

I said in discussing the treatment of the tragic endings by these critics (132). But from an intentionalist perspective—and I must repeat myself once more—the question is not whether we can find such problems but whether the ending calls attention to them and so undercuts its own “closure.” I also said in this section that the only ending that apparently would satisfy these critics would be the dismantling of patriarchy and the establishment of a new order of gender equality. If Cacicedo disagrees, then I think he is obligated to tell us what, in his view, *would* constitute an “unproblematic” happy ending.

His next point, that I glided over what I acknowledged to be the “very impressive achievement” of feminist criticism, is correct. I did so because I thought it would be obvious to most readers of *PMLA* and because expanding on it would have meant dropping other material, since the article was hovering on the edge of the word limit, but I may have been wrong. However, I do not see any contradiction between acknowledging this achievement and maintaining that the comedies are meant to end happily. And I never asserted that Leontes’s jealousy “says nothing at all about male attitudes toward women.” Leontes is a male and his jealousy is therefore a male attitude; but Camillo, Antigonus, the unnamed Lord, Dion, and Cleomenes are just as male, and their defense of Hermione is just as much a male attitude. I was arguing about what “the play presents,” and I said it does not present his jealousy as “the intrinsically male attitude” (130). So again we return to intentionality. Cacicedo seems to slide back and forth between intentionalist and nonintentionalist positions, but he cannot have it both ways. I think the basic issue between us lies there, and not in the opposition between my bogus “im-partiality” and his honest partiality, which is how he keeps trying to cast it (although in his third paragraph he claims that *he* is being impartial).

This brings me to his final point, which involves a misreading of my last sentence. I knew that in that sentence I would be flying in the face of the latest orthodoxy, and so I tried to choose my words with some care. I asked not for a scientific study of human development that would “remain free of ‘ideology,’” as he puts it, but for a study based on *evidence* that “compelled the assent of all rational people, regardless of their gender or ideology,” which is a very different thing. And I certainly did not suggest that such a study would give us “a magic key” to “unlock” the “mystery of texts.” In fact, it was precisely the claim to possess such a key to all human behavior that I was objecting to in both the older Freudianism and the feminist revised version that Cacicedo defends. That version, moreover, is not a “conclusion to which feminist readers of Shakespeare come”; it is a theory these critics bring to the plays. And it locates the cause of the masculine malady, not in men’s “strategies to take and keep power,” but in their infantile experience with mothering, and now perhaps in their fetal tissue, to judge from Madelon Sprengnether’s account of “primary femininity” in her article “Annihilating Intimacy in *Coriolanus*,” which

appeared too late for me to consider. So the problem may be sex and not gender after all, and biology can once more become destiny, but this time only for the men.

I would also like to take this opportunity to comment on another matter. I received a number of favorable letters on my article, many of which expressed surprise that *PMLA* accepted it. Apparently there was a widespread impression out there that our journal is not open to criticism of the new approaches now achieving hegemony, an impression that I hope has been dispelled by the publication of my article and Edward Pechter’s last year. And I want to thank the members of the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board for supporting these dissident voices, with which some of them must have disagreed.

RICHARD LEVIN

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Craving Oblivion

To the Editor:

Regarding Eco’s theoretical *ars oblivionalis* (103 [1988]: 254–61), the devices by which one forgets on account of excess are quite real and are known to cognitive psychologists as proactive and retroactive inhibition. Proactive inhibition occurs when a body of current information distorts recall of what is learned next, while retroactive inhibition happens when newly learned facts seem to force out the old.

As someone who took his orals not too many years ago, I can vouch for the power of both types of inhibition. No sooner has one memorized the dates of Virginia Woolf’s novels and major essays than one’s grasp on the data surrounding *Ulysses* begins to fade. Reacquiring Joyce forces out certain aspects of Lawrence, and so on. The one consolation is that I am now working on my dissertation. I have only to sit down to work on it when I begin to remember all sorts of information, including luncheon dates, swatches of sonnets, bills to pay, and anything else you care to name. Strangely, there are days when Eco’s “Strategies for Producing Oblivion” seems aimed at a consummation devoutly to be wished.

DAVID GALEF

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Hillis Miller and His Critics

To the Editor:

In his presidential address (102 [1987]: 281–91), Hillis Miller accuses critics of deconstruction, from both “the right” and “the left,” of a collective professional failure to read carefully and accurately “the plain sense” of

deconstructionist texts. I had to rub my eyes to be sure that Miller had used the phrase “plain sense,” since it was my understanding, shared by many other readers, that texts yielded “plain sense” only to the naive. Isn’t the most strenuous work of reading needed for one to discover the problematic sense of a text, including a deconstructionist text?

But I pass over the bad faith of Miller’s sudden claim of plain sense for his cherished texts to point out the even more egregious bad faith of his call for close reading. It would seem that his first obligation would be to show himself a close reader of the texts of the critics who, he believes, have failed so miserably to do their jobs. Instead, he presents himself as no reader at all, demagogically lumping together critics on “the right” as diverse as Wellek, Bate, Scott, Searle, and me without the slightest evidence that he has condescended to pay attention to the arguments and to the *differences* among them. The critics on “the left,” I assume, have similar reason to complain. I should add that Miller’s neat division of the world between left and right with deconstruction at the true center shows how utterly conventional and stereotypical his sense of intellectual discourse is, how uninstructed by the rigors and sophistication of deconstruction.

To show the emptiness of Miller’s sudden claim for the historical and political imagination of deconstruction, I would need more space than a letter to the editor permits. But I cannot let pass Miller’s attempt to associate himself with John Stuart Mill as a defender of academic freedom. Miller tells us that he is “for diversity, for heterogeneity in the university, . . . for free debate.” But there is no evidence in his address that he is capable of listening in “a fair and open” way to opposing voices. It is unimaginable that John Stuart Mill, author of the essays on Bentham and Coleridge (essays distinguished by their responsiveness to adversary ideas), would have characterized opposing voices in the following manner. “Let a hundred flowers thrive if they can, say I, even those that seem to be indubitably skunk cabbages and stinkweeds.” Miller’s idea of free inquiry is to insist that his conception of theory become the organizing principle of humanistic study for everyone.

Miller’s presidential address seems little more than an expression of wounded vanity that his party is losing support in the profession. I think it deplorable that he uses the forum of the presidency of a large, diverse organization to rally his troops, invidiously named at the expense of everyone else in the organization who does not share the true gospel.

EUGENE GOODHEART
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Reply:

I am glad to have an opportunity to respond to Eugene

Goodheart’s letter.

I thought I was doing him an honor by listing him in my presidential address, along with two such distinguished scholars as René Wellek and Walter Jackson Bate, as a conservative critic or critic on the right. Apparently he considers himself something else. I should have thought, however, that a book like Goodheart’s *Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism* (henceforth *SD*), with its sharp words about Barthes, Fish, Derrida, de Man, et al. and its appeal to a misread Matthew Arnold as the model for humanism based on “transcendent” values (values that are also, strangely, only “immanent” and “manmade”) is pretty far to the right of, say, Frank Lentricchia. But of course the point I was making, a point Goodheart might have noticed if he had read me more carefully, was that, when it comes to deconstruction bashing, the secret identities between a certain apparent “left” and a certain apparent “right” come clearly into the open, and the distinction breaks down. Goodheart has an inalienable right to attack deconstruction if he wants to do so, but he also has a responsibility, academic and otherwise, to understand better than he does what he is attacking. It was for that reason that I mentioned him in my presidential address.

Much is at stake in the differences between us, not least questions of the social, ethical, and political implications of the study of literature. An example would be the difference between Goodheart’s approval, in *SD*, of Schiller’s concept of the “aesthetic state” and my conviction that the aesthetic ideology we inherit from Schiller and others has been directly implicated in totalitarian thought and political action in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In any case, my chief objection to Goodheart’s letter, as to his work generally, is that he is such an inadequate reader, for example of my presidential address or, in *SD*, of Matthew Arnold and the work of the so-called deconstructionists.

Goodheart is scandalized, or pretends to be, by his discovery that “deconstructionists” think texts have a “plain sense” and that the main business of criticism is to identify this. We “deconstructionists” have said that over and over, both in assertion and in practice. The message ought by now have made it through the static of received opinion and journalistic clichés about “the corrosive acid of dogmatic skepticism” in deconstruction that holds that “when we read a work we are in the presence of nothing,” and so on (*SD* 14, 8). Yes, the plain sense is what we are after, believe it or not, though that pursuit, of course, includes identifying and deciphering rhetorical complexities (ironies, for example) in the text in question. Goodheart is not conspicuously gifted with a sensitivity to irony. This is a considerable disadvantage in reading, for example in reading Matthew Arnold, one of the greatest ironists in English literature. It is often ignored or forgotten by Goodheart, moreover, as by other critics of “deconstruction,” that almost everything Derrida, de Man, and I have written is a reading of some text or other.