

Editor's Column

RECIPES in *PMLA*! How will readers take to that? Will they welcome or reject their staid journal's turn to culinary criticism? Then again, will they respond with sympathy to honorary fellow Carmen Martín Gaité's gentle reminder of the technological threats that reading suffers in our day and with hostility or applause to Roger Seamon's frankly polemical review of literary criticism qua technology? His analysis of the historical flows and flaws of the critical enterprise and of its emphasis on system over object, as one approving consultant predicted, "is bound to offend a disparate constituency" even while, in the words of another referee, it manages "to lay bare some surprising connections and consequences in a way that sheds fresh light on what goes on in current academic criticism." I wonder if the Romance contingent's strong presence in these pages will produce resounding huzzahs. Both specialist and generalist will discover exciting insights in each of these important essays, but they may also find some bones to pick with Uta Schaub's discovery of a hidden discourse in Foucault, with Geraldine Friedman for the interpretive position that she extracts from a key Baudelaire prose poem, and with Margaret Greer's contextualized reading of a neglected corpus of Calderón plays. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's 1988 convention speech is of course born of the disputes and attacks that the humanities and the academy have endured of late and into which she so forcefully and courageously inserted her presidential voice. Her reflections on her own experience in the limelight will surely stimulate others to raise their voices in productive debate. The contents of this issue will, as always, spur expressions of satisfaction and displeasure. Will the good judgment of our referees, the Advisory Committee, and the Editorial Board be impugned for their acceptance of these essays? An astute reader of the printed word may espy a blemish that we overlooked in the manuscript. Another may take umbrage at the way we conduct our business. Yet others will find reason to address matters of general concern to the journal or to the profession.

PMLA regularly invites reader response and usually gets it. Many of the letters that reach us are composed specifically for publication in the Forum. Others are sent to the editor for his private consumption. Not wishing to abuse my editorial prerogatives by taking up space in the Forum when I have this column available to me, I have refrained from answering in those back pages the increasing number of comments that touch on editorial policies and judgments. On the assumption that an individual's complaint usually registers the view of a group, I'd like to share with you some of the contents of my recent mailbags and to expand on a few of the subjects that have been raised.

The staff of any journal must be prepared to receive expressions of discontent from authors whose articles have been declined. *PMLA* is in double jeopardy because it returns readers' reports to all authors, who then have a concrete document to contest if they are prompted to do so. Although it would be easy enough for us to avoid this risk, we believe—and we have been confirmed in our belief—that we pay authors a significant service by sharing with them the criticism of their work that reviewers funnel through our offices. We do our best to screen our consultant specialists and to discern in their reports ideological bias, inadequate appraisal, or crass lack of diplomacy. (On the rare occasions when a report seems deficient, we seek further evaluations.) *PMLA* is fortunate to have at its disposal hundreds of consultants who advise on articles meticulously and constructively; but even so, in the eyes of an unhappy author the system sometimes founders. The heartening fact is that while *PMLA* must decline many more essays than it accepts, the expressions of appreciation far outnumber the grievances.

Some of my correspondents—referees as well as authors—have objected to the practice of allowing subsequent readers to see the first reader's report. The organizers of *PMLA*'s evaluation procedures conceived the second reader's role to be not only judgmental but corroboratory and corrective. In the continuing review of our methods, succeeding editorial boards have discussed this step, most recently last year, and have concluded from their experience (which includes seeing a great many revised articles) that authors are best served by a sequence that enables referees to enter into dialogue with earlier readings. The question of the referees' anonymity has also been on board agendas repeatedly. In the Forum of this number, Michael Shapiro presents one side of the argument, namely that "full disclosure of the evaluators' identities coupled with blind submission" is the ideal solution for a truly open and fair process. The opposing argument is that anonymity, as in letters of recommendation, may more readily elicit unencumbered, forthright assessments. Both viewpoints have been defended vigorously

and sensibly, and right is not easily assigned to either position. The custom of conceding to readers the freedom to reveal or withhold their names predates the blind-submission policy, and since *PMLA* is so dependent on the good will of its army of consultants, to grant them the courtesy of this option may be regarded as a minimal gesture of gratitude.

In the face of a bibliographic dispute in the Forum, a faithful and attentive reader in Japan took me to task for sidestepping my responsibility when I left unanswered the charge that, in their failure to catch a serious omission, *PMLA*'s consultants and committees exhibited a lack of care or of competence. The collective response in the January issue to Richard Levin's article on feminist interpretations of Shakespeare similarly questions the judgment of *PMLA*'s referees. On the one hand, I believe it is hardly necessary to state publicly that, evenhanded and exhaustive as the evaluation system is, it can be no less fallible than is human nature in the aggregate. On the other hand, authors and editorial boards must face the obvious fact that controversial articles will raise controversy and that the most considered decision to publish such a piece will invite opposition if not outrage. That those involved in the selection process will be the butt of criticism and even ire is an unavoidable concomitant of the professional responsibility and privilege that they have assumed. Along the same lines, I do not interpret association members' considerable resistance to Stanley Fish's views in his guest column (Oct. 1988) as a lesson that his commentary should have been suppressed. But I can assure Sieglinde Lug (whose letter appeared in the March issue) that *PMLA* draws no distinctions along lines of gender or race: Maureen Quilligan and Myra Jehlen in their earlier column and Wole Soyinka in his Nobel Prize speech took equally firm and controversial stands in these same pages.

Dwight Purdy's admonition to the Editorial Board in this issue's Forum reflects the strength of conviction that other readers, too, have noticed in the wording and tone of many recent Forum letters. Staff members and the editor do, in fact, routinely scrutinize the letters that arrive. Sometimes we request slight rewording; at other times, further correspondence between the writer and the editor seems more appropriate than a public airing in the journal, or, if the letter refers to a published article, we may channel it directly to the author and suggest a private exchange. But the policy is to allow the writers of letters the widest possible latitude and to give authors the opportunity to defend themselves. While the implication that distinguished scholars are victimized in *PMLA*'s back pages may itself carry the touch of picturesque hyperbole that Dwight Purdy and Arthur Weitzman have detected in Forum rhetoric, there is no doubt that the dialogues—indeed, those in this very issue—are marked by a measure of contentiousness. Whether the Forum has become more unfriendly or more lively, however, is a matter of perception, and I would like to think that the journal's intellectually provocative contents stimulate the impassioned stands of the respondents. The other side of Purdy's coin is that the line between the maintenance of professional decorum and the suppression of ideas is a fine one, and I can well imagine the charge of censorship that might be delivered against any effort at greater editorial intervention.

By far the heaviest amount of mail pertains to the contents of *PMLA* and to the absence of certain subjects and methodologies or entire association constituencies. As my predecessors did, I have returned to this problem time and again, and every Editorial Board would like to see the lacunae filled and the imbalances redressed. One member's complaint, for instance, that modern drama is too scarce in our journal is well taken, but the explanation does not lie with referees who hold deep grudges against matters theatrical. Perhaps the trickle of material on drama that we receive reflects a state of criticism in which narrative and poetry have been the favored genres; perhaps the experts in the field have turned to other outlets with their manuscripts. English Showalter pointed out in his October 1984 editor's column that any imbalance in submissions produces an imbalance in the journal's contents. The special topic on performance (the submission deadline for which is 1 September 1990) has been designed in part to remedy this deficiency. My colleagues and I heartily agree with Guy Stern's conviction (expressed in the October 1988 Forum) that *PMLA* should be instrumental in attracting new members into the professional family: the special topic on Afro-American and African literature, for example, has had precisely this effect. I often hear echoes of Stern's appraisal of *PMLA* as a "trendy" magazine and can only repeat that an association's scholarly organ will inevitably reflect the trends of its members' current work. But if it is true that a coterie of tastemakers entices potential contributors along certain paths, then those makers clearly have eclectic tastes, as the contents of past issues—witness the last two Parker Prize winners—and future issues will reveal. By the same token, *PMLA*

neither shies away from a rehearsal of existing canons nor shuns its obligation to provide the stimuli for scholarly growth that Kurt Opitz proposes in his letter to the Forum. All that is required for these efforts to succeed is the members' willingness to have their work pass through our system.

PMLA would be a duller place if it drew no fire and the editor's task less challenging if no complaints came in. The best news, however, is that in 1988 the number of manuscripts submitted increased 37% over the previous year's. I take that added weight in the mailbag to be an indicator of confidence in the journal and a promise of good health for the future.

JOHN W. KRONIK

Carmen Martín Gaité's meditations on the virtues of reading continue our series of contributions by honorary members and fellows of the association. We are grateful to Martín Gaité for granting *PMLA* permission to translate and print this unpublished essay.

