

EDITORIAL: AN OPEN LETTER

Dear Chairmen:

The annual sales at the academic conventions are over. The exhibits on display outnumbered all those in years before but, not surprisingly, there were few eager buyers. The recession had hit Academe. That this year's model was entirely new, equipped with fancy stock options and guaranteed to shift disciplines easily, didn't matter. Both the \$9,000 A.B.D. and the \$11,500 Ph.D. models made a fine showing at the MLA Grand Prix, but only 250 buyers were rumored to have come for the more than 2,000 models available. The market was, as they say, glutted, and that's why we're writing.

The word from the convention spread anxiety like peanut butter over the schools, and was, like peanut butter, hard to swallow. As the "we regrets" began to roll in from Columbia and Slippery Rock Teacher's College alike, students began to spend more time brooding over coffee--about the Job Situation. One was heard to mutter, "And I stayed in school to get a better job." Those who got jobs at all were feted like ex-cons who'd finally gotten a position after a year's wait in Halfway House. As for those students who actually got a job teaching one folklore course, they were treated like an addict who'd kicked the habit and been made chief of the Newark police.

The view from here is not encouraging, and it's not just the Job Situation that boggles the mind. It's the thought that someday, just someday, folklore might be an MLA monster too. Look at the Atlanta meeting. William Thoms wouldn't have believed his eyes. Two Ph.D. programs, five M.A. programs and God knows how many interdisciplinary programs turn out degree holders. We've always had the popular following, but now the is becoming more "professional." Compared to all the lean years before, Atlanta was a potlatch, and the applications keep rolling into the departments. It seems odd to think that folklore too has "benefitted" from the post-Sputnik blitzkrieg, but something has happened and suddenly there are a lot of us. Yes, it's amazing and wonderful--all the years of hard work on the part of professionals and non-professionals has paid off. The supply, however, has begun to exceed the demand, and there aren't any government-financed storage programs for surplus academics.

While folklore has certainly gained in popularity due to that same hard work by enthusiasts, deans are not begging us to set up programs in Columbia or Slippery Rock (re: the Afro-American Studies hysteria), and the single folklore courses slipped into English departments don't begin to catch up with the people available to teach them. Graduate programs aren't catching up either. Folklore is a highly diversified area of study. It requires, in a graduate department, a number of people with special skills. If more faculty can't be hired, the courses have to be limited, and the students leave with only the specialité de maison. With 40 or more full-time graduate students, the small faculties have to run the yearly basic offerings plus, if they're to do the job right, a number of individualized readings courses. That's just for the graduate students too. Then there's the yearly hassle of getting some support for just the best students--anybody tried to get a National Defense Loan lately? It's a nasty circle, as the saying goes. Something has to be sacrificed, and we're hoping it's not the

quality of folklore education. We've made it into the academic haven. We're respectable now. Let's think of some ways to stay respectable. Unless we want the MLA scene, unless we want to be bigger and perhaps not much better, we need to "establish some priorities" for folklore education, graduate and undergraduate. It'll be a bit different for each school, for each kind of program, but there should be some general goals possible. Maybe the people responsible for departmental and degree planning should get together with their present faculties and students, with the deans, and with each other. We're still small enough to do that. Perhaps the AFS would like to offer a structure for this kind of discussion. Let's talk about the economics of it, about the "professional" aspects of what we're all about. May be we need to decide what we're all about. But it's time to do it. Please--no MLAs for us.

A final word: an informal but frightening calculation tells us that, in September of 1971, at least 20 new Ph.Ds in folklore will be "on the market." What's really ghastly is that most of them are resigned... resigned to teaching English or Anthropology or history for a couple of years, maybe more, before they'll do what they've been taught to do. It's depressing to think we'll have to sneak our folkloric interests into a lecture on Hawthorne but, even worse, that we might not get to lecture on anything at all. It would be nice, we agreed wistfully, over that last cup of coffee, if folklorists could somehow begin to talk about the blight in the Groves of Academe and the rats in the Ivory Tower, before the trees and walls come tumbling down.

With concern and affection,

Your students

NOTE: On a final examination in F201 (the beginning course in folklore at I.U.), one student's reply to "Identify: William Thoms," was most enlightening. "William Thoms," he postulated, "said folklore isn't worth anything and cut funds for folklore study, especially at I.U."

VOX POPULI, VOX DEI!