

the ground of all human practices, the term can apply only to mimetic literature and not to talk about it. Bialostosky gives the illusion of opening a space for his proposed art of dialogic discourse by misinterpreting the distinction that Aristotle makes between dialectic and rhetoric. That distinction does not separate ideas from persons, for both are concerned with convincing others of what one believes to be true. Rhetoric teaches how to tap emotions in this enterprise, whether to serve what one believes to be true or to serve one's concealed interests. Certainly, intimate knowledge of others' hopes and fears allows one to intensify emotional associations that accompany ideas and to diminish impulses to inquire into the appropriateness of those ideas, but one still seeks to persuade another that something is either true or false, good or bad, worthy or unworthy. Similarly, dialectical discourse also involves persons. To engage in a rational discussion is to open one's views to critical examination on the assumption that reasonable persons will abandon views that prove logically indefensible.

While there are various reasons one may want to know how others' views express their characters, that is, to know the cause of, rather than the reasons for, their views, such a stance, whether taken in one's own interests or in those of another, is condescending and manipulative. While one does get a sense of a continuum from one's friends' views to their persons, if one respects one's friends one expects that they will change their views when confronted with rational grounds for doing so. The condescension involved in reducing ideas to expressions of persons becomes clear when one considers that one never presents one's own view to others merely as illustrative of one's character. One does not say, "I am telling you my views on the problematic of authority in Shakespeare's plays so that you will understand the intricacies of my character." (An exception would be the intellectual historian's stance, which is not denigrating but which is not dialogic either. It simply shifts one's interest from the truth of the idea to the truth about what Hirsch has called the idea's meaning, that is, its relation to its original context.)

In therapy groups a standard practice is to offer one's opinions of others as though one were free of rhetorical or dialectic intention, by prefacing an observation about another with the trope, "I want to share with you my feeling that . . .," a locution that evades responsibility and attempts to divert possible hostility. On such an occasion, it is true, one might be more than usually prepared to acknowledge the grounds on which one holds opinions, since consciousness of one's own strategies for resistance and defense is the object of therapy. The self-reflexive therapeutic stance constitutes a form of skepticism that easily coexists with dialectic discourse. That is, even in hot debate, the memories of now-repudiated convictions can hover around the edges of consciousness. Habitual self-reflexivity on one's intellectual predilections that can increase attentiveness to others may be part of what Bialostosky means by a "dialogic move" that involves

"opening oneself . . . to being characterized by the other in terms alien to those one might be pleased to acknowledge" (794). But even in such "moments of full humanity" one can both generate valid arguments and ride one's hobbyhorse full tilt. To locate the meaning of people's ideas in their personalities is a devious strategy for denigrating the ideas; it improperly changes the subject of discussion from the idea to the person who holds the idea, and it has no claim to be exempt from the traditional categories of discourse and debate. As Fish says, to speak is to speak in a certain way and therefore involves rhetoric, and, as Fish does not say, to be motivated to speak in a critical context implies a desire to have one's views seriously attended to on their own terms.

If Bialostosky wants to change the subject of our discussion from literature to ourselves, then at best he intends a version of the reader-response study most fully practiced by Norman Holland. Holland, however, honestly abandoned the pursuit of truth claims about literature in order to offer truth claims about the process of reading. The more likely consequence of this proposal's being taken seriously would be to foster bad faith, since people would incline to conceal their arguments and their rhetorical intentions under the guise of assumed humility in order to appear to others as engaged in a fashionable critical movement, a movement that substitutes critical discourse about critics for critical discourse about texts. Though it may be difficult theoretically to justify the privilege of literary over critical artifacts, the literary remain the *raison d'être* for the work of critics, including Bialostosky's, and a more interesting subject as well.

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To the Editor:

"Dialogics as an Art of Discourse in Literary Criticism" urges us to read others dialogically: "to read for an opening in the discussion or a provocation to further discourse" (790). There are three consequences of dialogic criticism: "we would self-consciously represent the voice-ideas of others and involve others in dialogues they had not anticipated"; "we would also self-consciously expect unexpected replies and foresee unforeseen uses of our own words and ourselves by others"; and "[w]e would be more likely than others to recognize how even an admirer's repetition of our words may embarrass us and how another's reformulation of our meaning in the most alien terms may convert us" (791).

Struck by the compatibility of some of Bialostosky's "voice-ideas" with some of my own interests and professionally acquainted with Bialostosky through the Society for Critical Exchange, I wrote him a letter in which I applauded his essay's "theoretical grounding for critical exchange" and enclosed a description of my own proj-

ect, which explores how the personal and social purposes of individual critics engage them in episodes of cultural change. The project uses interviews with several scholars about their published books on Harold Pinter.

In reply, Bialostosky observed that “introducing evidence from interviews with critics opens up an interesting complication for my notion of person-idea by making the community of living critics accessible outside their published works and by taking away the initiative from them and *eliciting* their thoughts in answer to the interviewer’s interests.” In Bakhtinian terms, this adds “anacrisis (‘eliciting and provoking the words of one’s interlocutor, forcing him to express his opinion and express it thoroughly’) to the syncrisis (‘juxtaposition of points of view on a specific object’) on which my vision of dialogics mainly relies” (letter to the author, 3 Dec. 1986).

This correspondence between Bialostosky and me—initially a more “private exchange” than a *PMLA* article—provides another example of the anacritical dimension of dialogic discourse that he defines, just as this Forum letter aims to do. Occasions for professional correspondence, such as the “personal” letter, the interview, and the letter to the editor, *when handled dialogically*, may help “reshape the practice of literary criticism.”

Bialostosky’s repetitions of the word *embarrassment* (in various forms) suggest one aim of dialogic criticism (791). But to *embarrass* others is not the ultimate aim of dialogic reading. A dialogic reader is also more likely than others to be *converted* by a “reformulation” of his or her “meaning” (791).

The author cites his gratitude for his own “personal correspondence” with Tzvetan Todorov “that has clarified the issues between our views of dialogic criticism” (796n7). Clarifying issues between conflicting views of a subject follows the syncritical juxtaposition of points of view on a specific object so as to synthesize or resolve these issues in some way. As Bialostosky might acknowledge, his readings of Todorov’s and Leavis’s conversions from dogmatic criticism to dialogic criticism can be perceived as following dialectical practice even as he tries to establish a dialogic one. Like Brown’s emphasis on the characteristics of a “genuine poem” (794), Bialostosky’s characterization of a “*more truly* dialogic move” than Todorov’s and his approval of Leavis’s recognition of (in Brown’s words) “communal creativity” in “collaborative exchange, a corrective and creative interplay of judgments” (794), appeal to dialectical or rhetorical notions of validity rather than to any dialogic idea, even as Bialostosky defines such a move as one that would “recognize the difference and try to characterize it, opening oneself at the same time to being characterized by the other in terms alien to those one *might be pleased* to acknowledge” (794; emphasis added).

If a “truly dialogic move” requires as evidence of its successful operation a lack of pleasure felt by the practitioner, there are some internal grounds indicating that it has taken place. One must ask the author if he or she

has indeed felt embarrassed by having been characterized by another in such “alien” terms. Has the writer felt vulnerable in this reading of his or her work? Has he or she been converted? And so: Has Bialostosky felt embarrassed and vulnerable through my move here? Has my move been “truly dialogic”? Without asking him, how can we judge?

One way for readers of *PMLA* to learn whether, beyond embarrassing and converting our colleagues, there are *other* aims of dialogic criticism is through Bialostosky’s answers to these questions in this forum. If the “art of dialogics” is “a program for conducting our conversation about conversation more responsively and responsibly than [dialectics and rhetoric] have encouraged us to do” (795), does the Forum enable us to follow his program as he would like?

“Omissions” in the *PMLA* essay are partially accounted for by the “rhetorical genre” in which the author has “chosen” to present his vision of dialogics: “the deliberative essay addressed to my fellow literary critics” (795). But earlier on he explains how “the best generic model” for dialogic discourse is “the symposium,” which he praises for its “openness to new voices and its power to situate them among those who have already spoken” (790).

Bialostosky’s paper was presented, in an “earlier version,” at a conference, an event much more like a symposium than *PMLA* (796n13). How did the paper for the conference differ from the essay appearing in *PMLA*? What *changes* were necessary in converting from symposium discourse to learned-journal discourse? Does *revising* the person-idea from the symposium event to this article “threaten to reduce conversation to the rhetoric and dialectic from which [Bialostosky has] tried to distinguish it” (795)? (And how did the author’s more recent MLA convention paper “Criticism as a Dialogic Practice” further distinguish this conversation from rhetoric and dialectic?)

If the Forum can promote “further exchange beyond the limits” of *PMLA* articles and MLA papers so as to “address” issues that one might wish Bialostosky’s discourse on dialogics to “open,” it should enable us to elicit and provoke his thoughts and words in answer to such interests.

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Reply:

Since Susan Hollis Merritt asked, I must say that I take little pleasure in either of these letters, but I wouldn’t say that my discomfort means that any “truly dialogic move” has taken place. Merritt asks a lot of questions, but by asking them in this forum instead of in the private correspondence she initiated with me, she addresses them to