Reply:

I thank David Galef for his remarks. Might I make two points in reply? 1. My essay does not offer to supplant exegesis with an emphasis on rhetoric, but suggests that poetics need not subserve hermeneutics. That is a quite different matter. 2. Galef asks: "where is the dividing line between mere language and poetry?" In my short essay, though, I explained that I had made a deliberate choice to refer not to "poetry" but to "verse." To draw a distinction between performative and constative language may or may not, as Galef believes, be a precondition necessary to the provision of a definition of poetry, but it is not a precondition necessary to the task of specifying verse styles and their histories. I don't yet know what poetry is, and that may indicate why "poetry" is both a more powerful and a more difficult term than "verse." I referred in my essay to what I regard as a good working definition of verse, Derek Attridge's. Whether or not everyone can agree upon that definition, it is not necessary for those interested in the history of verse practice to down tools until such time as a universally approved formula might have been arrived at.

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Humor and Politics

To the Editor:

I read with great interest Jean-Jacques Lecercle's article "Return to the Political," which appeared in the special issue on literary criticism for the twenty-first century (125.4 [2010]: 916–19). As a proponent and critic of humor, I had read Lecercle's book *Philosophy of Nonsense*: *The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* (Routledge, 1994) and wondered what role nonsense would play in his newest propositions. I opened the journal with a grin, but instead of what I wanted I found a serious and somewhat circular argument that literature should intervene in imperialist Western societies through an "indefatigable advocacy of the rights of the *sans papiers*" who are "trying to cross the Mexican border or to reach Europe on fast-sinking boats." Lecercle also argues against "the George W. Bush parenthesis" and its "blatant imperialist aggression" (917).

In *Philosophy of Nonsense*, Lecercle argued that "discourse is always the product of a dialogue, or a clash, between institutions" (179). In "Return to the Political," he writes off the Bush administration and the human rights gains it secured for Afghan women. Nine million women in Afghanistan can read thanks to the Bush administration. As people stream out of the Third World, Lecercle argues that we must fight for their rights. But only here. Why not there? Human rights are either universal or nonexistent. If a whole gender is subjected to silence, how can it participate in "discourse"?

Meanwhile, Lecercle raises the question of the silencing of Marxism in the New Criticism. But was Marxism silenced, or was it delegitimized because it silenced freedom of thought? In the Soviet Union, Andrey Zhdanov imprisoned humorists and reduced writing to praise of Stalinist policy. Similar censorship was imposed throughout the Eastern Bloc and Mao's China and resulted in the destruction of literacy itself by the Khmer Rouge. North Korea is a reminder that totalitarian intervention against freedom of inquiry continues. Do we want only political institutions to remain standing? Is Lecercle kidding?

Shall we reduce writing to the critique of whatever egg happens to be rolling across the White House lawn? Thumbs up if it's a Democrat, thumbs down if it's a Republican? In *Philosophy of Nonsense*, Lecercle reminded us that any judgment is often hilarious: "the vast number of trial scenes in nonsense has often been noted by critics" (71).

The Soviet Union became a laughingstock partially because of its criminally complacent approach to the law (show trials, no trials, and trial by disappearance). The state was the only standing institution, and no one was permitted to question its edicts. To return to a state where the political trumps all else is Lecercle's rallying cry—and yet he denies that it is: "Much as I

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