

limited by guarantee. In practice this has resulted in minor administrative changes but not, it is hoped, in any long-term change to the essential academic ethos of the Association and least of all to the quality of its publications, which continue to flourish and are currently illustrating the latest development in a period of rapid and exciting change as they begin to be disseminated to subscribers in on-line electronic and CD-ROM versions as well as in the traditional printed format, the uncertain future of which, as for all academic publications in humanities subjects, is perhaps today the most vexed question in our field as a whole.

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The Modern Language Association of America (MLA)

Eva Kushner

Dr Phyllis Franklin, Executive Director of the Modern Language Association of America for many years and currently Vice-President of FILLM, would have been the appropriate contributor on this topic, but she could not be present at this symposium and she has asked me to represent her. Although I cannot match her unparalleled knowledge of the Association and the American scene in general, I can say that I am well acquainted with the MLA, as I have been a member of it since 1959. Since 1985 I have represented the MLA at FILLM meetings several times. Canadians have their own set of learned societies in the Humanities, yet there is a substantial Canadian membership of the MLA; I estimate it at 1000 members. The late Professor Northrop Frye, more recently Professor Mario Valdés, and in the 2000–1 session Professor Linda Hutcheon have been presidents of the MLA. This is an example of the internationality of the Association, which also regularly elects honorary fellows and members from many countries. Altogether the MLA counts approximately 30,000 members; thus it is by far the largest member-association within FILLM.

As I speak of the strengths of the MLA, its range of interests, its structures, I should like to make it clear that I am not uncritical of it, on the contrary. But let me first of all emphasize the importance of its presence and participation in FILLM. Because it holds yearly conventions (between Christmas and the New Year, unfortunately), because a large number of languages and literatures are regularly featured in its programs not only during conventions but, in certain groups, on a continuous basis, because it has an extensive publishing activity in scholarly and pedagogical matters, the Modern Language Association of America is for us, in many ways, a model with which to reckon. Add to this the fact that besides being a major scholarly association the MLA also undertakes to serve as a professional body, keeping watch over matters of equity, social justice, human rights relating to the working life of its membership, and you will begin to perceive the magnitude of the MLA phenomenon.

The structure of the MLA is designed to facilitate communication with and among the membership, and to encourage participation. The election system operates by correspondence; the nominating committee chooses a certain number of candidates, circulates their *curricula vitae* and the membership chooses by mail ballot three of those candidates to renew one-fourth of the executive council, and so on every year. The presidency also changes every year; the membership elects by mail ballot a second vice-president who, the following year, becomes first vice-president and the year after that, president, and so forth. This rapid

turnover in the presidency ensures that – in principle at least – no subdiscipline is unduly privileged and that no ideological tendency predominates. The president is intensely active for a relatively brief period in really central matters of leadership, and it is the administrative staff who carry responsibility for operations and continuity of planning. The delegate assembly, which meets during the convention, examines, and votes upon, resolutions stemming from the membership at large.

The management of the yearly convention is itself an awesome task, involving negotiations with cities, hotels, convention centers years ahead of time. The staff also supervise and execute publication series, bibliographies which have become mainstays of the profession, two periodicals: *PMLA*, for scholarly articles and *Profession*, which as its name indicates deals with the problems and prospects of the professoriate but also of the graduate students whose education and future the Association regards as its collective responsibility. The *Newsletter* carries messages from the president, the executive director, announcements about forthcoming conventions and their programs, and news about the job market. The publications also include the *MLA Style Manual*, and a series devoted to approaches to the teaching of literary texts as well as to texts in translation. Because Italian, as well as the Slavic literatures, had not been represented in the series in the past, there is now a new emphasis on these areas. The *ADE* and *ADFL Bulletins* are oriented towards the educational and professional problems and needs of English as well as foreign language departments. All these publications are important tools in our work as researchers and teachers in the Humanities.

The conventions meet in a different city every year; they vary in size but can at times reach 10,000 to 15,000 participants. The plenary sessions attempt to capture the most central themes in the life of the modern languages and literatures community. Divisions focus upon given periods in a number of literatures or groupings of literatures, or on comparative topics; they are continuous, with elected executives who select the papers to be read at the convention so that each division forms a kind of learned society in its own right within the general framework of the Association. Discussion groups are more informal; they deal, in the form of panel discussions rather than full-fledged papers, with new topics, often interdisciplinary and/or experimental, suggested by interest groups. The convention also serves a number of affiliated learned societies whose interests coincide with that of the MLA (for example, societies devoted to the study of a single major author). The MLA also links together a number of regional associations, such as the Northeastern MLA, which meet at other times of the year.

In addition to the scholarly programs of these various meetings the MLA works continuously through a number of regionally balanced national committees to foster debate on current problems affecting the profession, and contribute to solving them. Thus, teacher education has been an area of intensive study. The publication in 1999 of *Preparing a Nation's Teachers* was preceded by a teacher education project. It contains the reports of 12 university English and foreign language departments on preparing college students to teach in the schools.

The future of doctoral education has been an ongoing concern, discussed on many occasions with intense graduate student participation, particularly at a conference in 1999 the proceedings of which were published in *PMLA*. The MLA has reacted vigorously to the tendency of universities to hire temporary and part-time personnel rather than tenure-track junior faculty.

Still on the positive side, I should like to draw attention to some of the areas on which the MLA focuses in the professional field.

1. The MLA is deeply conscious of human diversity in the USA, in the world, in the disciplinary spectrum; and it works towards the respect of diversity in all areas of endeavour. This may bring about certain excesses, real or imagined, in the direction of 'political correctness'.

2. The MLA attempts to work for the young generation without neglecting the older generation.

3. It attempts to work for social justice, and equity (e.g. gender equity) in matters of employment; to foster attention to the situation of minorities, minority languages and literatures.

4. In all its meetings, publications, and new ventures in electronic communication it works for research in the Humanities and provides advocacy for it.

5. The MLA is constantly reflecting upon the social role of the Humanities, trying both to preserve their essential values and to make them meaningful to American society. For example, more corporate executives are now trained in foreign languages and this should be further encouraged. There should be increasing understanding of foreign cultures, for their own sake as well as for the sake of better economic relations; and, of course, respect of human rights everywhere is of the essence.

Given all these characteristics, the Modern Language Association of America could be regarded as a microcosm and a model of everything that the FILLM also endeavours to be, more internationally. The MLA itself is far from perfect, however. The American membership has also been its most vocal critic. Many scholars have felt that the professional aspect of the Association tends to dominate its life; that at the convention particularly trendy issues monopolize the attention of participants at the expense of literary and linguistic scholarship. As a reaction, a new association with a more conservative focus has arisen. I believe it is called 'Society of Authors and Critics'.

The relationships between the MLA and the FILLM have varied over time. The first thing for us to realize today is that the MLA is by far the largest and the most powerful among the member-associations. To the best of my knowledge it has never exploited this situation to make its views prevail; the problem is rather the obverse – a lack of interest in FILLM because of what at least appears to our American colleagues as its imprecise and disjointed nature. Those MLA members who have remained in contact with the FILLM agree by and large on the nature of its role as a locus of reflection upon wider issues in modern languages and literatures scholarship, interdisciplinary issues that are not or not thoroughly covered by the programs of the member-associations. FILLM pre-dates the UNESCO 'pyramid' of linked learned societies.

Because of the nature of the MLA many of its members may not feel the need for another large body offering large congresses, especially if these congresses take place in faraway lands – which on the other hand they have to do if FILLM is to fulfil its mandate vis-a-vis developing countries. This is why FILLM must be ready to offer challenging, innovative programs rather than digests of what its member-associations offer.

The magnitude of the MLA phenomenon should not be a deterrent to our cooperation as long as within the framework of FILLM the MLA accepts to be just one of several members rather than the dominant one. (With its professional staff of over 90, it must become accustomed – and this may prove difficult – to dealing with a set of organizations virtually all of which are run by volunteers.) The FILLM, not unnaturally, has tended to ask the MLA to do more in financial terms because it is able to do so given the fees consequent upon its large membership; this, however, is unfair to the MLA unless specific reasons are agreed upon. Another deterrent to our cooperation might very well lie in the official attitude of the United States towards UNESCO and towards the UN, as well as conscious or unconscious attitudes American colleagues tend to develop in a world which both resists the US, and accepts its resources. Rather than run away from these problems, should we not bring them to the surface inasmuch as they affect our work together, and deal with them?

At any rate, there has been excellent cooperation over time. The late Professor Winchester

Stone, a long-time executive director of the MLA, was also a president of the FILLM. He was instrumental in finding a considerable amount of funding for the 1993 FILLM congress in Brasília. The Arizona congress in 1981 had already brought about much enthusiastic cooperation between the two bodies. And Dr Phyllis Franklin has been a tower of strength since her election to our Bureau.

We must also, however, pay attention to the administrative and evaluative standards of the MLA. While the FILLM cannot match the size and resources of the MLA, it is within its capacity to communicate more efficiently and more democratically than it has done in the past, especially so as to involve more younger colleagues in more countries, and a larger number of relevant new associations. Above all, the FILLM must endeavour to gain a clearer vision of its mission apart from, and in addition to, its modest, shrinking function as distributor of CIPSH/UNESCO funds to its member-associations.

The MLA would particularly like to see FILLM announce its congresses earlier and more widely; to communicate earlier regarding elections. It stands ready to help applicants for travel funds but deadlines such as those of the American Council of Learned Societies must be known and observed. Much could be achieved by way of common projects: co-sponsorship of conferences, exchanging speakers, fund-raising towards specific objects.

In closing, I should like to offer a few suggestions, quite informally, not as past president of FILLM, but as a long-time participant and observer.

1. FILLM should investigate American sites for some of its activities: websites, administrative functions such as secretaryships and treasurer positions, publishing activities.

2. The FILLM should find common subjects of research projects, conferences, and even congresses in which the MLA is or could become involved. Ethics is surfacing as a common area of concern; there is a renewed interest in subjectivity; and also cultural studies.

3. Teacher education too, which MLA privileges at the moment as a subject of study and action, is emerging as an FILLM concern; and the renewal of national and international literary histories may be symptomatic of a need which the FILLM could help to fulfil.

4. Last but not least, the FILLM could play a crucial role in monitoring the global linguistic situation. Is English becoming the global language? What are the effects of this unprecedented situation? What sort of English is it and how should it be taught in order to facilitate both communication and cultural understanding and respect? But our reflection on the quality and efficiency of language teaching – and on the problematic relationship of these two criteria – should not extend to English alone but to *all* modern languages. If the FILLM's presence is to be truly global it must be fully cognizant of the multiplicity and diversity of languages in the world, including endangered languages; and of the situation of many countries where the multiplicity of languages, often imposed by political circumstances, necessitates much cross-translation, reciprocal lexicological adaptation and, above all, cultural understanding of the Other.

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