

Cullen's to which he refers in his last footnote, and shall again have a few things to say about his interpretations of Spenser and Marvell. But the complaint in the last paragraph of his "Reply" calls for some explanation on my part that goes much beyond the immediate occasion of our controversy. I apologize for having classed him as a New Critic since he disclaims this title. Years ago (*RES*, Nov. 1957, p. 382) I confessed that I used "New Criticism" to include anything that had been written on Marvell after my (French) book was published in 1928. But, jest apart, there is more of Empson's search for hidden meanings in Professor Cullen's method (as in many of his fellow critics') than he seems to be aware of. He claims that he is historical; he is . . . up to a point. When he meets history he either devalues it, as in "April," or ignores it, as in "Little T. C." And the obvious does not satisfy him. True, he does not make much use of the now well-worn "ambiguity," but he has a substitute for it, viz., "ambivalence"—a word already used in his "Reply" and occurring again and again in his book. He even sees a deeper meaning, too deep for me, in the frivolous conclusion of my "Reply"; so I shall give a graver one to this "Rejoinder," for him to exercise himself upon it: "Ante omnia tamen, fratres, hoc in nomine Domini et admonemus, quantum possumus, et praecipimus, ut . . . prius illud quod lectum est credatis sic gestum, quomodo lectum est; ne subtracto fundamento rei gestae, quasi in aere quaeritis aedificare."

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¹ An unfortunate double misprint has slipped into the third and last footnote of my reply to Professor Cullen (*PMLA*, March 1971, p. 277). Though Louis Lecocq's book was published in Paris there was no "Perversion" in its publication; on the contrary "Perversion" should be read, instead of "Version," in the title of S. K. Heninger's article, published in *JHI*.

Literature and Morality

To the Editor:

I have been most happy with the new trend in *PMLA*, specifically the Forum, which, I feel, adds a new dimension to the publication in its pursuit of truth.

However, if I may, I should like to add something which I do not believe has been made clear in the letters published in the Forum thus far. Scholars since World War II have tended to assume that Henry James is beyond criticism when he draws a clear line between the "moral" and the "aesthetic" in *The Art of Fiction*, saying that the latter is a matter of "execution" and that there cannot be moral or immoral

"execution." This assumption, however, is completely false.

In order to show why it is false, I need to examine the words *moral*, *immoral*, and *unmoral*. It should be apparent that our language is deficient in that it poses only one word as the logical opposite of *both* the words *immoral* and *unmoral*. This has led to a terrible blurring of the distinction between the *general* and the *specific*. On the general level in which *moral* contrasts with *unmoral*, we mean by the former term "moral matters"—those matters which any person gives "top priority value" to. Now everybody everywhere, educated or uneducated and regardless of social status or wealth, gives "top priority value" to *something*. If he is educated, he may be very articulate about it; if he is not, he may not even understand clearly that he does so. But it is simply not possible for a person to be *human* and at the same time *unmoral*. As a matter of fact, it is this insight which Stephen Crane uses when he draws a distinction between man and nature and says that, *because* of nature's unmorality or indifference, man must *build* a brotherhood.

Now, to go back to James, I think that one can see that he has not "won" the field at all. He has simply indicated that he places the "aesthetic" above all else in his value system—in other words, he indicates that he gives to the "aesthetic" that "top priority value" which makes his judgment a fundamentally moral one in the general sense. When we see this clearly, we can then debate whether James's doing so was justifiable or not. I personally do not believe that it is at all justifiable, for it places "something else" above "humanistic" value, just as many persons professing "humanism" do. Only if the human being is placed first in the value hierarchy, it would seem, can one lay claim to the title of "humanist."

Obviously, one's decisions about such matters will affect his politics as well as his views of literature. My purpose here is to point this out so as to clear away the confusion which, I feel, underlies so much that passes for "literary criticism."

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PMLA and Politics Continued

To the Editor:

It would be unfortunate if Professor James L. Allen's letter, "*PMLA* and Politics" (Jan. 1971) were to pass unremarked. Leaving aside the fact that *PMLA* has long been a repository for the Association's internal and perhaps even political affairs (e.g., the presidential address), I must say that the recent articles of Professors Smith, Hook, Crews, Ohmann, and others have made the journal vastly more readable,

and with no diminution, as far as I can see, of its purposes as a scholarly and critical periodical. The tensions within the MLA are those of the academic profession as a whole, and how we look at literature is intimately connected with how we perceive ourselves. I should be very disappointed if *PMLA* ceased to reflect what may indeed be regarded as some rather uncomfortable professional realities, and to offer a variety of points of view upon them.

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Circular Rhymes in *Lycidas*?

To the Editor:

In a recent article in *PMLA*, Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., argues that *Lycidas* is tied together by a unitary rhyme scheme, which gives the poem a circular movement and suggests progress from disorder to order.¹ “*Lycidas*, I shall argue, possesses a formal, circular pattern carefully articulated by the poem’s rhyme scheme—a rhyme scheme that is more regular than most when most irregular it seems . . .” (p. 61). “Despite the clearly-marked divisions between stanzas or verse paragraphs, the poet, interested in the binding effects of rhyme, worked out a single, continuous rhyme scheme. Thus instead of beginning a new rhyme scheme with each new stanza, the poet treated those stanzas, or verse paragraphs, as if they did not exist at all” (p. 62). Taking distant lines and rhyming them with each other, Wittreich claims that there are only three unrhymed lines in the poem—one for each crisis (p. 63). Because rhyme words used near the beginning appear also at the end, the poem’s whole movement is said to be circular (p. 65), a form that emphasizes the poem’s “perfection, and eternity” (p. 67).

Of all these assertions, only one can reasonably be supported—that the rhymes toward the end of *Lycidas* move in the direction of order. But this has nothing to do with Wittreich’s claims for inter-stanzaic connections—and it has been pointed out before.

An examination of the rhyme scheme of *Lycidas*, as printed in an appendix to Wittreich’s article, reveals that the “rhymes” he is talking about are too far apart to have any meaning. Thus, although he speaks repeatedly of a breakdown in the stanza pattern, and of the use of rhyme to bind the verse paragraphs together, Milton seems to have gone out of his way to avoid this very effect. There are only five instances in the whole of *Lycidas* in which adjacent verse paragraphs can be said to contain the same rhyme: “rude” (l. 4) and “shroud” (l. 22)—a poor rhyme, as Wittreich admits; “horn” (l. 28) and “morn” (l. 41);

“swain” (l. 92) and “twain” (l. 110); “said” (l. 129), “head” (l. 147), and “dead” (l. 166). None of these rhymes is especially unusual. If stanzas are to be woven together by the “band”² of rhyme in any perceptible way, much tighter connections must be made.

If anything, it appears that Milton has deliberately avoided tying the verse paragraphs together. He has avoided inter-stanzaic rhymes closer to each other than thirteen lines, while within the stanzas the rhymes are never farther than five lines apart, and with rare exceptions, no more than three lines apart. At a distance of thirteen lines, it can safely be assumed that the first rhyme will have stopped sounding in the reader’s ear. But this is exceptionally close for the rhymes Wittreich cites: one pair is sixteen lines apart, another seventeen, and the rest are eighteen or more. A record is set by “blue” in line 192, which is 182 lines from its predecessor “knew” (l. 10). What possible significance can such a rhyme have?

Presumably, this is a purely intellectual rather than a poetic pattern. Aside from the fact that Milton normally writes poetry that is “simple, sensuous, and passionate,” however, any such intellectual scheme must appear more nearly regular than random if it is to be accepted. This Wittreich’s scheme plainly fails to do. Far from shadowing forth a circle, the “rhymes” more nearly resemble a spider’s web, with no rationale for the connections perceptible. If this is true when the lines are laid out and schematized for the reader in an appendix, where he can see them most easily, how much more must it be true for a reader without Wittreich’s aids, and with only the poem to go by? The distances between the inter-stanzaic rhymes are as follows: 18, 16, 17, 33, 57, 47, 24, 58, 29, 18, 69, 66, 58, 41, 18, 73, 41, 34, 19, 117, 134, 138, 95, 23, 28, 97, 182.³ The *distribution* of these pairs also appears to escape any pattern, although Wittreich apparently believes that the final stanza is particularly closely tied to the first. He may possibly be right, but the distinction is not especially pronounced.

In fact, rhyme in a long poem is bound to repeat itself, since there are only so many convenient rhyme sounds in English. Although a poet could avoid repetition, he would have to make a special effort to do so, nor would the result be worth the trouble. Probably, then, the extra-stanzaic rhymes in *Lycidas* are instances of random repetition, with Milton concerned only with avoiding repetitions that fall too closely together. To take another poem at random for comparison, the first Canto of Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*, with a total of 148 lines, contains six pairs of couplets that rhyme, two groups of three couplets, three groups of four, and one group of six.⁴ Pope is a careful poet, and so few of these identical sounds are close to each