

mon sense tells us and not what the best minds have been slowly and painfully (often painfully slowly) finding out in psychology, sociology, linguistics, or semiotics?

Poetics, leaning on the human sciences, provides us with much needed tools of analysis. With it one can begin to analyze and understand the poetry of everyday life and see literature as part and parcel of that life, rather than as some hallowed and mysterious activity cut off from the normal course of social events and essentially irrelevant to it.

But *criticism*, as Culler points out, only repeats yet one more thematic analysis, one more explication de texte, one more. . . . Even criticism that takes into account what poetics has achieved cannot be of interest to the entire profession. (Despite Schaefer's affirmation to the contrary in his May 1978 column, the issue he published is not *essentially* about "Freud, Heidegger, Greimas, Todorov, Derrida, Frye, de Man, Hartman, Holland, Fish, Bloom, and the many other scholars and critics who helped inspire its contents"; it is intelligent criticism inspired by contemporary—and even outdated [Freud!]-thinkers.)

I do not suggest that *PMLA* should publish only, or even predominantly, articles about the above authors or, simply, articles concerned with literary theory—but I do wish that more purely theoretical essays would be accepted, instead of ending up in other publications.

What I do suggest is that, following Culler's approach, *PMLA* encourage articles on poetics—the most abstract kind but analyses that would examine and test theories through the careful study of literary texts. In this fashion, the text would play a truly secondary role, except for those few readers specializing in the author serving as an example. The constant reference to a specific text would ensure two things: readability and relevance. *Readability*: even if logical formalization à la Greimas is indispensable, *PMLA* readers are not accustomed to it and do not accept it in its pure form. But if theoreticians descend from their high level of generality, the *relevance* of their formalizations would begin to be recognized by the whole profession.

In fact, a third advantage would result from this approach: readers previously uninterested, say, in Maupassant might come to understand his works better because of Greimas' three-hundred-page (but not exhaustive) study of the eight-page "Deux amis." In short, what the profession truly shares is an interest in understanding literature and in teaching students and colleagues to enjoy it. Working together to evolve *the best tools* to achieve such ends is the "consummation devoutly to be wished." The

sesame for *PMLA*'s literate monads is not criticism but poetics.

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To the Editor:

William D. Schaefer's valedictory remarks on leaving the editorship of *PMLA* impel me to some comments. Perhaps not everyone will agree with them, but one is, after all, sorry to see a person who has served us so well depart with a gesture of failure. Perhaps it may also be perceived as a challenge that encourages response. Let me say at the outset that I think Schaefer in his parting mood underestimates his accomplishment. *PMLA* has changed perceptibly under his editorship in regard to the importance and the methodological implications of the subjects treated; indeed, his last issue seems to me one of the best. But it is true that the purpose of making the whole *PMLA* required reading for the entire membership has not been achieved.

Such a purpose is not an absolute necessity. There is no reason why *PMLA* may not be a repository of the best on the forward edge of our scholarship, with a reasonable eye toward significance and range. Schaefer acknowledges but does not sufficiently stress the desperate economy of time with which we all must wrestle, especially in regard to reading matter. The annual bibliography of the Germanic field listed 6,103 items for 1977. The one author with whom I have been most preoccupied in recent years, Heine, alone generates some two hundred books and articles annually. When we add to that our other reading needs in our fields and in our teaching preparations, in current theory, in unread literature past and contemporary, in history, politics, and current events, along with the desire from time to time to watch a baseball game or even exchange a word with our families, the problem of producing a journal that we all ought to read may seem insuperable.

Still, since it would be valuable for us to learn from one another, Schaefer's purpose is a noble one, and perhaps something went awry in its execution that, on inspection, might be reparable. It seems to me that Schaefer in his own comments on the problem, despite his appeals for "scope and breadth," has tended to stress matter rather than manner. He "would argue that *Beowulf* and *Madame Bovary*, Coleridge and Clemens, are all in the family and that it is important for us to pause, every now and then, to discover how the other half

lives." Who would deny it? The question is how much we can get out of most of these studies, in themselves uniformly excellent examples, without knowing their subjects pretty well to begin with. I suspect—and I am only guessing, for I have had no experience with the matter under Schaefer's editorship—that, while the call has gone out for breadth of appeal, contributions have been evaluated by rigorous standards of specialized scholarship. This is a contradiction that must be resolved one way or another, for I don't think we can often have it both ways. Specialization is inevitable and necessary, no matter how we may grunt and groan about it, but it is a notorious enemy of universal communication.

Most of us outside our own areas of expertise and experience are amateurs, though of a well-informed and, one hopes, teachable sort. The *PMLA* editorial policy may have been too much in search of the "earthshaking" contribution. We do not need our earth shaken—for that we have the daily newspaper—we need instruction. Perhaps the most suitable posture for an article under the policy I am suggesting would be like that of a teacher presenting an argument to a student by explaining first principles and giving elementary information rather than that of a seminarian in colloquy with his nearest colleagues—the latter image, I think, is reinforced by the impression of fussiness sometimes given off by the Forum section. A structuralist, for example, would not address himself as he does to other structuralists but would endeavor to explain to those of us who are not familiar with his field what he is doing, with what motivation he does it, and what its redeeming social importance might be. A Germanic article might well be composed on the assumption that most MLA members command but the vaguest grasp of the crucial elements of the German tradition. In fact, my own preference would be for less interpretation and more literary history (not, I hasten to add, in the manner of *New Literary History*): rather than an even more refined article on Flaubert, one giving an account of aspects of nineteenth-century French literary life with which we are wholly unacquainted. Schaefer might reply that he did not receive such submissions; but the appearance of *PMLA* does not encourage them, though from time to time there have been a few approaching what I have in mind.

It seems to me, furthermore, that the articles have sometimes been pitched at a level of difficulty that can be intimidating for the general reader. I have a feeling that I am not alone with this problem, in respect not just to *PMLA* but to the whole universe of scholarly discourse in the language and literature disciplines, which have been marked re-

cently by a rush to theory of largely European provenance; since this is an area that was not much stressed in the past in American literary studies, this trend threatens to leave many colleagues behind. We are thirty thousand individuals, all of us educated, all of us presumably knowing something about something; but it is a little much to expect that we are all geniuses or always able to achieve the level of abstract and abstruse concentration that the contemporary idiom regularly requires. Is not *PMLA* better suited to breach these barriers of communication and convey larger perspectives in mankind's literary experience than to examine one more time the theoretical nuances of Wordsworth and Coleridge?

I think there is a danger in failing to recognize that scholarship of sharply focused intensity, on the one hand, and discourse among the language and literature disciplines, on the other, are related but different enterprises. The commitment to the first can lead to a disappointment that flips into rejection. This has happened, it seems to me, to Schaefer in what one may hope is his temporary mood of discouragement, for he has published in *Profession 78* what appears around the edges to be an assault on scholarship itself. I disagree with that part of his argument and regret the prominence it was given in that publication. Some of his quotations from readers' reports may suggest what has been wrong as much with the evaluation process as with the submissions. It is, to be sure, compellingly true that, if we cannot build bridges of communication from the forefront of scholarship to our own profession, our claims for the value and urgency of humanistic education are fatally fragile. The question is whether *PMLA* has yet given the effort a fair trial.

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Herbert's "The Collar"

To the Editor:

Like William D. Schaefer, I found Barbara Leah Harman's essay "The Fiction of Coherence: George Herbert's 'The Collar'" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 865–77) very impressive indeed, particularly in the patient clarity of its exposition. In fact, the author does so well what she is trying to do that one need challenge her not at different points but only at the center.

Harman proves to her satisfaction that Herbert's poem eliminates the notion of a coherent self or