

Letters to the editor are welcome.

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WLT AND THE ESSAY

In our world, literature faces a grim challenge: the exacerbated sense of cultural identity today, the sense of borders, barriers, differences misperceived and misused. Literature has roots, as they say, deep roots in its culture, clime, soil. Yet, like the "great, rooted blossomer" of Yeats, literature grows, crooked or straight, to flower into a Tree of Life.

I recently returned from the Melbourne Writers' Festival, where a panel I served on took up the question, "How Australian Is It?" The livelier, yes, and keener the discussion grew, the more the question flickered, faded, disappeared altogether. Of course, I would not say quite the same about an intensely beleaguered imagination, say Aboriginal literature. Yet even there, even in Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung*, I, an Egyptian-born American, felt the intimacy of my own desire, pain, mortality.

There are no universals? Perhaps none Platonic, but many pragmatic. Language, for instance, proximate to our needs. Indeed, there are many languages, five thousand and more, and therein lies a great mystery of mind — or, if you prefer, of evolution and the brain. But all human beings — even Kaspar Hauser, even the Wild Boy of Aveyron — have language. Their languages translate, imperfectly, into one another. And we are all lost, James Merrill said, in the translations.

Hence the continuing claim of world literature today: its power to move across all borders, its imperfect translatability into all languages, its spiritual efflorescence where cultural identities wither. In academe, such a claim would be furthered less by heroic self-assertions than by ideological abnegations, a kind of momentary unknowing. After all, even the heroes of myth must learn, in the end, self-submission to the universe.

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Congratulations on identifying the challenges of renewing, of innovating a journal, with boldness and reflections of the past. "Back to the Essay" discusses a historical polemic that goes back at least to the great classifier, Aristotle. The issue seems to be divided between those who would consider the expression or language as more important than achieving readability for a general readership. I commend you for attempting to reach a more diverse readership by publishing more essays. The emphasis should always be the present audience and the audience-in-the-making. I present my interpretation of your argument to support your new policy.

First would be to consider that the great prose documents of the Western tradition were written at a time when it was possible to be a renaissance man, such as a Bacon or a Montaigne. These men could focus on the issues of their time and place to produce essays to "move" their audience. And although their style was different, I suspect they both used the rhetorical form practiced at that time. Today, for richer or for poorer, we have a global information overload that requires, more than ever, a writer who can make sense of pressing issues in a clear, coherent,

concise manner. The issue here seems to be: do we continue publishing professional articles that are in the form of a thesis supported by researched proofs in the manner of the Greeks' rhetorical form, or do we focus on articles that are also professional but use a more relaxed, "lively" form of writing and are supported by a knowledgeable perspective? Your fear would be to receive essays that focus on radical polemics, sentimentalism, opinionism that are "open" and "lively" but do not adhere to the scholar's notion of an essay. And our notion of a scholar's essay has been shaped by scholars. Again, your difficult job as editor would be to decide if form is more important than content. They will not all be happy marriages. When does an opinion become a perspective? When will you decide that an essay's material is literary and not social in origin? Can we make those divisions or distinctions? Will you want to?

The second issue that your editorial discusses is language. It appears that another reason for turning to essays is that scholarly articles use philosophical, obtuse, and jargon-laden language. Academics tend to write in "insider discourse," maintaining the journals' exclusivity of audience. There are others who, like Butler, believe that convoluted prose subverts the established academic system linguistically. A rather lengthy "essay" written by Andrew Epstein appeared in the September issue of *Lingua Franca* explaining the Language poets' attack on official verse culture. It outlined the public and academic success of Language poets such as Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman, and Charles Bernstein, who preach that "writing must be 'taken out of the service of the capitalist project.'" I assume these "poets" are doing for poetry what Butler, Adorno, and other theorists claim to be doing with theory. What Epstein so quietly points out is that all the Language poets have managed to land tenured positions in prestigious institutions, so how are they continuing their attacks? They have become establishment figures, many argue, yet Bernstein seeks to perpetuate what he calls the "aversion of conformity" at the heart of the American intellectual tradition. Who is their audience? Did they create one and are now nourishing it though their teaching? Most likely. That is what academics do, and the language they use does not have to be subversive. Their ideas and calls to action should be the criteria. What can theory do if it does not have an audience that implements it? And as Orwell points out, there is no rationale for writing ineffectively. How will you establish criteria for effectiveness?

Possibly the greatest twentieth-century Chicano essayist, José Antonio Burciaga, in *Spilling the Beans*, recalls a time when a story he wrote was selected for a high-school literature anthology with the condition that he change the word *carajo* because some teachers objected to it. Instead of *carajo*, could they use the word *idiota*? He checked the Royal Dictionary and found many substitutes for expressing amazement and surprise, and *idiota* was not one of them. He wrote back and explained that they could not change *carajo* to *idiota*: "If you do not want to use *carajo*, you may substitute *caray* for *carajo*. But not *caramba*. *Caramba* is too much like 'Gee whiz!'" That's why Speedy

Gonzalez and Donald Duck use it." Who decides whether to use *carajo*, *caray*, or *caramba*, and, more important, should publication be decided by cultural *carajos*?

Burciaga's anecdote takes me to the most important reason stated for publishing essays. That the essay can "mirror the culture back to itself" too often applies to the literature written by the dominant culture. *World Literature Today* publishes articles with many global perspectives. I urge the editors to consider that the peoples and cultures residing in the USA have created a global audience here in the United States. Many Chicanos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans can also provide hybrid forms and knowledgeable perspectives on life in the States. The capacious form of the essay suits these points of view, as does the academic article format. Too few established "elite" journals accept work by these diverse Americans.

Your decision to "open the windows" of *WLT* parallels the global consciousness of today. You can publish in many formats from all cultures in the United States and the world. You have decided to embark on a perilous journey, with many voices urging you to listen. Bernstein takes a poignant attitude: "I don't think you lose critical function by publishing books or by teaching, but rather by what you say, and what you teach." To paraphrase John Ashbery, "publishing of the future is / Opening its doors." What happens on the other side of those doors remains an unresolved question, but one that the *WLT* editors have decided not to ignore.

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In Robert Con Davis-Undiano's editorial "Back to the Essay: *World Literature Today* in the Twenty-First Century," he explains that "*WLT* was in the unusual position of being able to choose to engage with the challenges and opportunities of the coming century — to understand emerging literatures, to weigh new directions in scholarship, to focus on the changing interests of our readership, and (through electronic and traditional means) to serve young scholars and students as never before." What I find most interesting about his statements on the challenges and opportunities of *WLT* is the acknowledgment of electronic media and their potential effects on the journal. Throughout his musings, however, he does not discuss further the role(s) of the most obvious electronic shift: *WLT*'s own website. After finishing the editorial, I was still left wondering about the ways in which the *WLT* website draws upon potentially new and different audiences from those persons currently reading the print version of the journal.

With an emphasis on the history of the essay and its role in opening the accessibility of the journal to a wider readership, I expected Professor Davis-Undiano to discuss the ways in which the *WLT* website invigorates the journal's readership. The readers themselves might now be found in front of a computer screen rather than behind the pages of a print version of the journal. With the form of the journal in both print and electronic versions, the *WLT* editors are presented with the challenge of understanding its electronic readership. This audience might expect some traditional print essays for download, as what is now available on the website, but they also likely will expect to find a refiguring of the traditional essays available in the journal.

In closing, I want to commend the journal's goal of opening the discourse on literature to a broader audience, and I also

want to thank Professor Davis-Undiano for sharing his vision of the journal. My hope is that the *WLT* staff will investigate the potential of its website to help achieve the goal of sharing intellectual discussions on literature with a broader audience.

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The critical reevaluation of a journal's aims and policies is one of the best ways to ensure its continuing relevancy and sustained growth. Years of publication are never a guarantor of contemporary significance, and even journals with long and venerable publishing histories like *World Literature Today* must be evaluated on the basis of their recent issues and current policies. However, publications with great historical success are often more reluctant to examine their publishing practices and engage in the difficult task of critical self-assessment. With that in mind, the recent efforts of *WLT* will be an inspiration to editors of other established academic journals to rethink the focus and form of their publications in light of contemporary cultural and academic conditions. Changes in editorial policy will ensure that *WLT* continues to be a vital and engaging publication for the larger literary community.

While a number of *WLT*'s recent editorial decisions captured my attention, three in particular were of special interest: 1) the decision to publish more poetry; 2) the establishment of the "Forum" section devoted to reader commentary; and 3) the decision to make the essay the preferred form of contribution. These three initiatives reveal not only exciting new directions for *WLT*, but also indicate the kind of challenges that lie ahead for academic journals in general. . . .

I applaud *WLT*'s decision to publish more poetry. Academic journals devoted to literature are too strictly divided between those that present studies of literature and those that publish new literature. At their best, journals like this one should be places where one can find not only high-quality studies of new poets and poetry, but also a stimulating selection of new poetry itself. The decision to publish more world poetry is an opportunity for the editorial staff of *WLT* to utilize their excellent judgment in an area increasingly neglected by major academic journals and relegated to smaller poetry reviews and journals.

However, there are risks involved in publishing world poetry. Even if one can come to terms with the problem of translation (whether to present the poems in their original language, or in English translation, or both), there is also the matter of selection and coverage. Should *WLT* publish canonical poets or non-canonical ones? What countries/languages will be most represented and why? Will the basis of selection be noted in the journal or not? Will the poems be previously published poems or new poems? Will permission cost be an issue in selection and coverage? These questions and conflicts are all the more intensified in an age where editors and journals are held more accountable for the cultural and political implications of their editorial decisions. *WLT* can help establish a standard for publishing world poetry in an ideologically charged atmosphere. . . .

The decision to establish a section which opens *WLT* to commentary from its readership is another excellent way of making this journal of interest to a wider audience. Sections such as "Forum" widen the audience of *WLT* by encouraging specialists and nonspecialists alike to comment on the journal and on matters pertaining to world literature regardless of their affiliation or level of expertise. A change as modest as adding a page or

two for public discussion and commentary brings a dimension to *WLT* that will separate it from much of its competition. . . . Contributions to the "Forum" section of this journal are interventions from the reading public into a space previously reserved for carefully crafted interpretations of world novelists and surveys of academic books. The presentation of opinions via letters, notes and comments can break down the notion that *WLT* is the public display of a non-publicly situated discourse about world literature. Letters also bring back the *hic et nunc* of the "Today" in *WLT*'s full title. . . .

The public forum should be viewed as a response to one of the greatest challenges for the next generation of literary scholars: finding ways of bringing academic scholarship more strongly into the public sphere. I think that it also complements the last policy change on which I'd like to comment: *WLT*'s new policy of focusing on the essay as the preferred mode of inquiry into world literature today. Recently there has been much discussion and debate concerning the importance of making scholarship in the humanities, particularly in areas such as literature studies and literary theory, more publicly accessible. A number of commentators have contended that at least since the mid-1970s, the study of literature has come to be dominated by dense discussions replete with specialized and obscure terminologies. Consequently, much professionally respected literary criticism of the last twenty-five years makes little sense to those unfamiliar with its theoretical foundations or its specialized vocabularies. In opposition to this trend, some journals have refused to publish discussions of literature utilizing vocabularies which might be inaccessible to the general reader. The journal *Philosophy and Literature* is one such publication; in its "Note to Contributors," *Philosophy and Literature* states, "Though the journal owes allegiance to no particular school or style of criticism or philosophy, its editors prefer contributions free of jargon or needless technicality."

The working assumption of the *P&L* editors is that there is a common parlance which transcends critical positions and interpretive methodologies. No matter what the topic, claims can and should be formulated in a common language — and if they cannot, then they are meaningless. The new "preference for the essay" policy of *WLT* essentially takes a stance similar to that of *Philosophy and Literature*, and it is here that *WLT* is faced with a dilemma. While the essay form will surely change the demographics of the journal's potential readership, it will also necessarily alter its status as a professional academic journal in much the way that *Philosophy and Literature*'s "style policy" has affected its status as a legitimate source for professional criticism on the interrelations between philosophy and literature.

In "Back to the Essay" Professor Davis-Undiano makes a distinction between the "'professional article,' written for insiders such as professors and graduate students," and the "essay," that is to say, writing which is "as careful and well informed as possible, yet bold enough to make decisions and state opinions without waiting to achieve an impossible level of perfection." Presumably, *WLT* has chosen to embrace the essay with the aims of increasing its audience and increasing its contributions' accessibility to the public. The differences, however, between encouraging public commentary on its contents and policy and turning to the essay as the preferred mode of writing for the journal as respective means of increasing public access to the journal are great — as are the implications of such policies on academic journal publishing in general.

While I agree with Professor Davis-Undiano that academic journals should not resist changes in editorial policy because they are "partially shielded from market forces," and that they should continue to "develop an audience" and to "discover" their "material," at the same time journals also should not alienate one audience in pursuit of another. The professional article is more than just a form of writing for most professors and graduate students; it is their main form of legitimate publication. This form of publication opens academic opportunities for graduate students and professors, locates them in professional communities, and determines their future in the academy. The "jargon" and "technicality" of the professional article is generally the consequence of its author attempting to firmly position his or her ideas within the preferred language and argumentative style of his or her respective discipline or area of scholarship. What might seem unnecessary to someone who is not a member of their community of scholars is often a necessity of participation within that area of inquiry. Consequently, when the editors of *Philosophy and Literature* choose not to publish articles that utilize the vocabularies and modes of argumentation or styles of presentation representative of particular intellectual communities, they are effectively indicating to those communities that *P&L* does not wish to support their future inquiries.

While the decision by the editors of *Philosophy and Literature* to publish jargon-free articles and the new policy of *WLT* to focus on the essay broadens the range of people who will be interested in and capable of benefiting from these journals, they also exclude members of professional communities who are unwilling to alter their scholarly standards. Academic journals are given tax-exempt status so that they may serve their respective academic communities without the added pressures of market forces and public opinion. Academic journals must first and foremost serve the ends of their respective academic communities. This does not imply, however, that they should not challenge their communities, and make efforts to expand them.

While I think that *WLT*'s policies of publishing more poetry and opening its contents and policies to public discussion will work to both challenge and expand the community of people interested in world literature, I am uncertain that the essay policy will. Perhaps what is needed is a commitment to publish more essays in *WLT*, while at the same time reducing the number of "professional articles" published. Such a policy would work toward the dual ends of continuing to serve the scholarly community by providing a source for the publication of professional articles as well as to make more in-roads into the public sphere by publishing more contributions in essay style.

My hope is that the *WLT* policy will encourage academic professionals to review the rich history of the essay in world literature criticism. A second hope is that *WLT* will utilize its new essay policy not to the exclusion of the professional article, but as a way of complementing the journal's long tradition of providing the international literary community with high-quality, stimulating writing on world literature. In that manner, *WLT* will serve as a model for other academic journals on how to balance the needs of academic communities with the desire to produce publications which make an impact in the public sphere.

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