Lacanian Tragedy and the Ethics of Jouissance

To the Editor:

In “Lacan and the New Lacanians: Josephine Hart’s Damage, Lacanian Tragedy, and the Ethics of Jouissance” (113 [1998]: 395–407), James M. Mellard refers to a “paradoxical, perhaps perverse, twist Lacan gives to ethics and traditional tragedy” (395). More specifically locating this idea, Mellard asserts, “In The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Lacan insists that the true ethical position is not that which abides by the desire of the law of one’s culture but that which accords with [and a lot depends on what Mellard means by “accords with”] jouissance, with the drive of the other within oneself” (406). But while a shift “from an ethics of desire to one of jouissance” may have taken place in history (396), such a shift is not at all evident in Lacan’s Ethics seminar, where jouissance is by no means privileged over desire.

Mellard’s PMLA article drastically simplifies and misrepresents the intricate complexity of Lacan’s argument about the ethics of psychoanalysis. I question Mellard’s damaging idea that the ethics of psychoanalysis is illustrated by a character who causes various forms of horror by superimposing his own death-driven jouissance on that of a femme fatale. (Mellard refers to a “horrifying element” in Stephen Fleming’s “drive,” “the horror of this jouissance,” “the obscenity of his demand,” and the “obscene kernel of [his] enjoyment” [406].) An underlying concern of this letter is what sort of value psychoanalysis could possibly have in the practical arenas of the clinic and social change were its ethics to be conflated with the death drive.