

Editor's Column: Metaphoric Spaces, Existential Moments, Practical Consequences

THE PHYSICAL SITE WAS AN ELEVATOR AT AN ANNUAL MLA convention. This particular elevator was located in the New York Hilton. (Many of us recall that hotel from the time when we met regularly in Manhattan, until the city's hostellers, having concluded that academics do not spend as much or tip as well as civilian tourists, banished the MLA from the premises.) Convention elevators are much alike wherever they are, however: smallish metallic containers packed with people who are trying hard not to be too obvious in their attempts to read the name tags of fellow passengers. Of more importance were the psychological features of the site: an unforgettable annual overload of fatigue, elation, and anxiety shared among a wedged-in mass of strangers.

It was in that place and that context that a question was directed at me over the heads of the others: "Where are you?" Turning, I glimpsed a familiar face. Not stopping to consider that the purpose of my friend's query was to find out whether I was booked into the Hilton or another of the MLA hotels, I shot back, "Is this an existential question?" Laughter filled the elevator, somewhat nervous yet warm with self-awareness. Where are we, indeed? We will be assaulted by this question in many places and at many moments, but are we not inordinately vulnerable to its demands when ringed by the peculiar circumstances of our professional lives and of our function as academic practitioners of languages and literatures?

I cite two moments when what I do, and am, as a professor of literature was challenged in a manner that, all of a sudden, forced me to rethink the existential applicability of the words "Where are you?" I recall these moments of personal experience in order to venture certain comments about the situations in which all of us as members of the MLA function in our professorial duties and about the role *PMLA* may take in these situations.

In my persona as a citizen of Los Angeles County, I was summoned for service in a jury "pool." Eager to escape the boredom of having to pass ten days in the jurors' "lounge," I hoped to get assigned to the jury "box" so that I might attend to a case. Finally called into that box for preliminary screening, I was queried by the lawyers for the defense and the prosecution. Although it frequently happens that potential jurors are dismissed through peremptory challenges if it is learned that they are employed by academic institutions, the lawyers seemed satisfied with my answers to the basic questions put to me. Yet the presiding judge soon told me to leave the box, step out of the pool, and return to the lounge. I was dismissed "for cause," as it were. He stated that I could not possibly function properly as a juror. His reason: because I was a literature professor and worked entirely with fantasies, I was incapable of processing the factual evidence on which final decisions in legal matters must be based. (He patiently took the time to inform me about that which he assumed I was unaware: that court cases depend on evaluating hard facts, not soft fictions.)

Another existential moment that caught me off guard took place in yet another closely confined space (the backseat of a taxi). As the newly elected president of a national scholarly organization, I was told (told off) by a well-known scholar trained as a dedicated empiricist that I, as a literature professor, represented the particular tradition that was responsible for the murder of six million Jews: "*You people* only believe in fantasies, and fantasies gave Nazis the power to carry out the work of the Holocaust."

The judge chose only to censor me individually for practicing an occupation blind to reality. The scholar elected to condemn an entire professional discipline in my name for its mindless advocacy of untruths that led to the horribly true destruction of an entire generation. Is this, indeed, where we are?

Such encounters can shake teachers, scholars, and critics toiling in the fields of languages

and literatures loose from the comfort of feeling at some peace with the tasks we perform day by day. Such existential moments (in elevators, jury boxes, and taxicabs) have the power to raise doubts about who and what we are. They also have a way of breaking into the monotony of activities that are more literal in their practice than profound in their commitment. How one responds to such moments is, however, an individual matter. No single call voiced during an MLA Presidential Address, no one item printed in the *MLA Newsletter*, no set of debates mounted at the Delegate Assembly, and no particular view advanced in a *PMLA* Editor's Column will resolve the unsettling circumstances that elicit existential moments, which, by their nature, only take possession of our minds and wills, one by one.

Recognition of where the "where" resides remains a private discovery, though one liable to have public consequences. There is an oft-told bit of apocrypha (but one so apt it carries its own truth) about the verbal exchange between Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson after Thoreau was incarcerated for refusing to pay taxes to Massachusetts because it had recently sanctioned the capture and return of runaway slaves. Emerson supposedly queried Thoreau. "Henry, why are you there?" "Why are you not here?" Thoreau flung back in his customarily untactful manner.¹ In Thoreau's view, Emerson's *here* was situated midst the corrupt conventionality of a smugly law-abiding society. Thoreau's *here* was Concord's jail, the moral space he elected to occupy to express in real terms his abhorrence for America's slave system.

Sooner or later, we all need to choose our own "good jails" if we hope to have workable answers to the almost impossible questions of where we situate ourselves. For those of us who lead the academic life, our best jails will probably be the spaces we daily claim, in our own manner, in the classroom, the study, and arenas of community activity. Also consider that *PMLA* and its parent organization, the Modern Language Association, strive to offer additional

metaphoric spaces for experiencing existential moments and responding to the practical consequences these moments call into play.

In the March issue of *PMLA*, Charles S. Adams's Guest Column describes the real small world inhabited by teacher-scholars in the nation's many liberal arts colleges. Writers of other Guest Columns in the recent past have also reported on the special spaces they occupy and the practices that follow from these facts. Linda Hutcheon has traced the scholarly geographies Canadian academicians must traverse (114 [1999]: 311–17), and Nellie Y. McKay has analyzed the implications of being in "the Wheatley court" for all scholars of African American literature (113 [1998]: 359–69). In 1998, the special Forum on *PMLA* Abroad published communiqués from members who teach in universities around the world (113 [1998]: 1122–50), while the 1999 special Forum on Literatures of the Environment addressed the problematics of writing responsibly about the immense entirety of the natural world, that "where" where we all exist, like it or not (114 [1999]: 1089–104). Appearing in this issue are the first in *PMLA*'s new series of commentaries, filled with a wide range of spaces, moments, and consequences. These inaugural contributions take us inside the back rooms where arguments over the film studies curriculum and the tight little island of academic book publishing are under way and into the arenas where debates are taking place over the "where is it going?" of French theory and the "what are they?" of premodern sexualities.

I close with a rapid look at the doings last December in Chicago at the annual MLA convention. As usual, the elevators are crowded, the lobbies jammed, the barstools occupied, and the session rooms either filled to overflowing or sparsely occupied (each panel its own special world of professional tensions and delights). Seasoned conventioners sense it is wise not to think too hard about what is going on upstairs in the rooms where job interviews are being held or downstairs in the large communal areas where

other interviews are taking place nakedly in public view. But whatever precautions the cautious take, the four days of the convention will ball together into one massive existential moment. Lobby, elevator, corridor, room, and meeting place are metaphoric spaces in which persons whose tenure-track positions define for them their "where" are invisibly separated from others who feel, as yet, nowhere in the professional world. Still, there is excitement in the atmosphere and benefits to be gained for those willing to open themselves up to the abrupt experience of the existential question that can come at any moment.

Ralph Waldo Emerson had his own jails to deal with. It was often troubled spaces he wished to escape, not the good spaces his acerbic friend Thoreau fought hard to inhabit. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson offers a little parable of the person who flees to faraway places in hopes of eluding the unresolved tensions of existence back home:

Travelling is a fool's paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern Fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from. (145)

Whether we fly off to distant cities for the annual conventions with sad or happy hearts or remain at home in the study or the classroom, the moment will surely come when a voice calls out from over our shoulder, "Where are you?" The answers to that question are our own to devise, but there are positive ways to deal with the practical consequences of our professional existence. *PMLA* will continue to try to offer the best of all possible "jails," from whose site we are free to retort, "Why are you not here?"

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NOTE

¹ The version cited here comes from Henry Seidel Canby's biography, *Thoreau* (233). Walter Harding's *The Days of Henry Thoreau* reports that Emerson asked Thoreau why he had gone to jail, and Thoreau replied, "Why did you not?" (205–06). Harding takes as his source John Weiss's 1865 essay on Thoreau. In the January 1919 issue of the *Liberator*, Floyd Dell stated that the magazine was addressed "to two classes of readers: those who are in jail and those who are not" (14).

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