

clear thought about the function and nature of literature and about what distinguishes literary and critical activity from other kinds of engagement with texts.

Of the four essays in the teaching-of-literature issue that moved through the traditional *PMLA* evaluation procedures—anonymous submission, outside reading, review by Advisory Committee members and by the Editorial Board—only two are really about teaching: Pamela L. Caughie's "Let It Pass: Changing the Subject, Once Again" and Betsy Keller's "Rereading Flaubert: Toward a Dialogue between First- and Second-Language Literature Teaching Practices." Together they almost enact the "class" divisions between research and teaching characteristic of the profession. Though concerned with the intellectual and moral enlightenment of students, "Let It Pass" locates itself in the center of present debates about the postmodern condition. I mean no disrespect when I say that the subject is one of those sexy ones that currently win rewards inside the profession. However problematic and, from my point of view, overmoralized the author's argument is, the essay is the only one in the issue to attempt to connect critical theory with pedagogy. An interesting move to legitimize writing about teaching, it proceeds by rejecting the tradition of literary study on which departments and disciplines are still built.

On the other hand, "Rereading Flaubert" (and again I mean no disrespect) is not sexy. It does not raise questions about literariness but assumes the value of engagement with language for reading any literary text. Its strength is in its scholarly and linguistic meticulousness and in the insightful way it applies the lessons of second-language learning to literary study. It is probably the only essay in the issue that would not have found its way into *PMLA* were it not for the special topic.

The two other new essays, Carrie Noland's "Poetry at Stake: Blaise Cendrars, Cultural Studies, and the Future of Poetry in the Literature Classroom" and David R. Shumway's "The Star System in Literary Studies," were drawn from the general pool of *PMLA* submissions, and they have virtually nothing to do with the teaching of literature. Their presence suggests the failure of *PMLA*'s undertaking, symptomatic of the profession's failure to engage the most serious issues of teaching literature. The supplementary material chosen by the Editorial Board (obviously there to fill the gap left by the shortage of acceptable submitted essays on the topic) implies a discipline-wide self-consciousness about the profession's lack of attention to its current problems in a world of downsizing, corporate modeling, and culture wars.

A focused issue on the teaching of literature, a genuinely edited one, recognizing the limitations of its resources and the fundamental disciplinary problems, would

have served the profession better. By engaging the question of teaching literature more centrally, the profession as a whole might be able to recover its credibility with a public ever less interested in supporting literary or cultural work and to produce conditions in which the Editorial Board of *PMLA* could accept more than two essays for its next issue on this topic.

GEORGE LEVINE

Rutgers University, New Brunswick

To the Editor:

Carrie Noland's "Poetry at Stake: Blaise Cendrars, Cultural Studies, and the Future of Poetry in the Literature Classroom" (112 [1997]: 40–55) begins with a provocative question: "why are sonnets, epics, odes, and confessional lyrics so rapidly disappearing from the literature classroom?" I was not aware that they were disappearing, but as a poet who wrote a creative dissertation in poetry, I take the form's importance for granted. The first- and second-year students in my American literature and composition classes this fall read a good deal of poetry.

Noland's real agenda is revealed in her next question: "Why has poetry proved to be a more useful tool with which to *do* cultural studies, with which, that is, to explore how symbolic value is institutionally and ideologically constituted?" (40). Her interest does not seem to be poetry as such but its utility in the enterprise of cultural studies. Her reading of Cendrars, a poet I had not previously encountered, is illuminating despite its cultural studies language ("signifying practices," "cultural spaces," and so forth). Cendrars seems to have strong affinities with such an American poet as William Carlos Williams, who was also concerned with finding subject matter in local and popular culture, not traditionally regarded as having lyric beauty. Nevertheless, Noland's reading of Cendrars is designed to lead to considerations of how "poetry could be reintegrated into research concerning the social (institutional *and* semiotic) production of cultural distinction. . . . [T]eachers and scholars can redefine cultural studies through renewed attention to the poetic" (51).

I fail to see how this approach will improve what Noland describes as poetry's precarious place in the academy. Perhaps it will bring poetry more attention from cultural studies theorists, but poetry—especially the avant-garde variety—has not lacked for such attention, as Noland admits and the work of Cary Nelson, Marjorie Perloff, and Michael Bérubé demonstrates. Poetry, it seems to me, is doing just fine in the academy. When my students and I interrogate literary tradition and experimentation, feminism and race, the tension between

nationalist and internationalist perspectives, and the contemporary relevance of classical myth as we read Rita Dove, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Williams, and other poets, we seek not to demonstrate the utility of cultural studies but to develop a fuller understanding of the poetry, of its aesthetic *and* social dimensions.

To thrive, poetry does not need to be utilized to exemplify a theoretical perspective. Poetry simply needs to be taken seriously in itself—as a literary genre that can do certain things more efficiently than other genres, in its intense and memorable depiction of scenes, emotions, and narrative. As the American poet-critic Dana Gioia argues in *Can Poetry Matter?*, the real problem is not poetry's marginalization in the academy but its marginalization in American culture. One cause of this problem is the unwillingness of theorists and critics to accord poetry in itself the attention that other genres receive—a tendency that Noland displays, perhaps unwittingly.

KEVIN WALZER
University of Cincinnati

Reply:

Kevin Walzer's central point, that I "utilize" a poem "to exemplify a theoretical perspective," misrepresents both the substance and the objectives of my essay. To begin with, I would be hard-pressed to name precisely which theoretical perspective I "utilize" the poem to exemplify. In my close readings I attempt to forge a synthetic approach informed at once by French formalist methodologies and by an imperative I associate with cultural studies to provide a thick description of the context in which the poem was written. I never meant to imply that a poem is of interest only when it contains the language of advertising. Nor did I want to subordinate an understanding of Cendrars's work to a demonstration of the worth of cultural studies. I hoped instead to explore whether there were in fact aspects of a poem that a cultural studies approach might elucidate, while simultaneously suggesting how a formalist analysis of poetry can open new avenues for a project engaged in analyzing cultural dynamics (the ways cultural practices influence one another).

Although I too am tempted to affirm the aesthetic "as such," poetry "in itself," I can't help wondering what poetry in itself would be and whether in fact we ever have unmediated access to it. It may be that, as Theodor Adorno writes, "[i]f art is perceived strictly in aesthetic terms, then it cannot be properly perceived in aesthetic terms" (*Aesthetic Theory*). The tension between the two impulses Adorno invokes—the ontological and the materialist—is, I believe, highly productive; I would not want to see either foreclosed. One of the things poetry does

"more efficiently than other genres," as Walzer puts it, is to juxtapose the ontological and the materialist, to express at once a yearning for an "in itself" and a perception of radical contingency. Therefore, in my readings of specific poems I focus both on the formal experimentation that distinguishes Cendrars as a poet and on the cultural context that provided him with his extraliterary material and with the directive to use it. My intention was to study both the "aesthetic *and* social dimensions" of the poem "Aux 5 Coins," as well as to show how the two are formally interdependent and thematically intertwined.

Finally, I am not convinced that poetry is "doing just fine in the academy," despite the fact that Walzer teaches a good deal of poetry in his classroom. So do I in mine. However, we are in the minority for a large variety of reasons, only one of which is that too many contemporary critics are interested neither in the study of poetry nor in the close analysis of form. If Walzer treats "feminism and race" and "the tension between nationalist and internationalist perspectives" as well as poetry in his classroom, he would surely not disagree with me that poetry studies and cultural studies each can benefit by attending to reading strategies associated with the other. But when Walzer lumps Marjorie Perloff together with "cultural theorists" such as Cary Nelson, he fails to make some necessary distinctions between different critical emphases and ideologies. As the letters included in the recent *PMLA* Forum on "the actual or potential relations between cultural studies and the literary" repeatedly stress (112 [1997]: 257–86), there is a difference between approaches that replace the study of canonical literature with the study of popular or marginalized forms and approaches that seek to understand the literary within a broader context of institutions and signifying practices.

My own goal is to shed light on specific poems while advancing, modifying, and nuancing a useful critical apparatus. Although I reject Walzer's characterization of my intentions, I nonetheless hope to continue conversing with him and with others who share his views in the future.

CARRIE NOLAND
University of California, Irvine

To the Editor:

In delineating the differences between prominent academics of early- and late-twentieth-century America, David R. Shumway underestimates the public presence of the earlier group ("The Star System in Literary Studies," 112 [1997]: 85–100). While it is unarguable that a superficial star system has largely replaced earlier modes of notoriety, it is not true that "[b]efore World War II,