

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

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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 conclu-

sions 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 obsolete.

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

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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.

But—and this is my second point—it also seems to me that there is a limit, a law of diminishing returns, which governs the extent to which one pursues all this critical evaluation of a critical text. Although Nelson admits that “That would not be the most exciting research ever conducted, so it is not likely to be forthcoming” (p. 809; a correlation that, sadly, does not necessarily hold), some of us cynics may envision a utopia where Critic A’s *Text I* will be evaluated by Critic B’s *Text I:I* will be examined by Critic C’s *Text I:“I:I”* will be examined by. . . . Perhaps it will even begin to resemble *Finnegans Wake*, in which case an enterprising post-post-modern can declare the multicritical artifact a creative text. Et cetera. The point here is that, if art is divorced one step from life, if criticism is divorced one step from art, then what is criticism of criticism? And how about criticism of criticism of criticism? After a while a number of small steps does add up to a giant leap, perhaps a leap into triviality, into solipsistic specialization, into pettiness.

Of course I realize that Nelson does not advocate such an extreme and that his essay is not guilty of it. But I also could not help but notice that he does seem to display his own “defensive armature” (p. 801), his own ambivalence, and “conflict behind that mask [of objectivity]” (p. 803). As he says in note 16: “I am presently working both on several other general essays on criticism and on extended treatments of several of the critics mentioned here” (p. 814). Or, when speaking of metaphoric language in concluding paragraphs of critical works, Nelson also writes that “My own *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1973) demonstrates that I am not above this temptation” (pp. 814–15). But, having noted this, I doubt that I will write a book about it.

JAMES NEIL HARRIS  
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*Mr. Nelson replies:*

What is a book review or a letter to the editor of an academic journal? In an increasingly pluralistic critical environment, it is imperative to ask this question of every review or letter we read. For too long we have assumed that such documents are merely forms of professional evaluation. At the very least, however, we need to see that a review records an interaction between two intelligences with similar or dissimilar assumptions. A review will often have a self-reflexive dimension; it talks not only about another book or essay but also about itself.

Each of these letters has such a dimension. Rei-

man has himself previously written about the relativity of humanistic knowledge in poetry. His letter in part records his shock and distress at seeing elements of his own topic turned to the analysis of critical discourse. Harris’ letter tries to balance his own self-consciousness with the self-consciousness admitted in the essay itself; in a curious way, the two become interchangeable. Mollinger suggests that “Reading Criticism” is a highly duplicitous essay, a point I would insist on conceding. Yet her letter proceeds through a series of paradoxical assertions, without proving any of them, a technique that is itself duplicitous. Hartman’s letter is also in its way about itself: arguing for the radical intertextuality of all critical prose, he makes his own letter a deliberate collation of his own and his colleagues’ recent positions. For both Hartman and Reiman, the self-referential quality in their letters is partly collective—Hartman’s because his letter articulates a group position, Reiman’s because he believes he speaks for the profession at large.

That is not to say that these letters have no bearing on my essay. Indeed, along with letters I have received directly, they have provided me with numerous occasions for reflection. Yet the bearing they have is of a particular kind, for “Reading Criticism” is a most insidious essay to discuss. Any response amounts to additional evidence for its argument; any comment contributes to its enterprise. To read these letters as value judgments about the essay would thus be to miss the point. If I may be permitted a moment of irony directed at once toward myself and toward the archetypes of our profession, I would, I think, have been disappointed not to have received a letter defending scholarly objectivity and a letter invoking the problematics of deconstruction. There is really only one defense against “Reading Criticism”—not to read it at all. For no reading is innocent or uncompromised. Anyone willing to write about the essay enters a productive dialogue that denies privilege to all.

That is true even of Reiman’s letter. “The essay,” he writes, “made me very sad.” Reiman wants to believe that criticism is written in a translucent, empirical language absolved of its historicity. Yet he also insists on the communal, mutually corrective, and historically evolving nature of scholarship. I cannot see how he can have it both ways, though I can understand the discomfort this contradiction causes him. As soon as he acknowledges that critical prose is composed of insight, error, self-discipline, scholarly interaction, and its own historical particularity, he has established a rationale for disentangling those verbal patterns by analyzing the practice of criticism. In a very real sense, Reiman’s letter concedes my case. He maintains categorically the