

such as the assumption that writers who do not say *I* “ignore . . . the personal” (Claudia Tate quoting Ralph Ellison; 1147) or “deny their involvement” in their own research (Deborah Tannen; 1151). These overcorrections are products of the fact that consciousness of language, once adopted, comes to dictate everything, as Marshall McLuhan argues in relation to any technology throughout *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

In most of the letters on the personal, the *I* has been theorized. In a garish paradox, the attempt to argue for the personal has resulted in its depersonalization in the concepts of pedagogy (Joseph A. Boone; 1153), of organizing principles (Carole Boyce Davies; 1154), of metanarrative (Sharon P. Holland; 1158), an outcome often buttressed by barrages of quotations that finish the beating of the *I* into a docile abstraction (Agnes Moreland Jackson; 1159). Instead of restoring humanity to the profession (Sharon P. Holland; 1158), the personal thus represented obliterates it. If the *I* is authoritative, authentic, or acceptable, why does it need such artillery to back it up?

There are those who argue in favor of the personal while attaining the universality that the personal is supposed to avoid (Norman N. Holland; 1147). Frederick Douglass is said to reach the universality of race through his *I* (Nellie Y. McKay; 1155); Joonok Huh wants to speak for the universality of East-West complexity by recounting personal relationships (1156). Karl Kroeber is right in saying that the “autobiographical impulse is in truth a contorted masquerade of its opposite, the loss of meaningful individuality” (1163). Meaningful individuality has been replaced by the nomenclature of the clarion *I* sounded at the international colloquium. *I* is a chip on the shoulder, a need to justify oneself, as David Simpson suggests (1167). In that shouted *I*, what is shouted down first and foremost is the object of study. *I* takes the place of Shakespeare, Čexov, Sarraute (which is why *I* refused to use it in my dissertation). Every time *I* appears, the great writer or work—the point of the study—disappears. Perhaps the researchers hungry for an “audience . . . nodding in agreement” (Stephanie Sandler; 1162) replace the conflation of scholar and scholarship (Michael Bérubé, “Against Subjectivity,” 1067) by the drowning of scholarship in the scholar. Far from being a vehicle for avoiding narcissism (Sharon P. Holland; 1158), the personal is a way of confirming it. Arguing for the personal is impossible as long as the advocate is looking in the mirror, and looking in the mirror brings no new insight to studies of Shakespeare, Čexov, Sarraute.

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The Teaching of Literature

To the Editor:

PMLA's decision to publish an issue on teaching literature was admirable and important (112 [1997]: 7–112). But as fine as the individual essays are, the issue undercuts its apparent intention. It will do nothing to change the professional ethos in which teaching literature or writing about doing so is scarcely rewarded—at least in major research universities—and in which “my work” almost always means research and writing as opposed to teaching. All the more reason that the shape of the teaching-of-literature issue is so unfortunate. It is something of an embarrassment that the official professional organization of teachers and scholars of literature could not—after a long period of preparation—gather more than two essays about teaching that it was willing to publish.

Obviously, the teaching-research split does nobody any good. It hurts the profession in the eyes of an uncomprehending lay public; it sustains an artificial and potentially demoralizing division in the work of the professoriat. In research universities the argument in defense of a heavy emphasis on research is often that one cannot be a good teacher without being a good researcher. Nobody claims that you cannot be a good researcher without being a good teacher. And there is surprisingly little literature about the way research and teaching interact.

By barely addressing that interaction or the major questions confronting the teaching of literature in the university, this issue of *PMLA* becomes not a step toward improving a difficult situation but a symptom of the problems. It suggests that, as serious as most faculty members are about their teaching, the profession still does not know how to make it a subject of study.

The issue devotes little attention, for example, to the way graduate training is still, with an increasing number of honorable exceptions, unconcerned about teaching, although most PhDs do not go on to research universities, or about the fact that the “teaching assistantship” serves primarily as a relatively inexpensive way for the university to provide writing instruction to all incoming students. Moreover, it barely touches on the ways in which the nature and subject of the discipline are now in question. The profession badly needs a new orientation toward the integration of teaching and scholarship.

Teaching literature is a subject, and a difficult one. Addressing it well demands scholarly and critical sophistication but also a clear understanding of how such sophistication relates to the requirements of the classroom—to what, how, and when students are most likely to learn. To write well about teaching literature requires

clear thought about the function and nature of literature and about what distinguishes literary and critical activity from other kinds of engagement with texts.

Of the four essays in the teaching-of-literature issue that moved through the traditional *PMLA* evaluation procedures—anonymous submission, outside reading, review by Advisory Committee members and by the Editorial Board—only two are really about teaching: Pamela L. Caughie's "Let It Pass: Changing the Subject, Once Again" and Betsy Keller's "Rereading Flaubert: Toward a Dialogue between First- and Second-Language Literature Teaching Practices." Together they almost enact the "class" divisions between research and teaching characteristic of the profession. Though concerned with the intellectual and moral enlightenment of students, "Let It Pass" locates itself in the center of present debates about the postmodern condition. I mean no disrespect when I say that the subject is one of those sexy ones that currently win rewards inside the profession. However problematic and, from my point of view, overmoralized the author's argument is, the essay is the only one in the issue to attempt to connect critical theory with pedagogy. An interesting move to legitimize writing about teaching, it proceeds by rejecting the tradition of literary study on which departments and disciplines are still built.

On the other hand, "Rereading Flaubert" (and again I mean no disrespect) is not sexy. It does not raise questions about literariness but assumes the value of engagement with language for reading any literary text. Its strength is in its scholarly and linguistic meticulousness and in the insightful way it applies the lessons of second-language learning to literary study. It is probably the only essay in the issue that would not have found its way into *PMLA* were it not for the special topic.

The two other new essays, Carrie Noland's "Poetry at Stake: Blaise Cendrars, Cultural Studies, and the Future of Poetry in the Literature Classroom" and David R. Shumway's "The Star System in Literary Studies," were drawn from the general pool of *PMLA* submissions, and they have virtually nothing to do with the teaching of literature. Their presence suggests the failure of *PMLA*'s undertaking, symptomatic of the profession's failure to engage the most serious issues of teaching literature. The supplementary material chosen by the Editorial Board (obviously there to fill the gap left by the shortage of acceptable submitted essays on the topic) implies a discipline-wide self-consciousness about the profession's lack of attention to its current problems in a world of downsizing, corporate modeling, and culture wars.

A focused issue on the teaching of literature, a genuinely edited one, recognizing the limitations of its resources and the fundamental disciplinary problems, would

have served the profession better. By engaging the question of teaching literature more centrally, the profession as a whole might be able to recover its credibility with a public ever less interested in supporting literary or cultural work and to produce conditions in which the Editorial Board of *PMLA* could accept more than two essays for its next issue on this topic.

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To the Editor:

Carrie Noland's "Poetry at Stake: Blaise Cendrars, Cultural Studies, and the Future of Poetry in the Literature Classroom" (112 [1997]: 40–55) begins with a provocative question: "why are sonnets, epics, odes, and confessional lyrics so rapidly disappearing from the literature classroom?" I was not aware that they were disappearing, but as a poet who wrote a creative dissertation in poetry, I take the form's importance for granted. The first- and second-year students in my American literature and composition classes this fall read a good deal of poetry.

Noland's real agenda is revealed in her next question: "Why has poetry proved to be a more useful tool with which to *do* cultural studies, with which, that is, to explore how symbolic value is institutionally and ideologically constituted?" (40). Her interest does not seem to be poetry as such but its utility in the enterprise of cultural studies. Her reading of Cendrars, a poet I had not previously encountered, is illuminating despite its cultural studies language ("signifying practices," "cultural spaces," and so forth). Cendrars seems to have strong affinities with such an American poet as William Carlos Williams, who was also concerned with finding subject matter in local and popular culture, not traditionally regarded as having lyric beauty. Nevertheless, Noland's reading of Cendrars is designed to lead to considerations of how "poetry could be reintegrated into research concerning the social (institutional *and* semiotic) production of cultural distinction. . . . [T]eachers and scholars can redefine cultural studies through renewed attention to the poetic" (51).

I fail to see how this approach will improve what Noland describes as poetry's precarious place in the academy. Perhaps it will bring poetry more attention from cultural studies theorists, but poetry—especially the avant-garde variety—has not lacked for such attention, as Noland admits and the work of Cary Nelson, Marjorie Perloff, and Michael Bérubé demonstrates. Poetry, it seems to me, is doing just fine in the academy. When my students and I interrogate literary tradition and experimentation, feminism and race, the tension between