intellectual in the twenty-first century. I have been especially gratified to learn that colleagues are assigning the published letters for discussion in their courses.

Despite the positive reception of this new approach to the Forum, I recognize that what seem to be widespread albeit contradictory perceptions of *PMLA* have not changed in the past five years, and this is, I confess, a source of disappointment. The journal appears to be viewed by one camp as stodgy and devoid of cutting-edge work and by another as dominated by politically correct referees and editors who disdain serious scholarship in blind favor of jargon-infested theoretical fads. Moreover, both parties paradoxically insist that they hardly ever find work relevant to their fields while bemoaning the heterogeneous nature of each issue's contents, and both believe that *PMLA* authors come predominantly (even exclusively) from the junior ranks of the profession. I have addressed most of these issues in editorial columns and have even dubbed some of them "myths," after analyzing data about submissions and acceptances, for example, but myths serve needs and thus die hard, even in the face of contrary evidence. Indeed, at times I have been surprised to discover that MLA members who spoke to me authoritatively about this publication had little knowledge of—or practice reading—its contents. Although my March 1994 column, which was based on the latest MLA survey of the membership, provided some encouraging statistics about how many members read the various features of *PMLA*, I have been consistently concerned over the past five years with the journal's readability and thus its readership. To be sure, as John Kronik wrote in 1992 in his final Editor's Column, "perhaps the problem is that too few of us have or take the time to read as expansively as we might" (1130). Beyond the need to re-think our reading habits, it is important to recognize that this journal, as I noted in my inaugural column, in January 1993, "represents the Modern Language Association, not only as the official organ but, more intimately, as an image of who the members are and are not, who they want and do not want to be. . . . [E]ach of my predecessors," I continued, has recognized that change "occurs only through the work that the readers of *PMLA* choose to submit, the letters they write to the Forum, the manuscript reports they file" (10).³ When pronounced by colleagues who have not tried these and other ways of changing the journal, which is, after all, metonymically a part of every member of the association, criticism of *PMLA* can sometimes seem gratuitous, even exude a scent of bad faith.

Like my predecessors, I leave the editorship with a skin more toughened to criticism. I am not referring to honest differences of judgment that I occasionally had with the journal's readers and with authors whose work we published or rejected,⁴ for these exchanges usually generated in me (and I hope in them as well) an expanded point of view or at least some intellectual adrenaline. Above all, I am not referring to the exhilarating and exhausting marathon discussions of the Editorial Board three

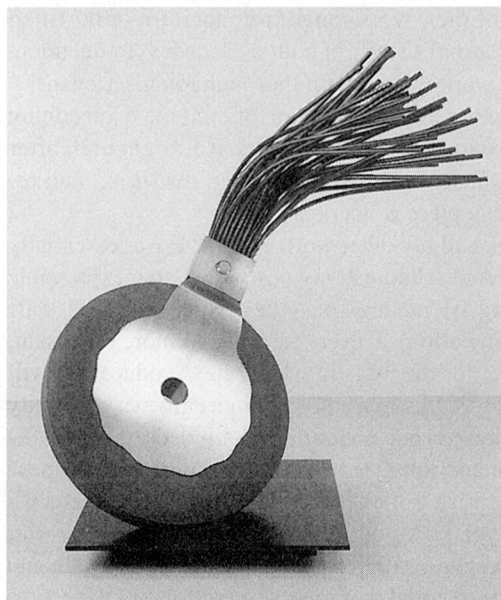


Fig. 1. Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929), *Typewriter Eraser*, 1976, stainless steel, ferrocement, and aluminum on a steel base, 7'5" × 7'6" × 5'3" (226 × 229 × 160 cm). Courtesy of Claes Oldenburg and The Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher Collection, Dallas. Photo: David Heald, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

times a year, which have the sequestered intensity of a papal election, the suspense of an Oscars ceremony, and, at the end of the day, the pleasures of a fine meal with the most respected of peers.⁵ No, the kind of criticism I mean belittles, rather than uplifts, the parties involved: a certain grumpiness—or, more accurately perhaps, a lack of generosity—from a few readers and a kind of rancor from some rejected authors. More frequent and thus more disturbing were harsh reports from a number of the journal's referees, whose sarcasm and contempt for an essay under consideration required editing, paraphrasing, or erasure in the interest of sustaining civility among colleagues. Although I have wondered at times whether *PMLA*'s anonymous reviewing procedures encourage such harshness, I tend to believe that it is in part symptomatic of dissatisfactions in the profession at large and, even more broadly, of a loss of civility (by which I do not mean Victorian gentility) in United States society, whose aggrieved, atomized members vent their rage on talk shows from dawn

to dusk. While campuses struggle to define the limits of hate speech, academic and intellectual communities must work to refine and reaffirm the parameters of civil discourse in a way that mediates the tensions between substantive critique and respect for the labor of others, especially labor that seems unsophisticated, unprofessional, or unimaginative.⁶

In the past five years I probably signed some two thousand letters of rejection, which included peer reviews (many of them paraphrased), a task that may appear Sisyphean (or is it Penelopean?) but from which each week I learned something useful about a writer, an approach, a conceptual problem—above all, about the profession and its concerns, its pulse. But the real labor has undoubtedly been the editing of accepted essays: some people wake up and think they have metamorphosed into a giant bug; I felt at times that I had turned into a large and somewhat entomomorphic eraser (fig. 1). Indeed, I was occasionally disappointed by the quality of writing in *PMLA* submissions and by an author's failure to develop a tight, cogent argument supported by persuasive evidence. In all likelihood, these problems have several causes, including perhaps the ease and speed of writing on a computer and more decidedly the enormous pressure to produce work, send it out, and have it published, which affects graduate students no less than the most prolific members of the profession.⁷

Still, I must admit to being a somewhat obsessive editor. My obsessiveness found the perfect partner in *PMLA*, whose copyediting is known for its pinpoint rigor (some have said the rigor mortis it induces in writers' styles). And yet, as discussed in my October 1995 column, on the views of winners of the annual prize for the best essay in *PMLA*, authors'

responses to our editing of their work range from taciturn or horrified resistance (to which the journal's staff, of course, accedes) to unending gratitude for having their work treated with thoroughgoing seriousness. Indeed, one esteemed member of the profession offered me a job editing all his work. So there is pain and pleasure in what I might call, after Flaubert, *les affres du rédacteur*—erasing, cutting, rewriting, and re-sculpting to make a valuable piece of work shine.

My editing of essays, like all my other work on *PMLA*, was essentially and ideally collaborative. As I relinquish my post, I feel an inexpressible gratitude to—and abiding friendship for—the family of *PMLA* staff members who facilitated my efforts at every turn.⁸ Even more important, I have an unshaken respect for the ways in which they produce and will go on producing the pages of this journal. I begin as always with Judy Goulding—with admiration for her tranquil, fair-minded, orderly, efficient, and diplomatic managerial style and for her unfailing caniness when sensitive problems arise but also with thanks for the laughs we shared during these five years. Among the members of her staff, who process submissions, correspond with referees and authors, copyedit and proofread texts, prepare the material that precedes and follows the essays in every issue, design and set the pages, and in many other invisible ways help to birth the journal six times a year, I single out two with whom I spoke at least once a day for the past 1,825 days: Eric Wirth, assistant editor and copyeditor (of my columns, among other texts), whose unstinting hard work and dedication, sharp intelligence and subtle wit, made him an exemplary collaborator, and Xeni Fragakis, my coethnic and comigrainous confederate in the dailiness of *PMLA* work, who moves articles through the complex process from submission to declination or publication and oversees relations with the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board.⁹ For the rest of my *confrères* and *consœurs*, I will let a photograph, which I received in the final days of my term, do what pictures often do best: speak louder than words of thanks (fig. 2).¹⁰

With such a team of collaborators, how can the editor go wrong? It is thus with utter confidence that I turn *PMLA* over to Martha Banta. During the past year, I worked closely with this distinguished scholar of American literature



Fig. 2. “See, some people do read *PMLA*.” *Left to right, back row (standing)*: Xeni Fragakis, Katherine Florey, Erin Trostle, James Poniewozik, David Cloyce Smith, Elizabeth Holland, Jennifer Wilson; *middle row (seated)*: Judy Goulding, David F. Cope, Cathryn Dwyre, Paul J. Banks, Tracy Edwards, Brian Hinson, Eric Wirth; *front row*: John Golbach, Michael Kandel, Judith Altreuter. Photo: Pete Kolonia.



Fig. 3. Attributed to Eva Gonzalès (1849–83), *La lecture dans la forêt* (*Reading in the Forest*), 1879, oil on canvas, 41¼" × 54" (106.0 × 137.2 cm). Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Abraham M. Sonnabend, 1962.

and former editor of commercial and academic journals and came to appreciate her incredible efficiency, agile mind, clarity of thought, and flexibility. Martha has leaped right into the fray—choosing authors of future guest columns, announcing new topics for the Forum (*PMLA* and graduate studies and *PMLA* abroad)—and as I write this column she is about to draft her first letters of conditional acceptance and to review

her first set of declined essays. By the time you read this column, the orderly transition will have occurred, the future of *PMLA* will have begun—although happily no one can predict how the narrative of the next five years will read—and, without a doubt, the bottle of megadoses of vitamin C that I prescribed to Martha will be partially consumed.

Like Montaigne, I can say that I exit with no feelings of repentance, albeit with some regrets that I did not do otherwise in certain instances and that the desired results did not materialize in others. For what Michel Butor said of writing surely applies to editing: "All our experiences with writing tell us that it is only after we have finished . . . that we really know what it should have been" (15; my trans.). Still, as I think of this exit, I feel far more than a foreboding of termination, of a sudden void, of an unsettling letting go that will leave me at loose ends. I have a sense of new possibilities—was it Tom Stoppard who said, "Every exit is an entry somewhere else"?—and, better yet, a vaulting feeling of liberation that catalyzes fantasies of life after D day (figs. 3–6): of luxuriously reading without eraser in hand and kicking irresponsible heels up in Paris before starting the revolution of the silenced and, finally, writing the great *œuvre* blissfully incommunicado. That these fantasies are of course unrealistic or unrealizable makes them all the more tantalizing at this turning point. Whatever faint trace of these dreams may mark my future, you have my word that I would not have missed these *PMLA* years for the world.

DOMNA C. STANTON



Fig. 4. Josephine Baker. Dance Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations). Photo: Valery.



Fig. 5. Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945), *Losbruch (Outbreak)*, 1903, etching on heavy cream wove paper, 19 $\frac{1}{4}$ " \times 23 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (50.2 \times 59.1 cm). Private collection. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

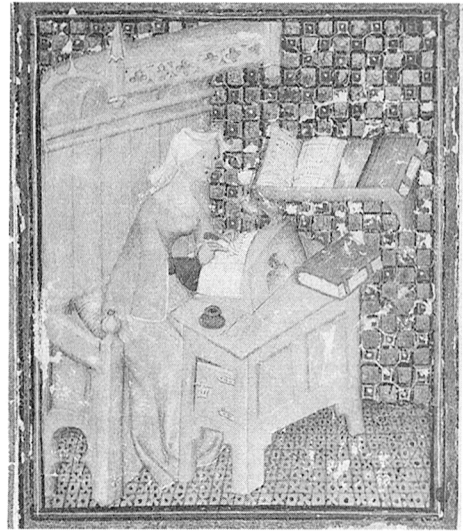


Fig. 6. From Christine de Pisan, *Le livre de la mutation de fortune (The Book of the Change of Fortune)*, early fifteenth century, ms. 493/1668, fol. 232r, Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. Photo: Giraudon / Art Resource, New York.

Notes

¹I hasten to add that this is not because of a scarcity of submissions. Since 1992 *PMLA* has received an average of 410 essays a year.

²The deadline has passed for submissions to the special topic Ethics and Literary Study, which is scheduled to appear in January 1999, but manuscripts can be sent until 1 May 1998 for Rereading Class, planned for the January 2000 issue.

³I should have added that change is also determined by the members of the Advisory Committee and of the Editorial Board and of course by the editor, all of whom the Executive Council appoints to varying terms of service.

⁴Nor do I mean the running commentary that one of the journal's most devoted (and appreciated) readers has sent me about the essays in nearly every issue.

⁵The contributions of board members extend far beyond the reading and evaluating of articles for meetings. The members review conditionally accepted essays between meetings, vet submissions for the Criticism in Translation feature, occasionally withdraw from the evaluation process to help authors complete revisions, and sometimes become coordinators of special topics. I take this opportunity to thank the various "classes" of board members with whom I served for their extraordinary contributions and good cheer.

⁶The problem I am delineating is closely related to the loss of collectivity in the United States, which some observers have attributed to the privileging of the wants and rights of individuals over the needs of communities and over a commitment to community building.

⁷Despite the general nature of this problem, those of us who work with graduate students must make sure that we offer, perhaps even require them to take, courses or workshops in

writing research and analytic papers at both the entry-level and the dissertation stages. The comments we attach to the twenty-page seminar assignment at the frantic end of the term do not provide adequate instruction in scholarly writing. Moreover, writing courses for graduate students would be a good way of integrating teachers of composition into the graduate curriculum.

⁸In addition, I extend particular thanks to Executive Director Phyllis Franklin, whose dedication to the MLA has set a standard for the organization and the profession and who has never failed to give me her advice, support, and friendship, and to the Executive Council, which appointed me to serve as the first female editor of *PMLA*. Finally, I thank the University of Michigan, which provided me much-needed released time from teaching in the past five years.

⁹I want to express my appreciation as well to Cindy Port for the crucial part she played on *PMLA*'s team and to wish her success in the doctoral studies in English that she is pursuing.

¹⁰I should note that the staff members in this portrait do more than assemble *PMLA*: they are responsible for the copyediting, design, typesetting, manufacture, and distribution of all the books, periodical issues, catalogs, miscellaneous mailings, and advertisements that the MLA produces each year.

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