horizon is expanded by them. Those who agree with Levin simply have their prejudices confirmed, and they are set free to follow their leader in deploring new directions in criticism without going through the bother of learning anything about them. Those who are angered by Levin's reappearance in *PMLA* might wish to put the whole matter in historical perspective by recalling Virginia Woolf's caricature of Professor Von X in *A Room of One's Own*:

> His expression suggested that he was labouring under some emotion that made him jab his pen on the paper as if he were killing some noxious insect as he wrote, but even when he had killed it that did not satisfy him; he must go on killing it; and even so, some cause for anger and irritation remained. . . .
>
> I knew that he was angry by this token. When I read what he wrote about women [feminism, Marxism] I thought, not of what he was saying, but of himself. When an arguer argues dispassionately he thinks only of the argument; and the reader cannot help thinking of the argument too. If he had written dispassionately about women [feminism, Marxism], had used indisputable proofs to establish his argument and had shown no trace of wishing the result should be one thing rather than another, one would not have been angry either. One would have accepted the fact, as one accepts the fact that a pea is green or a canary yellow. So be it, I should have said. But I had been angry because he had been angry.

I couldn't have put it nearly so well myself.

JAMES O'ROURKE
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To the Editor:

Seldom can one see more clearly how the battle lines of contemporary criticism have been drawn than in the juxtaposition in the May 1990 issue of two articles: Richard Levin's "The Poetics and Politics of Bardicide" and Susan Winnett's "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure" (105 [1990]: 505–18). Each critic represents what the other despises: Winnett is a "neo-Freudian," a revisionist reader of masculine paradigms both in primary texts and in criticism, while Levin is an "androcentric" reader who, like Peter Brooks, would see Winnett's effort as little more than a new version of thematics. Yet each, I believe, could learn something from the other.

Winnett polarizes the issue of the pleasures of reading, saying that there are masculine and feminine ways of reading. But her discussion of feminine pleasure offers (for me, at least) new ways of reading male as well as female texts. I take as my example a poem widely regarded as "masculine": Yeats's "Among School Children." The speaker, conscious of aging and mortality, wonders what adoring mother, if she could see her infant son become "that shape / With sixty or more winters on its head," would consider that image "A compensation for the pang of his birth / Or certainty of his setting forth?" (37–40). Yeats's question anticipates Winnett's revisionist perspective of narratological pleasure. As she puts it, "[B]oth childbirth and breast feeding force us to think forward rather than backward" (509). Unlike Winnett, however, Yeats seems to have realized that such looking ahead will not necessarily produce pleasure. Also, Yeats's poem contradicts Winnett's broad generalization that in "the erotics of oedipal transmission, the woman is *always* a stage (in both senses of the word) for or in the working out of a problem of paternal interdiction, toward the moment of 'significant discharge' when the son frees himself from the nets of paternal restriction and forges a self-creation—however ironized this process may be" (512; my italics). In "Among School Children" woman does *not* appear to be a stage, in either sense of the word. Rather, Yeats uses woman as a symbol to free himself from the "restriction" of masculine philosophy: neither Plato nor Aristotle nor Pythagoras offers Yeats a satisfactory answer to his questions about origins and mortality in the poem. The images of woman offer Yeats a new way to conceive of experience—a way that circumnavigates the masculine tendency (so evident in Freud's "masterplot" of the death drive) to view life as linear, an unbroken progression from birth to death. Yeats, instead, adopts the more feminine (and for many readers more satisfying) image of "labour" that is "blossoming or dancing / Where body is not bruised to pleasure soul" (57–58). The cyclic pattern suggested by this image is more consistent with the pattern of motherhood than with the linear vision of life that predominates in so much of the masculine, meditative verse written by Donne, Wordsworth, and others. Yet one feels that for Yeats (and, ostensibly, for many readers) this image also adheres to the "pattern of tension and resolution ('tumescence and detumescence,' 'arousal and significant discharge')" that Winnett rejects (508). We need not insist on a choice of masculine or feminine pleasures. This text, like many others, might satisfy the various forms of desire as defined by Brooks, Scholes, and Winnett.

Levin's argument raises other problems. Both his recent *PMLA* articles use remarkable subtlety in analyzing contemporary approaches to Shakespeare. Levin correctly sees how Marxist and feminist-psychoanalytic views have politicized Shakespeare studies, yet I am not convinced that he represents those approaches fairly.

As one who has learned much from the feminist-psychoanalytic critics especially, I agree that their strategy may be defined as a version of thematics, but I do not believe that this strategy is inherently bad. Nor do I think Levin's system of fragmented quoting gives readers an accurate picture of the method.

Ultimately, Levin's best point has to do with the style of recent criticism. As he shows, the new methodologies, with their emphasis on passive-voice constructions and personified indirections (e.g., "the text has a project" and "the text conceals"), obscure interpretation absurdly. The quotations I have taken from Winnett make this point well enough. And yes, these critics do have their own agendas, as the "formalist-humanist" critics do, and those agendas *are* frequently moral. But I am disturbed that Levin finds so little use in, for example, the absent-mother theme in Shakespeare; surely, to a critic as perceptive as he the repetition of this theme in so many plays must "reveal" something significant (and very moral) about Shakespeare and his society.

I believe that both critics have something to teach us about the limitations and opportunities that various forms of criticism offer. But I also believe that Winnett and Levin emulate the pattern of too many critics today, those who write hostilely and who are so deeply entrenched in their own positions that they cannot see what others have to offer. And that, I think, is the most important lesson to be derived from the politics of contemporary criticism.

DANIEL W. ROSS
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Reply:

Since these four letters come from four different directions, I cannot in my allotted space give each one the attention it deserves and so will limit myself to some major points. Holland is wrong in saying that I object to the concept of "the real meaning of a text." I object to the inconsistency of critics who reject this concept in principle but violate their principle in their own practice. I think that the attempt to determine the real meaning is legitimate and does not assume a "god's-eye view," as he contends. It is what all normal human beings do hundreds of times daily, whenever they are at the receiving end of a verbal communication. They try to infer the real meaning of the words coming from the sender, which is the meaning that the sender meant, and they are usually successful. Otherwise communication would be impossible. Inferences from a literary text are more difficult, but the process is the same—that is, if we are trying to interpret the text's intended meaning.

Hyman misconstrues my position in the opposite direction by having me insist that interpretation should be "limited to the author's intentions." I never say that. I am a pluralist and believe there are several valid critical approaches. One of these approaches attempts to find the intended meaning, as the New Critics did (Hyman is wrong about them); but that is not the only thing one can do with a text. This also applies to his main concern, the "autonomy" of literature. No human artifact is really autonomous, but it is possible to interpret a literary text as if it were, in certain respects, which is again what the New Criticism did. And again I would say that this is just one of the valid approaches to interpretation.

I agree with Holland that critics should try to evaluate literature, a very important function that was poorly performed by most New Critics (who thought their task was to prove that every work they interpreted was perfectly unified) and has now virtually disappeared, in part because evaluation poses such difficult problems for both Marxists and Freudians. And I agree with Hyman that The Death of the Author is not the sole cause of the practices I examine; I should have made this clearer, although I mention that some of them are employed by "weak" intentionalists like Snow. I also agree with Ross's conclusion that every mode of criticism has "something to teach us" and that we should learn from one another. This is the rationale of my pluralism, and I have certainly learned from the feminists, as I state in my earlier article, and (less) from the Marxists, as I should have stated in this one. I have not learned, however, that the recent proliferation of absent-mother figures in Shakespeare "must 'reveal' something significant" about him. It only reveals that critics are now searching for these figures with a method that guarantees success since it has no negative test—no way of determining if any play does *not* contain an absent mother. The same applies to the proliferation of Christ figures and of appearance-versus-reality themes in the older criticism. Does Ross think they revealed something about Shakespeare or about the critics who sought them?

O'Rourke's only specific criticism of my article involves one sentence on the text's acquisition of a project. The sentence is sarcastic, but it raises a serious issue about critics evading the problem of agency. O'Rourke evades it too by shifting to the next sentence to charge me with concealing my knowledge of Marx's theory of ideology or revealing my ignorance of the theory. Now I never claim to be an expert on Marxist theory, since my concern is the practice of the new Marxist critics, and I do not know if some statement of Marx's supports their conceptions of ideology and the text as personified agencies that do things by themselves. But all his writings known to me assume that ideology is