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The Sound of Story: Narrative, Memory, and Selfhood

INTRODUCTION

At the conference where I first presented an earlier version of this paper I received an interesting and instructive response from one of my fellow panelists who objected strongly to my argument that narratives can help extend the sympathy of the imagination. "What you are forgetting," he asserted, "are the *limits* of narrative and imagination: those moments and those places where narrative's capacity to make us understand the experience of other human beings runs into a brick wall, those limits past which even the most powerful narrative and the most energetic imagination cannot venture." I responded that this notion of limits sounded like an account of exceptions rather than a comprehensive theory, but what most interested me then, and still does, about this objection, were the undertones of sadness and loss that accompanied it. As far as I could tell, the claim my colleague was making about imagination's limits seemed to produce in him none of that joy, discovery, wonder, or happiness that fresh insights into important problems are wont to produce.

If my fellow panelist had been a mathematician and if the insight he advanced had been a mathematical theorem, it would have lacked that aesthetic feature that mathematicians call *elegance*[1]—that symmetrical harmony of shape and that comprehensiveness of explanation that speaks of beauty and truth in the same formula—of which an insufficiency in a theorem is sometimes taken as grounds for reconsidering the theorem. But my interlocutor seemed not to have considered the possibility either that his unhappiness with his own theorem or its lack of comprehensiveness might point to an insufficiency in it. He took for granted the postmodern view that narratives are mostly fragmented illusions, and that any traditional appeals to them about how to live must always meet with disappointment. Richard Kearney summarizes this postmodern view of narrative succinctly: "The artist [in the postmodern age] becomes a 'player' in a game of

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signs, an 'operator' in an electronic media network. He experiences himself afloat in an anonymous interplay of images which he can, at best, parody, simulate or reproduce. Like a character in a Pynchon novel or Wenders film, the postmodern artist wanders about in a labyrinth of commodified light and noise, endeavouring to piece together bits of dispersed narrative" (13). Small wonder that my colleague objected to my positive views about narrative's power to lead the sympathetic imagination into fresh domains of experience and knowledge.

What I finally found most instructive about this challenge is just how profoundly I remain convinced of the ethical and intellectual promise contained within narratives' power not only to extend the limits of our imaginative sympathy, but to educate us about life generally. I do not take the brick wall for granted, and even if I did, I certainly do not think anyone could say just where it is going to be encountered. Where does narrative's appeal to the imagination fail? Where does it run into the brick wall? Is it the feel of another person's moment of death that imagination cannot capture? I offer *The Death of Ivan Ilych* as a rejoinder—also *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.* Does the imagination stop short of conveying the full impact of another's anguish of person or spirit? I offer the description of Sethe's lacerations from whipping in *Beloved* as an example of the former, and Oedipus's or Lear's anguish of spirit as an example of the latter. The assertion of limitations seems to me itself limited; the cataloging of counter-examples could go on forever.

It is true that a powerful narrative may sometimes fail to ignite the imagination, but in my own experience the failure, if there is one, is usually my own or my students', not the narrative's. My students and I frequently commit the same sins when reading narratives: we fail to pay proper attention; we fail to recognize the allusions or the kind of human experience being referred to; we want the author to do all the work for us; we refuse to be thoughtful; we feel too hurried or too tired, or maybe we are just standing at the wrong place in our lives to get the most out of a particular narrative at a particular time. As Peter Rabinowitz says, "[r]eaders need to stand somewhere before they pick up a book, and the nature of that 'somewhere' . . . significantly influences the ways in which they interpret (and consequently evaluate) texts" (2). When I read Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* at age twenty two, I thought the story pretty dumb—just to be blunt about it—but when I reread the same novel again at thirty five, having by that age experienced some of my own "day[s] of tears and madness" (36), I found the story profound, illuminating, deeply moving. The brick wall I ran into at age twenty two was not in the narrative; it was my own ignorance and immaturity. Rereading *Henderson* at age thirty five is one of the things that helped educate me and leaven my immaturity. To me, one of the most amazingly persistent features of narrative is just how far it *can* take the imagination before *any* brick wall—supposing that it exists—ever appears on the reader's horizon.

One of the many things that happened to me between my two readings of *Henderson* was not just life experience, but other books, other narratives, that conditioned my abilities to go beyond myself every bit as much as the practical affairs and accidents of life. I'm reminded of Eliot's famous put down of the shallow modernist who smugly complained that "'dead writers are remote from us

because we *know* so much more than they did'": "[p]recisely, and they are that which we know" (93). One of the reasons we *know* so much more at any given age than at any previous age is that the narratives we have read in the meantime extend our education both of life's shape and possible content. In the words of Reynolds Price,

> A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species *Homo Sapiens*—second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our days' events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths. (4)

THE POWER, APPEAL, AND VALUE OF NARRATIVE

In this essay, I want to take a new look at the old question that goes to the root of our activities in teaching and studying narrative: Why do narratives matter? What is the source of narratives' power, appeal, and value?[2] Much recent literary criticism and theory implicitly answers that narrative matters because it powerfully conveys ideology (Michel Foucault, Terry Eagleton, and Judith Fetterley, for example), and recent work in the social sciences (Jerome Bruner, Robyn Fivush, and James Q. Wilson, for example) explicitly answers that narrative matters because it plays a crucial role in the construction of knowledge and the development of societies. Although these answers are helpful and frequently insightful, in this essay I want to complement them by attending closely to the kind of discourse that narrative is and to the activity and the consequences of reading narrative. I begin by turning not to the formulations of any contemporary narrative theorist or social scientist but to the testimony of one reader, the Russian dramatist Maxim Gorky, who provides an account both eloquent and moving of narrative's power to help shape the deepest contours and textures of a reader's emotional, moral, and intellectual life. While working as a young man in conditions that were physically and morally degrading, Gorky discovered in stories not escape—and certainly not *escapism*—but a better and more fulfilling mode of existence. The passage is worth quoting at length.

> There was much in my environment that was wicked and savage, and gave birth to a feeling of acute loathing. . . . It was in such accursed conditions that I first began to read. . . . (11)
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> The more I read, the closer books bound me to the world and the more vivid and significant life became for me. I saw that there were people whose life was worse and harder than mine. Though I derived some comfort from this, I did not grow reconciled to the outrageous facts of the life about me. I saw too that there were such who were able to live a life of interest and happiness in a way none about me knew how to. From the pages of almost every book sounded a subdued but insistent message that perturbed me,

> called me into the unknown, and plucked at my heart. All men were suffering in one way or another; all were dissatisfied with life and sought something that was better, and this made them closer and more understandable to me. Books enshrouded the whole world in a mournful aspiration towards better things, and each one of them seemed a soul tacked down to paper by characters and words which came to life the moment my eyes and my mind came into contact with them.
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> I often wept as I read—so moving were the stories about people, so dear and close did they become to me. Lad as I was, pestered with senseless toil and berated with senseless vituperation, I promised myself in the most solemn of terms that I would help people and render them honest service when I grew up.
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> Like some wondrous birds out of fairy tales, books sang their songs to me and spoke to me as though communing with one languishing in prison; they sang of the variety and richness of life, of man's audacity in his strivings towards goodness and beauty. The more I read, the more a wholesome and kindly spirit filled my heart, and I grew calmer, my self-confidence developed, my work improved, and I paid ever less heed to the innumerable spurns life was dealing me.
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> Each book was a rung in my ascent from the brutish to the human, towards an understanding of a better life and a thirst after that life. (16–17)

Because Gorky's testimony about narrative itself takes the form of narrative, it not only encapsulates but also exemplifies the chief elements of my answer to the question about narrative's power, appeal, and value:

(1) Narrative is empirical, that is, it deals in concrete details and must be experienced one particular detail after another rather than as one abstraction after another. ("[E]ach one of them seemed a soul tacked down to paper by characters and words which came to life the moment my eyes and my mind came into contact with them.")

(2) Because narratives are empirical, reading them activates our imagination, that faculty of mind by which we are able to vicariously experience the thoughts, actions, and emotions of others. ("I often wept as I read—so moving were the stories about people, so dear and close did they become to me.")

(3) The vicarious experiences provided by reading narrative are appealing because they satisfy our desires for learning and for companionship and intimacy. We remain hungry to learn about others' lives because such learning helps us understand our own. ("I saw that there were people whose life was worse and harder than mine. . . . I saw too that there were such who were able to live a life of interest and happiness in a way none about me knew how to.") We desire companionship and intimacy because, as Aristotle said long ago and many social scientists have repeated ever since, humans are social animals. ("Like some wondrous birds out of fairy tales, books sang their songs to me and spoke to me as though communing with one languishing in prison.")

(4) In satisfying these desires, the vicarious experiences of narrative create the potential for real and significant effects—ethical, emotional, intellectual, polit-

ical, and so on—in readers' lives. First, these experiences allow us to stock our memories with knowledge about many of life's situations, knowledge that enables us to see ourselves and our own circumstances more clearly. ("From the pages of almost every book sounded a subdued but insistent message that perturbed me, called me into the unknown and plucked at my heart. All men were suffering in one way or another; all were dissatisfied with life and sought something that was better, and this made them closer and more understandable to me.") Second, these vicarious experiences influence the formation of our very selves. The wider our scope of experience is with narrative, the larger is our repertory of imaginatively-held images of how we might live and who we might be. ("The more I read, the more a wholesome and kindly spirit filled my heart, and I grew calmer, my self-confidence developed, my work improved, and I paid ever less heed to the innumerable spurns life was dealing me.")

In elaborating on these interrelated aspects of my answer, I will, in a sense, be making a new apology for narrative literature, one that tries to connect reading narratives to living life in our postmodern, poststructuralist age.

ACTIVATING THE IMAGINATION: NARRATIVE'S EMPIRICAL PARTICULARS

Hegel's assertion that "[w]e must proceed historically—empirically" (157) can be adapted with equal accuracy to literature: "We must proceed literarily, empirically." Elder Olson, in trying to define the nature of "a work of art," emphasizes the point that a work of art can only be experienced as a particular, unique object, not as a set of universals or propositions or precepts.

> [A] work of art is a particular, and a special kind of particular. It cannot be known through a universal. . . . I cannot know any particulars about Hamlet because I know about tragedy. Euripides' *Tyro* is a lost work; it was a tragedy; what do you know of it? Further, the work of art is a particular that cannot be known through the account of someone else. . . . I may learn accidental bits and pieces from accounts; the form I must experience directly, through the workings of my own mind upon the data of my own sensations. A work of art is not merely a particular; it is a unique particular. It has its qualities to be, not an individual representing a class, but what it is uniquely. (311)

Literary and dramatic narratives get made, as do histories, by the author's constructing sequences of concrete experiences into an order that constitutes not only an empirical *record* of fictional characters' lives, but an empirical[3] *experience* in the lives of readers. Cynthia Ozick, in effect, takes Olson's point about narrative's particularity and discusses its consequences for readers:

> In [the] steady interpretive light [of literature] we can make distinctions; we can see that one thing is not interchangeable with another thing; that not

> everything is the same; that the Holocaust is different, God knows, from a corncob. So we arrive, at last, at the pulse and purpose of literature: to reject the blur of the "universal"; to distinguish one life from another; to illumine diversity; to light up the least grain of being, to show how it is concretely individual, particularized from any other; to tell, in all the marvel of its singularity, the separate holiness of the least grain. *Literature is the recognition of the particular.* (248 Ozick's italics)

The vicarious imagination, that faculty most directly appealed to by narratives, needs concrete details to stimulate it. The fundamental activity of the imagination is the construction of mental images, and the features that distinguish human imagination from the (apparently) much more limited imagination of animals—some of whom, such as dogs, chimpanzees, and gorillas engage in behaviors that strongly suggest mental imaging—are the abilities (1) to hold images in the head indefinitely, not as a consequence of reflex conditioning but as objects of ongoing contemplation and self-conscious reflection; (2) to construct images across a vast range of experience from what *has* happened (memory of past events), to what *might* or *could* happen (imagined alternatives to one's present behavior or situation, such as imagining oneself on a date with someone other than the person one is with), to what will *probably* happen (forecasting of future events), to what will *never* happen (fantasies such as meeting a griffin at lunch, or falsehoods designed to deceive); and (3) to string images together into sequences that constitute narratives.

The fuel that powers all of these imaginative activities is concrete details. Abstractions, generalizations, precepts, and logic play indispensable roles in reasoning and theory-making, but the imagination needs images, textures, sensations, smells, sounds, tastes—the look and feel of particular things in particular contexts—in order to do its work. The concrete details seized by the imagination frequently pass, of course, from the imagination to other mental faculties such as reason and logic, and in so doing, may come to influence our beliefs and ideologies and actions. Clearly, these effects of narrative are very significant. For now, however, I want to attend to this first level of narrative experience, the imagination's response to empirical data. It is the imagination that first apprehends Hamlet's or Mrs. Dalloway's or the Invisible Man's experiences, that first registers the emotional jolt of vicariously joining them in their sufferings, their joys, their longings, their doubts, their moments of confusion, and their moments of clarity. The vicarious imagination allows human beings to live not one life but many, and allows us to learn, by a baptism of imaginative immersion, what it means to live this *other* life, to be this *other* person, to wish or work for a *different* destiny, to shape life along the route of a *different* parabola.

All kinds of narratives possess an immense power to educate. Since modernism's elevation of the notion of aesthetic purity and writerly experimentation in literature, and since poststructuralism's elevation of the notion of linguistic indeterminateness, the educational power of literature, history, and other narrative forms has been either neglected or reduced to the inculcation of ideology. The source of educational power that springs to life in narratives lies in the ability of

narratives to *move,* to put the mind and heart in powerful motion, to engage the whole person, to lift auditors up and out of their own tiny spots in time and space and to enlarge their sense of life's possibilities by putting them down in other spots of time and space imaginatively apprehended, places where different views, different beliefs, different feelings, and different ways of being are not just observed but *experienced.* Auditors of narratives not only *witness* the lives of others concretely rendered, but *experience* those lives through the operation of the vicarious imagination.

In a kind of writing becoming more and more common in the humanities, a kind of writing that blends personal autobiography, social commentary, and critical theory into an inseparable amalgam, Frank Lentricchia sees a causal connection between the empirical texture and the ethical effects of art in general and literature in particular:

> My allegiance is not to a literary theory but to the sum total of my liberating literary experiences. . . . The "art" and "life" distinction . . . makes "life" harder for me. . . . The fun is all in disrespecting it by finding art in life, or, if you can't, by making it up in concert with the givens, the gifts, which need to have their say—a desire we ought to respect. The ethics of interpretation: Be decent to your materials. . . .
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> When I experience art, I feel good because I feel the specificity of the moment, the act, the image, the scene, but before and after I don't feel too good, so I seek out more experiences of art's particularity because art is the only place I know where to find deliverance of the specific from the habits of abstraction. . . . Art as stubborn specificity, as untheorizable peculiarity. Art for life's sake. (55–56)

NARRATIVE'S APPEAL: LEARNING AND COMPANIONSHIP

By emphasizing that narrative's capacity to move us is dependent on its empirical quality, I inevitably raise another question: why do not *all* empirically rendered arrangements of events or facts in the world move us? Laundry lists, bills of sale, menus, telephone books, and college schedules do not move us, even though they all contain verbal representations of one concrete detail after another: "4 long-sleeved white shirts, no starch"; "250 gross of number two, cedar-cased, eraser-tipped, yellow Ticonderoga lead pencils"; "EN 382 Studies in Major Authors: Jane Austen. MWF 10:00–10:50. Jordan Hall 342. Gregory. Open to seniors only." There's not much here that "pierces the sight of the soul" (Sidney) or makes one "feel good" (Lentricchia). Clearly, empirical details are not moving just because they are empirical and not just because they are arranged in sequential or rational or intelligible structures.

The power of narratives to move is based on two additional susceptibilities: (1) Our susceptibility to learning; we remain always hungry for knowledge of others' lives because such knowledge contains clues about the possible meaning,

organization, and potentialities of our own lives. It matters that narratives are empirical accounts not just of anything but of humans (or representations of humans) in interaction. We want to know about each other. (2) Our susceptibility to companionship and intimacy, a deep and perhaps innate need for sociability. Aristotle's formulation of this dimension of our nature has been recently restated by James Q. Wilson in a way that links our social selves to our ethical selves:

> Man is by nature a social animal. Our moral nature grows directly out of our social nature. We express sympathy for the plight of others both because we value their company (and so wish to convince them of our companionable qualities) and because we can feel the pain of others even when not in their company. (121)

> This innate sensitivity to the feelings of others . . . is so powerful that it makes us grasp not only the feelings of friends and family members but also those of some strangers, many fictional characters, and even animals. . . . Scarcely a waking hour passes when we do not wonder how we appear in the eyes of others. . . . Our sociability generates our moral sense. . . . (140)

In this view, then, narratives have the power to move us because they are empirical, which makes them vivid; because they convey knowledge about how to live, which makes them engaging; and because they provide deep companionship, which makes them fulfilling.

We must not confuse this deep companionship with the academic's or the aesthete's "appreciation" of artistic qualities and formal strategies. Such appreciation may be mingled with a great quantity of intellectual abstraction and emotional distance. The kind of companionship I am talking about does not preclude such appreciation, but goes far beyond aesthetic appreciation in the energy of its personal, emotional, and ethical significance. As Anthony Burgess says, "We have to *like* our author. . . . We do not demand of an author that he be an intellectual . . . but we have a right to intelligence, a knowledge of the human soul, a certain decency." The companionship I am referring to has more to do with voices that carry meaning than with structures that are formally coherent. When I was a child I used to write notes to authors in the end pages of books that I loved, thanking them for the book that had just given me such pleasure[4] (and, since confession is said to be good for the soul, I must admit that I continued this practice occasionally even when I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago). Some books convey to readers such a powerfully concrete sense of authorial presence—George Orwell says that "[w]hen one reads any strongly individualized piece of writing, one has the impression of seeing a face somewhere behind the page . . . the face that the writer *ought* to have" (110–11)—and some books elicit such a deep gratitude from readers, the way I felt when I "dis-

covered" Dickens in graduate school,[5] that the companionship between author and reader becomes positively palpable, producing a kind of implicit dialogue with the author that may accompany the reading of the work and sound something like this: "I wish you could see how much I am loving *Bleak House,* sentence by sentence, page by page. I can't put it down. I have to find out what happens next. I love Esther and Ada and Mr. Jarndyce and hate Skimpole and Vholes and Tulkinghorn and laugh at Mrs. Jellyby and Mr. Guppy and Reverend Chadband, just as you knew I would. I wish you were here to see the completion of your work occurring right now in the appreciation I have for it. I even love the feel of the cover and the smell of the pages."

There is nothing very sophisticated and a lot that is childlike in this kind of effusiveness. It is even a little embarrassing for an academic critic to admit ownership of such simple feelings about a narrative. But it does help remind us that the acts of writing stories and taking them in were not developed as academic exercises or curriculum fillers or the intellectual equivalent of learning to play scales on the piano. Narratives are not written for critics to criticize; they are written for readers to love. Story telling and story listening arose, presumably, as deeply affective, ethical, emotional, and social acts—probably around camp fires or cave fires initially—acts which allowed the members of the group, perhaps a tribe, to hear repeated descriptions and affirmations of their shared ways of feeling and seeing and thinking. Such acts are profoundly companionable, the narrative lines stringing the hearts of community members together into a social web. Simple gratitude for such companionship is not only not an inappropriate response, but is a necessary part of the energy that keeps the narrative transaction going. In its permanent absence, writers have little reason to keep writing, and readers have little reason to keep reading.

No one has ever written more insightfully about the companionship offered by narratives than Wayne Booth, who positions his own views of this issue in the context of

> the ancient tradition that saw friendship as one of the most valuable of all things in the world, and pursued talk about its degrees and kinds as one of the most important of human activities.
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> That tradition, which endured into the nineteenth century, never forgot that the quality of anyone's life is in large part identical to the quality of the company he keeps, that, as one modern commentator on Aquinas says, "Man's whole pursuit of happiness is in a sense a pursuit of friendship, a pursuit of something more than himself, since he feels and knows that he is not complete alone. . . ."
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> All stories, in short, claim to offer something to us that will add to our lives, and they are thus like the would-be friends we meet in real life. We never *accept* the offer unless we see ourselves as getting something from it: we seek the companionship only of those who give us a reason to, but all fictions implicitly claim to give us a reason to accept some level of friendship. ("The Way I Loved" 7–8)

THE EFFECTS OF NARRATIVE: READING AS EXPERIENCING

Our friends and companions move us, and whatever moves us also forms us. The companionability—indeed, the intimacy—of the narrative transaction becomes a potentially formative experience that informs the character of our lives and helps us make sense out of life at the same time. According to Harold Brodky, "[r]eading a good book is not much different from a love affair. . . . One can marry the book: reread it, add it to one's life, live with it. . . . Reading always leads to personal metamorphosis. . . . A good book leads to alterations in one's sensibility and often becomes a premise in one's beliefs." I would like to extend Jerome Bruner's claims about autobiography to all narratives deeply experienced: "eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life" (15). In other words, we live our lives as narratives and then tell narratives to keep ourselves informed about the range of lives-as-narratives available to us and to explain how lives-as-narratives actually happen in concrete reality. Significantly, narratives have a greater capacity than abstract accounts, be they philosophical, psychological, or even theological, to explain the "happening" of a life's formation *in its fullness,* for only narratives can offer the comprehensive view of a whole life. To quote Wilson again, "Novelists may do a better job of explaining character formation than social scientists" (145). I would like to extend this argument further by suggesting that narrative plays a crucial role for humans precisely because we are human.

Somewhere along the evolutionary path human beings seem to have traded the relative predictability and security of genetic programming for the relative freedom and dangers of intellectually, imaginatively, socially conditioned experience. In the words of Loren Eiseley, the noted paleontologist and former curator of the Smithsonian museums,

> "[u]nlike a solitary species of animal, [the human] . . . has suffered a major loss of precise instinctive controls of behavior. . . . Creature of dream, he has created an invisible world of ideas, beliefs, habits, and customs which buttress him about and replace for him the precise instincts of the lower creatures. . . . [T]his strange reduction of instincts in man . . . may have . . . [prompted] the dire necessity of building about him a world of ideas to replace his lost animal environment." (91-93)

The simple but profound lesson of this comment is one that experience teaches us all: we are not born knowing much of what we need to know to survive, let alone knowing how to live what we call a full life. Unlike wasps and other creatures who are born, develop, and engage in complex forms of behavior, all without thinking about the process of development (let alone suffering crises of identity rooted in self-consciousness), we human beings have to learn how to exercise

the capacity for choice that comes with our reduced instincts and expanded intellects and imaginations.

One of the most important functions of narrative is precisely to convey the lessons about being human that we can never draw with sufficient certainty, clarity, or frequency from first-hand experience. The predictability and security we lost when we traded instincts for imagination has been replaced by a latitude in what we may become that is much wider—frighteningly wider, exhilaratingly wider—than that claimed by any other species. No species other than human beings, for example, permits such extremes of type as Adolph Hitler and Mother Theresa, and no other species creates means of destruction that threaten the very existence of the species itself. Human imagination, perhaps itself a product of biology, paradoxically rises above biology and uses the impulses of the physical realm in its own service. Even the supposed evolutionary demand for species survival can in human beings—but apparently in no other species—be overridden by our pursuit of what we want rather than what we need. In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, "[e]very biological fact and every animal impulse . . . is altered because of its incorporation into the human psyche. The freedom of man consists . . . of vents on every level which allow every natural impulse a freedom which animals do not know of. . . . Each physical impulse, freed of the restraints which hedge it about in nature, can therefore develop imperial tendencies of its own" (40). Despite the dangers hinted at by Niebuhr's reference to "imperial tendencies," the advantages of having traded biological determinism for imaginative freedom are immense. Paramount, perhaps, among those advantages that add an incalculable richness to human life is the ability of the vicarious imagination to conflate, sometimes more and sometimes less completely, the distinction between first- and second-hand experience.

Looking upon the narrated actions of others has for centuries been compared to looking at life as reflected in a mirror, usually with the sense that what we discover in the mirror is a kind of encyclopedic knowledge, something different from what we learn by direct experience. I believe that a closer look at how we experience narrative challenges this distinction. In the empirical realm of narrative, we experience an immediacy of feeling, a rush of emotion, and a flow of sensations that frequently match the intensity and flow of first-hand experience. (One can see why Plato so deeply distrusted literature's effects: he saw more clearly than most thinkers have seen how literature's empiricism teaches its auditors to *care,* and care deeply about, precisely those features of life that he was most interested in teaching people *not* to care about, namely, how life's physical and emotional aspects *feel.*) Narratives lift us out of the here-and-now and take us to the there-and-then. Once in narrative's there-and-then, the sweat on our palms as we experience danger with the protagonist of a narrative, the lust that rises with the depicted eroticism of sexual encounters, or the longing in our hearts as we are made to want the goals or objects in life that our heroes want are more like the sweat, lust, and longings of our everyday life than different from them.[6]

In the crucible of the vicarious imagination the second-hand—represented—sweat and lust and longings of narrative become our own. And they become our

own not in some pale, imitative sense. It is often the case that we experience the empirically rendered events of literature and history even more vividly, as Gorky eloquently testifies, than we do the events of so-called first-hand experiences. This observation does not deny that some ways of experiencing narratives are significantly different from our ways of experiencing things first-hand. Reading narratives, for example, leaves us free of certain kinds of self-interest that run like an electrical charge through most first-hand experience. And it is true that the actions we read about in histories and novels are not actions that we are performing first-hand as we read.

On the other hand, so much of human experience is of the kind that we have when we are reading narratives that the obvious differences between reading narratives and living life may cause us to be uncritically blind to the similarities underneath the obvious differences. While it is true that when I read about Hamlet's anguish or Huck's desire to escape the widow Douglas or Sethe's choice to murder her daughter rather than yield her up to slavery I am not in any of the places that I am reading about; it is also true that I am not doing any of the things the narrative characters are doing. But when we reflect how much of life's experience is lived in the mind's eye *quite apart from the reading of narratives,* the "truth" that I am not on the Mississippi with Huck Finn is a superficial truth that masks a deeper truth: many of my most intense experiences have exactly the same imaginative source and energy that I experience when I read narratives, only I am neither reading narratives nor engaged in what most people would call first-hand living. Every time I day dream about traveling abroad or getting a promotion, every time I visualize myself teaching my class, every time I plan ahead for my children's education or a vacation, every time my heart beats faster at the anticipation of a sexual encounter, I am living in my mind's eye. I am not "really" doing the things I picture, if (and only if) "really" is reserved exclusively for physical action, but I am undeniably having some kind of "experience" of these events, an experience that is sometimes more intense, full, and vivid than these same events might be if experienced by the body instead of in the mind's eye.

During the moments when I am imagining such images and feeling such emotions I am *there,* but this kind of there is *here.* I live as fully in those moments, sometimes more fully, as in any other moment. Are the moments of day dreaming first-hand or second-hand? I know what it means to call them first-hand, but if calling them second-hand means that they are somehow "unreal," then "second-hand" fails to capture one form of reality upon which the psychic richness of life feeds deeply. The line between what counts as first- and second-hand experience is just not clear, precisely because our imagination lets us live at more than one level both simultaneously and sequentially.

Another reason for the compelling pull of narratives is, simply, that first-hand experience is often confused, unfocused, and disordered, while the so-called second-hand events of history and literature are arranged, focused, and ordered into communicative structures for maximum clarity and effect. In the words of Martha Nussbaum, "it does not seem far-fetched to claim that most of us can read [Henry] James [*even* James, I want to interject!] better than we can read ourselves" (162).

Yet, having emphasized the similarity between narratively experienced lives and our first-hand lives, it remains important to say that the educational power of narratives lies to a great extent in the crucial difference alluded to above: the relative lack of self-interest in reading narratives. After we have had first-hand experiences—"real life" events—we can back off, reflect, compare, and learn, at least some of the time. And thus real-life experience is educational. But sometimes in real life we cannot back off as soon or as far as we need to in order to learn. Our self-interest—our angers, envies, loves, ambitions, disappointments, fears, longings, insecurities, resentments, and a thousand other forms of interest—seize us, and prevent our seeing things clearly. Self-interest also prevents the acts of judgment, reason, and comparison upon which sound learning and sound reasoning so frequently depend.

Everything I have just said about the blurring of the distinction between first-hand and second-hand experience, and everything we know from thirty years of reader response criticism, indicates that the same problems of perception can and often do beset our reading. Nevertheless, the double consciousness that readers adopt in reading narratives—the consciousness that allows us simultaneously to be "with" Huck on the Mississippi and in our living rooms with our feet up—offers the potential for us to have it both ways: that is, narratives allow us, *at the same time we are intimately involved,* to back off from experience more consistently and at a further distance than we can from real-life experiences, thus allowing narratives, in some instances at least, to be more educational than real life. In narratives, we can have intimacy and distance at the same time. In Martha Nussbaum's words once again,

> How can literature show us or train us in anything, when, as we have said, the very moral abilities that make for good reading are the ones that are allegedly in need of development? James' artistic analogy has already, I think, shown us an answer to this question. When we examine our own lives, we have so many obstacles to correct vision, so many motives to blindness and stupidity. The "vulgar heat" of jealousy and personal interest comes between us and the loving perception of each particular. A novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favorable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life. We find here love without possessiveness, attention without bias, involvement without panic. (162)

Although I think Nussbaum's version of this argument understates the similarity between first and second-hand experience and oversimplifies the complexities of reading, she still articulates an important point: the double consciousness that makes it possible to back off from narrative more consistently than from real life experiences is potentially a difference in the cleft of which is generated a vast educational power. According to Iris Murdoch, "[a]rt, especially literature, is a great hall of reflection where we can all meet and where everything under the sun can be examined and considered. . . . Art is far and away the most educational thing we have" (86).

THE EFFECTS OF READING: STOCKING THE MEMORY AND FORMING THE SELF

But what is it that we learn from reading narrative? Clearly, this question can be answered in categories as wide as life itself. In the words of Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky, "human diversity is literature's lock and stock, as well as its raison d'être. . . . [L]iterature is the greatest . . . teacher of human subtlety" (16). In encounters with narratives we can learn about manners, ideas, values, ways of feeling, ways of judging, ways of speaking, and ways of looking; we can learn how to spend money, how to assume certain attitudes or social relations, how to be sexual, how to use power, and on and on. Rather than run through a catalogue that could be endless, however, let me suggest that two of narrative's most powerful educational/formative effects are, first, the stocking of memory and, second, the vivid portrayal of human models with whom we conduct important negotiations constitutive of a self.

Once the people and events of narratives are ingested, the memory of them does not go off and lie down in some special corner designated for historical or literary memories. Instead, the memory of the people we have come to know, sometimes to love and sometimes to hate, and the memory of events that sometimes arouse us to great indignation or pull at us with great poignancy, enter and mingle with that store of memories we have stock-piled from first-hand experience. Once there, memories of people and events from narratives are stored with real-life memories as are our mind's-eye and first-hand memories. Moreover, memories of narratives are as easily accessible to us as memories from any other source, and we are just as likely to draw on them in solving problems and identifying new experiences as we are likely to draw on the memory of first-hand experiences. It is just as easy to remember a character from a movie, television program, autobiography, or novel as it is to remember people that we know first-hand—sometimes easier, in fact—because characters in narratives are frequently more vivid than people we meet in our routine, everyday activities.

Moreover, the function of memories we have stored from vicarious imaginings matches the function of other memories. That is, the *use* we make of our memories is much the same regardless of whether they are memories of narratives or of life, and narrative memories often serve us just as reliably, forcefully, or vividly (often more vividly) as do memories rooted in first-hand experience. Memories of people or events in narratives may help us illustrate the truth of propositions or arguments that we are attempting to advance in the world, or they may serve as points of reference or comparison as we test new experiences against memories of analogous experiences. They may enrich a present moment by jogging memories of other moments from historical or literary narratives that resonate with significance. They may help us understand human motives and feelings foreign to our own. They may help us recognize human types that we seldom meet in real life. On and on, in these and hundreds of other ways, the enriching of memory by historical and literary narratives plays a crucial role in the development of our cognitive resources, intellectual endeavors, and moral judgments.

Robert Schank, a specialist in computer science and artificial intelligence, has argued that "human memory is story-based" (12) and that "story creation is a memory process. . . . We need to tell someone else a story that describes our experience because the process of creating the story also creates the memory structure that will contain the gist of the story for the rest of our lives" (115). Robyn Fivush and her colleagues in social science at Emory University have been conducting experiments for the last several years which demonstrate that the development of memory in children is tied to conventional narrative forms that children learn in conversations with adults.

> Through participating in adult-guided conversations about experienced events, we believe children come to modify their representations of personally significant events to conform more to culturally canonical narratives. Good narratives go beyond referential information . . . to provide contextual information . . . and evaluative information (the personal meaning or significance of the event) (Labov, 1982). Moreover, good narratives often distort the chronological sequence in order to enhance the evaluative meaning of the story.
>
> Thus, as children internalize the narrative forms provided by the culture through adult-guided conversations about past experiences, they come to organize their past experiences as culturally conventionalized narratives. . . . Through internalization of the culturally provided narrative forms, children are fundamentally changing the ways in which they internally represent their past experiences. (Fivush and Reese 117-118)

If Schank and Fivush are right about the close connections between memory and narrative forms, then it follows clearly that not only conversations that conform to narrative patterns but the reading of narratives themselves will play a crucial role in both the content and the structure of human memory. Learning the shapes and forms of different stories, and thus enriching the kinds of experiences we can both understand and remember, will also be crucial for providing us with remembered details that, by analogy, will allow us to store more readily the concrete details of our own experiences.

As human beings, we do not have the option of not stocking our memories with stories. Our drive to know and possess our own lives demands that we know the lives of others, and there is no way in the world we could ever acquire a sufficient amount of that knowledge without constantly acquiring the stories of others. We do not have a life beyond the story we can tell of our own, and we cannot tell one of our own without knowing those of others. Wayne Booth puts the point about the inescapably social nature of identity this way:

> I am not bounded by my skin. Rather, as a character I am a kind of focal point in a field of forces (for those who like pseudo-scientific language) or, as we used to say, a creature made in the image of God and hence essentially affiliated, joined to others and more like them than different from them. To be joined, in other words, is my primary, natural condition. . . .

> [T]o attempt to go it alone is to destroy a "self" that one never "possessed" in the first place. To break off from my "others" is to break off parts of my self. (*Company* 239–40)

Our extreme congeniality for memories of vicarious experience is like the extreme congeniality we have for language. We are not born with historical and literary memories any more than we are born with a knowledge of grammar, syntax, or vocabulary. But the brains of human beings apparently contain such a preference for linguistic knowledge that we begin building up language competence, despite its complexity and subtlety, very early.[7] As children we literally cannot wait to start talking, and we begin the practice and observation that will start us talking as early as we possibly can. It is instructive to observe that we possess the same kind of eagerness for vicarious experience as we do for linguistic experience. It stands to reason that the impulse toward language and the impulse toward narrative reinforce and support each other: one reason we want language is to own the means of telling and understanding the stories—our own and those of others—that make life accessible to us. We literally cannot wait to learn the stories the memory of which will help us enact our part in the world. And we sense that we cannot learn all we need to know and that we cannot learn it all fast enough by sticking to first-hand experience alone. First-hand experience is too slow, too limited, too repetitive, and too monotonous. The only way we can escape the sameness of our everyday lives is by assuming the lives of others through the vicarious experiences offered to us in empirically rendered narratives.

These observations may be supported by performing two simple armchair experiments. First, anyone who asks herself to estimate the ratio of the number of persons and events she knows about from historical and fictional narratives as compared to the number of those she knows or knows about from first-hand experience will recognize immediately that she, and everyone else, has met an incalculably larger number of persons and events in narratives than she has ever met in real life. If we begin to total the number of people and events we know about from all narrative sources—family histories and stories, formal histories, legends, myths, fairy tales, folk histories, stories in sermons, movie stories, television stories, stories in song lyrics and ballads, short stories, biographies, autobiographies, dramas, and novels, to mention only the most obvious examples—we begin to realize that most of the people and events we know about are, in fact, people and events that we have met in stories, not people or events that we have met or witnessed first-hand. This suggests that much of what we know about anything and everything has been learned by encounters with narratives and exists in our heads as memories of narratives.

The second thought experiment is easily conducted by asking ourselves to what degree our knowledge of the world would be impoverished and enfeebled if all the memories we now hold of fictional or historical people and events were suddenly erased from our heads, like deleting certain kinds of information from a computer disk. If all of the knowledge about the world that we now hold from all those tales and legends and sermons and myths and fairy tales and movies and

television stories and novels and other narratives were suddenly erased from our brains, we would be lobotomized; we would be left knowing practically nothing of human relations, of human feeling, of human motives, or of human nature. And all of the other kinds of knowledge that did remain in our heads—the knowledge not based on narratives but based on first-hand experience or propositional deduction or mathematics—would be immensely enfeebled, although it might still exist, because we would have lost most of what we know about how to make these different kinds of knowledge interact productively with one another, or how to apply them to problems in the world.

Just as Love is portrayed by Socrates as the child of Poverty and Plenty who, true to his divided parentage, is never fully replete or totally desiccated but is always somewhere in between and always in need, always requiring refurbishment (*Symposium* 202-203), so we human beings are the children of Poverty and Plenty with respect to being human. The most urgent need felt by any human being is the need to know how to be a human being.

We are born sensing our lack of knowledge about how to form a self, about what will make us complete. We are born in this kind of poverty, we live in this kind of poverty, we never cease trying to lessen this kind of poverty, and none of us who is capable of using language is either so wise, like the gods, or so ignorant, like most animals, that we deem ourselves complete and fully satisfied with ourselves as we are or with the moment as it is. In a frenzy of ambition to come into our human birthright that begins very early in our consciousness, we start working on the materials we are given at birth: we begin by learning the shape and configuration of the human face; we start babbling in order to master the sounds, syntax, grammar, and vocabulary of language; we play with toys till we drop in order to figure out—experientially, of course, not theoretically—the elemental forces of gravity, thermodynamics, inertia, mass, liquidity, solidity, and so on; we learn our social cues, listening for tones of approval, disapproval, instruction, affection, interrogation, and so on; we go to school to learn mathematics, history, literature, logic. The process is unending and the mechanism, the obvious mechanism, that we seize upon for meeting our poverty of knowledge about how to be a human being is education. We know intuitively that being human is all that we can be and we also know that if we miss the boat, if we turn out not to have developed any of our human capacities, if we turn out not to have become a realized self, we will be miserable. We will have missed out on being the only kind of thing the being of which was possible for us.

Thus, all human beings conduct a love affair with education. We do not all value the same kind of education, but we all do value the kind we deem to be most useful to our survival and fulfillment. Nor do we all define being human in the same way, but, within our working definition of what being human means, all of us want to be *it,* to be human. The obvious sources of education for being human lie readily available: we learn from family, friends, and associates; we learn from religion, science, and academic disciplines; we learn from nature and from animals; and of course we learn from experience. But probably more than from any other single source, we learn how to be a human being and how to form a self from encountering and digesting narratives, which offer us models of

human living with which we negotiate our way into the structure and "feel" of our own lives. J. Hillis Miller emphasizes negotiation as he answers the question, "What do we learn from fictions?"

> What do we learn from fictions? We learn the nature of things as they are. We need fictions in order to experiment with possible selves and to learn to take our places in the real world, to play our parts there. . . . With fictions we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of human life. (69)

Tied physically as we are to a single body occupying at any given moment only one single spot in space and time, we could never obtain all the clues, evidence, and models we need for becoming human if we were limited to what we could learn from first-hand experience. It is only by the (evolutionary?) luck of having a powerful vicarious imagination that we can begin to examine the whole range of different kinds of lives, different kinds of knowledge, different ways of feeling, and different modes of understanding that we need. These become the material out of which we satisfy the poverty of our knowledge and shape our selves into some coherent realization of human possibilities. Only narratives give us this kind of necessary, not just useful, scope. Alasdair MacIntyre makes my point in his strong claims about the relationship between stories and selves:

> [the human being] is . . . essentially a story-telling animal. [The human] is not essentially, but becomes through his [and her] history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men [and women] is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories . . . that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as well as their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things. . . . The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. (201-203)

If our lives are led as narratives,[8] then they can only be fulfilled as narratives, and as we all work at the task of writing our own life narratives, we find indispensable the stories of others recorded for us in narratives. Richard Eldridge describes our interactions with narratives as a fundamental ground of personhood; he sees our interactions with narratives as an ongoing process that informs all the choices that make us who we are and who we are to become.[9]

> [I]t is in and through narrative itself that we lead our lives as persons. . . . Persons are not, it seems, "just" real material entities. . . . They lead lives out of ongoing narratives, make choices out of them. These narratives and the lives and choices that they shape are in turn structured by assumptions about narrative unity, coherence, and closure that are tested in narrative writing in general, and in particular in fiction, where the influence of contingencies can yield to the imperative to achieve coherence. . . . It seems that literary narratives and personhood are, one might say, internal to one another. (11-12) We can attain moral consciousness only as we see our personhood and its demands reflected to us in the lives of others that are recounted to us in narrative art, while our collective responses themselves determine narrative art's relevant and proper exemplars.[10] (60)

CONCLUSION

In a tidal wave of theory such as literary studies has been awash in for the past twenty-five years or so, when critical theories of narrative sometime seem more important than narratives themselves; when some critical theories assert strongly that literature can refer only to language or to other works of literature but not to life (because referentiality is a delusion and self-reflexivity is a law); and when other critical theories teach readers to become literary inspectors, turning literary texts over with the stick of theory as if narratives can be handled safely only as infectious road-kills on the highway of cultural progress, and inspecting the textual intestines for patterns of political contamination and rhetorical deception, it is remarkable how little these theories influence the millions of people who still insist on watching television stories and still go to dramas, watch movies, and write their autobiographies, not to mention those who still read histories, biographies, stories, and novels. Critical theories that make us more aware of narratives' possible effects are helpful—this is the point of my own essay—but since theories with an anti-narrative cast will never shut down the hunger for stories by telling us of the ideological infections that narratives carry any more than anti-air theories could turn off our need to breathe by demonstrating to us that some air is polluted, the question of what narratives we need (and how we need them) is even more important than the question of which narratives we should avoid or condemn on the basis of their ideology. As critics, I think we should worry less than we currently do about protecting ourselves from objectionable ideology in certain narratives—insofar, at least, as such worry makes us suspicious of narrative in general—for two reasons. First, readers can better acquire the corrections that objectionable narratives need by reading other narratives than by reading criticism. People who read many narratives over the course of a life time receive that variety of views which will allow them—on their own, undirected by coercive reading strategies or highly abstract interpretive theories—to perceive the excesses and deficiencies of other narratives without becoming dependent on the limitations of particular theories.[11] Second, the price of protection is too high if that price closes us off as readers to the fulfillments and exten-

sions of ourselves, not to mention the enlargements of knowledge we acquire about the world and other people, available to us only through open and receptive encounters with a wide variety of narratives. C. S. Lewis's observation that "[l]iterary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality" (140) speaks to a value in the reading of narratives so profound that no amount of ideological protection gained from an ungrateful or dogmatic resistance to narrative would be worth the price of letting that value slip through our fingers.

Narratives hold out the possibility that we can learn about the world, that we can learn about ourselves, and that we may hope, therefore, not to be trapped in endless cycles of repetition. The way narratives transform experience into patterns of intelligibility suggests that there is more meaning to things in general—that there is a greater likelihood that the wonderful, the marvelous, and the unexpected do indeed exist in the world, or somewhere in the universe—than our brief moments of happiness and travail between a sleep and a forgetting can capture. In the midst of life's fragmentation and discontinuity, we continue to wonder whether or not the intelligibility we have constructed in our narratives is underwritten by the universe at large. In the worlds of reference, self, insight, and feeling created by narrative discourse we listen for a message, we look for a meaning, that may be larger than the sum of its parts, that may point dimly to patterns yet to be grasped.

ENDNOTES

1. "The aesthetic appeal of mathematics, both in passive contemplation and in actual research pursuit, has been attested by many authors. Classic and medieval authors, such as Kepler, rhapsodized over the 'Divine or Golden Proportion.' Poincaré asserted that the aesthetic rather than the logical is the dominant element in mathematical creativity. G. H. Hardy wrote that 'The mathematician's patterns, like the painter's or the poet's, must be beautiful. . . .' The great theoretical physicist P. A. M. Dirac wrote that it is more important to have beauty in one's equations than to have them fit the experiment." (Davis and Hersh 168-69)

2. In my present argument, "narrative" is an inclusive term for which the distinction between "narrative" and "dramatic" is not crucial. I am using "narrative" mostly in the sense of "whole story" or "shaped story." Thus, while my main *interest* is in literary stories, my *scope* of concern is not limited to literary stories. Within the context of this discussion, "narrative" includes whole stories as conveyed in dramas, films, television, narrative poems, oral presentations, history, biography, and autobiography—as well as the narratives of literary novels and short stories.

3. Robert McCauley, a philosopher of science at Emory University, strongly objects to this use of "empirical." He objects that "empirical" literally means "sensually experienced"—meaning that there can be no such thing as "an empirical *record* of fictional characters' lives"—and points out that the interaction between readers and narratives is *imagined,* not sensual. The sensual part of the experience, he insists, is the reader's perception of black marks on a white page; all the rest occurs in the imagination. His point is intelligent and serious enough to merit another whole paper in itself. By continuing to use such phrases as "empirical record" in this paper, I am not dismissing his criticism, but I can think of no other, more efficient way of calling attention to the fact that *imagined* experiences produced by reading narratives can create actual physical sensations in auditors—sweating palms, sexual desire, changes in breathing patterns and heart rate,

the recreation of smells and textures, and so on—than by pulling "empirical" some distance out of its usual semantic orbit. A detailed account of *how* the imagination spins sensual gold out of typographer's hay requires a length of treatment unavailable to me within the scope of this essay.

4. My wife, a poet and children's book author, tells me that in the children's book division of HarperCollins Publishers in New York there is a framed letter from a young reader addressed to Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the *Little House on the Prarie* series. The letter begins, "Dear Laura Ingalls Wilder, I know you are dead, but please answer my letter anyway. . . ." Although comic in its effect, this line nevertheless speaks to readers' sense of personal relationship with authors.

5. "Well, in the case of Dickens," says Orwell, "I see . . . the face of a man of about forty, with a small beard and a high colour. He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry*." (111)

6. I am tempted to say that the feelings and sensations aroused by narratives are in fact *indistinguishable* from those aroused by real life, but that may be going too far, at least as a description of *all* responses to narrative. On the other hand, I think most formulations that distinguish between feelings caused by narratives and those caused by direct experience seldom go far enough in recognizing their close identity. In the first place, reading a narrative, or seeing one (in a movie or drama), is itself a first-hand experience, even if the events and characters depicted are fictional. One does not *imagine* reading *Great Expectations,* even though the events in it may be imagined. In the second place, the element of make-believe on the reader's part in the narrative transaction does not get in the way of real emotions experienced just the same way we experience them in everyday life. This last assertion is precisely what Kendall Walton, responding to Robert Newsom's review of Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe* in *Narrative,* strongly denies. He claims that readers' transactions with fictions place the responses to fictional events within the fictional realm themselves, such that Charles's self-asserted fear of slime (in Walton's horror movie example) is rejected by Walton as a real fear of slime, and explained instead as "Charles participat[ing] in a game of make-believe" (155). While this explanatory strategy allows Walton to escape many knotty problems in attempting to assess the truth value or ontological status of fictional representations, it seems to me that it purchases this advantage, in the end, by creating a distinction that does not make a difference. Once I have conceded that Charles is merely pretending to be afraid of the slime, it nevertheless remains true that all the objective indicators of fear—the pounding pulse, the shallow breathing, the release of adrenelin, the prickling hair on the forearms and nape, the deep sense of dread, the impulse to cover the eyes, the urge to flee, and so on—are indistinguishable from (because *they are the same as*) these same indicators as they might be aroused by suddenly finding oneself really accosted, not by slime, but by a mugger with a gun in his hand and murder in his eye. Whether I am participaing in the rules of make-believe or not, once certain responses get aroused, they just are what they are: fear is fear, sexual desire is sexual desire, laughter is laughter. Instead of discussing these issues on a continuum that places Make-Believe and Really-Believe at polar ends, it seems to me that a more fruitful exploration of the differences between responses to fiction and responses to real life could be conducted on a continuum that places Resistance and Assent at polar ends. James Phelan points out, for example, that resistance to the values of a work of fiction may result not in a simple distancing of oneself from the narrative, but in fact may result in a productive dialogue with the work, such that the initial resistance may eventually slide toward assent, or, in a reverse move, may cause us to clarify the gounds of our resistance even more firmly and clearly: "The combination of intellectual resistance and emotional suasion has the potential of making one rethink—and justify or reject—one's own world view. . . . The act of repudiating a narrative . . . may be relatively empty if the repudiation is easy and dependent on an inadequate reconstruction of the narrative's design. . . . Resistance is more likely to be satisfying and productive when it is partial. . . . [W]e talk with the text and its author more as equals. . . . The dialogue established in these encounters can go on for a long time and can lead us to rethink some of our most fundamental commitments and beliefs." (187–88)

7. I am aware that my "contain"er metaphor in this sentence is a fudge, and that the exact nature of the "contain"ing of language in the brain is an issue of much controversy among linguists, psychologists, and language philosophers, but the exact outcome of that controversy one way or another, supposing that it ever comes to an exact outcome, does not drastically affect my argument here.

8. See also Seyla Benhabib on this issue: "Surely, a subjectivity that would not be structured by language, by narrative and by the symbolic codes of narrative available in a culture is unthinkable. We tell of who we are, of the "I" that we are, by means of a narrative. . . . These narratives are deeply colored and structured by the codes of expectable and understandable biographies and identities in our cultures." (214)

9. Given the importance of this topic—what could be of more importance to any of us than understanding how we form the selves that we are?—"one is tempted to pile to the heavens all evidence and commentary that shows the important role narratives play in self-formation. This is of course a self-defeating impulse, but some of the commentary on this issue is so incisive and insightful that I will offer one more in this footnote. In Kathyn Morton's words, "The first sign that a baby is going to be a human being and not a noisy pet comes when he begins naming the world and demanding the stories that connect its parts. . . . Nothing passes but the mind grabs it and looks for a way to fit it into a story, or into a variety of possible scripts. . . . She will keep writing these 'novels' until . . . she finds one story in which all elements, emotional and circumstantial, blend. Then . . . she will know what she "knows." . . . We want to make sense out of the greatest mystery all of us must face—ourselves. . . . Fiction gives us the names and symbols in a grammar of experience, synchronizing feeling with event into understandable order. The truth about people can best be known as people know it. It is a package deal, and the package best adapted to convey a sense of the human condition is the novel. . . . To glance up and see a great novelist offering a story of rare, sweet wit and grace is to feel that our heart has found its home. . . . So you say that reading a novel is a way to kill time. . . . I am not killing time, I'm trying to make a life." (2)

10. Mark Johnson, a philosopher of moral theory like Richard Eldridge, amplifies this same point in his book on the implications of cognitive science for ethics: "(1) Narrative supplies and reveals the themes by which we seek to unify the temporal, historical dimension of our existence, and without which our lives would be a meaningless jumble of disconnected events. (2) Narrative can illuminate purposes, plans, and goals, which are the forms by which our lives have some direction, motivation, and significance for us. There is no other cognitive-experiential structure that blends these two basic dimensions of human existence. . . . [O]nly narrative encompasses both the temporality and the purposive organization at the general level at which we pursue overarching unity and meaning for our lives." (170–71)

11. This is not to say that we ever could or should return to purportedly "innocent" reading in which we "just attend to the words on the page." Since reading never was innocent in the way that "just attending to the words on the page" assumes, there is no such innocence to return to. I am complaining, rather, about theory being pumped up with such an inflated importance that the suggestion is sometimes conveyed implicitly, even if never recommended explicitly, that readers are better off reading narrative theory rather than narratives; and about the lack of trust in readers' good sense exhibited by critics whose strenuous rhetoric implies that readers cannot be left to counterbalance the ideas in one narrative with the ideas from another one, but need a prepackaged, self-protective critical apparatus instead.

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