

## Editor's Column

THE award of the 1986 Nobel Prize in literature to Wole Soyinka confirmed the prescience and good judgment of the MLA membership, who had elected the Nigerian playwright and poet an honorary fellow in 1985. It is appropriate, therefore, that *PMLA* should launch in its pages the acceptance speech that an honored member of our ranks delivered at the presentation ceremonies in Stockholm last December.

Soyinka's standing as a creative artist is justification enough to publish his essay in *PMLA*. Yet, while it comes from the hand of a prime literary figure whose exceptional gifts as a writer abound in every paragraph, literature is not his subject. This piece is, instead, an impassioned and eloquent condemnation of apartheid. Some readers are likely to question the appropriateness of our scholarly journal's accommodation of a political statement, just as some members object to the association's involvement in nonacademic issues. I understand the rationale behind that position, though by Alfred Nobel's own specifications the proceeds of his estate are apportioned to those who "have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind," with the literature prize designed for "the person who shall have produced . . . the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency." No profile of Wole Soyinka is complete that fails to recognize him as a vigorous standard-bearer for the political causes of his people. Two years in prison did not silence the poet, and I see no reason for *PMLA* to quell his voice or to evade a historical reality that touches all of us morally. In a "professional note" in the May issue (374), three of our colleagues stress the difficulty of quarantining literary studies from the political and social currents of the world we inhabit. Soyinka's words remind those of us who manage the past and its linguistic representation how easily history turns into a text that is forgotten or rewritten. In the face of an intolerable present that resists becoming past, he takes up the one weapon that he wields so deftly and discharges it from a platform and with an authority that we cannot ignore. The speech by Soyinka springs from those interior ethical rumblings to which Hillis Miller, in his defense of deconstruction in the May issue of *PMLA*, attributes the recent turn to history. It is, to be sure, one of those texts that "grapple with realities rather than with the impalpabilities of theoretical abstractions" (283). Both Miller's and Soyinka's addresses are, in their respective spheres, political texts that bear scrupulous reading.

The marginalized discourses, those that have been unjustly relegated to the eccentric category of "other," have achieved due recognition and can be expected to command more of *PMLA*'s space in the future. In 1987, some of that space was also filled by the work of three young colleagues still engaged in their studies; in fact, a Nobel Prize winner in literature and a graduate student playing the same trade share these October pages. The March number gave the French and Italian constituencies their say in a trio of entries, and a record percentage of this year's articles has come from the Hispanic field: one has to go back more than a decade, when each issue was thicker, to find three in a single volume. The May essay on Hitchcock—a model of the kind of film criticism appropriate for our journal—was only the second analysis devoted entirely to the cinema that *PMLA* has brought; a ten-year hiatus separates it from the first. The present issue offers its readers, alongside the Soyinka piece, a range of periods (medieval, early and late nineteenth century, contemporary) and a mix of methodologies (feminist, homoerotic, deconstructive, reader-response), as well as representation of the Germanic, peninsular Spanish, and Spanish American fields and of gay criticism. On this occasion at least, the margins have inscribed themselves in the center.

The contents of *PMLA*, in turn, provoke dialogue both within and beyond its pages. Most authors can testify to the resonance of their words, always in colleagues' accolades or reservations, certainly quite literally in the margin that flattering footnote references inhabit, and on occasion in the more public media. We have not yet captured a segment of *60 Minutes* or a PBS special (though two of our honorary fellows, Carlos Fuentes and Isaac Bashevis Singer, recently did); but the *Chronicle of Higher Education* now and then takes an interest in an article of ours, and Donald W. Foster's "Master W. H., R.I.P." (Jan. 1987) made the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* and also caught the eye of the *New York Times*. Essays that have the ring of position papers on widely discussed topics, such as Don H. Bialostosky's "Dialogics as an Art of Discourse in Literary Criticism" (Oct. 1986), Edward Pechter's recent questioning of the new historicism (May 1987), or a forthcoming critique of feminist readings of Shakespeare, tend to attract more than the usual amount of attention. In that regard I note with pleasure that the Forum section of this issue breaks all records for numbers of letters and responses. The lively exchange speaks equally well for our authors and our readers.

Our efforts to introduce modest new dimensions into *PMLA* have, for the most part, met with enthusiastic demonstrations of approval and with words of encouragement. The sentiments behind the pair of cautionary letters that we included in the Forum are not lost on me, however. I promise Barbara Bowen not to pretend that *PMLA* can boast of a true scholarly/critical balance in its pages, since, despite the speciousness of the division, I do agree with her assessment of a professional circumstance that in many quarters favors criticism and theory over traditional scholarship. Still, I am happy that we can satisfy her preferences at least periodically, I repeat that the journal is open to work of every stripe, and I invite all who share her view to send us contributions. Clifton Cherpak, like Barbara Bowen a long-standing and valued supporter of this journal and the association, informed me in an earlier contact that copies of *PMLA* are hard to burn. Alas, I exercise no control over the quality of its paper. Neither does the dues schedule fall within my province. Like everyone else, the editor pays his dues (in the full sense of that term). I can remind Clifton Cherpak, however, that graphics have frequently graced our pages and that *PMLA* has never been tarnished by its images, not even by the cartoons that my colleague David Grossvogel contributed several decades ago. I can also set Cherpak's mind at ease with the assurance that I have no intention of turning to Ollie North for a contribution. There is no doubt in my mind that readers down the years, as they find continuing excitement in the dramas of W. S., alias W. H., will wonder if Colonel North was a minor character in one of them.

Another letter that I recently received began with words that would warm the cockles of any editor's heart: "Allow me to say that I never used to read *PMLA*. That has changed during the past few years, and I congratulate everyone involved in increasing the interest, quality, and democratic spirit of the journal. I urge my friends to submit now. . . ." Of course, I echo that encouragement of submissions to our readable—and read—journal. Few letters to the editor, however, allow their addressee to receive them without trembling in fear of the reservations that are sure to follow the praise. In fact, the colleague who was kind enough to write me these lines went on to voice two notes of warning about our solicitation of articles on special topics. He urged, first, that we resist the traps of trendiness and not allow "articles that seem to represent a current focus of interest" to "limit the availability of *PMLA*'s pages to the general scholar" and, second, that we avoid compromising the journal's high standards for the sake of a special package. These concerns happen to duplicate those that the Editorial Board debated when it considered the project at length. Precisely in order to maintain the representative character of *PMLA* and to preclude any incursion into the regular flow of manuscripts, the new feature was designed as an additional component, not as a competitor for available space. Furthermore, preferring to risk the failure of the experiment rather than to compromise the quality of the journal, the Editorial Board stipulated that manuscripts on special topics pass through the same stringent evaluation procedures that apply to all other submissions. The board hopes that the submissions for this feature match the general applause that has met its announcement.

Demands for excellence are not inconsistent with efforts at openness and innovation. Whether in the regular sections, under the umbrella of a special topic, or in the Forum, *PMLA* happily harbors the voices of the past and of the present, reflections from the margins and from the center, confrontations and evasions, cries of approval and of dissent. Soyinka's literature of politics and Miller's politics of literature both have their place in *PMLA*.

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Wole Soyinka's 1986 Nobel Prize address, which appears in this issue, continues *PMLA*'s series of contributions by honorary members and fellows of the association. We are indebted to Soyinka for his generosity in permitting us to publish this essay. We also extend our gratitude to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., of Cornell University for his tireless efforts as intermediary, to Carl Brandt for his cooperation in securing the script of Soyinka's lecture, and to the Nobel Foundation for permission to publish.