# Editor's Column

SINCE ITS new editorial policy was announced in March of 1973, *PMLA* has been receiving approximately six hundred submissions annually. The selection process is somewhat cumbersome, but, I think, effective. Here is how it works.

When an article is received at MLA Headquarters we check to see that the author is a member of the Association, that the manuscript has been prepared in accordance with the *MLA Style Sheet*, that the length is appropriate, and that an abstract has been included. If all is well, the author is informed that the manuscript has been received and that we hope to have a report within sixty days. I then scan the article to assign a specialist reader, an MLA member who, based on current bibliographies, the *Directory of American Scholars*, and our own files of past performance, seems qualified to give that particular article a sympathetic and informed reading; we try to call on as many MLA members as possible for these specialist readings, and thus each year more than 400 members share in the selection process for *PMLA*. This "first reader" is requested to forward the article along with a detailed report within thirty days to the appropriate member of the *PMLA* Advisory Committee.

Since the articles they receive have already had one close reading, members of the Advisory Committee, some of whom read as many as fifty articles each year, submit reports that are relatively brief, especially if there is agreement between the two readers. When an article is returned to me from an Advisory Committee member, I read both reports and, if the readers have agreed that the article is not suitable for *PMLA*, I return it to the author with the reports. If the specialist and Advisory Committee member disagree in their recommendations, I turn to a third reader as referee, but in the happy event that both readers strongly recommend publication, I inform the author that the article has been reported on favorably and that it is to be sent to the Editorial Board for further consideration. It is at this point that the process becomes most interesting.

Members of the Editorial Board (we are seven) meet at MLA Headquarters every three months. Prior to each meeting, photocopies of articles recommended since our last meeting are sent to the members so that by the time we sit down at the conference table all of us have read and taken notes on the material under consideration. In each case the Board attempts to answer the question, "is this article truly of such significance as to justify bringing it to the attention of *PMLA*'s 30,000 readers," a question to which, in four out of ten cases, the answer is a reluctant "no." Reluctant, of course, because when an article is recommended to the Board it obviously has considerable merit (fewer than 10% of all articles submitted to *PMLA* are so recommended), and the Board does not, in any case, consider itself to be a high tribunal come to bury or praise. What we are trying to do is select articles, regardless of their subject matter or of our own specialized interests, that we believe would be of interest to, and would be read with profit by, the large and diverse body of readers that constitute the MLA membership. Thus the discussion, which on a single article can occupy a full hour before consensus is reached, might best be described as an extended dialogue, seven characters in search of a significant article. Perhaps the main point is that, after a minimum of nine separate readings, whether finally accepted or rejected, an article has not been taken lightly. Undoubtedly, some articles that would have been accepted under the old editorial policy and before creation of the Board are now excluded, but I think it is also true that other articles lost to *PMLA* in past years are now being accepted. Only time—perhaps two or three years—will tell whether the system really works, but I suspect that few scholarly journals have ever involved so many members of the profession in the selection process, or have taken it all quite as seriously as we are attempting to do. Whatever the outcome, it is, I think, an experiment worth watching.

I also hope that it results in a periodical worth reading. As a case in point, this particular issue begins with Jeff Opland's description of the Xhosa tribal poet (which fascinated the Editorial Board) and concludes with Liane Norman's analysis of "Risk and Redundancy" ("one of the most important papers on literary theory I have come across," reported the specialist reader, who went on to add that he felt like an idiot for not thinking of the idea himself). Between Opland and Norman there are seven articles treating a wide range of subjects. Hugh Richmond's essay explores historical psychology from the Renaissance to the Reformation ("a seminal work," reported the specialist reader, "genuinely meeting the demanding criteria of the new policy"); Paul Jorgensen provides

new insight into Elizabethan views of God, Fortune, and war ("historical scholarship that transcends the situation," said one member of the Board); and Aubrey Williams, in his treatment of playwright versus priest, examines problems of censorship that in some ways are as central today as they were in 1698. Clifton Cherpack reevaluates *Paul et Virginie* ("at a time when the Marquis de Sade receives all the plaudits, it is no mean accomplishment to rehabilitate *Paul et Virginie*"), and Robert Lougy gives a similarly provocative reading of *Vanity Fair* as he looks into the warped looking glass, the vision that doesn't lend itself to satire. Robert Bozanich has gone to Ecclesiastes to discover convincing sources for some of Donne's most famous poems and has written an article which, according to the specialist reader, will influence nearly all future readings of the *Anniversaries*. Finally, David Murtaugh's essay on Dante "gives us one of the first attempts in print to account for the poetics, as opposed to the content," of the *Paradiso*.

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