

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than 1,000 words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Reading Criticism

To the Editor:

Cary Nelson's "Reading Criticism" (*PMLA*, 91, 1976, 801–15) makes an important point. Reading literature comes to include, for any developing mind, reading criticism. In philosophy there is much less of a distinction between "primary" and "secondary" sources: ask a philosopher what he does, and the answer is philosophy.

The dichotomy between critic and creative writer, as it presently stands, is the result of increasing specialization and doesn't do either any good. The distinction should be maintained, of course, but not the dichotomy. When we again learn to read the writer as a reader—to understand not only his reading matter but also his habits of interpretation—the dichotomy should disappear.

Nelson does not go far enough, however. He says too little about the nature of criticism as a collective activity. He accepts somewhat quickly Northrop Frye's position that literary commentary is an institution with its own reason for being and its own system or schemata. The situation, I believe, is more "contaminating": criticism may, despite Frye's concordat, be itself a form of literature. Or, enough of it exists at the present time to make us revise a concept of literature that has recently narrowed itself from "letters" to "purely creative" writing.

The literary and philosophic criticism of today is a development in the history of *prose*, or in a prose genre that had previously accepted certain rules: of expository sparsity, pedagogical decorum, and social accommodation. These rules produce benefits, but they are hardly absolutes. We gain something and lose something in accepting them. Combined with the narrow focus of many critical pieces that make a fetish of the particular work of art discussed, they lead us to forfeit the range and freedom of earlier essayists (F. Schlegel, Emerson, Pater, Ruskin).

It must be admitted, at the same time, that the essay has now bound itself to methods of Close Reading, so that literary texts are not used by us as mere examples or to illustrate some high argument. Indeed, consecutive writers may seem tedious, and so tempt us to cut their thread of prose into sharp-edged fragments or aphorisms. This could be the

result of intellectual short-windedness on our part. It could also be that the relation of tenor to vehicle, or of argument to example, has become as disturbed in criticism as it is in poetry.

Whether consecutive or essayistic, the writer borrows from and assimilates others. This is the problem of literary paternity (or, at times, literary fraternity), and Nelson states concisely that "How critics cope with the paternity they create for themselves is integral to the texture of their future productivity" (p. 803). True, yet Nelson overemphasizes the present generation. The problem of debt, quotation, and intertextuality has been with us for a long time, perhaps as long as literature itself.

In terms of the particular self-awareness we call "modern," we can take the matter back to Flaubert's Dictionary of Received Ideas. This Commonplace Book was meant to put all future writers into a permanent state of embarrassment and so to jeopardize writing. Everything we could say would appear as already said, not in the honorific sense of having been anticipated by the Classics but in the demotic or demonic sense of words sinking—necessarily—into common usage or the jargon that Natalie Sarraute named tropisms. The profoundest thought or expression has no destiny except to be as trivialized as Freud is today.

With this, the "Words in Wonderland" attitude perpetuated by the very phrase "creative writing" is checked. An explicit literary nihilism arises, which characterizes Nietzsche as well as Flaubert, and within or against which not only Derrida but most contemporary thinkers on literature move. The word "nihilism" sounds strange in English, but it comprises a set of attitudes that is subtle and complex, and includes, for example, Flaubert's remarks that he wished above all to write a book "about nothing."

This nihilism, not mentioned by Nelson, is also the real subject of Susan Sontag's *Styles of Radical Will*, one of the works discussed in his article. He quotes from her first piece on "The Aesthetics of Silence," which describes the development of art from Romantic self-consciousness to hope in a consciousness-cure ("Art is not consciousness per se, but rather its antidote—evolved from within consciousness itself") and finally to so strong a realization of the mediacy or treachery of words that "Art becomes the enemy of the artist, for it denies him

the realization—the transcendence—he desires” (*Styles of Radical Will*, pp. 4–5, Nelson, p. 807). At that point the artist’s will turns against art, as he adopts an “Aesthetics of Silence” or an asceticism through which he is “purified—of himself and, eventually, of his art.”

But critics too can turn against their art—by insisting on criticism’s parasitic nature. Nelson might have stressed even more the critic’s sense of his own mediacy. Nihilism is against neologism, in the broad sense of that word: the possibility of saying anything really new. The writer—critic or artist—is a *bricoleur* and has always been such. No ultimate historicizing disjunction can be made between ancient formulaic modes of composition and “modern” methods of inner quotation.

Yet the more you load language with quotations or allusive matter, the more it subverts meaning. Puns, in which this load becomes an overload, are a special case of this subversion: however witty and explosive, however energetic their yield of meaning, they evoke in us a sense of leprous insubstantiality, of a contagion that might spread over language as a whole. We feel like the Cheshire Cat who says to Alice: “You may have noticed that I am not all there.” The literary nihilist is the Cheshire Cat of language. He is a mobile synecdoche. Language shows its teeth in an empty grin.

The problem of quotation is especially maddening. It does not surprise me that what Susan Sontag says about the late Romantic myth (that art is an antidote to self-consciousness) is a quotation from my essay on Maurice Blanchot (republished in *Beyond Formalism*). Likewise, I absorb her phrase on the “aesthetics of silence” into another essay in the same collection. Her phrases and mine have suffered the fate of becoming, if not commonplaces, then virtual quotations. Yet “quotation” still implies a specific source or author. Inner quotation is unattributed, however, and this raises the entire problem of *attribution*.

In news conferences there is the convention that certain quotes are Not For Attribution. The conventions of scholarly criticism, however, dictate that everything should be For Attribution. Fiction, at the same time, is our clearest genre of nonattributive writing: it aspires to the condition of appearing totally original even when it has absorbed by inner quotation the words of others.

The reason, then, that scholarly criticism is so nervous about exact quotation and attribution is that one of its functions is to recover the *mediacy* of this deceptive and powerful kind of writing we call a fiction, and it cannot perform this function without accepting its own mediacy by acknowledging debts and attributing the words of others. But fiction, of

course, may itself move insidiously closer to criticism by various forms of mockery: feigned attribution, feigned originality, self-exposing plagiarism. The pleasures of Borges are anticipated by the burdens of Macpherson and Coleridge. . . .

GEOFFREY H. HARTMAN
Yale University

To the Editor:

Cary Nelson’s “Reading Criticism” is an excellent example of the critical stance he deplores. Arguing that criticism is “more personally motivated than we usually assume” and that “academic criticism works very hard to depersonalize its insights, to mask its fears and wishes in a language of secure authority,” he asks that we “forgo the collective professional illusion of objectivity and learn to be somewhat more iconoclastic about what we write” (pp. 802, 803, 813). All this is very much to the point and needs to be said and even insisted upon. But Nelson also argues that this “does not mean that we should make criticism more personal. The decision to add personality to criticism usually results in preciosity or hysteria” (p. 803). If we forgo objectivity and become iconoclastic, are we not subjective? Or, as Humpty-Dumpty said to Alice, is it the case that “when I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean?” Nelson perceptively points out that criticism “requires a language of meticulous duplicity” (p. 813). He condemns this duplicity; he also practices it. It is, admittedly, difficult to avoid. Our profession deals in paradox, and the line between paradox and duplicity is thin indeed. So, is it shiftyly duplicitous or simply intelligently paradoxical to be both subjective and impersonal at the same time?

Nelson, like the critics he discusses, does not want to be pinned down; he wants to argue his case without being responsible for it. The horror of subjectivity so prevalent among critics, the distaste for the personal so strong as to make Nelson’s statement that criticism is “more personally motivated than we usually assume” sound revolutionary when it ought to be a truism, the disinclination to explore why one writes in a particular fashion on a particular subject are unfortunately evident in Nelson’s own essay. It asks that we admit to our positions but does not admit to its own. It urges that we forgo a spurious objectivity, but its own stance toward the critics discussed remains conventionally distant. *They* are put on the couch, their motivations examined in a language that scrupulously avoids any gauche analytic terminology and carefully circumvents responsibility for its clearly meant implications. Nelson’s ambivalence toward his subject—his fear of being thought