

## Editor's Column

*PMLA*, where I now hang my hat, has something in common with the place I used to call home. Like Philadelphia, our venerable journal has a reputation for stuffiness it can't quite seem to live down. Those who have not explored Ben Franklin's city during the past few years still think of it as a village that closes at dusk—"A nice place to live but I'd hate to visit there." Similarly, those not familiar with the renovations of my predecessors, Stone, Fisher, and, most recently, Schaefer, tend to dismiss *PMLA* as stodgy. The problems, I suspect, are basically those of identity. Boston, Chicago, Seattle, even Cleveland ("city of light, city of magic") all evoke specific adjectives, but what words can do justice to the radiant multiplicity that is Philadelphia? And if *Critical Inquiry* or *Glyph* or the *Hudson Review* can be characterized fairly specifically, it would take a far better poet than I to put words around the robust, protean nonagenarian that is *PMLA*.

It is, though, precisely the journal's democratic eclecticism, its absence of critical boundaries, that accounts for much of its strength. Not everyone, of course, thinks so. During my first weeks as editor I have received numerous suggestions about what *PMLA* "really ought to do." "Commission essays," "Publish book reviews," "Include some poetry," I was urged, respectively, by an important critic, a well-known reviewer, and a young poet. A Goethe scholar would like at least one issue a year devoted to non-English authors. Others want more strife and conflict in the journal—transcriptions of the more timely Convention debates (e.g., Abrams vs. Miller) and an emphasis on the critical battles that are rending our profession. In response to these recommendations I say that I am completely open to new ideas and that I will do what I can to initiate change if I am convinced that change is in order. First, however, I need to know what *you* think of our publication, whether you like the present policies, whether you have ideas for improvement—what, in short, you would do in my shoes. So keep those cards and letters coming, please.

I also want to stress here, in my salutatory column, that I think our editorial policy needs revision. The present statement, drafted in 1973, announces that *PMLA* "publishes articles on the modern languages and literatures that are of significant interest to the entire membership of the Association." This is a noble possibility, but, as William Schaefer said in his valedictory column, "it hasn't quite worked out as planned." Very few articles, it seems, are of "significant interest" to thirty thousand complicated, diversely educated individuals. In every past issue, I must confess, there have been pieces that have not interested me very much, some that I have never finished reading—a source, four times a year, of mild guilt. I would prefer, as our opening statement of policy, "*PMLA* invites essays that are likely to engage the interest of individuals who share a devotion to literature and language." Whether such essays will appeal to the entire membership is less important than whether they are of enduring value and whether they provoke discussion among a significant number of readers.

I also want to underscore the point (and here I speak for the Editorial Board and, I suspect, for the Advisory Committee as well) that we welcome the chance to evaluate work on virtually any aspect of literature written from virtually any point of view. *PMLA* is not the *New York Review of Books*, nor was it meant to be. We do not represent a critical school or a closed network, geographical or spiritual, of scholars and evaluators. (I become uneasy, in fact, when I must confront essays that seem to enclose themselves in their own terminology, that appear to have been written by and for members of an exclusive society.) Rather, we hope to publish illuminating essays on a wide range of subjects, essays that attest to the most valuable and original work being done by our colleagues in what is, after all, a vast and heterogeneous enterprise.

Much that has appeared in these pages over the years has been useful and fresh, has been, in fact, altogether splendid. I share with members of the Editorial Board, however, the feeling that *PMLA* could be more lively, a bit more controversial, more likely to engage the attention of our readers. I use this space, therefore, not only to request your letters but also to issue a trumpet call for papers that will stimulate discussion. I look especially for essays that are spacious in conception, that connect with material outside their specific subjects. Many scholarly

journals are receptive to close readings of texts, but I would like this publication, while never slighting individual texts, to attract articles that are distinguished by expansiveness. I would particularly welcome essays that address themselves to general questions relating to humane literary study today. Though as far-flung students of language and literature we clearly do not constitute a definable school, we are nevertheless sharing (enduring?) a period in the academies that is both exciting and singularly confusing. Thoughtful attempts to put our beleaguered profession in focus should clearly interest us all.

Finally, I should say that we are especially responsive to the essay that has a strong voice, a personality, that is written in language that is clear, resonant, even quotable. During my first meeting with the Editorial Board I heard a number of papers described as "wooden," "anonymous," "mechanical," "constrained," "term-paperish." Like my colleagues on the Board, I am not moved to argue passionately for an essay that lacks all passion, that seems to have been written either by a committee or by a computer. I am not advocating self-indulgent rhetoric; I am simply asking each potential contributor to write (and rewrite) the sort of prose that lucidly reveals a unique mind at work.

Who knows, if these stylish, wide-ranging articles begin arriving at 62 Fifth Avenue, future issues of *PMLA* may well be as bracing as a visit to Chicago. Or even to Philadelphia.

JOEL CONARROE



From George Alexander Stevens, *The Dramatic History of Master Edward* (London, 1763), in *Tobias Smollett: Bicentennial Essays Presented to Lewis M. Knapp*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and P.-G. Bouce (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971)

[See R. G. Collins' article, pages 91–105]