

Editor's Column

THE DRAMATIS personae change, but the setting for our long-running drama remains the same: a windowless, airless conference room on the top floor of the Forbes Building in New York. Seven floors above the steady roar of lower Fifth Avenue, around a table covered with paper cups, manuscripts, and ashtrays, sit seven persons—from Berkeley, Boulder, and Cambridge; from Philadelphia, Stony Brook, and uptown Manhattan—who decide what will be published, not in *Forbes*, but in *PMLA*.

As we greet each other on the first morning and settle in, there is a sense of anticipation in the air as palpable as the cloud of cigar smoke already wreathing Larzer Ziff's head. Each of us has spent a good many hours with these essays, thinking about their qualities and recording our observations, and we are curious about our colleagues' views. We are also eager to persuade and, if not eager, at least willing to be persuaded. We have, too, a sense of sanctuary, knowing that for two days we will do something we especially like to do—talk about ideas and language and texts. During these days departmental politics and fiscal crises will yield to Michel Butor and Pushkin, to *The Years* and *La Princesse de Clèves*.

After a discussion of whatever policy issues are on the agenda—the revision of *PMLA*'s editorial statement, for example, or the question of a centennial issue—we turn to the essays, and the “seminar” proper begins. “Let's start with the paper on Hegel, Eliot, Woolf, et al.,” I say and then ask a colleague to lead off the discussion. We go around the table, each of us documenting the sources of our admiration or dissent (precious little dissent on this particular essay), taking as much time as necessary to give a full evaluation. As we progress, members support or refute what has already been said, the differences of opinion sometimes resulting in exchanges that are heated, and even impassioned, but almost always civil. After each of us has had a say we decide by an informal consensus whether to accept the essay and, if so, whether to request revision. When the decision on acceptance is negative, we make sure that we can provide some rationale; even though our contributors know that only a small percentage of the submissions discussed are chosen for publication, we try, wherever possible, to soften the inevitable disappointment by summarizing any potentially useful comments.

If an essay receives little or no support, the discussion, in the absence of disagreement, can be quite brief. A member who favors an otherwise unloved essay is generally hard put to convince the others that they should be more enthusiastic. Not uncommonly, however, an especially well-informed board member, by providing clinching evidence, persuades the rest of us that a seemingly strong paper is actually flawed. One major benefit of having seven members on the board is that collectively we have expertise on a wide variety of writers and genres in a number of languages. We listen with special care to those colleagues whose own work is pertinent to the paper at hand, whether the paper deals with Spanish poetry, German drama, or British fiction. We may not agree with the observations, but if we don't we should be able to provide compelling arguments of our own.

With most acceptances we recommend some revisions, either major or minor. Usually the author, even before the essay goes to the board, does some rewriting based on suggestions from the specialist reader and advisory committee member. The essay, thus, receives a series of fine tunings before getting to the copy-editing stage, where it undergoes final modulations. The piece that ultimately appears in print is, as a result, often quite different from the one originally submitted. Michael Harper's contribution to this issue serves as a case in point, but since his prose is unusually elegant, the revisions were largely substantive rather than stylistic. Before the paper reached the board Harper had made some changes suggested by the first reader (who, incidentally, said of the essay that “all Pound scholars will endorse the central thesis”) and the advisory committee member (who wrote, “thank God there is something worth publishing on modern poetry”). The board responded to the essay with unaccustomed enthusiasm. One member, however, had several specific recommendations for strengthening the final pages by getting rid of some ambiguities she had noted, and the rest of us, persuaded by her obser-

vations, made final acceptance dependent on successful revision. As the appearance of this fine essay makes clear, the revisions met with approval.

While all of us agreed that Harper writes enviable English, such unanimity about a contributor's language is rare. Some of the most passionate (and most entertaining) debates during our meetings center on whether a paragraph is readable (and, if not, whether it can be rescued by editing) and whether certain phrases are appropriate to a critic's argument or simply fashionable. If an otherwise sound essay has rough spots, we tend to be tolerant, knowing that they can be smoothed out through editing. Our real disagreements, amiable but frequently noisy, are not about syntax but about terminology. The board is, by design, an eclectic group, open to a wide range of methodologies and theoretical approaches, but some of us are considerably less patient than others with language that seems unnecessarily esoteric or alienating to potential readers. Like our debates over whether an essay brings any news and whether it deals with a sufficiently substantial subject, the discussions of language are both stimulating and instructive. In fact, I relish these lucid debates about opaque writing more than any other aspect of my work as editor.

At the conclusion of our marathon sessions, sometime around dusk, we generally join members of the MLA staff for a welcome libation, and our more strenuous disagreements are invariably forgotten in an atmosphere of relaxed conversation. It occurs to me at such times that on a lower floor of the building, another group may also have spent a long day putting a journal together. It also occurs to me to hope, for the sake of these good neighbors in the world of high finance, that the *Forbes* sessions are at least half as lively as those in *PMLA*'s smoke-filled room.

JOEL CONAROE



Editorial deliberations