

factors. Hyman admonishes me against looking in literature for the moral passion that may have preceded its creation. Like my “friends on the New Left,” I am said to be imperfectly reconciled to the difference between art and life.

This line of reasoning is highly contestable. One can grant that literary experience differs from ordinary passion without elevating it, as Hyman thinks necessary, to a realm where psychological knowledge is inapplicable. The very assurance of immunity from the “real world” enables both author and reader to call upon a *deeper* range of emotions than is usually accessible to either of them, and it is precisely this tapping of common, buried sources that accounts for literary communication across barriers of time, nation, and ideology. There can be no antithesis between the laws of literature and the laws of mental life in general; whatever we know about literature is knowledge of how minds behave in reaction to certain invitations and constraints.

Thus it is gratuitous to say, without any practical criticism at hand, that people who look in literature for signs of its emotional vitality must be uninterested in art or insensitive to form or incapable of telling the difference between one sort of experience and another. They may conceivably have a more accurate sense of these matters than a critic who attends only to abstract harmonies. The writer’s real freedom, as opposed to the quasi-divine autonomy attributed to him by formalist esthetics, is his ability to condense, represent, and impart meaningfulness to tensions that would seem irreconcilable to the rest of us. It is just because those tensions are *not* wholly transcended that we can appreciate artistic value; without them, art would be a minut of inert symbols.

What Hyman neglects above all is the waning historical vitality of the formalist paradigm, which he treats as permanently valid. Misperception and dullness inevitably follow when a method loses its *raison d’être*—in this case its energetic critique of impressionism—and becomes the accepted way of tending the store. Formalism now survives chiefly because it is well adapted to the ideological and institutional pressures discussed in my essay but overlooked by all three of your correspondents.

It is widely known that most academic criticism is practiced without enthusiasm and even with a certain disbelief. This deplorable condition is what is being protected from scrutiny when, for example, Bloomfield asks: “What advantage shall we gain in leading the way to the destruction of our subject-matter as an autonomous study? If we won’t support our subject, who will?” Such an appeal to departmental morale is, I believe, as self-defeating as it is parochial. A changing political and intellectual climate is bound to bring

with it a reassessment of the possibilities for vital knowledge, and it is precisely on this reassessment that the survival of “our subject” will depend. It is unavoidable, I suppose, that this point should be lost on scholars who mistake their own preconceptions about literature for the enduring cause of humanism.

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Literature and Politics

To the Editor:

In reply to Harvey Stuart Irlen’s letter (Forum, Jan. 1971 *PMLA*) on my speech, “The Politics of Literature,” I offer a few reflections.

To explain the distinctions I made between personal political involvement and organization-wide political commitment seems to me pointless. Mr. Irlen is unable to grasp the fundamental differences between the things he so blithely compares. He speaks of “political energies” and “political methods” exerted to increase the budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities or on behalf of TIAA. Apparently Mr. Irlen actually believed when he heard himself appealed to on behalf of these enterprises that he was being asked to join in political action. Small wonder that any injunction on my part to remain critical and individually responsible strikes him as hypocritical! For him, any pause to examine differences will obviously undermine the whole enterprise of action. For some of us, being moved by injustice does not drive us uncritically into supporting petitions and accusing all those who do not support them of hypocrisy. We realize, as Mr. Irlen does not, that a specious “unified” stance by the MLA on extra-professional issues such as the war in Vietnam will merely alienate many of our members and undermine the influence we can have in areas of our competence. “Humane interest” is too vague a phrase to convince us that Mr. Irlen understands the issues he invokes. He is the least dangerous of many sirens who would have us abandon the work we do—work which is valuable and relevant and an honest contribution to bettering our society—developing a critical spirit in the young people we teach.

I am far more interested in the *human* implications of our professional standards and the projects concerned specifically with education which we in the MLA support than in a comparative survey of pension plans. Mr. Irlen does his colleagues a severe injustice by assuming that when they refuse to blindly lend their potential influence to the vague causes he enumerates, it is because they are selfish and shortsighted. They realize more fully than he the serious nature of social injustice in this country; they are deeply concerned with effecting change; they are also acutely

conscious of the complexities inherent in implementing such change. They want to act effectively, rationally, without jeopardizing the goals they seek by using professional influence in areas where it will not only be ineffective, but may even work counter to what they seek to bring about. Mr. Irlen would do well to examine the full complexities of the “causes” he urges his colleagues to champion and to reflect on *how* he can be most effective. His clarion call to “involvement” is too ill-considered to reflect more than an unstructured, unchanneled enthusiasm; he may find himself *used* by persons less humane than himself.

Noble feelings in the service of ill-defined objectives can be as harmful as selfish abstention from action. It is the middle ground, difficult to reach and more difficult still to hold, that I defended in my speech: the examined and conscious vocation, the desire to effect change, coupled with the judgment needed to avoid slogans and banners and stampedes of any persuasion—in short, the burden of active conscience and never-ending choice which is the duty and the privilege of the intellectual.

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