

ature is being canonized, it will be made unreadable—*Red Harvest* is acceptable; can the pulps be far behind? Perhaps only three courses of action are open: never even looking at the table of contents of *PMLA*, retiring from the corrupting game, or dropping my membership. But, come on, with so much sadness in the world, could I afford to give up my laughs four times a year!

RAY BROWNE
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Reply:

Ray Browne's letter recalls his strenuous efforts, over many years, to discourage the intelligent critical analysis of popular culture. Since these efforts have been largely unsuccessful, it is easy to understand why he is upset. But we really cannot apologize for the fact that criticism does continue to exist, in the pages of *PMLA* and elsewhere.

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Narrative against Nuclear War?

To the Editor:

I applaud the political statement against nuclear war that Peter Schwenger makes with his article "Circling Ground Zero" (106 [1991]: 251–61), but I feel that his effort misses its mark. The problem, Schwenger says, is that rational thinking, the type of thinking that got us into this nuclear mess, will not save us from nuclear war. His solution presents narrative as a way of learning what cannot be expressed, of experiencing knowledge outside rational thought. Schwenger's logic seems to be that (a) nuclear destruction is unthinkable; (b) narrative can show what it cannot tell and we cannot think; and (c) therefore, by allowing us to think (extrarationally) about the (rationally) unthinkable, narrative can show us how to avoid nuclear war. This argument is fatally flawed and, considering the deadly seriousness of the topic, the flaw might prove fatal.

Schwenger argues that seeing or experiencing can teach us what cannot be expressed. I agree that by seeing or doing we can sometimes learn something we cannot learn by hearing or reading. But Schwenger's essay places hearing and reading outside experience,

values sight over sound, and risks elevating experience over rational thought. Paradoxically, Schwenger's argument for knowledge based on experience is similar to arguments for a rational science based on experiment: the scientist must experience every fact, and the record of the experiment is a narrative by which other scientists may relive the experience, thus verifying its reality. The distinction Schwenger makes between experiential knowledge and knowledge gained through rational thinking does not exist.

The article's opening presents the impossibility of determining the center of a nuclear blast, the center on which the "meaning" of the blast, its circumference and effect, could be measured. Then nuclear explosion is reduced to the level of metaphor, when Schwenger discusses ground zero as the absent origin. Because this center is unthinkable, knowledge of it must be gained by experience. Schwenger assumes we require knowledge of nuclear war, but those who had experiential knowledge of a nuclear blast are dead.

In an essay that Schwenger is obviously aware of, Jacques Derrida points out that before nuclear war is possible, it must first be imagined ("No Apocalypse, Not Now [Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives]," *Diacritics* 14.2 [1984]: 20–31). So narratives of nuclear war make it possible. (H. Bruce Franklin's *War Stars*, a work Schwenger mentions, points out how fictional works helped shape atomic-weapons research. We are all familiar with how *Star Wars*, the movie, became "Star Wars," the nuclear-war-defense debacle.) Schwenger's championing of narrative, combined with his use of the nuclear explosion as a metaphor, thus takes on very disturbing significance.

The bulk of Schwenger's article is devoted to a reading of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. Riddley Walker, the protagonist, learns about himself and his culture's history through the narrative that is his life. This is Schwenger's point (much simplified, of course) in discussing *Riddley Walker*. But Schwenger ignores the sinister implications of Riddley's narrative. People in *Riddley Walker* have not learned through experience. As Riddley walks his "Fools Circle," bringing back the "1 Littl 1," gunpowder, he begins to re-create the situation leading to the "Bad Time." He is able to do this because of narratives, inherited stories he does not understand. As Riddley learns, the narratives re-create the conditions for destruction. Riddley walks a circle of death, a circle leading always into the nothingness of its nonexistent center. Narrative defines the circle, thus creating experience while leading to ground zero, no experience.

The same cycle of destruction appears in another book mentioned by Schwenger, Walter Miller's *Can-*

ticle for Leibowitz. In this work the danger of knowledge is more explicit, as the world recovers from one nuclear war only to experience another. The second war comes sooner because of, if it is not made possible by, records that survive the first. While *Riddley Walker* offers no hope, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* suggests a (non)solution, a symbolic two-headed woman whose surviving head is incapable of gaining knowledge. Thus, the second nuclear war returns the earth to a Garden of Eden innocence, while the threat of nuclear war's flaming sword awaits any who might bring knowledge into the garden from the sanctuary in space. Similarly, Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos* ends after humans "de-evolve" into porpoiselike creatures incapable of "higher" learning. These books present knowledge as the villain and deny the possibility of avoiding destruction.

Stories like these are cynical, even fatalistic. Imagining the end of the world shows no more imagination than, and is in fact very similar to, the work of Pentagon planners who invent scenarios for nuclear war in order to make it possible. These fictions offer no path for avoiding nuclear holocaust, so they appear to be the only way to proceed. The sole hope they offer is deterrence: the weapons will seem so horrible that no one will be able to picture war. But that hope is obviously false, as continued improvements to our weapons systems and the abundance of imagined wars show.

What I want to see is antinarrative that leads away from the experiential knowledge of nuclear war. Possibilities include narratives that deny the necessity of an ending; books (or poems or plays) that deconstruct the idea of narrative itself, exploding the expected logical sequence of events leading to a goal; and utopias, whether narrative or not, that suggest ways of living that are less likely to lead to our destruction. Examples of all these types of texts exist. Rather than presenting as exemplary a book that shows an inevitable circle of destruction, a discussion of some of these other texts would provide a better example of how to make the necessary changes to avoid nuclear war.

I agree with Schwenger that "[n]arrative can help us go through the changes required, step by step, word by word" (260). But we need to walk and write carefully on our way.

CLAIR JAMES
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Reply:

On the way to his main argument, Clair James sets up a tension between two terms that do not figure

prominently in "Circling Ground Zero," although their presence may be detected there: rationality and experience. The first term appears late in the essay in a quotation from Russell Hoban: "Rationality is not enough to get us through what we have to get through" (260). A modest statement, neither a celebration of irrationality nor even a condemnation of rationality. The second term, experience, is not mine, but I take it as the equivalent of that "not enough," the ongoing remainder of rational thought. My essay, according to James, "risks elevating experience over rational thought." I accept that risk.

For James, it seems to me, runs an opposite and corresponding risk. His reading of scientific experiment as experience, recorded by narrative for rational purposes, seems to be an attempt to collapse experience into a rational matrix in order to elevate the rational—though he only concludes that for me "[t]he distinction . . . between experiential knowledge and knowledge gained through rational thinking does not exist." That is true. Scientific thinking commonly involves more than the rational: in the history of nuclear weaponry, I think of Szilard suddenly apprehending nuclear chain reaction while waiting for a traffic light to change; of the effects of masculine dynamics on the Manhattan Project, as studied by Brian Easlea; of Oppenheimer's belated recognition of the full range of forces that impelled him. Rationality is both driven and riven by the "not enough," by that which is other to it. This is so historically—it is a theme, for instance, in H. Bruce Franklin's *War Stars*—and philosophically, as Derrida is always already reminding us.

James refers to Derrida's essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now" in making his main argument that the narrative imagination of nuclear disaster is a force that may accelerate war. I assume that James is thinking of statements like this one: "'Reality,' let's say the encompassing institution of the nuclear age, is constructed by the fable, on the basis of an event that has never happened (except in fantasy, and that is not nothing at all)." If the nuclear age is constructed by the fable, Derrida goes on to assert, the age may be deconstructed as well; and this for him is the responsibility of the nuclear critic. Without dwelling on my reservations about this claim, I will merely say that a narrative, as Franklin among others demonstrates, may of course contribute to nuclear war: there are many narratives of nuclear war as orgasmic release, as punishment and purification, as survival, even as victory. However, narratives need not be written in such a manner. The question is *how* literature is to be written to enable us to go through the changes needed. And this is my concern as well as James's.