

Editor's Column

ALL OF US, I suspect, have words that we would like to see excommunicated from the English language. My own candidates include “cope,” “supportive,” “contact” (used as a verb), “life-style” (especially if “viable” or “meaningful”), “thrust,” “prioritize” (along with “narratize” and most other “ize” words), and “interface.” After several hundred essays I am admittedly getting used to “catachresis,” “polyvalent,” and “hypotactic,” but I continue to dislike fashionable buzz words like “input” and “parameter,” words that mainly reveal the poverty of a writer’s imagination. (I want to devote a future column to the especially vexing question of technological jargon in scholarly discourse.) I dislike, in short, the sort of language that Randall Jarrell said sounds as if it were composed on a typewriter by a typewriter.

Here at *PMLA* we encounter some of the most cumbersome prose produced in our profession, as well as some of the liveliest. We have a chance not only to observe the state of our critical language but also to watch certain words rise as others fall, to see yesterday’s catchword become today’s academic pariah. We have an opportunity as well, even an obligation, to influence the quality of the prose we publish. If, to that end, we cannot insist on banning all the words on our private lists of least favored terms, we can make some recommendations. And we can insist on standards of clarity, readability, and unexceptionable usage.

Our standards, of course, leave plenty of room for the individual author’s idiosyncratic style, as any issue of *PMLA* will confirm. We do not favor the sort of homogenized prose that sounds as if it were written by a committee. Nothing delights me more, in fact, than the essay with a quirky voice, with personality, provided it meets the criteria of quality appropriate to our journal. *PMLA*’s audience is far larger than that of all but a very few scholarly works. (It chastens me somewhat to realize that this column will have more readers than all my critical essays and books combined.) Since our bound volumes appear in virtually every academic library in the country, we try to see that they are a monument to good writing.

Given the profession of our contributors, their lapses from our stylistic standards are generally quite subtle, involving such infelicities as vague antecedents, unintentional repetitions, misplaced modifiers, and minor errors in diction—“between” for “among,” “comprise” for “compose,” and “each other” for “one another.” We query words that are imprecise, phrases that are unclear or redundant, sentences that the reader is likely to stumble over. We suggest alternatives to anything that strikes us as awkward, verbose, or unintentionally comic. And, like any other publication, we insist on “house style”—on our preferences for spelling, punctuation, and documentation based on the *MLA Handbook* and the other guides we follow. As a result, the clean, beautifully typed manuscripts submitted to our editorial staff are often returned to their authors covered with queries, notes, and suggested changes.

From the mail we receive we know that most of our contributors appreciate this painstaking assistance. It is a commonplace in our office that the most conscientious stylists, those Flaubertian virtuosi who pat every *mot* into place, are the most receptive to suggestions. I can understand this. If someone takes the trouble to improve a paragraph (or even a phrase) that I have labored over, I feel as if I have been given an extraordinary present. Gifted copyeditors, like gifted writers, are an endangered species, and I am fortunate in having editorial colleagues whose understanding of the structure of English is exhaustive and whose delight in literate prose is infectious.

I could end this small tribute to my editorial staff right here, but in the interest of accuracy I must admit that one contributor described our editing as egregious. The criticism distressed me because the essay in question is brilliant, and I had hoped for another from the same writer. Faced, though, with the choice between printing the author’s sometimes unconventional syntax and consistently maintaining our editorial standards, we naturally chose the latter—a decision that set off some epistolary fireworks. I can empathize with our critic to a degree. Teachers are accustomed to blue-penciling the writing of others, and it can be a blow to professional vanity to have one’s own prose, however eloquent, subjected to editorial scru-

tiny. "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" Juvenal asked. Editors, no less than scholars and poets, are guardians of the linguistic flame. If the MLA will not uphold the highest standards of literacy, who will?

Students sometimes complain that English teachers care more about "good writing" than about "content" ("I am not an average person," an undergraduate at Penn announced to me after receiving a C for a carelessly punctuated paper). But we in the profession know that the medium and the message, like Yeats's dancer and dance, are inextricably joined. After nearly a year as an editor I am more than ever aware of the ways in which careful writing enhances an author's meaning. The articles appearing in this issue of *PMLA* manage, I think, to embody this principle. There are elegant sentences here, and they convey important ideas. I hope that these essays will give you as much pleasure as they do those of us who have followed their progress from submission, many months ago, to this welcome appearance in our pages.

JOEL CONARROE



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