

Dear Colleague,

In January 2012, the MLA convention will take place in Seattle, and this year's presidential theme is "Language, Literature, Learning."

Choosing the convention theme, a tradition established by Marjorie Perloff in 2006, is a privilege and an important responsibility of the president. With a primary theme, each convention takes on a particular character, facilitating focused concentration on a core topic for the profession. I hope that "Language, Literature, Learning" will build directly on the accomplishments of recent conventions. In 2008 Gerald Graff's theme, "The Way We Teach Now," brought pedagogy front and center at the MLA. Cathy Porter's 2009 theme, "The Task of Translation in the Global Context," underscored the urgency of linguistic diversity. "Narrating Lives," Sidonie Smith's theme for 2011, emphasizes the continuum between specifically literary narrative and the experiential terrain of lives, lived and told. These three agendas explored the environment surrounding scholarship and from which scholarship is inseparable: teaching, translating, and telling stories.

"Language, Literature, Learning" benefits from these recent convention themes and names core values for humanistic learning that we need to restate more than ever in these difficult times. Language: no matter what our specialty, we work with language, interpreting complex works. Language is at the heart of our profession and a constant topic of interrogation. Literature: we share a focus on literary works, authors and readers, forms and themes, across diverse traditions, periods, and places. Literature enhances the imagination, builds the capacity for creative thinking, and cultivates the quality of language. Learning: cognitive growth takes place through language, from transmission of information to critical thinking, and the encounter with imaginative literature plays a special role in educational development. There is furthermore a tight bond between the learning we pursue as researchers and the student learning we elicit as teachers.

The intersections in this threefold theme are many. Language is the sine qua non of literature: there is no literature outside language, but there is also never only one exclusive language. The path to literature passes through language and languages, the linguistic diversity that defines humanity. Studying texts, especially literary texts, is the center of humanistic learning, as it has been for centuries: this is the tradition of which we are stewards. Teaching students and contributing to their learning is the metric of our success: this is how we contribute to the future. At stake, then, is student learning both about literature and through literature. At stake as well is language learning, whether first or second languages, as gateways to knowledge about other cultures and about ourselves.

"Language, Literature, Learning" describes a field of interrelated questions, pertinent to theory as much as to the criticism of specific works. What is it about language that lends itself to imagination, where do word and image overlap, and how can we explore the continuum between vernacular and poetic language? What about the gaps among professional discourses, communicative language, and artistic expression? How does the status of language vary across literary genres, from language poetry to popular novels? Can we account for the particular language of individual authors? How do changes in new media transform language and literature? How do we bring the history of language and literary history into dialogue with each other, and how do cross-language practices, from formal translation to creolization, redefine literary study?

What about the diversity of languages that students bring to our classrooms? How can we promote student language acquisition beyond the most basic levels? How can we pursue critical reading as a

learning goal in the face of government policy that pushes high school teaching toward merely technical competence in reading? What does cognitive science teach us about learning in language and literary study? And what kinds of bridges can we build between the mission of second language learning and the language learning often defined as rhetoric and composition? How does the focus on student learning shed a new light on potential changes in graduate education? Today's graduate students will become tomorrow's teachers of undergraduates: do we have the right curricula in place?

“Language, Literature, Learning”: the theme stretches from the most difficult poetic language to modes of language acquisition in the classrooms. Rather than treat the distance between hermetic form and practical pedagogy as insurmountable, I hope that the Seattle convention will provide an opportunity for us to seize the dialectic, explore its permutations, and recognize how literature study is language learning, with enormous benefits for students' cognitive growth.

Discussing these matters can remind us of our core mission. Facing current attacks on humanistic learning, we should mount a robust defense of our values and our profession. In the fight against the degradation of working conditions in higher education, the MLA has been playing a leadership role and will continue to do so. That battle is not separate from the defense of the humanities. On the contrary, protecting the quality of education at all levels, acting to improve the working conditions of all educators, and advocating for humanistic study form a single agenda, the ultimate goal of which is providing all students fertile opportunities to learn and to grow.

The 2012 convention will be an exciting gathering. I hope that many of you will attend, and I look forward to seeing you in Seattle.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Russell A. Berman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Russell A. Berman
2011 MLA President