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## Escaping the prison of singularity

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## Escaping the Prison of Singularity: The Behavioral Axis of the Narrative Transaction

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Marshall Gregory

### I

MATTHEW ARNOLD'S ELEGIAC LYRIC "TO MARGUERITE—Continued" laments the deep loneliness of any human life imprisoned in singularity. I say "singularity" because I mean not merely the kind of isolation that wounds us because we see it as an abnormality but also the kind of isolation that wounds us even more deeply because we have come to see it as the norm. Arnold stands on its head John Donne's famous metaphorical claim that "no man is an island" and asserts that in the modern world each of us is more deeply pained by the injury of singularity because we can remember a time—or at least we can construct visions of a time—when we were connected with others like present-day islands that once formed a single continent. Singularity has diminished us modern human beings, Arnold suggests, and he plaintively inquires of these individual islands,

[Who] bade betwixt their shores to be  
The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea[?]

Arnold's poem does not *argue* that singularity is a deep human deprivation. He simply describes it as such, leaving the truth of the description to be decided by the reader's own intuitive and presumably deep assent. Arnold recognizes profoundly that we require social reciprocity and, ultimately, love, not merely because these are useful to us but because our nature itself is stunted, thwarted, and impoverished in their absence. In other words, we need each other not just for utilitarian reasons but also for existential and ethical reasons: existential because the potentialities of full human existence are realizable only in society, not in singularity, and ethical because the quality and the moral status of life depend mostly on the quality and range of options both imaginable and real within the social contexts that form us. In the absence of constant interactions with others, we live in a prison of singularity where even our individuality loses its meaning.

Few human activities investigate the poverty or richness of human life or describe the mechanisms of ethical formation as fully and particularly as narratives do. In the development of our intellectual views and ethical stances, we cannot do without the guidance and examples of first-hand friends, acquaintances, and loved ones, but neither can we do without the second-hand guidance and examples of narrative friends and loved ones, for these latter supplement our need for sociability and help us fill out the education about the ways and means of being human that we receive from first-hand acquaintances. It would be wise of all of us who spend our lives construing theories about language and literature to remind ourselves—daily at least—about the roots of our deep and inextinguishable need for narrative.

Thus, to begin this essay, I am going to present a story that children's book author Maurice Sendak related in his Zena Sutherland lecture in 1983. Sendak's lecture is about the creative process, and in the course of it he tells a story about how a real-life girl named Rosie ended up in one of his books (which was eventually made into a Broadway play). Sendak was sixteen in 1945, when he observed Rosie, who was then eight or nine:

[M]y great pleasure was to sit at the window and draw Rosie. I have no idea why I did it. We lived in a two-family house; we were on the top floor, and you could look right down, and she would come out every day, all dressed up like the whore of Babylon, her mother's garments, hats, pearls, dripping jewelry, all Felliniesque.

You could see her ordering the day, sitting on the stoop, looking for victims. . . . Rosie had no opportunity but to make do with what she had, which was a small street of rather boring children, and I would watch her be Fellini. Sometimes she failed, sometimes she was immensely successful, but she'd sit there and plot, like a great black widow spider, and then the kids would come around because, although they resented the immense power she had over them, there was no one else to turn to. She'd seen the movies, she'd listened to the radio—there was no television at that point, or very few people had television sets—so they depended entirely on her for feedback.

Typical of Rosie's stories, when she was having trouble holding the kids' attention, [was] . . . a very fateful line that always worked; it worked with me, too, just watching her. She would say, "Did you hear who died?" Well . . . fantastic line [Sendak's ellipsis]. You knew she was going to lie, but it just made no difference, because it was the way she said it. Her timing was perfect, her coolness, her aloofness—every head would turn, and

we were all sucked in, and there was I, dizzy with pencil, writing out whatever she was about to say.

She did this on a number of occasions, but my favorite “Did you hear who died” day was about her grandmother; she said her grandmother died, and then, of course, came a great chorus of “Oh, she did not; you’re crazy.” She let that pass; she never picked fights, she would just wait for them to stop, and then she said, “She died. She died early in the dawn.” She was very dramatic. . . . Well, it seems that one dawn, Grandma got up . . . and began to beat a mattress in the window. She did this with such vim and vigor that she lost her breath. She choked, and she fell down onto the floor. Rosie heard the thud; no one else did. She ran up to the attic room, and there was her grandmother struggling for breath, deep purple. She leaped onto the prone body and gave her grandmother the kiss of life.

The kids all said, “What? The kiss of life?” . . . Rosie gave it to her grandmother any number of times. (At this point, Rosie hurled down one of her friends on the stoop and gave her the kiss of life to show them what it was like.) The kiss of life failed. It failed. And to avoid upsetting her mother and father, she didn’t tell them; she just called the mortuary. Apparently, her parents never found out their mother died. And Rosie’s grandmother was put in a kind of shopping bag, as Rosie described it, and taken away.

The story was fantastic. I stopped writing in the middle of it, because it was so vivid. At that moment—and I know this is true because I saw it—her grandmother came down the street with two enormous shopping bags, two great big puffy slippers on her feet. She was a ferocious, scowling woman who spoke no English. I don’t know if she liked anyone or not, because I never understood her, but as she came to the stoop, there was Rosie with her friends seated right in the middle. Her grandmother said some tough, guttural thing, and, like the Red Sea, the kids just parted; they didn’t fight her for a second. She went stomping up the stoop and she slammed the front door and she went stomping upstairs up to the attic, and the kids closed in and they said, “Tell us again, Rosie.” (16–18)

There you have it: the knockout punch, the slam dunk. Fact scores zero, narrative scores one hundred. The need for the story is stronger than the presence of the fact. Postmodernism’s skepticism about narrative’s power is made doubtful.

Well, not really. Postmodernists who chide some kinds of narratives for supporting objectionable social values and some readers for being too credulous are not going to roll over and give up the ghost. And they shouldn't; they have much to tell us that is important and interesting. But I wanted to repeat Sendak's story to make my own prejudices on this issue clear. In my view, narrative has the capacity to vivify life, the power to hold out a vision of things as they might be, and the power to suggest that we might want to value certain fictions over certain facts on the simple grounds that often *the fiction that hasn't happened seems to hold more truth, somehow, than the fact that has happened*. Insofar as anyone agrees with these views, he or she is also agreeing that fictions possess immense potential for forming and shaping ethos, or character, for important dimensions of ethos are embedded in whatever capacities we might have for leading a life more or less vivid, for seeing alternative versions of how things might be, and for believing in the value of truths that go beyond empirical experience.

My general topic, which I explore in the first section of this essay, deals with the ethically formative power of story: not its power to form our views about the stock market or building codes or gangster life but its power to meet our needs for sociability by educating us about the nature of the lives of the other people on whom our own sense of validated existence depends. In the second section of my essay, I narrow my focus to deal specifically with the educational power of narrative role-modeling. My thesis is that the narrative role-modeling of specific behaviors constitutes, first, an important form of education about discrete behaviors that can help us meet life's specific circumstances and, second, an important way to acquire a theory of life.

One of the most important educational realizations we ever come to as human beings is that knowledge and experience are not synonymous—though experience is certainly not irrelevant to knowledge. Experience yields only data, but the experience of data *as* data does not yield obvious knowledge any more than experiencing sand on the beach yields the knowledge that sand and silicone are the same substance, describable in terms of its specific molecules. Knowledge emerges only as the product of theories that organize and interpret the data. Knowledge, in other words, is always conceptual.

Experience counts, but primarily as a way of getting our attention, of focusing our interests. If we never get past experience by making an inference or constructing a generalization or postulating a law, then experience can teach us nothing. Never rising to the level of conceptualization means that future experience will lie before us in an unbroken string of ad hoc occurrences—life's famous "one damn thing after another"—each of which will be real and really experienced but mute as to its significance and meaning. As Plato was fond of pointing out, we can have knowledge of things

we have never experienced, such as perfect triangularity or perfect justice, and we can have much experience of things about which we have little or no knowledge, such as listening to a language we don't know or tasting a new kind of food with spices in it that we cannot identify. In the first case, the knowledge is real even though it has no experiential counterpart—real in at least the same sense that crescent wrenches and algebra are real: capable of being employed to measurable and evaluative effects in the world of both thought and matter—and in the second case, the experience is real even though it is based on no knowledge of what we are experiencing.

Literature, especially narrative, is humankind's most important, most comprehensive, and certainly most successful method of presenting before us, for our contemplation, our delight, and, ultimately, our knowledge, forms and images of conceptual knowledge that may be based on experience but that go beyond experience in precisely the way that made Aristotle claim that poetry is more philosophical than history. Fiction gives us the what-never-happened in order that we may make sense of the what-really-happened or what-really-is-happening. Hilary Putnam, I am happy to report, agrees with me. (This may be the only time in my life that I have ever been corroborated by a math professor.) Literature, especially the novel, he says, gives us "knowledge of a possibility. It is conceptual knowledge. . . . Thinking of a hypothesis that one had not considered before is conceptual discovery. . . . [And such knowledge] is practical knowledge of how to live" (90–91).

Such claims do not go uncontested today. The skepticism generated by postmodern critics has had the salutary effect of making some of us dedicated to a life and a love of literature less lazy and less complacent about the value of and the justifications for what we do and what we value. But though this skepticism has done me good, it has not made me change my mind. In fact, one of the best things postmodern criticism has done for me is to force me to sharpen and deepen my own understanding of why I *should not* change my mind about the value I place on literary knowledge: knowledge of the unseen but possible, knowledge of the concepts that help us all understand the data of our lives. Author Lloyd Alexander suggests that narrative is only illusion and concedes that illusion "is what appears to be real, but in actuality does not exist. Illusion seems." "Yet," Alexander continues, "[illusion] can seem to be more real than reality. It only pretends to be true, but it can show facets of truth we never saw before. Illusion, in this sense, is an illumination. It reveals, it does not obscure. . . . Without a life of its own, it creates a life for us; that is, it lets us create one for ourselves." (35)

Before I can simply continue making my case about literature's general educational power and narrative role-modeling as a special instance of it, I must at least acknowledge the strong challenges to my views. These

challenges come from many sources and are not unimportant. I will not take time and space here to analyze them, but I have no wish to pretend that the opposition has no voice of its own.

One challenge comes from the notion of the “resisting reader,” the view—ably advanced, for example, by Judith Fetterley—that readers should put up their guard when reading literature lest they be taken in by patriarchal (or other objectionable) values before they even know they have been co-opted. Another challenge comes from those who fear censorship so much that they advance the absurd position that since literature is “only words,” and that since real harm can come only from “sticks and stones,” we should all stop being so uptight about gangsta rap and pornography and Harlequin romances and worry more about poverty and guns (as if we had to give up one worry to have another).

Another challenge comes from those who claim that literature “just reflects reality” but does not invent it or influence it. This is the typical retreat of gangsta rap singers and their unlikely bedfellows, television network executives and Philip Sidney. The implication here, of course, is that if fiction merely portrays ideals or reflects reality, then it can neither lead nor mislead (as if duplicating a thing by reflecting it doesn’t intensify its effects).

A third challenge comes from the disciples of Jacques Derrida who started claiming in the seventies—and many of them have not given up yet—that since language is indeterminate, literature is also indeterminate, and that since literature can refer only to words, not to reality, it lacks sufficient traction on either experience or knowledge to be educational (a fundamentally trivializing view of literature that turns it into a game capable of being played only by an educated elite).

Another challenge comes from Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and their followers, who claim that authors have disappeared, that they have been folded back into something Foucault calls an “author function,” which is nothing but a kind of sentient pencil with which the “master narratives” of society perpetually reinscribe themselves into positions of political authority, using the unconscious complicity of author-functions as shills for the social masters who run society’s show. This view maintains that literature is educational, but only in the service of whatever power group happens to hold the top-dog position. In this view, literature’s educational power is merely a form of social and political manipulation.

Yet another challenge comes from the extremist branch of reader-response theory as articulated, for example, in the early work of David Bleich, whose theory takes away all autonomy from literary works and hands it over to readers, who remake every text in their own image as they read. If the text has no autonomy, it certainly cannot educate.

And, finally, another challenge comes from a certain pedagogical practice that shows up in some, not all, student-centered classrooms where Bleich's brand of reader-response theory encourages students to avoid being challenged by literature, on the grounds that literature is just a series of prompts for solipsistic rewritings of the self and that pedagogy is a matter not of helping students come out of themselves but of giving them the "freedom" to clone the world in their own image.

When advanced and argued responsibly, all of these challenges to a traditional faith in literature's ability to educate human beings can show and have shown the ways in which this traditional faith needs to be more self-critical, more self-aware, and less complacent. But even in their very best forms, most of these challenges, if taken seriously, cripple the very understanding of literature's ethical effects that I am eager to defend.

In the first place, what I mean by "ethical effects" refers to those influences that help shape ethos; I do not refer to literature that prescribes right and wrong behaviors in programmatic or doctrinaire ways. In the second place, although postmodern criticism has understood better than traditional humanism the extent to which hollowness, deception, and manipulation lie at the heart of many fictional representations, postmodern criticism has failed to understand that the potentially pernicious effects of these representations cannot be obviated by mere finger wagging, political bashing, or claiming that fictional images have no significance beyond surface shimmer. Postmodern criticism fails simply to understand how much we all *need* fiction and how little we are ever going to be persuaded to view, read, or otherwise consume only the "right" fiction—or to read it in the "right" way—by the sanctimonious, scandalized sneers of those who are horrified at fiction's complicity with the world's cruelty and oppression. Of course, fiction is implicated in the world's cruelty and oppression; it is also implicated in the world's generosity, kindness, and nobility. Fiction is as large as life and is coextensive with existence itself (all cultures and all human beings tell and consume stories), and the really valuable contribution that criticism can make to our transactions with fiction is to help us understand and evaluate its influence, not to flabbily trivialize or narrowly politicize that influence.

By *fiction*, I am referring not merely to written, published, mainstream, or canonical literature but also to stories in all the different forms that exist: stories on television; oral stories in nonliterate cultures; stories in the form of legends, parables, and myths; stories from the Bible and other religious texts; stories in the movies; and, of course, stories as told in dramas, novels, narrative poems, short fiction, and many historical narratives. My view is this: Although literary knowledge would never be enough to educate us in all the ways we need educating, it nevertheless addresses certain forms of learning sufficiently deeply to justify the view that literary knowledge plays



the role of an indispensable supplement to other indispensable kinds of education. I do not assume the misguided position that literary effects are always benign or automatically ennobling, but I do assert that for all their dangers and misdirections, literature's benefits cannot be dispensed with. We must have story, especially narratives, to come into our full humanity.

This is a sweeping but defensible statement, for I think it is undeniable that no human being is content to know of life only what he or she experiences first-hand, internally, or singularly. Life does not happen only within the confines of our inner feelings and thoughts. Like social constructionists, I hold a deep conviction that none of us can become human in the absence of other human beings. There is no essential, fully-formed homunculus in us that will flower into full development apart from other people the way an acorn will turn into an oak tree whether it grows in an oak forest or in the middle of a cornfield. As I have already noted, sociability lies at our human core, and stories provide an indispensable means in every culture for us to escape the prison of singularity and to know what other people experience. Because we are creatures of imagination, we are not content either to possess or to live just one life. One life isolated from others is not a human life; it is a form of autism. On the other hand, a human life with others in it but without stories would hardly be a human life either, certainly not a full one and certainly not a kind of life that anyone reasonably human has ever lived. (That there have never been any non-story-telling human cultures suggests that becoming human and telling stories are and always have been interdependent activities.) Any life deprived of the enrichment and sociability achieved by stories, no matter how many real-life people were in it, would be a disastrously crippled life, perhaps not even a human life. In the words of Mario Vargas Llosa,

Men are not content with their lot and nearly all—rich or poor, brilliant or mediocre, famous or obscure—would like to have a life different from the one they lead. To (cunningly) appease this appetite, fiction was born. It is written and read to provide human beings with lives they're unresigned to not having. . . . To want to be different from the way one is is the human aspiration par excellence. It has engendered the best and worst in recorded history, including works of fiction.

When we read novels, we aren't only who we are but, in addition, we are the bewitched beings into whose midst the novel transfers us. *The transfer is a metamorphosis—the asphyxiating constriction of our lives opens up and we sally forth to be others, to have vicarious experiences which fiction converts into our own.* A wondrous dream, a fantasy incarnate, fiction completes us, mutilated beings

burdened with the awful dichotomy of having only one life and the ability to desire a thousand. . . . Fiction is a temporary substitute for life. The return to reality is almost a brutal impoverishment, corroboration that we are less than we dreamed. (40; emphasis added)

Llosa's sweeping claim, which supports my own sweeping claim that story is essential to the possession of our full humanity ("the return to reality is almost a brutal impoverishment"), is further supported by the realization that every culture, every subculture, every family, every religion, every science, and every person is full of stories. Take away story and we lose most of what we know about the world. Observe: I do not say take away story and we lose experience. Experience, like the poor, we always have with us. But experience is a poor teacher by itself. We must go beyond experience, into the world of the unseeable—inferences, inductions, generalizations, analogies, metaphor, theories, and interpretation—to acquire knowledge, and this taking us into *and then beyond experience* is precisely what literature does most vividly, most comprehensively, and most efficaciously among all forms of human learning. Having once taken in a fiction, a hypothesis about the what-may-or-could-happen, we are liberated to act in nonprogrammed, unpredictable, and creative ways. Experience, either positive or negative, may direct our impulses, but to have an impulse is not necessarily to have knowledge, not even of the nature of the impulse. It is only to have an urge. (See John Dewey's distinction between "impulsion" and "expression" in *Art as Experience*.) But to have a hypothesis about the world is to have knowledge about it, at least presumptive knowledge that liberates us for deeds. Two years before the Llosa comment just quoted, John Barth said in an interview that although fiction is only

imagined reality . . . [it] has an objective existence and does work in the world. Fiction is made up; and yet, having been dreamed into existence by the writer, it does actual work in the world—witness the novel of Harriet Beecher Stowe to whom, as you know, Abraham Lincoln himself, in the midst of our Civil War, said, "You are the lady who caused all this." Fiction does work in the world. The characters in a novel don't ever take on the kind of reality that real people have; but people can be moved and changed and touched by them, as by one's friends and intimates. (35)

One of the obvious ways that fiction touches us is by providing models that guide us in our responses to life's everyday situations. In a chapter that he calls "Literature as Equipment for Living," Kenneth Burke lays down an

argument—sketchy but pregnant—that literature, specifically fiction, “names” the situations of life to which we must form responses. Burke argues that fictions, by representing these situations in all their concrete embeddedness, provide us with models for how to face these situations, deal with them, understand them, endure them, control them, and so on. He writes:

[T]he main point is this: A work like *Madame Bovary* (or its homely American translation, *Babbitt*) is the strategic naming of a situation. It singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure . . . for people to “need a word for it” and to adopt an attitude toward it. . . . Art forms like “tragedy” or “comedy” or “satire” would be treated as equipments for living, that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes. (296–304)

The power of fiction’s “naming of a situation,” we must remember, is not the same kind of power that philosophy and science exhibit in their naming of situations. Philosophy and science idealize particulars to name situations (via laws and hypotheses) at the highest level of generality. Once Isaac Newton saw the underlying connection among thrown balls’ returning to the ground, waterfalls’ plunging toward pools, and apples’ falling from trees, he did what science and philosophy always do: He attempted to formulate a general law (of gravity) that explains these particular events without any longer referring to them. This is an immensely powerful and, in its own way, humanly liberating way of naming situations, but it is not fiction’s way.

Fiction never leaves the realm of particularity. Fiction’s peculiar power resides in its ability to display human actions with such detailed embeddedness that auditors feel they are there: there in the world being fictionally represented. (Nancy Willard illustrates my meaning with a childhood story: “When I was a child, my older sister and I had a game. . . . It required two people: the teller and the listener. The teller’s task was to describe a place as vividly as possible . . . until the listener said, ‘Stop. I’m there’” [104].) It does not damage my point to concede that fiction’s details are artistically shaped, organized, and selected. This merely means that fiction’s embeddedness never was and never will be the “slice of life” that the naturalists claimed it was or should be. The philosopher Cora Diamond, drawing the phrase “texture of being” from Iris Murdoch, highlights the importance of literature’s representation of the details of people’s particular behaviors: the way people look at each other, the things they laugh at, the way they use body language to express rhetorical and political power, the kinds of jokes they tell, the occasions on which they weep or get angry, and

so on. These details reveal both what people do and who they are. These are just the details that scientists and moral philosophers never get much of a handle on and that are the very stock-in-trade of fiction writers. In Diamond's words,

[T]he opening chapters of *Anna Karenina*—what do they give us so much as the texture of Stiva's being? His good-hearted, silly smile when he is caught at something shameful, his response to the memory of the stupid smile, the failure of his attempt to look pathetic and submissive when he goes back to Dolly—what he blushes at, what he laughs at, what he gives an ironical smile at, what he turns his eyes away from: this is Stiva. . . . We cannot see the moral interest of literature unless we recognize gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face as morally expressive—of an individual or of a people. The intelligent description of such things is part of the intelligent, the sharp-eyed, description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives. (162–63)

In the same vein, Martha Nussbaum asserts in *Poetic Justice* that “an especially distinctive feature of the genre [of the novel is] . . . its interest in the ordinary, in the daily lives and struggles of ordinary men and women” (32). While “visiting” the lives of ordinary men and women and making literary friends with them, “We are made to attend to their ways of moving and talking, the shapes of their bodies, the expressions on their faces” (27).

Recent brain research by neurophysiologists is beginning to reveal the physical processes by which literary imaging in the vicarious imagination becomes available to us as brain pictures on which we can model behavior or by which we can achieve a deeper and richer understanding of the world. This research is in its early stages but is highly suggestive of narratives' power to give us models that influence us in exactly the same way that models in real life influence us. “‘People have always wondered if there are [literal] pictures in the brain,’ said Dr. Martha Farah, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania,” and the answer seems to be Yes: “[A]n image held in the mind's eye,” it turns out, seems to have “physical rather than [merely] ethereal properties” (Blakeslee 1). Stephen Kosslyn, a psychologist at Harvard University who is a pioneer researcher in both human visual systems and mental imagery, reports that “every visual area that sends information upstream through nerve fibers also receives information back from that area. Information flows richly in both directions at all times” (7).

In other words, it appears that although mental imaging cannot occur apart from brain activity, such brain activity can and does occur independently of direct, physical simulation. Thus, it seems that we can have physical

brain-imaging of things that we see only in the vicarious imagination. According to this research, mental stimuli activate the physical visual system, so that mental images constructed on verbal cues in narratives look to us—in our brains—just like the mental images we construct from visual cues in the material world. “When a person is asked to look at and then to imagine an object,” reports Farah, “the same brain areas are activated” (Blakeslee 7). Imagining an object gives us the same kind of physical mental picture of it as looking at the real object gives us. This research promises to be important in combating the view that, because literature exists only in words, it can never influence real-life conduct or events the way first-hand experience can. If literature’s words create the same brain-imaging as first-hand experience, then literature’s effects are susceptible to social, political, psychological, and ethical inquiry, just as the effects of everyday experience are. According to Kosslyn,

“[T]he stimulus can be anything: a memory, odor, face, reverie, song or question. . . . Images are based on previously encoded representation of shape . . . so you look up the videotape in associative memory. . . . When that subsystem is activated, a general image . . . is mapped out on the screen, or visual buffer, in the primary visual cortex.” (7)

And if the subsystem of associative memories can be activated by images from the imagination as well as from physical stimulation, then it clearly follows that the mind’s-eye imagining that we do while reading narratives causes us to create the same sort of physically based imaging that we would create if the people and events we “see” in a narrative were actually in front of our eyes in physical space and real time.

## II

The second part of my thesis is that narrative role-modeling constitutes one powerful way of acquiring a theory of life. No one can get by without a theory of life, by which I mean, simply, some guiding notions of what goods in life are worth pursuing, what evils are potent enough to try to avoid, and what operational values get one through the day. We generally think of a theory of life as being earned by reflection, introspection, comparative evaluation of other people’s styles and means of living, and so on. But a theory of life does not have to be earned this way, and our everyday experience of watching how people act suggests that in fact most of them hold only the sketchiest of explicit theories about life. This does not mean they lack a theory of life, for they work hard at pursuing goods and avoiding evils, but it does mean that even if they can identify what they want and don’t

want, they generally cannot offer searching arguments about the grounds of their choices. They have a theory of life, but it is borrowed, implicit, or both. The source from which people can and do get their models is other people, by imitating the behaviors of other people rather than thinking through the values embedded in or underlying those behaviors. Probably even those of us who are introspective and reflective are more given than we might predict to adopting an embedded and unarticulated theory of life in this way. But for people who are little given to holistic reflections about life, imitating the behaviors of role models, some of them fictional, may be a primary, not just a supplemental, means of acquiring a theory of life.

Sometimes Oscar Wilde's point about life imitating art receives astonishingly vivid proof in everyday experience. Various public figures, for example, create certain "looks" that sweep the country in waves. Such was true of the Elvis Presley look and the James Dean look in my own youth, and each generation can trot out the exemplars from venues of literature, entertainment, and sometimes politics, all of which were imitated in life as well as art. Van Wyck Brooks, echoing Wilde, once said of Honoré de Balzac that "the whole tone of French society was altered by Balzac's influence, types and characters arising on every hand, in the generation that followed him, reproducing in life all the traits that Balzac had conceived in fiction." And he goes on to record the credence he attaches to an observation that many would find implausible. "It used to be said," says Brooks, "that the women of England grew perceptibly taller as a result of Du Maurier's cartoons; and no doubt Du Maurier did spread the fashion of a more erect carriage. Thus writers and artists, and men of action, too, when they use words and phrases, play upon us and mold us to their wills" (378-79). Even in passages not specifically detailed, literary imaging can provide such a stimulus to readerly imagining that the latter fills out the empty places in the former. And the content both of the literary descriptions and of the readerly filling-out is not limited to ways of thinking, feeling, and judging but includes specific behaviors such as smiling in certain ways, using certain tones of voice, and moving one's body in certain ways. Northrop Frye says that "the end of literary teaching is not simply the admiration of literature; it's something more like the transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the student" (129).

Many of our particular behaviors are based on role models from narratives that we have stored in our memories. Once stored, our subsequent choices of modeled behaviors may seem automatic, the way that native speakers of a language display so easily, for example, the results of an extremely complicated training in language protocols without having to think about the content of the protocols themselves or the criteria by which one protocol is chosen over another; the speaker may not even be aware of choosing at all and may never be aware of the cognitive energy that was

originally invested in the acquisition of the linguistic protocols. This analogy suggests that what we are doing in these many moments of our lives when we base a particular behavior on the role model from a story is transferring not only the imaginative energy of literature to ourselves but the imagined content and forms of life portrayed there as well. The ethical significance of this act is enormous: Our ethos becomes what it is because of what we do. Choosing actions by taking models and images from literature is an important way not just of doing but of being.

Sometimes, we may take a stance of belligerence or strike a pose of dignity; sometimes, we may use a colloquial expression or employ a Brahmin inflection; sometimes, we may tap our fingers as a sign of boredom or roll our shoulders in evasion of a question; sometimes, we may assert leadership in a group or maintain a retiring self-effacement; sometimes, we may sit up front in class or sit in the back; sometimes, we may speak to others in varying tones of compassion or contempt or love or teasing; sometimes, we men may shave our heads or comb our hair over our bald spots; sometimes, women may indulge in "big hair," complete with lots of hair spray and tiny bows; sometimes, we may express our different group affiliations or merely our varying moods by wearing cowboy boots or hiking boots or tasseled loafers; sometimes, we may define brave behavior as demanding respect on the street or asking the dean for a raise or being willing to kill other human beings in wars initiated by our country's leaders.

Whenever we engage in these or thousands of other behaviors, we often do so not because we can articulate the idea that lies behind or justifies the behavior but just because we have learned these behaviors from other people and can imitate them in circumstances where the role models help us choose behaviors that fit the situation. Whenever we choose behaviors this way, the chances are good—and this is the point at which this issue becomes pertinent to ethical criticism and not just to developmental psychology—that many of our models for specific behaviors come not from the behaviors of people we have observed in first-hand life but from the behaviors of people we have observed in everyone's favorite form of second-hand living: stories. The ethical significance of imitating fictional figures from television, movies, historical narratives, and literature can carry no less significance than that of imitating real-life people.

In the words of Arthur Danto, a twentieth-century philosopher reworking an ancient metaphor, "[L]iterature [is] a kind of mirror, not simply in the sense of rendering up an external reality, but as giving me to myself for each self peering into it, showing each of us something inaccessible without mirrors, namely that each has an external aspect and what that external aspect is" (16). As centers of subjectivity, we think of ourselves as certain kinds of men or women, as certain kinds of moral agents, or as sites where certain human possibilities intersect, and, in order to acquire a sharpened

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focus on our roles, we turn to all the logical places where we can find the education that will help us acquire that focus. We turn to real-life models and personal experience; we seek advice, study history, and look to our peer groups or religion for guidance. Frequently and inevitably, however, all of us supplement the guidance we receive from peer groups or self-help books or art or friends or mentors by turning to specific narrative exemplars whose narrated lives invite us to identify with them.

The ethical models offered to us by narratives, especially literature, carry at least four advantages as role models that we may find difficult to duplicate with many real-life models. First, we often possess a degree of intimacy with literary models that is sometimes difficult to achieve with more than a few real-life acquaintances. Not many of our real-life colleagues or neighbors, for example, present themselves to us as vividly or offer us such intimate knowledge of their interior lives as do Ivan Ilych, Elizabeth Bennett, or even the poetic voices used by John Milton in "Lycidas" or by Wordsworth in *The Prelude*. Second, literary models may offer us guidance that is simply more understandable because we see all or most of the surrounding context that explains the relevance of the model. The best inferences we can draw from the behavior of real-life models are often murky because the behavior of other people is not easily understood unless we can see the interior context of motives, feelings, personal history, and attitudes that inform their behavior. In the absence of knowledge about such context, the behavior of real-life models often seems confusing, inconsistent, or disguised. Third, in fictions we are given one kind of information that is crucial to our everyday, real-life activities but that everyday conventions usually deny to us. Fictions offer us direct access to other people's minds, and this kind of information is indispensable to all of us in learning how to make reliable inferences about the states of people's minds in real life. Even if the minds are fictional, fiction gives direct access to people's self-talk, the kinds of thoughts, emotions, motivations, and attitudes that people refer to as they choose their actions. Fourth, because of the relative absence of self-interest in our relations with narrative role models, narrative acquaintances offer us role models with whom we can identify both intimately and intensely, but with whom we are sufficiently distant that we can, despite our intimacy, think about them more reflectively, more objectively, and potentially more generously than we can about role models in real life. Real-life acquaintances and friends who might serve us as models also serve as potential sources of emotional entanglement that make it difficult for us to think clearly.

Wilde's quip about life imitating art is frequently cited as nothing but a *bon mot*, but it is actually a well-developed view so pertinent to the present topic and so fresh when looked at in its larger context that it is worth resurrecting one more time as a fitting conclusion to this section of my



position. What Wilde offers is not exactly an argument (which, presumably, he'd be relieved to hear), but it is a deep insight. According to Wilde,

[L]ife imitates art far more than art imitates life. . . . And it has always been so. A great artist invents a type, and life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher. Neither Holbein nor Van Dyck found in England what they have given us. They brought their types with them, and life with her keen imitative faculty set herself to supply the master with models. . . . As it is with the visible arts, so it is with literature. . . . The imagination is essentially creative and always seeks for a new form. The boy burglar is simply the inevitable result of life's imitative instinct. He is fact, occupied as fact usually is, with trying to reproduce fiction, and what we see in him is repeated on an extended scale throughout the whole of life. . . . The nihilist, that strange martyr who has no faith, who goes to the stake without enthusiasm, and dies for what he does not believe in, is a purely literary product. He was invented by Turgenev, and completed by Dostoevski. Robespierre came out of the pages of Rousseau as surely as the People's Palace rose out of the debris of a novel. Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but molds it to its purpose. (680–81)

### III

Literary accounts in narrative are themselves a rich source of illustrations of Wilde's point and, in addition, offer a narratively reflexive assessment of the ethical power of narrative role-modeling. One of the things I like about such accounts is that most narrative writers generally pay their craft the respect of supposing its influence is real enough to do ill as well as good in the world. In this supposition, narrative writers sometimes display a tougher cast of mind than those soft-headed humanists who insist on arguing that literature can influence us only for good but never for ill (as if the bee could ever give us honey without threatening at the same time to sting us).

When Dante and Virgil are in the second ring of the *Inferno*, where carnal sinners are condemned, Dante converses with the two famous lovers, Francesca and Paolo, who inform him that they were led to their infidelity by reading a vivid description of the illicit love of Lancelot and Guenevere, which Francesca and Paolo used, then, as a model for their own illicit love. Francesca speaks:

On a day for dalliance we read the rhyme  
of Lancelot, how love had mastered him.  
We were alone with innocence and dim time.  
Pause after pause that high old story drew  
our eyes together while we blushed and paled;  
but it was one soft passage overthrew  
our caution and our hearts. For when we read  
how her fond smile was kissed by such a lover,  
he who is one with me alive and dead  
breathed on my lips the tremor of his kiss.  
That book and he who wrote it, was a pander.  
That day we read no further. (1165–66)

“[O]ne soft passage overthrew / our caution and our hearts”: Surely, there are few testimonials to literature’s power to move readers toward choices of character as succinct, direct, and poignant as this one.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* offers another vivid example of a literary account of narrative influence. In Book 2, at that point in the story where Criseyde shows great ambivalence about whether to give in to the importunities of Pandarus and the impulses of love itself but where her ambivalence still leans more heavily toward resistance rather than toward relenting, she happens to overhear a song of love being sung by Antigone, her female companion. Antigone’s song goes on for fifty lines and is full of opinions and descriptions of love—her lover is “the welle of worthynesse, of trouthe grownd, mirour of goodlihed, of wit Apollo, stoon of sikernesse, of vertu roote, of lust fynder and hed” (112), and so on—but what is being modeled in these fifty lines is not just a set of doctrines or opinions about love but a particular concrete action: the happiness of the singer. Antigone sings because her heart is soaring. What she models are the blessings of love for the beloved. In her fifty-line song, she is to love what Dickens’s Sissy Jupe is to horses—that is, she speaks from experience, not just from textbook knowledge, as Bitzer does—and it is this, Antigone’s bliss, that influences Criseyde so deeply. Criseyde inquires of Antigone,

. . . “Lord, is ther swych blisse among  
These loveres?” . . .  
“Ye, wis,” quod fresshe Antigone the white,  
“For alle the folk that han or ben on lyve  
Ne konne wel the blisse of love discryve.

. . . . .  
But every word which that [Criseyde] of [Antigone] herde,  
She gan to prenten in hire herte faste,  
And ay gan love hire lasse for t’agaste

Than it dide erst, and synken in hire herte,  
That she wex somewhat able to converte. (112–13)

Who can deny that the image of a person deliriously happy in love is a model more likely to move us in favor of love than are all the arguments contained in a world of syllogisms, and who can deny that some of the most moving models of love are those we know in narratives? It is obvious that romance novels, television programs (especially soap operas), and movies replay the images of lovers' bliss over and over—we have all seen these images thousands and thousands of times—yet the images never lose their fascination or their ethical power to shape the aspirations of the heart of many of their readers and viewers. Pandarus has been arguing Criseyde's self-interest, but Chaucer knows that modeling bliss will move her heart.

Few literary models from any time or place have achieved such long-lasting and practical influence as the Byronic hero. Bertrand Russell, who devotes an entire chapter to George Gordon, Lord Byron, in his history of Western philosophy, calls the Byronic hero "[t]he aristocratic rebel," whose life takes "the form of Titanic cosmic self-assertion [that] . . . has inspired a long series of revolutionary movements, from the Carbonari after the fall of Napoleon to Hitler's coup in 1933" (747). The editors of Byron in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* concur with Russell's estimation. The Byronic figure, according to the *Norton Anthology*,

infusing the archrebel in a nonpolitical form with a strong erotic interest, embodied the implicit yearning of Byron's time, was imitated in life as well as art, and helped shape the intellectual as well as the cultural history of the later nineteenth century. Although Byronism was largely a fiction, . . . the fiction was historically more important than the poet in his actual person. (480)

The opening lines of *Manfred* offer a self-presentation by Manfred that fills in the main features of the Byronic hero:

. . . [I]n my mind there is  
A power to make [philosophy and science] subject to itself—  
But they avail not; I have done men good,  
And I have met with good even among men—  
But this avail'd not; I have had my foes,  
And none have baffled, many have fallen before me—  
But this avail'd not.—Good, or evil, life,  
Powers, passions, all I see in other beings,  
Have been to me as rain unto the sands,

Since that all-nameless hour. I have no dread,  
 And feel the curse to have no natural fear,  
 Nor fluttering throb, that beats with hopes or wishes,  
 Or lurking love of something on the earth. (514–15)

Later, when the chamois hunter tries to still Manfred's agitation by advising "patience," Manfred retorts,

Patience and patience! Hence—that word was made  
 For brutes of burthen  
 not for birds of prey;  
 Preach it to mortals of a dust like thine,—  
 I am not of thine order. (524)

Later on, Manfred characterizes himself not as a bird of prey but as a lion:

I could not tame my nature down . . .  
 I disdained to mingle with  
 A herd, though to be leader—and of wolves.  
 The lion is alone, and so am I. (538)

And the last line of the closet drama is Manfred's defiant and fearless assertion: "Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die." The Byronic hero knows that he is superior to all other men. He is afflicted with a mostly nameless sense of guilt, about which he remains remorseless, and a deep if general sense of the futility of things. The characterization is highly self-congratulatory, cloyingly melodramatic, intensely egocentric, and intellectually incoherent. To any mature person with a farthing's worth of humility, an ell's worth of ironic detachment, or one iota's worth of sensitivity toward the relative differences in people's situations, the Byronic hero is downright laughable in his inflated solipsism and grandiose self-assertion.

On the other hand, who does not recognize the Byronic hero as one of the most imitated models of a certain kind of machismo possessing tremendous cultural and psychological significance in both life and art? Manfred is the model (himself based largely on the previous model of Milton's Satan) of any number of young men that all of us have known in high school and college, perhaps including some of us, who imitated the Byronic hero right down to the sneers, the saturnine moods, and the sweeping gestures. If cigarettes had been available to Manfred as they were to Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, we know exactly how Manfred would have stood, the angle of the shoulders and the tilt of the head, as he lit the cigarette, sucked in the smoke, and flipped away the match, looking sardonically through a veil of smoke into the eyes of a woman he was about to enfold or

an enemy he was about to crush. In literature, this Byronic hero is the model for such variations as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. In popular culture, it is the model for any number of rock stars, such as Sting and Mick Jagger, especially early in their careers. In the movies, it is the model for such variations as Marlon Brando's biker-as-antihero in *The Wild One*, Paul Newman's everything-is-meaningless rake in *Hud*, Clark Gable's don't-give-a-damn Civil War profiteer in *Gone With the Wind*, and Ralph Feinnes's I'll-come-back-to-get-you-at-any-cost character in the vastly popular *The English Patient*. But these examples are only a few of a massive number of examples in popular culture. The longer the issue of ethical role-modeling from narratives in literature, film, or television is considered, the more Wilde seems to deserve credit for being not only insightful but positively prescient.

Perhaps the most incisive and developed account of the influence of literary models rendered in any work of literature is Gustave Flaubert's narrator's account of how Emma Bovary's delighted and obsessive consumption of sickly romantic novels provided her with models that in their shimmering allure prevented her from ever growing up to become a mature and ethically sensitive agent. Captivated by the early images of romantic extravagance in the novels she read, Emma persistently but futilely, and eventually catastrophically, attempts to live the life modeled for her by these romantic narratives. Flaubert does not ask us to believe, nor does he himself seem to believe, that Emma's life is ruined by novel-reading alone, as if there were no other influences moving her toward catastrophe. He sees clearly the general vanity of human beings and the bottomless vapidness of French bourgeois society. At the same time, however, Flaubert takes narrative modeling as crucially important in Emma's development, for he not only describes in great detail the models that Emma reacts to with such depth of feeling, but deliberately recalls to the reader's mind the relevance of these models at each of the important turning points in Emma's story.

Part of Emma Bovary's problem is temperamental. She was, Flaubert's narrator tells us, "of a temperament more sentimental than artistic" (26), a person who "loved the sea only for the sake of its storms, and the green only when it was scattered among ruins" (25–26). On the other hand, the content of her religious education at the convent school—dominated by "comparisons of betrothed, husband, celestial lover, and eternal marriage" (25)—conditions Emma's susceptibility to the role of lovers in novels and shows her how to attach to them a kind of mystical importance. Emma receives the contraband novels from

an old maid who came [to the convent school] for a week each month to mend the linen. . . . She told stories, gave the girls news, ran their errands in the town, and on the sly lent the big girls

some of the novels, that she always carried in the pockets of her apron. . . . They were all about love, lovers, sweethearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postilions killed at every relay, horses ridden to death on every page, somber forests, heart-aches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, little boat rides by moonlight, nightingales in shady groves, gentlemen brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one ever was, always well dressed, and weeping like fountains. . . . Illustrations in keepsake books showed such scenes as a young man in a short cloak, holding in his arms a young girl in a white dress who was wearing an alms-bag at her belt; or there were nameless portraits of English ladies with fair curls, who looked at you from under their round straw hats with their large clear eyes. . . . Others, dreaming on sofas with an open letter, gazed at the moon through a slightly open window half draped by a black curtain. The innocent ones, a tear on their cheeks, were kissing doves through the bars of a Gothic cage. (26–27)

I have omitted a good portion of this passage, but there remains a great wealth of concrete detail to feed the imagination of the fifteen-year-old Emma looking for role models to show her the behaviors—the facial expressions, the attitudes, the gestures, the postures, the dresses and hats and how to wear them—that promise the reader a life of whirlwind excitement, exquisite sensibility, and thunderous passion. That all these images are saccharine, sentimental(ized), and shallow only reinforces Flaubert's underlying assumption even more powerfully, *the assumption that any of us, not just Emma, will take what role models we can get when we need them*. In order to come into our humanity, in order to take a place in society and to be recognized as a person, we know that we must assume roles and we look for models to show us what those roles look like and how to play them. If, when we are young, no one shows us models of thoughtfulness or reasonableness or self-control or generosity, we will settle for whatever models we can find and never know what we are missing.

After Emma marries and begins to fall into lassitude, she turns again to romantic narratives:

She subscribed to “La Corbeille,” a ladies' magazine. . . . In Eugene Sue she studied descriptions of furniture; she read Balzac and George Sand, seeking in them imaginary satisfaction for her own desires. She even brought her book to the table, and turned over the pages while Charles ate and talked to her. . . . At other times, she told him what she had been reading, some passage in a novel, a new play, or an anecdote from high society found in a newspaper story. (41–44)

Much later, when Emma and Léon are in the first stages of lust that will lead to their eventual affair, Emma counters Léon's preference for poetry over novels with the assertion that "in the long-run, [poetry] is tiring. . . . I have come to love stories that rush breathlessly along, that frighten one. I detest commonplace heroes and moderate feelings, as one finds them in nature" (59). When she finally does consummate her affair, Emma is ecstatic, and the fulfillment for her is largely a function of the expectations about life and passion that she derived from narrative role models. In her imagination, she melts into the daydreams of these narratives as if her life were written by them rather than by the forces of her own circumstances and character. In a sense, of course, her life *is* being written by narratives. To the extent that she subscribes to their role modeling, the shape and quality of these narratives are the shape and quality of her life. Here is Emma at the beginning of her first affair:

She repeated: "I have a lover! a lover!" delighting at the idea [that] . . . at last she was to know those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired! . . . *Then she recalled the heroines of the books that she had read, and the lyric legion of these adulterous women began to sing in her memory with the voice of sisters that charmed her. She became herself, as it were, an actual part of these lyrical imaginings; at long last, as she saw herself among these lovers she had so envied, she fulfilled the love-dream of her youth.* (117; emphasis added)

In fashioning her end, of course, Emma dramatizes herself in a manner supremely—and terminally—imitative of cheap-novel heroines. She takes poison, eating it "greedily," after which she goes home "with something of the serenity of one that has done his duty" (229). Despite the anguish caused by the slow-acting poison, Emma approaches the end of her life in the same manner she has lived it, not because she has thought through the terms on which she desires to end her existence by comparing one set of terms to another or by considering her obligations as a parent and spouse, but simply because she seems to have no other models in her head of how to have any kind of experience except by imitating those represented gestures of the narrative queens on whom she modeled herself in her girlhood, in her marriage, and in her illicit romances. These models have been her only intimate life-long companions, in the sense of companions with whom she held daily counsel in the inner recesses of her heart. Only a few hours before her death, she continues to dramatize herself as a romantic heroine in a novel: "[A] twilight dimness was settling upon her thoughts, and, of all earthly noises, Emma heard none but the intermittent lamentations of this poor heart, sweet and remote like the echo of a symphony dying away" (232).

That Emma's narrative models have led her to nothing but frustration, disappointment, and eventually a ghastly death does not mean that she abandons these models, nor does her refusal to abandon them mean that she is stupid or that she intends to be blatantly self-destructive. For that matter, Francesca and Paolo don't intend to be unfaithful, Criseyde doesn't intend to fall in love, and Manfred doesn't intend to see all his powers brought to nothing by an early death. These fictional characters, like all of us, intend to live life finely and fully, but they are influenced far more than they realize by the narrative models they take in—as are we all.

In real life, we gradually develop a theory of life, a set of guiding notions of why and how to live out our days. Some of us construct our theories with more or less conscious deliberation and thoughtful care than others do, but none of us goes through life without using role models, some of them from narrative as well as from real life, and all of us are affected by the models we choose. As children, we tie towels around our necks so we can be as powerful as Superman; as adults, we get better at disguising our imitation or at pretending that it's not really important to us. Instead of Superman capes, we select our conference wear with care: silk ties that connote our sophisticated taste or heavy-duty work shirts to connote our populist sympathies or "power suits" that connote our aggressive professionalism. We do all of this with deft nonchalance, with more or less conscious awareness. In our classrooms, the teaching models provided by Mr. Chips, Mr. Gradgrind, Jean Brodie, the Clerk of Oxenford, or our favorite college or grad-school teacher hover over our pedagogy like ghosts. Regardless of the kinds of models we encounter, however, we cannot help but be influenced, for good or ill, by those we have taken into our hearts. Imitation, as Aristotle long ago suggested, is a principal mechanism of both learning and becoming social, and our urge to join the continent of humanity, to bridge the gulf between Arnold's individual islands, will keep us returning again and again to role models from narratives that show us not only what we might live for but who we might become.

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