
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

The Fate of Reading

To the Editor:

While I agree with Geoffrey Hartman's eloquent pleas for a "renaissance of wonder" that emancipates "the aesthetic sensibility" and for literary criticism based on close analysis of (in most cases) canonical texts ("The Fate of Reading Once More," 111 [1996]: 383–89), I find problematic his unwillingness to take seriously certain recent developments in criticism and theory. What assumptions inform the following remark, for instance?

New historicism and related efforts to understand the literary text in socioeconomic terms or to reintroduce class, gender, and race are new entries whose popular base is greater than deconstruction's ever was; yet the number of scholars and students involved, whatever the brilliance of some analyses, will make for repetition and tedium in a relatively short time. (383)

When Hartman claims that "the number of scholars and students involved" determines the value of class-, gender-, and race-based studies, he appeals to an elitist economy of scarcity that ironically has more in common with Henry James's "gloomy prognostications concerning the masses," which Hartman derides, than it does with Shelley's more revolutionary (or at least more "democratic") urge to scatter the "stubborn centre" (386). He implies that deconstruction is more valuable precisely because it does not circulate as widely as new historicism, gender studies, Marxism, and the like. Such an argument does a disservice not only to those critical methods but also to the methods of close reading Hartman claims to be speaking for.

I find Hartman's strong commitment to pointing out "verbal evidence easily overlooked" in canonical texts a brilliant reminder of one of the central ironies of any programmatic movement toward decanonization. The canon may be more subversive than is commonly thought; decanonization is part of the canon. And I do not reject Hartman's interest in literature and criticism as, to some extent at least, amoral, or extramoral. His eloquent defense of readings that bring the reader to a "mental ecology . . . a green zone" and encourage a free circulation of expressive energies counters the pessimistic claims of Terrence Des Pres, which succumb to the social pressures against "the possibility of any kind of contemplative existence" (385–87).

However, Hartman limits contemplative existence too narrowly. The limits become especially evident in his discussion of an interpretive passage in the Babylonian Talmud that “uses verbal evidence easily overlooked to observe the phrase ‘Lord of Hosts [Zebaoth]’ occurs for the first time in the Bible when Hannah, who is childless, prays for a son” (387). The passage Hartman quotes is charged with questions of gender. Yet he does not stoop to ask, Was the passage written by a man or a woman? Why does Hannah pray for a son rather than a child? Does the fact that a woman is the first one to name the Lord of Hosts and to gender him male confer on patriarchy a spurious legitimacy that wouldn’t be as effective had the speaker been male? Can Hannah be read as ironic in her submission *de jure* to male authority? Such questions do not deny the kind of rigorous interpretive interventions Hartman defends and demands and indeed can supplement them. Nor does asking such questions destroy the possibility of a contemplative existence. Rather, they become a precondition for it. Isn’t it possible that feminism or women’s studies may be another one of the “earthquakes” (paradigm shifts) he claims Freud and the Holocaust were (383)? Unfortunately, Hartman’s blindness to the core importance of gender issues (and, by implication, issues of race and class) casts a shadow on the “natural light of reading lodged in every person” that he appeals to in his defense of close readings (386).

CHRIS STROFFOLINO
State University of New York, Albany

The Quest for a Name

To the Editor:

In response to Hannah Berliner Fischthal’s question regarding a name for those engaged in the study of literature (Forum, 110 [1995]: 416), I propose that we revive the noncommittal nineteenth-century term *literarian*, which means “one engaged in literary pursuits.” Granted, in its earlier incarnation the word was tinged with ridicule, as in the *OED* illustration, dated 1866, that refers to a “brood of literarians.” But the professional study of literature was in its adolescence then, which may account for the slightly contemptuous attitude toward the profession and the word describing it. The subsequent respectability earned by our now mature profession has overcome the pejorative associations of *literarian*.

Fischthal would probably feel comfortable working as a literarian, in company with the sociologist and the dramatist with whom she teaches. The word is no more specific about her work than the names of her colleagues’ professions are about their work.

Other words offered by contributors to the Forum are admirable. But *philologist*, recommended by Arvid Sponberg (111 [1996]: 131–32), and its parent *philologist*, from Lila Harper (131), arrive with too much baggage to be dissociated from their source. *Literate*, suggested by Keith Fynaardt (131) has the disadvantage of evoking anyone who can read and write. *Anglicist*, proposed by Sebastian Irigui (Forum, 111 [1996]: 476), on the other hand, limits the field to those in English, which eliminates everybody else in the Modern Language Association. While Irigui notes that *Anglicist* could be easily assimilated into the Romance languages at least, the word would retain its limited meaning. That is Irigui’s intent, of course, but is evidently not what Fischthal had in mind when she called for a word on the same plane as the words describing economists, historians, geographers, architects, and so on. Once a broad term of this nature is accepted, *Anglicist* would probably work as a subheading, comparable to, say, *Americanist* or *Caribbeanist*. One could be a literarian in the broad sense and an *Anglicist* in the narrow sense.

Literarian replaces naturally the denigrating term *literature person* and carries the connotations of dignity conferred by *historian*, *mathematician*, and so forth. Like those labels, it is broad enough to identify the members of the entire profession without requiring a confession of specialty. *Literarian* is already part of the English lexis, needing only a brief resuscitative effort to make it functional again. It means what we want it to mean, and it rolls effortlessly off the tongue. What more could we want?

PHYLLIS N. BRAXTON
Washington, DC

To the Editor:

Prior to my recent retirement from SUNY, Albany, one of my chores in the department of English was the compilation of our annual bibliography. I was struck repeatedly by the fact that, judged by our publications, we constituted not one department but three: literary scholars, creative writers, and teachers of how to teach composition. Each group published in a distinctive array of journals (indeed, even the term *journals* does not fit the magazines in which the creative writers appeared), and when they wrote books, each group had its own list of publishers. The three segments of the department were a classic case of apples, oranges, and walnuts, a situation, I believe, that is duplicated today at almost every other English department in the country. It is no wonder that our department (like those, I suspect, in other universities) was notoriously fractious, wasting a good bit of time in intradepartmental wrangling.