Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on the 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, and the authors of the articles discussed will be invited to reply.

The Language of Criticism

To the Editor:

Sacramentality, *ceremonialized*, *liminal*, *agentive*, *disjunct*, *parodic*, *affect* (noun), *foreshadow* (noun), *autogamous*, *autophagous*, "the collision of the modes incipient in the words is converted to a presentational dramatization," *narratological* (*narratology*, *narratorial*), *historicized*, *contextualized*, *problematizing*, *seriality*, *exceptionality*, *disjuncture*, *transgressive* (*nontransgressive*), *usurpatory*, *metonymic*, "to temporalize the spatiality of the dialogue"—is this the kind of language that the MLA encourages its members to use?

The answer seems to be yes, for these verbal monsters are unleashed in the first two articles in the May 1982 *PMLA*. (In the first, *sacramentality* and *parodic* are each used four times; so is *transgressive* in the second.)

That I offer a humble remonstrance is doubtless a sign of senility, for my generation of English teachers (at least when we were young) scornfully dismissed such verbal conglomerates as jargon, used only by such lesser breeds (so we regarded them) as psychologists and sociologists. And this bias in favor of plain English was naturally strengthened by forty years of trying to teach college students to write intelligibly.

Of course, there is nothing sacred about language. Usage determines "correctness," and usefulness validates new words. Changes come and must be accepted, whether we like them or not. We may agree with Shelley, in speaking of morality, that "everybody saying a thing does not make it right"; but in regard to language, reason bids us conclude that "everybody saying a thing *does* make it right."

But does everybody—do even all scholars and critics in the humanities—use the language quoted above? Or if they do not use it, should they accept it? Perhaps the authors would say in defense that, if one hitherto unused, or rarely used, word can replace a number of conventional words, economy justifies the innovation and that it is only the initial unfamiliarity that makes the reader stumble. Yet something may be said for tradition. If by taking a little trouble we can put our ideas into common words—which need not be colorless—is not the effort worthwhile?

For whom, after all, are we writing? What is the purpose, in the end, of literary scholarship? Do we aspire only to talk to one another? Or should the scholar and critic be, like Wordsworth's poet, "a man speaking to men"? (Or, remembering the acknowledged debt to Dorothy, we might say, "a man or woman speaking to men and women.") What and to whom do "professors" profess, what and whom do "doctors" teach? If we wish our writing to produce more, as well as more perceptive, readers of Shakespeare and Stendhal (and the content of these essays should surely serve that end), why should we disconcert them with such outlandish terminology?

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Peter Brooks replies:

I see no point in attempting to defend my prose against Ellsworth Barnard's charge of monstrosity. As author of the "transgressive" second essay, I would rather urge his reflection on three issues suggested by his letter.

1. Is the accusation of "jargon" justified when an essay uses a few rare forms (authorized by all dictionaries) and recent neologisms (perfectly well-formed ones), if these are set in a context of exposition that makes their meaning clear and shows why these terms are important to the conduct of the argument?

2. Barnard's "bias in favor of plain English" may result in blockage of vision. The most interesting work in literary study today calls on what can be learned from other fields in the "sciences of man": philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, psychoanalysis. This necessarily means accepting the challenge of new concepts and their vocabulary. To retreat into "plain English" suggests, I fear, a rejection of more than neologism: a rejection of new ways of conceiving our subject.

3. T. S. Eliot said of modern poetry that it "must