
Editor's Column

On Multiple Submissions

MULTIPLICITY, POLYSEMY, PLURIVOCALITY—those signs have become metonyms of late-twentieth-century postmodernity. They connote the rejection of monologic meanings and of exclusionary canons, thus of the imperial will to control what Foucault calls the “order of discourse”; and they have informed *PMLA* essays in recent years. How, then, can the beliefs and practices those terms imply be reconciled with the decision of the journal’s Editorial Board, published for the first time in this issue, not to consider multiple submissions—that is, “not to review articles that are under consideration by other journals”? The statement, which becomes part of *PMLA* editorial policy, continues, “An article found to have been submitted elsewhere will not be published in *PMLA* even if it has already been accepted for publication by the Editorial Board.” Is this decision necessary? Even if it seems necessary, is it a symptom of the “profound logophobia” common in different forms to all societies, according to Foucault, “a sort of dumb fear . . . of the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse” (229)? Does the policy constitute a kind of censorship—the topic to which the current issue is devoted? And yet, as Michael Holquist cautions in his compelling introduction to the essays in this issue, “[t]o be for or against censorship as such is to assume a freedom no one has. Censorship *is*. One can only discriminate among its more and less repressive effects.” Holquist rejects the simplemindedness of what he calls the “who-whom” vision of censorship, just as he and several of the contributors to this number emphasize the complexities of self-censorship. In this publication of the membership of the Modern Language Association, would the refusal to endorse the idea of texts circulating in multiple copies among journals represent censorship or self-censorship?¹

The specter of authoritarian censorship seems at odds with the broad process of consultation that preceded the adoption of the policy against multiple submissions. The increase in the quantity of submissions sent

simultaneously to *PMLA* and other journals in recent months made Judy Goulding—the managing editor—and me aware that the journal had not taken a position on the matter for over a decade. In 1980 *PMLA*'s editorial policy stated that “[o]nly an original typescript, not a photocopy or carbon, should be submitted”—a formulation designed to make clear to potential contributors that only articles offered exclusively to the journal would be considered. The statement skirted the problem of multiple submissions, however, since any scholar could have typed two “originals,” and the wording was deleted in 1981. Of course, the arrival of personal computers outmoded such a rule: the concept of an original typescript is meaningless in “the age of mechanical reproduction,” to use Walter Benjamin’s phrase. Indeed, the effortlessness of producing work with a word processor and printer facilitates the practice and thus the idea of circulating duplicate manuscripts.

Confronted with this ambiguous situation, the *PMLA* staff and I decided to survey the editorial policies of fifteen representative journals in the modern languages and literatures, then to examine the complex issues raised by multiple submissions with both the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board of *PMLA*, and, finally, to invite the elected members of the Executive Council and the officers of the association to discuss the topic. This involved, multilayered process, which typifies decision making at the MLA, yielded a predictable diversity of views that nonetheless seemed to place the needs of authors in some conflict with those of editors and reviewers.

The most often cited justification for multiple submissions is the pressure on scholars to publish and thus to send their manuscripts to as many outlets as possible, especially academics who are beginning their careers or about to undergo tenure and promotion evaluations.² Many universities require for tenure not only a book and a body of articles but also substantial progress on a second major project. These demands seem all the more unrealistic now that many graduate schools, faced with ever-present economic constraints, are forcing students to complete their doctorates—while teaching—in five years. By necessity, doctoral candidates produce short dissertations, of no more than 150 pages, that tend to be undigested and unpolished and that must be seriously reworked and expanded during the first years of assistant professorship.

Given these pressures, the careers of young scholars are jeopardized by book and journal publishers that take unconscionably long to judge manuscripts. As this consequence makes clear, the treatment of authors by journals should be viewed as an ethical issue. The much debated MLA “Statement of Professional Ethics” takes a significant step in this direction when it urges:

The timetable for publication review should be made clear to both referees and authors. Referees should discharge their tasks in a timely manner; they should decline invitations whose deadlines they cannot meet. Editors should not use referees who habitually prolong the evaluation process.

. . . Undue delay in review or publication justifies the author to submit the manuscript to another outlet, provided the first editor is informed in writing. (654)

The recommendation in *Guidelines for Journal Editors and Contributors*, written by the Conference of Editors of Learned Journals, is specific: journals may take “up to eight weeks to assess submissions” (14). *PMLA* tries to practice what is preached here, giving most authors a decision in eight to ten weeks. The decision takes longer when different rankings in the two initial reports make a third reading necessary, when an essay is recommended for publication and returned to the author for revision before the manuscript goes before the Editorial Board, when referees are away from their home institutions, and when other logistical problems intervene. Less excusable are delays that occur because reviewers do not discharge their responsibilities as quickly as they should. It seems essential, then, that a policy against multiple submissions be accompanied by strict guidelines for the prompt review and return of manuscripts. If this policy involves censorship, it is the kind of self-censorship that regulates the ethics of elective communities.

Changing practices in the field of literary studies may also justify multiple submissions. Offering duplicate manuscripts to journals may represent an extension of the increasingly common and acceptable procedure, modeled after conventions in commercial publishing and enhanced by the competition for book manuscripts among aggressive university presses, of sending multiple prospectuses and book-length manuscripts to potential publishers.³ Whereas such a practice would have been considered unethical a generation ago, there seems to be a new tacit consensus in the profession, which is reflected in the MLA “Statement of Professional Ethics”: “A scholar who feels it necessary to submit work to more than one outlet simultaneously should so inform the editors receiving the submission” (654).

Now, *Guidelines for Journal Editors and Contributors* notes that “[j]ournal editors disagree” about whether an author may submit the same work to several places simultaneously (Conference 13), but of the ten editors who responded to our survey,⁴ nine do not consider simultaneous submissions, and one does not have a policy on the issue. And although one journal has “never considered simultaneous submissions in [its] sixty-five years” and another adopted the decision as recently as December 1992, the majority of the journals instituted the policy in the 1980s. The reasons for those decisions over the past decade are not entirely clear, since none of the responding editors noticed increases in multiple submissions; however, several remarked that foreign scholars engage in the practice more frequently than others do, perhaps reflecting cultural differences in the protocols of publishing.

As the principal reason for adopting a policy against multiple submissions, the responding editors cited the strain on their resources and referees. Ron Tobin, the editor of the *French Review*, commented:

For the MLA to sanction multiple submissions would create havoc for us: an issue is set, but has to be undone because of a late withdrawal owing to a more attractive (i.e., sooner) publishing date of another journal; several journals accept, but only one is chosen, causing enormous costs in time, postage, and often credibility (with consultants); wanting the article badly to fill the last gap in an issue, an editor might feel obliged to “negotiate” with someone who had just announced a preference for another venue. . . .

The members of both the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board of *PMLA* emphasized as well the increased burden of professional service that multiple submissions would place on readers. Accordingly, the journal’s revised editorial policy states that “the submission of an article simultaneously to more than one refereed journal can result in duplication of the demanding task of reviewing the manuscript . . .”—and, as readers, contributors, and editorial and production staff members know, no journal’s reviewing process is more demanding than *PMLA*’s. The MLA Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities expresses a similar concern about reviewing in the working draft of guidelines the committee is preparing for authors and editors of scholarly articles: “In submitting an article to a journal, the author is requesting a thorough evaluation that will take considerable time for several people, who work without compensation in many cases. Given these realities, the author should submit an article to only one journal at a time. . . .” That the view presented in this draft contradicts the MLA “Statement of Professional Ethics” exposes emblematic ambivalences within the association.⁵

Some members of the *PMLA* Editorial Board also voiced the concern—which has been borne out by certain recent submissions to *PMLA*—that a prestigious journal with a large readership would benefit at the expense of smaller, more specialized journals by accepting multiple submissions and that this competition would increase strains in the field. These members argued that *PMLA* has a special responsibility not to exploit its stature for the sake of increased submissions. It is debatable, moreover, whether a greater quantity of submissions would yield more essays of high quality. The Conference of Editors of Learned Journals does not think so: “multiple submissions would increase the volume of incoming manuscripts without really increasing the amount of publishable material . . .” (13–14). Just what “really” means is, of course, unclear, since submitting in multiple to journals does not ever seem to have been endorsed in literary studies, much less in the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences.⁶ But it is possible that the practice would mean the circulation of more paper rather than of more—and less compartmentalized or less orderly—discourse, just as the increased burden on referees might reduce, rather than enhance, the quality of evaluations.

No simple matter, the cases for and against multiple submissions do not merely expose the personal stakes involved in scholarly publishing,

they reveal the ways in which market forces infect writing practices and ethical codes while being affected in turn. The ambivalences surrounding an issue such as multiple submissions surely manifest what Simone de Beauvoir called an “ethics of ambiguity” half a century ago and what now appears as postmodern uncertainty (Weeks). After all, ambiguity and uncertainty are the byproducts of multiplicity, polysemy, and plurivocality. But uncertainty does not dispense human beings from the responsibilities of decision or action, contrary to what those who rant against deconstruction would have the world believe. As Pascal explains in his argument for a self-interested wager in the face of cosmic uncertainty, human beings are always already “embarked”; they are engaged in an ongoing life voyage and are forced to—doomed to—take decisions (550). By that token, however, decisions can be—and are constantly—modified or reversed, most especially in a self-censoring community like the MLA. Just as morality is a process and product of continuous debate and argument, as Michael Walzer suggests, the referents of *multiplicity* and *uncertainty* are transitory. They are the stuff of history, of a becoming that needs to be reaffirmed, especially at the end of this millennium.

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Notes

¹My thanks go to Michael Holquist for his fine essay and exemplary help in coordinating the special topic.

²This emphasis on the author should be put into historical perspective, according to Ursula M. Franklin, who conceptualizes scholarly publishing as a triangle formed by the considerations of the field, of the readers, and of the authors: “Initially the author really was inconsequential. The purpose of publication was to benefit the readers. Over time, the vehicle of scholarly publishing has become a measure of the author’s productivity, the field’s purity, an institution’s voracity, or even of someone’s capability in handling the English language. It has become principally a service to authors—a service to their careers—and to the journal and the publishing house.” Franklin believes that “it is time to return to the primacy of the reader” and of his or her “enrichment” (248–49). The idea that the purpose of publication was ever principally and altruistically the benefit of readers seems unlikely and perhaps somewhat naive, a mythical notion that warrants a dose of demystification.

³However, friends who are literary agents and journalists tell me that magazine editors receiving a story also circulated to other publishers expect to be informed of the duplication and that journalists do not try to sell a piece to more than one magazine at a time, unless the story is especially hot. A journalist with a piece to place may have fewer options than an academic does, because each commercial magazine aims to have a distinctive profile or style, which is to be imitated by prospective contributors. Still, this distinctiveness may be more myth than fact. Dissimilar publications like *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker* can converge after the chief editor of one moves to the other. Moreover, cultural trends like the current obsession with gossip can permeate all kinds of journalism.

⁴The survey asked whether the recipient's journal had a policy on simultaneous submissions; if the journal did, when the policy was instituted and how authors and readers responded to it (editors indicated that authors and readers had not commented at all); and whether the proliferation of computers was contributing to an increase in simultaneous submissions (editors did not think so). We also asked editors to send us copies of their policy statements on this issue. The responding journals are *American Literature*, *College English*, *French Review*, *German Studies Review*, *Hispania*, *Italica*, *Monatshefte*, *New German Critique*, *New Literary History*, and *Speculum*. I thank Cynthia Port, of the PMLA staff, for canvassing the journal editors and compiling their responses.

⁵Signs of disciplinary ambivalence or uncertainty over multiple submissions are not peculiar to the MLA. My colleague Abigail Stewart informs me that there is a general understanding in the field of psychology that articles should only be sent to one journal at a time, but she notes that the manual of the American Psychological Association nevertheless allows "closely related manuscripts" to be "submitted for simultaneous consideration to the same or to another journal" provided that the author "inform[s] the editor" accordingly (158). The line of demarcation between identical and "closely related" manuscripts is not spelled out. Is it defined by a difference in the titles? in a few sentences or pages of wording? in the central ideas?

⁶In the special issue of *Scholarly Publishing* devoted to ethics, especially in scientific fields, Patricia K. Woolf writes that following "the rules, policies, ethics, and etiquette of publication . . . should be as ingrained as following traffic lights when driving," and she lists among the "red light" prohibitions "Don't submit the same manuscript to more than one journal or publication at the same time" (212). In fact, the only area in which multiple submissions are generally accepted seems to be the law. According to Jeremy Pomeroy, an articles editor for the *New York University Law Review* from 1991 to 1993, the journal was deluged with submissions from professors, who did mass mailings of articles and played one offer of publication against another before settling on the most prestigious journal. Law reviews waste a great deal of time and resources in reviewing submissions, according to Pomeroy, who believes that the only possible benefit of this arrangement is that editors see a broad spectrum of articles. In my view, the fact that law reviews are run by students, for whose time professors may not have the greatest consideration, might help to explain the practice; reviewing for most of the journals in other fields is done by peers, who may be less "generous" with their time. Power relations that favor the authors over readers and reviewers may underlie the prevalence of multiple submissions at law reviews. Still, Chris Brooks Whitman, professor of law at the University of Michigan Law School, adviser to the school's law review for many years, and previously law review editor herself, argues that students on law reviews have unique power over faculty authors and are rewarded for the work by higher status, connections with faculty members, and ultimately better jobs. She suggests that student reviewers in the less prestigious law schools tend to lose out to the three or four premier journals and may well feel abused by the system. To be sure, literary journals differ notably from law reviews, which publish articles of 300–400 pages and, having no need for outside referees, often give authors decisions on publication within a week, even though the most prestigious journals receive around a thousand submissions a year.

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