

in close translation; commentary linking, explaining, or amplifying the above texts, whenever necessary or desirable; reflections on and assessments of the documents from the perspective of the mature narrator; finally, a frame outlining the purpose, procedure, and goal of the exploration to be undertaken and inviting readers to make their own assessment of the narrator, then and now.

This approach, I believe, enables readers to extricate from the memoir the degree of information and truthfulness they expect or are interested in, be it factual, psychological, emotional, or aesthetic, without having to question or try to trace the presenter's perspective and motive. And just as it is up to the viewer of a painting to read meaning into or out of it and up to listeners to establish a relation with the music they hear, so the reader of such a memoir need not worry about its historical accuracy but can accept it as a glimpse into the life of another being, hopefully presented with such aesthetic components as form, structure, and style but without hiding manipulation or invention.

Elizabeth Welt Trahan
Amherst College (retired)

Leadership for a Diverse Profession

TO THE EDITOR:

Marjorie Perloff offers a most interesting and thoughtful survey of the state of the profession in her 2006 Presidential Address (122 [2007]: 652–62), but I must point out one blind spot, unfortunately common for people with prestigious appointments in English and foreign language departments. She writes, “Given these aporias of literary study, administrators are beginning to argue, perhaps English departments should concentrate on the study of composition and rhetoric, disciplines that really do teach students things they need to know, and the foreign literature departments should focus on language learning, so important in business, professional life, and especially government service” (656). She implies

this is a future possibility we should watch out for rather than a present reality. This passage suggests the former president of the MLA was, unfortunately, oblivious to the actual state of the profession. Overwhelmingly, English departments are composition departments, and foreign language departments are “language learning” departments. A glance at the course offerings of almost any college or university shows that literature courses make up only a fraction of the departments' total teaching load. The higher one's professional status, of course, the less likely one is to teach the nonliterature courses, leaving that work to graduate students, part-timers, temps, composition and language education specialists, and a significant percentage of the faculty at most nonelite schools (for whom such courses constitute a chunk of their teaching load)—that is, to the bulk of the profession below the top tier.

Look, I'm not saying that the MLA should reorient itself to focus on the predominant mode of work that English and language departments actually do—the literary focus is extremely valuable, the lure that got most of us into this business in the first place. I'm asking for a leadership that can see below the summit.

What would happen if the MLA elected its presidents from an activist bottom rather than a prestigious top?

James D. Sullivan
Illinois Central College

Reply:

I am grateful to James D. Sullivan for raising this issue. He is right to remind us that, even now—not just in some hypothetical future—in most large state universities, “English departments are composition departments, and foreign language departments are ‘language learning’ departments.” The truth, I suppose, is that, whatever the reality on the ground, the *discourse* of our discipline—indeed, of any academic discipline—draws its inferences from graduate programs at the top universities, and at these universities, as well as at liberal arts