



## From the Editor's Thinkpad

For a variety of reasons, and in various ways, concerns about individual agency and acceptance of responsibility have recently acquired a new interest and urgency—even if in the form of locating responsibility in an amorphous “they” who are perceived to be totally irresponsible, and whereby the master narrative seems to read: “we” must do something, but “they” won’t let us. Much of the current rethinking about such matters undoubtedly has to do with fears about technology’s getting out of hand, and much also probably has to do with the way that the once energizing “theorizing” about the social construction of the subject has become naturalized into a “given”—thereby ironically making such a worldview vulnerable to the kind of questioning that attends all seemingly “self-evident truths.”

This is hardly to suggest, of course, that we are witnessing a return to any earlier concepts of “free will,” or that “agency” has lost any of its more recently acquired connotations of being an organization to which one applies; similarly, there still remains the sense that responsibility is largely dependent

upon “response-ability,” and that this power to reply is not measured out equally to all persons and even at best is always limited. At the same time, however, there does seem to be a growing conviction that affirmative action requires a certain amount of self-determination, and that if “they” are in charge, this collective also includes the “we.”

In academic circles, the emphasis on responsibility and a kind of return to the notion of agency can be noted in the current emphasis on the personal in scholarship; individuals, it is argued, have the ethical responsibility to declare the vantage point from which they are speaking, while conversely the argument is that the “they” have the responsibility to recognize that “others” might have experiences and needs that require specialized attention. Not surprisingly, this new moral imperative has reopened the age-old debates about the pros and cons of anonymous submission and vetting policies, even if, as before, the controversy tends to resolve into a general view that while “the system”—an interesting technologizing of the “they”—may not be ideal, it’s the best we have.

Unfortunately, within these debates, as in the case of the earlier more general paranoia, what still seems to inform objections to anonymous reviewing is a sense that whatever goes on "behind the scenes" must somehow and inevitably be motivated by ill will. So as a tactic for encouraging a rethinking of this negativity, I would like to draw on my experience as editor of *Mosaic*—a journal which currently does adhere to evaluator confidentiality—and suggest that if there is a problem with such a policy, it often pertains to the way that anonymity can work against the "good will" aspects of the review process.

*Mosaic*, that is, regards the review process less as a screening mechanism and more as a means of affording an author informed commentary from the scholarly community; thus in assessing submissions, reviewers typically provide detailed directions concerning relevant research that an author should consult, and frequently reviewers draw upon their own expertise in the area to provide invaluable suggestions for ways that an author's argument could be strengthened.

Upon receiving such comments, accordingly, many and most authors express their desire publicly to thank the assessors for their assistance. This type of formal or printed acknowledgment, however, is not possible if the assessors' anonymity is to be preserved, and the result can be to create a severe ethical bind in the case of an author who has a high degree of integrity. Nor is it always sufficient to reassure the

author that the evaluators do not expect to be cited for their input, for the conscientious author is very aware of how he or she has been advantaged in this way, and that in a competitive market scholarship is a game that is played for ultimately high stakes.

Responsibility, then, can take many forms, with positives as well as negatives attached to each, and one of the especially provocative things about the essays in the present issue of *Mosaic* is the various kinds of material and perspectives that they bring to bear on the topic. What is also intriguing in turn—until one concludes that "responsibility" is today a pervasive concern, and part of the very air that we breathe (or don't want to)—is the extent to which the essays have this common focus, since such a unifying topic played no part in the selection process itself: that is, as in the case of all general issues of *Mosaic*, that the respective essays should have come together is solely owing to the mutual proximity of their date of acceptance for publication.

The question of "who is responsible?" is, of course, foregrounded most explicitly in Stewart Justman's use of Charles Manson's retort, "I am what you made me," as a focal point for an encyclopedic tracking down of the origins and implications of constructivist theories of education. But the concern with blaming others that Justman critiques is equally central to Kathleen Scheel's discussion of the cultural repression of awareness about incest that is the carefully hidden secret in William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and

which is perpetuated in critical readings of the novel, as well as in the current debunking of psychoanalysis as a means to recovery of memories about sexual abuse. Similarly, when Justman observes that it is only Frankenstein's monster who can justifiably claim to be a "made" thing, and then links this idea to a factory mode of education, he sets the stage, as it were, for Jerry Hoeg's in-depth focus on modern technology in the context of Latin American literature and his call for literary critics and creative writers to engage openly with science instead of nostalgically resorting to demonizing tactics.

The way that "semiotics" might constitute a medium for bringing the sciences and humanities together is, in turn, a primary concern in Louise Schleiner's discussion of what is involved in an ideologically informed mode of "discourse analysis," and in the course of applying such a methodology to an examination of the Renaissance patronage system, she also highlights the way that early feminists were able to exercise a certain degree of agency. Focusing specifically on the question of identity-construction, Charles Harmon takes a fresh look at the enigma posed by Ernest Hemingway and shows how his "style of self-management" involved a "middle-class" positioning between the poles of high culture and mass culture, whereby he was as much a compatriot of Marshall Field and Emily Post as he was an expatriate allied with James Joyce or Gertrude Stein.

Finally, that what might seem to be irresponsibility can sometimes be the most meaningful way of acting responsibly could be regarded as the provocative moral of the two essays that begin and end the present collection. Thus in the first, Franklin E. Court engages in a "risky" and personalized reconstruction of the originating circumstances of a fragmented and anonymous medieval poem, justifying the procedure by enlisting Jeremy Bentham's argument that the gamble is worth it if the potential for possible good outweighs the probability of negative consequences. Similarly, in the concluding essay, Nicholas Sloboda explores the way that Donald Barthelme playfully uses a collage of visual and verbal media to deconstruct any closed systems of meaning—including the stale language of postmodernist discourse—in the interests of showing how much there is still to know and to ensure that words continue to keep "furiously busy."

To ensure that these essays in themselves also continue to keep "busy" is, of course, precisely the purpose of the "Reader Response" section, which is inaugurated with this issue. And since it is also by way of participating in such a forum that readers can best exercise their response-ability and engage openly in the "good will" aspect of the scholarly enterprise, we very much look forward to your commentaries.

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