
Editor's Column

WHAT IS an occasional reader? Someone who reads sometimes, from time to time, only now and then, or once in a blue moon? Is an occasional reader something like an accidental tourist who takes in the sites of a text sporadically, wandering about for pleasure or to garner the precious bit that can adorn a future study? So I wondered, with more than passing interest, as I read Bettina Huber's *The Occasional Reader of MLA Journals*, a report based on data from the 1990 MLA membership survey.¹

Huber's study contains unexpected findings about those of us who read the blue issues of *PMLA*. Of the almost 8,300 members who answered one or more of the survey questions dealing with the respondents' use of MLA journals—a group that represents 50% of the larger response sample but reveals patterns typical of the MLA membership at large, according to Huber (1)—58% say that they occasionally read issues of *PMLA*, 35% that they regularly read them, 7% that they never read them (table 2). Surprisingly, respondents who have submitted articles to MLA journals or evaluated manuscripts for *PMLA* are not more likely to read the journal than are members who have not engaged in those editorial and authorial activities. Indeed, in Huber's report, the two groups differ in their reading habits in only one respect (13): referees and prospective authors are more likely than other respondents to peruse the Directory issue of *PMLA* regularly (52% and 62% vs. 36%).

Impressively, each section of *PMLA* listed on the questionnaire (except the Executive Council and Delegate Assembly minutes) is read at least occasionally by 75% or more of the respondents.² The sections regularly consumed by a majority of the journal's regular readers are the table of contents and abstracts (77%), the articles (61%), Forthcoming Meetings and Conferences (54%), Forthcoming in *PMLA* (52%), and advertisements (52%). Despite ranking second, articles are considered the centerpiece of the journal, as the answers of those who say they never read the blue issues indicate paradoxically. Among those respondents, 18% say they read the articles occasionally and 2% regularly, but approximately two-thirds state that they use, at least sometimes, the table of contents and abstracts and the section on meetings and conferences (table 6). For Huber, these findings, along with the reading patterns of regular and

occasional users, suggest “that ‘reading’ *PMLA*, and presumably other MLA journals, means reading the articles” (12). It is clear, however, that *PMLA*’s articles attract a greater number of occasional readers than does any other section of the publication. Overall, 67% of the respondents turn to articles occasionally, 25% regularly, and 8% never.³ For the journal’s occasional readers, the results are even more dramatic: whereas only 6% of the occasional users of the blue issues read the articles regularly, a whopping 91% read them occasionally.⁴

There is at least one notable professional difference among those who read *PMLA* articles regularly, occasionally, and never. Respondents with PhDs or who have completed all but their dissertations are less likely than those with BAs and MAs to read the articles regularly (21% vs. 40%), to read the journal as a whole regularly (32% vs. 46%), and to consider it highly or moderately relevant to their professional lives (58% vs. 80%).⁵ In Huber’s view, “[t]hese findings suggest that access to the scholarly content of *PMLA* may provide a key incentive for respondents with BAs and MAs to join the MLA” (12). And the finding that those who did not attend the convention in the 1985–90 period are more likely than those who did to view *PMLA* as highly or moderately relevant to their professional lives (71% vs. 55%) leads Huber to conclude “that *PMLA* is of particular importance to two groups of members: aspiring language and literature scholars and those who are unable to attend the convention. For such people *PMLA* provides an important incentive to become and remain members of the MLA” (17).⁶

These findings and conclusions are both ambivalent and ambiguous. On the one hand, they underscore the importance of *PMLA* to the growth and stability of this professional association; on the other, they highlight a disjunction between the journal’s readers and reviewers that reflects and reconfirms other disparities of status in literary studies and the academy at large.⁷ It stands to reason, then, that those who referee, edit, and produce the blue issues should devise ways to involve the journal’s most consistent readers in its production and to make its various sections more compelling to the occasional consumers. Could the table of contents and abstracts be more exciting, enticing the sometime reader to venture beyond the menu to devour what in less cholesterol-conscious times was known as the meat or marrow? It is possible, of course, that *PMLA* readers regularly turn to articles whose titles and abstracts stimulate the palate but that the texture and taste disappoint, and thus the occasion becomes the occasional. Unfortunately, the phenomenology of reading is not the stuff of even the most informative survey.

To be sure, the spasmodic, discontinuous read might well be the fitting emblem for multimedia culture’s fifteen-minute attention span. It would be more flattering, however, to focus on the finding that articles in *PMLA* are cited (and thus presumably read) more than those in any other journal of literary studies.⁸ Yet the Editorial Board and Advisory

Committee members, consultant specialists, and staff should keep the Avis slogan in mind and try harder to make reading *PMLA* an occasion, a happening that takes off in avian style. As James Russell Lowell writes somewhat moralistically in "The Present Crisis," "New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth; / They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth" (st. 18). In the exigencies of a present that has no singular Truth, *PMLA* needs to be subjected to continuous reflection about its discursive practices, which are necessarily those of the journal's consumers and producers. In fact, a forum for such reflection already exists, the very Forum in blue issues of *PMLA* that 89% of the regular readers, 75% of the occasional readers, and even 34% of those who say they never touch these issues scan occasionally at least (Huber, table 6). The Forum can become the site of dialogue, not simply about single articles, the focus of most letters now, but, more self-reflexively, about *PMLA* in the present and for the future. Huber's reconstruction of the paradigmatic reader of *PMLA* thus creates an opportunity: *carpe occasionem*.

For those of you who are still reading, this column also celebrates the cluster and the other articles featured in the current issue. The essays of Susan Schibanoff, Olga Lucía Valbuena, and François Rigolot, a grouping on early modern women that was culled from the stock of accepted manuscripts, gain special meaning from the comparative context that Ann Rosalind Jones provides in her substantive introduction, as she highlights men's anxiety over the manipulation of language by women in Italy, France, Spain, and the New World. If those essays explore the ideologies of humanism, Christianity, and the Inquisition in the early modern period, Tricia Lootens's text emphasizes the imperialist patriotism of Victorian England, which both made Felicia Hemans a national poet and obscured the subversive potential of her work, indeed the idea of the female poet as an "internal enemy" of the state. Through a reading of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, that perennial favorite of Victoriana, Audrey Jaffe examines the technologies by which the dominant ideological values of Western culture are reinforced and demonstrates that idealized identity is defined by the spectator's capacity to identify with privileged visual representations. Moving from early modern to modernist times, this issue closes with David Spurr's inquiry into the myths of the primitive in anthropological discourse (notably Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's) and into their distinctly different modes of appropriation by T. S. Eliot, for antimodernist ends, and by James Joyce, for demythificatory strategies.

And now, dear reader, as this prefatory column ends, will you say, "Nevermore," or turn the page? Will you become an accidental tourist or, better, a connoisseur of the fare that follows? Hypercritical reader, my double, are you there, still there, on occasion?

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Notes

¹I am grateful to Bettina Huber for sharing and helping me to interpret her report. The study also provides figures on the *MLA Newsletter*, *Profession*, and the ADE and ADFL bulletins, which I do not discuss. Copies of the report are available on request from the MLA office.

²Table 5. The ten sections are articles, table of contents and abstracts, Forthcoming Meetings and Conferences, Forthcoming in *PMLA*, advertisements, notes on contributors, Professional Notes and Comment, Editor's Column, Forum, and Executive Council and Delegate Assembly minutes.

³As I write this text, it is salutary to realize that only 18% of the respondents regularly read the Editor's Column (table 5).

⁴Other sections read by 80% or more of the occasional readers, at least sometimes, are table of contents and abstracts, Forthcoming Meetings and Conferences, Forthcoming in *PMLA*, advertisements, and notes on contributors (table 6).

⁵12, 8, table 8. Not surprisingly, 38% of the regular readers of the journal find it highly relevant to their scholarly and professional lives, 90% highly or moderately relevant. Moreover, according to Huber, "[r]egular readers of *PMLA* are also more likely than others to consider the *MLA Bibliography* highly relevant to their professional lives (65% vs. 50%) and the MLA's book publication program highly or moderately relevant (69% vs. 54%). The regular readers of *PMLA*, therefore, are members who place a premium on the scholarly resources the MLA produces" (17).

⁶And yet, respondents consider *PMLA* highly relevant to their scholarly and professional lives less often than they do the *MLA Bibliography*, the Job Information Service, the convention, and the positions the association takes on national issues (16% vs. 54%, 47%, 21%, 21%; table 7).

⁷In contrast to the members who read association publications, recent reviewers of articles for *PMLA*, writes Huber, "appear to be disproportionately drawn from publishing scholars in doctorate-granting institutions who are professionally old enough to have become full professors and [who have] been members of the association long enough to [be] known to their peers" (15–16).

⁸According to citation counts compiled by the MLA in 1991, *PMLA* was more frequently cited than *American Literature*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Modern Philology*, and *Speculum* in the period 1980–89. In 1980 and 1985 citations of *PMLA* outnumbered those of *Speculum*, the second most cited of the journals, by 103% and 68%. In 1989 citations of *PMLA* were 57% more numerous than those of *Critical Inquiry*, which had replaced *Speculum* as number two. Over the decade, the narrowing of the difference between the citation counts of the top two journals suggests some leveling in the field.

Works Cited

- Huber, Bettina J. *The Occasional Reader of MLA Journals: Selected Findings from the 1990 Membership Survey*. New York: MLA, 1993.
- Lowell, James Russell. "The Present Crisis." *The Complete Poetical Works*. New York: Houghton, 1896. 67–68.