
Editor's Column

ENDINGS do not automatically summon the sense of an ending, and they are not inevitably apocalyptic. As I leave the editorship of *PMLA*, I am inclined to echo neither the words of General Douglas MacArthur when he abandoned Corregidor nor those of Richard Nixon when he lost the race for the governorship of California. For a journal a transfer of editors is a bracing step forward, and this retiring editor takes heart from his predecessors, whose vigorous examples demonstrate that there is, indeed, life after *PMLA*. Beginnings invite new adventures but also tolerate a touch of nostalgia, so I may be insisting on the obvious when I say that my editorial role with *PMLA* has been a unique opportunity. My thirteen years of formal involvement with the journal and my service as its thirteenth editor add up in my mind to the best of fortune, even if in future tallies I may suffer the fate of the thirteenth floor in some hotels. The independence that I have enjoyed in tending to the editorial and intellectual dimensions of the journal while a capable colleague concerned herself with the governance of the association confirms the wisdom of the decision to separate those two functions. The volatility of both the academic scene and the journal over the past seven years has made my experience all the more challenging and exciting. Unlike those who guide other journals, *PMLA*'s editor is constrained by a democratic structure, but to my satisfaction I discovered that the team's collaborative force ensures the dynamism of the enterprise.

At this juncture memories run by kaleidoscopically. Among the most piercing, I confess, is the anguish I felt on each of two dozen occasions like this one when I could see all thirty thousand of you staring back at me through the words on my computer screen, absorbing their flicker and passing judgment from your sundry vantage points. The writer's audience is *not* always a fiction, and I realized that my task of addressing such a vast and variegated readership was the challenge that faced the journal itself. As I return to communion with my cozy family of specialists in nineteenth-century Spanish narrative, I relish joining the portion of the world that only *reads* editors' columns. I depart with a thicker skin, for I discovered that every

initiative one takes, no matter how widespread its endorsement, is certain to elicit the censure of some. Even so, I treasure the substantive dialogue with those who took the time to express their reservations, while the fruitful response that came from the member in Florida who cheered our unprecedented publication of an article on the discourse of culinary recipes remains in my fancy as the most memorable gesture of approval. On the day of the season's first frost in northern New York and in the same mail with the October issue that carried her Forum letter, there arrived in my office a box of twenty key limes—real key limes.

The meeting of the *PMLA* Editorial Board is surely one of the editor's richest rewards. After twenty-seven successive gatherings and the close discussion of almost five hundred manuscripts, I suffer no surfeit of that always invigorating activity. Despite strong intellectual disagreements, the moments of tension were rare, and a spirit of conviviality marked the deliberations. The rigor of the board's standards, the breadth of the members' expertise, their articulateness in expressing their judgments, and their scrupulousness in the dispatch of their responsibility were truly admirable. A jaw swollen from a painful tooth extraction did not deter one member from spirited participation in a meeting, and another came accompanied by her one-month-old daughter, who behaved fittingly for the solemn occasion. Even a telephone call announcing the editor's initiation into grandfatherhood interrupted a January session only long enough for a round of huzzahs. The Editorial Board of course shapes the contents of *PMLA*, but the journal's fresh dimensions and new features have also emerged from these councils.

Board meetings as well as other *PMLA* duties have brought me into contact with colleagues in different areas whose paths I might otherwise not have crossed so easily. I have learned immeasurably from these scholars, and I have had the special privilege of bringing my discipline into dialogue with theirs. My continuing education has also been bolstered by the many manuscripts from other fields that pursued me even to Madrid and Middlebury, to Boulder and Berkeley. To have read every word that has appeared in *PMLA* over a long span of years—and considerably more that have not—has been an unexpected boon to my own work, and I recommend for your benefit (and for the good of your students) such forays into strange waters.

In their valedictories, outgoing editors of the journal, reflecting the modesty typical of our discipline, have tended to bemoan their failures rather than to brandish their successes. William Schaefer, writing in 1978, lamented the inability of *PMLA* to attract essays that compelled the interest of the entire readership, and he reproached the profession for being so fragmented that it had nothing to say to its collective self. Perhaps he was expecting too much of the official organ of a hydra-headed monster like the MLA; perhaps the problem is that too few of us have or take the time to read as expansively as we might.

In any event, while diversification and splintering continue to mark the academy and *PMLA*, I believe that Schaefer's wishes have been answered at least insofar as each number brings some pages that address the journal's entire readership. It may be precisely our differences in politics and ideology, our debates around theory and the canon, our disparate methods and languages, our undefined roles as humanists in the social order that, in an ironic twist, have drawn us into communion. The material in *PMLA*, including the Forum letters, traces patterns of productive tension, and the wages of our confrontation are a lively collective dialogue. The very battles that have been joined in recent issues should come as reassurance to the board member who expressed the concern that the institutional protection of ideologies may be producing an exclusionary polarization that alienates some members of the profession: such biases as appear in the journal are not those of its editorial team but the voices of its contributors in legitimate contention. No one is excluded on ideological grounds; the parties draw their own lines. I share the view of another colleague on the Editorial Board, who said, "*PMLA* is remarkably fair. It's the most honorable scholarly enterprise in the profession."

Joel Conarroe, in his farewell remarks, deplored what he called *PMLA*'s "decidedly Anglo-Saxon cast" and the minimal representation of non-English-language subjects. Two years later, English Showalter echoed the sentiment that *PMLA* did not represent all its constituencies. My predecessors' complaints have been heeded, for that imbalance has been redressed at least in part. Certain absences do continue to gnaw at me—I count among my failures, for example, my inability to attract so important a segment as Chicano culture onto the roster—but the contents and backlog lists of most numbers now testify to the engagement of many different sectors, and I am heartened by the general spirit of involvement. It is important that this broadly based collaboration continue and that in some fashion the submissions add up to a potent, overarching statement.

I hope that all who peruse this issue of *PMLA* will agree that it meets the aim of offering something interesting and readable to everyone. This number opens its pages to a wide intercultural exchange and, building on the solid ground of *PMLA*'s traditions, takes initiatives in tracing fresh paths. Borges's previously untranslated gem about the art of translation mischievously dramatizes the pleasures and pitfalls of intertextual dialogues across national and temporal boundaries. The coincidental arrival of three fine essays on Chaucer written by colleagues dramatically separated from one another by rank and methodology provided an opportunity for a cluster that Seth Lerer, on short notice, consented to introduce, and I thank him for his unselfish cooperation. His characterization of Chaucer studies as "willfully omnivorous" applies across the board to current criticism, and other fields, too, have taught us, as Lerer puts it, that there are many ways of understanding modernity. Several essays then transport

us through the Italian Renaissance, German and British Romanticism, Chinese modernism, and contemporary Latin America and Africa in tandem. With neither at a disadvantage, the periphery and the center of traditional scholarly attention conjoin in a salubrious array of approaches that do justice to the text, to history, to language, to gender differences. Revisionary stands challenge the reader in each of these studies. The final two essays confront modern literary criticism in encompassing terms. The crossover between literature and science has become a pressing issue, and "This Is Not a Universe" examines physicists' link to literary critics in their shared questioning of language, of the production of interpretation, and of the structures of representation. Some of the same concerns underlie the last essay's examination of the state of deconstruction today, both as a system and as an institution. Readers of all persuasions can, finally, turn to the closing item in the Forum and delight in the deconstruction of deconstruction by a colleague who apparently has already reached certain conclusions.

The articles listed in this issue as "forthcoming in *PMLA*" I bequeath with pride and pleasure to my successor and to our readers. The January number will carry the special-topic section on the idea of Europe, along with a short translation from Derrida, and I wish to take this opportunity to give thanks to Timothy J. Reiss for his work as coordinator of that topic and to Jacques Derrida for his long-standing interest in our journal. Three further special topics are in process, and March will bring a cluster of articles on gender. The variety and the quality of the essays in our backlog are a promise of delectables that readers have in store. Last year, for the first time since the William Riley Parker Prize for an outstanding article in *PMLA* was instituted in 1964, the selection committee saw fit to award the prize to two entries. That development is encouraging, and the forthcoming essays will make the committee members' choices no easier.

I relinquish my post with confidence in the system and with deep respect for the people that make it work. I could not have accomplished my charge if the Executive Council's high regard for the association's journal had not translated, year after year, into full moral and material support of the Editorial Board's initiatives. My debt to the council members and to the association officers rests in blue on your bookshelves. I am fortunate to have coincided throughout my term with Phyllis Franklin, without whose advice, backing, and friendship I would surely have foundered. I am also grateful to my colleagues and the administration at Cornell University for having not only tolerated but supported my investment of energies in *PMLA*. It is the steadfast policy of the editorial staff to delete from the journal any strands of acknowledgment extended in their direction. In a final appropriation of privilege, I shall fly in the face of that custom of modesty and sensitivity as I look in vain for adequate words of ap-

preciation and admiration for those who run and produce *PMLA*: Judy Goulding and her staff. A recent author made the point picturesquely: "I've never had a \$100 massage, but the experience must be comparable to getting edited at *PMLA*." Judy Goulding's efficient and tranquil managerial style, her unfailingly sound judgment, her sense of order and fairness set the example for the entire operation. When a problem arose, I knew I could turn to her for the best solution. I shall also miss her staff, whom I respect boundlessly for their expertise and their unparalleled dedication and to whom I owe a heavy debt for having made my tasks easy. Among those who have processed hundreds of manuscripts annually, copyedited and proofread accepted essays, corresponded with authors, prepared all the peripheral material, designed and set the pages, and contended with crises so as to deposit each issue punctually in your mailboxes, there are too many to name, but you will find them all listed on the mastheads of current and past issues. I want to repeat publicly my appreciation of my colleagues on the Editorial Board and on the Advisory Committee—also listed prominently in the front pages—for their assiduous service in evaluating manuscripts and in setting policy for the journal. We who make the editorial decisions could not function without the conscientious help of our many referees or, of course, without the interest and confidence of the authors who send us their work and of the readers who find between the covers of *PMLA*, whatever its shortcomings, a moment of insight, of stimulation, of pleasure. My thanks go out to all of you.

By the time you see these lines, my successor will be signing letters, reading manuscripts, organizing a board meeting, implementing new ideas, and writing her first Editor's Column. Domna Stanton is, for reasons that are obvious to those who know her and that will quickly become evident to those of you who don't, an ideal choice for the editorship of *PMLA*. I have worked closely with Domna in the past, and my acquaintance with all her sterling qualities, her high standards, her efficiency and imagination gives me a sense of excitement about the future of the MLA's journal. With a measure of relief and a mass of confidence, I watch the flow of manuscripts shift from one snowy college town in the East to another in the Midwest. Like the rest of you, I look forward to reading every word that is to appear in her *PMLA*.

JOHN W. KRONIK
