

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 one thousand words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Neruda's "Galope muerto"

To the Editor:

In "Translating Pablo Neruda's 'Galope muerto'" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 185–95), John Felstiner tells us that "nouns normally serve to identify things in space, verbs to release them in time" and adds that "this truism can be likened to Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, which says we cannot at the same time determine both the position of an electron and its momentum: each measurement precludes the other" (p. 190).

Is the statement about nouns true? It is true of some concrete nouns, for they refer to "things in space" (e.g., *Thomas Jefferson*, *Vermont*, *Niagara Falls*). The things to which these nouns refer are spatial particulars. Some concrete nouns, however, are general terms and, instead of identifying things, merely classify them (e.g., *pencil*, *bridge*, *cat*). Moreover, no abstract noun, whether particular or general, can identify anything in space (e.g., *two*, *triangularity*, *number*, *color*, *virtue*). Accordingly, Felstiner's first statement is false.

The second part of his statement fares no better. Although it is valid for temporal verbs (e.g., a person *runs* fast, *eats* slowly, or *writes* for an hour), there are other kinds of verbs for which it is not (e.g., one person *knows* another, tells him that six *is* a perfect number, *learns* that a variable *ranges* over the members of a set, *wins* a chess game, or *arrives* late for dinner). Felstiner's account of nouns and verbs is not even true, much less a truism.

Nor, were it true, would it have anything to do with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, as Felstiner believes it does. Replying to Jane Somerville's well-taken objections to his putative analogy, he asserts that "The crux of Heisenberg's principle is uncertainty. . . . Neruda's opening images suppose the full complexity and uncertainty of the perceptual task" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 1006). But the uncertainty relevant to the principle is not perceptual; it is physical. It is a consequence of the fact that any measurement of a small particle, such as an electron, disturbs the particle, so that the measurement must be imprecise. The principle affirms that the *exact*

location and the *exact* momentum of a particle cannot both be known at the same time and that the more precisely one of them is determined, the less accurate must be our measurement of the other. The principle applies also to other conjugate physical quantities, such as time and energy: if the lifetime of an atom in an excited state is very short, then there is a great uncertainty in its energy level. The relevant phenomena indicate an indefiniteness in nature itself, not a deficiency in our instruments or our perceptual makeup. The indefiniteness, of course, is not significant in large systems (because of the small magnitude of Planck's constant).

Replying to Somerville, Felstiner says that in "Galope muerto" Neruda writes "as if trying to work through and then beyond his uncertainty about whether things can be apprehended perfectly. . . . The poet finally comes to imagine dynamic form . . . by having shared at first in the implications of the uncertainty principle." But Neruda's poetic world is macroscopic and perceptual. That "Galope muerto" moves from ashes and formlessness to swelling fullness is a matter of the affirmation that Neruda wants to express, not of his having shared some unspecified implications of Heisenberg's principle. Felstiner should restrict himself to translation and genuine literary criticism, for disanalogizing misunderstood science to poetic images abuses the literature it purports to interpret.

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Milton's Bogey

To the Editor:

Sandra M. Gilbert's "Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers: Reflections on Milton's Bogey" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 368–82) errs when, under the subterfuge of describing an interesting succession of feminine misreadings of *Paradise Lost*, Gilbert resurrects and authorizes numerous misconceptions that it has been the business of Milton scholars for the last quarter century to lay to rest. Her method is to shift from carefully contextualized statements