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INVOLVEMENT WITHOUT PANIC:  
ESSAYS ON SHAKESPEARE, WOOLF, AND MUNRO

By

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Abstract

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This thesis portfolio is comprised of an introductory essay and three essays of literary critique. The introductory essay is a general commentary upon reading, literature, and criticism, and introduces the three subsequent essays. The first essay is on William Shakespeare's play, *Measure for Measure*. The second essay is on Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Waves*. And, finally, the third essay is on the stories of Alice Munro.

[If Henry] James is right about what moral attention is, then he can fairly claim that a novel... not only shows it better than an abstract treatise, it also elicits it. It calls forth our “active sense of life,” which is our moral faculty.... [We] become more responsive to our own life’s adventure, more willing to see and to be touched by life.

But surely, we object, a person who is obtuse in life will also be an obtuse reader.... 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’s 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. Our moral abilities must be developed to a certain degree, certainly, before we can approach [a] novel at all and see anything in it. But it does not seem far-fetched to claim that most of us can read [works of literature] better than we can read ourselves.

In asking us to identify with and recognize ourselves in the sense of life expressed in his or her writings, where are authors of various kinds leading their readers, and how disposing them to various forms of human love?

Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*

I think we have failed to take notice of the phenomenon in adult life of the wide-ranging collective search for an object that is identified with the metamorphosis of the self.

Christopher Bollas, “The transformational object”

An exhibition of seventh-graders’ work in the hall in front of the teachers’ lounge. I’m walking with the other teachers, looking at the work, practically floating on my pride for their growth over the past year.... I read the following in [a student’s] biology paper: “In order for the bird to be able to fully develop its voice, it must be exposed to its kind during the first months of its life. Otherwise, its singing ability will be permanently damaged.”

David Grossman, *Be My Knife*

## Introduction: Complex and Interesting Human Events *Reading, Literature, and Criticism*

But rather than Theory as a persistent ghost in the castle, I prefer the less dramatic figure of theory as a discursive space within which literary and cultural studies now occur, even if we manage to forget it, as we manage to forget the air we breathe. We are ineluctably in theory. And if things were to change radically in literary and cultural studies, it would not be because we had left theory behind but because theoretical arguments had persuaded us that literary and cultural studies should henceforth proceed, for instance, as a branch of cognitive psychology, or of historical studies in some new, more generous, configuration, or as a version of artistic practice itself.

Jonathan Culler, *Theory in Literature*

Those who are concerned with the arts are often asked questions, not always sympathetic ones, about the use or value of what they are doing. It is probably impossible to answer such questions directly, or at any rate to answer the people who ask them. Most of the answers, such as Newman's "liberal knowledge is its own end," merely appeal to the experience of those who have had the right experience. Similarly, most "defenses of poetry" are intelligible only to those well within the defenses. The basis of critical apologetics, therefore, has to be the actual experience of art, and for those concerned with literature, the first question to answer is not "What use is the study of literature?" but, "What follows from the fact that it is possible?"

Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*

There is no theoretical substructure of reading *or* writing; there is only the infrastructure of the reader and the writer. Reading and writing are confirmations of Nietzsche's epigram that man is the unfinished animal. But this is precisely human nature: to be unfinished, and hence, to exist partially as the thinking or theorizing animal, the animal who looks for completeness.

Stanley Rosen, "The Limits of Interpretation"

Anything, or any part of oneself, that claims to know what life is really like is lying to us; because life isn't really like anything, and you couldn't know it.

Adam Phillips, "Missing Out"

### I.

Theodor Adorno wrote of Walter Benjamin that he possessed a "capacity for continually bringing out new aspects [of art, technology, and life], not by exploding conventions through criticism, but rather by organizing himself so as to be able to relate to his subject-matter in a way that seemed beyond all convention—this capacity can hardly be adequately described by the concept of 'originality'" (229). No one writing in the

humanities today need take the time to establish Walter Benjamin's unique vision, or defend placing him at the beginning of a thesis on literature. If, as in the quotation from Culler above, students and teachers of literary and cultural studies should become persuaded by theoretical argument—or, as may be the case, if some already have—that their work ought to proceed as “a branch of cognitive psychology, or of historical studies in some new, more generous, configuration, or as a version of artistic practice itself,” Benjamin's place as a forerunner of these new directions in criticism seems assured.<sup>1</sup>

In his 1936 essay, “The Storyteller”—an expansive cultural and historical meditation on narrative and commerce, information and technology, religion and spirituality, the division of labor and life and death—Benjamin asserts and animates the proposition, “The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out.... [This is] a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing” (87). The validity of this proposition cannot be confirmed (it can perhaps be dismissed all too easily). It would take a treatise the size of two cinder blocks to begin to unpack the phrase “the secular productive forces of history”; and “the realm of living speech” is—what exactly? One can see how “The Storyteller,” and much of Benjamin's work, would be ripe for the charge that Northrop Frye levels against a surfeit of “meaningless criticism” in the introduction to *Anatomy of Criticism*: “This includes all the sonorous nonsense that we so often find in critical generalities, reflective comments,

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<sup>1</sup> This essay will employ the term “criticism” very loosely, in the sense of how Northrop Frye describes it at the opening of his work *Anatomy of Criticism*: “by criticism I mean the whole work of scholarship and taste concerned with literature which is a part of what is variously called liberal education, culture, or the study of the humanities. I start from the principle that criticism is not simply a part of this larger activity, but an essential part of it” (3).

ideological perorations, and other consequences of taking a large view of an unorganized subject” (18). Yet from the enthusiasm with which Benjamin’s work has been received, and from the seriousness and respect with which his work has been studied, one is likely to conclude that his writings are something at least a bit more than sonorous nonsense. But why does Benjamin’s work succeed, in some manner, where most have failed, and where many more will fail still? Books and essays have, naturally, been written on the subject—Adorno, Arendt, Scholem, and Sontag would all be fine places to begin—and I do not propose to explore the reasons here. I want to mention, though, that Benjamin’s intelligence, the mental agility, rapidity, and inventiveness which was the source of his success and which manifested in part in a capacity to “organize himself so as to be able to relate to his subject-matter in a way that seemed beyond all convention,” was not cultivated or experienced without a mental and social toll. How could it have been? We all pay idiosyncratic mental and social tolls for being here, wherever and whenever we may be, obviously; wealth, for those who have it, can dissolve or diminish some of these tolls, and generally makes various others more manageable; and many experience mental and social realities so severe that to describe them as mere tolls of life would be to use the most wretched and soul-destroying of euphemisms indeed. But I believe we would be careless if, in praising literature and criticism, as in general I think it necessary and worthwhile to do, we did not also acknowledge, however fleetingly, Stephen Dedalus’ phrase, “Be careful what you wish for.”<sup>2</sup> This is so for no other reason than that not a

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<sup>2</sup> This phrase can have a wide range of meanings in different contexts and for different people. Some thoughts of W.G. Sebald’s, from the introduction to his collection of essays, *A Place In The Country*, may help to elucidate something of what I believe Dedalus, and Joyce, may have had in mind. Sebald writes of how the task or vocation of writing has at times manifested itself: “The essays in this volume span a period of almost two hundred years—which goes to show how little has altered, in all this time, when it comes to that peculiar behavioral disturbance which causes every emotion to be transformed into letters on the page and which bypasses life with such extraordinary precision. What I found most surprising in the course of

single loving individual would ever wish for their children (or indeed their neighbors) that they experience life in the manner of another of Dedalus' phrases: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (34).<sup>3</sup> It behooves us to keep in mind the conventions we adopt, the conventions which support and sustain us, and the conventions we implicitly or explicitly ask others to reject when we praise and advocate for literary, critical and theoretical work that is successful and lasting in part because it relates to life in a way that is *beyond all convention*. "We may become more used to jumping into flight," Maggie Nelson writes in *The Argonauts*, "but that doesn't mean we have done with all perches" (54). Far, far from it.

I begin with Benjamin, and with the question as to why he succeeds where most would and will always fail, in order to acknowledge at the outset of this thesis the extraordinary difficulty and essential mystery of criticism and literature. Mentioning Benjamin also allows me to acknowledge the brilliance and discipline of those able to practice these arts well, my gratitude for the lives and intellects of those who have done so, and my gratitude for having been given the time to read and contemplate some of their works, both on my own and in institutional settings. "Yeats tells us that what

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these observations is the awful tenacity of those who devote their lives to writing. There seems to be no remedy for the vice of literature; those afflicted persist in the habit despite the fact there is no longer any pleasure to be derived from it.... Evidently the business of writing is one from whose clutches it is by no means easy to extricate oneself, even when the activity itself has come to seem loathsome or even impossible. From the writer's point of view, there is almost nothing to be said in its defense, so little does it have to offer by way of gratification. Perhaps it would really be better simply to set down—as Keller originally intended—a brief novel with the career of a young artist tragically cut short, and a cypress-dark ending that sees everyone dead and buried, before laying aside the pen for good. The reader, though, would stand to lose much thereby, for the hapless writers trapped in their web of words sometimes succeed in opening up vistas of such beauty and intensity as life itself is scarcely able to provide" (4-5). See also *Cameraperson* (Dir. Kirsten Johnson 2016) and *The Sacrifice* (Dir. Andrei Tarkovsky 1986).

<sup>3</sup> This, I believe, is a human truth. That there have been, are, and always will be people for whom, and places on earth where, nightmares are not something experienced in sleep (a German Jew in the 1930's and 40's as just one example, though there are many closer to home), and that there are philosophical, religious, and theoretical understandings of life which would have us understand that life *is* a nightmare from which we one day may or may not awake (certain Marxist or Christian understandings for example) is of course another human truth.



fascinates us is the most difficult among things not impossible,” Frye writes in “Criticism, Visible and Invisible.” “Literary criticism is not in so simple a position. Teaching literature is impossible; that is why it is difficult” (84).

A passage from “The Storyteller” expresses well something of the general subject which is aspired towards in this introductory essay, and something also of the spirit with which many of the writers mentioned herein practice their art, craft, and/or profession:

An orientation toward practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers.... [T]his points to the nature of every real story. It contains, openly or covertly, something useful.... In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today “having counsel” is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. (Quite apart from the fact that a man is receptive to counsel only to the extent that he allows his situation to speak.) Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. (86)

In this essay I will first explore the nature of reading, relying on a short passage from the psychoanalyst and writer Thomas H. Ogden and a scene from J.M. Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg*. Is there something essential to the experience of reading that constitutes reading as a form of “having counsel,” and, if so, what does this “having counsel” consist in? Is this experience inherent in the nature of reading itself, or is it something that must be learned and developed? And how might this experience be reflected in or promoted by criticism, if at all? Next, I will consider how radical reverence exists (or no longer exists) in tension with impulses towards radical equality and individualist or relativist understandings within literary and critical discourse. My concern is not to resolve this tension, but to consider how or why the tension exists and to question whether it is at all useful. I will then consider the underlying tenets of two critical approaches to literature, those of Martha Nussbaum and Mark Edmundson, both of whom write, or have written in

the past, in some measure against the grain of traditional or prevailing modes of academic criticism, and both of whom are concerned with the question of what literature means for the reader themselves. Next, I will call upon passages from Virginia Woolf and Alice Munro in order to dwell on the nature of criticism and its place in society, and will contemplate the divide between scholarship and taste in literary criticism. Finally, I will introduce the essays that make up the body of this thesis.

## II.

Thomas H. Ogden begins his book, *Subjects of Analysis*, with the following passage:

It is too late to turn back. Having read the opening words of this book you have already begun to enter into the unsettling experience of finding yourself becoming a subject who you have not yet met, but nonetheless recognize. The reader of this book must create a voice with which to speak (think) the words (thoughts) comprising it. Reading is not simply a matter of considering, weighing, or even of trying out the ideas and experiences that are presented by the writer. Reading involves a far more intimate form of encounter. You, the reader, must allow me to occupy you, your thoughts, your mind, since I have no voice with which to speak other than yours. (1)<sup>4</sup>

One understands of course that Ogden is not privileging himself or his book in particular here, but that he is privileging the nature of the human experience of reading; and privileging specifically the transformational aspect of that experience. Indeed, in Ogden's mind, the transformational aspect of the experience of reading seems to be not merely a potential attribute or byproduct of that experience. Rather, self-transformation constitutes reading as an experience, as a human reality: self-transformation and becoming are here stated as the essence of reading, or as the inevitable and irrevocable proceedings of truly reading, or reading truly. Ogden's repeated use of the imperative—the reader *must* create, the reader *must* allow—is something different than didacticism: it seems to be genuine

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<sup>4</sup> It may be useful to also quote the epigraph Ogden selects to precede this beginning, from Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*: "The first sentence of every novel should be: 'Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human.' Meander if you want to get to town."

conviction, or, if one prefers, something like faith. This is how one must read, Ogden seems to say, not simply to read *well*, but to *read* at all.

One thought that might immediately arise from a consideration of Ogden's position could be something along the lines of, *well, I suppose he's right in a general way, but really what he describes is a kind of ideal, an encounter not just with any book at any time but with a book of brilliance encountered at the right time and in the right circumstances; for most of the time how I read—and certainly how most others read most of the time—is actually a matter of simply considering, weighing, or trying out ideas and experiences presented by the writer.* This thought (whether you had it or not in response to Ogden, we can now entertain it together) suggests that the intimate form of encounter necessarily leading to self-transformation that Ogden describes as reading is actually something rare and exceptional. It is something conceivably good, something that is perhaps worth striving for, but not in fact vital to or necessarily constitutive of the experience of reading.

Which is it? Is reading always “the unsettling experience of finding yourself becoming a subject who you have not yet met,” or is it more accurately described as simply “a matter of considering, weighing, or even of trying out the ideas and experiences that are presented by the writer”? Framing the question in this way might seem like a silly exercise. Reading is both of these things, reading is anything, reading is whatever the reader makes of it—this seems the reasonable position. But then why is Ogden so insistent, why does he begin with such a confident dictate, “you have already begun to enter into the unsettling experience”? How would he know what kind of experience the reader has entered into? He knows because he believes he understands

something about reading: he believes the nature of the experience of reading is fundamentally an unsettling, self-transformative undertaking. If one is skeptical that this is always the case, always the experience of reading or always the case for every reader, would it help to consider whether it could it be a matter of skill? Reading considered as a learned ability, determined by practice, experience, and talent? That with less skill reading may entail simply considering, weighing, and trying out ideas and experiences, but with greater skill reading may indeed be the far more intense undertaking of becoming a different subject that Ogden describes? Something like Northrop Frye's formulation: "the skill developed from constant practice in the direct experience of literature is a special skill, like playing the piano, not the expression of a general attitude to life, like singing in the shower" (28)? We had better bring in another voice to think about this question, or rather two other voices: a police officer and a lion of literature.

In J.M. Coetzee's novel, *The Master of Petersburg*, a fictional Fyodor Dostoevsky returns to St. Petersburg upon hearing of his stepson's sudden death. Dostoevsky sets out to learn about the life and character of his stepson Pavel, and to uncover the circumstances of his death: did Pavel commit suicide, or was he murdered by the political activists and anarchists he had become involved with, led by a young and radical intellectual named Nechaev? In a scene interesting for our purposes, Dostoevsky visits with a police chief in order to obtain some of his stepson's papers, stories which the young man wrote in something like an early attempt at his stepfather's profession. The police chief asks Dostoevsky, "Explain to me again: why are dreamers, poets, intelligent young men like your stepson, drawn to bandits like Nechaev? Because, in your account, isn't that what Nechaev is: a bandit with a smattering of education?" To which

Dostoevsky responds, “I do not know. Perhaps because in young people there is something that has not yet gone to sleep, to which the spirit in Nechaev calls. Perhaps it is in all of us: something we think has been dead for centuries but has only been sleeping. I repeat, I do not know” (46). As the scene progresses, the subject of reading comes up when Dostoevsky demands his stepson’s stories:

‘I came here only to fetch Pavel’s papers [Dostoevsky says], which are precious to me in ways you will not understand. It is the papers I want, nothing else. I ask again: will you return them to me? They are useless to you. They will tell you nothing about why intelligent young men fall under the sway of evildoers. And they will tell *you* least of all because clearly you do not know how to read. All the time you were reading my son’s story—let me say this—I noticed how you were holding yourself at a distance, erecting a barrier of ridicule, as though the words might leap out from the page and strangle you.’

Something has begun to take fire within [Dostoevsky] while he has been speaking, and he welcomes it. He leans forward, gripping the arms of his chair.

‘What is it that frightens you, [police] Councillor Maximov? When you read about Karamzin or Karamzov or whatever his name is, when Karamanin’s skull is cracked open like an egg, what is the truth: do you suffer with him, or do you secretly exult behind the arm that swings the axe? You don’t answer? Let me tell you then: reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering.’

[...]

‘You are a clever man, Fyodor Mikhailovich. But you speak of reading as though it were demon-possession. Measured by that standard I fear I am a very poor reader indeed, dull and earthbound. Yet I wonder whether, at this moment, you are not in a fever. If you could see yourself in a mirror I am sure you would understand what I mean. Also, we have had a long conversation, interesting but long, and I have numerous duties to attend to.’

‘And I say, the papers you are holding on to so jealously may as well be written in Aramaic for all the good they will do you. Give them back to me!’

Maximov chuckles. ‘You supply me with the strongest, most benevolent of reasons not to give in to your request, Fyodor Mikhailovich, namely that in your present mood the spirit of Nechaev might leap from the page and take complete possession of you. But seriously: you say you know how to read. Will you at some future date read these papers for me, all of them, the Nechaev papers, of which this is only a single file among many?’

‘Read them for you?’

‘Yes. Give me a reading of them.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you say I cannot read. Give me a demonstration of how to read. Teach me. Explain to me these ideas that are not ideas.’ (46-48)

*Explain to me these ideas that are not ideas*, the police chief says, *teach me how to read*.

The police chief, though, makes this request in ridicule, more or less playfully (the exchange is in the end of little consequence to him) but certainly in ridicule. He and Dostoevsky part ways, and when they encounter texts in the future they will each read

them after their own fashion and as the setting dictates.<sup>5</sup> The police Chief's claim to be himself a poor reader, "dull and earthbound" if measured by Dostoevsky's standard, is a claim to a reasonable and normal approach to and experience of reading, and, more saliently, a claim to sanity and laudable stability. And yet, his remark to Dostoevsky that Dostoevsky is a clever man is not disingenuous, and earlier in the conversation the police chief tells Dostoevsky, "you are a man of gifts, a man of special insight, as I knew before I met you" (45). Why does the police chief bother to compliment Dostoevsky if in the end he so summarily dismisses him? Perhaps these moments of praise, the police chief's acknowledgement of Dostoevsky's intelligence, primarily function to keep the police chief's ultimate disdain for and condescension towards Dostoevsky and his intellectual positions "in a respectable orbit."<sup>6</sup> Though they may also reveal the precariousness and uncertainty of that disdain and condescension: perhaps Dostoevsky's claim—"reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance"—is more insightful and substantive than the worldly police chief wishes to acknowledge, and perhaps he senses this, however faintly. Though

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<sup>5</sup> "What goes on in other minds is a mystery that can evoke frustrated responses. Thinking, I joke, is like going to the toilet: we don't know what the experience is like for other people, and we rarely talk about it. We presume that their experience is a lot like ours, but we don't know for sure... [People] vary in their relationships with words and images... Every brain begins differently, responding quickly and sensitively to some inputs and more sluggishly to others. Within limits, however, human brains can change their habits and structures at any time, according to the demands placed on them... At any given moment, mental skills and habits are a temporary index of what a mind is being called upon to do. Certainly, the abilities of human brains to craft new phrases and watch imagined letters turn can vary astonishingly. Investigating their variations is infinitely worthwhile, because nothing stymies communication like the assumption that other brains function like one's own. Although the differences between individual minds need to be acknowledged, these variations should be conceived as fluid. Every mind deserves respect, both for its tendency to vary and its capacity to change" (Laura Otis, *Rethinking Thought*, 3, 13-16).

<sup>6</sup> As Stanley Cavell remarked with regard to the general approach towards, and function of some of the criticism about, Emerson: "[Harold] Bloom loves Emerson and he has put us in his debt for having done as much as anyone has done in the past two decades to bring Emerson back to his culture's attention; whereas Updike is one more in the line of artful detractors of Emerson who from time to time are moved to get him in perspective by condescending to him. Bloom's praise of Emerson is not exactly praise for the wrong reason, but let me say for a stunted reason, and this, I cannot but feel, helps to keep condescension toward him in a respectable orbit" (1990, 133).

how could confronting such potential truths possibly be worth his time? What would it bring him? And in any case, the police chief's claim that the conversation has been long and that he has numerous duties to attend to is no doubt true. So we are simply provided with an example of two approaches to reading on different ends of a spectrum, and not with a resolution to our consideration of what reading truly is, or what essential reality constitutes the nature of the reading experience: Dostoevsky's approach is akin to Ogden's "unsettling experience of finding yourself becoming a subject who you have not yet met," and the police chief's is something like a sober considering, weighing and trying out of ideas and experiences.

The police chief's comment, "these ideas that are not ideas," is a provocative phrase, at once mocking and extraordinarily perceptive, even respectful; it gets at something that is as true for Ogden's attempt to describe reading as it is for Coetzee's Dostoevsky's attempt. Ogden's insistence that reading involves a uniquely, extraordinarily intimate form of encounter is an idea, without question, but it is not a clear idea, and is not self-evident, and his claim that reading involves entering "into the unsettling experience of finding yourself becoming a subject who you have not yet met, but nonetheless recognize" seems less clear and self-evident still. These are ideas about reading, but what is most important about them is not what they articulate about the experience of reading, but what they identify as (believe to be) the essential internal and existential movements which necessarily constitute the experience of true reading but which will ultimately be beyond adequate or even logical articulation. Though not concerned with reading specifically, the following remarks from Stanley Cavell, considering Wittgenstein, psychoanalysis, and the development and experience of

meaning, is the closest thing I have come across to what would amount to an explication of the phrase “ideas that are not ideas” as it is used in this context of *The Master of*

*Petersburg*:

It is my impression that many philosophers do not like Wittgenstein’s comparing what he calls his “methods” to therapies; but for me part of what he means by this comparison is brought out in thinking of the progress of psychoanalytic therapy. The more one learns, so to speak, the hang of oneself, and mounts one’s problems, the less one is able to *say* what one has learned; not because you have *forgotten* what it was, but because nothing you said would seem like an answer or a solution: there is no longer any question or problem which your words would match. You have reached conviction, but not about a proposition; and consistency, but not in a theory. You are different, what you recognize as problems are different, your world is different. And this is the sense, the only sense, in which what a work of art means cannot be *said*. Believing it is seeing it. (85)

Cavell’s “sense” in which what a work of art means cannot be said—the ineffable human becoming that encounter with a work of art sometimes engenders, the mysterious individual internal movements and transformations that sometimes belong to the experience of a work of art—this is an integral dimension of the experience of reading that Ogden and Coetzee’s Dostoevsky allude to but struggle to describe; the experience, it is important to stress, which for them is *intrinsic to reading*. How one will become a subject whom one has never yet met will be guided, but not determined, by the text, and it is the meeting between text and reader and the unique internal and existential change that occurs during the process of reading that is one of the greatest values of reading and of literature.<sup>7</sup> Helene Cixous alludes to this value and experience in a meditation on reading: “I recognize Jacques Derrida reading, in his manner, the manner of any genius, which is to slip back into childhood, to go sit in the classroom where a sublime teacher’s

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<sup>7</sup> *If it is done correctly*, Ogden and Coetzee’s Dostoevsky might insist: “You, the reader, *must* allow me to *occupy* you, your thoughts, your mind...”, “*reading is giving yourself up*.”



lessons are radiating, with the soul of the pupil who we are awakened to the other's word" (265).<sup>8</sup>

Yet, for the most part, criticism seems at a loss to acknowledge or account for this intrinsic value and experience, this, for some, fundamental reality of reading. Though I suppose Cavell's dense, circuitous passage and Cixous' poetic image demonstrate well enough why this would be so—"believing it is seeing it," "these ideas that are not ideas." And with regard to the apparent disconnect between the transformative experience of reading and works of even the most astute criticism, or with regard to the absence or impossibility of articulating the very real connection between the two, Northrop Frye's take from the introduction to *Anatomy of Criticism* is likely as keen as they come:

[T]he positive value-judgment is founded on a direct experience which is central to criticism yet forever excluded from it. Criticism can account for it only in critical terminology, and that terminology can never recapture or include the original experience. The original experience is like the direct vision of color, or the direct sensation of heat or cold, that physics "explains" in what, from the point of view of the experience itself, is a quite irrelevant way. However disciplined by taste and skill, the experience of literature is, like literature itself, unable to speak. "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off," said Emily Dickinson, "I know this is poetry." This remark is perfectly sound, but it relates only to criticism as experience. The reading of literature should, like prayer in the Gospels, step out of the talking world of criticism into the private and secret presence of literature. Otherwise the reading will not be a genuine literary experience, but a mere reflection of critical conventions, memories, and prejudices. The presence of incommunicable experience in the center of criticism will always keep criticism an art, as long as the critic recognizes that criticism comes out of it but cannot be built on it. (27-28)

### III.

In a beautifully simple sentence about the study of literature, Jonathan Culler writes, "If people study works of literature, it is generally because they think these works have important things to tell them and they want to know what those things are" (230). Would it were we might leave it there and the orchard prosper, its workers forever fulfilled, apple picking in the sun. But people study literature for the most part within universities,

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<sup>8</sup> And, further in the same essay: "whoever one elects, whoever one reads, has something to teach us for he is the master of our enigma" (266).

and all of critical and literary discourse owes no small part of its existence to institutional environments and supports. Apples are not separated from the branch with ease, sweat and good form make for more delicious and nourishing fruit, and the orchard—quite rightfully, quite beautifully—has orders to fill, procedures to follow, a hierarchy to maintain. I don't suppose there are many people studying literature within universities today who would not advocate for egalitarian access to them, and to this study. And yet, there is an innate tension between this indispensable aim and the concept of higher learning and high culture—or, if one dismisses a notion of higher learning and high culture altogether, then at least a tension between the aim and the history out of which it has grown.<sup>9</sup> Avishai Margalit reveals this tension succinctly in speaking of the twentieth-century philosophers Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, and Bernard Williams: “They were social egalitarians and yet tacitly believed in the aristocracy of the mind.”

Is this tacit belief in “the aristocracy of the mind” with us today, or has it vanished? And for good or ill? I don't ask this question merely to understand how or whether this belief is present or reflected in larger institutional realities and relationships, but, more importantly, to understand how or whether this belief is at play in the minds of the students in some measure born of these institutional realities and relationships, and to consider what this may mean for everyone's understanding and growth.

In a recent essay titled “What Are We Doing Here?” the novelist and critic Marilynne Robinson writes that she finds “a great deal to respect” in the organizing structures of the recent and contemporary academic landscape, and in the opportunities

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<sup>9</sup> “[Some professors, in defending the canon,] talk about subtlety and sophistication and depth, and they take up a condescending pose, the pose smug upper-middle-class types have greeted the unwashed with for hundreds of years. And of course, the cultural studies gang loves this kind of reaction. They're fulfilling their historical function of shocking hell out of the bourgeoisie.” Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?*, 121.

this landscape creates. She writes with a focus on “creative writing,” but also in reference to the humanities more broadly. “This is in effect a system of patronage that leaves no one beholden,” Robinson writes, “and that makes thousands of students aware that writers are not so unlike themselves—a valuable stimulus to aspiration” (28). This is a true enough, seemingly innocuous claim.

But what of the critical or artistic capacity that Adorno praises in Benjamin in the quote that began this essay, a capacity that somehow overflows the very concept of originality? The best writers and critics stand beside Benjamin in deserving such assessment and praise. And surely such an original critical or artistic capacity and life presents students not with a picture of writers “not so unlike themselves,” but indeed with a picture of writers exceptionally distinct in their understandings and styles and fundamentally *unlike* most students in their abilities and cognitive experiences. This is not to suggest that Robinson’s claim is untrue or that the academic structure she describes is not praiseworthy.<sup>10</sup> However, to suggest that a significant part of the value of the academic structure is that students encounter writers “not so unlike themselves” seems to me misguided, if not potentially ruinous: it disregards a fundamental aspect of how literature and criticism work and why they mean something—or why they *ought* to mean something, why they *could* mean something—to members of a culture.

Do we not read, at least in part or at times, to encounter individuals of special gifts and rare insight, individuals possessed of capacities that “can hardly be adequately described by the concept of ‘originality’”? And while this reading undoubtedly always

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<sup>10</sup> It is and she defends it beautifully; though I hope she has encountered a few bright students who do recognize that she possesses far greater understanding, to say the least, than they do. And it is also possible that Robinson’s phrase has something more like an aspiring recognition in mind; a recognition akin to how Edward Mendelson writes of Erich Auerbach’s encounter with Dante: he “recognized Dante as infinitely greater than himself, but... he [also] claimed a share of Dante’s imaginative power” (41).

involves a recognition that these special gifts and rare insights come from a place which is *distinctly human*—from human faculties which virtually all individuals possess and which they are usually, in our free and prosperous society at least, in a position to cultivate and refine—doesn't forgetting the differences (in some ways, the hierarchy) of sense and sensitivity, and disregarding the extraordinary achievement of character of some of the greatest writers, effectively misconstrue literature in a fundamental way? If, in Ogden's assertion, the reader *must* allow the writer *to occupy you, your thoughts, your mind*, will not this experience, this event, only open up to the weight of its potential implications if the reader has at least some sense of the worthiness, if not exceptionalness, of the writer and/or the writer's perception and processes of thought? This is what I mean by radical reverence. As Montaigne wrote in an oft-cited line, a passage which Emerson copied out into his journal, "For my part, I consider some men as infinitely beyond me...., though I clearly discern my inability to come near them by a thousand paces, I do not forbear to keep them in sight, and to judge what so elevates them, of which I perceive some seeds in myself." The awareness, within students, that writers are "not so unlike themselves" is potentially meager stimulus to aspiration compared with the acknowledgement and experience of writers unlike and, in some faculties or capacities at least, far greater than themselves. Benjamin seems to portray the potentially disconcerting nature of this situation at one point in *One-Way Street*: "Let us imagine the peaks of the High Alps silhouetted not against the sky but against folds of dark drapery. The mighty forms would show up only dimly. In just this way a heavy curtain shuts off Germany's sky, and we no longer see the profiles of even the greatest men" (62).

Perhaps, though, Robinson's stance is more desirable for our age, or even truer to life as it really is, and we're finally, slowly, getting around to it. Maybe we would all do well to discover the plain truth that everyone, the best writers and professors included, are "not so unlike ourselves," and this ought to be our most valuable stimulus to aspiration. My insistence on radical reverence, on an aristocracy of the mind as constitutive of critical and literary discourse, could be merely a less than useful residue of religious feeling. "The worship of God," wrote William Blake, "is Honouring the gifts in other men each according to his genius and loving the greatest men best" (qtd. in Edmundson 2004 94). Perhaps the notion of holding individuals high up, high above ourselves, whether writers or not, is old-fashioned, the pedestal of character something of a joke, and Montaigne's comment an antique curiosity. "The nineteenth century," J.M. Coetzee writes, "was the heyday of the great writer. In our times the concept of greatness has fallen under suspicion, especially when attached to whiteness and maleness, and Great Writers courses have largely been retired from the college curriculum."<sup>11</sup> In reading exclusively male pronouns in all these sententious remarks one is inclined to acknowledge that if the concept of greatness has for the most part only ever been associated with whiteness and maleness, and if its heyday was in a century when people owned other people, then good riddance, to put it mildly. The potential for creating salutary relatedness be damned, revealed for the most part as a self-serving sham. Or so some seem to believe, and with no small amount of justification. Obviously there were and are many scenarios within which the concept was and is used, and its impact on the

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<sup>11</sup> This in an essay on the Australian novelist Patrick White, of whom Coetzee writes: "he had the typically great-writerly sense of being marked out from birth for an uncommon destiny and granted a talent—not necessarily a welcome one—that it is death to hide, that talent consisting in the power to see, intermittently, flashes of the truth behind appearances."

culture is unknown and unknowable, as is the exact impact of anything really, and certainly of something so amorphous and potentially diffuse. Another remark from Coetzee, from the obituary he wrote for Nelson Mandela, is also worth quoting: “[Mandela] was, and by the time of his death was universally held to be, a great man; he may well be the last of the great men, as the concept of greatness retires into the historical shadows.” It seems to me that Coetzee is on to something important. There is a contemporary sentiment or spirit that pervades our institutions and our culture which doubts the power of models and ideals and the idea of exemplarity of person and character.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps rightly so. Who knows?

I think something of this spirit is present in Tim Parks’ conclusion to a review of a new biography of George Eliot:

Rereading *Middlemarch*... one is intensely aware of how much of [the amalgam of demand and compassion that lies behind every character] comes directly from Evans [Eliot] herself; always generous to her characters, she is nevertheless, with insight after splendid insight (‘for the most glutinously indefinite minds enclose some hard grains of habit’), image after sumptuous image (‘notions and scruples were like spilt needles’), plainly and painfully anxious for us to concede that she, the obtrusive narrator, is brilliant, wise, and good, and that her novels constitute an admirably benevolent project. Perhaps if literature does have a therapeutic value, it is that each writer allows us to immerse ourselves in his or her own peculiar, inevitably circumscribed world of feeling. (51)

In other words, Eliot’s “peculiar, inevitably circumscribed world of feeling” is fundamentally not more valuable than any other writer’s, or any other person’s, despite what she, and maybe even a few others, thought of herself, and even if she does communicate it in resplendent style. If Edward Mendelson suggests that we would do well to consider Erich Auerbach as “a genius speaking for himself” (41), Parks responds by saying that it might be better—or in the end inevitable, or, more importantly, that it is *truer*—simply to consider the whole lot of them as merely humans speaking. With

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<sup>12</sup> Though, of course, it is not as if when Emerson was copying out Montaigne’s maxim that maxim was framed on walls in living rooms throughout Boston.

important differences and unique and meaningful styles to be sure, carrying with them their accomplishments and failings, but ultimately speaking only from and for their own “inevitably circumscribed” selves. And in that way we do learn that everyone is “not so unlike” anyone else.

So which is the more valuable stimulus to aspiration, radical reverence or radical equality?<sup>13</sup> Maybe it is the tension between the two that is most valuable; and how to maintain it productively is the important question.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV.

Jonathan Culler has argued that, “one of the major problems of literary studies is the assumption, all too infrequently challenged, that the goal of literary studies is the interpretation of literary works and that the test of any theoretical discourse is whether it makes possible new and convincing interpretations of individual works. This presumption produces a rather odd situation: although we have vast numbers of interpretations of every major work and of very many minor ones, we lack adequate accounts of how literature itself works: what are the norms and conventions that enable literary works to have the meanings they do for members of a culture?” (166). With regard to the presumed problems within literary studies of over-emphasis on interpretation and a harmful reliance on misguided criteria for judging the value of theoretical discourse, this is a belief that is essentially shared by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum and the literary critic Mark Edmundson. However, Culler’s position lamenting

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<sup>13</sup> Though it has been suggested by some that too often we have a commitment to neither. As Edmundson writes in *Why Read?*: “Not to admire anything, Horace said, is the only way to feel consistently good about yourself. Most of the cultural authorities now in place, in art, in the media, and in academia, are figures who programmatically hoard their esteem and apparently feel quite good about themselves in the process” (33).

<sup>14</sup> “The tyrant Equality is often unendurable or at least can seem so, but what an educator it is, what a teacher” (Robert Walser, *The Assistant*, 21).

the lack of “adequate accounts of how literature itself works,” though it is a phrase and sentiment that would be at home in the work of either Nussbaum or Edmundson, calls for scholarship which is radically different from the kind of work championed by them.

Culler advocates for more critical projects associated with structuralism, formalism, and/or poetics in order to explore “the norms and conventions that enable literary works to have the meanings they do for members of a culture.”<sup>15</sup> Nussbaum and Edmundson also advocate for better accounts of how literature works. They also seek to reveal through their writings what enables literary works to have the meanings that they do for members of a culture (never shying away from expressing their deeply held desire that these meanings be more widely acknowledged and experienced within our society). They do not advocate, though, for a return to structuralist concerns, and would not be overly supportive of such a project. They would likely see such a project, as they sometimes see the preoccupation with interpretation, as counterproductive to what, in their view, ought to be of primary concern to the literary critic: in Nussbaum’s phrase, “we need to make sure that our own writing is suited to be an ally, rather than the enemy of literature” (389). This imperative is sacred to both Nussbaum and Edmundson, and both believe it has been and is being too often violated in academic criticism.<sup>16</sup> How this

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<sup>15</sup>As Culler defines the project: “the formalism of poetics presumed the primacy of a system of conventions that made possible literary production. While literary study might take as its goal the elucidation of individual literary works, or the interpretation of works as products of a historical or biographical situation, the claim of formalism was that forms are neither ornaments to be admired for their embellishment of thematic content nor the expression of a content that is the burden of the work and whose elucidation is the goal of critical activity but that, on the contrary, the forms are themselves the central elements of the work, and the understanding of form is a condition of other possible critical and historical projects. The work of art is above all a combination of devices or formal structures that defamiliarize and deploy a logic of artistic convention against that of empirical experience or historiography” (6-7).

<sup>16</sup> Of course, both have a far too intelligent and nuanced understanding of literary criticism to ever prescribe exactly what it should entail. And the critique of academic trends as over-emphasizing structuralism or interpretation, or as misusing theory, is speaking generally, in broad strokes. And it can sometimes seem absurd to critique scholarship on any general level: the scholar should be led by her or his own light, and if



critical imperative operates is not exactly the same in Nussbaum and Edmundson, but it is similar. As Edmundson writes of Nussbaum, articulating the contours of what they see as the literary critic's role: she is "one of the few thinkers now who is willing to suggest that literature and art matter because they can help people to live better than they do" (2004 127).

Nussbaum is a prolific philosopher who has astutely explored the intersection between philosophy and literature, primarily in her collection of essays *Love's Knowledge*, which is, in so many words, an erudite and urgent "defense of the novel-reading heart." This is in addition to her extensive and accomplished work in liberalism and legal studies, economic development theory, Greek philosophy, and ethics.

Edmundson is a literary and cultural critic whose early work included studies in Romanticism and immersion in the work of Sigmund Freud. His study *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida*, demonstrates critical discernment and concern that have remained at the forefront of his thought throughout his career. In this work, he attempts to identify, and laments, a moment when "the attitude of criticism to literature became less celebratory, more inquisitive, even inquisitorial" (15), and he strives to articulate and provoke "profitable reflections on the contemporary limitations of academic literary criticism, as well as its future promise" (30). Both Nussbaum and Edmundson write for an audience outside of the academy as well as within, and Edmundson in particular, in full self-awareness, has generally left behind the more academic and theoretical criticism and concerns of his early work, writing in the last fifteen or twenty years as more of a cultural critic and polemicist than literary critic and scholar. Both are also deeply

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that light is bright and genuinely leads to emphasis on structuralism or interpretation, or wherever, then so be it and hats off to all involved.

concerned with pedagogy, and with the social and political influence and implications of critical and pedagogical institutions and practices.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most important beliefs, as I see it, which composes the soil out of which their work grows, and which by necessity leads to their critical imperative of critic as ally, is the belief that, as Wayne Booth writes in a review of Nussbaum's work, "the discourse we call philosophy [and criticism] will be best performed when it acknowledges its indebtedness, and in at least one dimension its subordination, to the ethical work of the 'poets'" (302). One could contend, of course, that all literary critics and many philosophers are well aware of this already: *scholars know, one might say, that Shakespeare's plays are more important, and potentially far more ethically and existentially consequential, than their own writings, as are the movements of the mind that produced them; they know they might be in a different line of work altogether if some of the ancients making up the canon hadn't bothered; this goes without saying.* But, for Nussbaum and Edmundson at least, this does not go without saying. They believe that far too many critics and philosophers proceed without any acknowledgement or understanding of the indebtedness and subordination of their critical work to the experience of literature.<sup>18</sup> An insufficiency, Nussbaum and Edmundson believe, which necessarily leads to the obfuscation of that experience, and ultimately to the shortsightedness, if not degradation, of the entire critical enterprise. An enterprise which for them is an inherently ethical one and which, at its best, will have some bearing on the question, "how should one live?" This situation makes it worthwhile and necessary to

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<sup>17</sup> "Anyone attending an academic conference," Edmundson writes, "or reading an academic journal for the first time would be forgiven for not knowing that what most of us spend most of our energies doing is teaching" (2004 123).

<sup>18</sup> One reader of this thesis identified this predicament as akin to a "circular firing squad."

continually demonstrate the inherent value of immersion within literature and literary forms, and to establish some kind of ground or framework that will help to assure that literary criticism is “suited to be an ally, rather than the enemy of literature.” This demonstration is what they attempt, and this ground or framework is what their work argues for.

Another judgment Wayne Booth offers in his review of *Love’s Knowledge* characterizes well the animating force beneath all of their work: “its dominant passion is a defense of passion” (306). And why do Nussbaum and Edmundson feel they need to mount this defense? Discontent (sometimes bordering on disgust for Edmundson) with prevailing practices of literary criticism, and concern about the impact of these practices on their profession, themselves, and students. “What does the young person learn?” Edmundson asks. “The techniques of criticism. These techniques are often demystifying; they are almost always distancing in the extreme” (2012 153).<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum claims that *Love’s Knowledge* grew “from my sense of the force and inevitability of certain questions, and from my bewilderment at finding these questions, on the whole, not addressed in the academic contexts I encountered” (10). “It was assumed,” Nussbaum continues, “that any work that attempts to ask of a literary text questions about how we might live, treating the work as addressed to the reader’s practical interests and needs, and as being in some sense about our lives, must be hopelessly naïve, reactionary, and insensitive to the complexities of literary form and intertextual referentiality” (21). Laid

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<sup>19</sup> “A great deal of contemporary literary criticism is—most will agree—overprocessed, composed of what Gramsci called elaborations upon elaborations. Nothing vital is exposed” (Edmundson 1990 564). “Critical thinking is now much revered in humanities departments. We pride ourselves on dispensing it. But what exactly is critical thinking? Often it is no more than the power to debunk various visions.... Why did these approaches, these forms of translation, catch on?.... They give the teacher something coherent to teach. They give the students a portable knowledge, something to take away from the scene. And they give them an illusion of potency over works far more potent than they” (Edmundson 2004 43, 50).

out in so many words, who would not be on the side of these defenders of passion for and love of literature? Who would not cheer Nussbaum when she writes,

The speech of literary theory, especially in recent years, has not often shared [the concerns of manners and morals, character and life]. I believe that it has an impoverished future without them. I imagine, instead, a future in which our talk about literature will return, increasingly, to a concern with the practical—to ethical and social questions that give literature its high importance in our lives.... In short, a future in which literary theory (while not forgetting its many other pursuits) will also join with ethical theory in pursuit of the question, ‘how should one live?’ (168)

No one. How could anyone *not* be on board with this project? This speaks in part to Nussbaum’s brilliance and skill, of course, but also the scene of the critic or philosopher setting off for the library with the thought in his mind, *I will be literature’s enemy* or *I think I’ll be for an impoverished intellectual future*, is frankly unimaginable.<sup>20</sup> And perhaps this is one of the reasons why certain recent work within literary studies is so disconcerting for Nussbaum and Edmundson, why it is potentially so disenfranchising, to use Edmundson’s term, for literature. No one would be doing what they were doing (*you think this is easy!*) if they were not allies of literature: this is the simple and easy conclusion, and by no means untrue. And so the good intentions and the incentives of professionalism carry the day; the snowball rolling down the mountainside, gaining weight and circumference as it goes. No doubt these intra-professional debates and critiques come with the territory. Similar demands were made long ago, similar critiques will be offered for some time to come. It is good to remember that such discourse takes place because not only are we not unlike one another, we are quite dependent upon one another as well:

The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the

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<sup>20</sup> As Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello has it: “If you turned to any of those people we had lunch with and asked them, as humanists or at least card-carrying practitioners of the humanities, to state the goal of all their efforts, surely they would reply that, however indirectly, they strive to improve the lot of mankind” (132).

basis upon which it can be or has been established.... The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason. (Cavell 1999 20)

And let us not forget, as Northrop Frye wrote, that teaching literature is impossible. Let us not forget that we are asking and asked the impossible. “The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in face of the constant force that makes for muddlement,” Nussbaum quotes James in her essay, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination.” To which she adds:

We live amid bewildering complexities. Obtuseness and refusal of vision are our besetting vices. Responsible lucidity can be wrested from that darkness only by painful, vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars. Our highest and hardest task is to make ourselves people “on whom nothing is lost.” (148)

Nussbaum and Edmundson would have us believe that we generally live in darkness, that it is all too human to be someone on whom most everything is lost, so to speak. They would have us believe that we are in a constant struggle to discover illumination, and they desire that we relish this struggle. They suggest that we honor and praise, maintain and evolve institutions erected, however precariously or imperfectly, in its service. They demand that we relish illumination. All things considered, they do not deny that this all looks something like a losing battle. For them, though, this heightens the sense of urgency. It is the reason they call for reflection and engagement within literary studies and through the work of literary studies. “We do ask how to live,” Nussbaum writes, “undeterred, in our neediness, by the messiness of that enterprise. What I propose here is not a merely theoretical undertaking, but one that is urgently practical, one that we conduct every day, and must conduct” (28). And, in a statement that Edmundson would agree with wholeheartedly, “that is what makes the person who does the artist’s task well so important for others. In the war against moral obtuseness, the artist is our fellow fighter, frequently our guide” (164).

It was mentioned earlier that the critical imperative to be an ally of literature does not operate in exactly the same way in Nussbaum as it does in Edmundson. Recalling two passages from our discussion of reading will help establish their key critical preoccupations and uncover the ethical element of literary experience each of them seeks to foreground and elucidate.

Nussbaum's emphasis is on the novel's ability to provide the reader with a more comprehensive experience of the infinite complexities and over-determinations of human circumstance and choice, and to offer opportunities for deepening and enriching perception and feeling that life itself is scarcely able to provide. This emphasis can be related to Coetzee's Dostoevsky's description of reading as "being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up." A "giving yourself up," Nussbaum might add, which necessarily involves, in the very form of the novel itself,<sup>21</sup> recognition of "the ethical significance of uncontrolled events, the epistemological [and ethical] value of emotion, [and] the variety and non-commensurability of the important things" (26). "[L]iterature is an extension of life," Nussbaum writes, "not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life" (48). The crux of Nussbaum's work rests on an expansive and vital notion of perception as something akin to "moral knowledge" and "ethical ability," along with the

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<sup>21</sup> Though it should be noted that Nussbaum in general uses only a very limited range of what the novel is and could be in her work, in terms of both form and content. James plays the most prominent role, and Proust and Dickens are next in line. I do not believe this diminishes the intelligence of her effort or the value in attempting to understand the weight of her claims. Though one would be right in suggesting that some of her assertions about the *inherent* qualities of the novel as form would not hold up to closer scrutiny.

unique opportunity to exercise perception that is created through immersion in a masterly novel's world. Not an objective world, it is important to add, but "a world already interpreted and humanized by our faculties and our concepts" (164), a world imbued through and through with the presence of another's active perception; and so a world uniquely suited to the development of an ability which after all needs instruction and care to be realized in any healthy individual, and which is, in Nussbaum's understanding at least, not created equally.<sup>22</sup> The reader does not simply "come into contact" with various circumstances, people, and events through her reading, she actively perceives them. Nussbaum identifies this as an "ethical ability" and models the salient features of the concept—more importantly, the experience the concept identifies—on the ideas of Aristotle and Henry James. Moral knowledge, she writes, "is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeking a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling" (152)—being the arm and the axe *and* the skull. Nussbaum makes abundantly clear that for her, and for Aristotle, this active sense of perception (the ability to perceive *well*) is not only functional or utilitarian, though it is that as well. It is useful in any attempt to make correct decisions and proper communications, but perception is also "ethically valuable in its own right" (37).

Nussbaum's next most important critical claim, after her description of the cognitive and sensory experience of reading and the establishment of the ethical value of

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<sup>22</sup> "[W]ho could deny that there are some among us whose visual or auditory acuity is greater than that of others; some who have developed their faculties more finely, who can make discriminations of color and shape (of pitch and timbre) that are unavailable to the rest of us? Who miss less, therefore, of what is to be heard or seen in a landscape, a symphony, a painting? Jamesian moral perception is, I think, like this: a fine development of our human capabilities to see and feel and judge; an ability to miss less, to be responsible to more" (164).

immersion in a novel, is to link this experience and value with the formation and habits of the imagined ideal citizen of a liberal democratic social, economic and political order. “[S]ocial democracy and the art of the novel are allies,” Nussbaum writes, in a phrase which recalls her insistence that critical writing serve as literature’s ally, and which sharpens our understanding of her own social and political commitments. “Their focus is the human being, seen as both needy and resourceful; and their dominant passion is love” (391). If the claim that the dominant passion of social democracy is love seems a bit of a stretch, remember that criticism is fundamentally about stretching imagination and understanding in order to sharpen and strengthen each, and that it would have little use if it was not. Browning’s remark about the need for our reach to exceed our grasp and Thoreau’s about castles in the sky at this point commonplaces that seem worth repeating. “Just as a child who has learned to grasp stretches out its hand for the moon as it would for a ball,” Benjamin writes (2008 45). And yet I don’t know that Nussbaum’s claim about love being the dominant passion of social democracy really is a stretch. Deeper examination into many social and political habits may reveal originating impulses of desire and concern not unrelated to love, as Nussbaum’s deeper examination into the art of the novel does. As deeper examination into something so ordinary as a nursery rhyme might:

Narrative play does teach children to view a personlike shape as a house for hope and fear and love and anger, all of which it has known itself. But the wonder involved in story-telling also makes evident the limits of each person’s access to every other. “How I wonder what you are,” goes the rhyme. In that simple expression is an acknowledgment of the lack of completeness in one’s own grasp of the fear, the love, the sympathy, the anger, of the little star, or of any other creature or person. In fact, the child adept at story-telling soon learns that people in stories are frequently easier to know than people in real life, who, as Proust puts it, frequently offer “a dead weight that our sensitivity cannot remove,” a closed exterior that cannot be penetrated even by a sensitive imagination. The child, wondering about its parents, soon learns about these obstacles, just as it also learns that its parents need not know everything that goes on in its own mind. The habits of wonder promoted by story-telling thus define the other person as spacious and deep, with qualitative differences from oneself and hidden places worthy of respect. The ability to see another



person in this way is... profoundly political, closely linked to core values of a liberal democracy.  
(1999 272-273)

Criticism and theory may help to remind us of many things. And we all need reminding.

In turning from Nussbaum back to Edmundson now, we can begin to understand the key critical preoccupations of his work, what he hopes to remind of us of, through recourse to Ogden's formulation of reading as "the unsettling experience of finding yourself becoming a subject who you have not yet met, but nonetheless recognize." For Edmundson, the transformative aspect of reading ought to be recognized as a vital component of critical discourse. It is perhaps the most socially and politically relevant dimension of literature, and criticism ought to recognize and encourage it as such. "What do books at their best go to effect? What is their highest and best purpose?" Edmundson asks. "It is not understanding—or not understanding only—but change. I hope to be provoked to change in salutary ways by the books I read. I hope to be provoked to struggle for productive change in my society and in myself" (2005 45). Yet how best to depict and facilitate, through criticism, the real and longed for change that is essential to the experience of literature is anything but straightforward.

Even more so than Nussbaum's work, Edmundson's writing is a provocation to critics and teachers of literature to examine their methods and allegiances. This is evident in how he identifies his book, *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida*, as a "defense of poetry": "with defense inevitably involving some harsh, even assaultive questioning" (238). In this work Edmundson examines what he believes to be some of the predominant theoretical preoccupations within academic literary criticism at the time, including criticism inspired by and reliant upon the theory of Paul de Man and the Freudian unconscious, Derridean deconstructionism, new historicism, and criticism

inspired by and reliant upon the work of Michel Foucault. Though Edmundson stresses that he does not write “against theory or negative critique as such” (237), and though he generally does demonstrate high regard for the critics and theorists he writes about, he ultimately argues that these theoretical preoccupations are insensitive to social and political realities, esoteric, and self-serving. Worse still, these theoretical preoccupations not only fail to communicate the pleasure, introspection, and enlargement that often arises from a compelling encounter with a work of literature, criticism in this academic, theory-driven mode, Edmundson claims, is often actively hostile to immersion in and appreciation for the works and writers that are being critiqued.

To be sure, Edmundson does not suggest that there is *never* a place or time for literary studies to interrogate and employ theoretical discourse; he knows that some specialization of language and concepts within literary studies is inevitable and potentially invigorating and illuminating; and he would not suggest that there is nothing to be gained from cross-disciplinary research and influence. Edmundson does suggest, however, that the consequences for literary culture and the culture at large of the elevation within literary studies of theoretical discourse and the critical concerns and methods that come with it need to be considered. As Edmundson writes,

*My chief doubt* about the deployment [within criticism and literary studies] of Freud’s concept of repression... by de Man and others *is socially pragmatic*. Theories of interpretation should catch on because they offer opportunities not only to understand texts, but to understand people. How shall we talk about ourselves? How shall we describe others?... [C]riticism can, or ought to, work in collaboration with literature to enlarge such expressive resources. Making the theory of repression central to your interpretive procedures induces you to stop questing for more and more varied ways of representing experience and to find repose on an absolute truth. (60; emphasis added)

Edmundson bemoans what Northrop Frye describes as “substituting a critical attitude for criticism” not because the theories critics often employ are untrue, or because there is never insight to be gained from them. Rather, he bemoans certain critical practices

because he feels that too often they turn works of literature into unambiguous, shallow artifacts, or pieces of evidence used to support external claims, effectively neglecting that they are first and foremost works of art, novels and poems. These critical practices, from this perspective and without necessarily meaning to, inevitably constrain something constituted by the grace or absence of horizon; as Edmundson writes, “a key measure of a poet’s prowess lies in her ability to possess, transform, and surpass the reigning conceptual modes, writing in such a way that no existing theory can account for the work” (1995 51). The novel or poem in this style of critical approach too often becomes, in Edmundson’s understanding, if not a balloon to be deflated, then a brick to be used in the building of some kind of theoretical bunker, which, for all the ostensible firepower of social and political critique that might come out of it, is not really about literature at all. Edmundson’s “socially pragmatic” doubts about theory-driven academic literary criticism arise in no small part from his own journey through literature; a journey which features prominently in some of his writings, as Nussbaum’s journey does at times in *Love’s Knowledge*. Each of them form their “critical principles” directly from knowledge gained from their own experiences of literature and their work, and the critical work they call for, is consistent with Frye’s imperative that criticism “grow out of the art it deals with” (6).

Edmundson’s foremost critical principle is that “true humanistic study is not geared to generalized, portable truths; it is geared to human transformation” (2004 51).<sup>23</sup> While he is not dogmatic in suggesting that criticism should not be subordinated to “externally derived critical attitudes” or practiced in order to demonstrate “generalized,

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<sup>23</sup> And, he goes on to say, “that is something that [university] catalogues cannot describe and to which the writing of detached literary critical essays is more or less irrelevant” (2004 51).

portable truths,” he does contend that the critic adopts these attitudes at the risk of discarding or diminishing the defining characteristics and concerns of literary art and obscuring the essential nature of literary experience—“the unsettling experience of finding yourself becoming a subject who you have not yet met.” No small part of the essential nature of that experience being, for both Edmundson and Nussbaum, immersion and, however unsettling reading and change at times may be, pleasure. “The perception of [‘what a feat it was to turn that that way’],” Edmundson writes, “is inseparable from authentic literary pleasure, and that’s tied up, I think, with the ability to delight in change, to accept the fact of time’s inevitable modifications of who and what we are” (1990 11). And this authentic literary pleasure is hardly achievable, Edmundson suggests, without some amount of trust in the inherent value of the work of art itself and the experience of that work; a trust that critical approaches shepherding theoretical agendas or searching for general truths may have a difficult time adopting, and certainly a difficult time promoting. As Nussbaum writes regarding philosophy, and perhaps it is true of criticism as well, “Mistrust, rather than trust, is the professional norm since Socrates” (238). One can imagine, of course, the argument for the importance of mistrust and skepticism in criticism. “Authentic literary pleasure” might carry for some a tone of escapism, and “immersion” a sense of an invitation to immerse in preconceived understandings and familiar situations. The trust that Edmundson and Nussbaum advocate for, though, includes intense conviction in great literature’s inherent denial of any such escape or familiarity; as Nussbaum writes:

[P]hilosophy, too, has its seductive power, its power to lure the reader away from the richly textured world of particulars to the lofty heights of abstraction. It, too, can promise escape—from the messy and difficult world we live in to a world made more simple and schematic. This sort of seduction can frequently be pernicious in human life. On the other hand, the seductions of literature can frequently return us to a richer and more complex world; and the very enchantments

of the novel can lead the reader past her tendencies to deny complexity, to evade the messiness of feeling. (238)

The assertion that relinquishing a certain critical or philosophical distance in face of literature's seduction and enchantment will lead to confrontation with "the fact of time's inevitable modifications of who and what we are," and to confrontations with complexity and "the messiness of feeling," is, I believe, presented by Nussbaum and Edmundson convincingly. The assertion that this confrontation is in the end innately pleasurable, despite the myriad difficulties encountered along the way, is less convincing; though it is perhaps an assertion just as vital to their larger arguments. For if refinement of moral perception and deliberate transformation through literature is rare enough as it is, how will the invitation sound if it portrays such involvement as tribulation without joy?

It is important to say of Edmundson that he is not against critics working on political and ethical grounds. "Those who challenge literature," he writes, "using terms such as race, class, gender, and sexuality ought to press their claims as hard as they can" (1995 237). But Edmundson does value critics who "partially embody and comprehend presiding versions of the reality principle" (1995 232), and he suspects that contemporary critical and theoretical methods too often undermine, rather than promote, their professed political and ethical aims.<sup>24</sup> His position here, again, is one he would describe as "socially pragmatic." Edmundson completely acknowledges, as most politically and ethically minded critics would, that "[a] burden of being an intellectual in a democracy is to

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<sup>24</sup> Undermine their political and ethical aims in the culture at large, that is. In the academy these projects may very well deepen theoretical and professional discourse, may refine the language of political and ethical philosophies and imperatives, and may proliferate other similar projects. But Edmundson is not shy in stating his opinion that a political and ethical project that is a more or less esoteric and self-perpetuating professional discourse might not be a political and ethical project. This subject is obviously a vital and perpetual debate within the academy.

convince people to switch terminologies, to jettison ways of talking that they've gotten used to" (1995 135). He departs, however, from the methods and strategies for achieving this end that he identifies with the predominant methods of critical discourse. In the broadest terms, these methods and strategies might be defined as negative critique, or ideological critique. Edmundson finds these critiques to be "distancing in the extreme," to alienate huge segments of potential readers, including many students, and to generally be counterproductive to the purported political and ethical aims of critical discourse. "People ought to be asked to get rid of habitual ways of seeing and saying not because they are functions of repression, or ideological constructs, but because alternate ways will help them to live better" (1995 135). And here, Edmundson argues, literature itself is far more impactful than any philosophy or theory ever could be:

[In literature] there's further to go, into legitimate complexity, true density and depth. Theory, on the other hand, tends to be an all or nothing affair. You get it or you don't. Face young people with a page of Derrida, whose reflections on the defining limits of Western thought are anything but valueless, and they're likely to depart with no benefit at all. Nothing is available to them. They don't get it, period.... [E]xperience has shown me that there are more viable and more varied options for students in literature itself, and that contemporary theory, though not without its appeals, tends to be implausibly extreme in its vision of experience and, accordingly, untenable as a guide to life. Can you live it? Alas, it's generally the case that no one can live out the latest version of theoretical apostasy and that, just as depressing, no one, even theory's most devoted advocates, is even mildly inclined to try. (2004 41-42)

In "The Storyteller" Benjamin writes that "The novel is significant... not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate" (101). *By virtue of the flame which consumes it*: Nussbaum and Edmundson believe that the best critical approaches to literature will respect, intensify and encourage the flame that consumes literature, and they recognize that the warmth generated from this encounter will be unique to each individual and that it will always elude easy description, theoretical formulas and absolute truths. Would they agree with

Benjamin's next line, that "What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life" (101)? In some cases, certainly, they might say; and the refinement of perception and deliberate transformation that they contend is essential to literary discourse ought to encourage one who approaches literature with such a hope. They would not be so harsh as to suggest that all life is somehow shivering life, though, and would find it absurd to suggest such a thing of what is fundamentally an individual experience. But all life is mortal and, even if experienced individually, dependent and pregnant and unknowable. "[W]e might well conclude that philosophy," Nussbaum writes, "as the art of our thought and the pursuer of truth about us, had better speak mortal speech and think mortal thoughts..., acknowledging... the incompleteness and neediness of human life, its relations of dependence and love with uncontrolled people and things" (389). And if there is a better way to speak mortal speech and think mortal thoughts than through literature, we have yet to encounter it. "Literary response is individual, particular," Edmundson writes,

to put trust in literature affirms the antiphilosophic view that there are as many ways of living well as there are individuals disposed to do so.... The turn to literature for multiple truths is a democratic turn. The conviction that each of us has a particular genius to unfold is a democratic conviction. (2004 140)

## V.

The following is a passage from Virginia Woolf's lecture, "Mr. Bennett And Mrs.

Brown":

[E]very one in this room is a judge of character. Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practiced character-reading and had some skill in the art. Our marriages, our friendships depend on it; our business largely depends on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help.... But it is the art of the young. In middle and old age the art is practiced mostly for its uses, and friendships and other adventures and experiments in the art of reading character are seldom made. But novelists differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes. They go a step further, they feel there is something permanently interesting in character itself. When all the practical business of life has been discharged, there is something about people

which continues to seem to them of overwhelming importance, in spite of the fact that it has no bearing whatever upon their happiness, comfort, or income. (95-97)

We can gain much by replacing Woolf's conception of being a judge of character and the art of character-reading in the thoughts above with that of being a critic and the art of criticism; we lose nothing of Woolf's subtly acute insight thereby.<sup>25</sup> Character-reading and critique are close enough in their essential rationale and mental processes that a defense of this substitution seems unneeded. So rather than the novelist differing from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in the art of character reading when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes, we can picture the critic differing from the rest of the world because they never cease being interested in criticism when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes. Indeed, in the case of criticism, the critic's initial experience of art has often been so urgently practical (so existentially consequential) that he or she falls under a kind of spell that insists that criticism surely *is* one of the most practical things of all—it is not.

In "To Reach Japan," the first story of Alice Munro's most recent collection, *Dear Life*, Peter, a young engineer, bids farewell to his wife Greta and young daughter Katy as they depart Vancouver on a train to Toronto:

The smile for Katy was wide open, sunny, without a doubt in the world, as if he believed that she would continue to be a marvel to him, and he to her, forever. The smile for his wife seemed hopeful and trusting, with some sort of determination about it. Something that could not easily be put into words and indeed might never be. If Greta had mentioned such a thing he would have said, Don't be ridiculous. And she would have agreed with him, thinking that it was unnatural for people who saw each other daily, constantly, to have to go through explanations of any kind. (3)

Here Munro offers a wonderful take on the nature and dynamics of criticism. First, we have the husband's smile to the daughter, given as if their relation to each other would remain the same *forever*. We all of course know about Heraclitus and the river, and that

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<sup>25</sup> If she arrives at this insight through a bit of hyperbole and simplification she may be forgiven, for that is usually a good way to get there.



nothing remains the same. But we also know that our relations, our habits, our society and we ourselves *do* most of the time appear, if unconsciously, as somehow permanent and natural; and all of these things usually are (thank heavens!) for the most part relatively stable. Criticism always reminds us that this stability, this *forever*, is, as we all know but too easily ignore or forget, a subtle illusion, if not an outright lie. Next, “something that could not easily be put into words and indeed might never be”: here we have criticism’s *raison d’être*, simply stated. And finally, “don’t be ridiculous” and “it is unnatural for people who [see] each other daily... to have to go through explanations”: criticism is often after explanations of things so prevalent and essential that most would never seek or bother with such explanations, in part because the explanation often cannot help but appear inconsequential and bothersome beside the inevitability and rigidity of the thing explained; and criticism can indeed appear ridiculous and unnatural, as the passage from Woolf above so wonderfully alludes to: what is neither customary nor necessary (on top of which being so difficult) all too easily takes on an aspect of the ridiculous and unnatural.

A page on in the story, Munro describes Peter and Greta, and their relationship, in more detail:

With the glass between them, and Katy never allowing the waving to slow down, they indulged in looks of comic or indeed insane goodwill. She thought how nice-looking he was, and how he seemed to be so unaware of it. He wore a brush cut, in the style of the time—particularly if you were anything like an engineer—and his light-colored skin was never flushed like hers, never blotchy from the sun, but evenly tanned whatever the season.

His opinions were something like his complexion. When they went to see a movie, he never wanted to talk about it afterwards. He would say that it was good, or pretty good, or okay. He didn’t see the point in going further. He watched television, he read a book in somewhat the same way. He had patience with such things. The people who put them together were probably doing the best they could. Greta used to argue, rashly asking whether he would say the same thing about a bridge. The people who did it did their best but their best was not good enough so it fell down.

Instead of arguing, he just laughed.

It was not the same thing, he said.

No?

No.

Greta should have realized that this attitude—hands off, tolerant—was a blessing for her, because she was a poet, and there were things in her poems that were in no way cheerful or easy to explain. (5)

A work of art and a bridge are undoubtedly not the same thing. Peter is spot on. And he is clearly a kind and a good, an intelligent and a loving man, not uninterested in culture but certainly uninterested in criticism; and who could blame him or be upset with him for that lack of interest? But, for those who travel on them, both a bridge and a work of art lead somewhere; and since, unlike the bridge, a work of art does not simply take someone where they are going or else fall down, we have criticism to remark upon the travel. Criticism in general may ask, in part: Where are we going? Where should we be going? What is the best way to get there? What of the past, if anything, is relevant here, for the individual and for the community? What of philosophy, science and technology, what of all writing and thought and custom and invention, may be particularly pertinent? With regard to literary criticism, or criticism of any work of art, the questions might look something like: Where does this work take us? Is it worth going there? Do we need to bring something along with us to get there, a certain knowledge or experience, so that the work does not leave us behind? How can I make sure the reader of the work does not get lost along the way? What can I do to make the landscape arrived at or passed through brighter or, as the case may be, darker? What can I do to make the reader's perception of the important features of that landscape more lucid? Is there anything I can bring to or set-up within this landscape that would help it, or the landscape, stand out in its significant contours? How can I invite appreciation and, perhaps, hunger? Obviously these questions are vague and general and they are by no means exhaustive, and the more distinct forms these questions might take in any work of criticism will vary widely, to say nothing of the approach or answers to them. As Stanley Cavell writes:

[In experiencing a work] we may have missed its tone, or neglected an allusion or a cross current, or failed to see its point altogether; or the object may not have established its tone, or buried its allusion too far, or be confused in its point.... The critic will have to *get* us to see, or hear or realize or notice; help us to appreciate the tone; convey the current; point to a connection; show how to take the thing in.... What this getting, helping, conveying, and pointing consist in will be shown in the specific ways the critic accomplishes them, or fails to accomplish them.... He is part detective, part lawyer, part judge, in a country in which crimes and deeds of glory look alike.... [And] when it has happened there is no sure way he can get the news out; and no way at all without risking something like a glory or a crime of his own. ("Music Discomposed" 191)

It will be remembered from a footnote at the beginning of this essay, and from the meandering path we have followed to get to this point, that the term criticism has been employed loosely throughout, consolidated as "the whole work of scholarship and taste concerned with literature." This is a consolidation that has allowed us to speak of literary criticism with perhaps less rigor than it warrants, though hopefully not with less care. But in this phrase we recognize the most common demarcation within the work of literary criticism and we do well to acknowledge it: scholarship and taste. The former is associated with academic journals, essay collections, monographs, undergraduate and graduate work, with erudition, deep historical and philosophical knowledge, and with theoretical and political/critical commitments. The latter is associated with literary journals and review sections, with belletristic concerns and personal opinions, and with high-minded or playful pronouncements on contemporary works and contemporary culture. There is no hard and fast demarcation between the two, as there is overlap between each approach to literary criticism in various ways, but some divide is certainly there. It was part of Edmundson's work in *Literature Against Philosophy* to argue that "scholarship" has been too dismissive of or blind towards "taste" as a viable path of criticism within the academy, at the expense of the experience of and appreciation for literature. He argued that, "the university's evolution into virtually the sole source for serious literary critical work augmented criticism's theoretical disposition and

undermined its capacity to defend poetry” (24). I don’t know enough of this story to agree or disagree, though I would guess, if there is truth to the claim that the university evolved “into virtually the sole source for serious literary critical work,” that this was the result of what was taking place outside of the academy as much as within, if not more so. I do agree, though, with the premise of Edmundson’s that “metaphor making” in academic criticism is often assessed or discouraged as less desirable or significant than more seemingly precise philosophical language and concern:

Metaphor making is surely essential to literary art, but broadly conceived, it is also central to the defense of poetry. For to express what is singular and inassimilable about a writer or artist, one must often turn to metaphor. Figurative language, which at its best gives us new perceptions, adding, as Blackmur liked to say, to the stock of available reality, is often necessary to describe what is surprising and vital in a work of art. Paul de Man is a more difficult critic to read and understand than a responsive, rather impressionistic essayist like Virginia Woolf. But one can teach intelligent students to do what de Man does; it is probably impossible to teach anyone to respond like Woolf if he has little aptitude for it. And how could we sustain the academic study of literature if we were compelled to say that a central aspect of criticism is probably not teachable? When you transfer criticism to the academy, the philosophical impulse gets an extra charge. (24)

There are likely plenty of professors willing to admit that an element of criticism “is probably not teachable.” And even if it were, there are still a few reasons why one might *not* want to attempt to teach students to respond like Woolf. As Edmundson writes of Johnson, Hazlitt, and Woolf, three critics he values and whose critical merits and approaches he feels the academy is inimical towards: “[they] became who they did as critics not with a recipe, but through an introspection so severe that it revealed their potentially determining circumstances. Their strength lay in the fact that such introspection, which perhaps placed them in contact with the worst aspects of their cultures and themselves, didn’t make them despondent, didn’t kill their capacity for literary pleasure” (235). It is probably best not to encourage students in a style where the best practitioners of that style need to be complimented on their stunning avoidance (but not always) of the despondency that the style necessarily tempts.

I should be clear that I do not decry the fact that in academic criticism “the philosophical impulse gets an extra charge.” I believe there is good reason for this, if also slight cause for concern, in line with Edmundson’s. Edmundson’s explanation of figurative language and metaphor making being impossible to teach is part of the picture, but there are also reasons for elevating the “philosophical impulse” in criticism which speak for the beauty of scholarship and academic rigor, accomplished pedagogy, and the hopeful cultivation of intelligence.

## VI.

The three essays that comprise this thesis are distinct in their subject matter and approach, and should be considered as discrete and unrelated essays or attempts of literary criticism. No thematic, methodological or theoretical thread can be tied between them without an unproductive stretch. If they present any common mood or narrative—the groping after of which being required by their grouping—hopefully it is that they all attempt to take on what Nussbaum describes as “the highest and hardest task” of making ourselves people on whom less is lost. Another common mood of the essays might be the disquiet of the writer struggling with the tension between scholarship and taste discussed above; struggling with the tension between the rightful and formidable demands of the former and the young reader’s belief in or disposition toward the latter. The disquiet of a writer struggling is in itself obviously nothing worth mentioning, as common as raindrops on a rainy day. But since this introduction seems to have found its way to a description, through Edmundson, of the academic preference for scholarship over taste in matters of literary criticism, and the potential implications thereof, it is worth pointing out that the tension of this preference was one the writer of these essays likely experienced (though if

we dwelt on the tensions and contradictions of writing scholarship, or on the sheer proliferation of scholarship and writing in general, graduate students would be yet more unendurable, and no one would have any time to read or write the criticism that we do in the end, often wholeheartedly, find to be necessary and worthwhile).

The first essay in this thesis is on *Measure for Measure*, a play in five acts by the poet and playwright William Shakespeare. One of the wonderful things in writing about Shakespeare—and in writing about each of the writers that these essays take up, in writing about great writers—is that you do not have to worry, to use Cavell’s language, about getting the news out that deeds of glory have been committed. Deeds of glory *have* been committed. The question is then where do we go from there? Where *can* we go from there? In this essay, I explore an idea of clear-sightedness as an exemplary moral awareness of oneself and one’s community. I argue that the play encourages such a consideration in no small measure through the conspicuous absence of such an awareness in the characters themselves. I suggest that Shakespeare’s Vienna represents a thorough vision of moral relativism or pluralism, and introduce Isaiah Berlin’s concept of the plurality and incommensurability of values and Melanie Klein’s concept of the depressive position in order to deepen an understanding of such a world, and to interrogate the moral and political approaches that such a world may necessitate. I close the essay by exploring the qualities in Duke Vincentio that seem conducive to clear-sightedness but which ultimately fall short of such an awareness and understanding, encouraging again some of the contemplative and political qualities the play’s world so sorely lacks.

The next essay is a study of Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*. I begin the first part of the essay by exploring some of Woolf's general social and political concerns. These concerns lead to a discussion of Woolf's preoccupation with the nature of identity, as this subject presents a potentially important convergence of Woolf's social and political interests with her aesthetic project. Keeping in mind how it may be obliquely related to a politically relevant social ideal, the original and remarkable portrayal of identity in *The Waves* is discussed, with emphasis placed on what is demonstrated in this novel with regard to the processes of identity that are fundamental to all human experiences of identity, rather than processes merely fundamental to extreme experiences of identity formation or breakdown. In the second part of the essay, I introduce psychoanalytic theories and concepts, in particular Freud's concept of primary narcissism and Julia Kristeva's elaboration of it. These theories and narratives are explored in order to question whether, as forms of perception, they may allow us to understand, or help to confirm, aspects of the nature of identity and its demonstration in *The Waves*. While keeping *The Waves* in mind, the essay closes with a reminder about the limits of theory and the mystery of identity, and speculation on the role of fiction in each.

The first two essays in this thesis likely toe the line between scholarship and taste. They try on scholarship's shining armor. If it is likely that neither of them perform their analyses with the historical depth, philosophical rigor, or interpretive sophistication needed to stand out in that armor, if they perhaps resort to matters of opinion or general speculation too quickly, and employ concepts too loosely defined, they nevertheless do admire that armor greatly and they aspire to participate in scholarship's realm.<sup>26</sup> The third

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<sup>26</sup> As one reader astutely observed, taste is what parades about in armor, whereas scholarship's armor is blood-spattered and dented.

and final essay of this thesis does not attempt to adopt the glorious research and rigor of scholarship, and would seem to fall exclusively into the category of taste. The essay is on the Canadian writer Alice Munro, and it arises almost entirely out of a reading of Munro's stories. There are a few other writers quoted in the essay, but this is somewhat incidental, and these outside passages and ideas are intended simply to bring into starker relief the attributes in Munro's work that I find particularly salient or beautiful. The essay is an appreciation of Munro. It explores her approach to writing in the larger context of one possible approach to art, and suggests that her style uniquely, perhaps incidentally, presents the reader with a remarkable encounter with allegorical and symbolic understanding, with both the enriching and the potentially alienating dimensions of such an understanding.

Before moving on to the essays themselves, it should be acknowledged that, as Greta should have realized that Peter's hands off and tolerant attitude was a blessing for her as a poet, we live in something of a blessed society (I ought also to mention again how grateful I am for having been given the opportunity to read and study at the graduate level in an institutional setting). Any society where art and criticism are free and tolerated and where, through education, they are even actively encouraged is, in that small way at least, blessed. This acknowledgement can be difficult for many reasons, not least of which being the prevalence of hardship, injustice, inequality, greed, and irreconcilable difference. For those relatively few invested in literature and criticism this acknowledgement can also be difficult because criticism is usually wildly demanding, of both individuals and communities, and because, like Greta's poetry, it is generally



concerned with things “in no way cheerful or easy to explain.” But it is, perhaps, a necessary acknowledgement, lest we forget the alternative.

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“Till you have heard me in my true complaint”:  
(Failure of) Awareness and Community in *Measure for Measure*

This will last out a night in Russia  
When nights are longest there. I'll take my leave,  
And leave you to the hearing of the cause,  
Hoping you'll find good cause to whip them all.

*Measure for Measure*, II.i.134-137

A very good exposure of the want of self-knowledge and contempt for others, which is so common in the world, is put into the mouth of Abhorson, the jailor, when the Provost proposes to associate Pompey with him in his office—“A bawd, sir? Fie upon him, he will discredit our mystery.”

William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*

I.

Shakespeare's genius or mastery resides in part, W.H. Auden suggested, in his ability to devote himself to art while never failing to acknowledge and demonstrate art's frivolity and minor role in human life. It also resides in a clear-sightedness that never reposes in cynicism. Clear-sightedness and the ability to articulate an understanding of the world that displays this gift or achievement are, of course, two different things. Failure in expression does not necessarily reflect failure of understanding, however frequently we encounter examples to the contrary. Wisdom might take any number of paths, many of them without a commitment to communication and none of them with a guarantee that disclosure of what is experienced and learned along the way will be successful, or even possible. Yet the creation of other worlds, in various mediums and forms and always, however displaced, reflecting the world that we share, seems to be, for some, the necessary precondition for communicating truthfully the dynamic, institutionalized, and impossibly complex social relations which are the soil and watchtower of any and all personal experience. As Iris Murdoch writes, “Art [i.e., the creation of worlds through various mediums and forms] presents the most comprehensible examples of the almost

irresistible human tendency to seek consolation in fantasy and also of the effort to resist this [*mere* consolation, and *misperception*, through fantasy] and the vision of reality which comes with success. Success in fact is rare” (62-63).

In speaking of “clear-sightedness” at the outset of this essay, we do well to define the term. We doubt, however, that we can do so adequately. “[T]he human psyche finds the apprehension of reality extraordinarily difficult,” we might say, along with Richard Todd in his work on Murdoch and Shakespeare, and leave it there (28); or, to repeat Murdoch again, “success in fact is rare.” Apprehension of reality is always problematic, transitory and contingent as the reality it seeks to apprehend. Yet it is nevertheless preferable to the alternatives of fantasy, illusion, and ignorance. The relation of clear-sightedness to, even its near equivalence with, understanding, gift, achievement, and wisdom is as far as we might be able to go in defining the term. We should also add, though, that clear-sightedness is always the experience and domain, we might say privilege, of a unique individual, developed to be sure through interpersonal and environmental relations and encounters, but fundamentally personal and private. Why is it so difficult to define clear-sightedness? Where to begin, we might answer. This passage from Iris Murdoch seems to carry significant weight in hopefully a helpful direction:

The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. In some ways it resembles a machine; in order to operate it needs sources of energy, and it is predisposed to certain patterns of activity. The area of its vaunted freedom of choice is not usually very great.... It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. Even its loving is more often than not an assertion of self.... That human life has no external point or [telos] is a view as difficult to argue as its opposite, and I shall simply assert it. I can see no evidence to suggest that human life is not something self-contained. There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search. *We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and change....* Our destiny can be examined, but it cannot be justified or totally explained. *We are simply here.* (76-77; emphasis added)

This essay considers how the absence of clear-sighted characters in *Measure for Measure* contributes to the play's events, and to the characters' concerns and conduct. What does this absence convey about individual experience and about the workings of society so clearly under examination and presented for examination?<sup>27</sup> First, I will consider why some characters in the play may approach—and why some scholars claim they embody—clear-sightedness, and why they nonetheless fail to achieve it. Next, citing the work of several prominent Shakespeare scholars, I will suggest that the play's world is a thorough vision of moral relativism or pluralism, and will explore how the themes of justice and judgment are presented in and complicated by such a vision. Relying on essays by Meredith Skura and Ronald Macdonald, I next seek to establish my claim that the absence of clear-sighted characters in the play works to encourage contemplation of, and in fact effectively calls for, clear-sightedness. I will then introduce Isaiah Berlin's concept of the plurality and incommensurability of values and Melanie Klein's concept of the depressive position. In part in order to deepen an understanding of the kinds of conceptual frameworks and cognitive processes that may sometimes contribute to a more accurate apprehension of reality; in part in order to interrogate characters and events in the play as either adhering to or rejecting the experiences and understandings which Berlin and Klein champion as developmentally desirable, ethically necessary, and politically true or pragmatic. And finally I will explore the character of Duke Vincentio,

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<sup>27</sup> If also, of course, presented for entertainment, laughs, and to “make a living.” As Philip Larkin writes: “As a member of these companies [Lord Chamberlain's Men in the reign of Elizabeth and the King's Men under James], and as a shareholder in them, Shakespeare eventually enjoyed a prosperous career, but this was done by writing plays that pleased his audiences; and if we speculate what his plays would have been like if he hadn't had to please them, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they wouldn't have been as good.... [T]here was no opportunity for Shakespeare to make money simply by being Shakespeare even in his own country” (91).

who possesses a refined sensibility and a distinguished knowledge of the community in addition to his privileged authority; a combination that might seemingly lead to clear-sightedness. But the Duke's failings in this regard are instructive in confirming just how difficult such perception and practice is. His failings also confirm the claim that the absence of clear-sighted understanding in *Measure for Measure* does suggest, if not demand, its cultivation.

## II.

For the sake of argument, let us consider some of the candidates for clear-sightedness that the play presents. Certain scholars would have us believe, passionately in some cases, that it is Barnardine, the imprisoned convict and murderer, who is the play's clear-sighted character. He is the only character, Harold Bloom writes, "who has the wisdom to stay perpetually drunk because to be sober in this mad play is to be madder than the maddest" (359). "In this world of tottering values and disordered will," A. P. Rossiter writes, "Barnardine stands out as admirable" (56). Harold Goddard suggests that, "The more we meditate on Barnardine the more he acquires the character of a vast symbol, the key perhaps to all our troubles" (42). For Goddard, "it is the more insidiously personal bondages to power that should concern us first," and Barnardine has not only acknowledged this primary concern, he has found a seemingly clear-sighted existential and political solution to it:

If we do not want a world presided over by a thundering Jove... and under him a million pelting petty officers and their understudies, and under *them* millions of their victims, we must renounce Power as our god—Power and all his ways.... Revolution against authority—as Isabella, for all her great speech, did not perceive, and as Barnardine did—begins at home. Let men in sufficient numbers turn into Barnardines, who want to run no one else but will not *be* run by anyone, even to the gallows, and what would be left for the pelting petty officers, and finally for Jove himself, but to follow suit? There would be revolution indeed.... We may growl... with Barnardine at all intruders on our daydreams, and learn with him that even in a prison life may be lived—



independently. Why wait, as modern gospels preach, until we are out of prison before beginning to live? “Now is a time.” (41-42)

While it may be true, as Goddard believes, that Barnardine possesses the great virtue of tempting “the imagination to play around him,” and while he may even have “earned his nap” by foregoing the cycles of “professing and pretend” which ceaselessly perpetuate deceit and misunderstanding if not outright injustice in the world (40), a drunken resignation, however principled and fulfilling, cannot embody clear-sightedness. If Barnardine as vast symbol is key to all our troubles then clear-sightedness effectively ceases to be a privileged ethical pursuit. Yet we read and study Shakespeare in our schools, and sometimes attend his plays, because, despite all, our society is fundamentally organized in a way that does acknowledge clear-sightedness as a privileged, worthwhile and ethical pursuit. Perhaps there is truth, indeed some clear-sightedness, in Barnardine’s position. But it is a position that by renouncing the discipline and awareness required to understand itself *in relation* to others and to society absents itself from the necessarily dynamic and developing environment that may give it an honest or valued status. Clear-sightedness must entail attentiveness to changing relations and circumstances. To reach independence in a prison, Barnardine forgets, firstly requires a prison, not to mention the previous stages of utter helplessness and dependence which have now resulted in a bottle being always at hand. “He is a fine antithesis to the morality and the hypocrisy of the other characters of the play,” William Hazlitt writes (141). “[H]e is the one positive: man without a mask, entirely assured, unstrippable, ‘complete’,” Rossiter writes (57). He is not clear-sighted.

Another candidate for clear-sightedness is Pompey, the clownish bawd and apprentice hangman. The jester archetype—the undeniably lucid wit, admitting to

frivolity while carving up customs and conceits with knife and fork, all the while evading cynicism through a surfeit of merriment—might be argued to be the closest of kin to the author in a number of Shakespeare’s plays. And while it is true that Pompey might have evinced a Falstaffian clear-sightedness had he been allowed to continue the defense of his ways and means after admitting to the Duke the partial stink of his occupation (III.iii.283), as he stands we must deny him that corporeal manner of self-interested intelligence. No one whom we have seen on stage entreat a man such as Lucio<sup>28</sup> with such pitiful results could we describe as clear-sighted, even if he does offer, like Barnardine, some of the most clear-sighted lines of the play: “Truly, sir, I am a poor fellow that would live” (II.i.199).

The Duke is perhaps the most obvious candidate for clear-sightedness in the play, living out a singularly privileged campaign of knowing, one immensely different from that of Barnardine or Pompey or any other character. Yet while the Duke’s manner of understanding and inhabiting the world of the play clearly represents a distinction in awareness, of himself and of the community, he too falls short of what we could describe as clear-sightedness; this will be addressed in more detail later in the essay. For now at least, our claim stands: there are no clear-sighted characters in *Measure for Measure*.

### III.

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<sup>28</sup> Lucio is not included in this essay’s short list of potentially clear-sighted characters up for examination. Of all the critics I have read, it seems that only Bloom would object to this and might advocate for his inclusion on the list: Bloom asserts that, excepting the great Barnardine, Lucio is “the only rational and sympathetic character in this absurdist comedy” (370); Bloom also compares Lucio to a modern-day celebrity journalist. The validity of this latter comparison seems a good enough defense of why I feel he is not worthy of consideration as potentially clear-sighted, even if his lies do “ring out some wounding truths” (371). Rossiter seems to agree, claiming that “Lucio and his fellow-gentlemen” stand for both “defense-reaction” and “the index of a potential or real hardness of sensibility” (48)—which is clearly inimical to the potential or real suppleness of sensibility that this essay associates with clear-sightedness.

What is the understanding of the world that *Measure for Measure* conveys and how does it do so? Ambiguity, ambivalence, and compromise are watchwords within the criticism on the play, and we might say that it offers a thorough vision of moral relativism or pluralism,<sup>29</sup> especially with regard to the morality of authority or power and the morality of sexuality. A. P. Rossiter writes that in considering *Measure for Measure*, “nobody questions that justice is on trial” (46). In other words, nobody questions that the play compels one to consider what it would mean, and what it would look like, for justice to be served in this world; to ask whether it is being served or not, and what would need to change for it to be; to consider what would be the just treatment of, and the just conclusion for, each character. This perspective might be brought to bear on any community. These questions might be asked of any community. Justice is, from the vantage that invests in it, never not on trial (if obviously not always at the forefront of any one mind, or of general discourse).

In the opening of his essay on *Measure for Measure*, Goddard writes that, “The entire play might be said to have been written just to italicize the lie [spoken by Angelo]” (24): “It is the law, not I, condemn your brother” (II.ii.82). In other words, of course it is the individual or the group of individuals, and not the law, that in the end judges and condemns; for there is no law at all without the expression and enactment of it, without

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<sup>29</sup> “One way of defining relativism is as a form of subjectivism or moral irrationalism. This is how Berlin defined it in his attempts to refute the charge of relativism brought against pluralism.... Pluralism, on the other hand, as Berlin defines it, holds that communication and understanding of moral views is possible among all people.... Relativism, in Berlin’s definition, would make moral communication impossible; while pluralism vindicates the possibility of (and acceptance of pluralism may facilitate) moral communication.... Yet another way of defining relativism is to view it as holding that things have value only *relative* to particular situations; nothing is intrinsically good—that is, valuable in and for itself as an end in itself. A slightly different way of putting this would be to maintain that there are no such things as values that are always valid; values are valid in some cases, but not others.... Berlin’s pluralism seems opposed to relativism, since it is premised on a belief that, for human beings, at least some values are intrinsically rather than instrumentally good, and that at least some values are universally valid, even if others aren’t—and even if this universal validity isn’t recognized” (Cherniss).

the exercise of an individual's or group's judgment and condemnation. This is plain as day in *Measure for Measure*, as Goddard's shrewd and succinct commentary indicates. It is undeniably *we* who have built the stages and the courtrooms, *we* who are the ones that maintain and reproduce them (and reproduce within them). We are judging creatures, and judgment, whether sanctioned and authoritative or intimate and immaterial, is a fundamental shaping element of every society and of each unique inner life.

But what is the foundation upon which the state's legal apparatus is erected so that it can issue decrees, and what is the ground upon which we stand when we exercise discernment? *Measure for Measure* seems to suggest that they are foundations and grounds with the mere appearance of stability. Foundations and grounds never immune to the elements, never without risk of cracking and crumbling, a solid plateau becoming a swamp without warning. "The play thus centers on the question of whether judging is possible at all," Marjorie Garber writes. "From what vantage point can one fallible human being judge another, mete out measure for measure?" (569). From the vantage of *law* is one reply. Law and law enforcement by and through legal and cultural means, however flawed, as an absolute necessity of human life: "this play suggests that human nature is why human beings need laws" (576). But the laws are of course, as Goddard stresses, merely extensions, appendages of human activity, and the law would turn into a scarecrow without the heart and blood of human activity, attention and care.<sup>30</sup> Angelo, not the law, sentenced Claudio to death. As Claudio remarks: "Thus can the demigod Authority / Make us pay down for our offence, by weight, / The bonds of heaven. On whom it will, it will; / On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just" (I.ii.100-103). And so it

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<sup>30</sup> Angelo: "We must not make a scarecrow of the law, / Setting it up to fear the birds of prey, / And let it keep one shape till custom make it / Their perch, and not their terror" (II.i.1-4).

goes, on and on and on, “living” law animated by imperfect, to say the least, human activity, and always on the verge of morphing into a mere scarecrow lest something in that activity change. In the world of *Measure for Measure*, the imperfect human activity behind the law appears so outrageous that intelligent critics hold up as admirable, in all sincerity, a stubborn drunk murderer who sleeps twenty hours a day.<sup>31</sup>

#### IV.

In an acknowledgment of the absence of clear-sighted understanding in *Measure for Measure*, Meredith Skura writes, “The real problem in this play is not... easily formulated, nor is it ever summarized in neat statements by the characters, *who always seem to be thinking about the wrong problems*” (41; emphasis added). She goes on to say that the understanding the play begs us to approach, the question(s) it begs us to consider, “is not defined by the explicit question at the beginning of the play, ‘How do we make people obey the laws?’ Nor even by the more subtle question we are left with at the end of the play, ‘How can we make sure the laws are administered with mercy?’ It is a deeper question about the very nature of law itself—and about the nature of mercy” (41-42). Skura suggests that the questions surrounding this play that critics have most frequently considered, or the ones they have most frequently asserted the play requires us to consider, have missed the boat. These questions can be grouped into two general categories. Critics have dealt, on the one hand, primarily with the difficulties of governing a body politic, which Skura’s shallower questions above represent; and on the other hand the critic’s questions have dealt primarily with the repression and containment

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<sup>31</sup> Reminiscent, as Philip Larkin writes, of, “That forlorn hope recurrent through all the later D. H. Lawrence that if only a few people, somewhere, somehow, would ‘let go of the social lie’, machine civilization would perish of itself” (118-119).

of sexuality, with social organization that will inevitably do so in some manner, and with a certain desire that seems innately to resist repression or containment.<sup>32</sup> Skura pointedly calls out the critical preoccupation with these questions and suggests the more urgent question(s) and realities of which they are the trace and symptom:

It's clear that an obsession with law and appetite distracts from the real problems. The real sin in Vienna is not indulgence of appetite but the detachment from all human feeling which such liberty may lead to—a detachment, however, which can come from too much restraint as well as too much liberty. *Questions of law distract from questions about how well people know themselves and each other, and how well they treat themselves and each other.* The real sin is a refusal to participate in human exchange—a failure both to recognize what other people are saying and feeling, *and* also to recognize one's own active role and to take responsibility for one's actions, to be *there*. (43; first emphasis added)

Skura's assessment of a "failing to be *there*" in the play's characters is akin to this essay's preoccupation with the absence of clear-sightedness. And her thoughts on what being *there* would entail are pertinent to our ongoing consideration of what it would mean to be clear-sighted.

In his essay on *Measure for Measure*, Ronald Macdonald also identifies at the heart of the play, though in different terms than Skura, a wish or petition for an embodied lucidity (also akin to clear-sightedness) that truly participates in the messiness of human exchange. He believes that the play demonstrates a wish or petition for an awareness that acknowledges the difficult entanglement of the various lives (bodies) and values (ideas) of this world—*wished and petitioned for through the dramatization of the absence of this awareness in the characters themselves*. Justice and mercy, Macdonald writes, "are not the work of the mind merely, for they involve, in a way the play makes terribly concrete, the body as well.... And while we must reject the attempt to make *Measure for Measure* yield up a univocal message about justice and mercy..., we can say that it continually

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<sup>32</sup> The problem that the play portrays and "seems to offer no hope of mediating between pure and unbridled lust... and an absolute and equally uncompromising abstinence" (Macdonald 266).

returns to the idea of incarnation (but not to the Incarnation), to the word made flesh and the flesh made word, to the body not as a philosophical abstraction but in all its organic bluntness” (279). The dramatization of some characters as being hardly anything else than “organically blunt”<sup>33</sup> and others as endlessly intellectualizing away or evading this corporeal reality through circular and/or self-interested logic<sup>34</sup> foregrounds the difficulty of developing a true conception of the complex relations and driving forces which propel this world—any world—forward. Added to this, again, is the conspicuous absence of a single character who is able to truthfully comprehend and embrace these contradictions and conflicts in a sustained manner, or a character who even wishes or attempts to do so. The great difficulty in developing a conception of the complex relations between corporeal and abstract matters is then something that the spectator/reader is asked, if not forced, to consider:<sup>35</sup> how might we become more genuinely aware of these relations and forces, and more considerate of each individual’s unique needs, desires and complaints within society? Since no one seems capable of this awareness and consideration in the play, does this signal the impossibility of ever reaching such clear-sightedness? Or does it suggest an imperative that we seek it out, however difficult?

None of the characters in the play seem to be *there*, in Skura’s sense of an ethical and political imperative or ideal, open to and conscious of the unique experiences and constitutions of the other characters. None of the characters, that is, seem to inhabit the community with anything approaching a truthful or open awareness of the complex and

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<sup>33</sup> Pompey: “I’ll be supposed upon a book his face is the worst thing about him. Good, then—if his face be the worst thing about him, how could Master Froth do the constable’s wife any harm? I would know that of your honor” (II.i.140-143).

<sup>34</sup> The Duke coming upon Pompey and Elbow: “O heavens, what stuff is here?” (III.i.262). Lucio on Angelo: “one who never feels / The wanton stings and motions of the sense, / But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge / With profits of the mind, study, and fast” (I.iv.57-60).

<sup>35</sup> At the same time, of course, that we are asked and compelled to laugh, and to enjoy ourselves.

unstable human motives, passions and values of the others; nor do any of them possess a desire to reach such an awareness, to say nothing of the patience and intelligence it would require. The reasons for this seem to be unique to each character, though many of them, and particularly Angelo and Isabella, are “desperately embroiled in attempts to evade their own human complexity by making the self the site of an abstraction” (Macdonald 275). The characters refuse to acknowledge the fundamental reality of the plurality and incommensurability of values in society and in others, and also within themselves. For Berlin, as Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy write,

When two or more values clash, it does not mean that one or another has been misunderstood; nor can it be said, *a priori*, that any one value is always more important than another. . . . Conflicts of values are “an intrinsic, irremovable part of human life”; the idea of total human fulfillment is a chimera. “These collisions of values are of the essence of what they are and what we are”; a world in which such conflicts are resolved is not the world we know or understand.

There is no question that these constant collisions, and the mutable, situational or relative hierarchy of values that results, can create a sense of unknowability: “as the glasses where they view themselves, / Which are as easily broke as they make forms,” as Isabella says (II.iv.125-126). But that is just the point: “*a world in which such conflicts are resolved is not the world we know or understand.*” Fragility and conflict *is* the world we know and understand; or rather, it is how we must conceive of the world if we are to know or understand anything at all. And this conception is one that the characters in the play, for the most part, struggle to arrive at, if not prominently dismiss.

The risk in striving for understanding with the aid of this conception is that everything becomes, to quote Isabella again, “Seeming, seeming!” (II.iv.150). But, for Berlin at least, the core of his thought “was his insistence on the importance of humanity, or the distinctively human, both as a category and as a moral reality, which does not need to be reduced to an unvarying essence in order to have descriptive and normative force”



(Cherniss). This is just what the play illustrates: the moral reality of society is anything but essential; but it is also plain as day that morality exists and that it is an (dis)ordering force, begging to be considered and addressed.<sup>36</sup> Isabella conveys no small truth in the oft-quoted passage: “But man, proud man, / Dressed in a little brief authority, / Most ignorant of what he’s most assured, / His glassy essence, like an angry ape / Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven” (II.ii.120-124). And, Shakespeare unfailingly demonstrates, *all these tricks are human*.

The refusal or inability of the characters in *Measure for Measure* to genuinely acknowledge the plurality and incommensurability of values—or, at least, to productively employ or act in accordance with such an acknowledgement—might also be described, in psychoanalytic terms, as a refusal to inhabit the depressive position. More accurately, as a failure to *work through* the depressive position. Originally theorized by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, a simplified understanding of the concept or “position” can be described as “a state of mind that can accommodate complexity and ambivalence” (Kurtz 126).<sup>37</sup>

The idea is an attempt to conceptually understand a way of being and growing and relating to others that the individual must necessarily, at different times, experience if

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<sup>36</sup> The play also beautifully suggests how this may in no small part be based upon or developed within (the essentials of?) biology and/or sexuality: Pompey: “Does your worship mean to geld and spay all the youth of the city?” (II.i.205); Lucio: “But it is impossible to extirp it quite, friar, till eating and drinking be put down” (III.i.348-349). This poses interesting parallels with the psychoanalytic theories of development addressed in the next paragraph: “Klein believed that this desire to know was focused initially, in the minds of infants, on the primary ‘facts of life’... of gender, generation and mortality. Klein followed Freud in this respect, in holding that it was sexual preoccupations, concerning the relationships between parents and children, that were the initial drivers of the child’s desire to know and understand” (Rustin 149).

<sup>37</sup> “This concept of ‘position’ conveys a whole complex interplay of anxieties and defences, and Klein suggests this enables us to think across the whole life cycle rather than to locate these problems as ‘phases’ of... development” (Rustin 59). “It is important to note that the ‘depressive position’ in Klein is an internal state full of anxiety about the hatred felt towards objects. This ‘position’, dominated by unconscious phantasy, can easily be confused with its resolution into a state of mind where ‘depressive anxiety’ mutates into actual concern for others, and the capacity to give real reparative expression to this. ‘The depressive position’ in Klein’s theory is *a step in the direction of emotional and psychological integration*—it has to be ‘worked through’—it is not a state of perfect integration” (Rustin 137; emphasis added).

they are to reach a clear-sighted understanding of social reality. Or, more simply, the concept of the depressive position is an attempt to acknowledge certain requirements and experiences that constitute what is understood as healthy development.

In the concept of the depressive position Berlin's notion of the necessity of conflict and often irreconcilable disagreement between individuals and groups is mirrored and supplemented by a notion of the necessity of ambivalence and balance within the individual: "The tremendous importance of balance in all the major ideas that inform Klein's thinking is visible [in the depressive position]: love and hate go together, as do guilt and repair, anxiety as a painful affect and as a stimulus to development" (Rustin 63).<sup>38</sup> As with Berlin's understanding of the incommensurability of values, Klein's understanding of the depressive position and its role in development has deep ethical implications: "central to the depressive position is an extended conception of moral capability, based on the wish to make reparation to the other or 'object' for the harm imagined or believed to have been inflicted by the self. Ethical impulses—the desire to do good to others (and also to care for the self)—are thus for Klein based not only on rules imposed by the conscience or primitive superego, but also on dispositions to love and restore" (Rustin 129). In the Vienna of *Measure for Measure*, however, most of the characters actively avoid or deny such a state where ambivalence can be recognized and worked through; thus they foreclose, to no one's gain, the discovery of or development

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<sup>38</sup> It is relevant to state that, as Adam Phillips writes, "Ambivalence does not, in the Freudian story [and this holds true, as I understand it, for the Kleinian story also], mean mixed feelings, it means opposing feelings. 'Ambivalence has to be distinguished from having mixed feelings about someone.... It refers to an underlying emotional attitude in which the contradictory attitudes derive from a common source and are interdependent....' Love and hate—a too simple vocabulary, and so never quite the right names—are the common source, the elemental feelings with which we apprehend the world; they are interdependent in the sense that you can't have one without the other, and that they mutually inform each other" (1).

toward an ability to achieve clear-sighted understanding of their relations with their contemporaries and society.

Macdonald identifies this penchant for avoidance or denial of what here we are contemplating as the depressive position in Angelo in particular: “It is clear that [Angelo’s] drive to associate himself with impersonal principles above the sweaty disputes of ordinary men has a defensive character and is an example of the strategy of denying by embracing the opposite [rather than embracing both opposites, as the depressive position entails], a strategy characteristic of reaction-formation” (273).

Continuing and expanding this line of thought, Macdonald writes that “allegorization in Shakespeare’s characters may be understood as their attempt... to dispose of the problems our stubbornly incarnate existence, with its vagaries of desire or gusts of anger, perhaps above all with its vulnerability to pain, is constantly posing” (276). And any attempt to *dispose of* rather than *acknowledge* these problems and realities, in ourselves and in others, effectively restricts the characters’ abilities—anyone’s abilities—to potentially address them and the myriad other difficulties associated with communal life.<sup>39</sup>

## V. (Intermezzo)

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<sup>39</sup> “The ability to see others as complex beings... is... essential for constructive engagement in group life. It is one of the things that begin to make it possible for people to come together to work, with time and effort, on a shared approach to a problem. Without this ability in some or many of the members of a group, collectives fall prey to them-and-us thinking, either breaking up into cliques or small groups within a group, or organizing themselves around the perception of an external enemy. *An important point to be made here is that the developmental tasks associated with the depressive position are not seen as things we do once and for all and never go back to. We do not achieve the ability to bear complexity and ambiguity for good. Instead these tasks are conceptualized within psychoanalysis as themes that re-emerge throughout the life cycle, and most particularly at times of stress and development*” (Kurtz 127; emphasis added).

Harold Bloom writes that he knows of no other “eminent work of Western literature that is nearly as nihilistic as *Measure for Measure*” (380). He also writes that the Duke’s Vienna is nothing other than “Shakespeare’s London, or our New York City, or any other vital disorder of the human” (374). Although it is clearly true that a vision of vital disorder is presented in *Measure for Measure*, a disorder that may invite nihilism, this essay suggests that the play nevertheless enables us to witness, and even begs us to consider, how this disorder might be more gracefully understood and attended to.<sup>40</sup> Yes it is true, as Bloom writes, that “*Measure for Measure*, the threshold to *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, harbors a deeper distrust of nature, reason, society, and revelation than the ensuing tragedies manifest” (364); but it also goes a long way in illustrating the only possible path towards revelation which refuses nihilism in a world where nature, reason, and society are what they are.

## VI.

We turn to Duke Vincentio, the character who, on the surface at least, possesses the strongest claim for comprehensive awareness of Vienna’s social life. But the Duke’s *there-ness*, to return to Skura’s concept, seems to suggest a distinct absence or failure as much as any success or achievement. It suggests the deficiency of an awareness based on formulas, machination and presumed control, and thus of a degraded participation and mistaken responsibility. The Duke’s manner of *there-ness* culminates not in reconciliation or productive resolution, as in most of the comedies, but in the mere staving off of tragedy (Macdonald 269). In contending that there are no clear-sighted characters in the play, and that through this absence the play discreetly stakes its ethical

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<sup>40</sup> That is, how it might be inhabited, inclusive of attempts towards improvement or justice or mercy, with clear-sightedness.

and moral claims, we do well to examine how this most privileged character makes his way.

Bloom claims that the Duke “speaks [only] for the Duke, for a savage reductionist who has emptied life of all value” (372). He writes that, “Vincentio has neither Hamlet’s transcendent mind nor Iago’s diabolical will, yet he seethes with Hamlet’s sexual malaise and with Iago’s drive to manipulate others, to weave his own web” (374). Yet, as Marjorie Garber reminds us, “There was a time in critical history when the Duke in *Measure for Measure* was seen as a godlike playwright figure, a precursor to Prospero in *The Tempest*, ordering the lives of all the other characters, making sure that things come out right in the end” (565). It cannot be denied that he is the catalyzing figure of the play; his supposed departure reveals the disorder of Vienna, even if it is clear that the disorder has always been present. Nor can it be denied that he is the most knowledgeable character in the play, possessed of the keenest awareness, or that he displays moments of brilliance and wisdom, and even, perhaps, compassion. Depending on how the play is staged, we may be inclined to trust him in his pronouncement on his own rule: “Let him be but testimonied in his own bringings-forth, and he shall appear to the envious a scholar, a statesman, and a soldier” (III.i.382-384); or Escalus in his pronouncement on Vincentio’s fidelity to a philosophical imperative that is intimately related to elements of Klein’s concept of the depressive position: “One that, above all other strifes, contended especially to know himself” (III.i.456-457).

It is a truism that there is a difference between “the stage and the page.” But in the character of the Duke—who, as Hazlitt writes, “makes a very imposing and mysterious stage character” (141)—this difference has the potential to produce radically different

meanings. Differences of perhaps greater consequence than the usual variations of interpretation and understanding that can arise from any text or performance, and from *Measure and Measure* in particular. As Rosalind Miles writes:

We cannot accept the Duke simply as part of the... whole, if only because it is impossible to be certain about the quality or even the extent of the irony which is directed at him. Rarely can we see that any of the Duke's acts or statements are clearly, if implicitly, rebuked. We have seen the guarded nature of Shakespeare's treatment of the Duke's early laxity, his withdrawal from ruling, his manner, and his treatment of the other characters. From time to time we may feel, as we do in the scene with Juliet, that the Duke is being deliberately presented as pompous and rather inadequate. At other times it is possible—one cannot be certain—that what may appear pomposity may in fact be consciously exploited by the Duke as an ironic mask; and at times, too, particularly in the final scene, it is clear that the Duke is enjoying an ironic awareness of his situation at the expense of the other characters. At all events the constant fluctuation of tone in Shakespeare's treatment of the Duke is disconcerting in its capacity to leave us not knowing where we really stand, or in what spirit to respond to him. (171)

It seems we must write, then, along with so many other critics, that “the play's central and most puzzling character, the Duke, traverses a space that is at once psychological and theological, and how the audience responds to him will determine much about the tone of any production” (Garber 578). And, “If what we make of the ending depends on what we make of the Duke, then all I can say is that the Duke (like everybody except Barnardine) is ambiguous” (Rossiter 58).

Yet Bloom made no bones about finally making a negative pronouncement on the Duke. Hazlitt calmly asserts that the Duke “is more absorbed in his own plots and gravity than anxious for the welfare of the state; more tenacious of his own character than attentive to the feelings and apprehensions of others” (141). And Marjorie Garber informs us that, “Lately the Duke has not had... good press. If he is a playwright, he is often seen as a failed playwright who cannot keep his actors in order... [and] is often regarded as something of a meddler or busybody, a ruler who may see himself as godlike, but who is mistaken” (565-566).

One interesting defense of the Duke, though, comes from an actor who played him. Daniel Massey writes:

I reject... that the Duke is an amoral manipulator of people's lives. I don't frankly think the text supports such a reading. There is a deal of plotting and scheming, it is true, but, behind the scheming, there is, always, the drive of high moral purpose. And to those who would argue that he is unnaturally obsessed with the necessity to make his scheme succeed, I would answer that he is playing for the highest stakes, playing indeed for his life and the moral regeneration of his city and his subjects. And in obsessions, ends justify means. (203)

This claim rests in Massey's reading of "the integrity of [the Duke's] secret moral purpose" (207) of mercy when he discovers in himself, and in his position, "a tremendous force for good and, even more importantly, the strength with which to implement it" (211). A key interpretation on which Massey's understanding depends, and a key distinction between his reading and that of many other critics, is that for Massey, "when Angelo falls from grace, it is a terrible blow to the Duke, not only on a personal level—the man is his protégé, promoted by himself—but also because Angelo, in a sense, compounds and intensifies his total disillusionment with the past. Not only is his city ablaze with decay and corruption, but the symbol of power at its head is the most corrupted and disgraced of all" (210). Whereas other scholars identify the Duke's knowledge of Angelo's broken compact with Mariana as an indication that the Duke was from the outset expecting, waiting for, and even hoping for trouble to ensue, Massey identifies Angelo's failings as a shock to the Duke, and as an incitement towards mercy and a better way forward. Perhaps it is necessary for an actor to develop the most sympathetic reading of the character they become, and Massey's reading is sympathetic if nothing else. Who knows whether or not Bloom would still consider the Duke a less illustrious, significant and lucid mixture of Hamlet and Iago had he seen Massey's performance. Whether we see the Duke, like Massey, as impelled by "the drive of high

moral purpose” or, like Hazlitt, as “more absorbed in his own plots and gravity than anxious for the welfare of the state” is not of so much significance for the purposes of this essay. The indexing of the ambiguity not urgent for our argument. For in either case, the Duke fails to enact or achieve clear-sightedness. Despite a political lucidity that realizes many of the same characteristics.

For whatever one can say about the Duke, and whatever has been said about him, one cannot say that he is not interested in statecraft. His first words, essentially the very first words of the play, are, “Of government the properties to unfold” (I.i.3). And even if he does not immediately unfold them in elaborate terms to the “kindly and humane but weak-kneed Escalus,” as Goddard called him (26), we are made to feel that the Duke very well could unfold them with distinction if he wanted to, and that they are of genuine concern to him. Moreover, his failure to unfold all-encompassing and specific properties, and his subsequent actions and interests, seem entirely consonant with a realist approach to politics. Consonant, according to Cherniss and Hardy, also with some of Isaiah Berlin’s precepts regarding political life: “Berlin disputed the idea that political judgment was a body of knowledge which could be reduced to rules.... Such judgment necessarily involves personal instinct and flair, ‘strokes of unanalysable genius’. In the realm of political action, laws are few and skill is all.” Whether one should regard the Duke’s actions, instincts and flairs as strokes of unanalysable genius is, as our discussion of him so far has shown, up for debate. One cannot deny, though, that they do pertain to governance. In absenting himself at the outset of the play he is clearly demonstrating an investment in political “skill” far more than the letter of any law. As Goddard writes, “He is really not so much giving up his power as increasing it by retaining it in secret form”



(25). We must admit, if we find any honesty at all in the Duke's professed wish to "Pattern in himself to know, / Grace to stand, and virtue go" (III.i.283-284), that he potentially does embody clear-sightedness in his understandings of political reality.

Nor can this political awareness be said simply to be the fruit of the shallow soil of self-interest and the blind desire to have and wield power. The Duke's "Be absolute for death" speech at the beginning of Act III (III.i.5-41) in itself will permit no such reading; there is too much there. Even if, as Bloom writes, "we can make immediate sense neither of the Duke nor his ghostly advice" (370), and even if it is true that, as Rossiter writes, "the Duke absconds from all [the ideas contemplated in the speech] by the end of the play... returning as reinstated Justice (which, within this speech, is just another illusion)" (56), we cannot forget it. Nor can we allow ourselves to forget that it was Duke Vincentio who said it, despite Bloom's assertion that the speech is "dominated by an uncanny eloquence that reverberates far more magnificently out of context than in it" (367). The speech, as Rossiter writes, is

the record of [skepticism's] emotional effects on a mind which wants to believe in human magnificence and the nobleness of life—and cannot.... [Y]et it is never a cynical dismissal of life as sour grapes, nor a self-dramatizing welcome of death with heroic, histrionic gesture.... It takes away all Man's proud additions, honours, titles, claims—even his selfhood and integrity; and the soul and afterlife are not even dismissed as vain hopes.... The only certitudes are existence, uncertainty, disappointment, frustration, old age and death.... It determines an attitude of mind in which tragedy is quite impossible; in its somber light all odds [are] gone. (56)

It takes away even man's selfhood and integrity and posits certitudes only of existence and uncertainty. Over three hundred years before Klein wrote we see Duke Vincentio inhabiting, to work through, some ramifications of the depressive position.<sup>41</sup> And we can

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<sup>41</sup> "Emotional and moral development, in [Klein's] view, depends on the understanding by the self of its different and conflicting desires and beliefs, and on its capacity to reflect on these" (Rustin 137). "[B]asically the integration of the Self is no cause for any mystical or other kind of enthusiasm, but it is a cause for concern; we should be concerned to be more aware of our own destructiveness.... This is the core of the depressive position" (Lesmeister 301).

expect nothing else than for the Duke to abscond from all this, to work through and move on, lest it lead to Barnardine with a crown. Philosophy cannot, to re-emphasize Berlin's point mentioned above, directly guide us in addressing "the concrete situation," cannot teach us exactly how to approach the maintenance of "a precarious equilibrium that avoids, as far as possible, desperate situations and intolerable choices" (Cherniss). The Duke's response to Escalus' question, "What news abroad I'th' world?" is perhaps yet more profound than his speech to Claudio:

None, but that there is so great a fever on goodness that the dissolution of it must cure it. Novelty is only in request, and it is as dangerous to be aged in any kind of course as it is virtuous to be inconstant in any undertaking. There is scarce truth enough alive to make societies secure, but security enough to make fellowships accursed. Much upon this riddle runs the wisdom of the world. This is old enough, yet it is every day's news. (III.1.448-455)

This is the Duke's political instinct and flair articulated. The idea that there is scarce enough truth to make societies secure is a succinct expression of the fundamental reality of the plurality and incommensurability of values, and the idea of virtue in inconstancy, along with the acknowledgement of this "riddle" as daily reality, if not necessarily daily bread, embraces the ongoing necessity for at times returning to and developing from the depressive position.

And yet, despite his skill, his keen instinct and eloquent flair, and all the privileges and glimpses into Viennese society which his crown and disguise grant him, the Duke cannot be said to be clear-sighted. He is too self-obsessed, too confident in his ability to manipulate others and society, and, despite Escalus' claim to the contrary, does not in fact, "above all other strifes," productively or truthfully contend "especially to know himself." The Duke's "Be absolute for death" speech is instructive in this regard: it contains no small amount of truth or clear-sightedness, and "moves with a grandeur that enhances its nihilism, with a sonority that is eternal," as Bloom writes (369). Yet how the

Duke moves outward from this philosophical position and experience represents a failure to properly work through the truths encountered; for the Duke fails to acknowledge his reliance upon the contingent world and others within that world for his own identity and experience. Yes, the world is one where “Thou art not certain, / For thy complexion shifts to strange effects / After the moon” (III.i.23-25), but it is one where these shifts take on abundant—and moral—meaning because they take place in relation to the concrete reality of, and shifts of and within, other people. By all but ignoring the inner drives and experiences of the other characters, the Duke disregards how each individual in Vienna navigates the world of “skyey influences” each in a distinctive way, with unique experiences, value structures, desires and complaints. Perhaps this is the inevitable result of one who imagines they bear “the sword of heaven,” but his ignorance and blindness is nevertheless real. The Duke, Skura writes, “thinks that nearly all meanings can be shifted, that sermons can be preached more for effect than for content, that lying references can be the means to some other truth—but that there is still and always the duke’s own seal, the symbol of absolute and unquestioned authority” (54). The clear-sightedness which the play allows us to approach or glimpse, though it is absent from the play’s own world, reveals how obstinately the Duke clings to falsehoods (despite briefly recognizing them as such). In Kleinian terms, the Duke may at times inhabit the depressive position, but he subsequently directs his concern toward preserving the self rather than other people, who, in a more successful working through of the depressive position, he would desire to care for (in no small part through the recognition that other people make up no small part of the self). Perhaps Berlin’s following wishful political imperative helps to place the Duke’s failings in starker relief:

Let us have the courage of our admitted ignorance, of our doubts and uncertainties. At least we can try to discover what others [...] require, by [...] making it possible for ourselves to know men as they truly are, by listening to them carefully and sympathetically, and understanding them and their lives and their needs, one by one individually. Let us try to provide them with what they ask for, and leave them as free as possible. (qtd. in Cherniss)

The Duke momentarily admits to ignorance, to doubts and uncertainties, and even works through them in his way. But he lacks an understanding of the role others play in the formation of the self, and lacks the courage to bring his more elemental experiences to bear on his political and social reality. And it is no surprise that to be clear-sighted in a world where “Lie hid more thousand deaths” (III.i.40) would require one to be, in part, inordinately, perhaps absurdly, courageous.

## VII.

So we return to the following questions: How does the absence of clear-sighted understanding in any of the characters determine their conduct, and what does this absence convey about the workings of society so clearly under examination and presented for examination? How might we become more genuinely aware of the relations and inner forces that propel individuals and groups forward, and more considerate of each individual's unique needs, desires and complaints within society? Since no one seems capable of this awareness and consideration in the play, does this signal the impossibility of ever reaching such clear-sightedness? Or does it suggest an imperative that we seek it out, however difficult? Obviously, these questions are not easily answered, if they can be answered at all. They seek to reach knowledge about nothing less grand than an ideal of consciousness and community. They all ask for judgment. They all imply an encounter with necessarily idiosyncratic experiences of understanding, contemplation and care, and demand that the fruits of these experiences be assessed. These questions may all lead,

finally, to something like this clear-sighted equivocation, offered by W. B. Yeats in a letter: “When I try to put all into a phrase I say, ‘Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.’ . . . . The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions” (qtd. in Norton 2085). Or perhaps to an elaborate and onerous, intelligent but mystifying manifesto, like this passage from Cherniss and Hardy, derived from Berlin’s philosophy:

Like the study of history, political judgement involves reaching an understanding of the unique set of characteristics that constitute a particular individual, atmosphere, state of affairs or event. This requires a capacity for integrating “a vast amalgam of constantly changing, multicolored, evanescent, perpetually overlapping data,” a “direct, almost sensuous contact with the relevant data,” and “an acute sense of what fits with what, what springs from what, what leads to what [...] what the result is likely to be in a concrete situation of the interplay of human beings and impersonal forces.” Such a sense is qualitative rather than quantitative, specific rather than general.

*Success in fact is rare*, we quoted from Iris Murdoch at the opening of this essay.

Attempting a more permanent understanding of the social context, of the social frames and the frames of mind that are our shared world, is a necessary step in honoring the wish that the value of such success—the value of clear-sightedness—is not limited to its immediate experience. Meredith Skura summarizes beautifully how *Measure for Measure* might offer lasting and useful insight about our context and our frames:

Shakespeare has finally taken us away from reference to *all* absolutes like “authority” or “justice” or even “mercy,” and *has substituted instead a human context of mutuality in which the process of working together to find or invent absolutes is as important as the lost absolutes themselves*, whether they be authoritative ducal seals or sentimental abstractions. The primary subject of the play, in fact, is the difficulty of working toward this mutuality. The play is about the problem of growing up—the problem of learning how to go out from self to other; from adolescent ideal to adult, compromised human realities; from the “life removed” without issue to some more fruitful exchange. It is about the problem of moving out from the realm of fantasy (Lacan’s Imaginary) to the social realm of language (Lacan’s Symbolic), *disciplined not so much by the hard realities of fact as by the hard realities of the way others see facts—their schema, their conventions, even their fearful fantasies.* (54-55; emphasis added)

It is all quite labyrinthine. And as if so much abstraction were enough to make one blush and get on with some more important task, to dive back into the “vital disorder of the human.” As Mariana blushes when she is discovered enjoying a crooning youth: “I cry you mercy, sir, and well wish / You had not found me here so musical. / Let me excuse

me, and believe me so: / My mirth it much displeased, but pleased my woe” (IV.i.10-13).

How presumptuous it seems to imagine that hearts might be, or even that they are required to be, “whipped out of their trade” by art.<sup>42</sup> But, nevertheless, it cannot always be helped; as Seamus Heaney writes:

[Wallace Stevens] declares the poet to be a potent figure because the poet “creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it, and... gives life to the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of [that world]”—meaning that if our given experience is a labyrinth, its impassability can still be countered by the poet’s imagining some equivalent of the labyrinth and presenting himself and us with a vivid experience of it. Such an operation does not intervene in the actual but by offering consciousness a chance to recognize its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways, it does constitute a beneficent event, for poet and audience alike. (2)

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<sup>42</sup> Pompey [to Escalus]: “I thank your worship for your good counsel; [*aside*:] but I shall follow it as the flesh and fortune shall better determine. Whip me? No, no; let the carman whip his jade. The valiant heart’s not whipped out of his trade” (II.i.224-227).

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“This is life then to which I am committed”:  
Identity in *The Waves*

Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

The first section of this essay begins as a general commentary on Virginia Woolf’s work, and on some of her social and political concerns. I then begin to focus on Woolf’s apparent preoccupation, evident in much of her work, with the nature of human identity, and I argue that the unique portrayal of identity in Woolf’s work represents an important and instructive convergence of her aesthetic project with her social and political concerns. I then narrow my focus to thinking about *The Waves*, and I attempt to contemplate some of the most important lessons the novel may provide with regard to the nature and experience of human identity. I also suggest how Woolf’s understanding of the role of the artist and the potentials of the novel, along with her understanding of some of the most salient elements of her contemporary moment, may have contributed to the creation of work that would be able to offer such lessons. In the second section of this essay, I introduce psychoanalytic theory, and in particular the concept of primary narcissism as it was imagined by Freud and developed by Julia Kristeva, as another way to conceive of the nature of human identity. This is done with the hope of continuing to interrogate some of the lessons concerning human identity that the first section of the essay identifies in Woolf’s work, and in *The Waves* in particular. The essay concludes with an acknowledgement of the potential limitations of theory, with a somewhat uneasy recognition of the role that fiction may play in the experience of human identity, and with

a question about the worth of making a point of interest out of “the dark places of psychology.”

I.

“Therefore let us make the attempt; even if it is doomed to failure” (3). So writes Virginia Woolf on the first page of *Three Guineas*, concerning the attempt to answer the question, “How are we to prevent war?” It is true that such an attempt is likely even more doomed to failure than Woolf’s other endeavors (certainly it is more doomed to failure than the more modest tasks that generally constitute our lives). All of Woolf’s writing, though, is imbued with the sense that much of what we reach for is necessarily beyond our grasp. It is imbued, also, with a somber reminder that this will always be so. Whether it is an answer to the question of how we are to prevent war, an honorable bearing towards our impulse to seek truth and knowing, firm and secured grounding in our own histories and memories, or committed and open relations and connections with others—none of these, in Woolf’s work, is quite attainable. They are, rather, “doomed to failure.”

I don’t suppose there can be any doubting that, of these aspirations, the answer as to how war might be prevented would be the most desirable to attain, and not simply because it is the only concrete proposition among so many amorphous ideals. Woolf would certainly agree. At the closing of *Three Guineas*, she addresses the connection between private realities and emotions and public customs and institutions; the connection between the everyday, spiritual lives of individuals and the public culture and material world that in some manner harbors them. Woolf recalls a picture of dead and mangled bodies from the Spanish civil war and the emotions such pictures give rise to: “you called them ‘horror and disgust’; we called them horror and disgust” (142). She

recalls Creon and Antigone, and how “pictures and voices are the same today as they were 2,000 years ago” (141). In the face of such “horror and disgust,” such a consistent and essential feature of human life, and with the question of how to prevent war always in mind, Woolf writes: “with the sound of guns in your ears you have not asked us to dream” (143).

Woolf is well aware, though, that she has the opportunity to address such issues—“a letter perhaps unique in the history of human correspondence, since when before has an educated man asked a woman how in her opinion war can be prevented?” (3)—because of her success in an art that privileges and honors dreaming. While she resists the temptation to give herself over completely “to the voices of poets, answering each other, assuring us of a unity that rubs out divisions as if they were chalk marks only” (143); while she refrains from focusing her lecture exclusively on “the capacity of the human spirit to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity” (143); she does assert the values that such voices and capacities might engender. She suggests the importance of overcoming or abolishing insignificant private fears in order to reach these voices and capacities. And she asserts the relationship between private dreaming (and fighting the small struggles that may enable one to dream, encountering “the fear which forbids freedom in the private house”) and the far more important collective life. She makes a powerful case for the importance of acknowledging and cultivating this relationship between the private and the public:

[The photograph of the tyrant or dictator] suggests that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other. But the human figure even in a photograph suggests other and more complex emotions. It suggests that we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure. It suggests that we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life. How essential it is that we should realize that unity the dead bodies, the ruined houses prove. For such will be our ruin if you in the immensity of your public abstractions forget

the private figure, or if we in the intensity of our private emotions forget the public world. Both houses will be ruined, the public and the private, the material and the spiritual, for they are inseparably connected. (142-143)

*Three Guineas*, as with much of Woolf's work, is in part concerned with feminist issues, with considering and addressing the many wrongs and injustices that are the legacy of certain patriarchal and misogynistic practices and beliefs upon which society has in no small part been founded. Woolf obviously addresses these issues in her work with an eye towards benefiting that society as a whole, and it goes without saying that her work does not suggest that the attainment of the ideal qualities and orientations mentioned above—an honorable stance towards truth or knowing, stable grounding in history and memory, committed and honest relations with others—is in such a world possible for free and privileged men but doomed to failure for women bearing so much weight of sordid human history. Woolf, though, was keenly aware that life is generally, and thankfully, not lived under such intense scrutiny as would expose one's stance toward truth or grounding in memory to be flawed or precarious; that life is wonderfully not lived as if substantial mental and social undertakings were "doomed to failure." And so, in the everyday order of things, Woolf did like to poke fun at the customs that apparently make it so much easier for a man to find his way into a settled and spacious routine and secured identity than for a woman; as she writes in *A Room of One's Own*:

[I]t was delightful to read a man's writing again [Mr. A's writing]. It was so direct, so straightforward after the writing of women. It indicated such freedom of mind, such liberty of person, such confidence in himself. One had a sense of physical well-being in the presence of this well-nourished, well-educated, free mind, which had never been thwarted or opposed, but had had full liberty from birth to stretch itself in whatever way it liked. All this was admirable. (99)

Obviously there is a playfulness to Woolf's critique here, something that runs throughout *A Room of One's Own* and is present in much of her criticism. Some might say this playfulness sharpens Woolf's knives, others that it dulls them. In either case, the Mr. A

she sets up here is useful to consider not only as it relates to Woolf's feminist concerns. It also leads us to Woolf's preoccupation with identity.

In Mr. A's portrait we find a confident, free and stable identity. But we must recognize that the existence of such confident modes of inhabiting identity and relating to one's past and to others does not negate or detract from the problematic and potentially disconcerting insights Woolf's work reveals with regard to identity. Indeed, the existence of such confident modes of inhabiting identity may be a particularly salient reality upon which Woolf's aesthetic and political concerns converge. For though her work never goes so far as to suggest that inhabiting identity so confidently and firmly is in any way unnatural, it does suggest that to approach identity in a taken-for-granted manner may be to limit one's capacity to see and to experience life. A narrowing of experience that is potentially a detriment to one's experience; and also a detriment to one's efforts to understand, and therefore to positively influence, oneself and one's society. This is not to equate Woolf's portrait of Mr. A in *A Room of One's Own* with her critique of the picture of Mussolini or Hitler in *Three Guineas*, but it is to recall her insistence on the connection between private emotions and the public world. It is to focus on Woolf's suggestion that there may be certain infelicitous "public abstractions" that contribute too much to the formulation, and in some cases undesirable manifestation, of Mr. A's—or of anyone's—private emotions.

So far we have touched on a few of Woolf's explicitly social and political critiques, but in the next passage we can see how her political thinking might inform her aesthetic concerns. We can thus begin to contemplate how her fiction, and particularly *The Waves*, seeks, however obliquely, to contribute to the advancement of her social and

political ideals; we can begin to see how Woolf's style in *The Waves* may encourage encounters with potential truths about identity that are all too easily concealed and dismissed in the habits and exigencies of daily life. In the following passage we see how a less than desirable social understanding or orientation toward identity is mirrored in a less successful artistic production and experience, for Woolf at least:

But after reading a chapter or two [of Mr. A's novel] a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter "I." One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was always hailed to the letter "I." One began to be tired of "I." Not but what this "I" was a most respectable "I"; honest and logical; hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding. I respect and admire that "I" from the bottom of my heart. But—here I turned a page or two, looking for something or other—the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter "I" all is shapeless mist.... [W]hy was I bored? Partly because of the dominance of the letter "I" and the aridity, which, like the giant beech tree, it casts within its shade. Nothing will grow there. (99-100)

Here Woolf's critique obviously goes beyond the work of the unknown Mr. A. It may even go beyond a critique of the self-assured and partially sightless contemporary male voice and identity that she sets up as a backdrop against which to extol the virtues of an androgynous mind.<sup>43</sup> The critique may go beyond this because the "I" of this passage, though it begins in reference to Mr. A's work, does not necessarily need to be considered in relation to Mr. A or to a man at all. It can also be understood as a critique of the encroachment of any singular (likely authorial) and historically conditioned presence or identity which functions to eclipse the experience and appreciation of various individuals and social landscapes in a work of fiction. And if the experience of any aspect of life is somehow obscured or missing in fiction it is important, for Woolf, because it suggests that something important in life has not been carefully contemplated, faithfully expressed, or successfully communicated, to the detriment of the reader and writer alike.

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<sup>43</sup> The fusion that takes place when "a mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties" (98): "It is fatal [for the writer] to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.... The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness" (104).

Understood in this way, the critique appears prescient of the form and content of Woolf's next novel, *The Waves*, which Woolf began to formulate as early as 1928 and began the first draft of in 1929, at around the same time that *A Room of One's Own* was completed (Graham 193; Beer 74).<sup>44</sup>

The “respectable, honest and logical” “I” seems to impinge, for Woolf, on one's ability to commune wholly with the world of a novel, and thus to prevent one from experiencing the truthful immersion in human life, relationships, sensations and sensibilities that ought to lie therein. For Woolf, such an “I” seems in some way even to obstruct the writer's ability to create such a world in the first place. *The Waves*, then, might be considered an attempt not only to create a novel without the domineering if indeterminate presence of an authorial “I,” but to both question and demonstrate how this “I,”—indeed, how any “I”—formulates and establishes itself in the first place. Clearly Woolf sets herself a rather arduous task in this novel. A task, I suggest, which is intimately, if obliquely, linked with Woolf's social and political concerns: “in the intensity of our private emotions” we must not forget “the public world.” *The Waves* questions and demonstrates how a human identity develops, and therefore it explores the soil out of which any private emotion must grow; the novel also questions and demonstrates how an individual, in no small part (entirely?) constituted by her or his identity, navigates the social experience, and therefore it explores the inseparable connection between identity, public abstraction, and the material world.

There seems to be a near critical consensus around the subject of identity as the most pressing theme or concern of *The Waves*: a consensus that the novel represents a

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<sup>44</sup> Though Beer, in her introduction to *The Waves*, also writes of an earlier “glimpse” in Woolf's diaries: “When in 1926 Virginia Woolf first glimpsed the book that became *The Waves* it was to be about ‘the thing that exists when we aren't there’” (xi).

continuation of Woolf's intense interest in the nature of human identity, in particular a continuation of her explorations of identity in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and that *The Waves* also brings this interest to the fore in a new and original way and takes the aesthetic choreography of this interest to a new depth. J. W. Graham, in his essay "Point of View in *The Waves*: Some Services of the Style," suggests that Woolf was developing a "growing dissatisfaction... with what she called 'psychology';" that she desired to "break free from 'personality' as the subject of her fiction;" and that she was determined "to achieve in her fiction the impersonality she associated with poetry" (204). For Graham, this disquiet and longing contributed to Woolf's establishment, in *The Waves*, of a "narrative continuum" that he describes as "omnipercipience," as opposed to "authorial omniscience": "a *perception* (not an understanding) of the characters' inner experience fused with a *perception* (not an understanding) of what they do not perceive—the background of time and the sea against which they are set" (204). I believe Graham is correct in his assessment of an aspect of Woolf's motivation, and that his concept does capture the narrative style accurately and in a way that furthers our understanding of its method, particularly in its identification of the novel's underlying and formal insistence on the primacy of perception over understanding. But in general I want to posit Woolf's deep appreciation and understanding of human identity, rather than any dissatisfaction with psychology or poetic longing, as the most salient (if perhaps unconscious) element contributing to the composition of *The Waves*—an understanding and motivation that I believe may be too easily lost, or over-complicated, by some critical approaches to identity in *The Waves*.



Makiko Minlow-Pinkney claims that most of the novel maintains “a precarious dialectic between identity and loss, the symbolic and its unrepresentable other.” In even simpler terms, Elizabeth Abel calls *The Waves* an “experiment in dissolving identity” (qtd. in Beer 83). These are common critical understandings of the treatment and portrayal of identity in *The Waves*. However, I believe that these phrases too readily imply an understanding of identity as intrinsically or naturally stable, and that they posit this understanding as “square one” of their critical projects. If to call this critical approach to identity a *false* understanding would be too harsh, this approach, and the language it uses, nonetheless seems to me to imply a relative framework for an understanding of the experience and development of human identity that does not do that experience and development justice. And a narrowed or pre-established understanding of identity is disconcerting because it involves the “square one” of understanding that Woolf effectively takes from beneath our feet in *The Waves*, through the style and intelligence of her work. The suggested understanding of identity as intrinsically or naturally knowable and fixed is precisely what a genuine encounter with Woolf’s work ought to discourage. Asserting that the narrative of the novel represents a dialectic *between* identity and loss, or that it is an experiment in *dissolving* identity, already works to shield the concept of identity from some of the attributes (loss and dissolution in this case) that the novel demonstrates are constitutive of human identity, however hidden or unconscious these attributes might be in a “normal” experience of identity. This is not to suggest that Minlow-Pinkney, Abel, and other critics are not capable of the understanding of an “unshielded” concept of identity, or that they might not themselves in fact harbor such an understanding, but in my reading of what is most salient in *The Waves* and in my

albeit limited encounter with the criticism on Woolf, I find this “shielded” use of identity, if unwitting, too prevalent.

Critical approaches to identity in Woolf’s work sometimes seem to obscure the brilliance of that work’s portrayal of identity; they sometimes seek to deny that portrayal’s universal human significance or applicability. Some critical approaches seem not to acknowledge Woolf’s project, as Julia Briggs describes it, as the “search for what human beings have *in common*” (76; emphasis added). *The Waves* “searches for the fundamental things in human existence” (77), not for what resides on the limits of that existence or for what can only be encountered when those limits are dangerously or needlessly pushed. As Susan Dick writes, “Even in [*The Waves*], in which she moves furthest away from writing ‘exteriorly’, she could not abandon material reality, for it is an integral part of the other, more profound, reality she wished to explore.... [*The Waves*] expresses Woolf’s desire... to include the ordinary within her vision of the extraordinary” (71). The insights into the foundations of identity that can be found in *The Waves* are not insights into the moments when identity fails or dissolves. Rather, they concern identity formation as it is constituted by and experienced through the extraordinary human mind, in all its ordinariness.

Though I am writing in some measure against it, the critical concern with Woolf’s work as speaking primarily for identity on the brink, or for the moments when identity fails us or is subverted by us, is certainly understandable. As Nicole Ward Jouve writes, “Woolf’s work invites endless psychoanalytic interpretation because of the ways it skirts ‘madness’—because, like Clarissa Dalloway struggling to make her party hold together, like Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, straining to make her painting cohere, it seems,

with all its grace and surface clarity, to be forever fending off the threat of disintegration, blurred boundaries, insecure identities” (256). Fair enough. But this emphasis on Woolf’s work as an “art that records near madness, that skirts the edge of madness [but is] not madness” (259), is detrimental to our ability to understand Woolf’s work in relation to what is fundamental in life. The acknowledgement that what is fundamental in “madness” is not always as absent from what is fundamental in life as we might like to imagine is of course one idea that we might encounter through Woolf’s writing, but to make this relation the focus of critical work seems to me an impediment to deeper understanding. To write, as Daniel Ferrer does, that “through their relation to madness, [Woolf’s] texts systematically challenge the frontiers that constitute novelistic fiction” (141), is potentially to miss the relation of Woolf’s work to her extraordinary intelligence and deliberation, and also to miss the insights regarding what is fundamental in human existence that such an intelligence may offer us. When critics shift emphasis to understanding Woolf’s portrayal of identity through a feminist lens, though obviously much intelligent and important work has been done in this vein, it seems to me they often do little to eradicate this potential for critical shortsightedness. “In such [feminist] readings,” Jouve writes, “the stress is no longer on psychotic disintegration, on the threat of madness. [Instead,] the indeterminacies, the lack of a stable subject, are read as the positive inscription of a form of feminine identity that has never before been allowed to exist” (264). The same problem exists: how to honor Woolf’s talent for exploring and uncovering fundamental aspects of human experience, rather than claiming her work speaks more loudly for a specific dimension or rare manifestation of that experience?

For surely it is not too simplistic to suggest that there is no human identity other than dynamic identity that is always in process. Yet, if so, why does it seem that so much criticism is reluctant to say it as simply as that? To say definitively that the stability so often associated with human identity is essentially a false, or at least a vastly incomplete picture, and that Woolf's work, and particularly *The Waves*, demonstrates this with remarkable honesty and lucidity? The encouragement of an understanding as simple as this is, I believe, a salient point where Woolf's aesthetic and political concerns converge. The false or vastly incomplete picture of identity is what Woolf suggests Mr. A needs to acknowledge if he wants to be a better writer, and maybe a better man; it is what we must acknowledge, in "the immensity of our public abstractions," about the private figure; and it is a recognition we ought to bring to "the intensity of our private emotions," without forgetting the public world.

If some would instinctively dismiss as hyperbolic or plainly unrealistic Louis' claim about identity that "Illusion returns as they approach down the avenue... and the pulse quickens and the eye brightens and all the insanity of personal existence without which life would fall flat and die, begins again" (155), or Rhoda's that "far from being allowed to spread in wider and wider circles of understanding that may at last... embrace the entire world, I must go through the antics of the individual" (149), what about a few of the more modest claims from *The Waves* that also posit the stability of identity as a rather mysterious fabrication? Could some of these comments calmly and simply bring us closer to a notion of dynamic, dependent, and perhaps fictional identity without also invoking precarious sanity or subversive indeterminacy? Surely this comment from Neville has the ring of a simple truth: "I do not know myself sometimes, or how to

measure and name and count out the grains that make me what I am” (53); or this comment from Bernard: “The complexity of things becomes more close.... What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that.... it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many” (48).

To be clear, to suggest that the stability of identity is a mysterious fabrication is not to suggest that there is no stability in identity. It is to suggest that the stability of identity has perhaps too often been taken for granted, or has been too closely and quickly connected with the concept, in both criticism and popular discourse, rather than understood as the manifestation—perhaps the essential manifestation, it is true, the manifestation, even, that makes life worth living—of a process. A process Woolf explores with incredible richness and at an incredible depth. As Neville expresses this, the experience of stability in identity is a very real, a very crucial experience:

Change is no longer possible. We are committed. Before, when we met in a restaurant in London with Percival, all simmered and shook; we could have been anything. We have chosen now, or sometimes it seems the choice was made for us—a pair of tongs pinched us between the shoulders. (134)

And not only is the experience of stability in identity real and crucial for the ways in which we know and encounter ourselves, it is essential for the practical business of getting on with life, and for our ability to interact peaceably and profitably with others; the alternative often being something frightful. As Louis states:

I must drop heavy as a hatchet and cut the oak with my sheer weight, for if I deviate, glancing this way, or that way, I shall fall like snow and be wasted.... There is no respite here, no shadow made of quivering leaves, or alcove to which one can retreat from the sun, to sit, with a lover, in the cool of the evening. The weight of the world is on our shoulders; its vision is through our eyes; if we blink or look aside, or turn back to finger what Plato said or remember Napoleon and his conquests, we inflict on the world the injury of some obliquity.... [If] I do not nail these impressions to the board and out of the many men in me make one; exist here and now and not in streaks and patches, like scattered snow wreaths on far mountains; and ask Miss Johnson as I pass through the office about the movies and take my cup of tea and accept also my favourite biscuit, then I shall fall like snow and be wasted. (110-112)

The exploration of the mysterious fabrication of identity in such richness is clearly no small accomplishment. It speaks obviously to Woolf's greatness as a writer, but it also speaks to her determination, and to what is, in a way, outrageous ambition. In her critique of the work of Arnold Bennett, among other prominent novelists of her time, in her essay "Modern Fiction," Woolf writes:

But it reappears most persistently as we drop the finished novel on the crest of a sigh—Is it worth while? What is the point of it all? Can it be that, owing to one of those little deviations which the human spirit seems to make from time to time, Mr. Bennett has come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side? Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. It is a confession of vagueness to have to make use of such a figure as this, but we scarcely better the matter by speaking, as critics are prone to do, of reality. Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. (149)

Such an original portrayal of the mysterious fabrication of identity, as in *The Waves*, would likely only ever be attempted by an artist with such a demanding conception of the "ill-fitting vestments we provide." "The longer the novelist pores over his analysis," Woolf writes in "Phases of Fiction," published in 1929, "the more he becomes conscious of something that forever escapes" (139). But the processes and the generally unspoken experiences of identity that do not escape *The Waves*, though they escape most of us all too easily (perhaps for good reason), are worth commenting upon; and all because they are human processes. Woolf's social concerns truly are never far from her aesthetic concerns, however indirect the relation may be. As she continues in "Phases of Fiction":

But however the novelist may vary his scene and alter the relations of one thing to another—and as we look back we see the whole world in perpetual transformation—one element remains constant in all novels, and that is the human element; they are about people, they excite in us the feelings that people excite in us in real life. The novel is the only form of art which seeks to make us believe that it is giving a full and truthful record of the life of a real person. And in order to give that full record of life, not the climax and the crisis but the growth and development of feelings, which is the novelist's aim, he copies the order of the day, observes the sequence of ordinary things even if such fidelity entails chapters of description and hours of research. (141)

For Woolf, one of the orders of the day is the nature of identity, and the importance of examining that nature's changes—what the shocks of modern life and the sensations of modern life that play upon and around individuals, families, and communities might mean for identity. Woolf also suggests that the order of the day most salient to the growth and development of human feelings is an order not inherently appealing to our imagination. For Woolf, in an important and often cited passage from her essay “Modern Fiction,” the writer “has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer ‘this’ but ‘that’: out of ‘that’ alone must he construct his work.” And, “For the moderns ‘that’, the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (152). The phrase “the dark places of psychology” is by no means unambiguous. But for Woolf it seems likely that an awareness of these dark places, and the urgency with which she suggests making them “the point of interest,” is intimately related to interest in the nature of identity and the nature of consciousness, which she did not imagine as static or as unaffected by the industrial, technological and political changes engulfing it. Ten years after writing this phrase about the “dark places” she felt the need to echo a commonplace in “Phases of Fiction,” a commonplace she found it sufficiently worthwhile to dwell upon: “Life—it is a commonplace—is growing more complex. Our self-consciousness is becoming far more alert and better trained. We are aware of relationships and subtleties which have not yet been explored” (144-45). And so, returning again to “Modern Fiction”: “At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors” (152). *The Waves* is an exemplary performance of such a “different outline.”

Near the close of *Three Guineas*, Woolf explores the demands and desires of women that have contributed to the slow erosion of patriarchal mores and strictures, and wonders how these demands and desires might be articulated:

Josephine Butler's label—Justice, Equality, Liberty—is a fine one; but it is only a label, and in our age of innumerable labels, of multicoloured labels, we have become suspicious of labels; they kill and constrict. Nor does the old word "freedom" serve, for it was not freedom in the sense of license that they wanted; they wanted, like Antigone, *not to break the laws, but to find the law*. (138; emphasis added)

The same purpose might be claimed with regard to Woolf's aesthetic project and its demonstration and examination of the nature of identity; or certainly with regard to *The Waves* and its demonstration and examination of the nature of identity. Woolf does not set out to demonstrate how identity breaks its own laws, how it might be manipulated to certain ends, or how it might breakdown or disappear in deviant cases or under extreme circumstances. Woolf does set out, in part, to demonstrate the mysterious processes and laws that contribute to the richness and necessity of human identity. The second part of this essay will explore some of these processes and laws as they have been conceived in psychoanalytic theory (recognizing, though, that we may have already encountered a contradiction: the nature of identity is likely fundamentally idiosyncratic, and therefore inimical to more general codification in laws).

## II.

We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too, as we put on our hats and open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road. (95-96; Bernard)

[Bernard] tells our story with extraordinary understanding. Except of what we most feel. (44; Neville)



In his essay, “What is theory?” the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas writes about encountering and in a way internalizing different schools of psychoanalytic theory and different psychoanalytic concepts over the course of his career. He writes that these encounters led him “to appreciate the value of psychoanalytic theories as *forms* of perception. One theory sees something that other theories do not see” (232). Which psychoanalytic theories or concepts, as forms of perception, may help us to see something more about the nature of identity? (In a way, and although much more was being considered, the first part of this essay approached *The Waves* as a *form* of perception to ask the same question; we answered that there was much the novel could help us to understand about the nature of human identity.)

Psychoanalytic language has a tendency to alienate readers by its oddities and extremes of concepts and narratives,<sup>45</sup> but if we approach this language as a form of perception only as valuable as where it may enable us to see something in life where otherwise we would not be able to see anything at all, hopefully it will be useful in our consideration of the processes of identity. As Bollas writes:

I do not care if Freud’s metaphors are hydraulic or electric any more than I care that the Klein-Bion model of ingestion, digestion, and metabolization is alimentary. The point is, does one understand what the metaphor conveys? *This is the definition of metaphor. It is a mental transportation system.* So, does it tell us what it intends to convey or doesn’t it? (231)

While Bollas writes this in reference primarily to the role of theory for the analyst in the clinical setting, I believe it still pertains for the purposes of this essay. Even Bollas’ subsequent remark I understand as relevant far beyond the consulting room: “There is an ethics of perception. Theories are not simply forms of perception. When practiced they

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<sup>45</sup> To quote just one instance, a delightful passage from Woolf herself: “[We] are publishing all Dr Freud, and I glance at the proof and read how Mr A. B. threw a bottle of red ink on to the sheets of his marriage bed to excuse his impotence to the housemaid, but threw it in the wrong place, which unhinged his wife’s mind,—and to this day she pours claret on the dinner table. We could all go on like that for hours; and yet these Germans think it proves something—besides their own gull-like imbecility” (qtd. in Jouve 255).

become ethical decisions” (233). This idea can bring us back to Woolf’s insistence on the ethical relationship between the private and the public, back to “the immensity of public abstractions” and the private figure, and to the “intensity of our private emotions” and the public world.

The psychoanalytic concept we will rely on most heavily in the second half of this essay is narcissism, primary narcissism, or narcissistic primacy. “In his narcissism paper,” Thomas H. Ogden writes, “Freud proposed that the normal infant begins in a state of ‘original’ or ‘primary narcissism,’ a state in which all emotional energy is ego libido, a form of emotional investment that takes the ego (oneself) as its sole object” (35-36). In the first chapter of her book *Tales of Love*, “Freud and Love: Treatment and Its Discontents,” Julia Kristeva discusses and builds upon Freud’s proposition in order to theorize and explore the origins of the self and one’s identity and the ground upon which we make meaning and organize our lives; the ground upon which, in continuation of one psychoanalytic story, Eros and Thanatos, the life and death drives or instincts, ultimately perform.<sup>46</sup>

Kristeva writes that “Freud seems to suggest that it is not Eros but narcissistic primacy that sparks and perhaps dominates psychic life; he thus sets up self-deception at the basis of one’s relationship to reality. Such a perpetuation of illusion, however, finds itself rehabilitated, neutralized, normalized, at the bosom of my loving reality” (22). Though the phrase “bosom of my loving reality” is endowed with the positive connotations of emotional vitality and a fulfilled life, the story Kristeva presents with regard to the origin and continuation of narcissistic psychic processes (as “a perpetuation

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<sup>46</sup> “[U]nder the impact of the struggle between the two instincts, one of the ego’s main functions—the mastery of anxiety—is brought into operation from the very beginning of life” (Melanie Klein 176).

of illusion”) is in many ways not a comforting one.<sup>47</sup> That an illusion founded on primary narcissism can lead to healthy and vital life in which these procedures continue to play an active (if unconscious) role must not be seen as a contradiction. Indeed, this is the crux of the story. “A narcissistic destiny,” Kristeva writes, “would in some way underlie all our object choices, but this is a destiny that society on the one hand, and the moral rigor of Freud on the other, tend to thrust aside in favor of a ‘true’ object choice” (21). “Society on the one hand” here refers to the world we are born into, existing before us and imbued with complex and nearly obligatory systems of law and social custom; law and custom that create ethical imperatives and color all of our choices and action. As Neville expresses in the first section of *The Waves*: “There is an order in this world; there are distinctions, there are differences in this world, upon whose verge I step. For this is only a beginning” (10). The “moral rigor of Freud” comment is somewhat opaque to me, though I suspect it has something to do with the depth of Freud’s historical and cultural considerations and with the concept of the superego as culturally determined arbiter. Another expression of Neville’s is helpful in indicating the culture we encounter when we set out within and through our identities: “here among these grey arches, and moaning pigeons, and cheerful games and tradition and emulation, all so skillfully organized to prevent feeling alone” (31). Yet, at least in the psychoanalytic narrative we are telling here, even our acceptance into and activity within the social group, within what is “skillfully organized,” does not dissipate the foundations and presence of our narcissism. As Paul Ricoeur writes: “Narcissism directly concerns the relation to reality, inasmuch as self-attention is inattention to the other. . . . Our loves and hatreds are the revocable figures

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<sup>47</sup> In this way, perhaps, the concept is paired well with Woolf: it is consonant with Woolf’s assertion that for modern writers and artists the point of interest must lie in “the dark places of psychology.”

of love derived from the undifferentiated substrate of narcissism: like the waves of the sea, these figures may be effaced without alteration of the substrate” (277). Perhaps a parallel might be drawn here with Susan’s expression in the first section of *The Waves*:

“I love,” Said Susan, “and I hate. I desire one thing only. My eyes are hard.... I am already set on my pursuit. I see insects in the grass. Though my mother still knits white socks for me and hems pinafores and I am a child, I love and I hate.” (7)

Susan, whose love and hate resounds as a refrain throughout the novel, and whose final expression is: “Still I gape, like a young bird, unsatisfied, for something that has escaped me” (155).

For Kristeva, the importance of primary narcissism lies in the fact that it is “far from originary,” that it is, for the infant, “a new action.” That is to say, it is a process preceding the mirror stage and the oedipal ego but one that arises after the infant is born, and is a “supplement” to the autoeroticism which is immediately present. Kristeva quotes this line from Freud’s *On Narcissism* as key to her theory: “The autoerotic drives, however, are there from the very first; so there must be something added to autoeroticism—a new physical action—in order to bring about narcissism” (22). In her theoretical construction,<sup>48</sup> Kristeva claims that “emptiness” is “at the root of the human psyche,” and that narcissism effectively functions as a screen over emptiness so that “significance,” “the process of formation and de-formation of meaning and the subject,” can take place (23). “Might narcissism be a means of protecting emptiness?” Kristeva asks:

—a protection of emptiness (of “arbitrariness,” of the “gaping hole”) through the display of a decidedly narcissistic parry, so that emptiness can be maintained, lest chaos prevail and borders dissolve. Narcissism protects emptiness, causes it to exist, and thus, as lining of that emptiness, insures an elementary separation. Without that solidarity between emptiness and narcissism, chaos

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<sup>48</sup> Which she develops in part to eventually serve her larger claim that: “love... reigns between the two borders of *narcissism* and *idealization*” (6). She relies, aside from on Freud, primarily on the work of Andre Green, Saussure’s “arbitrariness of the sign,” and Lacan’s “gaping hole” to make this argument.

would sweep away any possibility of distinction, trace, and symbolization, which would in turn confuse the limits of the body, words, the real, and the symbolic. (24)

In the story that Kristeva tells here, in the image of the mysterious fabrication of identity that she paints, Rhoda's and Louis' comments mentioned above do not appear hyperbolic or unrealistic in the slightest. "The antics of identity" seems about as good a shorthand as anyone could come up with, and Louis' comment appears strangely precise: "Illusion returns as they approach down the avenue... and the pulse quickens and the eye brightens and all the insanity of personal existence without which life would fall flat and die, begins again" (155). "In being narcissistic," Kristeva claims, "one has already throttled the suffering of emptiness." Even if the screen over emptiness, the protection of emptiness, is in some manner an illusion or a self-deception, it is a psychic development that girds all our subsequent relations and becomings. "More than insane, empty, that lining of our projection and representation devices is yet another defense of the living being" (43):

If narcissism is a defense against the emptiness of separation [of the child from the mother], then the whole contrivance of imagery, representations, identifications, and projections that accompany it on the way toward strengthening the Ego and the Subject is a means of exorcising that emptiness. Separation is our opportunity to become narcissists or narcissistic, at any rate subjects of representation. The emptiness it opens up [by covering it and therefore protecting it; allowing it to be emptiness rather than chaos] is nevertheless also the barely covered abyss where our identities, images, and words run the risk of being engulfed. (42)

In other words, the "narcissistic parry" is the means by which we separate from emptiness, "to calm it and turn it into a producer of signs, representations, and meanings" (42), effectively establishing the "murky source... from which narcissism will flow into a dynamics of confusion and delight" (43).

We ask then, does Freud's theory of primary narcissism, and Kristeva's elaboration and expansion of it, help us to see anything important or new? If this theory and narrative is taken as a form of perception, is what we see at all true or worth looking

at? Does it help us to see differently or imagine differently the sometimes enigmatic experience of identity? Is there parallel insight, or only parallel confusion, with Rhoda's experience in *The Waves*?

Also, in the middle, cadaverous, awful, lay the grey puddle in the courtyard, when, holding an envelope in my hand, I carried a message. I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather, I wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed. (40)

These are not questions I imagine there can be single answers to. If one understands theory as a form of perception only as good as what it enables one to see, how can there be a relevant answer aside from an individual's own vision and experience? As the psychoanalyst and literary critic Adam Phillips writes, "All psychoanalysis can produce is the life-stories told and constructed in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, as theory and therapy, can never be useful—despite Freud's commitment to the progressivism of Science—as a way of putting us closer to the Truth" (67).

Indeed, despite our disclaimer at the beginning of this section about understanding theory as a *form* of perception one adopts in an attempt to see (and to see, perhaps, ethically), we do well to keep in mind the perils of subscribing to a theory. In regard to the clinical setting of psychoanalysis, but relevant for our purposes as well, Phillips stresses how theoretical allegiances—ascribing truth to certain understandings of psychological functioning and developmental processes—can effectively limit one's ability to openly encounter the reality and origins of an individual's unique experience and identity:

The life-story the patient tells is matched against a kind of master plot of human development; and here the risks, clearly, are of pathologizing in order to limit variety (after all, any person might be a new kind of person). So the question is: given his or her training—whatever its theoretical allegiances—what is the repertoire of life-stories the analyst can allow, or allow himself to hear, and consider plausible? What are the acceptable shapes of a life that the analyst, by virtue of his

profession and of his conscious and unconscious aesthetic preferences, finds himself promoting? At what point, in listening to a life-story, does he call the police? Everybody sets a limit to the stories they can be told; and in that sense there is a repertoire of the stories one is likely to hear. (1994 70)

When I wrote of the “shielded” concept of identity in the first part of this essay, this is in part what I had in mind. The concept of identity in critical work, as I encountered it, seemed to me to encourage a certain “repertoire of the stories one is likely to hear” around *The Waves*, or Woolf’s work in general, centered around identity in precarious disintegration or subversive indeterminacy—stories that took one’s attention away from the fundamental, common nature of Woolf’s insights. Kristeva’s account of primary narcissism is another story to bring to the novel that may change how it is experienced. Any person might be a new kind of person, and any novel may present identity in a new light. Kristeva’s account of primary narcissism seems compelling in this regard, as it establishes an origin that necessarily proceeds by individual or uniquely narcissistic procedures and choices, acknowledging all subsequent paths as the idiosyncratic journeys they are. Though, of course, Kristeva’s theory is still open like any other to the charge of a “master plot” that then becomes a limiting template which individual lived experience is matched up against.

J. M. Coetzee, in a series of exchanges with the psychologist Arabella Kurtz titled, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction, and Psychotherapy*, states the difficulty that Phillips partially alludes to above in different terms, here writing of Melanie Klein’s developmental theories, but applicable also to theory in general:

Klein’s account, like many psychological accounts, has an interesting double status. First, it is a scientific hypothesis no different in essence from hypotheses in natural science. We posit our hypothesis, then check it against the relevant data. As long as the data does not contradict the hypothesis the hypothesis is confirmed, or at least not disconfirmed. But second, since it is a hypothesis about human experience, we as human beings can and do have intuitions of our own as to its correctness. Unless we are rigorous positivists and insist on exploring human psychology in

exactly the same way we would explore the psychology of rats, these intuitions play a substantial role in whether, at a lived level, we entertain (welcome) the hypothesis or not....

What Melanie Klein has to say about very young children does not run counter to empirical data about the behavior of babies. Therefore what she says has the status of a valid hypothesis—valid until disconfirmed. Nevertheless, part of the attractiveness of her account lies in its intuitive appeal. Thus you are able to write easily of an infant self without structure, as simply a site of hunger or cold or pain. You can also write of a breast that appears and disappears frustratingly, constituting the entirety of the world that is the non-‘self’.

Where does your confidence come from? The answer, I would guess, is that you can imagine such an existence; you can project yourself sympathetically into it; you can, briefly, be such a baby....

Fictions are neither true nor false, in the normal sense of those words.... For my purposes, it is enough to say that Klein’s account of neonate experience is a fiction. You happen to think it is a true account, and I tend to agree. But it is nevertheless a fictional account, a story about what it is like to be a baby. (131-135)

The point here is not to deconstruct every theory to a ground of relative fiction, but rather to explore how fiction (“neither true nor false, in the normal sense of those words”) and narrative work to structure our understandings of ourselves and each other, and our understanding of what is fundamental in identity. As Neville expresses: “Let him describe what we have all seen so that it becomes a sequence. Bernard says there is always a story. I am a story. Louis is a story” (22). Must our attempt to understand the nature of identity shift to an attempt to understand our seemingly instinctual construction of fictions then? Fictions “neither true nor false”? Or is there something more essential we can still reach for? What are the “roaring waters” which Neville expresses?

“Yet these roaring waters,” said Neville, “upon which we build our crazy platforms are more stable than the wild, the weak and inconsequent cries that we utter when, trying to speak, we rise; when we reason and jerk out these false sayings, ‘I am this; I am that!’ Speech is false. (90)

Neville’s “roaring waters,” Rhoda’s “grey, cadaverous puddle,” Kristeva’s “emptiness of separation”—what do they add up to? Do we see something new in each description? Do we see the same foundation through each concept? Do we see anything at all? Is that the ground we try to build identity from: merely the basically constant forms and objects which we see similarly from many angles, through many forms of perception?



One is reminded of a quote from Edmundson in the introduction to this thesis: “A key measure of a poet’s prowess lies in her ability to possess, transform, and surpass the reigning conceptual modes, writing in such a way that no existing theory can account for the work” (1995 51); and one stands in awe and appreciation of Woolf’s work. For surely *The Waves* demonstrates gracefully what Coetzee expresses succinctly here: “we can entertain the notion that we are continually engaging with constructions (fictions) of others, rather than with their ‘real’ selves, without feeling we are at the edge of an abyss. We can also entertain the more plausible (and more interesting) notion that our engagements are with a constantly changing interplay between shadows (fictions) and glimpses of the real” (142). And surely *The Waves* paints patiently, vividly, what Coetzee takes a little longer to express here:

I feel that, seen from the outside, the lives of other people almost always have a somewhat made-up, fictional quality. The capacity (which I think of as a moral capacity) to project oneself sympathetically into someone else’s life is rare, the capacity for sustained sympathetic projection even rarer. None of this amounts to a novel claim. But, more radically, I feel that our own needs and desires have a similar fiction-like status. We attribute them to ourselves. We try them out and if they suit us we inhabit them. (154)

Kristeva’s theory of a “narcissistic parry” confirms the outline of this form of experience further still: the psychic movement that turns emptiness “into a producer of signs, representations, and meanings,” initiating the “dynamics of confusion and delight.”

Towards the end of their series of letters, Kurtz writes that “psychoanalysis provides a compelling theory of human interrelatedness, a theory of relationships that emphasizes how people feel things on behalf of others, how people need other people to understand, and indeed in order to learn to be, themselves.”<sup>49</sup> She holds that

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<sup>49</sup> Here we may recall Bernard and Neville’s wonderful give-and-take meeting toward the beginning of *The Waves*: “How curiously one is changed by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend. How useful an office one’s friends perform when they recall us. Yet how painful to be recalled, to be mitigated, to have one’s

psychoanalysis allows for and encourages us to acknowledge “the creative value of confusion,” and suggests that it is “a comic narrative... of the best sort” (175). Coetzee responds:

You say it is comical that we spend our lives groping toward self-understanding via one misplaced identification after another. Maybe; but isn't it tragic too that our progress has to be so comically blind and halting?

.... Your faith seems undimmed that we can learn to 'be ourselves'. Would that it were so simple, I say to myself. To my mind, it will be enough if we can settle on fictions of ourselves which we can inhabit more or less comfortably, fictions that interact sans friction with the fictions of those around us. (177)

I suspect that Woolf would largely agree with Coetzee here. And perhaps they reach such conclusions about identity in part because they each, at times, make a point of interest in their thinking and in their art out of “the dark places of psychology.” In a way, they can “imagine such an existence,” can project themselves “sympathetically into it,” and so for them it is true. One need not, of course, make an interest out of the dark places of psychology to lead a good life. And indeed, if the final and something like true ground of identity that we land upon is simply a settling for “fictions of ourselves which we can inhabit more or less comfortably, fictions that interact sans friction with the fictions of those around us,” the reader may well be tempted to recall Woolf's portrait of Mr. A and say, *that sounds like a pretty good fiction to me*. And maybe it is.

What this essay did not touch upon sufficiently was the theory, psychoanalytic or otherwise, concerning the salutary nature of establishing one's identity. “[The] preservation of personal isolation,” D.W. Winnicott writes, “is part of the search for identity, and for the establishment of a personal technique for communicating which does not lead to violation of the central self” (qtd. in Parsons 100). Or, as Michael Parsons writes of the work of Heinz Kohut, “Continuing attention to one's sense of self is as

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self adulterated, mixed up, become part of another.... Let me create you. (You have done as much for me.)” (53-54).

important an aspect of psychic maturity as is concern with object relations.... Kohut is clear that the mature self requires a sufficient and reliable supply of narcissistic investments, and that ‘narcissistic sustenance’ is necessary for cohesion of the self and a rewarding relationship with one’s ideals” (101).

Why does Woolf contend, though, that common ideals of modern artists will almost assuredly lead them towards making a point of interest out of the dark places of psychology? And what might the artist reveal in such places, or bring back from such places, that will be of value to those who do not wish to, or who are unable to, dig so deeply and so darkly? An answer to the first question, I think, is difficult to arrive at with any confidence. Though perhaps the answer is less important than recognizing that Woolf is more or less correct—the artist in our time often does seem to need to make an interest out of the dark places of psychology. And with regard to the second question, the answer can only be given through the lives of those who encounter such work. “How then does light return to the world after the eclipse of the sun?” Bernard asks. “Miraculously” (192).

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## Some Notes on Alice Munro, Art, and Allegory

The feeling of something being out of kilter, in a way that could not be fixed or altered but only resisted, as well as you could. Some people entering such places give up immediately, they do not know how to resist, they are outraged or frightened, they have to flee.

Alice Munro, "Powers"

The first four sections of this essay offer general commentary on the work of Alice Munro. I praise qualities in Munro that I admire and I suggest ideas and emotions that an encounter with her work may encourage. I speculate about the desires that lead her to write, and I situate these desires in the larger context of various experiences and motivations that may lead an individual to projects of artistic creation. Using passages from a few of her stories, I attempt to contemplate the interdependence between the desires and experiences that lead her, or any artist, to write and the ideas and emotions present in her work.

In the fifth section of the essay, citing Hugo von Hofmannsthal's famous essay or story, "The Letter of Lord Chandos," I suggest that the allure and power of art is intimately connected with the workings of allegory and symbolism. I argue that despite, and perhaps because of, her work's realism, Munro's stories offer exemplary opportunities to experience and to refine our understanding of allegory, and to acknowledge the intrinsic presence of allegorical reasoning in cognition generally. Allegory and symbolism, or allegorical and symbolical reasoning, are not explicitly defined in this essay.<sup>50</sup> In part, this speaks to the belletristic, rather than scholarly, nature of the essay. In part, this speaks to the problematic nature of any definition of allegory,

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<sup>50</sup> These two terms, and the cognitive and conceptual experiences they name, are clearly similar. Though allegory is generally preferred to describe the cognitive and conceptual experiences this essay wishes to contemplate, the more straightforward notion of symbolism is also useful. In large part allegory is in the end preferred because of this difference of connotation: "[The] freedom of interpretation within allegory has been claimed to be the marker of what distinguishes it from symbolism" (Tambling 17).

and to the various and often quite disparate ways it has been employed at different times and by different writers. As Jeremy Tambling writes at the beginning of a book-length study of the concept and its history, “What is meant by ‘allegory’... ranges... from defining certain specific texts or types of texts, to claiming that all literature, and all writing, is allegorical” (2). One thing that can be stated with certainty is that allegory says one thing and means another. And in this simple assertion we can see how one might easily claim that all writing involves allegory: all writing might, indeed generally does, if unconsciously, mean something other, or more, for each reader than what it merely says. “Allegory interprets events,” Tambling writes, “or reinterprets them in such a way that exceeds their literal meaning” (16), and we can hardly read, or think, without interpreting and creating (more) meaning. The relevance of thinking about allegory is conveyed succinctly in this question of Paul de Man: “Why is it that the furthest reaching truths about ourselves and the world have to be stated in such a lopsided, referentially indirect mode?” (2). And the difficulty of contending with allegory and its unavoidable relevance—and why thinking about it through Munro’s work may be useful, and why such potential represents an artistic accomplishment—is articulated well by Stephen Greenblatt:

Allegory may dream of presenting the thing itself... but its deeper purpose and its actual effect is to acknowledge the darkness, the arbitrariness, and the void that underlie, and paradoxically make possible, all representation of realms of light, order, and presence. Insofar as the project of mimesis is the direct representation of a stable, objective reality, allegory, in attempting and always failing to present Reality, inevitably reveals the impossibility of this project. This impossibility is precisely the foundation upon which all representation, indeed all discourse, is constructed. (vii-viii)

1.

I am struck by a sense of remarkable composure and nonjudgement in the work of Alice Munro. Composure and nonjudgement that exceed, in scale and sophistication, what



could be ascribed merely to her art's intrinsic trade in these matters. Munro's stories are built with the architect's unaccountable intuition (gained through more discipline than it lets on), and often they calmly unfold around moments that would rob anyone of composure, the most stolid and the most fragile alike. The lives that make up her stories are often fashioned through tender and subtly disinterested exposure of the visions and incentives, histories and relations that contribute to a life's prejudices and conscience.

The sense of composure in Munro's work is all the more remarkable for the fact that Munro possesses an intelligence so out of the ordinary that she knows well how thin, fragile or shallow everyday equanimity can be, and how commonly composure is feigned. Yet she understands well, and demonstrates, how essential, how structuring and strengthening equanimity and composure are to our individual and, more intensely still, collective lives. Munro's nonjudgement is all the more remarkable because her perceptive and penetrating eye would make it possible for her to hold up to the light our individual and collective faults, frailties, and hypocrisies in a way that would make our culpability all too apparent (and, at times, she does exactly that), yet she never abandons herself to this occupation and is never even principally concerned with it. In part this is because she is keenly aware that cultivated perception approaching penetration is an uncommon human characteristic, and an even less common human desire. In part, she exemplifies nonjudgement because she is keenly aware of the role that chance and necessity play in our lives. What purpose would harsh judgement serve, what kind of truth would it reveal, what impossibly intricate whole might it alter, not to say heal? From what vantage does the artist who is able to dole it out assess the landscape, or the battlefield? No vantage that Munro wishes to occupy.

Very likely there are such vantages, however rare and fleeting they may be: such heights and refined air that enable the traveler (so often either a solitary, perhaps ascetic, explorer, or a bitter or resigned outcast or outsider) to assess the situation in the valley below and pronounce judgements of sound and comprehensive moral reasoning. I believe that Munro is capable of these heights, and that she has visited them more than a few times. It is to her great credit, however, and to our good fortune, that she would never wish to reside there, or to write from there. The truth lives in communities, and in the individual lives that make up communities, not along the slopes or at the peak of a mountain. The work of Alice Munro helps us to understand this.

2.

When you start to write you're so excited, writing seems so important, much more important than real life; it seems a way, well, of making life bearable, but also of giving it significance and of casting it in eternal form. And I think maybe for the first two books I was feeling this, and then, of course, you begin to catch on to the fact that this is just something you're doing, and real life isn't going away at all, and that the way in which you use it is doomed to be inadequate. Sometimes it seems to me that what you do is for other people—other people's books do things for me that have to do with my own real life, my books don't do things for me; they may do things for somebody else.

*Writing seems so important, much more important than real life.* Here Munro expresses what is perhaps, in one form or another, the fundamental impetus behind the initial efforts of many artists. What is called “real life” is deficient, and pales in comparison to what is cast in the furnace of art and to what is learned working near its heat. The artist feels that the existence we are asked to live is inadequate, that the various but somehow narrowly confined options available to us are but variations on the same theme, and that the theme is either corrupt or constricting. The artist sees in their community—in the mores and environments of their upbringing, in the aims and inner-workings of their society—something that, to their young and hungry mind, their young and hungry body, amounts

to death in life, and to abdication of responsibility. The artist strives to replace what is missing, or to correct what is mistaken, through work.

Some artists endeavor, through their work, to replace what is missing in the world outside of themselves. They strive to create something that reveals to their fellow citizens the absence or the falsity that they perceive to be at or near the center of the goings-on of the community. They strive to lift the veil, as it were, in order to reveal the truth of “real life,” and in order to spur the community on to reform, on to more significant activities and pursuits that will honor what the artist identifies as more genuine, just, or true life.

Other artists do not hold such grand ambitions, or not grand in this worldly way. These artists generally do not hold political ideals or societal transformation close to their hearts. The drive to redress what is missing in “real life” is still manifest in their work, but the project seems an inward one. The labor of the artist working in this fashion is not necessarily less committed or purposeful, but the artistic project does not place, or feign to place, demands on society. The narrative or passion behind this approach suggests that the inadequacies of “real life” will be amended, or compensated for, by how the artist is able to navigate their own existence, and perhaps by how they are able to incorporate their art into that existence. Not by suggesting that we all must pay more attention or perish, or that there are pressing wrongs that a more genuine or truthful life would seek to put right, as the first approach does.

In this crude sketch of some desires that may contribute to an artist’s efforts, Alice Munro would exemplify the second approach.

Mary, in “The Shining Houses,” a story from Munro’s first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, is not an untypical Munro protagonist. She is a young mother beginning her life in a newly sprouted but not yet solidified suburban neighborhood of Vancouver: “The name of the subdivision was Garden Place, and its streets were named for flowers.... Garden Place was already put down, in the minds of people who understood addresses, as less luxurious than Pine Hills but more desirable than Wellington Park” (22-23). Mary finds herself at a neighborhood event, a birthday party for a young child at which all the local mothers and some of their husbands are present, “Because the children on the street were so young, and also because any gathering-together of the people who lived there was considered a healthy thing in itself” (25). Before arriving at the gathering, Mary pays a visit to Mrs. Fullerton, who is getting on in years and who has lived in the neighborhood since it was known simply as Wicks Road, long before any of those attending the birthday party. Mrs. Fullerton’s old, somewhat rundown house from a previous era is considered an eyesore to the young families planning their lives from within their newly constructed homes, surrounded by manicured landscape and lawn. Mrs. Fullerton herself is also considered something of an eccentric eyesore by these new neighbors. But Mary finds Mrs. Fullerton, not necessarily pleasant, and quaint or even interesting would be the wrong word, but she finds in Mrs. Fullerton something real, genuine or true, and the talk of the other young mothers and of their husbands, along with their machinations to have Mrs. Fullerton essentially evicted from the neighborhood, do not sit well with Mary.

“Mary found herself exploring [Mrs. Fullerton’s] life as she had once explored the lives of grandmothers and aunts—by pretending to know less than she did, asking for

some story she had heard before; this way, remembered episodes emerged each time with slight differences of content, meaning, colour, yet with a pure reality that usually attaches to things which are at least part legend” (19). One has the sense that this “pure reality” that Mary finds so oddly nourishing—not comforting or instructive, simply and in some senses *merely* revealing—is not something Mary’s neighbors are interested in. Or, if the reader does not have this sense, it must be admitted that the lack of regard her neighbors show for “differences of content, meaning, colour,” is something Mary acutely perceives. But what is to be said to her neighbors in defense of Mrs. Fullerton? And what is it to be wrong or right in these matters? *Is there a wrong or a right in these matters?*

“But remember she’s been here a long time,” [Mary] said [of Mrs. Fullerton]. “She was here before most of us were born.” She was trying desperately to think of other words, words more sound and reasonable than these; she could not expose to this positive tide any notion that they might think flimsy and romantic, or she would destroy her argument. But she had no argument. She could try all night and never find any words to stand up to their words, which came at her now invincibly from all sides: *shack, eyesore, filthy, property, value.* (27)

At the end of the story it occurs to Mary that her neighbors “were right, for themselves, for whatever it was they had to be. . . . [T]hese are people who win, and they are good people; they want homes for their children, they help each other when there is trouble, they plan a community” (29). Mary leaves the party the lone abstainer, the only neighbor unwilling to sign the petition setting in motion Mrs. Fullerton’s eventual ousting, but she does not imagine that she has won any kind of moral victory. She understands that the neighbors—*good* people—will have the final say. “There is nothing you can do at present,” the story concludes, “but put your hands in your pockets and keep a disaffected heart” (29).

For Mary this may be all one can do. But for Munro, for the artist, one can also write. Or if one *is* able to write in the face of it, perhaps it is not so bad. Maybe this is

more akin to putting your hands in your pockets than raising a fist in the air or hammering nails or chopping wood. But like Mary, Munro has entertained the idea that there is a need to argue with the world, with the way decisions are made and lives organized, and with those who seem to be making the decisions. This idea is often present in Munro's work, like a bubble that one of the children at the birthday party might have blown in the backyard, but in the end blown only to be popped. For Munro, also like Mary, there is ultimately no argument to be found, hardly any firm footing on which to claim that there is a definite wrong and right in these matters. As an artist, she does not look for an argument. Her art even suggests that anyone claiming firm footing ought to be careful where they are stepping. This is not resignation—tending to one's heart is hardly resignation—but there is an element of resignation present. What is missing in "real life," this position seems to suggest—what one is innocent, angry, intelligent, and/or hopeful enough to suggest is missing from what one is bold enough to claim as real life—will not be found, and Munro does not suggest we drop what we are doing to go searching. But, as an individual, for Munro and other artists like her, this lack can be withstood, if not always understood and overcome, in some small way through work. As she describes it during the same interview quoted above:

I found it very easy to take myself seriously as a writer, I always had done. That is, I felt it was never difficult for me to claim to be a writer, and to take that much attention away from the world to make myself a writer.... I suppose I used to think it was a trade-off. I used to think, if the world will just allow me to write then I'll do anything else it demands; and so I was a very conventional woman on the surface: I got glamorously dressed and went to parties and flirted, and I kept house quite well, I had children. I did all of these things without regret; I enjoyed all of those things. Because I was managing to get the other thing which mattered more than anything else to me. And it only came to me very gradually that I couldn't exist in the writing alone.

In “Epilogue: The Photographer,” the final story of Munro’s second collection, *Lives of Girls and Women*, the narrator, Del Jordan, writes of the novel she once held in her mind: “[A] time came when all the books in the Library in the Town Hall were not enough for me, I had to have my own. I saw that the only thing to do with my life was to write a novel” (267). One day, walking with a friend with a penchant for imagining future worlds—perhaps dystopias, but in any case worlds where social engineering is rife, where “newborn babies could be stimulated with waves of electricity and would be able to compose music like Beethoven’s, or like Verdi’s, whatever was wanted”—Del has a vision of “how strange this was”:

Jerry Storey and I coming back from our walks could see Jubilee so plainly, now the leaves were off the trees; it lay before us in a not very complicated pattern of streets named after battles and ladies and monarchs and pioneers. Once as we walked over the trestle a car full of people from our class at school passed underneath, hooting at us, and I did have a vision, as if from outside, of how strange this was—Jerry contemplating and welcoming a future that would annihilate Jubilee and life in it, and I myself planning secretly to turn it into black fable and tie it up in my novel, and the town, the people who really were the town, just hooting car horns—to mock anybody walking, not riding, on a Sunday afternoon—and never knowing what danger they were in from us. (272)

But just as the residents of Garden Place, their artifices along with their noble pursuits, were in no danger from Mary’s qualms and subtle intellect, neither is Jubilee in any danger from Del Jordan’s imagined novel, or from Jerry Storey’s *Brave New World* diagnoses. For, as we all know, art makes nothing happen, as the often-quoted Auden poem, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” has it:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth. (248)

Remember, though, that Munro is the kind of artist who does not wish to transform society, or who at least does not see art as a means to elevate and enact this wish. She does not suggest that something essential within humanity might have been

corrupted somewhere along the line, or that the present structure of things may in some fundamental way suffocate conscience or goodness or love, or that we might do well to find different air to breathe and quick. What she encounters in life is often something inadequate, to be sure, but she never seems to imagine that she is addressing in her work any inadequacy beyond that of her own experience. Contemplating this approach may offer one key to explaining the basic consistency of style and content in Munro's work throughout her career. Her growth and development could hardly alter this fundamental soil from which her writing had always grown. She never set out to change anything—she set out to experience everything, and to write about everything.

It so happens that for many artists, as Munro acknowledges of herself, in order to experience everything there must also be a turning away from the world. The hands of this kind of artist, then, may dig deep into their pockets indeed. "I am asleep but my heart is awake," as a passage from the Bible has it.

## 5.

When we say that art makes nothing happen we do so in all seriousness, with a straight face. And yet, of course, we know that it makes something happen. "[S]o long as the approach is an aesthetic one," Walter Benjamin wrote, "paradox must have the last word" (216). Here I would like to suggest that this *something* is often bound up with the workings of allegory and symbolism, with the role that allegory and symbolism play in the intricacies, subtleties and expansions of meaning that accompany, or are revealed by, one's experience of a work of art (though a work of art need not necessarily be involved: a tree or a river or many other situations might very well create equivalent experiences). In another paradox, the expansion and increased complexity of meaning within and



through words and images also functions to condense and quicken the imaginative and cognitive processes by which we all make and encounter significance. While it is something of a truism that literature's ability to condense and quicken the imaginative and cognitive processes ought to be praised, and that it ought to form an integral part of the complete educational development of our society's youth, the reality is that prodigious cultivation of these abilities does not always engender incorporation into the complex folds of a society, and can indeed bring about social alienation or a potentially destructive sense of doubt. I would like to suggest that Munro's stories offer extraordinary opportunities for these allegorical encounters while at the same time providing frequent reminders of the dangers of this kind of thinking; reminders also of the ultimate futility, or at least of the ultimate incommunicability, of elaborate, but in the end idiosyncratic, forms of comprehension. I would like to suggest that therein lies something of the brilliance of her art.

In an introduction to a collection of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's work, J. D.

McClatchy writes about Hofmannsthal's essay, "The Letter of Lord Chandos":

Though clearly a work of fiction, "The Letter of Lord Chandos" has always and rightly been read as an autobiographical confession, one that dramatizes its author's own "word-skepticism" and marks a decisive change of direction in his career. In the letter, Chandos writes to his friend Francis Bacon of "a peculiarity, a vice, a disease of my mind, if you like" that has rendered him incapable of writing. In the past he had "conceived the whole of existence as one great unit," a continuum in which the smallest detail of nature or thought, history or culture had its place. All that has shattered. Abstractions turn to dust in his mouth, descriptions distort rather than clarify, opinions only induce doubt. "For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea.".... Hofmannsthal himself later described this as "the situation of a mystic without mysticism," and the allegory depicts his own impasse. He had arrived at the limits of aestheticism and symbolism, which has exhausted him and dried up his impulse to continue as a poet. A literature divorced from life, all incantation and allure, is a dead end. (7-8)

Literature that is all incantation and allure is indeed a dead end, but writing without incantation and allure is hardly literature. Munro's work is an art of consummate realism. The "incantation and allure" of some of the events and cognitive experiences portrayed in

her work does not alter this realism. Indeed, Munro's ability to subtly demonstrate incantation and allure without ever divorcing it from life is the glory of her realism.

Dramatized in Hofmannsthal's "Letter" is one man's extraordinary intellectual growth through allegory and symbolism, through the cultivation of an allegorical understanding of the world, along with the crisis to which this path to insight and acuity may also lead. Quoting directly from the "Letter" now:

When in my hunting lodge I drank the warm foaming milk which an unkempt wench had drained into a wooden pail from the udder of a beautiful gentle-eyed cow, the sensation was no different from that which I experienced when, seated on a bench built into the window of my study, my mind absorbed the sweet and foaming nourishment from a book. The one was like the other: neither was superior to the other, whether in dreamlike celestial quality or in physical intensity—and thus it prevailed through the whole expanse of life in all directions; everywhere I was in the center of it, never suspecting mere appearance: at other times I divined that all was allegory and that each creature was a key to all the others; and I felt myself the one capable of seizing each by the handle and unlocking as many of the others as were ready to yield.... In these moments an insignificant creature—a dog, a rat, a beetle, a crippled apple tree, a lane winding over the hill, a moss-covered stone, mean more to me than the most beautiful, abandoned mistress of the happiest night. These mute and, on occasion, inanimate creatures rise towards me with such an abundance, such a presence of love, that my enchanted eye can find nothing in sight void of life. Everything that exists, everything I can remember, everything touched upon by my confused thoughts, has a meaning. Even my own heaviness, the general torpor of my brain, seems to acquire a meaning; I experience in and around me a blissful, never-ending interplay, and among the objects playing against one another there is not one into which I cannot flow. To me, then, it is as though my body consists of naught but ciphers which give me the key to everything; or as if we could enter into a new and hopeful relationship with the whole of existence if only we begin to think with the heart. (72, 76-77)

*If only we begin to think with the heart.* And yet, if this mode of comprehension is in some senses thinking with the heart, it is also an illusion—it is merely the cognitive process by which one man understands the world. Unquestionably it represents the sophisticated and perspicacious consciousness of a learned man, but it is clear how Hofmannsthal might soberly reflect on the impasse that this process leads to as "the situation of a mystic without mysticism." Perhaps it would be a stretch to rephrase this claim and suggest that Lord Chandos' predicament represents the plight of a mystic who has lost his *faith*—faith in what exactly? Surely not faith in any singular God—but

nevertheless, the process by which he achieves a percipient understanding of the world, his initial “mysticism,” is intimately related to belief and unbelief:

To a person susceptible to such ideas, it might appear a well-designed plan of divine Providence that my mind should fall from such a state of inflated arrogance into this extreme of despondency and feebleness which is now the permanent condition of my inner self.... [In] familiar and humdrum conversation all the opinions which are generally expressed with ease and sleepwalking assurance became so doubtful that I had to cease altogether taking part in such talk. It filled me with an inexplicable anger, which I could conceal only with effort, to hear such things as: This affair has turned out well or ill for this or that person; Sheriff N. is a bad, Parson T. a good man; Farmer M. is to be pitied, his sons are wasters; another is to be envied because his daughters are thrifty; one family is rising in the world, another is on the downward path. All this seemed as indemonstrable, as mendacious and hollow as could be. My mind compelled me to view all things occurring in such conversations from an uncanny closeness. As once, through a magnifying glass, I had seen a piece of skin on my little finger look like a field full of holes and furrows, so I now perceived human beings and their actions. I no longer succeeded in comprehending them with the simplifying eye of habit.... As soon... as this strange enchantment [of allegorical understanding] falls from me, I find myself confused; wherein this harmony transcending me and the entire world consisted, and how it made itself known to me, I could present in sensible words as little as I could say anything precise about the inner movements of my intestines or a congestion of my blood. (72-74, 77)

Lord Chandos successfully moves beyond the “simplifying eye of habit” to discover a vision that comprehends reality in a far more comprehensive, nuanced, complex and interrelated manner. And yet, the absence of a “simplifying eye of habit,” replaced by a somewhat inevitably solipsistic vision that arises from imaginative and cognitive processes achieved through abstractions that are neither necessarily intuitive nor necessarily logical, potentially creates less an encounter with truth than a consciousness that doubts whether it might be able to grasp anything at all. In one sense, Lord Chandos has seen through, or beyond, the foundations of a society and the interactions that take place within a community; in another, he has seen through or beyond them using idiosyncratic imaginative and cognitive processes unable to provide any lasting or foundational truth whatsoever. In an essay written one hundred years after Hofmannsthal’s own, J. M. Coetzee creates a second “letter,” this one written by Lord Chandos’ wife, Elizabeth, and a passage from this letter provides a concise summary of the impasse:

All is allegory, says my Phillip. Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation. And perhaps he speaks the truth, perhaps in the mind of our Creator (*Our Creator*, I say) where we whirl about as if in a millrace we interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousand. But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation—how? *We are not made for revelation*, I want to cry out, *nor I nor you, My Philip*, revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun. (229)

The effort towards a deep understanding of the world, and not simply a comprehension of appearances, will necessarily entail an engagement, in part, with allegorical reasoning. If one is patient and conscientious in this approach, developing greater proficiency and greater capacity, the rewards are potentially significant—the landscape may appear as if it had previously never existed in the sun’s direct light, as if learning has been made to reveal, and then clear, leaden skies. There is no question that this process involves the imagination, and is in that sense inexact and unscientific. Yet imagination is so much a part of any one consciousness, is already so involved in any individual’s cognitive process, that it is almost absurd to attempt to develop perception without the deliberate involvement of the imagination. Recall Mary’s phrase in “The Shining Houses”: “slight differences of content, meaning, colour, yet *with a pure reality that usually attaches to things which are at least part legend*” (19, emphasis added). “Legend” here does not mean legend in the sense of a shared cultural narrative. Rather, one creates and experiences legends as well in secret; such allegory, symbolism, and/or narrative can form no small part of the reality one perceives and the reality of one’s methods of perception. Legends, and more specifically the innate ability to rely on and construct personal legends, as Lord Chandos’ plight demonstrates and as Munro’s work dramatizes, often play no small role in how we comprehend ourselves and our world.

“It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, so powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there” (275), Munro writes in “The Photographer.” The

cunning, the power of an allegorical understanding is revealing. The scaffolding of such an understanding is present in the most fundamental movements and patterns of thinking itself. And so the deliberate development of an allegorical understanding can have powerful implications for how meaning is comprehended and for how it might be worked through. But the ground on which this understanding rests, the varied intuitions and leaps and relations that have gone into it can seem, in the end, incommunicable, and disconnected from reality. So that one at times may wonder, like Lady Chandos, whether they have been staring at the landscape newly flooded with light, or whether they have made the mistake of staring at the sun.

At the end of “The Photographer,” Del Jordan is served lemonade and cake by Bobby Sherriff, a young man recently back from, and perhaps soon to return to, an asylum. Bobby is the son of the family who was to be the inspiration, the model, for Del Jordan’s novel. As they are talking, Del thinks of her hunger for the town, her hunger for meaning and significance, her hunger for description, and her hunger for an archive. She realizes, though, that “The hope of accuracy we bring to such tasks is crazy, heartbreaking” (277). As Bobby Sherriff clears away her empty plate, and fork, and napkin, he tells her that he “wishes her luck in life”:

Then he did the only special thing he ever did for me. With those things in his hands, he rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina. This action, accompanied by his delicate smile, appeared to be a joke not shared with me so much as displayed for me, and it seemed also to have a concise meaning, a stylized meaning—to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know. (277-278)

The narrator responds to this, and the story concludes: “‘Yes,’ I said, instead of thank you.” The *yes* here suggests comprehension—comprehension of “a concise meaning, a stylized meaning.” But how are we to comprehend the letters, the words, of an alphabet we do not truly know? And, if we do somehow comprehend a concise meaning using the

letters and words of an alphabet we do not know, how might this acknowledgement change how we understand ourselves, and how might it influence how we understand and communicate with others? Is the attainment of understanding and insight through an alphabet we could never know something we should be grateful for? Something we should cultivate? Or is it merely something always there, fundamentally unchanged whether acknowledged or not? *Yes, instead of thank you.*

Earlier in the story, Del Jordan says that she has “not worked out all the implications of [her novel] myself, but felt they were varied and powerful” (270). And so it is, I think, with Munro, and perhaps with all great art. Munro has said in interviews that she does not write with elaborate allegories in mind, that she does not write with any kind of symbolism at all in mind. She writes, rather, to convey a real world, and to compose a true story. And yet, the ways humans contend with allegory, the ways in which we are consistently encountering and thinking through a kind of symbolism, are often consummately dramatized in her work. As are the ways we fail to employ this capacity in any genuinely shared or measured manner, and the ways we often employ it individually only towards our own disaster and estrangement.

“If ‘compression is the first grace of style,’” runs the first line of Marianne Moore’s poem “To a Snail,” “you have it.” It is certainly a grace of Munro’s style. And thinking without the compression (and expansion) of significance in words and images is not thinking we can know or experience. So that the writer whose work possesses and performs this grace, and who demonstrates the role this fundamental rhythm of thought plays in our lives, is one we should be grateful for. The consistency of Munro’s form, the

unabated gift and discipline of her organized perception, is an invitation to learn all we can from the grace of style. "Contractility is a virtue" Moore's poem continues:

as modesty is a virtue.  
It is not the acquisition of any one thing  
that is able to adorn,  
or the incidental quality that occurs  
as a concomitant of something well said,  
that we value in style,  
but the principle that is hid:  
in the absence of feet, "a method of conclusions";  
"a knowledge of principles,"  
in the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn. (656)

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