

Editor's Column

FIVE years ago, during the interviews that led to my appointment as editor of *PMLA*, I was asked to give my views on a subject that was on everybody's mind, the question of author-anonymous submission or, as it is sometimes called, blind reviewing. It occurred to me then that in the many years I had been evaluating essays for the journal as a consultant reader I had only once or twice recognized the name of an author and that I had, in a sense, been participating in an anonymous process. I told the search committee that I could see no reason not to initiate an experiment in author-anonymous reviewing, especially if the process would erase any suspicions of privilege, real or imagined, and would make it clear to all contributors that they were not being judged, consciously or unconsciously, on the basis of age, rank, sex, or place of employment.

You may remember that after some heated debate the experiment was finally endorsed by the Delegate Assembly in 1978 and adopted by the Executive Council. The policy has now been in effect for three years, and at its May meeting the Council will decide either to continue it on a permanent basis, to renew the experiment for a specified number of years, or to return to the earlier policy of identifying authors by name. I have a substantial file of letters from members on various aspects of the subject, but I would welcome opinions—pro, con, or mixed—from readers who have not expressed themselves, especially from those who have submitted or evaluated work during the time in which the experiment has been in effect. Although I favor continuation of the policy I will see that the Council is given a balanced sense of the views of the membership.

For the record, the mail I have received so far has been almost wholly in support of blind submissions. "Such a policy," one member writes, "puts the first-timer and the experienced professional on equal footing, giving eager, innovative beginners as much of a chance as well-established scholars in the academy." "I have often had the feeling," another writes, "that scholarly journals (at least ones I know of from personal experience) tend to accept those writers who have been acknowledged and accepted before, those who are already established." Several readers say that the quality of the essays and the variety of voices in which they are written have shown marked improvement under the policy. One member, responding to the charge that the process is contrary to the ideal of a scholarly community, says, "Nothing prevents a reader from making his or her identity known, once a decision has been made, and inviting response from the writer; responding this way to blind submissions enhances the intellectual force of such exchanges and frees them from mere cronyism. The time to learn names, affiliations, and backgrounds is after we have given each other's work our most careful and respectful attention."

One member who has had an essay accepted under the policy writes, "As long as the procedure is in place it functions as a neutral and uncompromised measure of scholarly achievement. I believe that as a profession we need more such measures, but I insist that we certainly must retain this one." This contributor also suggests that if the policy may on occasion discourage senior scholars, "it heartens and inspires the nobodies. And they, after all, are the ones who need such cheering, the ones most in danger of being lost to the profession, to scholarship, and to students." On the same theme, a writer suggests that young scholars "aren't going to remain ambitious newcomers long—they're going to go on to write books, and their books are going to be exciting and important books, and as this happens over time you have, presto, a whole new generation of established or important names—a new establishment, if you like—of scholars whose best work first saw the light of day in *PMLA*."

"As one who has read articles submitted anonymously and with a name attached," a member recently wrote, "and as one who has, in turn, submitted essays in both ways, I would like to cast my vote on the side of anonymous submissions. As egalitarian as I profess to be, I must confess that I read differently when the name on the manuscript belongs to a vener-

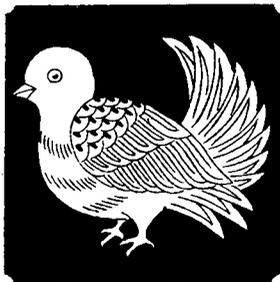
able scholar I've long admired or when it belongs to someone newly entering the profession. Without the names, I find myself reading both critically *and* generously." Another member, however, now chooses not to evaluate any essays for us: "Because of this new policy, I find it unethical to participate in the editorial process. There should be no need for all this obsequious guessing on the part of authors, established or not, and no need for a fraudulent pose of objectivity on the part of readers: it is not a mere text one is reading—it is the work of a real living person, and this fact should be utilized in the editorial process and not concealed."

There are others who prefer not to read for us if the author's name is not revealed. I have noticed, too, that evaluators increasingly prefer to remain anonymous (although Advisory Committee members sign their names) and that some pen brief notes: "AA. Anonymity for All!"; "I ask for anonymity even as the authors (or the MLA ideologues) do. Slips which pass in the night"; "When an author's name is withheld, mine too should be withheld." I have also noticed, however, that the evaluations we receive, whether signed or not, tend to be fuller, more detailed, and a bit more rigorous than in the past. This trend may, of course, have more to do with the conscientious habits of our members than with the anonymity of the authors. I don't know.

Some minor problems have surfaced in the course of the experiment, all of which, I think, result from small misunderstandings about exactly how the process works. Occasionally, for example, I get a phone call that goes something like this: "Professor Conarroe, I wonder if you can give me a progress report on the essay I recently submitted called 'Shelley's Debt to Yeats: A Study in Intuitive Foreshadowing.'" I must then explain that the caller has inadvertently compromised the process and that I will be unable to vote on the paper if it comes to the Editorial Board: like the other Board members I must remain ignorant of the identity of an author until a final decision has been made. Sometimes, too, despite our reminders, an author who is revising an essay communicates directly with an evaluator (obviously one who signed the report). Such correspondence should take place only through the editorial office, where all "Editor, *PMLA*" mail is delivered. Our staff will block out an author's name before sending on letters or the revised article to the appropriate reader. There are, of course, unpredictable ways that let a reader know who the author is (such as hearing the paper at the Annual Convention), but—at least in principle—we believe we can always find readers who haven't seen (or heard) the essay before.

I end with an observation and a brief anecdote. Virtually everyone who has served on the Editorial Board during the experiment is convinced of the value of author-anonymous review. (One member, in fact, was convinced before starting to serve, saying that the existence of the policy influenced his decision to accept appointment in the first place.) Frequently when the name of the author of a paper we have been considering is finally revealed, Board members discover that he or she is someone they know and say that they might well have felt inhibited about expressing themselves freely had they known the identity during our discussion. And this leads to my anecdote. This summer, sitting on the shores of Lake Champlain, I read a powerful essay, one that buzzed in my mind for weeks. At the October Board meeting I expressed, in considerable detail, my admiration for the paper, my few reservations, and my positive vote, which joined the votes of a majority of my colleagues. I was pleased and surprised, at the end of the discussion, to discover that the piece was written by a departmental colleague who is a valued friend. Perhaps my response to the paper would have been as guiltlessly enthusiastic had I known the identity all along. But perhaps not. And it is that latter possibility, it seems to me, that adds special force to our experiment.

JOEL CONARROE



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closing it and limiting its claims; in fiction, footnotes extend textual authority by enlarging the fictional context. Both inner- and outer-directed, these two kinds of notations display a self-conscious anxiety about the critical and creative acts they annotate. Scholarly notes mask this ambivalence by claiming extratextual authority; literary notes highlight the ambivalence by consciously dividing the text against itself. This essay examines the ways footnotes in *Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Finnegans Wake* parody the notational convention and draw attention to the faulted authority of its discourse by flouting scholarly claims to objectivity and neutrality, by calling into question the relations of author and reader on textual grounds, and by using self-reflexive narrative methods to illustrate the rhetorical double bind that keeps *all* language at the margin of discourse. (SB)

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Only members of the Association may submit articles to *PMLA*. Each article submitted is sent to at least one consultant reader and one member of the Advisory Committee. Articles recommended by these readers are then sent to the members of the Editorial Board, who meet periodically with the Editor to make final decisions. Until a final decision is reached, the author's name is not made known to consultant readers, to members of the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board, or to the Editor.

Submissions, prepared according to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, should be addressed to the Editor of *PMLA*, 62 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011. The author's name should not appear on the manuscript; instead, a cover sheet, with the author's name, address, and the title of the article, should accompany the article. Authors should not refer to themselves in the first person in the submitted text or notes if such references would identify them; any necessary references to the author's previous work, for example, should be in the third person.