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## Editor's Column

# What Is Literature?—1994

“**I** FIND THIS ESSAY publishable after revision, but I would hesitate to recommend it to . . . *PMLA* because of the essay’s primarily historical and sociological orientation.” So concludes a recent reader’s report, basing its negative decision on a reason that recurs in another evaluation: “I do not recommend the publication of this article, largely because . . . *PMLA* is ‘concerned with the study of language and literature.’ The text upon which this article is based is not literary but cultural.” Now, these readers are responding to *PMLA*’s editorial policy, which states that the journal “welcomes essays of interest to those concerned with the study of language and literature,” a phrase that appears in earlier versions of the policy as well. But what is the meaning of *literature* in 1994; what does it subsume in a world of hypertexts and incipient virtual realities? Does the term connote, as reputedly it did 50 or 150 years ago, a set of “high cultural” texts with certain distinct aesthetic, poetic, or self-reflexive features of *literarity*? Or isn’t the notion that there ever was a consensual definition of what distinguishes the literary from the nonliterary a constitutive myth of literature, and haven’t the meanings of literature and its boundaries been contested and negotiated since the concept gained legitimacy and cultural capital?<sup>1</sup> In this light, isn’t *literature* today, for some readers at least, capacious enough to include any text that can be studied from a historical or sociological perspective? After all, the term is used, or so says the second edition of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, to mean both “the entire body of writings of a specific language, period, people, etc.” and “the writings dealing with a particular subject,” such as “ornithology” (s.v. “literature”). Shouldn’t that expansive sense inform the selection process of a journal whose editorial policy underscores receptiveness to “all scholarly methods and theoretical perspectives”? Or in view of the salient interests of the members of the association, as manifested in the programs of recent annual conventions, should *PMLA*’s editorial policy be revised so that “culture” is included, as in the phrase “language, literature, and culture,” so that “texts” sub-

stitutes for “literature,” however untrippingly “language and texts” comes off the tongue, or, even more radically, so that all those terms are replaced by the broader expression “discourses” or “discursive practices”?

These questions, which the hesitations and ambivalences of recent readers' reports have generated in this editorial I, are symptomatic of what has been considered a crisis in literary studies. The crisis, whose root, according to Terry Eagleton, lies “in the definition of the subject itself” (214), would seem to have emerged between 1950 and 1980. It was during this period that Roland Barthes, for instance, in *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953), analyzed the changing conceptions of literature from the classical to the modern, thereby demystifying the principle that literary values were universal, and some years later proffered a purely institutional definition: “literature . . . is what is taught. That's it. It is only an object of teaching” ‘la littérature . . . c'est ce qui s'enseigne, un point c'est tout. C'est un objet d'enseignement’ (170; my trans.). It was also Barthes who privileged “the text” over “the literary work,” in *S/Z* (1970) and most especially in *Le plaisir du texte* (1973), after having valorized the analysis of contemporary popular myths (*Mythologies*, 1957) and of fashion (*Système de la mode*, 1967).<sup>2</sup> On this side of the Atlantic, of course, dissatisfaction with the disciplinary divisions and exclusions of knowledge led to the development of women's and black studies in the 1960s and, more recently, in their wake, postcolonial studies. In fact, in England the theory and practice of cultural studies, a field committed to understanding cultural change and to combating the forces of exclusion, as Stuart Hall writes, was perceived in the mid-1950s as a response to “a crisis in the humanities” (11).<sup>3</sup>

That this “crisis” has promoted a decisive permeability in disciplinary boundaries may also help to account for the current efforts in departments of language and literature in the United States to integrate the study of culture in their undergraduate and graduate offerings and often to shift to an interdisciplinary curriculum that includes history and sociology, political science and popular culture (under a rubric such as “French studies,” for example).<sup>4</sup> Beyond the “linguistic turn” in the social sciences, which has profoundly disturbed the epistemology and practice of history and anthropology most notably, there has been a more recent *cultural* turn in “the human sciences.” Lynn Hunt traces the new turn toward culture among social, Marxist, and *Annales* historians not only to their interest in language and in literary theory but also to the influence of Michel Foucault's discursive studies of the technologies of power and, above all, to the importance of anthropological models, particularly in the work of Clifford Geertz (4–13).<sup>5</sup>

Of course, like *literature*, *culture* has had different meanings at different times. Raymond Williams distinguishes two principal definitions, which devolve from earlier convergences of interests: first, an idealist emphasis on “the ‘*informing spirit*’ of a whole way of life, which is manifest over the whole range of social activities but is most evident

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in 'specifically cultural' activities—a language, styles of art, kinds of intellectual work" and, second, a materialist "emphasis on 'a whole social order' within which a specifiable culture, in styles of art and kinds of intellectual work, is seen as the direct or indirect product of an order primarily constituted by other social activities." For Williams, a "new kind of convergence" between these two positions emphasizes the whole social order while regarding cultural practices as major elements in the constitution of that order and making culture "the *signifying system* through which . . . a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored." In this scheme, the category of artistic and intellectual activities is broadened to include "all the 'signifying practices'—from language through the arts and philosophy to journalism, fashion and advertising . . ." (*Sociology* 13).

Williams's definition of culture, which had a fundamental influence on the conception of cultural studies evolved in England, differs from the meanings embedded in various types of literary studies of culture in the United States over the past fifty years. For Gerald Graff, the history of that tradition should include the first generation of New Critics, whom he casts as "engaged critics of culture" working during the international political crisis between the two world wars (67–72; see also Dickstein). In one of the latest manifestations of that tradition, new historicists trying to renegotiate anew the problematic relation between texts and history in the wake of poststructuralism have examined the circulation of discourses in cultures and indeed, according to Stephen Greenblatt at least, have essentially aimed to explore "the poetics of culture" (6).<sup>6</sup> Whatever specific understandings of poetics and of culture Greenblatt's phrase may contain, it seems to strive to conjoin the poetic and the historical, sociological, or anthropological—an expansive, inclusive project that Graff finds in Williams himself. Cultural studies, Graff writes, citing Williams's "Beyond Specialization," includes "the works which have been the normal material of literary courses, but it offers to read them in relation to a much wider cultural history and in conscious collaboration with elements of linguistics and sociology"—an interdisciplinary matrix that Graff would enlarge to include "philosophy, anthropology, economics, the other arts and the history of science and technology." Graff's belief that this "more inclusive model" provides room in which "conservatives, liberals, apoliticals and others besides Marxists like Williams [can] . . . work—while still retaining enough definition to avoid being simply a catchall" has a utopian appeal (80). But it also signals a danger for future studies of culture, a danger that Hall phrases laconically when he observes that in the United States "'cultural studies' has become an umbrella for just about anything" (22).

Whether cultural studies or literary studies of culture in the United States will melt the significant differences among its practitioners down in a full but essentially unaltered critical pot is difficult to predict. It is clear, however, that in various forms and degrees cultural, historical, and popular studies are shifting the scholarly and curricular concerns of

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some teachers of literature and that *PMLA*, the journal of an association of such teachers, will inevitably reflect those concerns. Indeed, a number of *PMLA* articles over the past decade have involved not "high" literary texts but more popular works, such as a western novel (Lee Clark Mitchell, "'When You Call Me That . . .': Tall Talk and Male Hegemony in *The Virginian*," 1987), a Gothic tale (John Allen Stevenson, "A Vampire in the Mirror: The Sexuality of *Dracula*," 1988), and a detective novel (Carl Freedman and Christopher Kendrick, "Forms of Labor in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*," 1991). Even more numerous have been essays that treat visual texts, notably films, such as Tania Modleski's 1987 analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail*, the contributions in the 1991 special topic on cinema, coordinated by Teresa de Lauretis, and Alan Nadel's work on *The Ten Commandments* as cold war "epic," which won the William Riley Parker Prize for the best essay published in *PMLA* in 1993. Other pieces featuring the visual arts and media are William E. Holladay and Stephen Watt's 1989 study of a recent play and film about "the elephant man," a Victorian sideshow figure; Mark Franko's 1992 article both on a Japanese performance piece and on an essay by Jean Cocteau about a performer; Barbara Hodgdon's 1992 analysis of film and television adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew*; and Susan Schibanoff's 1994 reading of a Botticelli painting. Perhaps most clearly engaged in cultural studies are Susan J. Leonardi's 1989 anatomy of social meanings in narratives of cooking recipes and Frances E. Dolan's 1993 inquiry into tracts and pamphlets that proliferated during the early modern controversy over women's use of cosmetics. Historical and sociological studies, such as Anne Trygstad's 1985 analysis of an eleventh-century runic inscription on the Järsta stone, have been far less frequent. One of the referees I cited at the outset is not wrong in saying, "I have scanned recent issues of the journal and, in spite of the increased emphasis at conferences on cultural studies, I do not see articles on cultural studies alone devoted to the mainstream cultures."

In the face of this lack, *PMLA* can signal receptiveness to work in cultural studies, starting with this Editor's Column. Recently the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board discussed what more should be done. Some members have expressed the view that consultant readers who are not receptive to cultural approaches should, like any reader out of sympathy with a submission, recuse themselves from evaluating manuscripts using those approaches. Others have argued for adding a specialist in cultural studies to the Advisory Committee, though still others believe that this step would marginalize an approach or method that is relevant to all divisions in the association. Above all, these discussions have centered on the journal's editorial policy and on the desirability of altering the phrase "language and literature." Predictably, here too there are distinct differences of view. Whereas some members want to add "culture," thus stipulating "language, literature, and culture" in the policy statement, others feel that the addition would do

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a disservice to literature, which can and should be construed broadly enough to include culture. Indeed, given a choice between expanding the idea of literature and implicitly narrowing it by making culture a separate category, the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board decided, for the moment at least, not to recommend any changes in the present policy.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, we want to encourage the most inclusive understanding of literature and to invite submissions of cultural, historical, and popular studies. So doing, we reaffirm both continuity and change, which literature has always manifested.<sup>8</sup>

Even more important than such editorial signals is the announcement on page 358 of this issue of the special topic The Teaching of Literature. Beyond the single question of “cultural studies in relation to literature,” which is one of many suggested subtopics, the special topic provides a forum for debating what is literature half a century after Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*; for historicizing and pluralizing the concept of literature; for grappling with the complexities of teaching; and for continuing to cultivate this slippery and porous field in a postmodern, multicultural, technologized, globalized world.<sup>9</sup>

This issue of *PMLA* bears witness to the blend of continuity and change that has marked the journal’s history.<sup>10</sup> It begins with a brief and moving text by Julia Kristeva that is both a tribute to Yury Lotman, the Tartu-based semiotician and MLA honorary member, who died in 1993, and an introduction to his work, including his definition of the text as a “reduced model of culture” immersed in history and society and in dialogue with preceding and contemporaneous discourses. Lotman’s multilayered discussion “The Text within the Text,” which enjoys its first publication in English in Jerry Leo and Amy Mandelker’s able translation, prefaces Mandelker’s study of Lotman’s work in the 1980s and his conception of the semiosphere, which he molded from Mikhail Bakhtin and Vladimir Vernadsky, organicist philosophy and gendered biological metaphors, and which, according to Mandelker, both furthers and hinders the resolution of problems in semiotic theory. Gordon Teskey’s richly textured essay, which ranges from Aristotle to Paul de Man, grapples with the contradictions that led to the exclusion of irony from allegory in postclassical theory but also to irony’s necessary presence as the trace of an origin. Focusing on society and culture and the “monumentalizing rhetoric” locatable in textual editions, Neil Fraistat examines the ways in which legitimate and pirated editions of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s posthumous poems attempted to construct, respectively, a pure and a radical poet, engaging in a battle for dominance that ended in the reaffirming of social hierarchies. Finally, John Ernest’s analysis of the writing and distribution of Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* some thirty years after those editions of Shelley’s poetry also highlights the economies and ideologies at work in the production of a text—Wilson’s paradoxical advocacy of capitalism, even of the distrust it spawns among social groups, against proslavery forces that denounced capitalism for undermining the existing system of relations. Wilson’s

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recognition of the inevitability of social conflict continues to resonate today, but so does Lotman's more hopeful vision of *perestroika* as a restructuration within the text, culture, and the world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Reiss argues that the modern meaning of literature first emerged in the seventeenth century.

<sup>2</sup>It is thus no accident that Weliek's "The Attack on Literature" appeared in 1972.

<sup>3</sup>On the shift from literary to cultural studies, see also Bratlinger 1–33.

<sup>4</sup>This shift is underscored in the latest draft of "A Report to the ACLA: Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century," which has generated controversy in its call for a less Eurocentric practice that strives to "contextualiz[e] literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race and gender," unlike the "old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres." At the same time, the report is wary of identifying comparative literature with cultural studies, "where most scholarship has tended to be monolingual and focused on issues in specific contemporary popular cultures" (2, 4).

<sup>5</sup>Hunt emphasizes Geertz's "increasingly literary understanding of meaning" (13). While commenting on the decline of debate over the role of sociological theory in history, she notes the emerging importance of Pierre Bourdieu in the current practice of cultural history in the United States (10–11, 13).

<sup>6</sup>There is no agreement about what new historicism is, though both Veese's introduction to *The New Historicism* and Dollimore's to *Political Shakespeare* provide useful descriptions. On the links between new historicism and cultural studies, see Nelson 32–33, 41, and Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 18–20.

<sup>7</sup>It should be said that changes in the journal's editorial policy can only be decided by the association's Executive Council.

<sup>8</sup>As Summers remarks, "It is important not only that the meaning of art has changed but also that the meaning of what was always called 'art' was always changing. The simple continuity of terms indicates the continuity of a tradition, and the transformation of the meaning of those terms indicates the transformation of the tradition" (17; I was led to Summers through a citation in Reiss 3). Like the tentative decision about *PMLA*'s policy statement, the draft "Report to the ACLA" upholds the term "literature" and rejects the idea of adding a phrase such as "Cultural Studies," "Cultural Critique," or "Cultural Theory," on the grounds that "new ways of reading and contextualizing should be incorporated into the very fabric of the discipline" (2–3).

<sup>9</sup>In the global village, it is imperative to formulate a new, post-Enlightenment concept of cosmopolitanism. Spivak points in this direction as she calls for "transnational cultural studies" (277–78).

<sup>10</sup>See my editorial in the January 1993 issue.

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