The importance of social motive, private motive, and idiosyncrasy to lyric and to critical theory is illustrated in de Man's "Lyric and Modernity." In this essay, which deals with the meaning of modernity, de Man examines William Butler Yeats's attempt to distance his poetry from that of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In a 1936 anthology of modern English poetry, Yeats declared that his poetry was "good" and "modern" because it was representational while the poetry of Eliot and Pound wasn't good or modern because it had lost the mimetic function. The distinction came down to one between self (read "social") and soul (read "private" or "idiosyncratic"), between a poetry (Yeats's) that depended on an outside world and one (Eliot and Pound's) that depended on the private soul's fancy. Truly modern poetry, according to Yeats, involved an awareness of the "incessant conflict" between self and soul. As de Man points out, Yeats worried about the loss of self in this conflict because such a loss meant loss of representation and of action as embodied in poetry. This loss is, according to de Man, what modernity is all about. But is it really? What we may be dealing with here is de Man's idiosyncratic behavior as a deconstructive critic.

What should not be overlooked in de Man's account is his return to Aristotle and the *Poetics*, wherein the lyric poet imitates something like action. Aristotle analyzes action in terms of conflict in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and as James Kinneavy pointed out forty years ago in *A Study of Three Contemporary Theories of Lyric Poetry*, conflict, emotion, and choice as components of action relate directly to the object of imitation in the *Poetics*. De Man's return to Aristotle is an acknowledgment that important theoretical discussions of lyric have historically begun on Aristotle's turf. Willingly or unwillingly, de Man returns to the source.

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## Birth of the Cyberqueer

To the Editor:

I found it quite impossible to understand the first sentence of Donald Morton's "Birth of the Cyberqueer" (110 [1995]: 369–81) and so read no further. Instead, to explain my failure, I turned to statistics. From a hurried count, I found that this sentence has about ninety words, twelve commas, one colon, one pair of parentheses, and two words identified by quotation marks as bearing special meanings. It includes several current buzzwords, opaque to all except a few initiates: *ludic, textuality, commonal-*

*ity, libidinal economy*. The purpose of such a sentence is clearly not communication of information but verbal virtuosity. I contend that this is bad writing by any definition.

Shouldn't *PMLA*'s editorial readers insist on good style as well as good content? Or does this opening sentence seem queer only to me?

Second, I think that we have had enough of the coy puns made within words with parentheses (the first sentence contains one). Users of this device must view themselves as (a)cute critics, but I increasingly find such clichés merely (ped)antic and ludic(rous) crap(ulence).

WILLIAM B. HUNTER
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## *Reply:*

William B. Hunter raises the important issue—which one hears in many sites—of the relation between language and radical intervention: isn't commonsensical ("readily readable") language capable of breaking through the thick of ideology (congealed commonsense) to produce new understanding in the reader, or does any use of commonsensical language end up reproducing the ruling ideology (leaving the dominant knowledges intact)? Hunter's complaint echoes, for instance, that of L. G. Wolf, who expresses a similar distaste for "'problematic' language," presumably from a leftist position (*Socialist Review* 21.3–4 [1991]).

What is instructive is the "logic" by which Hunter concludes that my essay is an example of "bad writing." Having failed to "understand the first sentence," he decided to read "no further." Anxious over his "failure" as a reader, he converts it into my failure as writer. Instead of admitting that he is not familiar with the range of concepts used in my sentences and does not wish to bother to acquire the knowledges necessary to comprehending the text, he proposes that the failure of communication is the result of the presence, beginning in the first sentence, of unusual punctuation and "buzzwords." Hence he shifts from reading to counting and compiles statistics to show that the "bad style" of the first sentence is characteristic of the entire text, which is also therefore unreadable.

However, the contradictions of his letter indicate that for all his counting, Hunter has not succeeded in overcoming his anxiety. The troubling concepts he first designates "buzzwords" "opaque to all except a few initiates" become a few sentences later nothing but transparent "clichés" boringly familiar to everyone. Hunter thus anxiously dismisses what he calls my "queer" text on the contradictory grounds that it is simultaneously unreadable and already read.