
Editor's Column

ONCE UPON A TIME, *history* was an innocent word in an innocent world. In that time, long ago, professors and people lived happily. They didn't know there was an old history and a new one. They had never heard of intrahistory or metahistory. They suffered no confusion between history and historicity. They went about their daily labors in the simple belief that history was facts, occurrences, story, unsuspecting that it was, instead, discourse and narrative. They thought, misguidedly, that Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian peninsula was the big event of 1808, when what really mattered were the ingredients of the stew that the cobbler's family in Brittany consumed in the spring of that year.

Times have changed. History, whether national or literary, isn't what it used to be. Stripped of its luster, history, when not berated or ignored, is now the site of anxiety and wrangling. But we are, come to think of it, better off, the richer for our loss of innocence, as the essays in this issue—and some recent definitions—prove. The 1981 edition of the *Encyclopedia Americana* proclaims confidently, "History is the past experience of mankind," but immediately corrects itself: "More exactly, history is the memory of that past experience as it has been preserved, largely in written records." Two years later, *Collier's Encyclopedia* offers a more remarkable characterization of history as "the image of the past created by the play of the imagination and intellect on the materials left by earlier generations." History's duality as event and account of that event, word and word of that word (I borrow the phrase from Barthes), is the substance of its condition. Today, gaps speak as loudly as presences, and no story is complete without its absences. While history is the drive to know, many ride on the conviction that true knowledge is unattainable. Even so, since we are creatures of time, the temptation to look behind us and to seek out continuity and difference is irresistible. The desire to investigate lurks in the Greek origins of the word *history*, and the German *Geschichte* betrays our curiosity to know what happened. If history tells us that there is life after texts, as Marshall Brown affirms, it also whispers that there was life *before* texts—or texts before texts. If history numbs, it also incites. Why, after all, are we so hung up on it? Why, in the face of attempts to squelch it, will it battle back, sustain debate, and mark its gains?

Anecdotes of the past pique our curiosity just as yellowing photos do, and my editorial role as well as my choice of the late nineteenth century as my scholarly field of specialization lead me back, not so arbitrarily, to the period that brought the MLA and its journal into being. The association was born in 1883, and volume 1 of its *Transactions* (later to be known as *PMLA*) covered 1884–85. What made History and history in those years? What was Clio carrying in her baggage and on her scroll as she neared the end of the century?

No universal cataclysms competed in the news with the founding of the MLA. Chile and Peru actually signed a peace treaty in 1883. Chicago's first skyscraper went up, reaching a full ten stories toward the firmament, whence some of us looked down on it at the last convention. The Orient Express began its run to Constantinople, and the Brooklyn Bridge provided pedestrians and carriages an easy new link to Manhattan. The Metropolitan Opera opened in New York, and in London the Royal College of Music was established. The performance of Yiddish plays was forbidden in Russia, whose émigrés transplanted them to this country. Brahms composed his Third Symphony, and the publishing houses launched Maupassant's *Une vie*, Verga's *Novelle rusticane*, and Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Marx, Wagner, and Turgenev died in 1883, too soon to see their names in *PMLA*, while Kafka and Ortega y Gasset share the association's birth date.

It would cost members two cents to mail a letter of dissent to the author of an article in the first issue of the MLA journal (as long as they kept their objections to half an ounce). For \$8.50 they could get a whole year's subscription to the *New York Tribune*, which advertised itself as "Heartily Republican in Politics." If the editorial policy of either publication caused them discomfort, Dr. Holman's stomach, liver, spleen, and kidney pads were guaranteed to cure their ills "by absorption through nerve forces." The twenty percent of the United States population of fifty million who couldn't read ran no such risks. At the same time, France was legalizing trade unions and divorce, Queen Victoria was celebrating her sixty-fifth birthday, Porfirio Díaz became president of Mexico, and Grover Cleveland won the election in the United States. His eventual successor Harry Truman had been born six months earlier and could have shared a cradle with Eleanor Roosevelt. In less democratic fashion, Russia wrested a chunk of land from Afghanistan, while Belgium, England, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain were busy annexing territory in Africa and other regions of the globe remote from Europe. The British installed their eighth viceroy in India, and in Australia the journalist Alice Henry began her arduous campaign on behalf of women's suffrage and women's trade unions.

The two volumes of Leopoldo Alas's *La Regenta*, one of the monuments of Spanish realistic fiction, bear the same dates, 1884–85, as *PMLA*'s inaugural volume. These years witnessed the inception of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*, Ibsen's *Wild Duck*, Sienkiewicz's *With Fire and Sword*, Tolstoy's *My Re-*

ligion, and Zola's *Germinal*. Victor Hugo died, while the literary world gained soon-to-be-canonized figures with the births of Sean O'Casey, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Sinclair Lewis, D. H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound. As Serbia invaded Bulgaria (and met defeat) and Canada had to put down a rebellion in Saskatchewan, Johann Strauss composed *The Gypsy Baron*, Puccini produced his first operas, and Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* was staged. Tennyson received his peerage; Henry James was in what critics like to call his "first period"; Matthew Arnold, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Browning were near the ends of their careers; the impressionist painters had reached their peak; Grieg, Tchaikovsky, and Bruckner were flourishing. Nietzsche embarked on *Thus Spake Zarathustra* at this time. Freud busied himself with histological research on the acoustic nerve. In 1884 he spent several months in Paris, where he made a definitive turn away from his neurological investigations to the psychological study of hysteria. Significant advances in science and technology stamped these years, especially in the areas of the steam engine, electricity, photography, the bicycle, the machine gun, and the fountain pen. Pasteur announced the first successful inoculation against rabies, and cocaine began to be used as an anesthetic. Heated controversy surrounds the precise date of the invention of the ice cream sundae, and several locales lay claim to this singular event in history, but evidence has it that *PMLA* and the sundae were not far apart in their first felicitous conjunction of ingredients.

This haphazard collation of data proves that Schopenhauer erred in claiming that "[h]istory has nothing to record but wars and revolutions" and that his compatriot Konrad Adenauer wasn't thinking of ice cream sundaes, bicycles, or a Gauguin canvas when he quipped: "History is the sum total of the things that could have been avoided." The problem is to what use historians—political, social, cultural—are to put the available information and to what degree they invest their trust in it as they go about defining an age and tracing a continuity. Such doubts have surged as readers of all kinds of material have found their historical certainties upended by dizzying indeterminacy. The orderly recapitulation that we get from comprehensive manuals—the sort of texts to which professors all turn even while advising graduate students to eschew them—guides and comforts us only until we allow that the history of history and of literature is the literature of history. The number and variety of submissions that *PMLA* received in response to its announcement of a special topic on the theory of literary history speak to the subject's present vibrancy and perhaps to a healthy unease about certainties. Marshall Brown had his hands full in his task as coordinator of this topic, and I should like to express the gratitude of the entire Editorial Board for his patient, persistent labor, his diplomacy, and his unflinching good judgment.

The articles in this issue, along with the coordinator's introduction, engage the question of what literary history is and what it is not; they exhibit its tensions and explore its wants. Recognizing the flow of history,

the authors invite their readers to ponder the enigmas of agency and mediation. Since the design of this topic is to challenge all its components, the essays pose more problems than they solve. It should be clear from the start and at every point that literary history is here viewed in the broadest possible terms, not merely as history *of* literature but as history *and* literature, origins and reference, world and text, document and artifact. In one way or another, all the authors—and I include the trio of essays that round out the issue—have heeded Oscar Wilde, who, writing a few years after the MLA was born, surely was unaware of the implications of his dictum “The one duty we have to history is to re-write it.”

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