

lies behind the desire to put senior faculty members into freshmen classrooms” is the goal of “inhibiting our theoretical work, questioning the value of speculation and research . . .” (112). The authors, compiler, panelists, and translator represented in the issue are, with one exception, all from research universities (Cornell, Loyola, California [two], Rutgers [two], SUNY, Harvard, Carnegie Mellon, Michigan [two], Princeton, Stanford, and Massachusetts). A lone panelist is from Westchester Community College. Absent from the roster are teachers of literature from liberal arts colleges or regional comprehensive universities. This is not unusual for lists of contributors to *PMLA*, but in this particular issue, the omission seems embarrassing, revealing, even silly. Surely it is in the liberal arts colleges and regional universities that the teaching of literature is the primary focus of members of departments of modern languages, including English. Those of us who share that calling are certainly not the most prestigious members of the profession and are rarely regarded as cutting-edge practitioners of contemporary literary studies. When we write letters like this one, we often appear curmudgeonly, out of fashion, irrelevant. But what we undoubtedly do is teach literature—quietly, enthusiastically, effectively, and often creatively. It would have been wise, and maybe even instructive, for the organizers of the roundtable and the *PMLA* special topic to have included us in this discussion.

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To the Editor:

Joseph Skerrett, Jr., and George Levine rightly raise the problem of university administrators’ regarding their institution as a “technical institute” or as a corporation that deals with “customers instead of students” (“Teaching Literature in the Academy Today: A Roundtable,” 112 [1997]: 101–12). The matter requires much more discussion and analysis than is allowed by Skerrett’s obvious disdain or Domna Stanton’s laconic response, “That means the triumph of the McDonald’s mentality” (112).

MLA members first need to recognize the extent to which colleges and universities are already adopting the McDonald’s mentality. Many schools, for instance, distribute ID cards that function as credit cards, long-distance calling cards, ATM cards, and the like. The education supplement of the *New York Times* points out in excruciating detail how corporations regularly make advertising the price for donations of course materials and computers (4 Dec. 1996). Teaching is starting to be conceived of as an almost purely economic transaction. During winter

and summer sessions at my institute, teachers are paid not by the course but by the head. Thus, if a student decides to drop a class for whatever reason, the professor’s salary is reduced accordingly. Eli M. Noam, director of the Columbia University Institute for Tele-information, predicts that in ten years education will be predominantly commercial (universities will compete with publishers like McGraw-Hill for “customers”) and electronic. All these trends are epitomized in Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida’s newest state university, which is dedicated to electronic distance learning, has only temporary positions (its ad reads, “The State University System Board of Regents authorizes multi-year appointments”), and determines the value of research “by state and regional needs.” It is hard to see how research on the construction of gender in the Renaissance fits into such a place.

Dismissing these developments is the wrong response, as is pleading our case by advocating the study of timeless literature’s eternal truths. The former only increases the communication gap between faculty and administration; the latter renders us quaint and harmless. Neither approach will draw support for our work from those who control the purse strings and who subscribe to what Skerrett and Stanton (rightfully) deplore. Such administrators are more likely to regard our complaints as fossils of a better-funded age. Turning away in disdain will only hurt us. If we are to survive in an academy increasingly subsidized, as J. Hillis Miller notes (“Literary Study in the Transnational University,” *Profession 1996* [New York: MLA, 1996] 6–14), by “transnational” corporations with little or no sympathy for what we do, we need to learn how to justify ourselves in the language of the McDonald’s mentality.

There is perhaps more common ground between us and “them” than Stanton and Skerrett allow. For example, in a recent issue of the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, the chairman of the California Information Technology Commission, John M. Eger, calls for increasing use of distance learning and computer-based education, but he also wants a transformation of the curriculum that sounds like a move to cultural studies: “Schools and universities . . . everywhere must find ways of creating new programs that cross the lines between disciplines, cultures and institutions. The world has changed and students and their future employers demand broad-based, interdisciplinary, international curricula that produce a different and more relevant learning experience” (18 Dec. 1996: B13). Could we not combine the argument that cultural studies provides the education that students and their future employers apparently want with a defense of face-to-face classrooms as the best method for delivering this education? Along the same lines, Christopher Newfield has

pointed out the resemblances between cultural theory and the thinking of such management theorists as Tom Peters. Both, for instance, emphasize and encourage “flux,” “difference,” and “transgression” (Rick Perlstein, “Chairman Wow,” *Lingua Franca* Nov. 1996: 12–13). Could we not use these similarities to argue for more funding for classes and research in cultural theory?

In addition to other avenues, we need to explore making the case that our work is not hopelessly alien to the

values and aims of the corporations and marketing consultants hired by many universities. Whether we like it or not, we need to learn how to talk about literary studies in the language of those who see little use for us except as teachers of technical writing. Otherwise we risk being “downsized.”

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