

# Historicizing CELJ

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*It is utterly impossible to persuade an Editor that he is a nobody.*

—William Hazlitt

It is always celebratory and sobering, entertaining and instructive to be among fellow journal editors, collaborators in the essential scholarly tasks of selecting, preparing, and disseminating investigations, theories, analyses, and commentaries that are informative, provocative, exploratory, critical. Our common tasks as well as our uncommon ones still bring us together some forty-two years after our founding fathers, who must have felt pretty much the same way, first gathered together at an annual meeting of the MLA. That original meeting of what was then called the Conference of Editors of Learned Journals—the C in our common logo was initially designed to mean Conference, not Council—was held in 1957, called specifically to reinstate and amend the first *MLA Handbook for Editors*, then long out of print.

So the written record has it. Oral tradition also has it that the meeting was at least partly the idea of Don Cameron Allen, then the senior Renaissance scholar at Johns Hopkins University and editor of *ELH*. It had long been Allen's cherished dream to institute an American Academy, based on the French model, which would honor by election the foremost scholars of literature in the United States; and he himself was prepared to name the thirty who should be the first elected to such national prominence. I know of no one who now knows just whom Allen had in mind besides himself—so one editor would have been in that highly select grouping—but he seems to have settled instead for CELJ.

That first meeting apparently fulfilled its immediate purpose, for there is no further record until 1962 when Curt Zimansky, editor of *Philological Quarterly*, sent a memo to eleven journal editors inviting them to meet at the MLA in Washington, D.C., to discuss reprint rights; this eventually produced a "Statement of Permissions." Taking its centrality from its limited membership of congenial editors, small and self-selective, it continued to meet quietly each year over drinks to discuss central problems of editing or of the profession in general. It was not especially closed—in the way Allen might have preferred—but it was not especially public either.



I have forgotten how I first heard about it; perhaps, given a room, it was announced in the MLA convention program. At any rate, in 1969, when I was still investigating the desirability of beginning a new journal called *English Literary Renaissance (ELR)*, I was either invited or dropped in. I found the meeting pleasant enough—there were perhaps a dozen people in the room—but not especially informative; the editors had already shared all their ideas and had little to say about journals. The same was true in 1970, and then, in the fall of 1971, Curt Zimansky unexpectedly died of a heart attack and, during the illness that briefly accompanied it, he asked me to chair the meeting. *ELR* had by then gone through only a tumultuous first year of publication when we found, midway, we were underfunded; when we were feeling our way on criteria for selection and the final unique qualities of the journal and learning how to solicit (or not solicit) submissions, how to evaluate them, and how to return those we could not accept. What I knew I needed was a workshop in the basics, and perhaps more open discussions to which potential contributors could be invited, to remove the mystique of publication which still shrouded much of what we were doing.

It was the right time for such a move; within a year, CELJ rolls went from a dozen to 110; in two years, we had 250 members and were drawing up plans for organization and for committees to plan our activities at MLA, and then, through *Editors' Notes*, elsewhere. I was succeeded in 1974 by Mark Spilka, of *Novel*, who was in turn succeeded by R. G. Collins of *Thalia*, and by Marilyn Gaull, in 1977, of *The Wordsworth Circle*. Until then, CELJ had largely countered

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the self-isolating activity of editing a journal by sharing technical advice, procedures, and companionship, and presenting journals as more publicly open and eager to receive all sorts of material—from the conventional to the experimental, from the traditional to the interdisciplinary. Then under Marilyn's leadership, CELJ became proactive, investigating copyright, funding, production, protocol, peer review, and providing welcoming support for new and often highly specialized journals (one on Virginia Woolf comes to mind). There was heated discussion of standards: anonymity of contributors, number of readings, the length of time a journal could keep a submission before the author had the right to go elsewhere, multiple submissions, proliferation of publications, even shared financing. CELJ published a new *MLA Guidelines*, this time not only for editors, but, as the title said, for contributors as well, based on some early suggestions by Caroline D. Eckhardt, *Journal of General Education*, accepted by the Council at its meeting at MLA in 1977, and later suggestions made by Marilyn.

The seventies, then, were industrious but also heady days. Over a hundred new journals started up—and many remained. With publication becoming *de rigueur* for tenure and promotion for the first time in our relatively new field of English and American literatures, CELJ could fill a ballroom on a topic of "How to Get Your Paper Published"—and did, leading one senior scholar at Yale to suggest that presses that used journal articles as part of their books should pay a royalty back to the journal, or tithed into a general pool for journal funding. The euphoria characterizing those early years of CELJ in the seventies, with the help of William Schreck of *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, also created for potential contributors a handy formula of basic rules: size, appearance, footnotes, essential content (that spelled SAFE) that, adding reading the journal before submission, became SAFER. He also could joke about what not to do, how not to write letters like:

Dear Mr. or Mrs.:

Enclosed find a manuscript on the use of alliteration in the poetry of William Cullen Bryant. Although Bryant is thought by some to be a minor poet, the neglect of this fine writer and particularly of the subject I treat necessitates the fifty-page length of my submission. Can I expect to have your decision in two or three weeks; I am up for tenure review. Incidentally, anyone who has previously written on Bryant would make a poor choice of reader for my MS, because I disagree with each of them.

or

Dear Madame:

I have been studying Blake and Yeats now for a long time, and the manuscript I send you is part of a much larger project. My work concerns the use of light-darkness imagery in the poetry of these two visionaries. It may be useful for you to know that some of my insights were revealed to me in a dream.

At a time when, although griping about underfunding and lack of reward and recognition, editors experienced new-found delight in creating new journals and new-found power as referees or certifiers for tenure and promotion, the early seventies was largely marked by expansion and success.

Then all that changed. Success bred if not contempt, then inquiry. ACLS enlisted the help of an executive of McGraw-Hill Publishing to establish the National Enquiry into Scholarly Communication during the winter of 1976–1977, enlisting responses to four questions from various sectors of the academic community and the business community (but not editors, for the most part). Number one was a general reaction but number 2 was more specific:

Do you think scholarly publication, including journals, university press and commercial publishers' offerings, should be in any way coordinated? If so, how, and according to what bases? (Do you feel that currently there is too much repetition of effort? Should professional associations ever police or otherwise control published scholarship? Are there areas of scholarship that are currently neglected because of publication practices?)

Question 3 invited suggestions for "effective and proper approaches" for the Enquiry itself, and Question 4 returned to the spirit of 2:

Speaking practically, what actual steps would you recommend for implementation in the near future to improve the effectiveness of scholarly publication at national and international levels?

While this Enquiry concluded that "The journal is an efficient, flexible, and effective method of communication, and it plays an essential role in the dissemination of scholarly research," the clear intention of the Enquiry was to eliminate journals with small subscription lists or specialized interests, and to establish standards for those that remained—standards under supervision—and to combine publications for cost

efficiency. The start of journals divisions at some presses, like Hopkins and Wisconsin, resulted from this new mood, and many of us were asked to consider giving up our identifiable designs to cut costs in paper, covers, and production generally.

CELJ responded forcefully to this, as did the editors of *PMLA*, meeting the leaders of the Enquiry at the MLA offices in New York to argue for the free press, free rights of open discussion, and the necessity for new lines of inquiry in any direction which would, at least in the humanities, stand or fall by its own weight and effectiveness. CELJ strongly defended the open marketplace of ideas. The earlier jokes had become deadly serious matters and policing a central concern. In an address to CELJ at MLA, Arlin Turner, editor then of *American Literature*, commented that

I am uneasy to have it announced in the prospectus of the Enquiry that a major topic for the study is the "Proliferation of Scholarly Journals," and that the Enquiry "will attempt to assess the 'publish or perish problem in relation to the future demand for faculty and the availability of promotions.'" It seems reasonable to assume, we are told, that the studies will show that among the problems besetting scholarly publishing are, in the phrasing of the prospectus "pressures on young scholars to publish even trivial or duplicative materials and to create new journals to find outlets for their work." If I met this wording in a conclusion based on investigation, I would be surprised and would want to inspect the proof closely; but I am far more surprised to have it announced, ahead of the investigation, as a conclusion it can be assumed the investigation will yield. The expected products of the studies include also "recommendations to journal editors on methods of selection," and information on two subjects that we can hope will be made clearer when the findings are reported: "the relation of rejection rates to quality" and "the relation of academic promotion criteria and experience to post-publication evaluation."

The Enquiry's published conclusion did not underwrite financing of journals or further support of them, but made three suggestions: that journals sustain themselves by increasing the number of subscribers; that revenue could be enhanced by charging a reader's fee to contributors—\$35.00 per submission per journal was the figure put forth—and that journals further the dissemination of their material through close cooperation with a newly established Copyright Clearance Center.

From the start, the first two recommendations had little or no effect, but that was not true for the third. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for May 8, 1978, Jack Magarrel described a new National Periodicals Center as "an attempt to deal with some of the problems created by the exploding growth of periodical literature, the rising costs of subscriptions, and requirements of the new copyright law." Such a Center was recommended by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, established in 1970 by Congress, that saw a clear way for libraries to respond to the increased number and cost of journals not by consortia subscriptions (except in large cities such as Chicago) but by eliminating subscriptions and replacing them with copies on demand—of essays, whole issues, even runs. According to Magarrel:

The periodicals center might be expected to fill 375,000 requests in 1979 with a staff of 60 and a total of \$4.1 million, and to fill 732,000 requests in 1982 with a staff of 146 and a budget of 7.9 million, the commission estimates. . . . The commission says publishers of some periodicals have expressed concern over the possible loss of subscriptions if such a center were established, but it cites the experience of Minnesota, where the establishment of a state library network did not result in a significant drop in total subscriptions.

In its further defense,

The CONTU report says that copying fees paid for photocopying periodical materials might well become a significant source of revenue for some scholarly journals [after the Center's own operating costs were deducted]—"not to be compared with revenues from subscription charges, but in some cases more significant than such current sources of revenue as advertising, page charges, or subsidies."

Marilyn Gaull instantly replied, on behalf of CELJ, that "As an editor of a periodical during what most editors experience as lean and anxious years, I was heartened to see . . . that from the perspective of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Sciences, I have participated in the disruption of the entire library system, threatened the book-publishing industry, and will cost somebody \$4.1 million dollars for the first year of détente alone," but went on to explain that, unlike the sciences and social sciences, the humanities fostered journals that might have limited

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or even marginal interests and subscribers numbering two hundred or fewer whose existence depended on some library subscription income and security. It was a strong and effective reply at the time.

By the eighties, though, that time was eroding with the advent of desktop publishing—when costs for production went down and a number of new societies (so many the MLA had to set its own limit on the number of allied organizations because they had run out of hotel room) with their own journals once more battled for library income in a competing survival of the fittest. Luckily, desktop publishing helped to alleviate such a Hobbesian world. Rather, desktop publishing in fact encouraged yet another recommendation of the CONTU committee's preliminary report, if by a different route, that (in the words of an earlier era), a national periodicals center might also provide "a means for the on-demand publishing of short documents as an alternative to, or a supplement to, traditional journal publishing."

Now at the millennium (or perhaps the millennium minus one year), that particular response seems prophetic, even old-hat. In the new dawn of electronic publishing, libraries can supply campus-wide users with their own journal essays at their own terminals on demand. This is, as this brief history suggests, the fourth era of journal publishing in which CELJ must play a central—if not a policing—role, a role of collaboration, leadership, and (as we now say) outreach. I have in my brief history of our organization suggested that its various stages of growth have been caused by reversals of expectations and conditions—from the leisurely status quo to the sudden explosion of journals to an implosion of surveillance to the salvation of home (or even individual) publication. Each phase had made the earlier phase seem quaint or obsolete, or both.

But I think there is another and much better way to historicize CELJ. That is to see its history as spurts of growth reacting to and embracing the new worlds of technology and cost—and anticipated revenues. That would suggest a sequence of events underlying the erratic surface of events, by which the Council has confronted and assimilated changes in the course of production and dissemination in the world of learning and the world of ideas. At the same time, though, certain issues have remained constant—issues of procedure and ethics in the handling of material, the relationship with authors, and the treatment of

property rights. Our history tells us, cautions us, that these fundamental issues must stay with us no matter what the changes in technology, cost, and revenues. We must be increasingly vigilant with both sets of concerns, never excluding or diminishing one for the other.

At the same time, the libraries who once promoted investigation of what we do, and how and why we do it, must increasingly be our collaborators, just as on occasion university presses have been. The immediate question we face is hard copy versus electronic publication—or alongside it. Libraries are loathe to change course precipitously—or at least our own university librarian is—because they are fearful that electronic costs of production (and so subscription) will skyrocket well beyond the cost of hard-copy subscriptions. At the moment, but perhaps only for the moment, university administrations prefer hard copy publication as evidence for faculty promotion and reward. As we enter the electronic era, we in the humanities must find ways to pay the costs of any new operations and insure our revenues at the same time we maintain our own supervision of our publications. The balancing act is difficult. It was unforeseen in 1957, or even in 1977, but as a Council we are now much larger, much better trained in the production of journals and, at least to some degree, more inventive and creative than the founders of CELJ.

It really *is* a new millennium for CELJ (this year or next), and I for one am excited about the prospects of the next phase we are entering as a collaborative and mutually sustaining enterprise. We must welcome—but also constantly interrogate and evaluate—the fundamental changes already going on around us. The term "ways of getting published" is no longer the term it was in 1957.

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