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
University of Pennsylvania

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 embedment. 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