

Editor's Column

ENOUGH GLOOMY predictions hover in the air these days to discourage even the most sanguine of humanists. Nearly all the scores of reports, periodicals (*Change*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, newsletters), and statistical surveys that arrive at the MLA offices each month contain bad news and forebodings of worse to come. By now almost everyone realizes that the academy is in crisis (the word tolls like a knell through these communications) and that the decades ahead will be dispiriting, if not catastrophic, not only for humanists in search of employment but for anyone devoted to the advancement of literature and languages. The MLA has established its Commission on the Future of the Profession in response to the need for imaginative preparation for the eighties and nineties; among the various subjects being addressed by this group is one that especially troubles my sleep—the future of scholarship in our discipline.

PMLA now receives approximately seven hundred essays a year, some of which (those in this issue, for example) are impressive and most of which, if not selected by our Board, are accepted by other publications. Many of these submissions, carefully researched and bristling with intelligence, are the work of young members of the profession. A high percentage of the essays discussed at the last few Board meetings, in fact, were written by individuals relatively unknown outside their home institutions, scholars just beginning to establish their reputations. This balance strikes me as healthy, suggesting as it does that there is considerable vitality at the lower levels of the scholarly hierarchy. I note in this issue of *PMLA*, for example, that one essay was submitted by a full professor, two by associate professors, and three by assistant professors.

In humanistic scholarship, as in any cultural tradition worth preserving, the inheritors of the past—today's leading teachers and critics—seek the satisfaction of knowing that their work will be carried on and improved upon by a younger generation they themselves have nurtured. The mission of educators deserving of the name, Coleridge said, is "keeping alive the past in the present for the future." A tradition has no meaning unless its survival can be assured, but in 1980 that assurance seems to elude us. One serious consequence of the reduced number of teaching jobs in the future will be the loss of many of those educators who would add vitality to our departments and insight to the pages of our journals. We will, of course, do everything possible to see that these individuals maintain their ties with the profession and with our Association. But are scholars likely to continue to do research once they have settled into careers outside the university? I don't think so.

For many who do find employment in the academy, moreover, a job is usually only a place to hang one's book bag while looking for . . . a job. One-year and even one-semester appointments have gradually become the order of the day. This situation creates a Catch-22 world: without impressive credentials, that is, scholarly publications, a young teacher is unlikely to gain even the shaky security of a three- or four-year contract. But how is one to create luminous essays when faced with the problem of finding work that will tide the family over for a few more months? I have long felt that promotion decisions come too early in the careers of humanists, that research of the sort we do should not be hurried, since it is, after all, intimately entwined with the teaching-learning process. But an apprenticeship of five or six years, imperfect as it is, now looks downright leisurely to a generation of gypsy scholars, academic vagabonds. Little wonder that increasing numbers of our students and young colleagues, including some of the most gifted, have given up the academic life, no longer secure and tranquil, for careers they would never have considered in happier times.

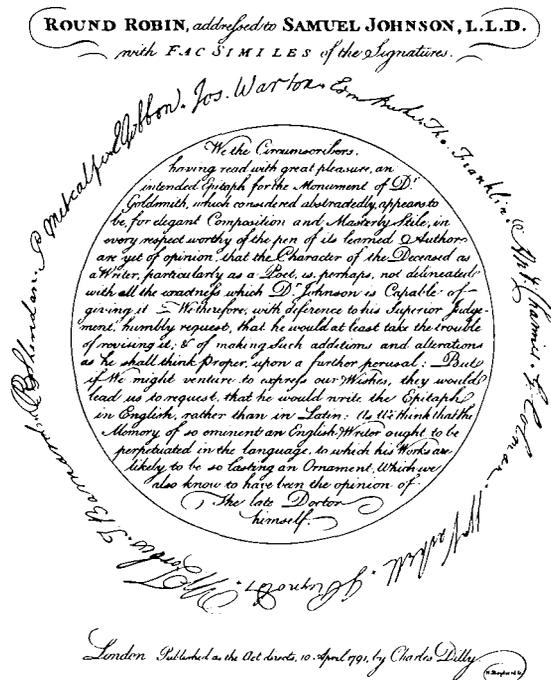
The question of the impact on scholarship of a diminished professoriat is one of the crucial subjects facing our commission. A related question that also calls for careful scrutiny is the effect on future scholarly research of increasingly sophisticated technology. The compilers of *Scholarly Communication: The Report of the National Enquiry* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979) suggest that we will soon do most of our typing not only onto a page but into a computer memory, that we will do bibliographic research on video displays attached to our type-

writers, and that we will rely more and more on printouts, microforms, tapes, and disks and on international information centers. Our libraries will still contain books and journals, but we will increasingly use storage and retrieval systems as well.

This forecast may sound a bit chilling to anyone who is never happier than when browsing through dusty library stacks or settling into a comfortable chair with a palpable book. Sober reflection, though, ought to convince an armchair explorer that technological aids can be regarded as amiable (if demanding) collaborators rather than as charmless antagonists. We need to understand what technology can and cannot do and to let it serve us; whether machines assist or intimidate will depend, ultimately, on whether we comprehend (and thus control) their possibilities. After more than a year as an editor I am very much a convert to modern ways. I now realize that such endeavors as bringing out our international *Bibliography* on schedule or producing our *Directory of Periodicals* would be impossible without the assistance of advanced technology.

If we as individual scholars learn to master computers and other research aids, we may well have considerably more time available for thinking and writing. Perhaps, too, we will be moved to devote some of this released time to grappling with the problems of our profession that machines cannot solve, not only those problems affecting our own discipline—how, for example, we can assure that there are careers for our younger colleagues—but those involving the humanities, indeed, the liberal arts. I am thinking of questions that deal with the decline in literacy among our students and the general population and with the various moral and intellectual malaises that seem to be afflicting the nation as a whole. I hope that members will take up such questions at department meetings and that they will give our commission the benefit of their reading and discussion. We can't afford to wait until the new century to address these matters. We may well discover, if we do wait, that we have relinquished control over our professional lives, that the future of our profession is an illusion.

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The Work of a Johnsonian Committee

A modern facsimile of the document that appeared in the first (1791) edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Reproduced from the *Life*, ed. G. B. Hill and rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934), III, facing p. 83.