

Editor's Column

A *forum*, one lexicographer tells us, was a public place or square in a city, where markets and popular assemblies were held and where justice was administered, or alternatively any judicial assembly or place for public meeting and speaking, by extension a tribunal or court. A more modern repository of words defines *forum* as an organization that holds public gatherings for the discussion of subjects of current interest or as a meeting held by such an organization and frequently in the form of a question period following a lecture. The last and climactic entry in this list of definitions is, simply, "a medium of open discussion."

PMLA has never sought to place its contributors on trial, though they gladly and voluntarily await judgment; and, in contrast to *Biological Abstracts*, which defines itself as "a forum in which controversial issues can be discussed," *PMLA* finds that most of the discussions and controversies around it take place behind its back. For the past sixteen years, however, its back has harbored a direct opportunity for commentary and debate in the section entitled Forum.

The birth of the Forum in the January 1971 issue accompanied *PMLA*'s last change in packaging. The May 1970 *Newsletter* had carried the announcement that this new feature would provide more expeditious publication of opinions and responses than the long-standing Notes, Documents, and Critical Comment column had (that section disappeared after January 1974). Whatever the practical considerations, there is no doubt that the Forum, like the *Newsletter* itself, grew out of the turmoil of the late sixties, both outside and within the association, and that it reflected the moment's general mood, needs, and demands. The questioning of authority and of monistic solutions, the pressure to democratize institutions, including professional bodies like ours, the insistence on maintaining dialogue and on the heeding of minority voices helped to produce the Forum.

By the end of last year, 266 letters had appeared in the Forum, along with 172 rejoinders by authors of articles that had incited comments. (The column appeared in all but five of the blue issues.) The initial call generated 19 letters in the first year, a number that rose to 24 in 1973 before leveling out to the average of approximately 16 per volume. The Forum's banner year was 1979, with 26 letters and 16 ripostes. Since then, a smaller but steady stream of letters has reached the editor's box. A professional study of the statistics might uncover telling correlations between these figures and the evolution of our historical profile and commitments from one decade to another. Certainly, the subject matter of the articles and changes in editorial policy, along with the reduced number of essays per issue, affect the flow of Forum contributions. Why one essay will stimulate a response and another will not has many possible explanations; but it is instructive to note that of the five articles that elicited the largest number of responses (four each), all but one (on *The Canterbury Tales*) dealt with general topics. Four of the presidential addresses in this period had tangible repercussions in the Forum, as did William Schaefer's plaintive valedictory column.

Debate in the Forum in the early seventies centered on the place that literary studies properly occupy in an academic environment astir with a new ideological consciousness. While one member protests against the discussion of the association's internal political affairs in its scholarly organ, others position themselves fiercely around the tensions between the social constitution and the autonomous status of literature or between historicism and formalism. Two correspondents on the same side of the fence fire their salvo in disparate fashion: one applauds the political content of *PMLA* articles; the other calls Henry James to task for privileging the aesthetic in literature. A long and acrimonious debate with Louis Kampf questions and affirms literature's redemptive and reformative powers. More than a dozen years later, in March 1985, the literature-versus-ideology polarity remains intact.

Beyond politics on the one hand and scholarship on the other, the Forum has broached many topics: the viability of liberal humanism, the bearing of scientific method on literary discourse, the nature of critical commentary, the function of literature in the academy, the value of statistical data in literary study, the balance between theory and textual criticism, the relation between literature and psychoanalysis, the strains between the creative writer and the critical imagination, the use of critical jargon, the merits of the feminist bond, the concept of "Romania." The Forum has been a platform for the expression of many of our deepest concerns.

One funny thing that happened to me on my way through the Forum is that I gained an education in the styles of forum debate. At times, of course, responses to printed articles spring not from disagreements but rather from the impulse to expand on the original piece with additional information or suggestions for further applications of a method. When discrepancy splits the parties, Forum contributors unfurl all available forensic ploys (How, for example, could they dispense with the ubiquitous rhetorical question?), and their missives, worthy of textual analysis in themselves, purvey sheer joy—at least

to third parties. The art of the author's rejoinder is also fully developed in *PMLA*. The sage who advised us to forbear dispute and practice love as angels do above had not perused these pages of our journal down below.

My point in highlighting the Forum is to encourage your contributions. The Forum is as significant an outlet for the exchange of ideas today as it was at its inception. Over the years, at editorial urging, the letters have shrunk in size, and footnotes have been discouraged (though they have not expired easily). Letters have been as short as six lines although many reach the maximum limit, now set at one thousand words: subject and impulse should guide the length of the statement. When a letter discusses a *PMLA* essay, the author is invited to respond and usually seizes that opportunity. The comment and the response appear together within two or three issues after publication of the original article, so that the debates are timely. (An exception is a letter in the January 1985 number that added information to an essay published in March 1959, to which the author replied with expressions of admiration for the long shelf life of *PMLA* articles.) Horace reminds us that scholars' disputes do not necessarily remove cases from the courts, but the ensuing dialogue almost always—as in the present issue—enriches and enlivens the experience of the original contribution.

The articles in this number of *PMLA* all offer food for thought and response: Sandy Petrey's provocative reconsideration of *S/Z* and of realism in the light of speech-act theory; A. R. C. Finch's daring combination of metrical, formal, and feminist considerations in her study of Dickinson; Jackson I. Cope's illuminating examination of Gianlorenzo Bernini and of a commedia dell'arte offshoot; and James W. Earl's sprightly revelation of an Old English poem's hitherto unknown secrets. Our pairing of Jules David Law's project on politics and language in Joyce's *Ulysses* with Margot Norris's reading of a *Dubliners* story sets the two essays into potential dialogue. Naturally, we also invite your responses to Julia Kristeva's article and even to the editor's column, if you are so moved.

I draw your attention, however, to the policy statement that heads the Forum section: "Members of the association are invited to submit letters . . . commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest." I emphasize the last phrase in order to dispel some members' erroneous impression that Forum submissions must address a previously published article. They are welcome to do so, of course, but the Forum was conceived from the start, and we continue to regard it, as the marketplace for the exchange of our concerns. I interpret "matters of general scholarly or critical interest" in the widest possible terms, and I cannot divorce the state of the academy or our professional well-being from our interests as scholars and critics. Letters in the past, particularly in the seventies, sometimes used articles as springboards for the discussion of broader matters or, at other times, made direct thrusts at the nature and the values of our enterprise. Despite the passing of a decade and a half, I can echo the sentiments that Lawrence Poston III expressed in an October 1971 Forum letter: "I should be very disappointed if *PMLA* ceased to reflect what may indeed be regarded as some rather uncomfortable professional realities, and to offer a variety of points of view upon them."

Uncomfortable or exhilarating, such realities still beset us. The recent exchange (March 1986) on "woman's place" in the profession that Carolyn Heilbrun's presidential address sparked proved that Forum letters do not resolve an issue, but they do well to air it. The doors have not been closed on that particular disagreement. The editorial board's heated debate about Edward Pechter's forthcoming article on the new historicism and about Tania Modleski's feminist reading of a Hitchcock film was a preview of the reverberations that such inquiries might produce. Many other unresolved questions engage our attention: the continuing methodological jousts between left and right, the function of periodization, the politics of our critical jargon, the status of neglected disciplines, our roles as teachers and as institutional figures. Whether you wish to comment on an article or on an earlier letter or on matters such as these and others, the Forum welcomes your opinions. We also welcome your thoughts about the contents and policies of our journal. What you tell your colleague or a trusted friend about *PMLA* you might consider sharing with the general readership in the Forum.

In the earlier days of the Forum, its instructions admonished that "the usual rules regarding courtesy and avoidance of personalities will be enforced." Even so, one author found cause to complain that a respondent had argued against him with vehemence and an insulting tone. The deletion of a stated code of Forum decorum has not turned *PMLA* into a scene of intellectual carnage, and the exchanges, if sometimes testy, have not breached the bounds of collegiality. Carlyle could not have had future MLA members in mind when he described the forum as an angry, noisy place into which individuals descended (his word!) with arguments that could not but exasperate and divide. More pertinent to *PMLA* is the James Thomson poem that the *OED* quotes: "Foes in the forum in the field were friends."

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