

fore glossed over in the article, a reaction that is brought to the surface now by the forthrightness of Gilmore's question: that Pope's self-defense in the "Epilogue to the Satires"—even when we make what allowances we can for theories of personae and the like—does seem to me on the very edge, perhaps over it, of sentimental excess.

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Objectivity in Scholarship

To the Editor:

In "Do Literary Studies Have an Ideology?" (May 1970 *PMLA*) I suggested that recent academic criticism has been appreciably influenced by tacit political assumptions. Such influence, I conceded, is harder to discern in a libertarian society than in a totalitarian one, and is less evident in literary studies than in the social sciences; it can be established only inferentially. Yet our adherence to "scholarship's ideal of shedding prejudice" and our distaste for the "politicization of learning" should, in theory at least, make us eager to recognize and correct any political inhibition on our objectivity. I acknowledged that in practice most professors would be incapable of such unaccustomed self-appraisal, and I predicted that a shift of direction would have to come from critics who are impatient with the whole ideological consensus that has prevailed since World War II.

The three letters in your January issue ignore this reasoning, but in varying degrees they do offer some minor support for it by their very digressiveness. My essay spoke of the religiosity, hortatory muddle, and misplaced outrage that often substitute for argumentation when American values are felt to be threatened. Mrs. Katherine Cooper rebuts my essay by saying that I have "definitely supported the enemies of the American system" and then by invoking the defective heart of man, the sanctity of the family, and the need for "a God-oriented literature." Lawrence W. Hyman denies that I regard literature primarily as an art, wrongly infers that I am asking present-day critics to adjust their literary standards to their politics, and urges, as I would, that literature be enjoyed for itself. And Morton W. Bloomfield alerts MLA members to several dangerous tendencies he ascribes to my essay, volunteers to "take to the barricades" if necessary, and reaches a Churchillian climax of objectless fervor: "If we must go underground we will go underground, but the torch of humanism should not be allowed to lose its light in a universal holocaust by our throwing more fuel on the fire."

Largely through innuendo but also through incorrect summary, Bloomfield encourages your readers

to believe that I see all criticism and even all literature as nothing but ideology; that by my standards "*King Lear* is the same work as the *Communist Manifesto*"; that I would cherish *King Solomon's Ring* above *Hamlet* as being more "useful in the biological struggle for survival"; that I would deny that Americans have any "freedom to complain and criticize" by pointing "to the oppression of the blacks and chicanos, Judge Hoffman, the Bobby Seale trial, the students killed at Kent State, etc."; that literature, for me, *is* its social and mental antecedents; that I subscribe to the canons of socialist realism and would judge literature "according to whether it contributes to the advancement of communism or not"; and that my ideas would lead to "creating tyranny in the name of liberty" and to such policies as the detention of Soviet writers. These extravagant fantasies are offered, you will recall, in answer to my argument that American scholars are not as open minded as they might be. I can now understand how Leslie Fiedler must have felt when, after one of his piquant lectures about Ishmael and Queequeg, a member of the audience accused him of having stolen his raincoat.

Bloomfield's irrelevancies can be understood only as so many efforts to change the grounds of discussion and to surround my essay with an aura of subversion. Readers may remember that I credited the "genuine intellectual freedom" that scholars enjoy under capitalism in confident times, alluded to "the suffocation of dialogue under present-day socialism," and declared that "officially sanctioned socialist criticism is almost always simpleminded and venal, like any other mental effort that must flatter a bureaucracy and meet a doctrinal test"; Bloomfield pretends that I said the exact reverse. He takes as his thesis the truism that "there is a non-ideological aspect to literature," as if I had maintained otherwise. In place of rational debate we are then offered a melodramatic choice between freedom and bondage, American liberty and "Soviet insane asylums." Recourse to these all too familiar tactics does not inspire much confidence in the author's thoughtfulness. As Karl Mannheim observed, "Those persons who talk most about human freedom are those who are actually most blindly subject to social determination, inasmuch as they do not in most cases suspect the profound degree to which their conduct is determined by their interests."

The only intellectually serious argument I can find in your three letters is Hyman's claim that formalist criticism is justified by the very nature of literature. Citing Yeats and Eliot, he reiterates the formalist position that literature escapes altogether from emotions, creating "something that has nothing to do with action or desire." If this is so, he deduces, I was ill-advised to place such heavy emphasis on social and psychological

factors. Hyman admonishes me against looking in literature for the moral passion that may have preceded its creation. Like my “friends on the New Left,” I am said to be imperfectly reconciled to the difference between art and life.

This line of reasoning is highly contestable. One can grant that literary experience differs from ordinary passion without elevating it, as Hyman thinks necessary, to a realm where psychological knowledge is inapplicable. The very assurance of immunity from the “real world” enables both author and reader to call upon a *deeper* range of emotions than is usually accessible to either of them, and it is precisely this tapping of common, buried sources that accounts for literary communication across barriers of time, nation, and ideology. There can be no antithesis between the laws of literature and the laws of mental life in general; whatever we know about literature is knowledge of how minds behave in reaction to certain invitations and constraints.

Thus it is gratuitous to say, without any practical criticism at hand, that people who look in literature for signs of its emotional vitality must be uninterested in art or insensitive to form or incapable of telling the difference between one sort of experience and another. They may conceivably have a more accurate sense of these matters than a critic who attends only to abstract harmonies. The writer’s real freedom, as opposed to the quasi-divine autonomy attributed to him by formalist esthetics, is his ability to condense, represent, and impart meaningfulness to tensions that would seem irreconcilable to the rest of us. It is just because those tensions are *not* wholly transcended that we can appreciate artistic value; without them, art would be a minut of inert symbols.

What Hyman neglects above all is the waning historical vitality of the formalist paradigm, which he treats as permanently valid. Misperception and dullness inevitably follow when a method loses its *raison d’être*—in this case its energetic critique of impressionism—and becomes the accepted way of tending the store. Formalism now survives chiefly because it is well adapted to the ideological and institutional pressures discussed in my essay but overlooked by all three of your correspondents.

It is widely known that most academic criticism is practiced without enthusiasm and even with a certain disbelief. This deplorable condition is what is being protected from scrutiny when, for example, Bloomfield asks: “What advantage shall we gain in leading the way to the destruction of our subject-matter as an autonomous study? If we won’t support our subject, who will?” Such an appeal to departmental morale is, I believe, as self-defeating as it is parochial. A changing political and intellectual climate is bound to bring

with it a reassessment of the possibilities for vital knowledge, and it is precisely on this reassessment that the survival of “our subject” will depend. It is unavoidable, I suppose, that this point should be lost on scholars who mistake their own preconceptions about literature for the enduring cause of humanism.

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Literature and Politics

To the Editor:

In reply to Harvey Stuart Irlen’s letter (Forum, Jan. 1971 *PMLA*) on my speech, “The Politics of Literature,” I offer a few reflections.

To explain the distinctions I made between personal political involvement and organization-wide political commitment seems to me pointless. Mr. Irlen is unable to grasp the fundamental differences between the things he so blithely compares. He speaks of “political energies” and “political methods” exerted to increase the budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities or on behalf of TIAA. Apparently Mr. Irlen actually believed when he heard himself appealed to on behalf of these enterprises that he was being asked to join in political action. Small wonder that any injunction on my part to remain critical and individually responsible strikes him as hypocritical! For him, any pause to examine differences will obviously undermine the whole enterprise of action. For some of us, being moved by injustice does not drive us uncritically into supporting petitions and accusing all those who do not support them of hypocrisy. We realize, as Mr. Irlen does not, that a specious “unified” stance by the MLA on extra-professional issues such as the war in Vietnam will merely alienate many of our members and undermine the influence we can have in areas of our competence. “Humane interest” is too vague a phrase to convince us that Mr. Irlen understands the issues he invokes. He is the least dangerous of many sirens who would have us abandon the work we do—work which is valuable and relevant and an honest contribution to bettering our society—developing a critical spirit in the young people we teach.

I am far more interested in the *human* implications of our professional standards and the projects concerned specifically with education which we in the MLA support than in a comparative survey of pension plans. Mr. Irlen does his colleagues a severe injustice by assuming that when they refuse to blindly lend their potential influence to the vague causes he enumerates, it is because they are selfish and shortsighted. They realize more fully than he the serious nature of social injustice in this country; they are deeply concerned with effecting change; they are also acutely