Editor's Column

"THEORY RULES the roost these days," the coordinator of the special topic, The Politics of Critical Language, observes in a recent self-conscious, self-reflexive article in another journal (Herbert Lindenberger, "aFTER *sAUL'S fALL*: An Interview with the Author," *New Literary History* 21 [1989]: 50). "Over the last two decades," echoes David Kaufmann in the closing essay here, "theory has been the biggest growth industry in literary studies. While metacritical concerns are by no means new to the discipline, the sense of ferment provoked by the lush efflorescence of theory has been greater than in previous eras." If theory dominates this special issue of *PMLA*, that is because it has loomed so large in literary criticism in recent years.

What René Wellek and Austin Warren called the "theory of literature" almost half a century ago has donned and doffed many masks and titles since then, has gained in complexity and confusion, has acquired ideological and ethical overtones, and has spawned attacks and counterattacks. Inevitable accusations of excess and designations like "the resistance to theory" and "against theory" have not laid the discussions to rest; MLA members will recall *Profession 89*, for example, where theory, vaunted and flaunted and finally parodied (in Norman Holland's delightful fable of Little Red Readinghood), holds center stage. In his presidential address, printed in the May 1987 *PMLA*, Hillis Miller outlined his view of the reader's obligation to the written text and approvingly documented in today's culture an "almost universal triumph of theory" (284). Only three years later, in another presidential address pertinent to the subject of this special issue, Victor Brombert invites critics to hold in check the hubris that leads them to lord their theories over the words of the poet. He warns against dogmatism and hermeticism while invoking the humanistic criteria of taste and moral judgment. I suspect that Brombert's remarks will prove to be as controversial as Miller's. Not so long ago Emil Staiger, in the essay that we translate in this issue, could say categorically, "Nothing significant . . . can be achieved by mere theory," whereas his commentator, Herbert Lindenberger, now writes, "Although there may be readers who hope for a return to some earlier critical mode, it is difficult to believe that things will ever again resemble yesterday's world of unspoken values, unexamined ideologies, and stable, unquestioned canons." The point is neither that meta is better nor that self-consciousness is obfuscating but that a rigorous self-critique and the debates that it engenders are probably more productive than any particular position that the debaters may espouse. In her introductory remarks to *Profession 89*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith hazards a compelling prediction: "I think it also likely that, in the process of interchange and transformation, much that we now call 'literary theory' will be seen as having operated not as the agent of an ultimate disintegration but, rather, as the most fertile site of an interim destiny" (3).

If theory now occupies a "most fertile site," our "interim destiny" was molded long ago. Unlike members who claim never to read *PMLA*, I accepted the invitation on the cover of this issue to penetrate the *mise en abîme* and have gone back to review—summarily, I confess—more than one hundred volumes in search of theory in our journal. The experience, in addition to humbling the critic confident of his or her immortality, rewards the searcher with a sense of our profession's history and of the place that speculation and specularity have held in the development of our trade. For the purposes of this retrospective exercise, I found it convenient to define theory in the broadest possible fashion, say, in Gerald Graff's terms, as a discourse that treats literature as a problem (*Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987, 252).

It did not take long for one of our early colleagues to question the very value and function of literature. In 1896 A. R. Marsh's "Comparative Study of Literature" traces the trajectory from the medieval conception of literature as "an allegorical account of spiritual things" (153) to the Renaissance apprehension of the beauty of style, the "noble utterance" by which "man makes his name deathless" (154). Marsh aims "simply to point out how distinct and in many ways limited a theory of literature is implied by that word *eloquentia*, which Petrarch so incessantly uses, and which he appeals to as the ultimate criterion in forming his literary judgments" (155). To Romanticism and to science and nationalism Marsh attributes the disrepute into which belles lettres fell and the shift from manner to matter that produced the nineteenth century's strong philological, historical focus. He considers dangerous the modern scholar's neglect of "the literary side of literature" and sees "signs of doubt and hesitation as to the most profitable method of studying" literature (159–60). He applauds, as an antidote to the inroads of overzealous scientism, the practice of comparative literature, which "seems to be constantly acquiring greater currency" and "is as yet undeveloped in theory [and] extremely limited in practice" (163, 165).

The following year, Calvin Thomas, taking an opposite stand in his presidential address, ponders why in English we do not speak of a *Literaturwissenschaft* and calls for an allegiance to the scientific spirit. Ascribing three main dimensions to literature—historical development, the "artistic fact in itself," and status as "the product and the expression of personality" (301)—he makes a plea for the legitimacy and necessity of evaluation, which rests on the critic's "highest function, . . . to report feelings with nicety" (307), and which aims at the comprehension of the personality—the genius—that a literary work harbors. He declares that "names gradually affect modes of thinking" (299), invokes "the spirit of opposition to the worship of canons assumed to be absolute" (302), and prophesies, "Probably our latest descendants will occasionally be taken in, even as we are, by crude theories and wrong deductions" (301). All this in 1897. In 1905 S. Griswold Morley's piece, "The Detection of Personality in Literature," attests to the continuing interest in the person that lurks behind the written word.

"The New Constructive Criticism" is a title in the 1907 volume that catches the eye, as does the article's lead sentence: "There is a restlessness in the world of criticism to-day" (421). Robert Wernaer reports a loss of confidence in the day's three leading types of critics—impressionistic, appreciative, and scientific—and deplores the absence of "a standard, a criterion, a code of laws or principles, which should form a basis for critical *judgments*. There is an urgent demand for *judicial criticism*" (421). He maintains that criticism cannot prosper amid the uncertainties of a domain divided between formalists and idealists, observed by a majority that does not even know where it stands. Rejecting a "tyranny of rules" but conceding that the new scientific age demands scientific results, he proposes modern aesthetics, alongside history and psychology, as a critical tool.

The word *canon* makes its way into a title in 1912 and again in 1922 ("The Poe Canon," "The Marlowe Canon"), and *theory* first receives such billing in 1915 ("Goethe's Theory of the *Novelle*"). That year Clarissa Rinaker publishes an interesting metacritical engagement with "the historical method in literary criticism" as it develops in the eighteenth century. The author makes her own position clear: "[N]o work of art could be independently judged, isolated from the conditions under which it was produced . . . and without considering its relation to other literatures" (87). Charles Whitmore is the author of a 1924 article, "The Validity of Literary Definitions," a speculative piece that, while conceding the impossibility of scientific rigor in literary criticism, provides guidelines for the description of literary phenomena. Writes Whitmore, "[E]very sound literary definition implies a theory"; in other words, literary definitions must derive from a collectivity that is scrutinized for its bonds. He insists that "certain important theoretical questions can hardly be answered without taking into account literature as a whole" (731), that commentary and comparison inevitably lead to general principles, and that a cautiously constructed typology is useful. Whitmore's article, which nowadays might be called "In Defense of Theory," would fit into the current discussions of genre and periodization and the validity of labels. Whitmore returns to *PMLA* in 1930 with "Some Comments on 'Literary Theory.' " With his feet firmly planted in literary history, he defines literary theory and defends it against those who would disparage it. He pleads gently for the recovery of "[w]hat are slightingly called 'formal' aspects" (593) and closes with words that today would meet with a mixed response:

"Without supposing that criticism is to be reformed altogether by such a consideration, we might fairly hope that theory would bring about, in a not too distant future, an improvement worth having"; "[L]iterary theory can make good its claim to a position as a legitimate brand of speculative activity. . . . [T]he objections which are opposed to its study . . . are precisely those which have been brought against every sort of theoretical study since the development of human thought began" (595, 597).

In 1932 "Literature and Life Again" evokes a continuing controversy as Elmer Stoll states his case for the consideration of literature as illusion, as the artificial construct it is, and not as a document of history or of a life. The following year H. V. Velten, treating another burning issue of the day, provides a title with a resounding protopoststructuralist chiasmus, "The Science of Language and the Language of Science." In the introductory section, called "The Crisis," he examines the modern condition of extreme skepticism and the breakdown of comfortable monistic stands. Louise Turner's 1946 essay eloquently calls for a return to interpretive and analytic dramatic criticism and claims that the custom of attributing psychological import to Elizabethan drama is pseudoscientific "erudite nonsense" (651). A number of *PMLA* authors at that time turned to the problems of realism, and theories of generality and particularity occupied the attention of several critics, notably Scott Elledge and William Wimsatt (both in 1947). During the late forties and early fifties, New Critical analyses of specific texts are accompanied by several essays on more general subjects. In 1949 Douglas Bush accuses the New Criticism of appealing to "an inner circle of initiates" (supp. 21) and defends scholars against critics; Alfred Adler demonstrates in 1950 how to arrive at historical ideology through structural analysis; and Wimsatt, confronting the main polemic of the day in his 1951 "History and Criticism: A Problematic Relationship," warns against "bardolatry," which he calls "a corruption of the critical" (31). The word *metacriticism* makes its first titular appearance in a 1954 article on Coleridge; the following year brings Norman Friedman's much cited "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept"; and an essay of great resonance in the Hispanic field is Leon Livingstone's "Interior Duplication and the Problem of Form in the Modern Spanish Novel," which appeared in 1958. A young instructor at Yale, approaching literary criticism from a different direction, launches the sixties with an essay that inserts itself into still unresolved controversies: in "Objective Interpretation," E. D. Hirsch supports "the doctrine that description and evaluation are inseparable in literary study" and rejects criticism that uses "the text as the basis for an exercise in 'creativity' " (463). Five years later, James Thorpe, in "The Aesthetics of Textual Criticism," comments on the capabilities and limitations of aesthetic response in the practice of criticism, and in 1969 Clifton Cherpak turns to a problem of periodization in French literature.

To no one's surprise, the 1970 volume carries a pair of position papers written in the wake of the tumultuous closing years of the sixties: Rima Drell Reck's "Politics of Literature" and Frederick Crews's "Do Literary

Studies Have an Ideology?"—and, again unsurprisingly, they reach opposing conclusions concerning the academic's political role. The following year, Fredric Jameson, in his already classic "Metacommentary," moves to a theoretical level the debate about structuralism's bearing on history and experience and modern criticism's complicated relations with interpretation. From that moment forward, essays of a clearly theoretical bent multiply in the pages of *PMLA* year after year, and many of them have left a significant imprint on the memories or bibliographies of the journal's readers.

It is safe to say that any future reader or editor who indulges in the exercise of looking to *PMLA* as a document of its time will note the 1970s and 1980s (and the 1990s?) as an age of theory and will capture the delight and the dismay that academics variously registered in the face of that reality. The reader who compares these times with earlier days and decades will also notice, surely with a touch of amusement, that the problems, the poles of contention, the biases, and the yearnings keep on having a familiar ring, even if the battles are more intense and the weapons and the words more sophisticated. *Plus ça change* . . . , one is tempted to say, but one also recognizes that, ironic echoes notwithstanding, important changes have taken place in the critical discourse. Feminist criticism is a good example. Hardly an issue of *PMLA*, including this one, now passes by without an essay in that vein, whether it is an analysis of a specific text from a feminist perspective or a theoretical discussion of gender. Probably the earliest touch of a feminist consciousness in a *PMLA* article comes in 1905 from a male professor at Adelphi College who starts off his analysis of a little-known sixteenth-century French poet with these words: "Perhaps the most significant phenomenon of modern history is the emancipation of woman—the rise of the submerged half." He points to "the complete subjection of woman during the lawless Dark Ages and on during mediaeval times" and adds, "The cause of woman was only to be won—if yet it is—by a long fight" (567–68). While applauding those sentiments, today's readers of *PMLA* will agree that the fight certainly had not been won by 1905 and is still being waged today. Just as surely will they agree that today's critical and political language stands at a great remove from the terms used by a female professor from Smith College addressing her presumably male audience in 1892. Defending French literature as a valid course of study and the French language for its possession of the subjunctive, she concludes with these words: "Let me plead the fable of the mouse and the lion. It happens that I, the mouse, have been brought up in equal knowledge of the two literatures from childhood; while you, the lions, have been roaming over wider tracts. . . . Whether you deem me right or wrong, if these weak remarks call forth, anywhere, a more energetic, more penetrating, more responsive study of French literature, I shall indeed be content" (225). There is no doubt that in some respects, at least, times have changed.

This special issue of *PMLA*, The Politics of Critical Language, carries a group of essays that invite fresh debate as they demonstrate the intensity and maturity of today's theoretical discussions and broach key critical, linguistic, and political questions. It also brings to readers the first English translation of an important debate in which Emil Staiger, Martin Heidegger, and Leo Spitzer engaged some decades ago. We are deeply grateful to Herbert Lindenberger for his valuable suggestions and his tireless labors, for his devoted and zestful collaboration with the authors and the staff at every stage of this project. The response to the call for papers on this topic was an encouraging sign of the high level and broad vision that mark theoretical concerns at this moment. The essays that we include here not only reflect current critical discourse but, I am convinced, will contribute significantly to shaping its future.

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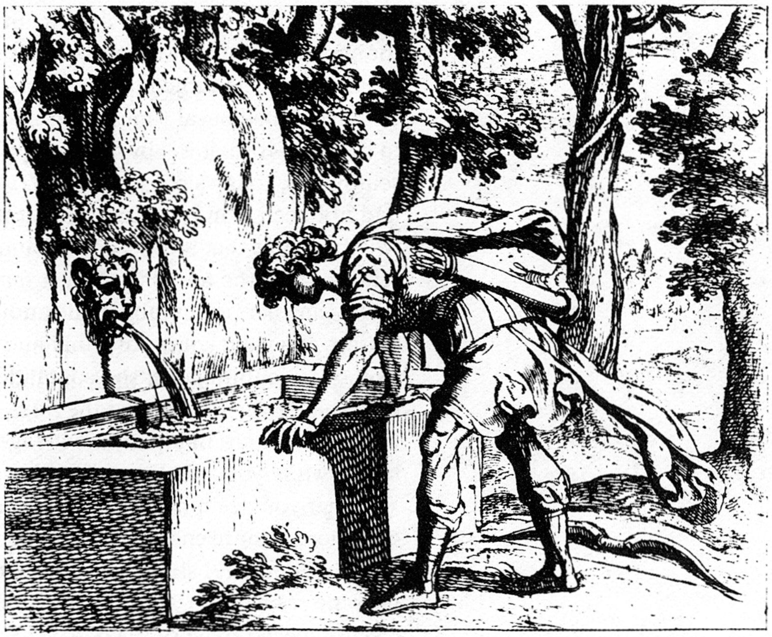

Amore ſui inardeſcens Narciſſus in florem tranſmutatur.

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