

## Editor's Column

IT IS LIKELY that the next issue of this journal will be made up entirely of essays on British and American literature. One could be disingenuous about this circumstance and stress the value that a "special number," with its particular focus and coherence, would have. It is not, though, a desire for thematic conformity that will produce such an issue but the lamentable fact that our backlog of essays on non-English-language subjects has, like reservoirs all across the country, dried up. And unless the Editorial Board, at its next few meetings, accepts not only studies of Hawthorne and Chaucer but some essays on French, Spanish, German, Slavic, and other literatures as well, *PMLA* will take on a decidedly Anglo-Saxon cast. Since this possibility distresses me, I am using this space to urge our members to send us studies on Goethe and Frisch, on Cervantes and García Márquez, Corneille and Char, Chekhov, Kundera, Calvino, and Borges. I hope we will be inundated, that our reservoir will overflow its banks. Nothing would please me more, in fact, than putting together an issue consisting entirely of papers on non-English literatures.

I certainly do not mean to discourage our colleagues in English from sending their best work. The point I want to make, rather, is that the Editorial Board can give its blessing only to such essays as come before it, and unless our members in foreign languages send us their work, the Board will be faced, as we were at the most recent meeting, with choosing from among a pile of papers devoted to Dryden, Richardson, Coleridge, Barrett Browning, Melville, Levertov, and others whose writings lack umlauts, cedillas, and acute accents.

Why do we receive so few essays on German and French literature and even fewer on Spanish and Italian topics? The majority of our members are in English departments, to be sure, and it follows that submissions on Milton and Eliot will always outnumber those on Dante and Cortázar; the disparity in submissions, however, is actually much wider than mere membership figures would suggest. Perhaps some scholars of, say, Russian prefer to send their essays to specialized journals whose readers will be familiar with both the works treated and the language in which they are written. It is also possible that our former editorial policy of accepting only work likely to interest the entire membership steered away some potential contributors, those not convinced that a specialized topic, even though it thoroughly engaged their own interest, would necessarily appeal to some 28,000 widely dispersed colleagues. And some of our members, too, may suspect that, because the majority of *PMLA* essays are written by members of English departments, the journal is not hospitable to studies of "foreign" writers.

Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth, but perceptions are important. During a recent meeting of the Commission on the Literatures and Languages of America questions were raised about why so few essays on minority literatures appear in *PMLA*. One of the members told an anecdote that may offer a clue: when he asked a colleague why she did not send an essay she had just finished to our journal, he was told, "They wouldn't be interested in something on Chicano literature." This suggests, of course, a self-fulfilling prophecy: because *PMLA* does not publish many essays on minority literatures, it is perceived as being uninterested in such topics; hence authors do not send their work, the journal rarely publishes on minority literature, and thus it does not seem interested. . . . A vicious circle indeed. How to break the pattern? Several members have suggested that we commission essays on minority literature rather than wait for them to arrive. Once we publish these papers our colleagues will see that we indeed welcome such material and that *PMLA* is a place to which they should submit their own work.

This proposal is intriguing, but it poses some problems. If we were to commission essays in areas that are underrepresented (Spanish, Catalan, Japanese, composition and rhetoric, linguistics, gay literature, Italian, and Eastern European, to name only a few) we would bump from our pages those who now gain entrance through a democratic process. A number of groups (and individuals) inquire every year about commissioned essays, and I

always answer that we much prefer to put all essays through the usual evaluation process. Should some association members, after all, be assured publication in our pages while others receive no commitment other than the promise of informed readings that may or may not lead to acceptance? Perhaps I can achieve the effect of commissioning essays by stating here, unambiguously and with all the force at my disposal, that *PMLA* eagerly invites essays on language and literature of all sorts and will give them conscientious and sympathetic readings. We certainly cannot promise publication, cannot, in fact, even offer assurances that any essay, whatever its subject, will reach the final stage, that is, the Editorial Board, but we can assure our readers that an essay that is good of its kind, whatever the kind, will receive serious consideration.

As recently as ten years ago there were few if any examples of feminist criticism in *PMLA*. The first such essays to appear were not commissioned, rather they emerged from the conventional competitive process. It may well be that these essays encouraged other scholars, both men and women, to submit work with a feminist orientation, but whatever the cause we now regularly receive such essays, some of which are superb. Had our colleagues decided in advance that the journal is not hospitable to subjects and approaches that are new and perhaps even controversial, we would have been deprived of some of the strongest essays that appeared during the 1970s. I like to think that by 1990 we will be able to look back to the 1980s and see significant incorporation of approaches previously unpublished or under-represented. I offer this hope as an invitation and as a challenge.

When I allude to a democratic selection process and stress that every member of the association has as good a chance of being published as any other, regardless of sex, race, literary interest, or place of employment, I do so with some conviction. It is still too early to comment on the impact of the recently inaugurated policy of anonymous submissions, but the most recent meetings of the Editorial Board suggest a few emerging patterns. Of the eighteen anonymous essays accepted during these meetings (of forty-eight anonymous articles discussed), nine were written by women. It is worth noting, I think, that essays by well-known scholars at prestigious institutions were often not selected while those submitted by younger academics living in, for example, New Mexico and in the Arabian Gulf were. I hasten to add that the Board did select essays by well-established males as well as by members without academic affiliation, but the Board members (including myself), like the specialist readers and Advisory Committee members who recommended the essays to us, had no information at all about the identity or academic affiliation of the authors. I will, as soon as we have a more substantial set of statistics, pass along other observations about the effects of the anonymous-submissions experiment; for now I use such evidence as is available simply to underscore my invitation to all MLA readers, whether holders of endowed chairs or members of the ranks, young or old, Whig or Tory, in English or other languages, to send us your work.

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