Editor's Column: In Medias Res

WHAT HAVE I LEARNED DURING MY YEAR AND A HALF AS EDITOR of *PMLA*? Now, at the midpoint of my term, I thought I might reflect on some of my hopes and hesitations about the editorship and think about what, from the submissions to *PMLA* and from the process of its publication, we might glean about important trends in literary studies and the humanities more broadly. Two things have delighted and frustrated me, in particular: the workings of the peer review process, on the one hand, and the disciplinary and subdisciplinary boundaries that inform our writing and teaching, on the other. On these issues and on their relation, I have some good news and some less good news to report.

When Rosemary Feal called me two years ago to ask whether I would be interested in serving as the editor of *PMLA*, my first reaction was trepidation. How could I ever feel qualified to evaluate essays representing the enormous range of fields and approaches in our profession? Why would I even want to spend so much time reading essays that in no way related to my own work? I had edited and coedited several collections and special issues of professional journals, and each time I vowed "never to do it again," to spend the time and energy on my work instead. At the time of this invitation, moreover, I was nearing the end of a leave year and far from finished with my project. And, being absorbed in my own work, I had developed just enough psychic distance from the institution to be able to interrogate the standards I and others were applying. Wouldn't the *PMLA* editorship draw me deeply into an institutional frame of mind, dictating standards and decisions that might not be mine?

Clearly, the journal was at an excellent point in its history, its submissions up, the review process efficiently organized and run,

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interesting special-topic issues in the pipeline. Colleagues I spoke to even admitted reading *PMLA* more than they had in the past, excited by its new look and some of the recently added special features. Carlos Alonso, who was then the editor, described the Editorial Board meetings to me as the most intellectually intense and provocative discussions I would ever participate in. The anonymous submission process, particularly, ensured that the deliberations focused on the *work*, not on reputation, politics, or personality.

It was the prospect of these conversations and perhaps the eternal student in me that made me throw caution to the wind. When again might I have the chance—no, the obligation—not only to read in detail about, say, Lope de Vega, Milton, Auden, Alejandro Morales, and Oliver Sacks in one sitting but also to consider debates about the linguistic turn, disability studies, trauma studies, constructions of masculinity, religion, politics, and aesthetics? I would know what's going on in the humanities, what the hot issues were, how different fields were defining and redefining themselves and the objects of their inquiry. I would be able to regain some of the breadth that after several decades of teaching and writing in one's own disciplinary locus one inevitably loses. And the teacher in me was intrigued as well. Here was my chance to learn what makes an article truly compelling, a knowledge that was sure to help me with my own writing and with my teaching as well.

Indeed, I have learned a great deal not just from reading the articles but from the practice of evaluation itself, although I have regretfully also had a hand in declining a great number of essays. I have even seen articles declined that, had I been able, I would have wanted to publish in the journal. The process is certainly not foolproof. But virtually each of the articles the journal declines is accompanied by helpful, engaged readings and by useful and at times very detailed suggestions for revision. Our colleagues, I quickly learned, spend a great deal of energy on peer review, and we generally read one another's work with attention and generosity, writing evaluations that range up to several single-spaced pages. It's not that we don't impose our own standards and even, sometimes, our own prejudices, and it's not that we don't sometimes get impatient with what we perceive to be the mistakes of others. We are, for the most part, extremely demanding readers. But most of us also believe in revision, and we want to see the essays we read meet very high standards indeed. To that end, we are willing to scrutinize them with enormous care, posing tough, provocative, and productive questions to them. It is rare for me to receive a letter of critique that is not constructive as well as incisive. And those of us who submit our work are most often open to critique and suggestion and willing to revise, cut, reorganize. At its best, the peer review process is a multistage conversation about the article's subject among a number of scholars who have high investments in that subject and its broader implications.

Essays are submitted by MLA members across the United States and abroad, by graduate students, independent scholars, and colleagues in every rank on the tenure track. In the last five years, 1,342 regular essays were submittted to *PMLA* (not including invited pieces), and 67 of them were published. Fifteen of the published authors were full professors, eleven were associate professors, twenty-six were assistant professors, twelve were graduate students, and four were scholars in other ranks. Forty were men and twenty-eight women.

Each essay submitted to *PMLA* is read anonymously by a minimum of two and as many as ten readers. Many are revised two or three times, and some of those may, in a final assessment, still be declined by the board. The first two or, in disputed cases, three reviewers generally represent the immediate field of the article. If they recommend it, it goes to the less specialized readership represented by the Editorial Board. The board meetings I have

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chaired have indeed included some of the most stimulating discussions I have ever participated in. It is rare to find pure agreement on the board, but, contrary to a common misconception voiced to me recently by a colleague, I have also not found that we decline work that is innovative, risk-taking, or controversial in favor of the safer essays on which we concur. And although board members may apply quite divergent standards to the essays before them, reflecting disciplinary preferences and prejudices, in addition to personal ones, I have not by and large found that those differences have caused the final decisions to favor some fields over others. Still, these are two issues about which we need to be most vigilant.

At our best, we consent to suspending our sometimes strong and categorical judgments long enough to listen to one another's opinions. As one board member put it at our last meeting, "If some of these very smart people find something of great interest in an essay, there must be something there, and I want to hear what it is." Some essays provoke long and heated arguments, at the conclusion of which, if things go well, we roll up our sleeves and figure out, together, how the author might be able to respond to some of our objections in revising the paper. There is not one moment during those discussions when I do not imagine myself in the author's position. I oscillate from vowing I will never put myself through such a demanding process to envying the attention the essays receive from informed critical readers asking tough questions. Before serving on the board, I worried that nine or ten readers, each with strong opinions and presuppositions, negotiating with one another could ruin an essay, flatten it to the lowest common denominator, make it safe and tame. That is a risk, and surely some arguments might best be put forward without having to answer to multiple critiques. I am convinced, however, that few essays would not be improved, made more subtle, layered, and complex, in response to constructive critical scrutiny.

Having just chaired my seventh Editorial Board meeting, I find I still cannot easily predict how an essay is going to fare in discussion. I often do not even know how, at first reading, I feel about it myself. Invariably there are topics that interest me in particular, others I know much less about. As I reread submissions, other criteria emerge. It is not enough to address a topic that "should" be covered in *PMLA*: that topic must provoke a productive, coherent approach and argument. It is not enough to read a text by applying a certain theoretical framework to it, as many of us learned or have taught students to do. What *is PMLA* looking for in an essay? colleagues and students have asked me. I find that some essays engage me immediately through their lively writing style, or the forceful way in which they raise the questions they wish to explore, or the broad range of resources they deploy to address their questions. They might be anchored in a text or the work of a writer I have never read, but they evoke that text or work or its period with an intensity or a passion I find infectious. They foreground its relevance for me, here, now, by exhibiting what—intellectually and politically—is at stake in the inquiry. They think through theory, practice theory, but do not exhibit theoretical knowledge for its own sake. They tell me a story, the story of a mind working through a problem, probingly, suggestively, with authority and openness at the same time, inviting me to join in the exploration with them.

Board discussions are the discussions of nonspecialist, general readers. Still, we do not insist that every essay we consider be of broad interest to most *PMLA* readers but ask that it be "the best of its kind, whatever the kind," as recent editorial policy established, and that it address "a significant problem [and draw] out clearly the implications of its findings." "*PMLA*," the policy reads, "welcomes essays of interest to those concerned with the study of language and literature."

But what *are* those concerned with the study of language and literature interested in?

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"You should change the letter you send to consultant readers," a colleague recently wrote me. "I was asked to review an essay about indigenous media. Is this included under 'language and literature'? Why don't you broaden the categories to include other media discussed in *PMLA*, such as film, visual arts, performance?" A prospective author e-mailed recently to ask whether *PMLA* was an appropriate venue for her essay dealing with the representation of certain political events in popular media. And at the last convention a graduate student sought me out to question the relevance of *PMLA* essays to the literature classroom. Most of the essays are purely interpretive, focusing on particular texts, she insisted, and few, if any, articulate what literary study is for—the objectives she feels she needs to define in her course planning and in her classroom.

In previous Editor's Columns, I have expressed my frustration with authors' and consultant readers' narrow interpretations of what constitutes a "scholarly article." To me, "the best of its kind, whatever the kind," includes a broad range of writing styles and forms of scholarship. These new questions elicit new frustrations with some of the boundaries of our discipline and its divisions within the MLA, boundaries that shape and delimit our understanding of "language and literature."

If we look at this issue alone, we find a number of disciplines invoked in every one of the essays, and we find that the "significant problems" raised by the essays cannot be contained in the methods offered by one discipline, even one as capacious as ours, but demand inter-, cross-, trans-, or maybe even postdisciplinary responses (since I believe that what we call interdisciplinarity remains too deeply rooted in the disciplines and actually, in many cases, has the effect of undergirding them). Although MLA divisions are still organized by language or nation, genre, and period—a categorization that is also reflected in the selection of the *PMLA* Advisory Committee—the sessions that MLA divisions and allied organizations sponsor, the expertise of Advisory Committee members and consultant readers, and the essays submitted to and published by *PMLA* do not sit comfortably within those categories. As a comparatist who never knew whether to stay at the "English" or the "foreign languages" hotel at the convention, I know I am not alone in my frustration with the traditional rubrics that divide literary study and structure undergraduate and graduate curricula and hiring. Editing this journal has only confirmed my sense that we may need to rethink our categories so that they better reflect the work we do, allowing us perhaps to look beyond local habits, often perpetuated for their own sake.

When I asked the *PMLA* staff to send me some statistics on submissions "by field" for the last five years, a number of individual fields, as categorized by the MLA, were well represented, others much less so (18 essays in sixteenth-century British, 19 in seventeenth-century British, 32 in eighteenth-century British, 63 in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American, and 218 in twentieth-century American, for example, as opposed to only 25 in pre-1800 French and 43 in post-1800 French, 16 in post-1800 German, 9 in Italian, 30 in Spanish). Something is wrong with the submissions, and the way they are categorized reflects a problem that goes beyond the two hotels at the convention. Why, at the MLA, are we keeping English and "foreign" languages on separate, nonintersecting tracks? Why are all "foreign" languages related to one another more than they are to English? What is the status of language itself in the MLA and in *PMLA*? Although I am convinced that we need to work to attract more submissions to the journal in underrepresented periods and literatures, I am heartened by the fact that the largest category of submissions was labeled "General and Miscellaneous": 303 essays (roughly a quarter of all submissions) escaped our traditional system of categorization. This should give us pause.

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Let us look at this issue as an example. Although one could say that a given essay fits under the rubric of twentieth-century American studies, or Chicano studies, or Milton studies, each also addresses problems that radically transgress the boundaries of these subfields. Reading them through the eyes of the general reader, one learns a great deal about Lope de Vega, or Alejandro Morales, or W. H. Auden. But one learns more about how to frame a question, how to read texts in relation to one another and to contemporary problems or events. Two of the essays in this issue respond directly to the crisis of reading and representation resulting from September 11, 2001. Two reread a past moment (the Enlightenment) from a particular vantage point in the twentieth century; two deal with the specter of religion and its constitutive force; several confront the relation between aesthetics and politics. They thus engage their readers on a number of different levels, opening out from specific and local textual or generic questions to broader methodological and intellectual problems. Alison Weber, for example, finds she has to return to a more traditional biographical approach to engage construction of the masculine subject through religion in Lope de Vega. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb uses reception theory, and the figure of Voltaire, to compare two mid-twentieth-century invocations of the Enlightenment, in Auden and in Horkheimer and Adorno. James Berger returns to the eighteenth-century figure of the wild child to illuminate contemporary responses to the "fall" of language by Don DeLillo and Oliver Sacks. Feisal Mohamed interrogates recent rereadings of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* occasioned by the terrorist attacks of September 11 both from within Milton studies and from the perspective of contemporary concerns with religious violence. And Dean Franco illuminates *The Rag Doll Plagues* from psychoanalytic and historical vantage points. Note also that in reading Derrida with Morales, Horkheimer and Adorno with Auden, and Oliver Sacks with Don DeLillo, the contributors significantly expand the category of writers traditionally taught in literature departments.

Do these essays tell us where we are as a discipline, what the hot issues are? Certainly they do, inasmuch as they illustrate the comparative and cross-disciplinary connections we make in our reading, the methodological flexibility we typically show. In reaching beyond, outside, and across disciplinary and subdisciplinary boundaries, these essays, as well as many others I have read for *PMLA*, have indeed provided the intellectual breadth that enticed me to the editorship in the first place, a breadth that traditional divisions within the association belie, I am afraid.

The special features in this issue also illustrate these disciplinary disruptions and reconfigurations and the enormous range of what "those concerned with the study of language and literature" are interested in reading about and contributing to. The papers from the Conference on Disability Studies and the University chart the growth of a new field, one that reaches across disciplinary divides and expands the boundaries of academic inquiry. The agenda of disability studies is inherently activist as well as scholarly and pedagogical. As Michael Davidson and Tobin Siebers write in their introduction to the conference papers, "The emerging field of disability studies provides a critical framework that reorients the basic assumptions of various fields of knowledge, from political science to architecture, from engineering to art history, from genetics to law, from biology to poetry, from public policy to education." While the conference papers describe the construction of an expansive interdisciplinary field, many of them come back to the special contribution of the humanities and literary studies in particular as the authors "shift . . . emphasis from a medical context that seeks to classify and cure individual impairments to a new context that exposes the ways in which impairment

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has been constructed, stigmatized, and embodied in human beings. . . ."

This issue also introduces a new focus for the regular feature The Changing Profession: state-of-the-art essays describing and evaluating a subfield, summarizing current questions and debates as they are carried out in recent publications. The present issue contains invited essays by Stephen G. Nichols on interdisciplinary formations in the "New Middle Ages," Julie Stone Peters's reflections on the "interdisciplinary illusion" of law and literature, and Bruce Robbins's critical look at the genre of "commodity histories." Future state-of-the-art essays will engage new work both in well-established fields and in emerging interdisciplinary formations and approaches, such as the "new formalism," narrative, feminist criticism, race theory, indigenous studies, hemispheric studies, southern studies, Pacific and Russian studies, and African and Brazilian literatures and cultures. These essays respond to the fact that, while not publishing individual book reviews, *PMLA* still wants to discuss work in particular subfields, at the same time giving a sense of how those subfields are defining and redefining their parameters and the stakes of their inquiry.

Finally, this issue features a forum on the legacy of Jacques Derrida's work for literary studies. It is early, of course, to assess the legacy of so monumental a figure, and perhaps even impossible to do so in the midst of mourning his loss. Contributors highlight the impact of different texts and preoccupations of his and describe his contribution in divergent ways. A number of them, however, pinpoint the profoundly cross-disciplinary (or un- or ill-disciplined, as Geoffrey Bennington writes) reach of his thinking, the disciplinary transgressions that made his work so instrumental for the study of language and literature, even as it addressed philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and politics. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak invokes Derrida's "setting to work of deconstruction altogether outside the formalizing calculus of the academic institution," and the stress, I believe, is on the "formalizing calculus," the institutional logic and comforting conventions that Derrida helped us to disrupt.

The cover of this issue illustrates this well. *Touching Writing*, by Svetlana Boym, a multitalented literary scholar and MLA member and, like Derrida, an exile and border crosser, connects body and text in the image. The act of touching writing brings us back to the interconnections between the linguistic and the counter-linguistic turn discussed by James Berger in this issue. The image shows the materiality of the text—the artist's copy of *Of Grammatology*—and its history, a history of multiple rereadings over twenty years. Boym's light touch is able to reflect Derrida's touching writing—its haunting traces and its survival.

What is literary study for? After a year and a half of reading the essays submitted to *PMLA*, I know that, at least implicitly, we respond to this question in every issue and that, in doing so, we perform the future of the humanities. Critique, Christy Bruns, my interlocutor at the convention, writes me, is not enough: "The question that troubles me . . . is this: In approaching literary texts primarily to critique them are we missing something important, both in our thinking about literature and in the ways of reading that this objective requires?" If not critique, then what? To some, the intense and passionate attention to particular texts (whatever their genre or discipline)—whether or not they are, in Anthony Appiah's terms in his talk at the 2004 convention, in themselves "worth holding on to and passing on," whether they do or do not conform to any particular definition of the literary—may seem local, even narrow, or dismissable as "purely interpretive." In just eliciting the question, What's it for? literary/humanistic study disrupts received ideas. To my mind, however, it can only do so if it does not rely on unquestioned and delimiting categories or boundaries, whether disciplinary or other.

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