

Editor's Column: What Can a Journal Essay Do?

AT THE 2005 MLA CONVENTION, I INVITED SEVERAL COLLEAGUES involved with *PMLA* to participate in a roundtable on journal publishing. What can a journal essay do? What are some of the questions that all of us face when we sit down at our computers and begin writing for an academic audience? How do we balance the things that we want to say with the things that we think our colleagues will want to read and that a journal in our field will want to publish? The participants in the roundtable shared their vast and varied experiences with a lively audience, and their comments were so sensible and useful that I want to offer them here.

Our conversation reflects the multiple relationships we have each had with the journal as authors, readers, and Advisory Committee and Editorial Board members. Thus, I invited Wai Chee Dimock (Yale Univ.) and María Herrera-Sobek (Univ. of California, Santa Barbara) to represent the Editorial Board; Richard Terdiman (Univ. of California, Santa Cruz) and Jahan Ramazani (Univ. of Virginia) to share their experience reading an enormous number of essays as members of the Advisory Committee; and Lucy McDiarmid (Villanova Univ. and the Cullman Center of the New York Public Library) as a three-time *PMLA* author who, in my time as editor, made what I would consider a model submission. The Editorial Board member Marianne DeKoven (Rutgers Univ., New Brunswick) offered her comments from the audience.

Several questions organized our discussion, and I reproduce them here, along with some of the most pertinent audience questions.

How do you imagine the reader of a PMLA article? How can you best balance the need to address a generalist audience while also appealing to the specialist audience in your subfield? This is a challenge posed particularly by generalist journals like PMLA.

Lucy McDiarmid: For the three things that I've had published in *PMLA*, I've thought of several groups of people. First of all, I think of my smartest friends. I think, "What would they learn from this? Would these words speak to them? Would this interest them?" And if I think, "No," or, "They've seen it before," then I don't go in that direction. So I have a model in mind, a group of my smartest friends who would be very encouraging but also somewhat critical.

Second, I think of the Editorial Board of *PMLA*, because those are the people who are going to be deciding, the people who will choose the essays. And to find out what they might want, you can Google them and see what their interests are, or you can read recent issues of *PMLA*. I think there's no better way really to see what kind of reader you would have than to look at recent issues.

And, third, I think of my mother, because she is what the NEH used to call "the literate but nonacademic humanist." She was a children's-book editor for forty years. She's very smart, she reads a lot, and if something is incomprehensible, she tells me so instantly and doesn't finish reading it. In fact, most of my books are sitting unread on a coffee table in the living room. I know what page she got to in most of them because there's a bookmark in the introduction somewhere.

So those are the audiences that I keep in mind.

I've submitted to issues on special topics—"Literature and Censorship" and "On Poetry"—and to the special millennium issue. Here you assume that the topic is conceived in a general way, and they want essays that cover specific aspects of it, so you don't need to worry about the idea of audience. If you have something on one of those topics, you send it in.

I think for me there are other issues that are more important, such as, What kind of diction do you use? how formal a style? Certainly, what we write, whatever it's called—cultural criticism, literary criticism, theory—has become more informal in many ways. It's

gone in two directions, really. It's become much more theoretical, but it's also become chattier, more vernacular, and I think that's as much an issue as the question about the audience. What style do I use—how do I pitch it? And how much background do I give? But I wouldn't worry about issues of background, because the Editorial Board will tell you how much to give. If they think you've given too much or not enough, they will let you know.

Finally, I would say: trust the statement of editorial policy: "the journal is receptive to a variety of topics, whether general or specific, and to all scholarly methods and theoretical perspectives. The ideal *PMLA* essay exemplifies the best of its kind, whatever the kind; addresses a significant problem; draws out clearly the implications of its findings; and engages the attention of its audience through a concise, readable presentation." I've trusted that because some of the things I've submitted have been a little eccentric, and I've thought, Either they'll like it or they won't. So I would trust this idea, particularly "the best of its kind, whatever the kind."

Richard Terdiman: It feels like I published my first essay in *PMLA* before most of you in the audience were born. It was at a very different time, when the journal was a very scholarly, philological kind of enterprise, and things have changed a great deal. I certainly subscribe to everything that Lucy said. I want to just add that I think there's been a swing for the past ten years, maybe more, away from the extraordinarily abstruse language that we were all using with each other for quite a long time and toward something that some people call "public-intellectual speech." In terms of the political situation within the United States and even beyond the United States, this seems to me to have a great deal of importance for us all. And *PMLA* is a good touchstone of that, in the sense that we really are addressing people beyond the narrow coterie—the three people that we know will read us no matter

what we write. And I want to encourage everybody to take that seriously.

What is the difference between a book or dissertation chapter and a journal essay? Or between a conference paper and an article? How do you transform one into the other?

Wai Chee Dimock: The transforming should be a generative process: starting out with a chapter and tightening it, paring it down to a shapely article. But I think it also could work the other way, which is to say, starting out with a focused article and using it to imagine a larger circumference, to think about the overall shape of the project. For the moment, though, let me concentrate on the first, which is turning a large chapter into a smaller article. In a chapter we have the luxury of making connections that are merely promising, not proved, and I really think it's important to keep the chapter as that kind of space of possibility. So it's OK for the chapter to be a little unwieldy. It's OK for it to spill out in all directions. The journal article, on the other hand, is disciplined, in the sense that it's almost like a job interview. You have twenty-five minutes to convince a group of strangers that you're worth hiring. You have twenty-five pages in which to convince another group of strangers that you're worth listening to. The journal article is audience-directed. I can't emphasize this enough: in order to make the strongest case to the reader, even some good ideas might have to go, if they happen not to contribute in any way to the argument being made. Which is not to say that we should throw them out; it just means that we should save them in a different file, one to come back to. The journal article should be purposeful. It should be constrained by its own momentum as it goes forward, so that everything said along the way is a prelude to the conclusion.

Richard Terdeman: When I was being mentored, somebody revealed a truth to me that I think is very relevant to what we're

talking about today. It is that most selection processes are not *selection* processes at all but *rejection* processes. For the submissions that I read on the Advisory Committee, the acceptance rate was one in ten. So you see the logic of what I'm saying in terms of rejection. There's a needle's eye to get through even to be seriously considered and move on to the next level. So in order to get to that point, you have to think about coming through to people. And it means that it's much easier to say what a journal article is *not* than to say what it *is*. It is not a "large loose baggy monster," as Henry James called *War and Peace*. It is perhaps not laser-focused, but it is definitely focused and disciplined, and it makes its argument coherently. It's exactly what you try to tell your students to do when they are writing an essay. If we all did what we tell our students to do, there would probably be a higher acceptance rate for *PMLA*. But we don't, because we have lots of ideas, and we have lots of directions that we'd like to follow, but the *PMLA* article is not the forum for doing so. If we avoid those mistakes, then the beautiful statue inside the block of marble will emerge.

What role have journal essays played in the development of certain emerging and also more established fields?

María Herrera-Sobek: I took the question "What can a journal essay do?" literally and focused on the journal essay's significance for women and underrepresented minorities in our profession. For example, in the field of women's studies, the edited collection of essays and book chapters has been extremely significant. The journal essay has been equally important in the fields of ethnic studies and Chicano/a studies.

In my field, Chicano/a studies, and in other, closely related fields, there has been a transformation of the literary canon, as you well know, and it has taken place in large part via the journal essay. I therefore encourage you to keep on writing because in my experience

an essay can definitely transform critical theory and literary-cultural production.

In addition, the journal essay has been very instrumental in the formation of new disciplines and new areas of studies. For example, the publication of critical essays for Chicano and Chicana literature has legitimized the field and helped scholars establish it in many colleges and universities in the United States, and in American studies across Europe and even the Middle East. I venture to say that most major universities in the United States either already have Chicano/Latino studies and/or ethnic studies programs or are implementing them.

In this discussion, I want to focus on four general categories in which the journal essay played and continues to play a key role in the development of new disciplines. First is the dissemination of new ideas, theoretical paradigms, and conceptualizations of the literary canon. The journal essay is an excellent venue through which new literary currents can be articulated, discussed, examined, and critiqued. For this reason all fields should be represented in *PMLA*. Getting published in *PMLA* is the gold standard in our profession. But since it is the gold standard, it is very difficult to achieve. This difficulty leads us to the second major contribution of the journal essay.

In Chicano and Chicana studies and other ethnic studies and women's studies also, the difficulty of getting published in *PMLA* and other prestigious mainstream journals led to the emergence of new journals. In other words, the journal essay stimulated the publication of new journals and literary reviews. I counted the new journals in Chicano and Chicana studies that came out between 1968 and 1982, and there were forty-nine. Some of these are still in existence today, and some, such as *Aztlán*, are now highly prestigious—it is published by UCLA. But others, which had quirky names such as *Capirotada*, *Caracól*, *Comadre*, and *Con Safos*, did not make it. Those of you who know Spanish are aware that three of these journal titles are very humorous.

Third, at a practical level, publishing a journal essay can help you get a job. It can aid you in landing the job interview you are seeking; it can help you achieve tenure; and it is essential for merit and promotion reviews in colleges and universities.

Finally, a fourth answer to what a journal essay can do for you is that reading it provides pleasure, delight, and enjoyment. So I encourage everyone to keep on writing.

Wai Chee Dimock: I'm speaking for a traditional field, nineteenth-century American literature, with a fairly long critical history. So let me go back a bit to talk about how journal articles in the past have shaped the field. I'm sorry to say that some of the most important articles have appeared not in *PMLA* but in journals such as *Glyph*. You might not know about *Glyph*, no longer published now, but it was one of the most exciting journals in the 1970s and 1980s. *Glyph* 8 (1981) was edited by Walter Benn Michaels. To my mind, it had the single most consequential essay on American literature, Jane Tompkins's "Sentimental Power," on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. No other article has transformed the field as powerfully. Not only did Tompkins turn *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into the most read novel of the nineteenth century, but an entire range of texts also got admitted into the critical canon as a result. It was a paradigm shift. Articles such as these might not appear often in *PMLA*, for in order to get through the review process, essays probably can't afford to be too controversial, to give too much offense. That's something we should think about: how to make sure that articles that are radical in their mode of thinking can be represented in this journal.

A single journal article can do a tremendous amount. It can be a major catalyst for the transformation of a field.

When we on the Editorial Board consider essays, we are always struck by the balancing act

required to fit your thoughts into twenty-five pages. Some of the balancing has to do with the role of theory and the role of close reading and the negotiation between them. How would you recommend that authors balance theory and close reading?

Richard Terdiman: It's hard to believe that there would be resistance to somebody's making a theoretical point in an essay, even in *PMLA*, which for a long time was relatively resistant to theory, but that was long ago. But I think that what we have learned to do, or what we're learning to do—certainly what I tried to do and what I try to teach my students to do—is to not have the theory stick out like the proverbial sore thumb. For example, close reading is a theory. I do close readings. But you don't have to give the entire history of the kind of reading that you're doing and explain its presuppositions for the reading to be effective. Maybe the reading would be more interesting if you spoke a bit about where this method seems to work and why you're using it. You could do that. But in general theory works best today when it doesn't stick out, when it is somehow integrated into the kind of task that a particular essay is attempting to perform. And to be conscious of that, to foreground the device, to bare it in your conversation with your reader, to say, "I'm going to do this, and the reason is that I think this is going to be productive"—as when, in a lecture, first you tell them what you're going to tell them, then you tell them, and then you tell them what you told them—helps the reader see why you did what you did. That is the best one can say about where theory ought to be. It ought to be everywhere. We all ought to be conscious of what we are doing, but we don't have to bristle the way we used to.

Jahan Ramazani: In reading essays on twentieth-century poetry for *PMLA*, I often encounter one of two problems with regard to theory. I think a successful manuscript manages to navigate successfully between Scylla

and Charybdis. There's the Scylla of overtheorization, which Dick Terdiman was referring to, in which the essay is so preoccupied with methodological issues that they get in the way of an engagement with the question or the text or the cultural problem or the historical moment or whatever the subject might be. And then there's the Charybdis of undertheorization—namely, a lack of awareness of or an insufficient foregrounding of the presuppositions, of the underlying ideas, that guide the essay.

Reflecting on Marianne's question about the productive role that theory can play in guiding a journal essay, I found myself, as someone who works a lot on poetry, resorting to the silly poetic device of an acrostic. It's going to end up spelling RUDDER, because I think of theory as a guide, helping one navigate and set a direction. The RUDDER theory of theory in journal articles might go something like this:

Theory Relates—are you surprised that I began with *R*?—that is, relates the particular findings or insights of an essay to larger questions, concerns, debates in the field. Theory can play a helpful role in taking the particular and relating it to the general.

Next, *theory Uncovers*—that is, it can play a role in uncovering and clarifying the assumptions that animate a journal essay.

Theory Defines. It gives precision to the terms of an essay's argument.

Theory Delineates. (I had to come up with another *D*.) It marks out the boundaries of an essay's literary-cultural exploration.

Theory Exemplifies—that is, it generalizes an essay's method as a strategy that someone else might want to adopt.

And, finally, *theory Recognizes*. It enables both reader and writer to recognize the writer's underlying position in relation to the material and clarify what's at stake.

Forgive my stretching to get that second *D* in there, so that the RUDDER theory of literary theory in journal essays wouldn't become the RUDER theory. But, for what it's worth,

that's in a nutshell my sense of what theory can do at its best in guiding a journal essay.

Lucy McDiarmid: First of all, I should say I'm really glad to hear so much common sense and so much whimsy on this panel. Faced with the question, "What is the role of close reading?" I thought, Well, you use what you need. I couldn't figure out what to say, particularly because grand statements seemed to be required, and I didn't have any grand statements. So that's why I'm glad to hear acrostics and silly things like that, because they can be useful.

How can you say what's the role of close reading? You have to say what it is in the profession as a whole right now. And that's too big a question for me to answer, so I will give some mini answers. Certainly, close reading is fundamental to everything we do. It's fundamental to theory, isn't it? You have to read a text. No other methodology is so important: they all presume and depend on it. But to say that close reading is fundamental doesn't mean that it's sufficient, or that it's a religion, or that any theoretical perspective is a religion. Looking at words carefully is what we do. It's hard to imagine any scholarship in modern languages that doesn't do this. When scholarship doesn't, I think it's not as good or as clear as it could be.

I was of the generation brought up to think that close reading was what people in English did, that the texts were frozen in time, and that if you knew how to read Donne and Wallace Stevens very well, you were set for life. And that's as good as anything else, I think, for getting you started.

But let me point out how I deviated from that recently. And pardon me for using my own scholarship as an example, but it's what I know best, and I have a very good quotation here, from Yeats. In the January *PMLA*, the issue on poetry, I published an essay about the "peacock dinner" given in 1914, where a lot of poets put poems inside a marble box and

presented it to Wilfrid Blunt. That seemed the perfect opportunity to do close readings of all of the poems in the box, as a sort of mirror: "this is what poetry in 1914 was like." But actually that didn't interest me as much as the letters written before the dinner. I felt it wasn't the time for close readings of the poems. The cultural politics of creating the dinner interested me more. So the techniques that I had learned for reading lyric poetry stood me in good stead for looking at Yeats's letter. I'll put on the table here one text that I quoted in my essay. This is Yeats writing Lady Gregory about preparing for the dinner of poets for Wilfrid Blunt. He says:

I can do nothing about the press. Pound says "tell Lady Gregory we hate the newspaper press as Blunt hates the British Empire[.]" I spoke of a 'photographer[.]' [H]e made contemptuous allusions to Ducal shooting parties, which are photographed for the American press. . . . I preserved our dignity by saying we had mechanically suggested what is usual in case of plays. Ferocious Youth [that's Yeats referring to Pound] does however agree to my sending a report to 'the Times' as this leaves 'a record for posterity[.]'

Well, this letter seemed to me full of rich and suggestive phrases that merited more attention than the poems in the box, because I thought the questions it raised were important for cultural history. What does Pound think is the connection between the "newspaper press" and the British Empire? Why does he think that this dinner of poets might be like a ducal shooting party? Why does he object so much to a photograph of the dinner? Who would be the audience for the photograph? Who is the "posterity" that would read a verbal record in the *Times* but wouldn't need to see a picture? And why does Yeats call Pound a "Ferocious Youth"? And so on. I'm just saying what is probably obvious to everyone in the room, that the techniques of close reading are useful for other methodologies, such as cultural his-

tory, which I think can't exist without them. Close reading is really just a form of careful attention that everything we study deserves.

Jahan Ramazani: I'll come back in just a moment to say something about the essay Lucy was describing, but let me start by saying that I leaped at the opportunity that Marianne offered to talk about both the theory question and the close-reading question because for a long time it seemed as if either you were in the theory camp or you were in the close-reading camp. You identified one way or the other. But I think one of the fortunate trends in recent years in journal publishing has been an erosion or breaking down of that divide. Like Lucy, as a three- or maybe even four-time offender writing for *PMLA*, I found myself in each piece trying in different ways to do both things—to bring together the work of close reading and the work of theorizing. As I train my graduate students, I try to show them that one doesn't have to choose between the two. Even in the syllabus for my most recent graduate seminar in cross-cultural and postcolonial poetics, I say a strong paper will likely function at both the micro and macro levels, addressing some aspect of a question or debate or theoretical problem or conundrum and at the same time closely exploring specific aspects of specific poetic texts. Perhaps that kind of balance can be a useful way of thinking of the project of writing a journal essay.

I want to say two more things about close reading. Although we don't expect analytic essays for *PMLA* to deliver exactly the same rewards as poetry or fiction or drama, it's not entirely the mimetic fallacy to hope that journal essays will make the qualities we value most in literature stand out, highlighting them and refreshing our sense of them. Since I deal with poetry, I hope an essay will renew my awareness of poem as text, as literally a woven thing, with multiple and sometimes contending, overlapping, competing discourses, forms, techniques, and ideologies. After read-

ing a manuscript, I sometimes ask myself if I have a keener awareness of key qualities such as the poem's imaginative daring, figurative reach, verbal dexterity, historical engagement, and psychological complexity. It doesn't have to do all those things, but it ought to do at least some of them.

Another of my relationships with *PMLA* over the last few years has been as a judge for the William Riley Parker Prize, so the third point I'd make is just that reading all the published pieces in *PMLA* for the prize, I'm happy to say that I thought many of the best essays—whether historically or textually or ideologically focused—continued to exemplify the uses and rewards of close reading. And here I wanted to mention, even before Lucy did herself, her splendid essay “A Box for Wilfrid Blunt” as exemplary in this regard—its tight focus on one literary moment that illuminates larger questions of reception, history, and poetic self-representation. Closely reading, as she did just now, the correspondence, photography, journalism, and archival materials surrounding that moment, she offers a deft, even seamless, interweaving of biographical, literary, and political strands of analysis.

I leave you with one other example from the pages of *PMLA*—a recent essay that is exemplary in its fusion of close reading and theory. I was fortunate enough to be a reader of Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb's “Two Versions of Voltaire: W. H. Auden and the Dialectic of Enlightenment,” which seemed to me an authoritative and rigorous philosophical and theoretical analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno and at the same time an equally unfaltering literary-critical analysis—a brilliant reading of Auden's poetry, exploring the lines of tension that run through the poetry and ultimately split it apart. That essay and many of the best essays I've read over the years in *PMLA* exemplify both conceptual deftness and scrupulous close reading, both analytic power and a kind of subtlety that comes through close reading and analysis.

María Herrera-Sobek: Two of the major sins that I noticed as an Editorial Board member, when I was reading and evaluating the different essays submitted to us, were that they were overly theoretical and overly descriptive. Some authors had so much theory that by the twenty-third page they still had not begun to discuss the essay's central thesis. Therefore, they only had a few more pages left to expound on the main subject of their article—the novel or poem they wanted to discuss and the original contribution they wanted to make to it. Being overly descriptive is particularly an issue for scholars writing about a text that is not well known since they feel compelled to provide background on the novel or poem being examined. There's a difference between doing a close reading and describing: describing entails recounting the plot. Giving straight plot summaries is one of the things that we instruct our students not to do. Nevertheless, believe it or not, we still get plenty of long plot summaries, even at the *PMLA* level. Discussing literary texts from underrepresented groups of writers is a problem since the author may feel the prospective readers are not familiar with the texts. So for minority literatures you really have to navigate a fine line between being overly descriptive and providing the reader with too little information to understand your analysis of the text and the point you are trying to make. This is indeed difficult to do. But being overly descriptive is not limited to the analysis of minority literatures; I found it throughout the essays submitted in all literary fields.

Richard Terdiman: It's occurred to me, after working with some natural scientists and social scientists on the kind of process that they go through, that we don't work in collaboration very much. Our habit is to lock ourselves in our study and then send the result off to *PMLA*. I would like to suggest that there's a stage in between, the stage of close reading by the people who you know are go-

ing to be both your best critics and your best readers, which may be the same thing, before it goes out. It is very difficult for us to apply to our own work the lessons that we teach our students. Somebody else can help us do that.

Wai Chee Dimock: I'd also like to emphasize the importance of getting help from fields outside our own. Close reading is actually an exercise that demands that kind of collaboration. I'd challenge the distinction some of us make between the "narrowness" of close reading and the "breadth" of historical analysis. There shouldn't be a binary opposition between these two if we take seriously Raymond Williams's claim in *Keywords* that words are the best indexes to the past, that to look at one word is to look at an entire way of life, an entire layer of history. Just to give one example, in the Divinity School Address, Emerson talks about the "historical Jesus." This phrase might not seem especially striking to us. But the word *historical* had explosive resonances in the nineteenth century: it was a word marked by its association with the German higher criticism, a historical scholarship brought to bear on the Bible and putting more and more pressure on the Gospels as humanly authored. To do a good close reading of this word, I need the help of people who know about theology, know about biblical scholarship, and can talk about Michaelis, Eichhorn, and Griesbach as well as the importance of this German-speaking world to Emerson's brother and teachers—William Emerson, George Ticknor, Edward Everett—all of whom studied at Göttingen. Close reading is never closed: it opens up a historical horizon, including the horizon of foreign languages, and brings home to us the limits of our knowledge and our unfailing dependence on others.

What, in your experience, is the role of anonymity in the PMLA review process?

Lucy McDiarmid: I can't say strongly enough how important anonymity is, because so often, I'm sure, all of us read things, and

we think, "Would that have been published if so-and-so hadn't written it?" And that's the great thing about anonymity. It's not your status in the world, or your age, or your professional standing, or whether you've written ten books, or what prizes you've won. It's just your words. That's certainly not the case when you submit a manuscript to publishers, where letters often come before it, spreading flowers in the way. This is just what you've said and nothing else. It could be by anybody, a chaired senior professor or an undergraduate. I want to encourage *PMLA* to continue that policy, because I think it's the fairest one.

María Herrera-Sobek: When I served on the Editorial Board, we were very surprised to see that many of the articles accepted were written by graduate students. On the other hand, we were shocked to see that some articles by major figures were declined. So it went both ways. We were always very pleased to see graduate students' papers getting accepted.

Jahan Ramazani: I started submitting to *PMLA* as a graduate student. I think part of the reason I became a repeat offender, frankly, was the anonymity. It's such a rigorous, strenuous process, but, at least for me, there were always suggestions for improving the argument or the writing or what have you. And I think that I went back for more because I found myself growing through that process. By the third time around, I also just wanted to see if I could still do it—go through the arduous labors, the rigors, of the process. I like knowing that nobody knows who you are—that they're responding just to the quality of your thinking.

Wai Chee Dimock: It's reassuring to me that readers' reports actually get judged as much as the articles. This is one way *PMLA* keeps the review process many-layered, allowing judgment calls to be made at different stages of the process, and providing different kinds of safety nets to make sure that good articles don't slip away.

Does the quality of the feedback from the readers' reports make it valuable for junior scholars to submit to PMLA, even if their essays are rejected?

Richard Terdiman: I've only seen some parts of the process and have not been on the Editorial Board, but I know that when I read essays for *PMLA*, I had the sense that my reading was being read too, so I was careful and thoughtful and always let it sit for a while after I had composed a first draft. I took these things very seriously, and when some of the essays that I reported on came out in the journal, I saw how they were improved in a small measure by what I said and no doubt by what other readers said. I don't think I know of another journal where an author, even one whose article is not accepted, gets so much valuable feedback. If the proportion of acceptances to submissions is about ten percent, you know when you send something to *PMLA* there's a good chance that it won't be published, but you're going to get very valuable feedback. And it seems to me that it's not a bad thing for somebody who's not tenured to do, even when it comes back and you send it to some other journal. It'll be a better article when it goes out again.

Jahan Ramazani: Not only do you get valuable feedback, but it's a quick turnaround. With other journals you sometimes wait for years. The amazing editorial staff keeps everything moving in such an efficient way, so that the piece doesn't have to wait for four years to get published. I sometimes suggest *PMLA* to brilliant, promising grad students, who are just learning how to do this kind of thing, if only because they will get their work read by serious professionals who will give them pointers on how to reshape the essay and on how to conceive their work in terms of the rigors of journal publishing.

Marianne DeKoven: I would add that people shouldn't think they have to write a *PMLA* essay with a kind of high seriousness.

I mean I think there's a sense that a *PMLA* article means that you are speaking from on high, you're laying down the law, to the profession. It can be whimsical; it can be daring and imaginative. We want to read interesting articles. We enjoy reading imaginative, engaged, well-written articles that feel passionately about their subject and are not just dry and careful; in fact, dry and careful is not what we're looking for, as I see it.

Marianne Hirsch: When you decide where to submit your work, I guess the way I always think about it is, What conversation do I want to be a part of? At *PMLA*, this is a very general conversation that is sure to generate response and be part of a lively dialogue with experts and general readers at the same time. Even if that dialogue is just between the author and the two or three readers evaluating the essay, it may well be a worthwhile and productive one.

Does PMLA monitor how often it publishes work on a certain author or text? So that if there has recently been an article on Portrait of the Artist, for example, one should not submit another for a few years?

Marianne Hirsch: No, that is never a factor. In fact, for the issue on cities, which is coming out next January, we've just accepted two essays on the same text. We loved both essays, and we realized that sometimes for a certain topic there is a kind of key text that will open up central and important issues. So do keep writing and send your work to *PMLA*.

I hope that, reading this, you can sense the keen interest and enthusiasm of our colleagues for the work submitted to the journal. I thank them for their dedication and contribution.

Marianne Hirsch