

nation of the profit motive, is not real socialism but an aberration—totalitarianism, Stalinism, state capitalism, or whatever—and so does not count. It is a game the Marxists must always win, but who do they think they're kidding?

3. She calls my argument “anti-intellectual.” The only sense I can make of this is that she regards the Marxism of these critics as a purely intellectual exercise with no bearing on events outside the academy (this may be implied in her reference to “the theoretical debates within our discipline”), so that bringing up those events in an argument with them is like Johnson’s attempt to refute Berkeley by kicking a stone. But Berkeleyanism did not claim to be a program for action in the external world. If these critics will stipulate that their Marxism makes no such claim, I will be happy to withdraw my suggestion about that trip to Eastern Europe.

4. She says my argument assumes “that all who criticize capitalism . . . are communists and that all communists are totalitarian.” This assumption that she attributes to me is itself an example of the polarized thinking that characterizes Marxism and that I oppose. Of course there are many people (including myself) who are critical of aspects of capitalism and are not Marxists, but I think that all the critics I call Marxists have identified themselves as such—if I am wrong I would like to know which ones I mislabel. And I am well aware that there are many kinds of Marxists, but I believe they all share the project of replacing capitalism with socialism, which is the only thing I assume about these critics in this argument.

5. She says my argument also implies that “Levin and all capitalist boosters are ultrademocratic,” which is another example of Marxist polarizing. Criticism of Marxism need not imply uncritical boosting of capitalism, just as criticism of capitalism need not imply boosting of Marxism. Obviously, there have been tyrannical capitalist regimes, and I rejoice as much at their overthrow as I do at the overthrow of the Marxist tyrannies, since what I really am a booster of is “so-called” political pluralism.

6. She uses my argument to link me to “red-baiters” and the HUAC. This is yet another example of the polarized logic of Marxists, here lumping all their opponents together, and is all too typical of what anyone who criticizes them can now expect. If I were to retaliate (which I would not dream of doing) by linking her to the KGB or the Stasi, I am sure she would be indignant, because this kind of abuse is only supposed to proceed in one direction.

7. She tries to impugn my motives by saying I “would prefer not to think about what [my] own proj-

ect might be.” She never reveals what it is (perhaps to spare my feelings), but it must be pretty bad. It may be related to her contention that I want to make some critical routines “ineligible for disciplinary scrutiny.” I do not know where she got this idea, for I believe that all the routines should be open to scrutiny, including my own and those of Marxist critics.

8. She asserts that my use of this argument in the reply to Boyarin is “nasty,” “sneering,” and “deliberately insulting,” apparently because I do not take the Marxism of these critics as seriously as he (or she) does. I wonder if she thinks my reply is more insulting than his letter, which calls me, among other things, a sophist and a demagogue and an ilkist. Or does she think the people she agrees with should not be held to the same standards of civility as those she disagrees with?

RICHARD LEVIN

*State University of New York, Stony Brook*

### Popular Literature in *PMLA*

To the Editor:

For forty years I have glanced regularly at *PMLA*, happy to discover that the literature people read was not being degraded by scholarly studies of it in *PMLA*. Like thousands of other members of the MLA, I received *PMLA* but read it never. The many isms in the included work were enough to give anybody terminal nausea.

After being excoriated for many years for taking popular fiction seriously, I was convinced that this valuable area of literature was safe.

Imagine my shock, therefore, when I glanced at the table of contents of the March 1991 issue and discovered essays on Hammett, Greene, Mailer. My fear and trembling were, however, premature. I learned that these authors somehow represent “postmodernism” and a few other horrors.

Which finally arouses me to reaction against *PMLA*. I was happy when your authors made unreadable much stuff that was not readable anyway. But when they start preying on enjoyable literature and rendering it repulsive, I have had enough. Is there no writing that those serious critics will not leave alone? Is nothing secure from their canonization? I thought some of us were safe on the mean streets of America or in the moated castles of the Old World. But apparently I was wrong.

It obviously will do no good to call on Milton’s God to save us from these hordes. Now that popular liter-

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  
Bowling Green State University

### 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.

CARL FREEDMAN  
Louisiana State University  
CHRISTOPHER KENDRICK  
Loyola University, Chicago

### 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-*