
Editor's Column

Diplomatic Relations

I *JUST WANT to know.* Some do not, but I do, and among the questions that I am driven by my phrenological bump of curiosity to ask is, What about fellow members who live and practice their professions abroad, beyond the United States and Canada? It is one thing to pursue the study of modern languages and literatures while lodged on the North American continent and another when situated elsewhere along the vast curve of the globe. Identified by its New York City address, *PMLA* makes no pretense that it and its parent organization have been anything other than American-made, from the time of their origins in the 1880s to the present as they seek to represent the needs and concerns of thirty thousand far-flung members. Was I to let this geographic fact, steeped in ideological implications, prevent me from looking past the end of my editorial nose? Was I to remain enclosed in the complacency that follows from holding tight to old assumptions and unverified platitudes about *PMLA*'s announced mission to foster an international community of scholars? Did I not need to shake myself free from thinking in "American" in order to inquire what significance *PMLA* bears abroad? And so I set about to stir up some answers.

I planned a special Forum on *PMLA* Abroad and invited contributions to it by placing an announcement in the journal and sending out 110 letters to members, randomly selected from the *PMLA* directory, with overseas addresses. Five of my letters were returned as undeliverable, but of the remaining 105 contacts, 27 responded. (For the record, no one from south of the United States border chose to submit a letter, though I reached out to Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina.) As anyone who mails out questionnaires realizes, this was a remarkably high percentage of responses. More important is the remarkable quality of the letters, which are printed in this issue.

I had hoped for candor, and candor is what I received: candor regarding what there is to like and not to like about *PMLA*. The genuine seriousness

behind my invitation was met by commensurate seriousness from the respondents. Besides offering honed remarks about their personal experiences, more than a few made the extra effort to cull comments from a wide circle of colleagues. I could hardly have asked for more from my respondents. The question remains whether I, as editor of *PMLA*, will be able to do more for them and those whose views they represent.

From the start of this investigation, I told myself that dedicating a Forum to *PMLA* Abroad was not to be the act of that much maligned figure the Innocent (a.k.a. Ugly) American. I “knew” in advance what might be the general line of the responses to any request sent from a major academic organization based in the United States to constituents who live outside the boundaries of the nation’s vaunted authority. I “knew” that many of us in the States have become adept at perceiving others’ perceptions of America and American-style enterprises, for who among us is not constantly assaulted by references to American hegemonies and corporate power, to the rancid leavings from the Marshall Plan, the cold war, and the Gulf enterprise? Or by the more facetious yet no less scathing indictment that the nation’s mental range is limited to Coke diplomacy and its cultural gifts to the McDonald’s method of genocide through high caloric intake? Or by the testy concern of the French Academy that its sacred language is polluted by Americanisms? But I also “knew” that many of us like to believe in the soundness of the diplomatic relations that take place within the academic circles where we carry on our lives as teachers, scholars, and critics in all mutuality.

What I “knew” was, of course, predicated on assumptions (however enlightened) based on local perspectives. It will, therefore, be of as great interest to other MLA members on this side of our oceans as it is to me to realize how our self-conscious perceptions in whose sophistication we take pride get corrected when laid against perceptions from abroad.

Even our occasional indulgence in cathartic rituals whereby we intone *J'accuse* to ourselves over national failings should not prevent us from feeling a jolt on reading a contributor’s view (however ironic) that his colleagues exist under “the accusing, beckoning shade of *PMLA*.” There is praise, of course, to be found in these letters: *PMLA* is “a scholar’s feast,” and the *MLA Bibliography* is “the bible of literary research.” Even so, the accolades can bite deep, as when it is noted that the journal is highly regarded but little read, that its reputation is great but its usefulness small because it speaks for a “distant” organization dispensing “Americanized” information, that it is of aid to scholars though it has never covered some of their vital interests.

For me, at least, the good things ungrudgingly said about *PMLA* are as instructive as the more critical comments. If some of the respondents doubt whether the academic model it provides can be of use to those outside “the charmed circle”—doubt the “intercultural translatability” of the journal’s subjects and concerns—others laud its contributions. *PMLA* assists teachers who design study groups and student courses around its

special topics, those who keep up with the latest scholarship by checking out the advertisements, and all who test the winds of change that flow from the section Professional Notes and Comment.

My guess, however, is that the letters that will most command the attention of readers in the States are those registering relatively severe critiques of the rhetoric of global interests mouthed by *PMLA* and the *MLA*, a rhetoric the writers judge inadequate to the conditions experienced by academics abroad. Some letters weigh the pros and cons of America's mixed gift to other nations, what one describes as the frightening weight of "democratization and professionalization." Another worries that the power of the individual voice is smothered by this publication of an organization that "represents corporate tradition in an era of creeping post-Fordism." One writer wittily hastens to declare that he does not consider my request for letters "part of a global strategy by the American profession to gain more critical power over minor or dependent nations and cultures," while another is obviously restless under conditions that make him see himself and his world as "the essential unthought of every utterance" in American scholarship. For some, *PMLA* matters little under the pressure of local circumstances that define the intellectual as a political activist, not as a scholar safely encased within "arcane" meditations about theory. Still others, for whom *PMLA* may be one of their few contacts with the outside intellectual world, lament that the journal is largely unavailable to their colleagues and students because of the massive obstacles (political, geographic, and financial) that give these contributors over to a sense of isolation.

One writer biting puts it, "Can we talk about me now?" Personal talk is ample in these letters. (By the way, the letters appear in alphabetical order by the authors' names instead of in a classification system, which would inevitably be limiting; this arrangement follows Thomas Jefferson's protocol for seating his official guests at a round table so that none would be in an "inferior" position.) At this point, however, I wish to introduce a bit of historicizing about the nature of diplomatic relations of the kind figuratively in action here. I claim brief space to set down a few examples of how the touchy sensibilities of Americans were once turned outward toward foreign power establishments. These notations are intended neither to negate nor to diminish any of the views toward this country in the Forum letters. (Indeed, several letters offer their own historical reviews of changing relations, as in India after the departure of the British, in Spain after the 1960s, and in the United Kingdom in the aftermath of Thatcherism.) I put these examples forward solely to point out certain ironies of the current perception of the United States as an arrogant force, self-tutored in notions of national superiority by years of indifference to the fact that there are others out there to be taken into account.

As ex-colonials, the citizens of the new republic experienced hot moments of resentment over their entrapment within the language, customs, and cultural legacy of Great Britain and embarrassment under the

disdainful glance of Europe's cultural establishments. As compensation for its sense of inferiority, nineteenth-century America developed the tradition of the Great American Brag, fed its obsession over winning attention for its indigenous cultural achievements, experimented for a time with naming intellectuals and literary men to diplomatic posts (Irving, Lowell, Hawthorne, Howells, Douglass), bristled over slurs from abroad that pointed to the gap between its vaunted ideals of liberty for all and the festering fact of its slavery system, and indulged in tiresome reiterations about the virtues of a democracy set against the rot of the foreign aristocracies.

Americans with European antecedents felt doubly beset. They wished recognition from their parent cultures at the same time as they tried both to reject what they viewed as the refuse of Europe flowing into the States and to avoid absorption back into the parental womb. On 12 July 1883, in the same year as the founding of the Modern Language Association, a cartoon captioned "And we open our arms to them" appeared in *Life*, the New York comic periodical. In addition to the typical racial and religious bigotry of its images of grasping Jew, conspiring Papist, and Irish hooligan, aspersions are made against the cultural dregs imported into New York's harbor: the Salvation Army, Lillie Langtry tagged as Prince Edward's goods, Italian opera singers, ragtag English noblemen, and Oscar Wilde waving his lectures aloft. Five years later, on 23 February 1888, *Life* attacked the sorry situation caused by Americans who gave up their God-given culture (always read as American moral virtue) for Anglophilia. While an effete English lord sips champagne before the toppled bust of George Washington and as members of the nouveau riche kneel before the Prince of Wales, the Father of His Country sits neglected to one side pondering "what the child has grown to."

The tight little world of the diplomat is one of the most noticeable areas where the games of inferior/superior are played out on the public stage. This is where exclusions are made (most-favored-nation status withheld) and barriers set up (tariffs, fishing rights). It is where nations go on display and put on performances that proclaim their sense of authority before the watching world. It is also where public dignitaries make asses of themselves before those who are not impressed by their superior airs.

On 19 April 1888 *Life* lampooned Edward John Phelps, the United States minister to the Court of Saint James, on his return home to "his astonished family" (see the opposite page). Phelps is shown decked out in all the trappings of hegemony (ermine robe, embroidered court jacket, plumed crown, fop's walking stick, and clipped French poodle). Awaiting him as he minces down the ship's gangplank are a puzzled Uncle Sam and (surprising for the period) a comely young black woman, the parents of children playing nearby. The couple stare aghast at Phelps, antithesis of the ideal of democratic American manhood and simplicity.



MINISTER PHELPS RETURNED HIS ASTONISHED FAMILY.

The cultural dilemma experienced by nineteenth-century Americans claiming the right to express national ideals before the world can be summed up by the debates that took place then over the style of dress adopted by individuals chosen to represent America's highest political institutions. If these leaders imitated the look of their former colonial masters, they betrayed their culture. If they insisted on appearing in diplomatic circles abroad wearing American-bred fashion, they could expect ridicule from on high. Scandals flared over republican carpet slippers on the one hand and monarchical breeches on the other. European ministers calling on President Jefferson felt insulted when he padded toward them in sartorial disarray; visiting Englishmen were appalled when treated to "Indianapolis manners" by President Benjamin Harrison, who met them in shirtsleeves and stocking feet. American ministers posted to the Court of Saint James steadfastly refused to adopt the prescribed breeches and gold-encrusted jackets. Their decision to dress in Yankee trousers and plain frock coat notwithstanding the risk of affronting the queen became a public statement of decent democratic principles.

All the while, as we know, the United States was busily moving south into Mexico, west into California, and out into the fishing waters of the Pacific Northwest and the upper Eastern seaboard. All the while, Walt Whitman hungered for the annexation of Canada, and filibustering forays were sent over into Cuba and down to Nicaragua. The paradigm for future American encroachments around the globe was already in place during the nineteenth century, even as many of the nation's citizens seethed over the belief that they were "made small" by the world's great powers. Place, then, this little review of the national talent for self-doubt that lay behind many of the diplomatic actions taken by the United States and its representative institutions—whether governmental, military, commercial, or cultural—over against the manner by which today's populations from abroad add their own experiences to the ongoing narrative of the consequences of who thinks what about whom.

Ironic historical vignettes aside, the letters collected in the Forum section are what matter most. More than their printed presence is at issue. Also at stake is how healthy diplomatic relations might be developed between those in the States, where the *MLA* and *PMLA* maintain their headquarters, and those elsewhere who are fascinated and repulsed by the obvious Americanness of the journal and of the organization that sponsors it, for as one letter notes, Americans cannot expect to be joined on the dance floor unless others "believe that dancing with [them] would be worthwhile."

One respondent asks whether *PMLA* and the *MLA* are genuinely interested in "taking steps" to alleviate the situation, and another puts it even more pointedly by inquiring about the real purpose of the *PMLA* editor's call for these observations. Was this invitation simply one more instance of the familiar American habit of giving a moment of time and a modicum of space to the passionate cries of "the others," then walking

away without making any attempt to address the problems set down? No, not as far as I am concerned. I take up these questions as rightful challenges, out of my conviction that these letters add to our knowledge, and knowledge demands responsibility.

Certain issues extracted from these letters will be presented to the members of *PMLA*'s Editorial Board. Where appropriate, other matters will be brought to the attention of the MLA's Executive Council. What will come of these discussions remains to be seen. Obviously, not all the pains or all the lacks can be assuaged by either body. Some of the grievances may be relieved, however, and I hope that good things result from this set of diplomatic negotiations.

Let me mention some projects in the works at *PMLA*. The special topic Globalizing Literary Studies is scheduled for the January 2001 issue. The topic will be previewed in a session devoted to it at the 1998 MLA convention. In addition, another special Forum, on a subject of considerable international interest—Literatures of the Environment—will be published in October 1999. The announcement describing this subject and inviting letters will appear in the January issue. Finally, though the current Forum, on *PMLA* Abroad, turns its attention outside North America, scholars in Canadian institutions also have distinctive interests. Linda Hutcheon will discuss this topic in a guest column in May 1999.

PMLA is hardly unaware of the world beyond 10 Astor Place, New York City. Indeed, living under the postmodern curse of self-consciousness and wincing at what some of our compatriots say out of bigoted ignorance about cultures of which they have little understanding and no concern, we can sometimes be overly eager not to offend. Once Babel's tower collapsed and the Pentecostal voices were silenced, the business of diplomatic negotiations began. Complete unity by language or by culture strikes many of us both as an impossibility and as a principle whose pros and cons we still weigh, for we fear to appear as naive as the idealism expressed by Rodney King's plaintive "Can't we just get along?" Whatever attempts we make to answer the needs voiced in the letters on *PMLA* abroad, I trust that our efforts will be accompanied by a sharpened sense of the diplomatic stakes involved whenever we turn to the pages of *PMLA*.

Let me conclude with a few remarks about a group of letters on the role of *PMLA* in graduate studies that appear in the Forum after those on the journal abroad. Graduate student members make up the ranks of the other "others" with whom *PMLA* and the MLA are pressed to treat via diplomatic routes. I had just as insatiable a curiosity to know what *PMLA* means in their lives, as well as in the minds of the faculty members who regularly teach graduate-level courses and direct dissertations. Every effort was made to entice comments on *PMLA* and Graduate Studies: an announcement in *PMLA*, another in the *MLA Newsletter*, an in-person appeal voiced at the Toronto convention, and—finally—three hundred letters sent to a random sampling of graduate student members. Alas, only five members submitted letters. I am grateful to have them, though

saddened by the meagerness of their number—and puzzled by this lack of response, especially in the light of the perceptions held in some quarters of the graduate student enclave that neither the MLA nor *PMLA* gives a snap for their welfare.

Therefore, I am left with another “I just want to know” impulse: to know why students or faculty members involved in graduate education did not choose to reflect on the significance *PMLA* has in their endeavors. Is it because they take the journal’s usefulness for granted? Or does it not meet their most pressing needs? Or is it that students and faculty members are so caught up in their daily work there was no time to write? Oh, what *PMLA* meant to me as a graduate student! But that tale is past history and old knowledge, and my current wish is to know about things as they now are.

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