

Introduction: *Plus Ça Change . . .*

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THIS SPECIAL MILLENNIUM ISSUE OF *PMLA* OWES ITS existence to the inspiration of Elaine Showalter and its execution to a team of colleagues (David Bartholomae, Peter Brooks, Margaret Ferguson, Sylvia Molloy, Robert Scholes, and I) who followed the suggestion of the MLA's Executive Council for a volume on the association's timely theme for 2000—Looking Backward, Looking Forward. While, as David Palumbo-Liu reminds us in his contribution, 2000 did not mark the millennium for everyone on the planet, it has provided members of the Modern Language Association with a kind of watershed date or, at least, a useful heuristic marker of a moment in which to reflect on the past, the present, and the future. Since the history of the MLA is in some ways the history of the profession in North America (and, to an extent, elsewhere), this issue is intended as an exploration of historical memory but also as a stocktaking of the present and an occasion for predictions about the future. It conveys a sense of the present by offering a snapshot of how we see ourselves now, a snapshot taken with a wide-angle lens that allows many MLA members to get into the picture. To this end, the volume includes both documents of public record and personal accounts of current members. Following a general call to the membership for responses to a series of questions about the profession in general and the discipline of language and literary study in particular, letters flowed in from all over the world, from members working in every kind of institution and at every stage of career. As you will read, the range of tones—from nostalgia to cynicism, from celebration to complaint—fittingly mirrors the diverse makeup of this large and most varied of professional organizations. We also invited particular scholars in a number of fields to

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offer brief reflections on specific topics that seemed to us central to any current stocktaking.

As a way of organizing the wealth of material—historical (Presidential Addresses, past convention information, reports) and current (invited reflections and members' responses to questions)—we have divided the time from the founding of the MLA, in 1883, to the present into four sections. The first, 1883 to 1919, the end of the First World War, records not just the rise of philology in our discipline but the even more basic definition and defense—and then acceptance and growth—of the study of modern rather than ancient languages in the academy. The founders shared a common sense of the value of studying modern languages and literatures and knew that, in practical terms, forming a learned society would help the new discipline gain the same status as the study of classics, for which associations flourished in Europe and North America. A professional organization also provided a sense of community, one that from the start offered an occasion for scholars to disagree as much as to agree. As Phyllis Franklin explains, “[B]eyond agreement about the value of modern language study and the need for association, unanimity, if it existed at all among those in English studies, was likely to be temporary. Already there were questions about the proper work of the discipline” (“English Studies” 369). Nonetheless, as you will see, the MLA's early years were a time of confidence derived from the real achievements of having established this new object of study and seeing it move rapidly to the center of the curriculum. It was to this positive climate that the war in Europe posed such a threat. As Jefferson B. Fletcher wrote in his Presidential Address in 1915, the deaths of students, teachers, and writers could not but affect European scholarship, nor could the “lack of spirit, given war, for disinterested scholarship.” Fletcher predicted that after the war those who survived would bring their “tragic sense of life” back and would “cleanse their minds of the dry-rot of pedantry and the mildew of dilettantism.” American scholars without war experience, he suggested, would lack

“the deepened insight and the strengthened will” of their European colleagues.

In the next section—1920 to 1945—we can trace and test the validity of his predictions, as the academy and the Western world recovered from that war. These were the years during which MLA membership increased dramatically—from the 127 reported in 1883, to 1,600 in 1919 and then to 4,132 in 1932. This period likely marks the last time anyone would try to articulate any common sense of the task of teaching and research in modern languages and literatures, the last time anyone would claim we had or should have an agreed-on core of common professional understanding. But the signs of what would come to be lamented as disciplinary fragmentation are there already in John Livingston Lowes's 1933 Presidential Address. By the end of that decade war had broken out again in Europe and MLA presidents denounced the “madness of national hatreds” (Karl Young) that threatened the study of foreign languages in North American universities. John A. Walz, the president of the MLA in 1941, was a Germanist when it was a difficult time to be one, and he argued for the separation of the intellectual and cultural achievements of great nations from the horrors of war, reminding the audience at his address that anti-Napoleonic feelings had not damaged the value of French literature and art and that the First World War's anti-Germanism had not hurt Goethe's scholarly reputation. The next president took a different tack: Frederick Morgan Padelford returned to the theme of the threat to foreign language teaching represented by the war and by the insularity of the United States, cultural and physical. Urging literature teachers as well to believe in the power of their subject, he reminded his MLA audience that literature was an “escape *into* life” from the “mechanized world which spells death to the human spirit” and told them that as America entered the war, it was their professional responsibility to provide what their students would need to be fortified by: “something real to take with them.” It was also his audience's duty, he asserted, to carry on with their research “in calm-

ness of spirit”—“for all time.” In 1944 Robert Herndon Fife looked realistically at the ruin of European libraries, at what he called a “bankrupt and intellectually wasted Europe,” and urged the United States to take off the “linguistic blinders” and realize that the lack of knowledge of foreign languages had been a handicap to Americans in this war as in the earlier one. He also urged MLA members “to avoid entanglement in a single foreign culture” and to “broaden the bases of literary knowledge” while maintaining a strong core of American literature in their teaching curriculum.

The general postwar optimism and hope for change (often leading to more international cooperation among scholars) are reflected in the North American academy, as is revealed in the next section, covering 1946 to 1967. The MLA continued to grow; new perspectives generated lively debates, as what was known as the New Criticism moved to center stage. The historical and the biographical slipped into the wings, and close reading became the new *doxa* in the classroom. Almost every MLA president during these years commented on the increasing fragmentation of the profession, especially as reflected in what Howard Mumford Jones in 1965 called the “multitudinousness and gigantism” of the annual convention. But not just complaints can be heard in these two decades. There is also cause for celebration: in 1955 the first woman was elected president of the MLA, the distinguished folklorist Louise Pound. In her address, Pound expressed her nostalgia for the early days of the association, when the annual conventions were small and intimate, but was tactfully nonnostalgic about the “Smoke Talks” of her male colleagues: “These I could not attend,” she simply remarked. (Other MLA firsts followed much later: the first Jesuit priest to be elected president was Walter J. Ong, in 1977; the first Hispanic [Mario J. Valdés] became president in 1991 and the first African American [Houston A. Baker, Jr.] in the following year.)

The 1967 convention may have been the last quiet (if gigantic) convention held by the Modern Language Association, so the final division in our survey begins in 1968 and continues to the

present, outlining the years in which the legacy of the 1960s has been played out in colleges and universities as in the general culture. As John Kronik writes, “The social revolution that exploded in the sixties changed not only the way we eat and dress and love and play but the way we teach and relate to our students.” It also changed how we relate to one another and to the MLA as an organization. Fittingly, Henry Nash Smith’s 1969 presidential address took its title from Bob Dylan’s “Ballad of a Thin Man”: “Something is happening but you don’t know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?” Smith outlined the causes of the “stirrings of protest” and the new movement in the MLA and the academy in general: the reaction against the MLA as the “establishment” or a self-perpetuating elite, against its stress on scholarship rather than teaching, and against the bibliography as a systemic instrument of science, not criticism. The legendary 1968 convention led to the creation of the current governance structure of the MLA, with its large and democratically elected Delegate Assembly. This convention also marked the start of what would soon become the MLA Job Information Service, begun in response to the “sudden and rather mysterious decrease” in the number of positions available. In other words, the job crisis we are experiencing today is over thirty years old. While perhaps too protracted to be considered a crisis, it is obviously serious and debilitating nonetheless. Over the next few years, president after president called the profession’s attention to the job situation, and the women presidents’ messages reflect the rise of feminist thinking in their calls for solidarity in the face of the fragmentation of the profession and the new hierarchization brought on by the job crisis. *Plus ça change . . .*

[II]

Readers will find in this large section records of the immediate history of still-pressing issues of our day ranging from the impact of technology (in Walter J. Ong’s address) to the culture wars (in

Barbara Herrnstein Smith's) to the move toward an even greater acceptance of diversity (in that of Catharine Stimpson). But in the volume as a whole, what may strike you most forcefully are the differences (positive and negative) between the profession of the past and the profession we know today. What, then, have we gained and what have we lost over the last century? Roger Shattuck, in his reflections, claims that we have lost the coherent sense of a common field of study he feels we once enjoyed. But the implication of W. B. Carnochan's piece (and of the history of the MLA) is that we never had such a sense, that such nostalgia is (as all nostalgia proves to be) more a complaint about the present than an accurate comment on the reality of the past. Carnochan intimates that the early split of North American literature and language departments into three areas of study—European-influenced philology, the idea of literature as moral uplift, and the teaching of rhetoric and composition—is still with us today (in the form of European-influenced theory, literature as political and ethical understanding, and the teaching of rhetoric and composition). So too, he suggests, are the valuations that go with that division of labor. The split between advanced research in language or literature (carried out by tenured faculty members) and lower-division teaching, usually of language (increasingly carried out by adjuncts) has, as David Bartholomae writes, followed us into the next century as well. Yet MLA members' eloquent responses here attest to what I would wager many of us have experienced: some of the most memorable teaching experiences we have ever had have come from teaching these lower-level courses in the "basics."

This is only one of the many divisions that originated early in our history and continue to mark our profession today. The much lamented increase in the fragmentation of the discipline was likely inevitable as the numbers of scholars and teachers increased dramatically over the century and as the pressure toward even greater inclusiveness increased. New subfields abounded.

But disagreements among scholars have always been the norm, and therefore change is unavoidable; ideas evolve, and innovation is a constant. The convention's size and variety stand as a concrete index of such change; the Presidential Addresses from the late 1960s onward likewise document a variety of responses to this sense of the enlargement and consequent diversification of the field. Northrop Frye celebrated this as the diversity and catholicity of a healthy convention and profession as a whole, while Peter Demetz lamented the reduction of the convention to a "gathering of constituencies" with no central purpose. Jean Perkins, like Mary Ann Caws and Elaine Showalter after her, called for tolerance and solidarity in what she saw as a contentious discipline marked by quarrels and factions, no doubt exacerbated by the debates in the late 1970s and the 1980s over theory. But as early as 1949 George Sherburn felt the need to make a plea for the validity of a variety of critical perspectives, and in 1952 Albert C. Baugh protested the intolerance manifesting itself in the battles over the New Criticism, arguing for a "fruitful union" of close reading and literary history without disparagement of "the share which each contributes to the common end." *Plus ça change . . .*

Writing in 1982 about the Commission on the Future of the Profession, Peter Demetz remarked:

[W]e discovered early that it would be difficult to define what (beyond membership in the MLA) held together so many creative and irritable individuals with markedly different preferences, jobs, origins, aims, and functions in society. We learned that "the profession" is actually a highly diverse group of compulsive readers, talkers, and writers, all in love with language. (940)

If we have never had a single common purpose as a profession (beyond acknowledging the value—and our love—of our object of study), it is possible that we have nonetheless lost something else in the course of last century. Reading the early pieces in this volume, I was struck by their tone

of confidence—so different from the prevailing mood of today. What Peter Brooks explains in his reflections as the lack today of a sense of the importance of reading and interpretation to education has led to that beleaguered feeling of secondariness experienced by what he calls the “textual humanities.” Compare this with the confidence of James Wilson Bright in 1902, celebrating the achievements and future of modern philology because it united the study of various languages and allowed a look at “the history of the human mind.” As Brooks asserts, it is not that we do not need today “a critical reading of reality” such as our discipline provides; on the contrary, in the face of the dominance of technology and science, we need to be reminded that “no information is any better than what a critical reading makes of it.” What we have to do is to be convinced of this ourselves—and then convince others.

Has the last century marked only loss, then? Or have there been significant gains for our profession? Much of this volume documents two major changes that many (but not all) feel have been gains: an expansion of what we study and a more inclusive sense of who studies it. Our new and expanded sense of the canon is rather different from that of the founders of the MLA. James Russell Lowell’s 1889 confidence reads today as simultaneously touching and arrogant: “There is no question about what is supreme in literature. The difference between what is best and what is next best is immense; it is felt instinctively; it is a difference not of degree but of kind.” A few years later, with equal confidence, Francis A. March told MLA members that they should teach books containing “weighty truths, important facts, close packed, expressed in musical simplicity, or with rhythmic distinction”—that is, the work of Bacon, Franklin, Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell, Bryant, and Gray. But reading these early statements about canon formation should awaken us to the realization that the canon has perhaps always been more capacious than our construction of it in our current debates. In his 1901 presidential address,

E. S. Sheldon urged that we study not only masterpieces but also the lesser works that give them context; in 1916 James Douglas Bruce suggested that present-day writing should be read along with the English classics. Folklore and oral traditions have long been an important part of MLA members’ research, and as early as 1964 Morris Bishop was predicting the current move to include in the category of literature all verbal culture—“the whole body of written record and speculation.” The *MLA International Bibliography*’s definition of its subject scope is an inclusive one: “Works on literature transmitted orally, in print, or in audiovisual media and on human language, including both natural languages and invented languages that exhibit the characteristics of human language (e.g., Esperanto, computer programming languages), are listed” (xix). In more recent years, cultural studies, film studies, and a variety of interdisciplinary approaches have further enlarged our sense of what we should study. We never stopped teaching Shakespeare, Racine, Goethe, or Cervantes, but—as the responses of members here illustrate—we may teach them in new ways today. Different critical approaches have also made different writers rise in importance, as the canon became an increasingly flexible organizational fiction. But it is worth reminding ourselves that, from the start, MLA members have held on to what they deemed important and yet also have constantly expanded the parameters of the field. Franklin astutely remarks, “As a professional enterprise, the MLA has been conservative. The field rarely throws anything away” (“MLA’s First Century” 4).

The role of literature as a category in relation to nation has also changed in the century or so of the MLA’s existence. In his 1909 Presidential Address, M. D. Learned dealt with the interaction between language and literature and “a nation’s culture.” In the first four sentences, he repeated *nation* or *national* five times, largely in the context of an argument that “the nation’s progress and life” involve literature as much as they do the

building of bridges and railroads, but what is nonetheless striking is his insistence on the national. As the many current MLA members' responses to this issue testify, there has been a major move in recent years to what we could call a postnational focus. Challenges to national definitions from within (by Native American writing, for instance) and from without (by globalization, most obviously) are among the ostensible causes that have weakened the national at the end of the twentieth century. As John Guillory notes, "English" literature is no longer just the literature of England but a globalized form of writing, and as James D. Fernández observes, Spanish today is both a European and an American language. By way of proof, Edgar C. Knowlton, Jr., writes of his pleasure in developing a new course in Hispano-Philippine literature at the University of Hawaii, and courses studying various forms of postcoloniality now abound everywhere.

Many of the changes in the canon have come about in response to social diversity and a consequent breaking up of the dominant Eurocentric focus. From Frances Smith Foster's account of the important and paradigmatic rise of African American studies and from the responses by MLA members, it is clear that much has happened to make possible courses (and research) in a range of new fields, from transgendered writing to disability studies, from children's literature to Asian Canadian studies. Not all the responses, of course, are positive: many protest these changes, as they do the entry of theory into our discipline as a kind of metadiscursive self-consciousness. Yet to read Wayne Booth and James Phelan on the rise of narratology or Jerry Aline Fliegel on psychoanalysis is to be reminded of the impact of theory in the field in recent decades. Many members address the tensions that theory and identity politics have introduced into the academy: for some, these tensions are hugely productive, but for others they have proved distracting and even debilitating.

The other main shift in our profession over the last century is toward a much more democra-

tized and inclusive sense of who studies language and literature. Members' letters once again attest to the magnitude of this change—and to the need to remain vigilant. Michele Valerie Ronnick tells us about William Sanders Scarborough, the first African American member of the MLA, and from his tale we have much to learn about our past—and our present. In 1960, five years after the MLA elected its first woman president, Henri Peyre still felt the need to remind us that this profession was a woman's as well as a man's world and urged that room be made for women. Other women presidents followed, but not until 1963 (Marjorie Nicolson) and 1973 (Florence Howe). From then on, the numbers balanced out, although in 1984 Carolyn Heilbrun still spoke—with passion—about "the recent female intrusion on the male hegemony in which I have passed my professional life." But things had changed—in part, I like to think, because of the creation of the MLA Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession in 1969.

[III]

As my title ("*Plus Ça Change . . .*") suggests, however, the effect of reading all these old and new testimonials has been to make me aware as much of continuities as of differences. As I read, I'm constantly struck by parallels, welcome and unwelcome. For instance, it would seem that a series of tensions involved in our attempts to define our complex and often contradictory roles or tasks as literary and language scholars has been with us from the start. First, there is the tension between defining what we do in terms of the rigor of science, on the one hand, and love (literally, amateurism), on the other. In 1892 Francis A. March exhorted MLA members to "excite lasting love of great books" in their students but also to do "scientific as well as historical" scholarly work. Calvin Thomas, in 1896, defined "literary science" as having as its object the explanation of both the "bones" and the "soul" of literature, and Albert Cook, the

following year, reminded us that philology, true to its name, “enlists the head in the service of the heart.” The core of both endeavors, Michael Holquist reminds us, is language—as it remains for us today. Given the way literary scholarship has been moving recently, however, we might want to add something to that definition: “the study of language in some kind of context” (Franklin, “MLA’s First Century” 4).

A second continuing tension documented by this volume is the one between a kind of scholarly disinterestedness and a more general drive to social relevance. This tension too dates from the early years of the MLA. In 1899 H. C. G. von Jagemann argued that philology should “apply the knowledge it gained from the past to the questions of the present and the future.” Charles Hall Grandgent, in 1912, called for a more vocational focus to university education, a look in the direction of the “farm, shop and home,” and condemned the contempt exhibited by academics for knowledge of contemporary American culture. Many of these early calls for relevance are reminiscent of Patricia Meyer Spacks’s spirited 1994 defense of our object of study as a means of grasping *reality* or Roland Bartel’s account of his experience as a chair facing new demands by students. Another dimension of this tension between disinterestedness and relevance is that between a resistance to popularization and the desire to take on a public intellectual function. As early as 1915, Jefferson B. Fletcher’s Presidential Address attacked what we would call the desire to address the lowest common denominator but what he called “broad human appeal.” This is pandering to the crowd, he argued; it is “making knowledge too easy.” His attack on students’ refusal to grapple with ideas and on their too easy adopting of isms, which they attached “as labels with curious parrot-like precision,” echoes eerily in the disapproval of theoretical jargon in the 1980s. In 1920, however, John M. Manly pointed out that MLA members’ research should not just be of value for the profession but could reach all those who “care for literature in a

large and intelligent way”; therefore, he urged a move to the larger public sphere and thus to what Morris Dickstein today calls a “more public intellectual style” of writing. In 1980 Helen Vendler would echo these sentiments, as would the many members who submitted letters to this volume in the aftermath of the culture wars, arguing for the value of both official and unofficial outreach programs.

A third tension that we seem not to have resolved over the last century is the one that exists in our job descriptions as teachers and researchers—and in the differing status of the two roles. When Lewis Freeman Mott exhorted MLA members in 1911 to be competent, effective language teachers and to retain their high standards of scholarship, he implied precisely this kind of tension, as did Felix E. Schelling a few years later when he suggested that American academics’ scholarship was “creditable” despite more difficult working conditions than those experienced by Europeans: Americans taught more and did more committee work, grading, and advising than their colleagues on the other side of the pond. Some twenty years later, John Livingston Lowes would openly lament the advancement of research as a goal of the MLA, for it meant that teaching—the original focus of the founders of the organization—had been downgraded. His successor, James Taft Hatfield, appeared to disagree, suggesting that while all members were “practical teachers,” the object of the MLA was still the “advancement of research.” By 1963 the balance had changed, but the dual message remained: Marjorie Hope Nicolson noted that while her graduate education was totally scholarship-based, teaching was just as important. A decade later, Florence Howe repeated this message. In even more recent times, the increased attention to pedagogy does not simply reflect a response to legislators’ demands for accountability; it also means a sincere commitment, from graduate school onward, to training good teachers—a commitment to students and, in the end, to learning-centered environments of various kinds.

For that reason, in the responses here of MLA members to the various questions about teaching, you will read passionate defenses of the traditional face-to-face seminar that does not rely on “technological prosthetics” (Jill Campbell) and of the wired classroom (for both literature and language teaching).

Another constant over the century that this volume documents is our ongoing sense of embattlement as a profession: we seem to have to fight the same wars over and over again. First of all, there is the continuing struggle to defend the teaching—and learning—of languages other than English. After the initial heady years when modern languages were successfully established as an object of study, by the time of the Second World War MLA presidents were defending an “endangered species”—the study of foreign languages (Karl Young). In 1944 Robert Herndon Fife could hope that the war experience would make a “breach in the wall of indifference to language study on the part of educationalists and educational administrators.” *Plus ça change . . .* Today, if the members’ letters are any indication, we alternate between a kind of utopian dream of a globalized multilingual world and an equally common apocalyptic fear of unilingual domination.

Yet another war we continue to wage is in the name of defending the liberal arts in general and literary and linguistic study in particular from the onslaught of science and technology. This too is not new: in 1909 M. D. Learned noted the crisis of competition between the technical sciences and the liberal arts. The “technical,” he feared, threatened to eliminate the “serious study of language” to make room for technical courses. *Plus ça change . . .* But as early as 1978, Walter Ong reminded us that literature is the technological creation of print and suggested that we can assimilate technology to our own ends. And, indeed, many letters from MLA members published in this volume testify to the positive aspects of such a power of assimilation, especially in the changes to the concept of textuality that have come with the arrival of the elec-

tronic media, as outlined here by Richard A. Lanham. In addition, in this battle in defense of the liberal arts, letter after letter attests to the opportunity before us to convince the world that in our times the study of languages and literatures is intellectually sound and professionally and financially rewarding.

Last but certainly not least, another parallel between our profession’s past and its present is at the level of the conditions of employment. In 1914 President Schelling felt the need to argue for the “dignity” and “importance” of American college professors in the face of the low salaries then paid to them. While suggesting that a sense of sacrifice and “genuine love of learning” were certainly what characterized the profession, he noted that many who taught nevertheless had to moonlight to support their families. His prediction that unions might be on the horizon to protect professors’ rights reverberates through the decades to our own fraught times, when poorly paid adjuncts, part-timers, and graduate students are turning to unionization as a way to ameliorate their economic and professional situation. That academic institutions in North America and Europe have faced years of shrinking resources is not news to any reader of *PMLA*. But in 1949 George Sherburn was already urging libraries to resist attempts to cut their budgets, and his words echo the exhortations of MLA members today who have endured cuts to the budgets of their departments and university presses as well as their libraries. The much lamented utilitarianization and commercialization of academic institutions (as of the culture at large) cannot be considered a new concern either. In 1934 James Taft Hatfield scornfully noted, “The money-loving outside world sets the standard, and the academic community is sometimes tempted to follow suit.” The corporate mentality of administrative structures today, brought on in part by fears regarding “fiscal solvency” (Elizabeth Welt Trahan), has prompted worries that are real but, again, not a novelty. One thing that is more recent but still not new,

as we have already seen, is the job crisis. While it did not exist in 1883, it certainly did by 1969, when the Faculty Exchange, the predecessor of the present Job Information Service, was inaugurated. Little did we realize, over thirty years ago, that this scarcity of positions would lead to the “casualization of academic labor” (Richard Ohmann) and the “stratification” of the profession (Judith Fetterley). The recent MLA survey on the use of part-time faculty members allows us a more accurate picture of the consequences of this status hierarchy for part-timers in the profession. Like the other surveys the organization has conducted over the years, on such topics as curriculum and PhD placement, it helps us understand trends in the field and supports better planning in and for the profession.

My title, “*Plus Ça Change . . .*,” is not meant to invoke passivity in the face of inevitable sameness (*plus c’est la même chose*). Things have changed in our profession and will continue to do so. Among the lessons to be learned from looking backward, though, is the need for a certain humility. The forty people

who met at Columbia University in December 1883 established ideals that the MLA has continued to believe in: “inclusion, expansion, and innovation” (Franklin, “MLA’s First Century” 4). The danger is that we will forget this positive institutional history and thus lose our past—or feel the need to reinvent it. If reading this issue of *PMLA* does nothing else, may it remind us not only of real changes but also of equally real continuities throughout our profession’s history, especially its repeated calls to improve teaching (and learning) conditions, to respect difference, and to be open to multiple points of view.

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