

learn from experience. Having boxed himself into a corner, he constructs the best argument he can to get out. But it doesn't help. Hearing the sad music doesn't just magically appear in the poem; it appears because it is what Wordsworth has learned.

Finally, if Potkay really wants Wordsworth to wear the green coat, he has to rescue him from Marjorie Levinson's argument. Wordsworth, Levinson maintains, knew that an iron mill upstream from the Abbey was polluting the river Wye ("Insight and Oversight: Reading 'Tintern Abbey'"; *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* [Cambridge, 1986; print; 14–57]). A true environmentalist would not retreat upstream beyond the iron mill to view an unpolluted river and talk about the benefits of nature. A true environmentalist would abandon nature and join the protest.

George Bellis
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Reply:

Clearly, Wordsworth was not an environmental activist in twenty-first-century Sierra Club mode. In my essay I don't consider Wordsworth to be an "environmentalist" but rather—a very different thing—a poet whose lyric thinking is environmental. Nonetheless, for those who with George Bellis would like to see Wordsworth rescued from Marjorie Levinson's argument, I recommend Charles Rzepka's "Pictures of the Mind: Iron and Charcoal, 'Ouzy Tides,' and 'Vagrant Dwellers' at Tintern, 1798" (*Studies in Romanticism* 42.2 [2003]: 155–85; print). Rzepka scours the historical record to show that in Wordsworth's day the Wye River was not polluted and that we have no evidence of any industrial despoliation whatsoever in the vicinity of Tintern Abbey.

Bellis contests my reading of Wordsworth on three further grounds: grammar, logic, and the nature of God. I do indeed find Wordsworth's grammar in "Tintern Abbey" to be "wild"—that is, odic, difficult, twisting rapidly upon numerous particles, given to anacoluthon. Wordsworth claims that he has learned to look,

but this does not, I think, necessarily mean he has learned to hear. ("If this be but a vain belief, yet, oh!") As for logic, Bellis maintains that ethical reciprocity with subrational or nonsentient things is absurd; what I argue, however, is that Wordsworth in his poetry imaginatively entertains such a reciprocity and seems to think that doing so may have ethically beneficial consequences. This belief does not strike me as absurd. Turning next to "God," I would note that the word does not appear in "Tintern Abbey." In *Paradise Lost*, man is made nature's steward but not its cynosure: Eve falls, in part, by falling for Satan's flattering claim that all things revolve around her (*Complete Poems and Major Prose*; ed. Merritt Y. Hughes [New York: Odyssey, 1957; print; 5.41–47]). Milton's God, by contrast, is of potential service to the World Wildlife Fund. Speaking of the "various living creatures" of earth and air, he asks Adam, "Know'st thou not / Their language and their ways? They also know, / And reason not contemptibly" (8.372–74).

Adam Potkay
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Divisions in Comics Scholarship

TO THE EDITOR:

I read Hillary Chute's essay "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" (123.2 [2008]: 452–65) with interest; I found her analyses of Spiegelman and Sacco insightful and look forward to reading more by her in future.

However, I feel I must take issue with her (necessarily brief) contextualization of the graphic novel, particularly with her more sweeping asides about the history of the comic-book medium and the "strongest" work in it. In fact, Chute's essay confirms my suspicion that the nascent academic field of comics studies is already divided from within, along lines that replicate the most basic division of the American comic-book marketplace: the division between genre works (dominated by but not limited to superhero stories) and what we might call "literary nonfiction."

Dangers and distortions threaten when we allow generic divisions to shape our critical

narratives. Old-fashioned and politically divisive arguments about high culture versus low culture, or fine art versus commercial art, have a disturbing tendency to reassert themselves along generic lines. Despite the best efforts of literary theorists to deconstruct such aesthetic hierarchies, they prove remarkably resilient. Indeed, with almost tragic irony, these hierarchies frequently reproduce themselves in the criticism of art forms traditionally regarded as debased.

Consider, for example, the violent repudiation of disco music by many rock critics in the 1970s: few observers at the time recognized that this repudiation replicated the prior denigration of rock music by classical music critics, often in the same aesthetic terms (appeals to the notion of authenticity, invocations of fears of social or political corruption, complaints about deficient musical technique, and so on).

A similar replication of traditional aesthetic hierarchies mars Chute's discussion. She initially assures us that although comics are "usually understood" as a "lowbrow genre," she will approach them respectfully (452). However, she then goes on to reproduce the highbrow-lowbrow distinction immediately, in generic terms: first, by bluntly asserting that "the strongest genre in the field [is] nonfiction comics" (452) and, second, by dismissing the entire output of both Marvel and DC Comics, in a misleading parenthetical aside about the "commercial comic-book industry" (455). Unless Chute seriously believes that figures like Robert Crumb, Marjane Satrapi, or Art Spiegelman are not commercially significant comic-art practitioners, then such phrasing reveals more about her own aesthetic ideology than it does about the (historically complex) economics of comic-book publication.

Defining superheroes as a product of the "commercial comic-book industry," Chute implicitly excludes such fare from her serious discussion of "graphic narrative" (presumably along with the other less-than-respectable genres of funny-animal, western, horror, romance, science fiction, and crime comics published over the last seventy years, by Atlas, Charlton, DC, Dell, EC, IPC, Marvel, and many other companies, all of

which Chute disregards). The result is a peculiarly thin account of the form—rather like a history of television written by someone who watches only award-winning PBS documentaries.

I share Chute's basic impulse "to expand scholarly expertise and interest in comics" (462), and I don't mean to imply that she is wrong to be more interested in discussing Lynda Barry than Ramona Fradon, or Joe Sacco than Jack Kirby. If film studies can support histories of the western alongside monographs on Michael Moore, then comics studies can surely achieve a similar inclusiveness. But the unique critical and theoretical challenges of the comic-book medium cannot be adequately understood by a criticism that disdains genre work in general and superhero stories in particular. Even if one considers the generic dominance of the superhero in American comics to be a lamentable state of affairs, such are the facts on the ground, as it were; the historical causes of this dominance must therefore be explicated in our accounts, and the creative consequences must be addressed. Moreover, contra Art Spiegelman, it is far from obvious that these creative consequences are entirely negative; the stylistic innovations of Brian Michael Bendis, Ed Brubaker, Kurt Busiek, Warren Ellis, Garth Ennis, Robert Kirkman, Peter Milligan, Alan Moore, Robert Morales, Grant Morrison, Greg Rucka, Gail Simone, and Brian Vaughan arguably derive at least in part from the pressure to reinvigorate overfamiliar superhero formulas. However, to assess their many innovations, one would need to read their work—something Chute's essay does not encourage.

To put the argument more strongly: although the nonfiction genres of confession, memoir, and journalism dominate college courses on "the graphic novel," it is the height of academic arrogance simply to assume on this basis that nonfiction is the "strongest" genre in comics or that the critical marginalization of other comic-book genres is justified. The only conclusion we can safely draw from this state of affairs is that nonfiction and confessional comics are more congenial to current intellectual fashions than genre comics; and if that is so,

comics studies may be more institutionally insecure than either Chute or I care to imagine.

I am not suggesting that we should simply reverse this critical emphasis and focus as scholars on superhero and other genre comics at the expense of nonfiction comics. The point is not to invert the hierarchy of value that seems to accompany Chute's understanding of generic distinctions but to treat it with skepticism. The academic preference for "literary" comics of a confessional or journalistic bent and even for the (almost useless) term "graphic novel" itself requires interrogation and at least a measure of resistance. We require such skepticism regarding academic canons from our graduate students in literary studies, film studies, and art history, after all. The future of comics studies will surely require no less of us.

Ben Saunders
University of Oregon

Reply:

I welcome Ben Saunders's letter as a sign of the excitement and energy among academics who are exploring comics; that debate exists among us (as I indicated to Saunders and others I petitioned for support to start an MLA discussion group) reflects the health of the comics field. However, I feel that his criticisms miss the point of my essay. Saunders's critique is based on the premise that I wrote or ought to have written a cultural history of comics, but my project in the essay is to outline a formal and theoretical approach to graphic narrative.

"Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" is not an essay that aspires, in the unavoidably brief history I present, to account for the origin and development of all formats of comics. Rather, as I write, "a history of comics is being assembled as a way of carving out a tradition, in a rich history of forms, that leads to a contemporary excitement about graphic narrative" (455). At the beginning of the essay, I define a graphic narrative as "a book-length work in the medium of comics" and state my preference for that term over "graphic novel" (453).

While I argue that comics is a medium and go on to discuss the different formats of comics—such as comic strip, comic book, graphic narrative—Saunders twice uses the phrase "the comic-book medium" in his letter, showing his different understanding of comics terminology and, perhaps, his own values and investments. My essay never claims not to treat commercial comics work—over a million copies of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a touchstone text in the essay, have been sold in the United States. Rather, I wrote that in my "abbreviated history" I would not "emphasize the development of the commercial *comic-book* industry . . . dominated by two superhero-focused publishers, Marvel and DC" in my explanation of how we have come to the current contemporary excitement about graphic narrative (455; my emphasis).

What I do choose to emphasize is *MAD*, a commercial magazine that started out as a comic book, and underground (i.e., noncommercial) comics, also known as "comix." These are the cultural antecedents, I suggest in this brief trajectory, that most shaped the contemporary graphic narrative field.

Saunders seems to want the essay to have had a broader focus, one that would treat all sorts of comics and account for cultural histories for all of them. As a literary scholar, my interest is more specific: the complex relations between form, discourse, and memory that we see in nonfiction graphic narrative. (Hardly taking my cue from the institutionalization of comics on syllabi, I have been helping to create that institutionalization—I developed, for instance, Rutgers University's first courses on the literary study of comics.)

In my writing on comics, I hope to break down distinctions in culture and aesthetics between high and low (and it is a rare experience working on comics to be accused of being too highbrow). The interrogation of these boundaries is one of the most important things to me as a scholar and as a person, and my work is not, as Saunders suggests, "a criticism that disdains genre work in general." My goal is to open doors rather than to close them. In my current work, I am more interested in the single vision of the auteur of fiction or nonfiction comics—a Dan Clowes