

Editor's Column: Lost Moorings— *PMLA* and Its Audience

THE SIGNS POINTING TO THIS EVENT HAD BEEN VISIBLE for the past few years, so it was bound to happen sooner rather than later: the May 2000 issue of *PMLA*, the flagship journal of the Modern Language Association, did not include among its pages a single unsolicited article. The issue featured an assortment of occasional texts, among them Edward Said's Presidential Address presented at the 1999 convention, Günter Grass's Nobel Lecture, and contributions that had been commissioned by the Editorial Board to appear under new rubrics such as Correspondents Abroad and Theories and Methodologies, but not one article that had arrived unsolicited for the journal's consideration, undergone its review process, and been accepted for publication.

This remarkable circumstance in *PMLA*'s history did not go unnoticed. In a letter addressed to the editor and submitted to the journal's Forum section, Seth Lerer, of Stanford University, drew a series of sensible conclusions from the issue's unorthodox composition. Given the importance of the concerns that Lerer's letter raises, I have printed it in its entirety below, instead of in the section to which it was originally submitted:

I am writing in response to some of the changes in *PMLA* that seem to be signaled by the May 2000 issue.

Am I right that this issue contains no unsolicited, anonymously submitted, refereed articles? Each contribution appears under a heading, and each seems a solicited review of various aspects of the profession. Such a move is clearly announced in the section "Solicited Contributions," which states, "The editor and the Editorial Board periodically invite studies and commentaries by specific authors on topics of wide interest." Such periodic invitation is, no doubt, a good thing. But it would seem that these contributions will be more than periodic. No unsolicited articles in the May issue; only two listed as forthcoming in October; and only six (or at

least six that are not identified under a heading) listed as forthcoming in future issues.

Many years ago Stanley Fish, in a celebrated set of essays and opinion pieces, argued against the policy of anonymous journal submission. Claiming that the “meaning” of the critical work derived in large part from the professional, biographical, and institutional contexts of its production, Fish derided anonymous submission as a sham. How can one assess a critical work in the absence of these contexts? he asked. How can a senior scholar publish in *PMLA* without self-reference, or at least without the public awareness that the work is part of a larger trajectory of scholarship and criticism?

It would seem that *PMLA*, while not officially abandoning its policy of anonymous submission and review, has moved de facto to Fish's position. I was a member of the Advisory Committee for four years, during which time I read close to eighty submissions. Some of them were good; many of them were not. Two or three got published in *PMLA* (and I saw about half a dozen published elsewhere, with acknowledgment of the comments given by me and by the specialist reader for *PMLA*).

It seems to me that if *PMLA* is really going to publish only two or three articles accepted by this process in each issue, how can I encourage students and colleagues to submit? What are the statistical odds of getting an essay accepted now, if out of the hundreds of submissions in a year *PMLA* will publish fewer than a dozen? And what can we say to current members of the Advisory Committee and to specialist readers, who will be charged with reading and responsibly commenting on scores of contributions of which progressively fewer and fewer may see publication?

I feel strongly that refereed publication remains the benchmark of scholarly activity. It is certainly the requirement for tenure and promotion at many universities, and for many scholars it still is a mark of individual accomplishment to have an original work of critical writing accepted by a leading journal. If the official organ of the profession is moving away from this practice, then a larger shift in the criteria for professional accomplishment has occurred.

Now it is not acceptance but solicitation that marks achievement—you know you've made it when you're *asked* for an article.

Journal publication, I believe, has suffered over the past couple of decades, as more and more people publish in edited volumes and commissioned journal issues (a journal in my field, the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, edited at Duke, announces virtually every issue as a “special issue,” creating the impression that the journal is devoted to maintaining a coterie of invited guests rather than to disseminating scholarship in the field). The apparent new format of *PMLA* suggests that this is the direction for the association.

When I originally wrote this letter, it seemed that the Forum section had been eliminated (I was later informed that there was no May Forum because no letters had been received). I am glad the Forum is not gone, for I hope this letter will be of interest to your readers. But of course if it were gone, you could always solicit someone to write an essay on the subject.

Lerer's description of the matter is, on the whole, accurate. Not only were no unsolicited articles published in the issue he references; the announcement for the October issue that appeared in May indeed included only two unsolicited articles, while the essays listed as forthcoming in other issues were only some of those accepted for the present issue, devoted to the special topic Globalizing Literary Studies. Hence, Lerer's impression that the May 2000 issue may augur a trend for *PMLA* seems supported by the available facts. Nonetheless, I believe that Lerer errs by no fault of his own in ascribing to editorial design the preponderance of solicited materials in the foreseeable future issues of the journal. Would that this situation were indeed the expression of editorial will, for then it could also be modified at will. But we are dealing with a more intractable problem, one whose resolution may be beyond the reach or power of any one person associated with the journal: the drastically dwindling number of articles submitted and accepted for publication in *PMLA*.

A look at the last fifteen years of *PMLA* shows that new special sections—whether constituted by solicited materials from specific individuals or by invited submissions from the membership at large—have been introduced regularly since around 1986, when the Editorial Board decided to solicit articles by honorary members and fellows of the association. This development was followed soon afterward in 1987 with the news that *PMLA* would henceforth periodically announce special topics on which members could submit essays. Other features, such as Criticism in Translation, the Guest Column, and Forums on preannounced themes, have been added in the intervening years. Hence, the recent creation of new series of solicited contributions, such as Theories and Methodologies, The Changing Profession, The Book Market, and Correspondents Abroad, as well as the publication of selected papers from the MLA convention, is in keeping with *PMLA*'s history and with the desire to enhance the journal's usefulness to its professionally minded readership.¹ The incorporation of these novel sections has been accompanied by changes in the layout and design of *PMLA* that have transformed it into one of the most attractive journals currently in circulation.

Under normal circumstances these new features would be regarded solely as a welcome expansion of the journal's interests and coverage. But given the shrinking number of articles accepted for publication in *PMLA*, what was originally conceived as supplementary and peripheral material has managed to overwhelm and overtake the journal's core. There are simply not enough accepted articles to maintain any longer a hierarchy in *PMLA* between center and circumference, between pivotal, lasting scholarship and material that is important yet occasional. Thus, instead of signaling a move toward the surreptitious abandonment of *PMLA*'s policy on anonymous submissions, the creation of these special features might be interpreted as an attempt to generate guaranteed publishable materials. In other words, materials are solicited not because

the identities of the invited scholars and specialists are known but rather because the availability of these contributions can be counted on whether or not the editorial process yields a sufficient number of unsolicited accepted articles. The present circumstance does not represent a desire to circumvent the author-anonymous policy, but the lack of accepted articles has certainly conspired to promote the impression that it does.

One might be tempted to conclude that the decrease in the number of articles accepted for publication in *PMLA* has resulted from a tightening of the journal's already (and notoriously) rigorous standards, that *PMLA* has finally priced itself out of the market by imposing unrealistic benchmarks for acceptance, and that it is now paying the high price of that editorial praxis. Yet, considering the turnover in the membership of the Editorial Board and the Advisory Committee—the two bodies most responsible for editorial decisions—it would be very difficult to sustain heightened requirements consistently. Furthermore, the average rate of acceptance for *PMLA* during the 1990s (5.3%) is remarkably consistent with that for the 1980s (6%) and the 1970s (5.7%), which should dispel the idea that there has been a recent tightening of the selection standards.² In fact, historically there has been no significant correlation between the number of submissions and the rate of their acceptance. The number of submissions each year has seen an overall decline since its maximum of 660 in 1977 to a low of 191 in 2000, while the yearly rate of acceptance since 1977 has hovered around six percent. On the other hand, a fairly unchanging rate of acceptance as a function of a decreasing pool of submissions will inevitably yield a smaller total of accepted articles. Could it be that once the declining number of submissions crossed a certain threshold, the number of high-quality manuscripts yielded by the process shrank below the level needed to sustain the journal's publication? It stands to reason that every journal must have such a minimum threshold, and it may be that *PMLA*'s slide in submissions has finally reached that magic number.

The other possible conclusion (and it is one that does not exclude the agency of the previous one) is that authors of high-quality manuscripts are no longer submitting their work to *PMLA*. This proposition is difficult to prove conclusively, except by citing the decline in the number of accepted articles. Furthermore, if this conclusion is indeed true, the problem will be even more intractable, since no general increment in the journal's submission numbers will necessarily increase the pool of quality submissions.

The causes of the decline in submissions and acceptances may be too numerous to investigate exhaustively, too subjective to determine with precision, impossible to quantify, or random. Yet I believe that we must make an attempt to identify—even if imprecisely—whatever factors may contribute to the situation, which is excruciatingly real and concrete. If we fail to do so (and, more important, to do something about it), *PMLA* will only heighten its dependence on solicited material to keep to its appointed publication schedule. Such a development would not signify the end of the world, of course, but it certainly would alter the nature of the journal and its relation to the readership and the organization that it serves. I have come to realize very quickly that addressing this circumstance will be the most consequential task I will face during my tenure as editor of *PMLA*.

That the flagship journal of an association with upwards of thirty thousand members should receive only around two hundred manuscripts a year for editorial consideration is itself alarming, irrespective of how that low number may contribute to the overall problem. We may not be able to affirm anything conclusive concerning this problem, but one thing is unquestionably clear: at that crucial moment when authors decide to which journal they will submit an article they have just finished drafting, *PMLA* is evidently not in contention. Whether the problem is a dearth of all types of submissions or a disproportionate decrease in the number of quality submissions, the solution is for more authors in general to consider *PMLA* anew as a venue for their work.

One of the complaints most often heard about *PMLA* is that the manuscript-evaluation process is lengthy and Byzantine and that even after enduring it, the author faces fairly remote chances of acceptance. Providing information may be the best way to demystify the journal's procedures and encourage authors to abide by the demands imposed by those procedures. *PMLA* must share with the membership time and again the details of its evaluation process with a view to making prospective authors aware that they only benefit from the complications the procedures entail. For if *PMLA*'s selection process is rigorous, that rigor is accompanied by a number of other qualities and outcomes that are advantageous to the individual author: at least two careful readings by some of the profession's most informed and helpful scholars, a committed staff that does its utmost to prevent a manuscript's evaluation from faltering at any step of the process (and that aims to obtain readers' reports in eight weeks), and the guarantee that no one person can ever reject a submission singlehandedly (it always takes two negative recommendations before a manuscript is declined). Ensuring fairness and providing a submission its best chances require extra steps in the evaluation process. I would venture that few journals—if any—consistently create such a desirable set of conditions for manuscripts. The same applies to the notion that the low chances for final acceptance are made even less appealing by the lengthiness of the process. If risk can be defined as the possibility that a submission will languish for untold months in a journal's hands only to be declined in the end, the risk-reward ratio of a submission to *PMLA* is among the best in the profession, given the journal's efficient procedures.³

In my experience with *PMLA*, first as a member of its Editorial Board five years ago and now as editor, when readers withdraw support from a manuscript at one of the various stages of the evaluation process, they most often invoke a certain idea of what constitutes *the PMLA* article and apply this notion to the submission under

scrutiny. Usually the reason is some version of the following paradigmatic sentence: "This manuscript is too narrow to be of interest to the broad readership of *PMLA*." That assertion is usually followed by a list of specialized journals that in the reader's mind would constitute more proper venues or provide more homogeneous or germane readerships for the submission. The difficulty arises when this stricture is used—as it happens sometimes—to recommend against the publication of manuscripts that the reader recognizes as excellent. The journal's description of the manuscripts it seeks to attract, in the statement of editorial policy printed in every issue, does not support this criterion for exclusion:

PMLA welcomes essays of interest to those concerned with the study of language and literature. As the publication of a large and heterogeneous association, the journal is receptive to a variety of topics, whether general or specific, and to all scholarly methods and theoretical perspectives. The ideal *PMLA* essay exemplifies the best of its kind, whatever the kind; addresses a significant problem; draws out clearly the implications of its findings; and engages the attention of its audience through a concise, readable presentation.

The statement nowhere imposes the requirement that articles be of interest to the entire readership; it only makes clear that it welcomes submissions from all quarters of a diverse association. Understanding how a statement of editorial capaciousness has evolved into a requirement for acceptance does not demand a great deal of imagination, but a declaration of openness to all types of submissions should not imply that to be accepted, an article must appeal to all the constituents of the heterogeneous audience.

Undoubtedly, *PMLA*'s existence is meant to vouch for the possibility of communication between the various areas and subfields that make up our profession—for the intellectual translatability of the critical work that goes on in all the discrete camps constituting our discipline. In that regard, the journal is the disciplinary embodi-

ment of the particular function Walter Benjamin ascribes to translation: to point to the desideratum of communicability that is shared by all languages and that surfaces most distinctly when two linguistic universes are made to come in contact with each other. This principle can be seen at work already in the composition of the journal's Editorial Board. For how else could such a heterogeneous group of scholars be expected to render judgment on a collection of essays whose themes span centuries and several literary and linguistic traditions and whose critical inclinations and perspectives traverse the spectrum?

And yet the reality of our profession is that we are increasingly forced to become specialists in our chosen areas, genres, periods, and so on and that our scholarship reflects that fact. Thus, the expectation that a *PMLA* article should be gripping to a large and diverse readership is at cross-purposes with the way most of us are compelled to lead our scholarly lives. How many of us read every article in any issue of *PMLA*? Is the consistent application of this requirement by the journal's advisory readers and editors—and its consequent internalization by prospective authors—a factor in the declining number of manuscripts submitted to *PMLA*? Perhaps the journal should realistically reconsider what all members of the association still regard as binding collective interests, while it keeps in mind the centrifugal tendencies of our particular fields. Dealing with a well-defined topic, period, or genre does not prevent an article from interesting the journal's wider readership. As scholars we constantly seek to develop a repertoire of critical moves that appeal to us intellectually and that we incorporate into our critical performances. I would argue that the possibility of "translation" between our diverse fields can make perhaps its boldest and most compelling claim from the far side of that realization. Seen from this perspective, "narrowness" acquires an entirely different connotation, one defined not by the contingent qualities of an article's particulars but by its resistance to the sort of transformation

that will allow it passage from one field or disciplinary context to another. We should want to read every article published in *PMLA* because *PMLA* should by all rights be the foremost showcase of the movable feast that is, paradoxically, the bedrock of our collective work.

Being the official organ of a professional organization, *PMLA* both aspires and is bound to a “representativeness” and fairness that distinguish it radically from the other fine journals with which it competes for submissions. This is the source of the justification for, among other things, maintaining in place the journal’s policy on anonymous submission and evaluation, in spite of the cogent and even persuasive arguments that have been made against it at various times since its inception in 1980. But how is the idea of representation to be construed and, more important, implemented as an aspect of editorial evaluation? If prospective authors are not submitting their work to *PMLA*, perhaps the journal’s understanding of representation is at odds with that of a sizable percentage of the membership. What profile has *PMLA* acquired over time that has increasingly turned authors away from it as a publication venue? Speaking from a market perspective, should we perhaps bite the bullet and acknowledge outright that *PMLA* has lost touch with its constituency and that a rigorous reconceptualization of the journal’s objectives, procedures, and presuppositions must be undertaken? Representativeness surely implies reflecting and being responsive to whatever critical tendencies have most currency, but this concern should not obstruct the equally abiding responsibility to reflect the wider spectrum of critical performance in the profession.

Clearly, *PMLA* has come to mean something to the members of the Modern Language Association that enough among them actively resist, patiently tolerate, or ignore. It might be argued that every journal has a distinct profile, an assiduously cultivated “physiognomy” that prospective authors consider when seeking a good fit for their submissions. But I would propose that part

of *PMLA*’s responsibility as the journal of a diverse association is to strive for the opposite: for an impersonality or a neutrality that potential authors interpret as an unmarked plain rather than as a contoured and therefore limiting terrain. Whatever is the present mutual understanding between *PMLA* and its potential contributors, the result is rates of submission and acceptance that are endangering the journal’s future and its survival as a forum for the best work by the members of the association that it aspires to represent. With their cover letters and self-addressed, stamped envelopes, prospective authors are manifestly voting for other journals. We can either let them go peacefully on their way or take a long hard look inward to determine why they are taking their work elsewhere.

I hasten to add that my comments should not be interpreted as reflecting an intention to increase the number of accepted articles by lowering *PMLA*’s standards. The most precious quality *PMLA* continues to possess is the guarantee that articles in its pages have been vetted by perhaps the most rigorous editorial process in the profession. My overarching aim is not to argue that the best is the enemy of the good but to propose that the best may take many more shapes than what any of us alone envisions.

I am the sixteenth editor in *PMLA*’s history and the fourth of those appointed during the *nueva época* that began in 1985, when the positions of executive director of the MLA and editor of *PMLA* were vested in two persons, not one. All my predecessors confronted the issues addressed above throughout their tenures and plied their imagination, creativity, and sheer doggedness in searching for solutions. In fact, the one fear that strikes me when I try to persuade myself of the possibility of reversing the situation comes from the awareness that those individuals—far more knowledgeable and experienced than I—toiled creatively and consistently to come to terms with the same problem. They also would be the first to tell you that a proposal by the editor of *PMLA* must pass

through so many screens before it can be implemented that it is difficult to see how that person could have any effect on a predicament of this magnitude. For those reasons the editor of this journal must possess tenacity and drive as well as the capacity to persevere in the face of repeated setbacks and criticism.

Therefore, in this column, my first as editor of *PMLA*, I make a commitment to propose initiatives to address this situation in whatever fashion the Editorial Board and the executive branch of the association deem promising. I have a number of ideas about new directions in which the journal may evolve, and I plan on discussing them in future installments of this column. Yet I am keenly conscious that in the larger scheme of things none of them will mean much if we cannot devise in the short term ways to increase the number of manuscripts submitted for the consideration of *PMLA*.

At a time when journals are taking ever longer to render their editorial decisions, I would like to conclude by making a no-lose proposition to you, the reader: give us your best work for eight weeks (more or less!) in exchange for the chance to be published in what is still, regardless of its current difficulties, the premier journal in our field. It is finally up to you whether *PMLA* will become mostly a collection of special features or continue as the forum for the profession's finest scholarship.

Carlos J. Alonso

NOTES

¹ See Martha Banta's announcement of the creation of these features in her October 1999 Editor's Column ("Nervy"), as well as her farewell column, in the October 2000 issue ("Ethos").

² These figures through 1992 are drawn from Domna Stanton's "Testing the Myths: *PMLA* Submissions and Acceptances, 1973–92"; the figures from 1993 to the present were compiled by the *MLA* editorial department. Stanton's text provides statistical proof to debunk most of the misconceptions that have become "truths" of the professional lore surrounding *PMLA*.

³ *PMLA*'s outstanding staff does everything in its power to see that a manuscript flows unimpeded through the process. Individual readers may take longer than expected to evaluate a submission, but the staff sends reminders consistently—sometimes more than once—to ensure the fastest review possible. The other factor that can delay acceptance is the Editorial Board's final review of manuscripts that have been recommended for publication by two readers. While it is true that the Editorial Board meets only three times during the year (in October, February, and May), authors are given the opportunity to revise their submissions during the time between the receipt of positive readers' reports and the next board meeting. This step improves the chances for final acceptance of their work by *PMLA*.

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