

Editor's Column

"A good read." That expression is everywhere about us these days. However humble its beginnings, its incorporation into the critical lingo of the established literary press has vested it with apparent respectability. Before long, William Safire or another student of picturesque usage will comment on the origins and spurious legitimacy of this recent attachment to our linguistic arsenal. It is perhaps no accident that it was an expert on the allegory of language—and an erstwhile Californian—who introduced this designation some two years ago into the solemn deliberations of the *PMLA* editorial board. Unfortunately, I cannot recall the specific manuscript that incited this spontaneous and pithy assessment; but I do know that the newfound objective measure took immediate root as one of the board's many evaluative criteria. Most likely, the term fastened onto a way of perceiving and reading that we had been engaging in all along but for which no such neat tag had been readily available.

While the answer will surely be that we know one when we've seen—or had—one, the question is bound to persist: What is a good read? Which of the books that Francis Bacon classified are a good read: those that are to be tasted, those that are to be swallowed, or those that are to be chewed and digested? Carlos Fuentes's American publisher, basking in his client's success, is reported to have said of the Mexican author's best-seller *The Old Gringo* that "it works on every level—as a history, a good read, and as a philosophical statement." From this appraisal we may gather that a good read carries with it neither the authority of documentary retrospection nor the weight of metaphysical probing but occupies, rather, a mediating space by no means worthy of scorn though situated at another level. Our suspicions are confirmed as we stumble onto a variant of the phrase in a review by Robert Coover, a skilled manipulator of the word himself, who extols Mario Vargas Llosa's latest novel as "a highly entertaining read." By now we have edged dangerously near the precipice of pleasure and popularity, whose resonances of sensuality and rabble ostensibly stand to threaten the prestige of a journal like *PMLA*.

A scan of the readers' reports on the articles accepted for this one hundred first volume of *PMLA* reveals, as we would expect, an encompassing, variable, and sometimes contradictory apprehension of what constitutes a good read. The reappearing adjectives that pepper the evaluations disclose a blend of objective scrutiny and spontaneous bedazzlement; evidently, a good read, which is both an object and a process, incites judgments that are at once text-centered and oriented to reader response. The long list of plaudits includes "brilliant," "powerful," "admirable," "bright," "distinguished," "fascinating," "ingenious," "subtle," "energetic," "sophisticated," "deft," "exciting." Only a coup de foudre will produce the rare "magisterial," while "dense," like its target, requires a second look, since it appears in both positive and negative reviews. A statement like "This essay is perfectly readable" or the resounding conclusion "I liked what I read" underscores the dual nature of a good read and the tautological trap that awaits any attempt at definition.

Yet it is possible to extract certain patterns of expectations and evaluative criteria from the detailed, conscientious reports by *PMLA*'s consultant readers and advisory committee members. Intelligence, clarity, and interest are, predictably, traits that reviewers demand in an essay. Rare, too, is the report that omits "significant" or "important" from its vocabulary: readers look for significance in the subject matter—whether an author, a body of works, a particular text, or a critical issue—or in the method employed, that is, in the article's function as pedagogical model. The word "learned" continues to carry weight in the positive recommendations, where one finds approving statements like "consistently gives evidence of sound scholarship," "impressive familiarity with the primary texts," "impressive command of the voluminous criticism," "a model of patient acquisition of knowledge." Although excessive footnoting incurs displeasure, readers continue to prize the writer's scholarly authority and the labor invested in the pre-text, whether these appear in the text or in the after-text.

At the same time, freshness is indispensable. One article in the March issue pleased a referee because it "illuminates important moments in an important text in a fresh way": another, in the January number, was said to "expand a text beyond expected readings." Again and again manuscripts elicit praise when they "carry a discussion into a new context," offer "new insights" or a "significant reassessment," treat "problems that critics have ignored," or are "timely," "novel," "imaginative," "current," "original." Occasionally an article with these virtues manages to pierce all its reader's academic restraint: "Genuine originality in criticism is so rare that one's ordinary vocabulary of praise seems inadequate. . . . I can't remember so electrifying a reading of Emerson since Kenneth Burke's. . . . Even when I disagreed furiously with the readings, I felt invigorated by my opposition." Whether invigorated or infuriated, readers do take into serious account an article's rhetorical frame, its style, and its likely impact.

Articles in the first two issues of this year alone were found to be clearly argued, effectively argued, energetically argued, convincingly argued, and admirably argued. Clarity and persuasiveness are essential ingredients, for they help produce articles that are rated provocative, compelling, forceful, illuminating, enlightening, and rewarding. Writing that is carefully crafted, lively (and even breezy), sensitive to linguistic nuances, and free of jargon seems to meet the test of a good read.

The requirement, instituted in 1973, that articles in *PMLA* be of interest to the entire membership was abandoned for practical reasons in 1981; yet for many readers breadth remains a virtue as they wax enthusiastic over manuscripts that are “splendidly comprehensive,” “capacious,” or full of “richly rewarding contextualizations.” In any event, *PMLA*'s referees generally admire work that successfully accomplishes several things at once: essays that combine literary history with current critical concerns, theory with the practice of text explication, insightful unraveling of the particular with a consideration of “interrelated components in an intellectual architecture.” Lest this composite of the ideal article become awesome, I should report that one advisory committee member confessed that a manuscript he read was fun. And if statistical dominance is any consideration, contributors should note that titles boasting a scholarly colon, an alluring alliteration, or a delicate balance around a coordinate conjunction are almost *de rigueur* invitations to the read.

The articles in this issue of *PMLA*, to judge by the recommendations of their readers and the response of the editorial board, met these high expectations. Marta Powell Harley's amplification of mythic connections to reconstruct the erotic dimensions of the *Roman de la rose* was considered a soundly documented, incisively written study that goes against the critical grain and should therefore stimulate lively debate around its manner of illuminating a medieval text. Both reviewers of Stella Revard's tracing of the classical prototypes that infuse Milton's pair of poems were struck by the freshness and importance of her observations, by her learning, by the deftness and organization of her argument, and by her graceful, witty style. J. Douglas Kneale's examination of writing's appropriation of voice in Wordsworth's poetry also impressed its readers for the depth of its perceptions, for its solidity, for the significance of its thesis, and for its style. One consultant added that “it is a model application of recent theoretical developments in the continuing business of interpretation.” William Madden's intriguing study of the frame poems as keys to a better understanding of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books produced these comments: “a reminder of how illuminating formalist criticism can be,” “a stunning corrective to previous criticism,” “a model of intelligent criticism, quietly but passionately engaged with its materials.” The editorial board also agreed with the evaluators of Joseph Boone's article on *The Golden Bowl*, both of whom succumbed to its readability and discovered a major statement in his analysis of the novel's structural features as a subversive ideological enterprise. Finally, those who were not so fortunate as to catch the live performance by Theodore Ziolkowski at the Chicago convention last December can now revel in the wit and substance of his presidential address, complete with its doubly alliterative and triply balanced title.

The October issue, too, will offer *PMLA* readers varied and stimulating fare, articles that run the gamut of styles, approaches, and subjects, ranging from the specific to the general and from theory to practice. All, by one standard or another, are a good read. There is no doubt that among the ninety-five percent of submissions to *PMLA* that do not find their way into its pages, many “a splendid performance,” as a referee tagged one of the forthcoming pieces, is turned down. *PMLA* cannot accommodate all the excellent work it receives. It can only hope to meet, with what it does publish, the exacting standards of all its good readers. So, I remind you of the Augustinian urging *Tolle, lege*. Or, as the modern translation goes, Have a nice read!

JOHN W. KRONIK