

the question of whether the Modern Language Association should be officially represented by a man who has recurrently violated norms professed by the association itself. One way to avoid that question is to proclaim that people whom Said publicly assaults he is nonetheless willing to assist in other contexts. The first part of Daniel Boyarin's letter is a regrettable expression of that approach; the last part exhibits a repugnant attack of its own.

The issue I raised about the public conduct of Edward Said is not what Edward Said does or does not do on "other fronts." It is not dependent on whether those who reflect on the subject are "Zionist" in orientation or Israeli in affiliation. Nor does it entail, as Daniel Boyarin irresponsibly charges, some "attempted suppression of free discourse." The issue is whether Edward Said, who has repeatedly and publicly attempted to intimidate, discredit, or demean individuals whose views differ from his own, should be the officially authorized spokesman of the MLA. That issue extends far beyond a matter of individual conscience. It concerns the professional and ethical standards of the Modern Language Association itself.

JON WHITMAN

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To the Editor:

Without entering into a lengthy theoretical debate concerning the knotty relation between politics and language, and forbearing as well to urge on all of us the benefits of self-scrutiny and restraint in our choice of words and modes of argumentation (especially concerning explosive and painful moral issues), I would like to say that the final, ad hominem sentence in Edward Said's response to Jon Whitman goes a long way in support of Whitman's argument concerning Said's unsuitability as president of the MLA. This sentence reads, "Whatever oedipal rebellion he [Whitman] may now be enacting can't change the past any more than Israel's intransigent bellicosity can change the fact of its fifty-year dispossession of the Palestinian people, the destruction of their society, and the illegal military occupation of their territories" (Forum, 114 [1999]: 107). Mounting the oedipal charge seems to me a morally questionable procedure. Far more serious, however, is the relation between language and truth or "fact" that Said's words exemplify. Presuming to understand and to be able to state in evidence the inner workings of Whitman's psyche, coupled with Said's assertion as fact what can only be a personal interpretation of the complex and multiply interpretable Israeli-Arab-Palestinian conflicts, Said makes this reader question precisely what Whitman questioned: Said's re-

lation to language and to the subjective realities that language describes and produces.

Said suggests that the source of Whitman's animus is both psychological and political, resembling that of a "partisan, recently nationalized Israeli, once again fighting a Palestinian." Since none of us will ever know the "real sources" of either Whitman's animus or Said's, the question with which we must concern ourselves is more immediate and concrete. Is the source of Whitman's animus nowhere to be found in the documents Whitman cites? The facts in this controversy are at least as much the published words of Said and his opponents as any contextual political debate in which they participate. "[D]emocratic process" has elected Said president of the MLA. Democratic process, however, has also "appointed Whitman referee," for that process requires citizens to familiarize themselves, and refamiliarize themselves, with such facts as exist and carefully to interpret accordingly. It is on the basis of Said's published words—their form as much as their content—that the members of MLA can and must reach their own individual and collective judgments.

EMILY BUDICK

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To the Editor:

In his comments in *PMLA* Jon Whitman seriously questions Edward Said's fitness to serve as MLA president. I too wonder if anyone gave sufficient consideration to the fact that, through the years, this high official in the MLA governing body has condoned the terrorist acts against innocent Israelis. It is inexcusable that the man at the helm of an organization devoted to the study and promotion of humanistic values is someone who endorses violence and hatred among people. This is not politics or ideology. This is commonsense decency and morality. While I do not wish to resign my twenty-year membership in this organization, I urge everyone to protest this shameful state of affairs. The MLA leadership must rethink this.

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The Mormon-Gentile Dichotomy in *PMLA*

To the Editor:

In her column "If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem" (114 [1999]: 175–83), Martha Banta considers the work of memory, how it functions—whether in the "old meat" of