Ms. Cameron replies:

Roland Hagenbüchle and Joseph Swann are cogent enough in the framing of their disagreement with my article. To take an exemplary sentence: "Rage does not seem to enter this poem at all. . . ." But the completion of that sentence, which posits an alternative interpretation, gives up the burden of explanation entirely: "there is no rage in the acknowledgment that Eros is contained by Thanatos, Thanatos by Eros, that the ineffable is located at the limits where effables meet in pure relatedness (Rilke's *reiner Bezug*)." Thus, while Hagenbüchle and Swann would right my reading of a group of Dickinson's poems, the rhetoric of this rectification is most insistent where it sees least obligation to explain its own terms—precisely the critical evasion they attribute to me.

"Linguistic transformation" is at the heart of Hagenbüchle and Swann's interpretation of the poems I discuss and, although they don't elaborate, their use of the term implies that Dickinson's poems appropriate the world and, in the process, transform its limitations. There is no rage at earthly inadequacies because it is apparently no trouble for the mind to reverse them. This explanation is too idealist for my taste; it takes those solecisms and crudities Dickinson's poems provoke us to consider and smooths them out of existence by suggesting that her language converts the realities it does not like in the magic of an ineffable transcendence. Would it were that simple.

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Blake's Idea of Brotherhood

To the Editor:

Michael Ferber's interesting piece "Blake's Idea of Brotherhood" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 438–47) points out that "Blake does not explain very well the process by which self-annihilation saves another" (p. 433). But we know that Blake often defines his terms negatively or ironically. For example, at the beginning of *Jerusalem* Albion turns away from "humanity" and sleeps in Ulro. He pursues "war & princedom & victory" and twists the "fibres" of brotherhood into a druidical network of empire. No matter how readers define humanity, or brotherhood, or being awake, they can see that Albion is up to no good. But if they look for a positive definition they may miss Blake's point.

"Self-sacrifice" is another positive and commonplace term, but "self-annihilation" is more unusual. "Annihilationism," according to the *OED*, was a religious doctrine of Blake's time. An annihilationist supposed that damned souls eventually were "annihilated" in Hell. This sort of otherworldly prison reform, or otherworldly physics, if that's what it is, might have caught Blake's eye.

Harold Bloom, in Erdman's edition of Blake, notes that the battling angels in Milton "cannot but by annihilating die" (*PL* VI.347). *Jerusalem* provides another fix on the same Milton passage in the druid battle of Chapter iii:

> York and Lincoln hide among the flocks, because
> of the griding knife.
> (*J* 66.65, E, 217)

"Griding" is a Miltonism. Michael wounds Satan with a "griding sword" (*PL* VI.329). It is possible to imagine Blake putting annihilationism together with Milton's angel war and contrarily concluding that angel wars are "mental wars" and that "annihilation" is how a mental warrior surrenders a damnable position.

The "self" that Blake annihilates is not innocent, so it is not helpful to think "self-annihilation . . . self-sacrifice . . . martyrdom." The self that Blake annihilates is the "Spectre," a cowardly tyrant who stands in the way of Blake's artistic production. He is compounded of Blake's personal fears and jealousies and of his so-called friends, his critics, some philosophers, King George III, and Satan. In Blake's usage, the term is not meekly reflexive. Blake could self-annihilate somebody else. Or Los could

> . . . loud his threats, loud his blows fall
> On the rocky Spectres, as the Potter breaks the
> potsherds;
> Dashing in pieces Self-righteousness . . .
> (*J* 78.4–6, E, 231)

By "self-annihilation" Blake seems to be defining his experience of working intensely, in his own contrary way.

Ferber is right to think of sisterhood when he writes about brotherhood, and it is reasonable for him to decide that Blake's failure to do so reflects both literary tradition and the poet's own time. I wonder, though, what Ferber makes of these lines from the end of *Jerusalem*:

> The Feminine separates from the Masculine & both
> from Man,
> Ceasing to be His Emanations, Life to Themselves
> assuming! (*J* 90.1–2)

https://doi.org/10.2307/461810 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Up to this point in the poem only females have been called "emanations"; now males are too. The effect is to make "Man" lose much of its masculine coloring. "Humanity" would be a synonym, not "men."

Is it possible, in the catastrophe of *Jerusalem*, that Blake in his intensity, or Los in his victory, abandons male supremacy? If self-annihilation is a Blakean irony for the fierce contentions of art and mental war, personal enlightenment and some kind of socioeconomic transcendence are not precluded.

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The Ideal Reader

To the Editor:

Robert DeMaria, Jr., concludes his essay "The Ideal Reader: A Critical Fiction" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 463–74) with two related observations: "what we have gained in critical perspicuity we have inevitably lost in the literary form of critical writing" and "the sheer volume of material devoted to analyzing readers and demonstrating their value argues their essential formal importance in the total language of criticism." Each statement is, in itself, valid, as DeMaria's article suggests; taken together, however, they may define more closely the nature and limitations of a critical approach that concentrates on the responses and competence of "the" reader.

Underlying DeMaria's investigation of the criticism of Dryden, Johnson, and Coleridge is an essential tautology: Dryden's reader is a composite of Dryden's tastes and prejudices, Johnson's reader is Johnson's idealized self-conception, and Coleridge's, naturally, is Coleridge. That all three men are creative writers, as well as critics, reinforces our awareness of their postulated readers as fictionally reflexive standards of judgment. There is, of course, no such thing as an "ideal" reader—each reader, critic, and author tends to create consciously or not "the" reader in his or her own image. For Dryden, Johnson, and Coleridge, "the" reader is both a logical outgrowth of a critical perspective and a fictional figure sympathetic to his pronouncements. We might say, in this respect, that the "literary" quality of *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* or *Lives of the Poets* lies in Dryden's or Johnson's organic, as opposed to prescriptive, conceptions of their readers. What distinguishes Dryden's criticism from, say, Rymer's is not its sense of "objectivity" or universality in abstracting "the" reader from personal responses but its intelligence in *not* justifying subjective reactions by reference to a static conception of the ideal reader.

One wonders, then, what to make of Frye's criticism, which inverts the Joycean or Poundian notion of the artist as hero and makes the reader—or critic—the hero of the process of reading the text. Frye's reader is, of course, as much an alter ego as Dryden's or Coleridge's, but the transition from poet-as-critic to critic-as-reader is not necessarily a smooth one. Contemporary theories of reading—especially as they are based on a linguistic model—tend to break with the older, organic tradition of reader criticism by diminishing the relative importance of the text. The absolute becomes the notion of the reader, and the effort to assess value becomes, at least for many structuralists, an attempt to fix meaning. In practice, this kind of "criticism of criticism" operates at a further remove from the text and becomes an essentially theoretical discipline, with pretensions, one suspects, to autonomy or some form of metaphysical union with perceptual psychology. Such a methodology of reading is of questionable practicality. Ironically, the more criticism sets up and accepts "the" reader as an absolute standard, the more self-referential and subjective criticism in general may become and the less original and interesting our perceptions of individual works. We might well ask, then, what advantages we can find in a body of criticism that sacrifices literary quality for "explicitness" in defining the reader as a formal construct. To postulate a decline in the literary quality of contemporary criticism necessarily involves our asking questions about its assumptions, methods, and ends. In losing its suggestiveness and sense of idiosyncrasy, contemporary criticism may be losing whatever it is that makes it inherently valuable. At its worst, much reader-oriented criticism merely reformulates (often in overly abstract language) the familiar problems posed by the abstractions "the writer" and "the author's intention." To rephrase what is already generally known under the guise of a theoretical consideration of "the" reader makes literary criticism little more than a low-grade philosophical infection. And the more complex the outward show of this critical approach becomes, the more likely it is to accept uncritically several dubious propositions not directly connected with "the" reader, among them the fiction of the "central theme" of a given work.

The basis of reading is inherently intuitive, and the strength of criticism such as Dryden's, Johnson's, or T. S. Eliot's is that the fictions of objectivity and the ideal reader are recognized for what they are. If most characterizations of "the" reader—including my denial of his existence—seem unsatis-

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