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 shiftily 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

a hysterical subjectivist, for example—remains unacknowledged. This is a thoroughly duplicitous essay; Nelson could use some pointers from his own argument.

SHERNAZ MEHTA MOLLINGER
New York, New York

To the Editor:

Reading Cary Nelson's "Reading Criticism" did not move me to "welcome" the "self-reflexiveness of this essay" nor the self-reflexiveness of the criticism it both criticizes and celebrates. The essay made me very sad. Instead of urging that the admittedly limited, subjective, ego-ridden (perhaps "self-indulgent" is the proper phrase) talents and knowledge of the teachers of modern languages and their literatures be employed on such questions as what, in fact, Dante, Milton, Goethe, Shelley, Dickens, or Stevens meant in particular works or passages, Nelson urges us to turn our attention to deciphering the political biases of Hugh Kenner, speculating upon the father-anxieties of Harold Bloom, or watching with bated breath to see whether J. Hillis Miller will succeed in his struggle "to change his critical method by a deliberate act of will" (p. 811).

Though all of us, as Nelson notes, are subject to the same kinds of personal biases, some try to channel the appetite for gossip into small talk at cocktail parties or in the corridors at MLA conventions. Though all teacher-scholars enjoy attention and praise for their intellectual achievements, some pander to "that last infirmity" by trying to discover new information about and more accurate readings of the great literary works that, when we begin to comprehend them, tend to raise us a little above our commonplace, petty selves. Though all of us wish to be known to future generations of students and scholars—to leave small cenotaphs on the bookshelves of university libraries—some would prefer to be known as scholar-critics who rescued a valuable literary work from textual corruption or unwarranted critical neglect, rather than for the promulgation of eccentric critical constructs that isolate the work of art from its larger potential audience or distort it through random and unwarranted personal associations.

Nelson discusses the critic's anxieties in the face of other critics and of his own earlier work. This is a possible reaction, but the humanistic scholar-critic will ignore or overcome these doubts and will set forth his discoveries as lucidly, coherently, and succinctly as he can, hoping that others will find his evidence accurate and his conclusions convincing; he will equally welcome the discoveries and conclusions of other scholar-critics who join him in the common search for truth. Not only will he accept corrections of his own earlier work (by others as well as by his own maturing understanding), but he will actively aid and encourage his fellow scholars to complete research and criticism even though it may tend to render his own earlier publications obsolescent.

Let us hope both that Nelson will in the future see fit to exercise his obviously adequate talents on a literary subject of some genuine substance and interest and that the valuable space in *PMLA* will ultimately be returned to the full-time study of literature, rather than becoming (or celebrating) mere *Advertisements for Ourselves.*

DONALD H. REIMAN
The Carl H. Pforzheimer Library

To the Editor:

Having just finished reading Cary Nelson's provocative essay "Reading Criticism," I find myself in a quandary. Will this letter reflect a complex and uneasy interaction between me and my comments; will I simply be focusing on his text as an excuse for addressing a preoccupation of my own esthetic of criticism; will this letter open my thought to an eager burlesque? I may know, but, being a critic, I shall never tell.

However, as a critical reader, I cannot help but make two comments about Nelson's essay. Certainly, it is important to have some idea of a critic's point of approach when reading his criticism. Only an innocent would read, let us say, Eliot without recognizing that he had his own poetic ax to grind. And the same is true of lesser critics—they just happen to have duller axes. This is human nature and, as critics, we should be perceptive enough to realize that—no matter what certain disgruntled poets and painters may say—critics are usually human. Of course time has a lot to do with all this: when we read Taine or Arnold or Parrington we realize that these critics, in retrospect, had their own programs, their own sense of critical esthetic, their own foibles and prejudices and doubts. Modern criticism—probably because it is *modern*—may not exhibit its authors' idiosyncracies as easily to the modern reader (probably because he is modern also), but it will in time. Even in Nelson's treatment of Kenner, Bloom, and Frye this reevaluation is apparent. Since criticism teaches (or preaches) a close reading of text, and text includes critical text, the rhetorical stance of the writer is definitely an important factor that must be dealt with.