

pointed out to me, the narrative also discloses metaphorically that it is Lady Dedlock who constitutes the vital part of his existence—she is to him “a main fibre of the root,” “the core,” the “stock of living tenderness” (ch. 54). Perhaps in Lawrence’s novel the force of the aristocratic tree symbol can be seen as transferring from Clifford to Connie. The phallic potential of the tree symbol would then combine with the image of her female form—and with the pun concealed in her name—to create a powerful androgynous resonance complementary to that of Mellors’ “thin, white body” placed in the simile with which we began.

The greater part of what I suggest would obtain even if Lawrence’s simile was an unconscious error. Indeed, in this case, we gain the added interest of being able to consider what the error might be said to reveal. Dr. Freud is never far away from Lawrence—on the subject of those birds Humma discusses (and on the flowers, too) see, for example, Ernest Jones’s essay “The Madonna’s Conception through the Ear” (*Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis* [London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1951], vol. 2).

How far does the range of unconscious—but significant—error extend? “All students of twentieth-century literature will appreciate the implications of [Mellors’] gun” (Humma, correctly, no doubt, observes [82]), as will those others of us who remember Shakespeare’s *Ancient Pistol*. Perhaps the homophone in the name of the floral organ tricked Lawrence into a psychopathological pun. Or have we before us a wondrous instance of unconscious chauvinism, of expropriation of the organ, of (what shall I say?)—pistil envy? Humma’s article becomes far more interesting than even at first it seems, as offering not only a good critical reading in itself but also stimulating matter for discourse among psychoanalytical critics, feminist critics, reader-response critics, and other investigators of strategy and of subtext, not to say the harmless drudges and their kin. As the simile is quoted twice (once prominently as the first quotation in the article), I sense that its meaning may have escaped comment (that is, its misprision may have been affirmed) by a wide community, including Humma himself, the students in his seminar mentioned on page 3, the specialist readers of his article, the *PMLA* editorial board, the editorial staff, and yourself, Joel Conarroe, all forming petals of the “invisible flower” surrounding Mellors’ lonely form.

YVONNE NOBLE
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Reply:

Yvonne Noble offers some ingenious possibilities, which I confess I did not see in quite the same way, or at all, as I was writing the article—but, in the instance of some of them, wish I had. We are guessing, of course, but it seems likely that Lawrence was conscious of associating Mellors with the feminine in nature (the “lonely pistil”). That Mellors, like other Lawrence figures, combines a good deal of the “feminine” in his nature along with the “masculine” makes the connection perfectly apt. Moreover, since Lawrence was promoting the idea of tenderness in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, his association of Mellors with the delicate pistil is once again strategically appropriate. In another scene Connie is fascinated by the “frailty” of Mellors’ penis. Finally, *pistil* and *pistol* are not really homophones, or they are so only partially. And *pistil*, because of its last syllable—*ul* or *il?*—is a word we are more than usually conscious of as we pronounce it. Lawrence probably, therefore, would have been aware of the punning possibilities and so could not have been “tricked . . . into a psychopathological pun” or guilty of an unconscious “pistil envy” (a lovely phrase, by the way).

The point that Noble makes about *Bleak House* in relation to *Lady Chatterley* appears quite plausible. When Lawrence rests Connie against the tree, his interest obviously is in showing her response to its blatantly masculine properties. But that there may be an unconscious androgyny is an interesting possibility. Although the last sentence of Noble’s letter is not clear to me, I am taken by her notion of a community of scholar-petals. I hope that her recognitions do not exclude her from a place within the happy circle.

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The Footnote

To the Editor:

“At the Margin of Discourse: Footnotes in the Fictional Text” (*PMLA* 98[1983]:204–25) is without doubt a valuable essay. Some readers will quarrel with a few of Shari Benstock’s particular observations; but even they must admit that her remarks are suggestive—and suggestive in part because she (self-admittedly) leaves room for more to be said about the general significance of footnotes in works of fiction as distinguished from scholarly texts and also about the specific meaning of that device in the three instances she chooses to concentrate on. Yet

in confessing to certain limitations of her essay, as in exploiting on occasion the self-conscious dialectic between the text and its dependent notes that she deals with there, Benstock evinces a self-awareness that makes the kind of sophistry she presently succumbs to all the more disquieting.

Her very title is suspect in this regard; for by it she identifies the footnote with the marginalium, and for no reason beyond the one she implies in the note where she raises, but does not answer, the question of when the practice of footnoting began: that footnotes evolved from marginalia. Far more troubling, however, is the argument she resorts to for connecting *Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Finnegans Wake*; that their “notations demonstrate ever more complex narrational structures” (205). Her claim, as her subsequent discussion makes clear, is that the *apparatus criticus* in these books—reflective of and correlative to the relation of the author to the text—becomes increasingly “complex” as one proceeds from Fielding through Sterne to Joyce; and such an argument, confined to those three examples, is surely as unobjectionable as it is neat. To suggest, however, that the functional meaning of footnotes becomes progressively ever more complex in the course of the eighteenth century is quite another matter; and it is in this respect that Benstock’s essay leaves something to be desired.

Nowhere in “At the Margin of Discourse” does she say anything to discourage the latter inference. Nor does she so much as mention the one example sufficient to belie it: *A Tale of a Tub*. The omission would pass as venial enough if Benstock’s silence did not have all the marks of deliberation. As it is, however, she appears to have been at pains to avoid naming Swift. Thus, in quoting at considerable length from *The Stoic Comedians* (n. 4), she never divulges that the text Hugh Kenner is referring to in that passage is none other than *A Tale of a Tub*.

Even if Benstock had not been familiar with Kenner’s perceptive remarks about the *Tale*-as-book, and even if she be unacquainted with Denis Donoghue’s consequent elaboration of Kenner in *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction*, it must naturally have occurred to her that any line of descent from the eighteenth century to Joyce should properly run through Swift. Yet if she did in fact mean to imply a linear development of “complexity” in the use of footnotes, the *Tale* would certainly prove an embarrassment; for the footnotes to the fifth edition, like the digressions of which they are the typographical analogue, complicate the tenuous and ironic connection of author to text in a manner not to be met with in Fielding or Sterne or, for that

matter, in Erasmus and Pope (to cite two other pertinent names that Benstock takes no account of).

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To the Editor:

Perhaps it is trivial to quibble with one of twenty-nine footnotes in Shari Benstock’s interesting essay, “At the Margin of Discourse,” but since the subject of that piece was, in fact, footnotes, one effect of the article was to make me perhaps inordinately sensitive to these “extraliterary” appendages.

Benstock cites Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* as one of three modern texts exploiting the notational tradition within wholly fictional works. In what seems a rather casual gesture of critical dismissal, she suggests that “The radical shifts between the speakers and writers of the text and the inconsistent use of pronominal indicators (*I, we, one*) illustrate the ways in which *Pale Fire* is at cross-purposes with itself, its author, and its intended readers.”

This comment seems to confuse the basic premises of an admittedly complex but extremely carefully crafted and consistent novel. *Pale Fire* is in the form of a long, chatty autobiographical poem entitled “Pale Fire,” by a Frostian poet named John Shade, and preface, notes, and index by a commentator, one Charles Kinbote. Both Shade and Kinbote are fictional creations of Nabokov. As the novel progresses, the reader comes to the realization that Kinbote is anything but an objective annotator on Shade’s text. Indeed, he uses his footnotes less to explicate “Pale Fire” than to tell his own story, namely, an apparently paranoid fantasy in which Kinbote turns out to be one Charles the Beloved, deposed and beloved monarch of Zembla. Fascinatingly, though, it turns out that the notes and poem do, on a larger novelistic level, have a clear thematic relation, and what seemed at first to be “cross-purposes” are in fact artfully blended into a bewitching and powerful study of loneliness, aging, the quest to understand death, the search for love.

At one point in one of his more frantic notes, Kinbote vows that “I have no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel.” But that magical transformation is exactly the tactic of Kinbote’s creator, the master illusionist Nabokov.

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