

Academic Writing

To the Editor:

From the biographical information that you provided for Marc W. Redfield, who contributed “Pynchon’s Postmodern Sublime” to the March 1989 issue of *PMLA* (152–62), I could not tell whether English is Redfield’s first language. But at any rate, it seems to me that it is your own responsibility to impose stylistic guidelines on contributors to *PMLA*. Why is it, then, that I lost count of how many times Redfield used the terms *figure* and *figuration* in his ten-page article? And why is it that, contrary to Redfield’s assurance at one point that “[w]e are now in a position to understand why such apocalyptic closure might distribute violence along gender lines, while all other differences fade” (155), I found myself in no such position whatsoever—despite my being, as a student of literary theory, a sympathetic reader. Consider too this overblown and needlessly complex sentence in one of Redfield’s notes: “The arguments being pursued here, however, would suggest that notions such as ‘will’ and ‘consciousness’ need to be resituated and rethought instead of being abandoned to an ultimately recuperative dramatization of helplessness” (161n10). Construing this sort of language may, it is true, give a feeling of belongingness to those who have been properly initiated into the esotericisms of present-day academia. But such writing does little to strengthen the credibility of academics who, oftentimes voicing Marxist sentiments, write in a way that very few people without (and with!) PhDs could understand.

As a graduate student, I realize that the pressure to publish and the need to fit in encourage academic writers to use the technical vocabulary prevalent in literary studies today. However—and I speak from firsthand experience—the wholesale adoption of technical terms can be antagonistic to critical thinking in the strictest sense. It seems to me that only by developing a language of one’s own, only by resisting the temptation to use ready-made language and thus ready-made concepts, can one engage in vigorous and effective thinking. Perhaps the most incongruous and far-flung postmodern parody is therefore to be found in the pages of your own prestigious journal: that of intellectuals ceasing to think for themselves.

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Reply:

I have had some difficulty formulating an appropriate response to David Herman’s letter. Its complaint is only contingently directed at my article. Herman does not seem to care very deeply about Pynchon’s texts or the postmodern sublime: a different essay by a different critic

obviously would have served him equally well. He thus relieves me of the usual burdens of professional exchange but imposes on me the more delicate task of responding to a discourse that asks no questions. For of course I am not being requested to *justify* my or anyone else’s use of the “technical vocabulary prevalent in literary studies today.” The issue, in Herman’s eyes, is beyond rational dispute, and my article is merely the last straw; therefore, logically enough, Herman addresses his remarks not to me but to the agency that ought to be policing the likes of me: *PMLA*’s editorial board. One must be feeling threatened indeed if one needs to write with such depersonalizing belligerence.

It is not by chance, I suggest, that the object of Herman’s monologue is language. And since “Pynchon’s Postmodern Sublime” studies the defensive gestures that linguistic opacities inspire, I like to think that my essay precipitated Herman’s response in more specific ways than his remarks might at first indicate.

Consider the tacit articulations structuring his opening paragraph. Herman begins by qualifying my incompetence as “stylistic,” and this statement goes along with what he says later about my language being “overblown and needlessly complex.” But in between these claims, the stakes rise and become epistemological. My essay is no longer simply a badly written and unoriginal text but has become an emblem for radical illegibility. Herman is so keen to emphasize the opacity of my prose that he is willing to break the first rule of forensic rhetoric and confess that he is condemning what he does not understand. He must locate the problem “outside” himself and thus at all costs must distinguish his own voice, his own self, from the “we” of my essay (“I found myself to be in no such position whatsoever”). And then, in delivering his coup de grace, Herman reaches into a footnote and quotes my suggestion that “dramatizations of helplessness” help sustain complacent notions of what a self is. The choice of quotation is curious. Herman surely could have found better sentences to attack on stylistic grounds. But the very spectacle of (his own) incomprehending helplessness that he had called up in order to isolate himself from the linguistic abuses of my article excited in him, I suggest, the memory of a sentence describing his own predicament.

“Pynchon’s Postmodern Sublime” studies the logic and the appeal of such economies of self-assertion. My essay also seeks to affirm the value of patient reflection. We are always asserting our command of language with greater or lesser hysteria or optimism—but it is worth trying to defuse and interrogate hysteria. For what we are really angry about is that language has gone or might go astray; and it is easier to blame someone than resign ourselves to the fact that communication is not necessarily going to take place at all. These scapegoating gestures of naming and blaming are never innocent. The costs are small and symbolic here in *PMLA*’s Forum, but one can imag-