functions as an act of opposition to the repressive culture of Baudelaire's day; rather, I see Baudelaire's aesthetic strategies as belonging to a broader questioning of mid-nineteenth-century cultural norms and of the authoritarian society of his time that also makes itself felt on a more thematic level in his poetry. Unlike T. J. Clark, however, whom Nehring cites at some length, I focus not on Baudelaire's explicit opinions but rather on the positions implicit in his poetic texts.

In examining these texts, I do not attempt to "cast Baudelaire in a favorable light." At no point do I argue, as Nehring maintains, that Baudelaire was an "unambiguous" opponent of autonomous art. Throughout my essay, I emphasize the ambiguity of the aesthetic positions implicit in Baudelaire's poetry. I present "Lesbos," for example, as simultaneously nostalgic for the ideal of self-contained beauty and "painfully aware that this aim is no longer possible" (1131) and "La beauté" as exalting an ideal of living, human beauty through the final image of the speaker's limpid eyes while at the same time effecting "a disturbing transformation of the living woman into an object" (1134).

"[H]ermetic aestheticism" is indeed a troubling phenomenon; this point underlies my whole essay. To study it, or any other aesthetic position with which we disagree is surely not the same as to "salvage" it. As my title suggests, aestheticist texts often exert a powerful attraction; but by identifying moments of self-questioning in poems like Baudelaire's "Lesbos" and Rilke's "Die Flamingos," we can begin to distance ourselves from some of their more seductive effects.

Whatever side we take in the debate between aesthetic elitists and their opponents, it is perhaps best to remain mindful of the final lines of Rilke's poem, where the flamingos, proudly stalking off into the imaginary, do not actually become airborne, while the parrots in the nearby aviary merely vent their frustration in loud and raucous cries.

JUDITH RYAN
Harvard University

Poetry and Political Activism

To the Editor:

While I second Adrienne Rich's call for political activism to end institutionalized violence in the United States, I believe she overstates the case for poetry as a serious form of political action ("The Hermit's Scream," 108 [1993]: 1157–64). The making of poetry is one thing ("poiesis") and should not be confused with another—political activism. Rich blurs the distinction between poetry and political action when she too closely identifies the two: "*What is political activism, anyway?* I've been asking myself. It's something both prepared for and spontaneous—like making poetry" (1158). Ironically, Rich's troping effects a type of critical blindness to difference that Paul de Man has written about tellingly in *Blindness and Insight*.

In North America in the 1990s, political poets do not take big risks writing poetry. In fact, poets are ignored. When they act politically, however, the government may pay attention. The Pulitzer Prize–winning poet George Oppen (1908–84) is a perfect case in point. Oppen abandoned the writing of poetry for 25 years, from 1934 to 1958, to act as a political organizer of the poor, beginning in Brooklyn during the Great Depression. Oppen and his wife, Mary, advocated changing or ignoring laws that interfered with relief and caused starvation. For their pains, the Oppens were harassed by the McCarthy committee and forced to live in exile in Mexico from 1950 to 1958. Not surprisingly, when Oppen returned to writing, many of his poems, including "Philai te Kou Philai" ("Loved and Hated"), carried messages that were ethical, political, or both: "Children waking in the beds of the defeated / As the day breaks on the million / Windows and the grimed sills / of a ruined ethic."

During an interview in 1968 at the University of Wisconsin, Oppen said that his poetry was not trying to define the good and then work toward it. Instead, his work moved us in a direction we were already headed. He said he didn't believe in creating an ethic or writing political poetry as a political act. If one decided to act politically, then one *did* something political. If one decided to write poetry, one wrote poetry and didn't imagine that one was saving lives and so forth.

Oppen's rise to prominence during the 1960s coincided with the emergence of the peace movement. Like Rich and her activist friend Barbara Deming, Oppen did not believe that the marches, demonstrations, and sit-ins were "mere eruptions of youthful excitement." At the same time, he was not so naive as to think that "action informed by the love of justice and of the actual human being could change the perceptions of those at whom the actions were directed" (1159). He knew that human nature was not that uncomplicated, that violence could not be stopped simply by changing people's habits or by trying to make them love one another. Violence is a fact of life, and despite Rich's

https://doi.org/10.2307/463080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

assertion, no one can remain "beyond its seductions" (1161).

Unfortunately, violence has been with us since *before* the time of the *Iliad* and the Greek city-state. The Greek polis, however, tried to curb violence and to some degree succeeded. To be a *polites*, a citizen of the polis, was an honor and carried with it a heavy civic responsibility—to debate, to judge, and to vote on decisions that affected the lives of every Greek man, woman, and child. In fourth-century Athens, a statue dedicated to *dēmos*, the people, was erected next to that of Zeus Boulaios in front of the Greek Assembly, the most important political ground in the city, and as a result I. F. Stone wonders in *The Trial of Socrates* if democracy might not have been personified as a civic goddess had Athens had the time to develop into a full democracy. We citizens of the United States are sorely in need of the classical Greek commitment to public service and public values at a time when, as Rich writes, "the ghettos and barrios of peacetime live under paramilitary occupation" and "the purchase of guns has become an overwhelming civilian response to perceived fractures in the social compact" (1161). The Greeks of the *Iliad* are our ancestors, but not just for the worst as Rich and her poet friend Suzanne Gardinier would have us believe. It is a silly fiction to suggest, as Gardinier does, that we might be better off pledging cultural allegiance to the Mayans, the Mohawk, and the Iroquois (1161). She is simply reromanticizing the "noble savage."

The falsity of an equation between making poetry and acting politically is evident when Rich quotes the poetry and notebook of Audre Lorde, a black poet. Enraged by the killing of a ten-year-old black boy by a white police officer in Queens and the policeman's subsequent acquittal by a white jury, Lorde wrote a protest poem entitled "Power," which recognizes the difference between writing a poem and acting politically (1163). In her notebook, Lorde wrote the following about the killing: "How do you deal with things you believe, live them not as theory, not even as emotion, but right on the line of action and effect and change?" (1163–64). To write a poem protesting a terrible death is nowhere near as difficult as taking action to demand justice.

In acting politically, Lorde joins George Oppen in the streets and not in the poetic pulpit. As theory, the poem hints at a life-or-death action that is not the poem and could never be. The poem is like the action, however, in that both come "from fearful and raging, deep and tangled questions within" (1164), and it is on this ground that I can agree with Rich's assertion that political activism is like making poetry. In both cases, these questions result from conflicts within culture that extend as far back as the loved and hated cultures of the Greeks and Romans, whose fluted pillars' blossoming antique acanthus *still* lift their tremendous cornices on our and other coasts.

DENNIS RYAN
Pasco-Hernando Community College, FL

Scholarship at Whose Service?

To the Editor:

Only *PMLA* could turn a column on multiple article submissions into a tortured discussion on censorship, loaded with the rhetorical excess afflicting most postmodern writing (Editor's Column, 109 [1994]: 7–13). What bombast—"polysemy," "plurivocality," "monologic meanings," "the imperial will to control" (7)—all this baggage in the service of such a small idea!

Rejecting multiple submissions is fine if that's what *PMLA*'s Editorial Board wants to do. But does this policy decision have to be clothed in pages of abstruse rationalization, which, after making its strained point, *misses* the point? That point is made obliquely in the quotation from Ursula M. Franklin to the effect that scholarly publishing has become a service to authors' careers (11n2). Indeed, authors (still) produce most of what passes for scholarly publication only to avoid perishing.

Recently returning from the business world to teaching, I have found the administrators at my undergraduate institution obsessed with faculty publication in refereed journals. Trying to oblige my bosses, I have written several pieces and submitted them to various journals. The pathetically slow pace of academic publishing astounds me. Two journals each took six months even to acknowledge receipt of the articles I had sent them. These pieces are now being circulated to referees, and I can only imagine how long it will take before I get letters of acceptance or rejection. Other academic journals have quickly accepted pieces of mine, but for publication eighteen months in the future! For junior faculty members trying to pump up their résumés for promotion or tenure before they are eligible for social security payments, eighteen to twenty-four months, or longer, is simply too long to wait for a piece of writing to appear in print. Nevertheless, a fast letter of acceptance is useful until an article can be published.

https://doi.org/10.2307/463080 Published online by Cambridge University Press