

a hysterical subjectivist, for example—remains unacknowledged. This is a thoroughly duplicitous essay; Nelson could use some pointers from his own argument.

SHERNAZ MEHTA MOLLINGER

*New York, New York*

To the Editor:

Reading Cary Nelson's "Reading Criticism" did not move me to "welcome" the "self-reflexiveness of this essay" nor the self-reflexiveness of the criticism it both criticizes and celebrates. The essay made me very sad. Instead of urging that the admittedly limited, subjective, ego-ridden (perhaps "self-indulgent" is the proper phrase) talents and knowledge of the teachers of modern languages and their literatures be employed on such questions as what, in fact, Dante, Milton, Goethe, Shelley, Dickens, or Stevens meant in particular works or passages, Nelson urges us to turn our attention to deciphering the political biases of Hugh Kenner, speculating upon the father-anxieties of Harold Bloom, or watching with bated breath to see whether J. Hillis Miller will succeed in his struggle "to change his critical method by a deliberate act of will" (p. 811).

Though all of us, as Nelson notes, are subject to the same kinds of personal biases, some try to channel the appetite for gossip into small talk at cocktail parties or in the corridors at MLA conventions. Though all teacher-scholars enjoy attention and praise for their intellectual achievements, some pander to "that last infirmity" by trying to discover new information about and more accurate readings of the great literary works that, when we begin to comprehend them, tend to raise us a little above our commonplace, petty selves. Though all of us wish to be known to future generations of students and scholars—to leave small cenotaphs on the bookshelves of university libraries—some would prefer to be known as scholar-critics who rescued a valuable literary work from textual corruption or unwarranted critical neglect, rather than for the promulgation of eccentric critical constructs that isolate the work of art from its larger potential audience or distort it through random and unwarranted personal associations.

Nelson discusses the critic's anxieties in the face of other critics and of his own earlier work. This is a possible reaction, but the humanistic scholar-critic will ignore or overcome these doubts and will set forth his discoveries as lucidly, coherently, and succinctly as he can, hoping that others will find his evidence accurate and his conclusions convincing; he will equally welcome the discoveries and conclu-

sions of other scholar-critics who join him in the common search for truth. Not only will he accept corrections of his own earlier work (by others as well as by his own maturing understanding), but he will actively aid and encourage his fellow scholars to complete research and criticism even though it may tend to render his own earlier publications obsolete.

Let us hope both that Nelson will in the future see fit to exercise his obviously adequate talents on a literary subject of some genuine substance and interest and that the valuable space in *PMLA* will ultimately be returned to the full-time study of literature, rather than becoming (or celebrating) mere *Advertisements for Ourselves*.

DONALD H. REIMAN

*The Carl H. Pforzheimer Library*

To the Editor:

Having just finished reading Cary Nelson's provocative essay "Reading Criticism," I find myself in a quandary. Will this letter reflect a complex and uneasy interaction between me and my comments; will I simply be focusing on his text as an excuse for addressing a preoccupation of my own esthetic of criticism; will this letter open my thought to an eager burlesque? I may know, but, being a critic, I shall never tell.

However, as a critical reader, I cannot help but make two comments about Nelson's essay. Certainly, it is important to have some idea of a critic's point of approach when reading his criticism. Only an innocent would read, let us say, Eliot without recognizing that he had his own poetic ax to grind. And the same is true of lesser critics—they just happen to have duller axes. This is human nature and, as critics, we should be perceptive enough to realize that—no matter what certain disgruntled poets and painters may say—critics are usually human. Of course time has a lot to do with all this: when we read Taine or Arnold or Parrington we realize that these critics, in retrospect, had their own programs, their own sense of critical esthetic, their own foibles and prejudices and doubts. Modern criticism—probably because it is *modern*—may not exhibit its authors' idiosyncracies as easily to the modern reader (probably because he is modern also), but it will in time. Even in Nelson's treatment of Kenner, Bloom, and Frye this reevaluation is apparent. Since criticism teaches (or preaches) a close reading of text, and text includes critical text, the rhetorical stance of the writer is definitely an important factor that must be dealt with.