Editor's Column

THIS IS NOT a beginning, as Magritte might say. The onset of my tenure as editor of *PMLA* does not represent, as some beginnings do, a bringing into existence, a creation, certainly not a resounding bang. The fourteenth editor of this 109-year-old journal, albeit the first woman, I edged into John Kronik's seat on 1 July quietly and, thanks to a reassuringly smooth and instructive transition, started my act, as Aristotle advises, in medias res. It is my good fortune that I have inherited a lively centenarian—not that venerable chimera of stuffiness and stodginess that my predecessors repeatedly tried to dispel in their columns—whose shiny redesigned cover reflects splendid changes within: special-topic sections coordinated and introduced by outstanding scholars, clusters of articles from the backlog knowledgeably prefaced by Advisory Committee or Editorial Board members, first English translations of important criticism from abroad, invited essays by honorary members and fellows, and guest columns on timely topics. Concurrent with John's remarkable seven-year labors—which included his massive and meticulous correspondence with many *PMLA* readers—was an increase in annual submissions to the journal, from 156 in January to June of 1986, the first year of his tenure, to 226 in the same period of 1992.

As John often pointed out in his columns, the editorship of *PMLA* is not the solo performance of an imperial authority, someone like the legendary "Mr. Shawn," whose word at the *New Yorker* was reputedly the beginning *and* the end. A democratic and collaborative enterprise, as all editors of the journal have stressed,[1] *PMLA* is the end product of a network of busy bodies—the Editorial Board and Advisory Committee; the hundreds of consultant readers who evaluate articles each year; the Executive Council, which sets journal policy and selects the editor, who serves at its pleasure; and, on the most quotidian, crucial, and all too often unacknowledged level, the extraordinarily able and devoted staff of *PMLA*, headed by the managing editor, Judy Goulding, who has been at the association since 1969 and whom I have known since 1976, when I joined the MLA's Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession.

In fact, this is not my debut at *PMLA*. I have been involved in the journal's work as a consultant reader and as a member of its Advisory

Committee and Editorial Board. Among a host of factors, I must confess, it was memories of board meetings, chaired by John Kronik, that clinched my decision to accept the Executive Council's nomination, with grateful thanks for the council members' trust and support. Another *PMLA* editor, English Showalter, who ranked these meetings in his inaugural column as "among the most rewarding events in my academic experience," aptly described them as "a kind of ideal seminar" on critical problems, in which "seven intelligent and well-prepared scholars" put their "judgment on the line," with all the drama and suspense that the collective decision and the revelation of the author's name ultimately bring: "after a particularly intense debate, we are as impatient to open the envelope as hopeful Oscar candidates," English concluded, in a testament to the dialogic pleasures of the text.

For this incoming editor, then, *PMLA* means continuation. And yet continuity is part and parcel of the modern "beginning," Edward Said suggests in his *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic, 1975). In contrast to "origin," which he associates with the theological, the pure, intransitive and passive, the modern beginning—or, more properly, beginnings—constitutes for Said an "eminently secular, . . . continuing" activity, a historical "beginning-again." Faith in a continuity that does not dominate what derives from it, as an origin does, is precisely what encourages development and innovation, Said observes: "beginning is making or producing difference; but . . . difference which is the result of combining the already-familiar with . . . fertile novelty . . . [an] interplay between the new and the customary without which . . . a beginning cannot really take place" (373, xiii). While an origin entails looking back, a beginning leads from here to an unteleological, uncertain there, which will devolve from the unpredictable interplay of continuity and discontinuity, tradition and innovation.

That interplay, with its attendant tensions, has characterized *PMLA*'s past and, I daresay, will mark its future. For the journal reflects and inflects the communalities and controversies in literary studies, in the academy, and, of necessity, as the debates over "political correctness" have most recently confirmed, in the society at large. Inevitably, each reader will see too much or too little tradition or innovation in the journal that 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. Thus, although each of my predecessors has advocated change in his inaugural column, each has also recognized that it 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. It does not seem imperative, then, to agitate for yet another change in the description of the "ideal *PMLA* essay" set forth in the statement of editorial policy that has been in place since 1981: an essay "of

interest to those concerned with the study of language and literature" that "exemplifies the best of its kind, whatever the kind; addresses a significant problem; draws out clearly the implications of its findings; and engages the attention of its audience through a concise, readable presentation." For what is judged to be "of interest," "engaging," and "readable," "a significant problem," and, of course, "the best of its kind" has undergone and will continue to undergo changes in relation to the complex shifts of contextual forces.

In "Remembrance and Reflection: *PMLA* 1883–1982" (*PMLA* 99 [1984]: 398–406), John H. Fisher, who served as editor from 1964 to 1971, highlighted some of the journal's steady but dramatic transformations. For instance, volume 1 of what was then called *Transactions of the Modern Language Association* contains only one article ("Richter's Correspondence with a Lady: Some Unpublished Letters," by Franklin Carter, then president of Williams College) and one review that are "even faintly literary," writes Fisher, in comparison with six articles on grammatical, syntactical, dialectical, and philological matters "of interest" to the membership and ten on teaching the modern—as opposed to the classical—languages, the fundamental pursuit around which this association was formed in the first place. The composition of the journal's readers by gender, race, rank, affiliation, or any other variable periodically reported in this column, their critical methodologies, their definitions of "significant problems" have changed far more profoundly than has the journal's title, whose first word has gone from "transactions" to "proceedings" and, in volume 4, to "publications." In fact, *PMLA* is no longer *the* publications of the MLA but only one of many, including *Profession*, edited by the executive director, Phyllis Franklin; the ADE and ADFL bulletins, overseen respectively by the director of the Office of English Programs, David Laurence, and the director of the Office of Foreign Language Programs, John Cross; and the *MLA International Bibliography*—not to mention the dozen or so books published annually. But some things should not change, even if "publications" is inaccurate and some neophyte, mystified by the abbreviation PMLA, might think the journal a guide to nightlife in Los Angeles.

What's in a name or a policy matters, of course, but it seems far more important to me that *PMLA* represent the kind of interplay between tradition and innovation that highlights productive divisions in the profession. The journal should be a patchwork that reveals different patterns and continuities to each reading eye, not a melting pot that homogenizes them. In this paradigmatic texture, the center and the edge keep shifting, the marginal becoming prominent over time, the prominent marginal for a while. "Eh bien, continuons," I would agree with Sartre, on the understanding that this continuation contains the promise of "opening up"—a process related by etymology to beginning—what is suppressed or silenced (however radical

or conservative some readers may find such material) rather than the prospect of "closing up," an action identified with ending.

As much as I would like to think otherwise, it is clearly an accident that my official beginning as *PMLA*'s editor and my thinking about its implications should coincide with the publication of a text by Jacques Derrida in which he asks, must Europeans "set out again . . . re-begin . . . separate themselves from an old Europe . . . reembark toward a Europe that does not yet exist? or else reembark in order to return to a Europe of origins that would then need to be restored . . .?" In this closing text of the special topic Literature and the Idea of Europe, conceived under John Kronik's tenure, Derrida argues for the obligation of being "the guardians of an idea of Europe . . . *but* of a Europe that consists precisely in not closing itself off . . . and in advancing itself . . . toward what it is not," an opening toward the other, toward something "unforeseeable," "*unanticipatable.*" (I am grateful to Jacques Derrida for allowing *PMLA* to publish this excerpt and to Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas for their fine translation.)

In a thoughtful and impassioned introduction to this special topic, Timothy J. Reiss examines the ambiguities of the idea of Europe that was and discusses the more "affirmative" idea that is coming into being. A product of a shared history and common culture, which are charged with traces of a darker Europeanism, the future Europe can become a wider union, Reiss urges, broadening its face to include a host of others who remain invisible. The four essays selected for Literature and the Idea of Europe do not, of course, begin to exhaust this rich topic, which Reiss coordinated with characteristic energy, but each points in different ways to the complex relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries between Europe and its others. The rhetoric of nineteenth-century British and American tourists, from Anna Jameson to Henry James, who produced a "Europe" that signified what "home" lacked—authenticity, culture, and feeling—is the focus of James Buzard's "A Continent of Pictures." Shifting the identification of the other, Brian W. Shaffer reconsiders the influence of Herbert Spencer's ideas, especially his typology of civilization, on Conrad's African fictions and argues that the author of *Heart of Darkness* invokes and shatters imperialist values and myths. Analogously, Kafka uses topoi of China to subvert the Eurocentrism of his orientalist intertexts, writes Rolf J. Goebel, and to probe the ties among discourse, power, and politics. Finally, Gian-Paolo Biasin shows how a Calvino short story featuring Italian tourists in Mexico becomes the site of a meditation on food that explores the links connecting gastronomy, eroticism, cannibalism, and, by extension, Euro-American civilization's most basic taboos.

The last four essays of this issue of *PMLA* also center on Europe, and they both echo and extend concerns in the first four. Susan M. Marren and Harriet Goldberg focus on examples of Europe's others—

a freed eighteenth-century African slave and the Jews exiled from Spain in 1492. Marren's reading of Olaudah Equiano's autobiographical narrative analyzes the constitution of a fluid, transgressive black subject in relation to the dominant English order; so doing, she suggests the possibility of a nonbinary conception of identity. Goldberg's study of Judeo-Spanish proverb collections investigates how a maxim's meaning and survival depend on popularity, circulation, narrative context, and vividness of imagery. This inquiry into the proverb is followed by a commentary on the cliché, which underlies Flaubert's irony, as well as Kafka's. Vaheed K. Ramazani examines the ambiguous and at times sublime representation of the revolution of 1848 in *L'éducation sentimentale*, underscoring, like Reiss and Derrida, the uncertainty and unreadability of history. George Eliot's parody of novels of formation, such as *L'éducation sentimentale*, heightens her critique of their generic conventions, which do not fit female protagonists. Complementing Marren's concerns, Susan Fraiman uses *The Mill on the Floss* to map another model for the development of identity, a relational construct that foregrounds conflict and social context.

A description of the essays that make up each issue of *PMLA* is, of course, one of the conventions of the Editor's Column. Perpetuating that convention also brings to an end my beginning as *PMLA*'s editor, an end that began officially, I suppose, as I started to write this maiden column. That beginnings are also endings, and in many ways mythic constructs, does not mean that we human beings ever lose our appetite for them, as presidential inaugurations confirm, or that we can do without their symbolism—without the possibility of a clean start and of the adventure of innovation on the bedrock of continuity. As I look toward the unpredictability of my tenure, I rely on the proverbial faith that "[she] who has begun has the work half done."

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Note

[1]My thanks go to Janet Rickershauser of Columbia University for her research in the *PMLA* archives.