
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the PMLA authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981 (fax: 212 533-0680).

Criticism and Humanness

To the Editor:

It is evident that many of us, who throughout our professional careers and into retirement have regarded *PMLA* as the *nec pluribus impar* of literary research and criticism, now may find its style and contents to have evolved so dramatically as to leave us feeling estranged, "out of the loop," in our former specialties, in which we once thought and still think ourselves proficient.

There appears to be an increasing trend toward extreme abstrusity, a predilection for a highly recondite language reminiscent of the argots closed groups used to ensure private communication and not easily accessible to other interested professionals. Naturally, erudite scholarship often requires the aid of words not in common use. However, such terms often flimmer and flicker in our concentration, as we desperately attempt to adjust and maintain them in a focus necessary for clear comprehension while grappling with the writer's intricate reasoning. Many articles also reflect a certain dehumanization, whereby the authors under scrutiny are stripped of all the features that define them as members of the human race.

Allow me to pick at random as an illustration David L. Sedley's "Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne" (113 [1998]: 1079–92) and share some of the thoughts it produced in me. Sedley endeavors to show us that, as exemplified by Montaigne, sublimity cannot be dissociated from skepticism. First of all I believe this to be self-evident. Indeed, are not all extremes—be they physical, ideological, intellectual, or spiritual, either experienced in the real world or created by the human mind—by their nature suspect and subject to skepticism? Such concepts as sublimity, their manageability mainly rooted in language, their definition tantalizingly elusive, owe their interpretation as much to the interpreted as to the interpreter.

Second, let us not forget that when a postmortem is performed—and Sedley's meticulous study is a kind of psychological autopsy on Montaigne's brain—it should be done on the original body. Readers should be emphatically reminded that, with respect to Montaigne's *Travel Journal*, we do not enjoy the benefit of his own words and thoughts. The original manuscript, once reposing in the Royal Library, has been mislaid, and we have only Querlon's edition of it. We are here dealing with a third person's account of Montaigne's meditations.

Whether or not Montaigne’s skepticism and universal incertitude were associated with his concept of sublimity, they always were patent—nay, prominently displayed below some of his portraits by the slogan “*Que sais-je?*” (“What do I know?”) and the drawing of a perfectly balanced scale. He prided himself on his critical mind, on a thought pattern not necessarily linear or chronological. And despite his skepticism he was not obsessed with it to the extent of not being capable of energetically dismissing it, where indicated, to express lofty, dare we say sublime, sentiments and emotions with an oratory worthy of that later found in Pascal:

What is man if he does not raise himself above his human condition? Let us consider man on his own, without outside help, solely armed with his own weapons, deprived of divine grace and knowledge, which constitute his entire honor, his strength, the foundation of his very being. Let us see how he measures up in his magnificent setting. Have him make me understand in his own words on what foundation he has built the great advantage he deems himself to have over other creatures. Who has persuaded him that this admirable motion of the celestial dome, the eternal light of those torches rolling so proudly above his head, the awesome movement of this infinite sea have been created and have continued for so many centuries for his convenience alone and to serve none but him? (my trans.)

Disappointment, whether or not based on sublimity associated with skepticism, regarding the deplorable state of Rome’s former grandeur was a commonplace, a cliché, in Montaigne’s time. The essence of his meditations on this subject, as related by a third party and relied on by Sedley, is concisely expressed in just one of Du Bellay’s quatrains:

Stranger who seeks in Rome the *Urbs* of ancient fame
and yet nothing of Rome in Rome perceives to be,
these ancient palaces and arches that you see,
and these old walls, are what of Rome now bears the name. (my trans.)

One final thought. Where is the real Montaigne? Would this fine gentleman from Périgord, future mayor of Bordeaux, recognize himself in Sedley’s painstaking laboratory analysis? Recalling his journey, would he ponder skepticism, sublimity, and that one short step bridging the sublime and the ridiculous? He had a ball in Italy, avid, observant, keen tourist that he was, equally curious about the old and the new Rome. He was astounded at being greeted everywhere in his own language and at the many Frenchmen crowding the streets. He met the French ambassadors, took part in Mardi Gras festivi-

ties, was gratified and honored to be named a citizen of Rome, and admired the Italian women, finding them as neat, but not as beautiful, as their French counterparts. He took pleasure in ogling the courtesans, noting to his surprise they were devout. When his guide became bored and discouraged and fell down on the job (I am not sure “*se rebuter*” means to quit), Montaigne threw himself passionately into studying tourist literature on his own, having the contemporary equivalent of the green Michelin guides read to him every evening, whereby he could easily have “gotten his guide back on track” (“*reguidé son guide*”). Would we ever have known this side of our essayist and traveler had we been limited to inferring it from speculations on the roots of his skepticism in his notions of sublimity? Conversely, knowing more about his personality might give us a better perspective on this particular aspect of his intellectual processes.

Who am I to question editorial policy? Still, must certain literary scholarship strip itself of all the belletristic elements, the beauty, the humanness, everything that makes authors and their works attractive in the first place? Let literature both instruct and delight! Is it really true and, if true, necessary, as I was recently told by a graduate student, that many of our colleagues in their writing now often speak only to one another and do not always communicate at that? Then Goethe’s advice and warning through Dr. Faustus are quite relevant: “All theory, dear friend, is a mere lifeless gray; / life’s golden tree alone sparkles in green array” and

If you don’t feel it, you’ll never reach your goal,
unless it surges, springing straight from the soul,
and all the hearers’ hearts are wrenched and rent
by the all-primal force of deep content.
Just sit there piddling, patch your thoughts together
with paste and glue, and with leftovers from the feast
of others
go brew a stew!
Blow on your measly heaps of ashes, blow in vain
to light a puny flicker of a flame. (my trans.)

MAX OPPENHEIMER, JR.
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Reply:

The letter by Max Oppenheimer, Jr., surprises me, since its assessment of my article as abstruse, dispassionate, and superfluous seems to ignore how, why, and what I write. I avoid jargon and explain the terms I use. I state my arguments regularly, explicitly, and as clearly as I can. My analysis of Montaigne’s meditation is close but