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 imitative; 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.

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A single line in the work—"And I pass out where it [a vista] ends" (line 20)—has, I argued, at least five possible meanings. As for the poem's eroticism and my alleged misreading of its fifth stanza, Bellis should reread stanza 4 (which guides interpretation of stanza 5), as well as stanzas 8 to 13 and 29 to 30. In stanza 5, the speaker distinguishes between the "*outside-frame*" established by his and others' "branch-work" and an "*inside-archway*," which, as it "widens fast," imaginatively reconnects the lovers to their joyous memories of Italy (21, 18, 22; my emphases). The poem juxtaposes rather than fuses these literal and re-created journeys, but it gives greater weight to the speaker's associative and erotic pathways and thus to the inside archway connecting the lovers. Stanza 30 later depicts the speaker as so excited by his memories that he urges his beloved, "Let us lean and love it over again, / Let us now forget and now recall . . ." (147–48), making clear that they don't in fact surpass the "obvious human bliss" but gladly re-experience it (143). Bellis seems to have forgotten, moreover, that Browning's speaker, in a telling metaphor, calls Italy "woman-country" (28).

There's more to say about these broad poetic issues and the philosophical questions that they raise. I remain very interested in contexts; what I questioned is the explanatory power they are said to have over works of imagination. Indeed, I want to repeat that aesthetic effects are irreducible to social factors, a claim accepting multiple shades of meaning and influence.

"If . . . anyone asked me to define the fictive," Foucault once wrote in a little-known essay on Robbe-Grillet and the novelists of *Tel quel*, "I would say, without deftness, that it is the verbal ribwork [*la nervure verbale*] of that which does not exist" ("Distance, aspect, origine," *Critique* 198 [1963]: 940; my trans.). Another metaphor! Countless artistic and literary movements, including ones that interested Browning, highlight the mistake of literalizing these "verbal ribwork[s]" and thus of representing aesthetic experience in rigid, simple-minded ways.

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