
Editor's Column

“NOW’S THE TIME to plunge into PCs,” advises the banner headline in the business section of a national daily. With manifest nostalgia I linger over the letters that for several years now I have attached with affection and assurance to the marvel of modernity that reposes on my desk, that jumps smilingly into action at the flick of a switch, that I sorely miss when it doesn’t accompany me on my travels. PC has been the repository of my innermost thoughts, the bluish reflection of my wordly worth. But all signs are polyvalent, as we’ve learned—*PC* is one thing to a physician and another to a Canadian politician—and my PC has had to cede its initials to a noisier competitor. (Is it conceivable that such a fate awaits ET?) The debate over “political correctness,” which has rent university faculties, has burst through the academic bulwarks to become the talk of the daily papers, a cover story and an editorial column in a weekly newsmagazine, a multisection feature on public television, a character in a comic strip, and even fodder for presidential speechwriters.

Following a series of onslaughts, the PC furor is the latest and most far-reaching campaign against the university. In its wake flow hostilities and epithets of ridicule; an air of misunderstanding and intemperance wafts over our domain. The politically neutral statistical count of *PMLA* citations in the March 1991 Editor’s Column, which one reader tagged “required reading for graduate students,” incited another’s ire, expressed in a letter to the Forum. If the writer of the protest failed to savor the irony of my tone, I must assume as much blame as he, but that he should take umbrage at an exercise in historical documentation and read it as a celebration of power is a telling commentary on our present sensitivities.

So, too, is the response to the MLA’s official disapproval of a government nomination to the NEH National Council on the Humanities. When a constituent ventilates a view to Congress or urges action on an issue, a politely worded, noncommittal acknowledgment from the representative usually lays the matter to rest. When the MLA Executive Council, acting through the executive director, gestures a mild protestation to the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, there ensue a flurry of warnings and an orchestrated campaign of derision entirely out of proportion to the stimulus.

Are we high-handed when, like any group with vested interests, we raise our voices about political actions that concern our welfare? Are we wrong to defend our principles and prerogatives? Did the reporter who misquotes me jumble his notes (surely the editor of *PMLA* wouldn't call his own journal stodgy and conservative, though others have!), or did he have a hidden agenda? Does the contributor to the Sunday magazine of a widely circulated newspaper who snickers at the arcaneness of our convention papers twit us rather than our colleagues in nuclear physics, clinical psychology, or animal husbandry solely because she considers us more vulnerable? Broad audiences have been informed that PC is a totalitarian philosophy, that it has poisoned the atmosphere on campuses, that it is a politically motivated betrayal of literature. I am chilled to hear the president of the United States himself, in a commencement address, equate the cultural-diversity movement with inquisition, censorship, intimidation, and bullying. One commentator, in a sweeping homogenization of all MLA members, marks us as the "epicenter" of PC in the humanities; and the personal integrity of the association's executive officer comes under question as she exercises her assigned tasks with sincerity and dedication. The PC campaign has exploited the dictionary's every invective in an easy rhetorical strategy of citing the MLA and *PMLA* as convenient symbols of the enemy force. One can only conclude that those who carry out such attacks on faculty members and associations of humanists perceive a threat to their own ways.

Anyone who studies the development of the university system or who compares college curricula at two widely separated moments recognizes the dynamics of transformation that characterize the campus. There is no site more inviting or appropriate for the exposure of ideological stands than the academic institution. Many convictions are born in that compound; all reverberate in its halls. The academic enclave, as it acts on its calling, often heralds reform and just as often attracts rebuke for doing so. Those of us who were old enough in the late sixties and early seventies—that is, over thirty and not to be trusted—recall that, despite the turmoil and disruption, those times produced an electrifying mood even in the classroom. To the pleasure of some and the dismay of others, the ensuing changes on campus and in society have run deep and far. (It's been a long time since I heard an airline passenger ask the attendant, "What's quiche?") Following on a period of relative student apathy and of material priorities, today's political activism seems tame by the measure of that earlier point in the cycle. The current reformism is also more pervasive. The Wisconsin legislature has banned discriminatory comments on the state campuses. A report commissioned by the New York State Education Department calls for a heavier concentration on non-white cultures in the social studies curriculum.

It is disquieting, therefore, that Anglo-America's awakening to its cultural and ethnic realities and responsibilities should arouse suspicion and resistance and that efforts to right historical wrongs should be charged with capitulating to pressure groups and with conforming to fashionable

political stratagems. It may be unrealistic to expect government limousines to bear bumper stickers proclaiming, "The Native Americans Discovered Columbus," but federal officials ought to realize that vetoing a project critical of the explorer will not vouchsafe him an untarnished image or squelch the questioning of a long-standing myth. Such policy instead tarnishes the promise of unfettered investigation and expression. The most rudimentary study of history reveals that beliefs erode, causes evolve, and myths suffer transfiguration and that they do so without the crumbling of value structures. Our lives would be no richer if they were not witness and party to a continual dismemberment and reassembly.

The multicultural realities of North America's present as well as the strains of its history invite not what has been ill named "political correctness" but certainly a political consciousness. Those occupied professionally with language and culture can't escape such awareness. The condition of difference, of which many have made much, presses for attention. The excesses of unbridled zeal are deplorable, but those most anxious about the methods of what is termed the PC movement must face the historical reality that the beneficiaries of its aims—the cultures justifying the prefix *multi*—are a growing force in the United States and elsewhere. *PC* is an unfortunate, demeaning, and abused designation that oversimplifies motives and issues.

I make no pretense, of course, to hide the personal nature of these reflections; I speak for no official body and do not expect unanimous agreement with my views. In my very private ideal world, the director of the NEH, instead of squaring off on television with the ex-president of the MLA, would work in harmony with her to guard the humanities. A diversified curriculum would not banish Europe or press the classics to extinction; it would attach them to a more ecumenical context. The baffling charge that the books upholding Western civilization are being discredited would evaporate under the curriculum's limitless capacity to absorb and expand. All the riches of the twentieth century have not squeezed the earlier idols off the roster. The accessioning of new lines of communication presumably increases the competition for space, but curricula, convention programs, and journal contents are not impoverished by an expansion of their scope. The incorporation of otherness has never diminished the self.

In any event, though the winds that are blowing may strike some of us as ominous, they'll soon enough dissipate the clouds of PC, and we'll be able to say with relief, "PC, RIP." In the meantime, the debate and attacks are not entirely unhealthy. Our constituency is noticed; it has become a factor in national politics. We also owe a debt to those who would have us look at ourselves more critically, for self-searching and housecleaning are wholesome activities, even if they come about under the stress of an assault.

PMLA is neither PC nor PI. The journal is a mirror of the tensions that flare beyond its pages. I receive enough contradictory comments from readers to confuse me—and to make me envy the editors of *Gour-*

met, which seems to get only letters strewing rose petals in its path and its recipes. Some members have praised the “courage” of those of us who bear editorial responsibilities for *PMLA*, though we never perceive ourselves in heroic terms; some discern in our journal’s contents the postures of a raging liberalism; others describe us as inveterately conservative. Such, perhaps, is the fate of a publication that has no political agenda. Even so, *PMLA*’s contents, insofar as they reflect personal choices and commitments, are inescapably “political,” as the term is broadly used today within the profession. Some of the special topics, guest columns, and articles do adopt more narrow stands. If by one measure *PMLA* is PC, it has become so through a natural evolution that corresponds to the tides of the profession. The journal has also, to be sure, made a point of registering the needs of special constituencies and opened its pages to those groups in a series of targeted efforts. To the extent that *PMLA* is not PC, it follows a long and strong tradition of publishing the best scholarship and the most powerful critical insights in all the fields that it represents. As I look through recent issues, I come across essays that, in a useless exercise, could well be classified as PC and many that could not. Like the modern curriculum, *PMLA* has welcomed fresh initiatives and become more diversified. These trends continue with the substantial and far-flung contents of the present number. Its cluster of articles focused on reader-response criticism invokes the mechanics of interpretation in an unexpectedly varied series of texts and contexts. I thank Constance Jordan for the illuminating introduction that finds the cluster’s common thread. The other seven essays, too, fluctuate widely on the scale of political correctness, consciousness, concern. The blend that characterizes *PMLA* is not only legitimate but necessary for the journal to fulfill its purpose. Recently one of those rare correspondents who do not spur me to go packing off to *Gourmet* summed us up accurately and picturesquely: “*PMLA* is now, like Robert Louis Stevenson’s cow, blown by all the winds that pass and wet by all the showers.”

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