

Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor. The authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

***PMLA* Evaluated**

To the Editor:

I presume you meant your editorial in the January number of *PMLA* as a red rag, and here is one bull's reply (I hope you've had many more). To a traditional scholar, especially in my field (Renaissance), there is one article every year or two in *PMLA* that is of interest. I'm happy to say there was one in the January number, Foster's on W. H., which I thoroughly enjoyed. The only other thing I can remember reading in several years was Ziolkowski's Presidential Address, which was as great to read as to listen to. Most issues are like the one that just arrived, wall-to-wall mod. crit., which I have neither time nor inclination to read.

This whole subject has interested me since I served on the Executive Council; I was the one who pushed successfully for the inclusion of the word *scholarly* in the revised statement of editorial policy. Not that it did much good, but I tried. You are in a bind: as long as scholars perceive *PMLA* as I do, they won't submit articles to it, and so the situation perpetuates itself. I think, too, that today's general intellectual climate is the real culprit—traditional scholarship is out of fashion everywhere, not just in *PMLA*. But please don't pretend there is a scholarly/critical balance in its august pages when there isn't!

BARBARA C. BOWEN
Vanderbilt University

To the Editor:

If higher education is increasingly big business, as few would attempt to dispute, the MLA is increasingly show business, or so it would seem. The organizers of the annual meeting have long displayed a naked eagerness to rub shoulders with celebrities (Pee-wee Herman's projected forum on children's literature is a good example), and now *PMLA* is apparently following suit with its solicited article by Julia Kristeva, complete with photos, not to mention the nice piece by, and shot of, Carlos Fuentes earlier.

According to rumors leaking from 10 Astor Place, this is the beginning of a new look. Aware that few members actually read the articles normally published, and having abandoned the wistful hope of producing a popular journal analogous to *Psychology Today*, The Powers have decided to use a new model. More pieces by celebrities will

be solicited each year (such as Oliver North on *Heart of Darkness*, Bette Midler on *Moll Flanders*, and Donald Regan on *A Pilgrim's Progress*), and the use of graphics will increase markedly. Before long, it is hoped, every airport newsstand will be selling *PMLA* under its new title, *People and the Modern Language Association*.

This is fine with me, but I do have one question. If the rumors are well-founded, and if the enterprise is successful, will our dues be lowered?

CLIFTON CHERPACK
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Dialogic Discourse

To the Editor:

In "Dialogics as an Art of Discourse in Literary Criticism" (101 [1986]: 788–97) Don H. Bialostosky attempts to convert Bakhtin's theory of dialogic discourse into a practice of literary criticism. Bialostosky's argument is based on an undisciplined interpretation of Bakhtin's terms and a mistaken definition of Aristotle's terms. Were the effort he proposes made in good faith, it would eventuate not in a changed mode of critical discourse but in discourse about critics rather than about literature. Were it made in bad faith, it would encourage an illusive writing that conceals its premises while using that illusiveness as a rhetorical strategy.

Bakhtin uses the concept of the dialogic imagination in two senses, the first having to do with the novel's mimesis of the tension between individuals' sense of autonomy and the multiplicity of their interconnections within the social nexus that permits their discourse. The second sense of the dialogic relates to the autonomy with which Dostoevsky empowers his characters to challenge authorial control. This aspect of fiction, Bakhtin argues, represents the ways in which we struggle to extricate ourselves from a defining conceptual hegemony. A critical discourse about the covert links among its practitioners and their relation to the larger society could well create an energy-depleting infinite regress of discourse about discourse that would subvert the assertion of autonomy that renders significant the signs of the participants' social embeddedness. But it would not change the kind of discourse; it would merely change the subject.

Since Bakhtin defines the dialogic imagination as the capacity to render what he considers not a practice but

the ground of all human practices, the term can apply only to mimetic literature and not to talk about it. Bialostosky gives the illusion of opening a space for his proposed art of dialogic discourse by misinterpreting the distinction that Aristotle makes between dialectic and rhetoric. That distinction does not separate ideas from persons, for both are concerned with convincing others of what one believes to be true. Rhetoric teaches how to tap emotions in this enterprise, whether to serve what one believes to be true or to serve one's concealed interests. Certainly, intimate knowledge of others' hopes and fears allows one to intensify emotional associations that accompany ideas and to diminish impulses to inquire into the appropriateness of those ideas, but one still seeks to persuade another that something is either true or false, good or bad, worthy or unworthy. Similarly, dialectical discourse also involves persons. To engage in a rational discussion is to open one's views to critical examination on the assumption that reasonable persons will abandon views that prove logically indefensible.

While there are various reasons one may want to know how others' views express their characters, that is, to know the cause of, rather than the reasons for, their views, such a stance, whether taken in one's own interests or in those of another, is condescending and manipulative. While one does get a sense of a continuum from one's friends' views to their persons, if one respects one's friends one expects that they will change their views when confronted with rational grounds for doing so. The condescension involved in reducing ideas to expressions of persons becomes clear when one considers that one never presents one's own view to others merely as illustrative of one's character. One does not say, "I am telling you my views on the problematic of authority in Shakespeare's plays so that you will understand the intricacies of my character." (An exception would be the intellectual historian's stance, which is not denigrating but which is not dialogic either. It simply shifts one's interest from the truth of the idea to the truth about what Hirsch has called the idea's meaning, that is, its relation to its original context.)

In therapy groups a standard practice is to offer one's opinions of others as though one were free of rhetorical or dialectic intention, by prefacing an observation about another with the trope, "I want to share with you my feeling that . . .," a locution that evades responsibility and attempts to divert possible hostility. On such an occasion, it is true, one might be more than usually prepared to acknowledge the grounds on which one holds opinions, since consciousness of one's own strategies for resistance and defense is the object of therapy. The self-reflexive therapeutic stance constitutes a form of skepticism that easily coexists with dialectic discourse. That is, even in hot debate, the memories of now-repudiated convictions can hover around the edges of consciousness. Habitual self-reflexivity on one's intellectual predilections that can increase attentiveness to others may be part of what Bialostosky means by a "dialogic move" that involves

"opening oneself . . . to being characterized by the other in terms alien to those one might be pleased to acknowledge" (794). But even in such "moments of full humanity" one can both generate valid arguments and ride one's hobbyhorse full tilt. To locate the meaning of people's ideas in their personalities is a devious strategy for denigrating the ideas; it improperly changes the subject of discussion from the idea to the person who holds the idea, and it has no claim to be exempt from the traditional categories of discourse and debate. As Fish says, to speak is to speak in a certain way and therefore involves rhetoric, and, as Fish does not say, to be motivated to speak in a critical context implies a desire to have one's views seriously attended to on their own terms.

If Bialostosky wants to change the subject of our discussion from literature to ourselves, then at best he intends a version of the reader-response study most fully practiced by Norman Holland. Holland, however, honestly abandoned the pursuit of truth claims about literature in order to offer truth claims about the process of reading. The more likely consequence of this proposal's being taken seriously would be to foster bad faith, since people would incline to conceal their arguments and their rhetorical intentions under the guise of assumed humility in order to appear to others as engaged in a fashionable critical movement, a movement that substitutes critical discourse about critics for critical discourse about texts. Though it may be difficult theoretically to justify the privilege of literary over critical artifacts, the literary remain the *raison d'être* for the work of critics, including Bialostosky's, and a more interesting subject as well.

KAY STOCKHOLDER
University of British Columbia

To the Editor:

"Dialogics as an Art of Discourse in Literary Criticism" urges us to read others dialogically: "to read for an opening in the discussion or a provocation to further discourse" (790). There are three consequences of dialogic criticism: "we would self-consciously represent the voice-ideas of others and involve others in dialogues they had not anticipated"; "we would also self-consciously expect unexpected replies and foresee unforeseen uses of our own words and ourselves by others"; and "[w]e would be more likely than others to recognize how even an admirer's repetition of our words may embarrass us and how another's reformulation of our meaning in the most alien terms may convert us" (791).

Struck by the compatibility of some of Bialostosky's "voice-ideas" with some of my own interests and professionally acquainted with Bialostosky through the Society for Critical Exchange, I wrote him a letter in which I applauded his essay's "theoretical grounding for critical exchange" and enclosed a description of my own proj-