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# AMONG THE INTELLECTUALOIDS

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## MLA MALAISE

by D. G. Myers

Toward the end of a particularly grueling session of papers at the recent convention of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco, Stephen Greenblatt spoke yearningly of what every English professor wishes for—"the moral authority of homelessness." Greenblatt is a star of the profession, head monkey of the latest fashion in literary studies (the New Historicism), full professor at Berkeley in his forties. Yet still he envies the frayed, unshaven, coughing men who live upon the streets. Why? They don't have a lifetime job or a home in the Berkeley Hills. But they do have the one thing Stephen Greenblatt does not: the moral authority ceded to the weak in a social-welfare state.

In his envious recognition of what it is he lacks, Greenblatt could easily have been speaking for a large segment of the academic profession of literary studies. As the MLA convention illustrated, these days a good many left-leaning professors of literature are demoralized. You wouldn't think they would be. After all, they are fortunate enough, as Cecelia Tichi of Vanderbilt said at one point, to live in "the post-Vietnam era of a declining imperial power." They have captured the profession; they have radicalized literary studies; they have very nearly succeeded in transforming the MLA from a scholarly to a political organization. By all rights they should be celebrating. But there is no celebrating. For the professors continue to lack moral authority, even though they're feeling weak.

MLA is sometimes called "Malaise," and the name never seemed more apt than in San Francisco this year. At the very moment of its triumph, the academic left—at least in literary studies—has run out of gas. Just as it should be entering a period of concentration, of drawing back and consolidating its gains, the professoriat seems instead to be entering a period of fatigue,

self-doubt, and nagging discontent.

Take the case of feminism (as if you had any say in the matter), the most prominent of the new theoretical movements in literary studies. Outgoing MLA President Winfred Lehmann reported that the women's studies section of the Association has increased in membership to rank second in size only to the section on literary criticism. Lehmann's figures were borne out by the program of the 1987 convention—fully 10 percent of the sessions were exclusively devoted to feminist topics (not counting the nineteen sessions on female writers or the endless number of papers given over to "feminist readings" of male writers). There were as many sessions on "Chicana" writers as on Shakespeare. (Esteeming writers solely on the basis of their "gender" or "ethnicity" is known in literary studies as "opening up the canon.")

The titles of MLA sessions are an easy mark for ridicule, but one will give a whiff of the present intellectual milieu of the MLA: "What Is a (Wo)Man Critic and What Does (S)He Want?" More than one convention paper raised the subject of "(en)gendering." Titles like "Let Us Speak" or "Speaking for Us" were characteristic, testifying to feminism's conception of literature as a branch of political oratory. Indeed, so prominent a part of the academic literary scene has feminism become that during one afternoon time slot at the convention no fewer than nine sessions on feminist topics from lesbian writing to "feminist dialogics" were droning on concurrently. Feminism has gone from being a special and rather narrow interest to having become one of the large clumsy categories by which literary study is organized in the university.

For all that, however, there are rumblings of discontent. What does feminist criticism have left to do when the last poem has been unmasked to reveal a male poet's secret desire for "immersion in the feminine"? Foreseeing a depletion of the literary works

and problems that will yield to the feminist approach—what might be called feminism's impending energy crisis—Sandra M. Gilbert of Princeton and Susan Gubar of Indiana proposed a solution. There have always been, they said, two types of feminist critic. On one hand there is the critic who insists on her "expressive autonomy," her freedom from fidelity to the historically determined text, and who despises "the phallo-logocentrism of the very idea of history"; on the other there is the critic who "believes that literature inscribes social conditions" (usually evil ones) and who "imagines utopian futures." Gilbert and Gubar named these critics, respectively, the "mirror" and the "vamp" (their caricature of the title of M. H. Abrams's great study of critical theory in the Romantic age was meant as homage, but its effect was to suggest the literary bounding, the straining after unearned distinction, characteristic of much feminist criticism). These two types of critic have remained at odds too long; they and their separate functions must be merged into one.

Gilbert and Gubar demonstrated how this might be done in an incoherent reading of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. In their version of the poem, Coleridge announces that "the utopian City of Ladies" has arrived, and the next task is to bring the repressed to the surface of consciousness and set it free! "Though based on misreadings," Gilbert said, such an interpretation "might be more to the point."

But if the new two-in-one feminist approach proposed by Gilbert and Gubar only demonstrated the hollowness of the previous feminist approaches, if feminist criticism was demonstrated to be in deep trouble as an intellectual method, feminists themselves at MLA appeared to be internally divided, rancorous, and fretful. More than one objected to the fact that not all women in the profession are radical feminists. Catherine R. Stimpson of Rutgers complained that too many grants were going to women "in the middle," and Ruth Salvaggio of Virginia Tech declared bitterly that it

is unethical to permit "conservative women" to review the work of feminists. What's more, men who express sympathy for feminism turn out to be just as dangerous as men who fiercely oppose it. Annette Kolodny of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute warned that male professors who seek to synthesize feminism with other methods or subjects are covertly seeking the "containment" of feminism. The result, she said ominously, would be the depoliticization of feminism.

Much as this might be welcome to feminism's opponents, there is better news still. Feminists in the academy fear they are reaching not so much a critical mass as a saturation point. Martha Evans of Mary Baldwin College said that, as women's numbers rise in the university, men are beginning to call for "balance" in the name of the same principle asserted to fuel the rise of women—Affirmative Action. "The very words we had used to attack white male hegemony are now being used to defend those interests," Evans said. "We need to rethink our rhetoric . . . to defend and protect our position. By our very success are we undoing ourselves?"

Feminists were not the only ones at MLA who felt their gains of the past two decades slipping away. Deconstructionists moaned that students continue to enroll in graduate school believing superstitiously that "texts" are actually "writings." Marxists, who once confidently expected Departments of English to wither away and be replaced by "cultural studies," are depressed to see how few courses in film and TV criticism are being offered in American graduate schools and how few articles on mass culture are being published in the scholarly journals. Worse yet, conservatives are beginning to develop cultural criticism of their own in journals like the *American Scholar*, the *New Criterion*, *Commentary*, and *The American Spectator*. Radicals warned that cultural criticism, meant to be "liberatory, feminist, egalitarian,"

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tarian, socialist, and anti-racist," was being co-opted by the right. The more intelligent among the Marxists admitted that, after years of trying to dodge the issue, distinctions of value in criticism must at last be faced (though how this is to be done, if discrimination and judgment are to be denounced as instruments of repression, went unsaid). The less intelligent complained that, despite the best efforts of the academic left to re-educate them, common readers still display a retrograde interest in narrative and the lives of individual men and women—witness the current vogue of that form of criticism which has resisted the advances of *nouvelle théorie*, the literary biography.

But the highpoint of the convention

occurred when Jane Tompkins of Duke, scheduled to participate in a panel discussion on the revival of mass-culture criticism along with Todd Gitlin and Richard Ohmann, rose instead to deliver a stinging rebuke to such well-known Marxist critics. "I am sympathetic to Marxist critics," Tompkins said, "but I'm also angry with them—I've carried resentment toward them around for a long time without knowing it." She described the Marxists as smug and knowing. They "condescend to the masses they would disabuse," and bear themselves with an insufferable "air of moral superiority." "My problem with Marxism has as much to do with being made to feel socially out-of-it as anything else," Tompkins said.

At a cocktail party, Marxists prefer to slouch around in their work shirts and Levis and talk darkly of hegemony and contradictions rather than to introduce themselves to Tompkins or offer to get her a drink. Gitlin and Ohmann didn't know what to say in response. Their breath was fairly taken away. Afterwards the convention was a-buzz. "Jane Tompkins is throwing bombs," a friend said.

It says much about the condition of literary scholarship in America today that a public attack on Marxism at a national convention of literary scholars should take the form of a complaint about bad manners, and that such an attack should be deemed unanswerable. But this little episode may also reveal

the extent of the demoralization on the academic left. Or perhaps only the lack of imagination. What passes for radical reform of academe these days is exemplified by the call, made by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. of Cornell, for MLA to be held in Africa. Next year (or maybe the year after) in Nairobi! But don't expect a large turnout. "I'm bored with trying to be politically correct," an attendee at this year's convention blurted at the end of a session—and if the sullen murmur of approval in the room was any indication, she may have spoken for a growing number of literary scholars who are bored with the politicization of their discipline. What's next? A renewed interest in the moral authority of great writers? □

## THE PRINCELY PULSE



### TITLES

by Alexandra Schönborg

During my early twenties, I thought little of being serious. I really did not know what the word meant. But I did know that being outrageous was fun. I would think with great amusement of the Prince of Wales, for example, who, while on an official visit to the court of Franz Josef and Elizabeth at the turn of the century, hurled chairs through the closed window, simply because he'd found the room stuffy.

One winter in Gstaad, a skiing resort reserved exclusively for the very rich and the "has beens" of the aristocracy, I was lunching with a large group of people when the ex-King of Greece, Constantine, turned to me and, making polite chitchat, asked, "Alexandra, do you use your title?"

"Yes, sir. Of course. But I use it only at the hairdresser and in restaurants."

My response, though out of line, came with a certain candor, but earned no admiration. It was, in fact, a downer. The table fell silent. Fortunately, some kind soul dove into the conversation and changed the subject. And I realized for the first time that outrageous behavior might not charm everyone. And that, perhaps, I was becoming too old to get away with it. And something else: I realized that the

whole notion of titles left me ambivalent.

Some years later, I fielded a far more innocent question on this same subject. During lunch at the home of some dear friends in Greece, their daughter, Atalanta, then 12, asked, "Are you really a princess?"

"Well," I said, "my family held that

title in Austria, when there was an Emperor."

"So, do you still wear a crown?"

"I do, sometimes, but only on Sundays, and unfortunately, I am leaving Saturday."

Shortly afterward, I was in England where I happened to spend a weekend at the Duke of Marlborough's castle,

Blenheim. The first morning, I was barely awake, lying in my canopied bed, when a chambermaid came in. "Good morning, your highness," she said, drawing open the curtains. "It's a beautiful day."

I disappeared under my pillows, thrilled and embarrassed at the same time. That such formalities still existed, in a day and age when the Queen of England is only a wax doll at Madame Tussaud's! Then the maid placed a silver tray on my bed and up "we" sat, propped by a multitude of lace pillows, and had breakfast: fresh orange juice, crisp toast, soft-boiled eggs, and morning tea. Afterward, I got out of bed, opened the door of my room, and looked down the hall trying to find a newspaper. Instead, I caught a glimpse of the Duke's room, its door also momentarily ajar. He was wearing silk pajamas, the pockets of which were embroidered in gold with his initials and his crown. This gleaming crown also reappeared, same embroidery, on the linen sheets covering his wife's bed.

Hastily, I retreated into my room, jumped back into bed, and wondered about what I'd just seen. Did the Duke suffer from a fear of forgetting who he was? Of being dispossessed of his title during the night? Or did wearing crown-embroidered pajamas in a canopied bed draped with mountains of



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