

Editor's Column: On the Way to the Forum

forum. . . . **1.** the marketplace or public square of an ancient Roman city, the center of judicial and business affairs and a place of assembly for the people. **2.** a court or tribunal: the forum of public opinion. **3.** an assembly, meeting place, television program, etc., for the discussion of questions of public interest. **4. the Forum**, the forum in the ancient city of Rome. [1425–75; late ME < L: marketplace, public place, akin to *forīs*, *forās* outside, *foris* DOOR]

—*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*
(2nd ed. unab.)

IN OCTOBER 1974 I HAD JUST BEGUN MY FIRST TEACHING JOB, at Dartmouth. My dissertation was not yet done: I was a teacher in the mornings and early afternoons and a graduate student in the evenings. I was hired on a one-year visiting instructorship and would soon have to apply for jobs again. It was a weekday afternoon, and I was in the department lounge, talking with my new colleagues over coffee, trying to find myself in this new role. When the mail was delivered, I took some comfort from the fact that my box contained the same large blue journal as everyone else's, partially wrapped in brown paper, my name and departmental address affixed on the mailing label. It was the October issue of *PMLA*, the first for me in my new position. I had not yet been to the annual meeting.

My reading of the journal so far had been that of an interested student who wanted to learn how one writes about literature. But this was the first issue since I had begun subscribing that contained an article close to my scholarly interests. In fact, it was devoted to one of my prelim topics, and I rushed to my office to read it at once, avidly, with a sense of personal investment and ownership. I had not heard of the author, a senior professor at a large university. The texts he discussed, his examples,

the methodology, the way of arguing were all familiar from the extensive preparation I had done just two years earlier, but the argument was more unsettling the more I read. He was conflating generic categories I had worked hard to distinguish from one another, and he used examples in ways that overturned the case I had made in my prelim essays. The more credible his argument became, the more urgent my need to respond.

I marvel now at the passion and energy I could devote to an interpretation of genre in the European novel—in the midst of a new job, an unfinished dissertation on a totally different topic, women's caucus meetings, and the beginnings of coeducation at Dartmouth, not to mention the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. I wonder especially at how I mustered the courage to write out the disagreements that emerged with pointed clarity on a second reading and to send them in a letter to *PMLA*'s Forum—a letter that was published the following year. Rereading my response now, I am surprised by the certainty I could rally and by the adamant, forceful, self-assured manner I was able to project. I knew enough about the conventions of scholarly disagreement to begin by expressing my admiration for the essay—I call it “provocative”—but in the second sentence I already “object” in no uncertain terms, proceeding to admonish the author on what “must” be distinguished, what “should” be considered in writings about these issues. I hesitated neither to discuss the article's “misapprehension,” “failure,” and “contradiction” nor to deem the argument “unpersuasive” and “confusing.”

What moved me to write the letter—my first publication and one I have long since put out of my mind (and probably would not have recalled had I not been given the occasion to reflect on my relation to this journal)? Why did I think that to respond to an article proximate to my interests, I had to assume a tone projecting unswerving certainty, so incongruous for my level of training and maturity?

“It takes time to get a feel for the roles that readers can be expected comfortably to play in

the modern academic world,” writes Walter J. Ong in “The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction,” published in the very next issue of *PMLA* (19), just as I was at work on my letter. Though I remember reading Ong at the time and have had occasion to return to his article many times since, I doubt I was self-conscious enough to reflect on my own role as a reader of critical articles, and obviously I did not take the “time” to “get a feel” for it. Ong writes, “[T]he roles of the reader of learned works until fairly recent times were regularly more polemic than those demanded of the reader today. . . . [A]cademic teaching of all subjects had been more or less polemic, dominated by the ubiquitous rhetorical culture, and proceeding typically by proposing and attacking theses in highly partisan fashion” (18–19). Although Ong maintains that the 1970s academic world contained less of the “fighting spirit” characterizing ancient and early modern debates and that academics now were more likely to “let [it] loose on the social order . . . than on their subject matter or colleagues” (19), I take the sharp and polemical tone of my fledgling writings as a measure of what I had learned (or imagined) to be appropriate for a reader and critic. On the one hand, I was surely responding to the authoritative and normative tone of the essay itself, a tone that is intensified in the author's detailed, if dismissive, response to my letter in the same Forum. I am accused of misreading and misunderstanding, of neglecting the refinements contained in the essay's footnotes, and of old-fashioned idealist assumptions about genre. Ong makes clear that reading is a transaction by which writers “fictionalize” their audiences, which in turn fictionalize themselves on the basis of the roles assigned to them by the writers. Did I ultimately feel hurt, discouraged, overly exposed by the response I received? No doubt. This forum of discussion (and judgment) was not, after all, an even playing field in the job market of the mid-1970s, and there was no place in which to say so.

On the other hand, it could have been that this very inequity—not just in academia but in

the larger political arena—was at the root of my tone and that I was displacing the political anger permeating that contentious historical moment onto the safer ground of genre studies. In the period of formalism and structuralism, I had certainly learned to split off my scholarly work from its social and political frame in ways that now, as I reread what I wrote, I find almost unimaginable.

I have had a great deal of opportunity in the decades since this exchange to reflect both on the ethics of critique—the vehemence and potential harm of much academic polemic—and on the often unspoken, even unconscious, ways in which the stakes of our scholarly work are inflected by the political situation in which we work. These decades, fortunately, have enabled alternative modes of dialogue and debate and alternative ways of entering the conversation.

My appearance in the *PMLA* Forum may not have engaged me in the most productive form of academic disagreement, but still, for me as a young scholar, the Forum did serve as a place to participate in academic discourse. It was—and remains—a public space open to the intervention of even the newest and least experienced members, a place where readers can become writers in their own right, where students in their twenties are as entitled to speak and as likely to be published as professors in their seventies. Here, in the journal of my scholarly organization, unlike in Richard Nixon's "social order," I could assert a voice and be heard.

The Forum has a long history in the pages of this journal. Beginning in 1927, a section called Comment and Criticism published readers' responses to articles, corrections by authors, and short scholarly contributions. In 1950 the MLA Executive Council authorized the editor to "introduce a section of Letters to the Editor, including scholarly notes and queries" ("Acts"). Soon thereafter the title Comment and Criticism was changed to Notes, Documents, and Critical Comment—an interesting shift from the possibility of separating "comment" from "criticism" to the conflation of the two in the form of "criti-

cal comment." That section continued until the early 1970s, but it was abolished shortly after a new feature, the Forum, was introduced in the following manner in the May 1970 issue of the *MLA Newsletter*:

Comment and Criticism in *PMLA*

At their meeting in March, the members of the *PMLA* Editorial Committee voted to do away with the elaborate procedure for controversy (including rejoinder, surrejoinder, etc., with none of the material published until all of it is in hand) and substitute for this a "Forum" section in which members could react at once to the articles in *PMLA*. . . . [T]he forum should make possible something more spontaneous than what we have had in the past.

The first such Forum appeared in the January 1971 issue. Comment and criticism, now again separate, as well as reaction and spontaneity, were meant to take the place of "elaborate procedures for controversy." The creation of the Forum was in itself the Editorial Board's direct and spontaneous response to the political ferment and controversy that characterized the spring of 1970, both in the academy and outside it.

Judging by a 1990 MLA membership survey, my letter to the Forum, like others, may have been read by more readers than the article that inspired it and than almost any other part of the journal except the table of contents (89% of the journal's regular readers, 75% of its occasional readers, and even 34% of those who never read the journal said they occasionally scan the Forum; consider, in comparison, that only 18% of the respondents said they regularly read the Editor's Column).¹ Why is that? I would like to think that it is not because our field thrives on controversy for its own sake but because the Forum offers something more than an insight into who at a given moment might be disagreeing with whom (though I certainly wouldn't deny that most of us like gossip). In fact, the initial installment of the Forum in 1971 resembles the Forum of today: if the section has remained

a site of immediate reaction, vigorous debate, and often constructive dialogue, it is also the place where the stakes of our ever-shifting disagreements and their full academic *and* ideological dimensions are most clearly exposed. Even if authors and reader respondents do not directly voice the assumptions undergirding their positions, the very genre of the letter to the editor elicits some clarity about those presuppositions. It is this clarity, I suggest, that draws us as readers to this section of the journal.

In the 1990s variations on the Forum were added to *PMLA*: comments (or brief articles) on topics of broad interest written and submitted either at the editor's request or in response to a call for comments, such as the series of invited replies to Julia Kristeva's interview about forgiveness (Mar. 2002). These changes reveal our current need to create a space for an exchange of views rather than for controversy and debate, even while maintaining the form of the brief, personal, clearly situated statement or the spontaneity of a roundtable discussion.

It is fortuitous and, indeed, fortunate for me that this special-topic section on Literatures at Large, in the first issue I have the task of introducing as editor, is an invited forum that powerfully illustrates this need. As is characteristic of the timetable of academic publishing, this feature was conceived by Martha Banta, two editors ago, and ably shepherded by my predecessor, Carlos Alonso. I am happy to inherit it, since it was intended precisely to lay bare the ways in which our teaching and scholarship, and our intellectual lives more generally, are situated in particular academic, cultural, geopolitical, and economic contexts. After the announcement of the special topics Globalizing Literary Studies and Mobile Citizens, Media States, *PMLA* solicited brief essays from some of "the academy's wandering scholars," those who teach literatures that do not reflect their birth culture and who have accumulated experience as scholars, critics, and teachers in universities all over the globe. Encouraged to write from their personal experience, contributors

have assumed engaging voices that offer keen insights not only into some of the questions that face the global academy but also into their personal engagement in issues of transnational and deterritorialized pedagogy and scholarship and in the power differentials that shape these issues.

In the first essay, Shu-mei Shih, writing from the perspective of a diasporic Third World scholar, critiques the "technologies of recognition" that have structured the notion of "global literary studies" in academic discourse and the literary market. These modes of recognition (e.g., the return of the systematic, the time lag of allegory, global multiculturalism, the exceptional particular, and postdifference ethics) continue the asymmetry between subject and object, the West and its others, thwarting the development of a global literary studies that would be self-conscious and critical of its own discourses. Paul Giles echoes Shih's suggested reorientation, challenging literary scholarship's idealization of exile and migration as forms of intellectual insight and empowerment. Giles relates his own "flight" from Margaret Thatcher's England, where he was trained, in order to undertake a pointed critique of the institution of "American literature" and its reliance on exceptionalism and territorial sovereignty. Using the example of Denise Levertov, Giles urges teachers to reimagine American literature in "English translation" and to teach it through a pedagogy of estrangement such as is used in foreign language instruction, a pedagogy that investigates the "awkward transitions between the local and the global." Raúl Antelo traces his own evolution from a student in Argentina who was trained in an agonistic mode of education to a professor in Texas who came to learn a more aleatory and reciprocal mode of learning. Inhabiting a hybrid space between the two allows him to practice a pedagogy of what, after Paul Valéry, he calls *interessere*—a form of knowledge that grants and lays bare its immediate, spontaneous, and very real stakes and consequences. A similar trajectory characterizes the

work of Beatriz González-Stephan, who recently relocated from Venezuela to Texas. Using her first impressions of Rice University as a case in point, she offers a sharp critique of the troubling politics of Hispanism in the United States academy, particularly in a part of the country where Spanish can hardly be classified as a foreign language. She finds that Latin American, Caribbean, US Latino, and Chicano studies are underrepresented, undervalued, and isolated in various parts of the curriculum in ways that disable their growth and intellectual impact.

Jeffrey Geiger, a United States expatriate teaching in England, reverses the trajectory of these first four scholars. His bicultural perspective allows him to compare the politics and economics of higher education in Britain and the United States, or, as he finds, the “Britamerican empire.” He wonders whether his frequent travel and his residency in both countries afford him a gateway to globality and transnational identity or whether the coimplication of United States and British interests and the corporate structures that ultimately determine the course of British educational reform, among other structures in the global academy, radically circumscribe the scope of what we might envision as the global. Ina Schabert also situates her contribution in Europe. She examines the curricular and scholarly inclusion of women’s and gender studies in English departments in German universities. Schabert finds that feminist methodologies, many of which are imported from Britain and the United States, are subject to strict ideological limits in German academic traditions. Yet, at the same time, these traditions enable relational modes of gender studies: both the study of relations between the sexes and a high degree of cooperation between female and male scholars. Writing from the perspective of an east-central European intellectual formed by the legacy of German and French cultural representation, Tibor Frank finds that today English, and specifically “supranational English,” is the lingua franca and a mediating force in Europe. Without denying fears of

American imperialism and globalization, Frank nevertheless offers the hopeful and controversial suggestion that the democratic outlooks and mentalities he finds in the English language itself might have the capacity of revolutionizing the transnational European community. In contrast, Takayuki Tatsumi’s pan-Pacific perspective offers a very different interpretation of the role of transnational English. Tatsumi lists the challenges of writing American literary history in the current globalist age, arguing that such a project would need to “deconstruct . . . the conventional logic of causality,” embrace anachronism, and historicize the enterprise of literary history. Only thus can multiple points of transpacific cultural contact emerge to unsettle any easy assumptions about the direction and effect of either American imperialism or the colonial project that created American literature in the first place.

Despite the differences in topic, approach, and geopolitical context that characterize their essays, each of the contributors to this special grouping encourages new deterritorialized perspectives on literary study—perspectives that also enable us to reimagine our practices of dialogue, controversy, and debate. The stakes that motivate their writings emerge with lucid force: in discussing global literary study from comparative, transnational vantage points, each finds, remarkably, the need to address the institutions of United States literary study, its enabling as well as its oppressive influences. These essays thus provide an opportunity to interrogate the place of *PMLA* itself in the context of literary studies “at large.”

The two additional features included in this issue, Mary Robinson’s “Present State of the Manners, Society, Etc. Etc. of the Metropolis of England,” published in 1800, and the first translation into English of Boris Tomashevsky’s 1928 “La nouvelle école d’histoire littéraire en Russie” (“The New School of Literary History in Russia”), contribute to this forum from different historical moments. As Adriana Craciun writes in her introduction, Robinson’s “manifesto of metropolitan culture” addresses turn-of-the-

nineteenth-century London as the “world’s leading republic of letters,” celebrating its democratic free press and its openness to international (in this case, French and German) influence. Importantly, Robinson’s cosmopolitanism includes women as shaping agents of public culture. Tomashevsky’s essay offers an overview and reconsideration of Russian formalism and the debates it initiated regarding the relation and, more radically, the separation of art and society.

In 1974, when I read *PMLA* as a comparatist and a member of a “foreign” language department, it provided an entry into the larger field of literary studies in the United States, a field dominated by English. If one was to read one journal, it was *the* journal to read. Since then, my work has taken a more interdisciplinary direction that has led me to journals in other fields (history, psychoanalysis, and visual culture), as well as to interdisciplinary journals in feminist and cultural studies. Some of these are published abroad, in English or in one of the other languages I am able to read. In this expanded disciplinary and cultural field, *PMLA* occupies a unique place for me and, I venture to say, for you as well: it is a *disciplinary* and a *nationally* based journal that nevertheless reflects the increasing *interdisciplinarity* and the *internationalization* of literary studies. Although *PMLA* articles cite work in numerous other disciplines, then, they are mostly written (and read) by literary scholars, members of the MLA, and thus they reflect what we as literary scholars share: our continued close attention to writing and to textual detail—whatever the texts we analyze. In his recent preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said describes this form of reading as a humanist philological understanding that is particularly important to “today’s globalized world” (xxiv). In the tradition of interpretation that comes to us from Vico, Goethe, and Auerbach, among others, and that Said wants to reclaim,

philology as applied to *Weltliteratur* involves a profound humanistic spirit deployed with gen-

erosity and, if I may use the word, hospitality. Thus the interpreter’s mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign Other. And this creative making of a place for works that are otherwise alien and distant is the most important facet of the interpreter’s philological mission. (xxv)

I would like to think that the term Said uses with some caution, “hospitality,” also describes the mission and practice of this journal. With its recent availability on the World Wide Web through libraries subscribing to *Ingenta* (for current issues) and *JSTOR* (for archived issues), *PMLA* promises to broaden further its international and surely also its interdisciplinary reach. Still, it emerges from a North American organization, and—in the context of a global landscape of literary study—it will have to reflect on what that means.

I hope to devote future forum conversations to this important and challenging issue. In fact, if I have featured the Forum in this, my first column as editor, and even gone so far as to interrogate the appearance of my earlier academic self there, it is because the Forum offers a “medium for an exchange of views” equally appropriate for our particular cross-cultural and interdisciplinary academic field, structured by deeply uneven and contested power relations, and for a moment when scholars and teachers in the United States can no longer afford to ignore the broader stakes of their scholarly and pedagogical work. As editor, I invite you to participate in these conversations by sending us your work and your responses to the work of others. I thereby invite you to share with other readers what is at stake for you in the work that you do in today’s academy.

After drafting this column, I learned of the deaths of Walter J. Ong and Edward W. Said, both of whom I had cited here, and of Carolyn G. Heilbrun, whom I had invited to write a guest column for the March issue. Walter J. Ong was president of the MLA in 1978, Carolyn G. Heilbrun in 1984, and Edward W. Said in 1999. Trib-

utes to Ong by Sara van den Berg and John T. Shawcross and to Said by Domna C. Stanton appear on pages 156–58 of this issue. The March issue of *PMLA* will include Heilbrun's guest column, along with several invited responses to it in the Forum.

Marianne Hirsch

NOTE

¹Stanton 185, 186n3. The membership survey, carried out at the MLA by Bettina Huber, also helps to explain the

interest that inspired the letter in the first place: members who did not yet have their PhD were more likely than other members to read the journal and to consider it highly or moderately relevant to their professional lives (Stanton 184).

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