

by any president of the MLA. Perhaps Whitman is suggesting that an election should be overturned if the candidate does not satisfy this criterion. Perhaps he is merely criticizing Said's supporters for failing to observe this criterion when casting their votes. The former is so arrantly antidemocratic and so obviously in violation of freedom of speech that it probably does not require refutation. But I fear that at least some members of the MLA will feel that the dignity mentioned by Whitman should influence their votes in the future, or even their membership renewal. Some might feel that Said is objectionable as president because at times he apparently lacked this "dignity."

There are two points to make in connection with this. The first is that the criterion proposed by Whitman is a matter solely of decorum, not of ethics—despite Whitman's assertion to the contrary. He is not suggesting that someone is made unfit for office by having, in practice, effectively supported the systematic degradation of individual human lives through the economic systems in which we live and work. He is not suggesting that a candidate becomes unfit for office by having—in national or professional or departmental politics—been complicit in the deprivation of individual human dignity based on race or sex or class or sexual preference or ability. He is not referring to the many and terrible varieties of practical dehumanization that make most of humanity suffer painful indignity every day. He is suggesting, rather, that impolite speech and impolite speech alone disqualifies one from office. Had Whitman adopted a moral criterion regarding human dignity rather than a criterion of mere etiquette, he may have been forced to conclude that Edward Said is one of the few people elected president of the MLA who in fact deserves the position.

The second point to make in this context is that even the criterion of decorum is never applied consistently. It is invoked almost entirely against dissident voices, as in Whitman's letter. As John Stuart Mill put it:

With regard to what is commonly meant by intemperate discussion, namely invective, sarcasm, personality, and the like, the denunciation of these weapons would deserve more sympathy if it were ever proposed to interdict them equally to both sides; but it is only desired to restrain the employment of them against the prevailing opinion: against the unprevailing they may not only be used without general disapproval, but will be likely to obtain for him who uses them the praise of honest zeal and righteous indignation.

PATRICK COLM HOGAN
University of Connecticut, Storrs

To the Editor:

Pardon my cognitive dissonance if I am unable to understand the recent attack on the qualifications of Edward Said, one of the most distinguished and well-known members of the academy in America or indeed in the world, to be president of the Modern Language Association. As someone who has known Said both through his written work, interviews, and media appearances and personally as my dissertation director, colleague in the Columbia English department, and friend, I can say that there probably are few people more fit to head the MLA.

The implication made is that because Said has attacked some scholars in a strong, engaged, and heated manner, he has somehow forfeited his right to be placed in a position of honor and service within the profession. First, it must be pointed out that the specific quotations were taken out of context and made into a tessellation secured with the misleading glue of ellipses. Second, even if we grant that some of the quotations were accurate, must we conclude that strong and even offensive language is inappropriate? We should all remember that Said is not arguing some abstruse theoretical position or some nicety of style. His work has been involved in the life-and-death politics of the Middle East and the ideological struggles associated with that conflict. Strong situations demand strong words, and the Supreme Court upholds the right of Americans to use strong and even offensive language. We should also remember that many of the authors we teach in literature classes—people like Thomas More, Jonathan Swift, or James Joyce—wrote things that make Said's comments seem like remarks at a Junior League tea.

Living as we do in a time of renewed puritanism, let us not stoop to the kind of impugning of character best left to scoundrel politicians. Integrity and commitment are characteristics too complex to be judged by a handful of selectively chosen "bad" words. By any standards, Said's accomplishments in literature and politics set an ideal for the rest of us. I believe that the majority of MLA members are deeply honored to have Said head the organization.

LENNARD J. DAVIS
State University of New York, Binghamton

To the Editor:

As a recent student of Edward Said's at Columbia, I write in a state of particularly outraged response to Jon Whitman's letter, in which he resigns from the MLA because of Said's accession to its presidency. Whitman's

bizarre and nearly racist caricature of Said results from a tabloid-style pastiche of quotations from Said interpolated with Whitman's own histrionic verbs (which have Said variously sneering, posturing, concealing, and so on). It constitutes one more round in a debate whose subject is too rarely made explicit. A more honest letter might simply have stated that an anti-Zionist MLA president is, for Whitman, a reason for resignation. But it is difficult to explicitly impugn a duly elected president on the grounds of political disagreement, so instead Whitman indicts Said for failing to find a "language of civil exchange." No one has worked harder to find a language of civil exchange across more daunting ideological divides than has Edward Said; Whitman's letter suggests that he could learn much from his former teacher about this difficult process.

As a professor of English and member of the MLA, I look forward with great enthusiasm to the intellectual distinction and the humane inclusiveness that Edward Said will bring to the MLA as its next president. No one could better represent us as intellectuals, and no one could better help us to envision the serious contributions that we might make to public discourse given a steadfast belief in the possibilities of civil exchange in and beyond the university.

ELAINE FREEDGOOD
University of Pennsylvania

Reply:

In writing about my decision to leave the Modern Language Association, I cited the disturbing record of repeated public assaults by its incoming president against individuals who challenge his views. The response I sent to the Forum regarding Edward W. Said's reply to that letter (Forum, 114 [1999]: 107) has been refused publication by *PMLA*, which has written me that its policy prohibits publication of a "letter that continues a Forum exchange in which the writer participated." I appreciate the opportunity provided by the journal to comment on the letters of Patrick Colm Hogan, Lennard J. Davis, and Elaine Freedgood. But it is saddening to observe such members of the MLA attempting to evade or condone Edward Said's recurrent violations of norms officially held by the MLA itself.

Efforts to disregard or disguise indefensible attacks do not excuse the attacks; they expose the apologists. The contemptuous assaults by Edward Said that I documented in my original letter are not incidental remarks. They are

programmatic acts contributing to broader printed affronts in which Said has persistently sought to humiliate, intimidate, or demean others. Though the letters of Hogan, Davis, and Freedgood differ in emphasis, each tends in its own way to obscure that offensive design. For Hogan the issue raised in my letter about public conduct involves "impolite speech alone." Expressing his concern for humanity at large, he conspicuously fails to engage the moral problem of Said's public efforts to discredit others. For Davis "the specific quotations" in my letter "were taken out of context." The Forum section of *PMLA* allows him one thousand words to develop his argument; it is revealing that he offers not a single example to support that fanciful allegation. For Freedgood my account is a "bizarre and nearly racist caricature" that entails "a tabloid-style pastiche of quotations." But distorted accusations from her can hardly rectify the acts of distortion from the record of Edward Said that I documented in my letter. To pretend that Said's blatant assaults are not what they are is to promote his effort to escape from professional and ethical accountability.

There is another way to evade the issue of professional and ethical conduct: to try to politicize it. Hogan charges that the standard cited in my letter is "invoked almost entirely against dissident voices." To Davis the voice of Edward Said nonetheless appears to be almost the voice of consensus. "By any standards," he assures members of the MLA, "Said's accomplishments in literature and politics set an ideal for the rest of us." Freedgood imagines that for me "an anti-Zionist MLA president" is "a reason for resignation." But the issue in this case is not the popular estimation or the political position of Edward Said. It is rather his repeated public subversion of standards professed in resolution after resolution of the association over which he now presides.

It is relatively easy to pass from evading that abusive record to condoning or even endorsing it. Patrick Hogan seems unaware of how his closing quotation criticizing the special pleading for "honest zeal and righteous indignation" keenly exposes contemporary acceptance of the offenses of Edward Said. Is "offensive language" necessarily "inappropriate"? asks Lennard Davis. "Strong situations demand strong words," he announces, as if such a formula could help to turn Said's words of disfigurement into expressions of duty. Declaring her "great enthusiasm," Elaine Freedgood looks forward to the "humane inclusiveness that Edward Said will bring to the MLA" as its president. Could she be thinking of the expansive inquiry cited in my original letter in which Said charges one of his critics with "solemn idiocies" that "inhabit a semideranged world entirely his own" and