

Editor's Column

THIS issue of *PMLA* contains not only five excellent and diverse essays but several important documents from the 1984 convention in Washington: the presidential address, the annual report, the financial statement, and the report of the Delegate Assembly meeting. By most accounts the convention was an exceptional success; certainly the attendance surpassed our expectation. Anecdotal evidence and corridor gossip indicated that the job market was more favorable for candidates than it has been in years. The balmy weather helped boost morale, too. Success brought some problems: the main hotels overbooked by a conservative margin, based on previous MLA conventions, while our no-show rate plummeted to a record two percent. I can only apologize to members who were inconvenienced; as anyone who travels regularly must already know, overbooking and no-showing are standard business practices these days and the MLA has no power to prevent either one.

Over the years the MLA presidential addresses constitute a fascinating history of our field and a remarkable expression of our highest ideals. Carolyn Heilbrun's 1984 address makes a distinguished extension of the tradition. Carolyn speaks forcefully and wittily of the changes that have occurred in the MLA and in the discipline and particularly of the accession of women to their rightful status. Perhaps it would be appropriate to record here my tribute to her at the conclusion of her talk:

Some four years ago in becoming a candidate for the office you have now fulfilled so well, you said, "The learned professions are threatened by general illiteracy, anti-humanism, and unemployment. In Carlyle's words, the time grows stringent. Within the MLA the young lack faith and the old fear change. It is more difficult to counter these dangers than to name them, but we must try." Tonight, as on many occasions, you have helped us name and counter dangers; you have given faith to the young and even made the old welcome change. You have inspired us all to wrestle with angels. The MLA will have to let you go, as the new year breaketh, and although we do so regretfully, we do it also with a sense of having been blessed by what you have given us.

Many members, like Carolyn, give generously of their time, energy, and knowledge to serve their colleagues through the MLA. Working with them has been one of the consistent rewards of the executive director's job. It is therefore perplexing to contemplate the general subject of MLA governance. Just before the convention the fall election results were tallied. Only 10.5% of the membership returned a ballot. The percentage has dwindled steadily for almost twenty years, as far back as the files in my office go. From 1966 through 1972, returns averaged 29%; for the rest of the 1970s, 19%; for the 1980s to date, 11%. Not everyone votes in every contest or on every question, either. One need not be a mathematician to conclude that major decisions about the MLA are being made by a very small fraction of the membership.

At the same time I receive regular complaints from members in various fields, such as the teaching of writing, about their lack of representation on the Executive Council. Yet if only one third of the members registered in the division on the teaching of writing voted for their candidate, he or she would be elected. If the candidates proposed by the Nominating Committee prove unacceptable, any ten MLA members can nominate their own candidate by petition. I single out teachers of writing only because they form a division whose membership count I know; the same complaints arise and the same opportunities lie dormant in other, less organized fields, areas of interest, and professional constituencies. To keep those opportunities available, the MLA spent almost \$5,000 just on postage for ballots that went into the trash.

Those same ballots also elect new delegates to the Delegate Assembly, which meets during the convention. In Washington, of 250 eligible delegates, 121 attended, about an average turn-out in recent years. Under the MLA constitution, a quorum consists of a majority of those who sign in, or 61 in this case. As the afternoon wore on, the 121 shrank to 43; but under the rules adopted, debate can continue if a majority of the remaining delegates wish it, and motions can be passed if enough delegates to constitute a majority of the quorum—31 at the Washington meeting—vote in favor. For a short time but a significant part of the agenda, 31 members were representing the entire association. As usual, those present tended to be first-year delegates; with each year of seniority attendance becomes less likely. About 20% of those elected never go to a single meeting and almost 25% more go to only one of the three they are eligible to participate in.

Among the actions of the Delegate Assembly was the passage of two recommendations proposed by the Delegate Assembly Steering Committee and addressed to the Executive Council. The 1984 Steering Committee members—David Bethea, Nelly Furman, Barry Gaines, Judith Johnston, and Harold Kolb, Jr. (chair)—have been exceptionally conscientious and constructive. They were troubled by aspects of their committee's role as liaison between the Executive Council and the Delegate Assembly, by their individual roles as representatives, and by the assembly's function in the association, and they have asked the council to appoint an ad hoc committee to study the structure and function of the Delegate Assembly. The job the assembly was created to do remains important; the assembly is the principal forum through which the membership is systematically invited to express its concerns to the officers, the council, and the headquarters staff. If the structure is failing to function as it was meant to, and the apathy among members suggests that it is, then the time has come to consider changes.

The Steering Committee's second recommendation called for the establishment of a Commission on Professional Ethics. In my view, the two recommendations are related. When the subject of ethics is raised, we seem to think first of justice for ourselves: protection against such abuses as plagiarism of our work, unfair hiring practices, biased promotion procedures, inexcusable delays by journal editors, infringements of academic freedom, and so forth. These are grave concerns, many of which the MLA already recognizes and tries to deal with. A code of professional ethics, however, must also include our responsibilities and obligations, to our students, to our colleagues, to our institutions, and to our discipline.

In my annual report on the association, I expound my belief that as scholars and teachers of language and literature we have an obligation to support a professional association. I will add to what is said there that I believe we have a similar obligation to participate in running the association. Not everyone will be called on to engage in the sometimes tedious and sometimes stressful work of sitting on committees or the assembly; but even the busiest and the weariest among us could, I believe, find the time and summon the energy to mark a few boxes on a ballot.

ENGLISH SHOWALTER

Notes on Contributors

MARSHALL W. ALCORN, JR., earned a BA in psychology and then spent two years teaching agriculture in India as part of the Peace Corps. He received his MA in English from Vanderbilt University and the PhD from the University of Texas. His dissertation examined "narcissistic sublimation and lyric volition," and he has used theories of narcissism to examine D. H. Lawrence (*D. H. Lawrence Review*), Conrad (*Conradiana*), and Coleridge (*Wordsworth Circle*, forthcoming). He is currently finishing a book entitled *Styles of Narcissistic Ambiguity in the Literary Text* and is working with Mark Bracher on another book on literature and psychoanalysis. He is adjunct assistant professor of English at Iowa State University.

MARK BRACHER is adjunct assistant professor of English at Iowa State University. He has published articles on Blake and Shakespeare and a book, *Being Form'd: Thinking through Blake's Milton*, recently published by Station Hill Press. He is revising a manuscript on Blake's early prophecies, coediting a collection of essays on Blake and critical method, and coauthoring a book with Marshall Alcorn on literature and psychoanalysis.

CAROLYN G. HEILBRUN has taught at Columbia University since 1960. She has held fellowships from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations and from the NEH and has written on biography, feminist criticism, and modern British literature. Her books include *The Garnett Family* (Allen & Unwin; Macmillan, 1961), *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (Knopf, 1973), and *Reinventing Womanhood* (Norton, 1979).

ANGELA S. MOGER received her PhD from Yale in 1980. She has taught at Wesleyan University and Sarah Lawrence College, where she is professor of French and comparative literature. She has published another essay on Maupassant's narrative practice, in *Yale French Studies*, and a study of the function of the frame in Barbey d'Aureville appeared in *Sub-Stance*. The current essay is part of a book she is writing on the theme of romantic love as a poetics of narrative.