

Editor's Column

"I can't write that kind of stuff!" This proclamation of humility, which I quote without permission, issued from the lips of a highly respected, extensively published, and uncommonly articulate colleague in the Slavic field. What produced the utterance was my urging that he send his next essay to *PMLA*. The unexpected response led me to ponder, as my predecessors in the editor's chair have, just what is the stuff of which *PMLA* is made? What, if any, is its right stuff? And what keeps some members from sending us their stuff? I confess that my scrutiny of our journal's pages, past and future, has led me to no perceptions as clear and definitive as those of the Camus scholar whom I reproached for neglecting *PMLA*. Her response was a confident measure of the journal's contents: "I haven't written anything suitable."

Suitability presumes a fit with an inscribed pattern, yet the statement of editorial policy defines the ideal *PMLA* article as broadly as possible: the best of its kind, whatever its kind. Significance, clarity, concision, readability, interest are expressed desiderata, but the journal's openness to a variety of topics and to all scholarly methods and critical perspectives is the stuff of its identity. No quotas of any sort govern acceptances; and while referees inevitably bring their private ideological and methodological biases to their readings of manuscripts, the very play of disparate convictions among readers tends to prevent the favoring of one approach or the exclusion of another. Those who serve on the *PMLA* advisory committee and the editorial board on a rotating basis come from as many persuasions as the association's membership. The executive council defines its nominees for these posts by field, period, and genre (the classifications are invariably narrower than their bearers), but it does not deliberately seek out a critic of a particular stripe. True enough, an eavesdropper on the editorial board's huddles would not always hear judgments untainted by subjectivity or partiality. In one reader the word *diegesis* may cause a reaction more glandular than rational; to another *modes of production* seems better suited to the *Wall Street Journal* than to *PMLA*. It is a healthy sign of the maturity of our profession's critical enterprise that we no longer feel born to the task, that we learn to adopt positions and working methods, and that we develop convictions. The sacrifice of passivity and neutrality and sometimes even of our academically decorous tolerance is the price we pay for flourishing debates. The interplay of disparate commitments and expectations and the occasional contentiousness among the nine or ten readers of a manuscript ensure not only reasonable fairness in *PMLA*'s evaluation process but variety and disparity in the final selections. *PMLA* receives and judges articles with a collective open-mindedness, and no single procedure or ideology has a jump on any other.

The only possible response to the questions I have been asked—What is *PMLA*'s critical orientation? What methodology does the editorial board prefer?—is a gesture of embrace. Summon to mind any two journals that you consider at opposite ends of the critical horizon, and we would be happy to compete with their editors for your favors and your articles. Peruse the pages of our journal, and you will most likely identify essays that could readily have gained entry into one or the other of your discrepant publications.

A further self-effacing explanation for nonparticipation, "I'm too traditional for *PMLA*," appears to echo the sentiments of a number of readers. Some of the essays—and now and then an entire issue—may well fan such a perception. Last October's number, for example, was heavily slanted toward theory and the ways of modern critical analysis. It offered an essay on Bakhtinian dialogics, a metacritical examination of literary convention itself, an application of contemporary narratology and gender criticism to a series of nineteenth-century novels, poststructuralist readings of a Henry James novel and a sixteenth-century poem, and a figural analysis of Coleridge's writings. As the long-lived scholarly organ of a vast community rather than the voice of a coherent minority, *PMLA* is as much mirror as it is lamp. It reflects the state of our art. Inevitably, it collects the winds that blow through our profession, the vocabularies in vogue, the theorists most in the news or in the footnotes.

These *modes and names*, however, hold no proprietary rights over today's *PMLA*, as the contents of any succession of issues and yet another disclaimer will prove: "I'm not erudite enough for *PMLA*." If the responses to my invitation carry a touch of contradiction and distortion, the explanation probably lies with *PMLA*'s very multifacetedness. At the same time learned journal and literary review, assembled mostly from what comes in over the transom (as John Fisher put it in the centennial issue), *PMLA* holds no brief for any given stance. Modernity and tradition as well as the tensions that divide them are appropriate stuff for a *PMLA* article, as they are of our convention sessions and of our membership's profile.

The articles in this issue differ from October's collection and from one another. Several of them es-

chew canonical texts. Reed Way Dasenbrock, treating a subject that appears too rarely in our pages, grapples with the critical apprehension of Anglophone literature by African, Indian, Chinese American, Chicano, and Maori writers. Susan Crane's close look at Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* suggests fresh juxtapositions of history and fiction, satire and romance, semantics and society. Phyllis Rackin's provocative exercise in feminist criticism focuses on three Renaissance dramatists as it considers gender in the context of theatrical representation. Donald W. Foster's witty piece of detective work based on Elizabethan rhetorical conventions offers a startling solution to a mystery that has long puzzled Shakespeareans. In David Laurence's article the historical and rhetorical analysis of Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* shares space with an important consideration of the subtleties of the sublime. Finally, Lee Clark Mitchell deftly deals with language, gender, and the social structure in the American western along with questions of reader reception. The articles that we have on hand for future issues are equally varied in subject matter and methodology: a metrical analysis, with feminist overtones, of Emily Dickinson's poetry; a cultural history of a dramatic genre of the Italian Renaissance; an assessment of the new historicism; a feminist interpretation of a Hitchcock film; an intertextual reading of a Spanish pastoral poet; a pair of inquiries into James Joyce, one a model of eclectic criticism that addresses language, politics, origins, and authority, the other a Lacanian reader-oriented reinterpretation of a *Dubliners* story; and a trio of textual analyses of medieval English verse that draw from the arsenals of semantics, Marxism, and hermeneutics. Some of the referees' responses to these articles—"sheer joy," "quite unlike *PMLA's* usual fare," "will set many fertile bees buzzing in the critical bonnet," "a refreshing alternative to the older pedantry"—suggest that readers and potential contributors can find in *PMLA* opportunity without circumscription. Indeed, modes of production and codes of seduction can cohabit harmoniously in today's *PMLA*, while sources and intertexts can both find sustenance around *PMLA's* table of contents.

PMLA, in the heterogeneity of its ingredients, reflects the pluralism of the act of interpretation to which its contributors devote themselves. The polemics between valid interpreters and creative critics refuse to subside, but the perpetrator of the notion that interpretation is the projection of self on data may not have been entirely off the mark, as readers from Don Quixote to Norman Holland's quintet have demonstrated. Few who ply our vocation would agree with Emerson's dictum, "The trait and test of the poet is that he builds, adds and affirms. The critic destroys." Critics are governed by the same anxieties as poets. If they destroy anything, they destroy their own critical forebears while subsuming and transcending received interpretations. That continually evolving process, with its constants and its innovations, is the stuff of which *PMLA* articles are made, of which *all* our articles are made.

Surely, then, the young critic fresh from a tenure victory is misguided when he retreats from my call to try *PMLA* with his next piece of work: "I wouldn't *dare!*" I ask myself: What are the risks to body or soul, to personal equilibrium or professional status that a submission to *PMLA* entails? The ultimate in my collection of excuses for noncollaboration with our publication is a duo of responses that came from colleagues in the same department—English, if the truth must be told—and that aptly describe the constructive tensions within *PMLA*: "Oh, *PMLA* is too modern for me!" said one; "No, *PMLA* isn't yet modern enough for me!" said the other. As Blake put it, "Both read the Bible day and night, / But thou read'st black where I read white."

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