

Editor's Column

WITH THE January 1981 issue, *PMLA* began soliciting essays under a revised statement of editorial policy, one that may well be in effect in 1984, when the journal celebrates its hundredth birthday, just a year after the association's own centennial. (Our Committee on the Centennial, chaired by former *PMLA* editor John Fisher, has wisely decided to make 1983–84 the MLA's anniversary year.) If it has the impact we hope for, the new policy may even be in existence by the journal's bicentennial. The realist in me, however, doubts that it will be, since the statement, like all its predecessors, is quite clearly not carved in adamant but written in the sands of time. The needs of the profession change, decade by decade, and our journal should reflect these alterations, even when they are not especially dramatic. The new statement, in fact, represents only a shift in emphasis from the one that has been in effect since 1973, though this shift could have a substantial influence. The central difference? We no longer insist that every essay be of significant interest to *every* MLA member, but instead we announce, less ambitiously, that we welcome essays "of interest to those concerned with the study of language and literature." Implicit in this wording, of course, is the hope that our journal will stimulate discussion and debate among a wide readership, but we acknowledge the incontrovertible fact that not every essay we publish will appeal to every member.

PMLA has had several policy statements throughout its history, though for many years it existed without specific guidelines for contributors, the published papers themselves apparently establishing the implicit criteria. Volume 1 (1884–85) contains neither policy statement nor editor's comments but plunges in medias res with articles that discuss "The Factive in German," "Old English Philology in Elementary Schools," "The Collective Singular in Spanish," and other topics of linguistic and pedagogical interest far removed from "Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel" or "Repetition and Excess in *Tiempo de silencio*." A half century later, in 1939, when the essays had long since become more literary ("Shelley and Shakespeare," "Rilke and Jens Peter Jacobsen"), a note from the Editorial Committee advises contributors that the "purpose of *PMLA* is to present the best work of our younger members in association with the mature contributions of established scholars," that "substantial value is the criterion of acceptance," and that "revision may be required to ensure . . . courteous expression in controversy [and] reasonable readability." Doctoral dissertations, "even in part," are discouraged, while "Germanic and Romance articles in greater number" are encouraged. The latter note is struck again in 1948 when William Riley Parker, in one of his engaging "For Members Only" columns, points out that "the distribution of papers published in 1949 will necessarily reflect the high percentage of articles now being submitted in the field of English literature. For members who deplore this distribution, the remedy is obvious." A year later, a lengthy editorial statement was introduced announcing that the journal "should publish to the learned world the most important work of members of the Association—that, and nothing less." The statement also asserts that "the distribution of papers . . . should reflect work of distinction actually being done from year to year, regardless of periods or language," and that, because the journal "exists to encourage the advancement of literary and linguistic learning on the widest possible front," it is "reluctant to publish minor articles or highly technical studies which are more suitable for other journals."

This policy held sway until 1964, when a new editor, John Fisher, introduced a more concise version of the statement. The revised language emphasizes the journal's endeavor "to represent the most distinguished contemporary scholarship and criticism" and to consider "both new and traditional approaches," providing only "that whatever is published is excellent and likely to be of permanent value." "Minor articles or highly technical studies" are still urged to find homes elsewhere, since *PMLA*'s audience is the total membership of the association. The statement calls for "a clear, concise, and attractive style." Six years later this policy was modified slightly, "the most distinguished" scholarship becoming simply "distinguished" scholarship, and the sentence about minor articles and technical studies being dropped, replaced by a request to authors "to bear in mind that their audience is the entire membership of the As-

sociation and to strive to communicate the broader implications as well as the precise substance of their research."

A change in editors invariably produces a change in policy and hence my immediate predecessor, William D. Schaefer, introduced the first editor's column (an innovation I obviously support) and announced that the journal would publish only articles that are "of significant interest to the entire membership of the Association." Although *PMLA* has printed many superlative essays under this rubric, the ideal of universal significance has been honored more often in the breach than in the observance—hence the current, more realistic statement, one that actually looks back to some of the earlier incarnations. Our new version stresses that the journal is "receptive to a variety of topics, whether general or specific," and that "all scholarly methods and theoretical perspectives" will be considered. "The ideal *PMLA* essay," we emphasize, "exemplifies the best of its kind, whatever the kind; addresses a significant problem; draws out clearly the implications of its findings; and engages the attention of its audience through a concise, readable presentation." We also, without prescribing specific phraseology, urge contributors to "seek wording free of discriminatory overtones," and we request translations to accompany passages cited in languages other than English. In the best of worlds, all MLA members would read all languages, but given our members' diversity we think it appropriate to provide English versions for all quotations, including those in languages with which most of us are familiar.

It is clear to me that the various statements that have graced these pages through the years, although differing in emphasis, have all had essentially the same purpose—to induce our members to send work likely to arouse interest and provoke discussion, both now and in the future. And all of us who have had the privilege of editing this marvelous old journal have made fervent pleas for more essays on literatures other than English and American, urged our members to take pains with their prose, and emphasized that submissions, whether accepted or not, receive thoughtful evaluations from specialist readers who give generously of their time and wisdom. I take this opportunity, here at the beginning of what I hope will be a brave new era, to underscore these points and to issue, as I did in my inaugural column, a trumpet call to our members. You can be assured that your work will receive informed evaluations and, if accepted, careful editing, a large and varied audience, and a permanent place in an important scholarly tradition.

Since the theme of these ruminations has been history, I would be remiss not to note that this issue is itself a historical document, containing as it does the first essay accepted under our policy of anonymous submissions. During the meeting of the Editorial Board last May, the other members and I were as curious about who wrote "Hendiadys and *Hamlet*" as we were impressed by the author's learning, stylistic poise, and delight in the bard's wondrous ways. We recognized that we were in the thrall of a wide-ranging scholar who was clearly not a novice, but beyond that we had no clues to his or her identity. When, following our vote, we learned that it was George T. Wright who had so engaged our interest, I was delighted, in part because he was once hospitable during a visit I made to Minneapolis, in part because he is a former winner of our William Riley Parker Prize (for an essay on simple present verbs in English poems), but mainly because he is among the most conscientious and helpful of our specialist readers. Even had the author turned out to be an arrogant colleague and uncooperative reader, though, I would still welcome this essay, for it represents one kind of submission that, at least while I sit in the editor's chair, will get a warm reception in our offices.

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