

Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the *PMLA* authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789.

Mimetic and Nonmimetic Fiction

TO THE EDITOR:

In Christopher Lane's "The Poverty of Context: Historicism and Nonmimetic Fiction" (118 [2003]: 450–69), the pot calls the kettle black: nonmimetic fiction calls new historicism poor. Lane claims that because new historicism seeks a bridge between literature and ordinary life, it is limited to handling mimetic fiction only. Mimetic is grounded in fact—it copies the world. Its language is literal, its perspective earthbound, and its goal is a clear connection between fictional and factual event or, preferably, between a fictional and a factual sequence of events. These characteristics impoverish new historicism for they confine it to the material world.

In contrast, nonmimetic fiction opens the critic's eyes to a higher world because it does not try to imitate ordinary reality. It tries to create a world of the imagination. It speculates on new models of the old world. It seeks to mystify by exploring new perspectives and using figural rather than literal language. Because it has no historical referent, nonmimetic fiction gives us visions that are both meaningless and inexpressible. That is not bad. It thereby gives us the freedom not only to contemplate alternative worlds but to understand the value of nothingness.

A great deal of poverty and nothingness pervades Lane's theory. There is no such thing as nonmimetic fiction. Writing that refers to nothing real is gibberish, not fiction. Pure figurality does not exist. The unknown tenor always refers to the known vehicle. If no meaning emerges in their union, you have, as Lane admits, a meaningless statement. I see no reason to brag about it. In copying life, mimetic fiction perforce writes about a supernatural source of the real mysteries of life and doesn't have to use metaphors to invent fake ones; conversely, in replacing the supernatural with metaphor, nonmimetic fiction severely limits the range of possible criticism. And by hustling the value of nothingness, it impoverishes the value of criticism.

Like much contemporary theory, Lane's turns out to be useless in practice. At least, it does not prevent his misreading much of Browning's "By the Fire-

Side.” Lane says the children slip out “to collect twig ships for a nearby creek” (462). A more noticeable slippage is from the words of the text, which says that the children slip out “To cut from the hazels by the creek / A mainmast for our ship!” (lines 14–15).

Lane misreads the whole of stanza 5:

The outside-frame, like your hazel-trees:
 But the inside-archway widens fast,
 And a rarer sort succeeds to these,
 And we slope to Italy at last
 And youth, by green degrees.

Lane says, the “‘inside-archway’ connecting the lovers is partly yonic, the terrain seeming to expand as it becomes aroused . . .” (462). But (1) the archway does not connect the lovers, it connects future time with time past. (2) The speaker asks his wife to imagine that she, a woman in her thirties, is an old woman sitting by the fireside, listening to him recount a tale of their youth. A “yonic” message seems a bit indelicate. She might not appreciate hearing that the passage from future to past resembles or goes through her aroused vagina. The text does not support the idea of arousal but actually contradicts it. Sexual pleasure, the “*obvious* human bliss,” drew them together in an earlier past (line 143; my emphasis). The poet is now about to recall a higher bliss, which came later.

Of the poem in general, Lane says, “[T]he speaker indicates that the sequences we use to give sense to experience are associative, not literal” (462). Don’t include Browning. His poem is about a past series of literal events that led to the moment when the friendship of the couple was transformed into a love that made them one. His poem is all literal, all cause and effect: the speaker says, We went here, we went there, there was still something between us, and then it was removed. “The forests had done it” (line 236). How the forests did it was mysterious and Wordsworthian (another reference). But Browning attributes the mystery to a supernatural power instead of letting us dally in a world of pure imagination.

George Bellis
 Saint Paul, MN

Reply:

George Bellis seems to have missed a few basic premises in my essay: fiction is not always imi-

tative; literature and art that do not mirror the world can still make sense to us; and works of imagination that eschew realism are often at odds with proximate social contexts. Accordingly, such works are sometimes best viewed as “intransitive” rather than as embedded in ideology. In stating these premises, I was partly following the *OED*, which gives the rhetorical, sociological, and biological meanings of *mimesis* as “imitation” and “mimicry.” Although some kinds of art appear imitative (as Plato and Aristotle long ago contended, with different degrees of concern), verisimilitude is neither a reliable nor an exhaustive guide to fiction. In this respect, one need only think of allegory and myth, but gnostic, Romance, Gothic, fantastic, impressionist, symbolist, expressionist, surreal, absurdist, and broadly postmodern fiction all depart from realism, pushing representation to the limits of recognition and intelligibility.

The confusions apparent in Bellis’s letter ensue from his shaky grasp of mimesis. “Mimetic is grounded in fact,” he asserts, in apparent summary of my argument, whereas “nonmimetic fiction” does not exist or—if it does—“refers to nothing real” and thus is “gibberish.”

Well, no. Art that does not adhere to realism has a complex, open-ended, and sometimes ineffable relation to social reality. Consequently, I argued for a subtler model of causality and determinism, as well as for greater tolerance of the space or sense of vertigo that opens between fiction and society. I did so, as I stressed several times, neither to ignore the demands of history nor to champion literature’s transcendence but to explain why critics intent on “adequately historicizing” works of imagination often simplify the works’ philosophical, semantic, and temporal perspectives.

Bellis thinks these arguments amount to nothing, but he doesn’t refute my points about time, fantasy, situatedness, asymmetry, and intransitivity so much as ignore or misunderstand them. While making my thesis almost unrecognizable, he also insists that one of Browning’s most complex lyrics is “all literal, all cause and effect.” It would be difficult to imagine a more naive claim about a poem of Browning’s. The stanza that Bellis reproduces contains several metaphors and a simile. Editors and critics widely acknowledge that many factors, material and imaginary, influenced the poem’s composition.