The Mysticism of Reading: An Introduction to the European Narrative Classics for Students, Teachers, Reading Groups, and Independent Readers.
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**Why Read the Classics?**

Before answering this question in general, I want to answer it for myself. Odd as it seems, I became a serious reader in order to stave off attacks of numbing terror. When I was fifteen, my father owned a factory for oil tanks in a small Midwestern town. After some incidents of petty vandalism, he had me stay up as an unarmed guard in the factory office. I had been wasting my summer by staying up late and sleeping till noon when my parents reasoned that my bad habit might as well serve some useful purpose. Since I was curious about our leather-bound, color-coded Great Books which were new and unread in 1962, I resolved with the naive bravado of a teenager steeling himself for life to guard the factory, earn some spending money, and improve my mind all at the same time.

Every night, I experienced bouts of abject terror. With the lights turned on inside the office, I could see nothing through the reflecting windows. When I stepped outside to reassure myself by looking up at the stars, I faced dark fields on one side and shadowy oil vessels on the other. Entering the dimly lighted factory to buy soft drinks from a vending machine meant running a gauntlet. Steel structures cooling in the night air made clicking and groaning noises that resounded in the vaulted space. There were jagged shadows and unnerving odors of oil and metal.

Every night, I made brief forays into the outer darkness and then locked myself in the office and passed the night reading under the gaze of its mirror-like windows. I read with a concentration nourished by fear, the way a lone camper in a woods might stoke a campfire to fend off beasts and maintain a haven of light in a hostile wilderness. Faced
with the teeming outer darkness, I sought refuge in ordeals of concentration. Straining to follow the logic of Plato’s *Republic* or the plot of *War and Peace* freed my mind of lurid scenarios. I fled from the outer darkness behind my mirrored face into new mental zones.

First I realized that the Great Books were uncongenial for reading. I traded their double-columned uniformity for paperbacks with bright covers but kept to my program of reading the classics of literature and philosophy. Under the circumstances, my reading took on an aura of terror and adventure that might be compared to learning how to fly. I gained access to other worlds of thought and could soon survey my own from a distance. Some of my most intimate memories of my home town are framed by recollections of books I was reading at the time. The next two summers, I worked with my friends for farmers bringing in hay. Since the hay had to dry in the morning, work began after noon. By sleeping late, I could work in the afternoon and continue my nocturnal flights into the worlds of Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer, Voltaire, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, William James, Freud, Chekhov, and Nietzsche, among many others. Five decades later, I prefer the classical calm of the pre-dawn hours to the romantic seclusion of the post-midnight ones. I went on to study philosophy, languages, and literature and enjoyed a modest career as a professor of German, winding it down just in time to register a precipitous decline in the culture of reading.

Literacy—as a skill, a familiarity with literature, or a predominance of the culture of the printed word—is in decline. As reading becomes less universal, less like speaking or eating, its mystical aspects are highlighted. One of the best of the recent books on the culture of reading, Alberto Manguel’s *The Library at Night*, plays on an association with nocturnal reverie. In reading, we reframe our existence in terms of alternate possibilities
and values. Our rebirth into the alien circumstances of the text makes us aware of latent human qualities. Albrecht Dürer’s engraving of a radiantly absorbed Saint Jerome with his emblematic lion slumbering at his feet is an allegory of reading. When the beast of passion sleeps, the inner life of the reader is awakened and gives off light. Straddling the boundary between worlds, Jerome’s absorption takes place in a dream milieu of subdued ferocity. But the scholar is no dreamer. He is alert to a different order of reality. To the visually oriented, literature is nothing. To an absorbed reader, this nothing is everything.

To answer the questions, what are the classics and why should we still read them, we need to forget the straw-man debates of past decades and ignore Webster’s canonizing definition of the classics as embodying an “authoritative standard of excellence.” They can be defined as the most original and influential literary works of the past. Originality or influence are hard to quantify, but they are not subjective value judgments. All human culture has antecedents, but the classics have some of the deepest clearly traceable roots. The past is ingrained in them like the rings in a tree. Inner complexity betokens depth of origins. We can take or leave the classics, but what they offer is real. Even in a slender but well chosen selection, they can be read as an imaginative chronicle of humankind.

To understand why we need to read the classics, readers need to recall or imagine an experience of isolation or disorientation of the kind that makes us wonder who we are, where we are coming from, and what the point of our life is. There are moments when it is unbearable to be what we are, when our existence is like a swollen and throbbing limb. Even the necessary recourses of counseling or medication might not clarify the meaning of the experience for us. Some might find answers in religion. But even the faithful do not expect answers to every question in the Bible. We are curious about the meaningful
particulars of existence and our origin and place in the life of the world. The belief that Freudian psychology could address this need has by now lost its credibility, but a desire for the self-knowledge that was once promised by psychoanalysis still tantalizes us.

Not by accident, some of Freud’s most compelling work treated the classics as an adjunct to psychological discovery. We can only make sense of literature by recognizing ourselves in it. We can gain a deeper understanding of ourselves from reading than from self-absorbed introspection or faded documents in the family attic. Our roots in language are not only deep but protractible. Words create the speaker and reading the reader. The language and sentiments of those we have heard or read shape our conscious being more than the genes of our unfamiliar progenitors. Since our ancestry as readers extends back through those we read to those they read, it is richer than the oldest family chronicle. The authors who influence us are not our antecedents because they belong to our group but because their sentiments endure as a living presence in our memory. Our lineage is not limited to any continent or race. We have close kin on all continents. Potential readers who do not read are like heirs to an estate who do not reclaim their heritage.

There is a growing interest in the culture and history of reading, and there is an emerging consensus that it has broader implications for society. Reading in general and the reading of sustained literary narratives in particular are losing their capacity to hold and mold generations adrift in seas of information and images. Levels of reading ability that were once taken for granted are going the way of Greek and Latin as standards of academic preparation. The implications of this have been discussed in Neil Postman’s critique of entertainment and technology, Sven Birkerts’ characterization of the inner life of the reader, Maryanne Wolf’s testimony regarding its neurobiological underpinnings,
Mark Bauerlein’s assessment of the impact of digital culture on students, in surveys of the decline of reading habits, and in many other public discussions.¹

Within this far larger picture, the decline of the classics is a small but significant detail. There are at least four reasons for the dissipation of the sense that timeless books are obligatory reading. First and foremost, literature is losing ground. Recent studies suggest that visual stimulation and electronic communication are promoting a decline in pleasure reading.² Second, those who read literature are less likely to favor the classics. In popular culture or in publishing, the market-driven promotion of the new distances us from the old. Third, the culture wars have diminished the status of books once valued for their resonance with a privileged tradition. Self-styled elite guardians of tradition in the mold of Allan Bloom have probably done as much as post-colonial theorists to give the classics their spurious aura of hegemonic Eurocentrism. And finally, the classics are in decline because the academic study of literature has become too technical and specialized to encourage a lay culture of reading. As less is read, theory replaces the context which was once provided by more extensive reading. Divested of readers and branded as elitist, the classics are a once prominent family whose estate has been parceled out to successors and strip-mined in the interest of critical theory. Their lustrous titles might still adorn bookshelves and inspire movies. As literature they are fading into obscurity.

This sounds dismal, but the decline of literature is exposing the secret of its public relevance. Readers’ responses to what they read are a measure of the willing suspension of disbelief which brings whatever is read to life. Why does a story engage us or leave us unaffected? A story that engages us brings the presence of narrative authority to light. A story that leaves us unaffected signals its absence. Authority is as universal as the air we
breathe, but it operates invisibly in the mind. Those who disregard authority often end up surrendering to it. To become conscious of what is behind authority helps us transcend it. Serious literature demonstrates the leanings of authority without requiring indoctrination into any ideology or creed, and without the distractions of the visual. Unlike overt force or violence, authority is empowered by narration. The Ten Commandments or the U. S. Constitution draw their authority from narratives sacred or historical. Understanding the relations of narrative and authority can help us comprehend the premises of our debates about religion, morality, politics, or culture. Serious reading in any genre should not be confused with pleasure reading. Franz Kafka famously scoffed at the notion of reading for pleasure. He called books an “axe for the frozen sea within us.”

Those conditioned to react to flashing ballets of violence in split-second time will find literature boring and pointless. Their reactions are thoughtless. We only perceive a story as such when the lens of narration singles out action from the chaos of imaginable events. Framing elements and the camera eye of perspective make narrative sense out of pointless events. Narrated action is framed by contextualizing devices, just as in politics events are framed to guide or manipulate voters. We can read books more perceptively and assess issues more astutely if we recognize the authority imparted by contextualizing devices such as point of view, perspective, framing narratives, allusions, and symbols.

This survey is an introduction to reading the classics and an overview of literary tradition. It developed out of the challenge of teaching literature to undergraduates in the General Education sequence of a Midwestern state university. Teaching to the purposes of a general education led me to inquire what sort of knowledge literature holds in store for non-specialists and how it can best be imparted. Even the brightest and most willing
students often find the activity of reading the classics as alien as a solitary nocturnal vigil or an exercise in mystical contemplation. Students unfamiliar with the culture of reading want to know why they should read literature which is more demanding and less relevant to their immediate concerns. What follows was written in response, as an introduction to the European narrative classics for students, teachers, and independent readers.

The literary classics are introduced here as a sequence of narratives presented in a simple but unconventional light. Though the discussion of literary theory will be kept to a minimum, the presentation is indebted to Erich Auerbach and Viktor Shklovsky, two towering figures with seemingly opposite leanings that in fact complement one another.3

The course outlined here begins with lecture and strategically interposed questions and shifts to directed discussion as participants acquire background knowledge and reading experience. Reading literature is a highly individual activity. It takes us down divergent paths. Teaching students how to read literature in a large lecture course therefore labors against the grain and requires pedagogical subterfuges. I provide narrative summaries with multiple interpretations so that students in my class and readers of this survey can engage mentally in a virtual discussion without getting lost in tangential digressions.

Students in the course would read narratives from the sacred to the profane, from the Bible to Boccaccio. They would begin with excerpts from the Bible, Homer, Saint Augustine, Dante, and selected tales from the Decameron. In full, they would read most of the following: Cervantes’ Dialog of the Dogs, Voltaire’s Candide, Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, German Romantic fairytales by Tieck and Brentano, Leo Tolstoy’s The Cossacks and Master and Man, Flaubert’s A Simple Heart, Chesterton’s The Man Who Was Thursday, some shorter writings by Kafka and Borges,
Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, and Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man*. Information on these authors is readily available online, but readers of the classics need something more. They need a juxtaposition of plot with tradition and history which can convey the outlines of an overarching narrative. Most college textbook introductions to literature proceed unhistorically, organizing readings to exemplify genre, character, or plot. The readings selected for this survey cast a critical light on the so-called European master narrative, which exercises hegemony over us only if it remains unexamined. The narratives presented here trace one possible itinerary through the worlds of words to gates of enlightenment traversed by prior generations. Let others add their own itineraries.

First principles, whether in mathematics or reading, are best exemplified by the simplest cases in point. I chose these particular readings for their surmountable brevity, thematic variety, and significance in history and tradition – but also because literature attains its relevance, paradoxically, by demonstrating its irrelevance, which it does by challenging the familiar. European literature is somewhat less familiar than American from our high school curricula. Its unfamiliarity should be one of its attractions. Like natural science, literature focuses the data of the known in de-familiarizing perspectives. The bewilderment of the novice reader, if it is not passive incomprehension, presents a more Socratic point of departure for learning to read the classics than does the smug self-assurance of the moralist or the adept sophistication of the specialist. Literary meaning matures gradually, resulting in discrete illuminations of self-recognition and in overviews as panoramic in time as the satellite-generated, earth-spanning images are in space. The reader of the classics recapitulates the development of literate humanity itself. There is a mysticism of reading that can be experienced by any reader with sufficient perseverance.
Only time will tell whether the classics are destined for marginalization. What is certain is that, just as some people are born to be athletes or musicians, others have the makings of serious readers. And just as education acquaints us with physical or musical activity in order to draw out those with talents and teach the rest of us how to appreciate them, everyone should know the activity of reading, not only as a means to an end but as an end in itself.

Nearly any pursuit, trivial or profound, has been mapped and elucidated better for the novice than the activity of reading the classics. Most university undergraduates could search their course catalogues in vain for an introduction to the how and why of reading. Why should we read the classics? They fulfill the same needs that compel us to research our genealogies and forage in our attics for ancestral memorabilia. The classics deepen our awareness of our intellectual and cultural heritage. They help us understand who we are. Reading with a critical mind refines our understanding of authority without requiring our indoctrination in any set of beliefs. Complex literature strengthens literacy skills. In terms of a general education, the classics provide an access to knowledge complementary to other humanities fields such as philosophy, history, or religion. Finally, society needs serious readers. Someone has to stay awake in the dream world of manipulated visuality and pervasive entertainment. Mental alertness and perseverance are required in order to break out of the confines of the controlled image and penetrate the outer darkness of the all-absorbing moment. Reading literature might not be for everyone, but anyone aspiring to a higher education should at least know what it means to read the classics.
An Introduction to Reading

Any story might serve as an introduction to reading narrative literature, in the same way that the nearest creek might be followed to the sea, but one obscure story casts light on the mysterious mechanism of reading. It is a posthumous narrative fragment by the Austrian-Jewish writer Arthur Schnitzler entitled “The Boxer Uprising.” A century ago, the ancient and cultivated Chinese nation was in disarray, dominated and exploited by foreign powers. Britain, France, Russia, Japan, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the United States had carved China up into commercial spheres. The Boxers were members of nationalistic secret societies. They practiced the martial arts and plotted to kick the foreigners out. In 1900, the Boxers staged an uprising, attacking foreign nationals and Christians. Aided by the anti-Boxer Chinese governors, the foreign armies crushed the rebellion and dealt ruthlessly with the defeated rebels. Prisoners were shot, hanged, and beheaded in the streets of their cities. The world press circulated striking photographs. With their faces frozen in terror and misery, the prisoners look like pathetic stereotypes whose lives are meaningless and cheap.

In Arthur Schnitzler’s “The Boxer Uprising,” a condemned Chinese prisoner gets transformed from a stereotype into an individual in the eyes of the European officer who is responsible for executing a cohort of Chinese prisoners. The officer is the one telling the story. This officer is a typical man of his society, indifferent to political or social issues. He has a job to do and intends to do it. A group of prisoners has been sentenced to be shot. The execution is scheduled to take place in a short time. Inspecting the men
under sentence, he finds one weeping and another saying his prayers. Some are writing letters or receiving visits from their families or in conversation with their fellows. But the last of the seventeen is doing something unexpected. He is reading a book.

This stimulates the curiosity of the officer. He is curious about the state of mind of those about to die. But he is probably not someone who reads many books himself. He cannot make sense of the fact that the sentenced man is calmly reading. The officer questions the condemned prisoner. Doesn’t he know that he is about to be killed? *You never know what will happen in life*, the prisoner replies. Why isn’t he writing to his family? *Oh, they’ll find out soon enough. They may even think he’s already been killed.*

The officer manages to find out what the man is reading. This is an important question for us too. If the condemned prisoner is reading the Bible or Karl Marx or a book on how to perform magic tricks and disappearing acts, this would make a difference. The answer is none of the above. It is a novel. We never learn the title or author.

The officer becomes more and more agitated. He keeps coming back to the condemned man reading the book. He asks him whether he thinks he will have time to finish it. The condemned man glances at the remaining pages. *Probably.* His tone is not hostile, but it seems to say, *not if you keep pester ing me with your questions.* The officer knows this prisoner must die. He is in charge of the firing squad. But something bothers him about a reading man who refuses to play the role of a prisoner about to die.

Why is this so unsettling? Has his conscience been aroused? Could it be that the condemned prisoner, by refusing to play the role of a man about to die, is challenging the authority of the officer who is therefore driven to prove that he is after all in command of the situation? For whatever reason, the officer rides to his commander and argues to get
this one prisoner pardoned. He calls in personal favors and then gallops back to tell the 
reading man that he has been pardoned. The prisoner who is still reading is in the last 
group to be shot. The officer tells him he is pardoned. *Can I go?* asks the Chinese. On 
his own authority, the officer tells him he can go. Now it is time to execute the other 
prisoners. Some are in shock. One laughs hysterically as he rises to face his death. The 
officer waits until the pardoned reader is going out through the gate, then gives the order 
to fire, killing the others. The freed prisoner is startled but he does not look back. He is 
alive and free.

What has the officer learned? Not much. He concludes that the reading prisoner 
was the strangest man he had ever encountered. He is ashamed after the execution, not 
because he has shot the other men: he expects that, when word gets out, all condemned 
Chinese prisoners will show up with books in their pockets which will do them no good. 
He also reflects that, aside from reading, the man was not impressive as a human being.

And what can we learn? There are various possibilities. The condemned Chinese 
tells the officer that no one ever knows what will happen in life. Fate is capricious. Does 
the realization that human fate is capricious set us free? Or perhaps the story is about the 
evils of imperialism. But a sentence prefacing Schnitzler’s story seems to reject political 
implications. For all we know, these condemned prisoners may have done terrible things. 
What would we say if we knew they were terrorists? Deciding what the story means is a 
matter of deciding what it is about. The reader should not begin with the question, what 
is behind it, but ask instead, what *is* it? We will consider the alternatives that might arise 
in a typical classroom discussion. To assess what makes an interpretation applicable or 
attractive, we will consider divergent interpretive hypotheses.
A. The story is about an officer whose sense of justice makes him save a helpless Chinese man.

B. The story is about a foreigner whose half-forgotten obligation to the Chinese man who once saved his life leads to an act of clemency.

C. The story is about a male whose repressed attraction to those of the same sex leads him to do something unexpected.

D. The story is about the saving power of faith in a God who watches over even those who are not aware of it.

E. The story is about the peculiar activity of reading books and how it can affect people’s relations to their surroundings.

Despite what has been said, the first answer is still appealing. A story about men facing a firing squad implies a tale of justice and injustice. To save a man’s life is surely a good or just thing. But if we are talking about the officer’s “sense of justice,” where is the evidence for that? If this is Schnitzler’s point, why doesn’t he play his cards better by telling us about the political situation or by making the officer, or at least the condemned reader, think about the fate of the other prisoners? The prisoner doesn’t even look back. If we regard the story as a protest against imperialism, the author is surely a poker player who throws out the ace to claim a four-card run. Not the best played hand.

The second answer is appealing because it pulls a rabbit out of our narrative hat. B appeals to what I will call the Easter Egg School of Literary Interpretation. The author is an Easter Bunny, surprising us with hidden meanings. But the story as presented to us offers not a shred of evidence for such an interpretation. A common misunderstanding of literature leads us to think that we always have to dig up something hidden to get at what
it means. Suffice it to say that if we only own a shovel, we may dig more holes than our garden needs. In literature or life, the truth is often hidden in plain sight.

The third answer again relies on the Easter Egg approach. Let us be entirely clear that there is no reason why any sexual theme should be off limits. Exposing things that are suppressed or concealed is a venerable and powerful function of literature. But does the absence of evidence for a sexual interpretation indicate that it is cleverly concealed? Since we tend to be discrete about sexual matters, they are a prematurely appealing field of interpretation for the Easter Egg School.

The fourth answer—it is God’s will—makes sense if, and only if, we believe that everything is part of God’s will and plan. This explanation fits any story or sequence of events equally well. “God’s will” by-passes the particulars of the story. If we pick this answer, we are no longer talking about this story as such. Instead, we are talking about what we believe. It is certainly acceptable, even refreshing, to talk about beliefs. But it is not the same as talking about the story. Because “God’s will” fits anything, it cannot explain why anything in particular happens one way and not another. Instead of talking about the story with its unique details and events, we have simply changed the subject.

What is wrong with E? We have been trained to expect that in the lofty realm of art and literature, everything will be so subtle and symbolic and deep that what we see is never what we get. If we pick E, we are unimaginative and unsophisticated. But E is my choice. The story is about the activity of reading familiar to us all. This is of course not all. It is also about facing death and executing people, things less familiar to most of us.

Performing a mental exercise of substitution suggests that the story is even more about reading than it is about China. Take away the Chinese setting, relocate the story in
France or Mexico, and it could still make the same point. But take away the condemned
prisoner who wants to finish his novel before facing the firing squad and we eliminate the
story as we know it. Take away the novel and give the man a rosary or a deck of cards or
a Bible, and again something essential has been lost. Proceeding by mental displacement,
which avoids tampering with the sealed box of the author’s unarticulated intentions, we
can conclude that the story is about reading. Reading a novel.

Since that is also what this survey is about, we should reflect for a moment on the
mysterious experience we take for granted in the act of reading. What is important about
this man reading his novel? It is the fact that he is so absorbed in reading that he ignores
his situation. He prefers being engrossed in his book to savoring, counting, or otherwise
making use of his last minutes of life. He is, as we say, in his own world. Not everyone
would react as he does. The officer observes that the prisoner was the strangest man he
had ever encountered. But there are strange people and events in this world. Stranger
things happen all the time. So strange as it is, why might it still make sense to imagine
someone behaving this way?

It makes sense because to a certain degree we have all behaved this way. You are
waiting at the dentist’s. By becoming absorbed in a book or magazine, you forget that
you are waiting for painful root canal work. You are on a boring bus journey. Reading a
novel lifts you out of the bus. In place of the boring trip, you experience the hours, days,
and lifetimes of your story. Your friend who only wants to kill time is getting annoyed.
You only care about finishing your novel before you get off the bus. We have all been
the condemned prisoner, as well as the officer who is spooked by the inaccessibility of an
autonomous reader. Schnitzler’s story represents an encounter of the incommensurable mentalities of a reader and a non-reader, an encounter in which we have all taken part.

One of the Beat poets whom we used to read in our squalid student quarters when I was a college freshman in 1965, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, had a memorable line in one of his poems in his book that bears the cool title, *A Coney Island of the Mind*: “I have slept on islands where books were trees.” All readers have slept on islands where books were trees. All of us have been transported across deserts of time on the pages of novels. All of us have escaped firing squads by fleeing into tunnels of narration. This story evokes the record of all our reading and, with it, the threatened demise of the common reader.

What happens when we read or interpret is that we recognize something familiar (in this instance our own experience of reading) in something strange (the situation of a Chinese prisoner facing a death sentence). When we read or interpret, the familiar (our own reading) is made strange; and the strange (the situation of a condemned prisoner) is made familiar. The familiar is made strange and the strange familiar. Viktor Shklovsky refined this insight into a sophisticated tool of analysis, but it can be grasped even at the level of common sense. If there were nothing familiar in a story, we wouldn’t be able to make sense of it. If there were nothing unfamiliar in it—would it be too boring to read? Perhaps. Or weird beyond belief. Some stories tease out this polarity of story-telling: a man sits down to read a book on a stormy night. What does he read? “A man sits down to read a book on a stormy night,” etc. If a story with nothing familiar would be cryptic as a message from Mars, a narrative unable to exit its narrative confines might be no less indigestible. Authors of meta-fiction from Flann O’Brien to Julio Cortázar have played
with this narrative polarity. Fiction is like an electric charge between the opposing poles of the familiar and the strange. Cut either pole and the voltage drops.

In reading literature, we see ourselves reflected in narrations that we imagine and interpret in reading them. Anyone who has read the Harry Potter novels knows that two things in them hold our attention. They are about school kids, about which we all know. But what the kids learn and do is strangely magical and adventurous. Hogwarts is not in Normal, Illinois. The interplay of opposites, the familiar world of school and the strange world of magic, is what makes the Harry Potter novels such a good read. The opposites sustain the charge. Reading involves an intricate process of transformation. Beneath our threshold of awareness, we transform lifeless letters into an imagined narration. We see what we know configured in new information and in the process see our own experience in a new light. When we read, we do this without thinking about it. When we interpret, we do the same thing, only deliberately. A reading is another word for an interpretation. To interpret is to read in a thoughtful way. This might involve the austere pleasure that can accompany an exacting mental effort. Since reading is often more challenging than physical exercise, weak readers (who might embrace the mindless repetition of working out by lifting weights) sometimes complain that reading is too boring for them, much as those who cannot read at all plead that they don’t happen to have their glasses with them.

There are two approaches to narrative. One is technical. It inquires how a story works. The other is thematic. It asks what the story is about or what it can tell us about reality. If we want to understand cars, we can either take them apart or we can go for a drive to see how they handle and where they can take us. Both ways of understanding a car may be valid: breaking it down into all things less than a car or experiencing what the
parts add up to. Following this second approach, we might take any of the hundred tales from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and compare it first with our own experience and then with this tale or that, with Boccaccio’s times or with our own. Each comparison would cast a different reflection of reality. In every case, manifest content might prevail over hidden meaning. In steering our story toward this comparison or that, nothing need be read into it at all. Yet each comparison with other texts or experiences might highlight the story’s manifest content anew by virtue of shifting kinship and contrast. This thematic approach is what I referred to as seeing where the story can take us. Without dissolving into pure subjectivity, the thematic reading of literature belongs to the reader in a way a theoretical or analytic approach does not. Novice readers need and want to own their relationship to narrative without incurring heavy mortgage obligations to literary theory. They are like someone buying a car who needs to get in the driver’s seat and take it for a spin.

The thematic approach of course also has its limitations and its prerequisites. The reader needs to know the limits of the literary vehicle. The intelligent buyer should know what sort of reality it is good for. Yet all the theoretical analysis in the world might still not tell us whether we want to buy the tale or not. To understand why we buy a story, we need to consider how narration confronts us with realities, and of which kind the realities are. Narrative is as vital to our mental world as air to our physical being. We may think that fiction cannot tell us anything for certain about the hard facts of reality, but reality is more than raw facts. It is framed by and infused with the subliminal authority of beliefs, fantasies, myths, and values. To these a perceptive reading of literature can offer access.

Consider “The Boxer Rebellion.” It is, in addition to reading, about the exercise of lethal force in compliance with authority. What is authority? It is the power to elicit
assent and compliance. When we find an argument or a piece of literature appealing, we say in recognition of its authority that it is “compelling.” Authority does not compel us with brute force, seduce us with mindless desire, or prove things to us scientifically. It *induces* us to do things that range from the trivial act of turning the page and reading on to the momentous one of believing our leaders and following their directives. Our officer acts on orders which to his mind possess legitimate authority. He “knows the story.” In his place, we might have known it too. By our standards, the Boxers were terrorists. The occupying powers in China could claim about the same legitimacy as certain occupying powers can today. Then as now, authority upheld the political, ethical, legal, religious, and cultural premises that guide the behavior of any society. Such premises must either remain unquestioned or seem plausible. To retain their authority, they must conform to our understanding of the world. The reading prisoner undermined the implicit ways of the world that made his execution appear necessary. His reading counteracted official authority. Moreover, it dignified our reading about him by making our activity coincide with his. His reading persuaded us to frame his situation in the abstract. His executioner was moved to seek clemency: we are moved to consider questions about authority. What we find in the story is what it finds in us. This symmetry offers us an inkling of literature as a reciprocal mirror in which reading and reader shape one another. We peer into and through the mirror-window of literature and recognize what we have in ourselves to be.

“The Boxer Uprising” is of course a fiction. If it were taken as a factual account, we might look for archival sources to ascertain whether it is true. But since there was no such claim, we simply asked if the story made sense or affected us. Could we recognize something of ourselves in reading it? Some readers might say yes. Others might say no.
In either case, the answer lies in our reactions, not in external factual evidence. The way fictional accounts relate to reality differs from the way a scientific account or newspaper report, even a false one, relates to reality. But in the absence of external factual evidence, even sacred narratives that do claim truth can be evaluated only in terms of our reactions.

Much is at stake in our understanding of narrative. We could free ourselves from our most oppressive tyranny by comprehending that the Bible is fundamentally narrative: sacred, yet still a narration which, if it appeals to us as more than just a story, does so by telling us stories. The Christian Bible is a sequential chain of narratives about the world from creation to destruction. Jesus and the Apostle Paul claim authority by declaring that their stories were anticipated in biblical narration. Those who believe in the Bible rarely do so because of scientific investigation; nor are they often swayed against believing by scientific argument. Convinced that biblical narratives anticipate and clarify their sense of who they are and where they are going, they transcend the suspension of disbelief by resolving its double negative into their simple affirmative of faith. Doctrine and factual evidence carry less weight for such believers than do narrative principles. Believers and non-believers alike ignore these principles at their common peril.

In biblical narration no less than in literary-fictional, the anticipation of events is a source of authority. In literature, a satisfying outcome may be anticipated in the opening sentences, framing observations, or setting. Anticipation and fulfillment are catalysts of narrative persuasion. They embody the elements of the familiar and the strange extended through time. To Christians, Jesus is both new and old, both unheard of and anticipated in prior biblical narrative. Following the same principle of narration, any movie spins out the familiar with the strange like musical chords evolving from anticipation to fulfillment
before arriving at a conclusive end. Bible or action film: the fact that the authoritative or engaging qualities of either function similarly tells us among other things that we need far more refined criteria for distinguishing different kinds of narrative.

Internet, FaceBook, or Twitter might give us a sense of the way stories frame and inform one another, but the media haze of overwhelming immediacy blocks out the stars that guided literate humanity for millennia. We need to detect the trace elements of those remote narrative galaxies. This entails a return to the most primordial purpose of writing, a constant since the first primitive peoples engraved signs on wood or stone: the purpose of communing with an inaccessible spirit world of the absent or the dead, doing so more directly than incanted sounds relayed across generations could allow. We have no other access to thoughts or ideas that cannot be depicted in images. We can penetrate the one-sided mirror of the past and hear its voices by “texting” with the minds of our precursors.

In order to understand the “worldliness” of secular literature, we will consider the Bible, the impact of the Reformation on the culture of reading, the use of spiritual themes in literature, and the limits imposed by narrative on any faith-based authority. We have suggested that reading and interpretation must be centered in the text itself and not in its hypothetical hidden meanings. In the same way that a public bewildered by events favors conspiracy theories, naïve readers are unduly attracted to hidden meanings. It is easier to postulate them than to scrutinize our lives and society. Familiarity with distinct kinds of writing highlights what is present in a text by contrasting it with what is absent, revealing to us that key elements of literary meaning are actually hidden in plain sight. Our next step will be to apply a contrastive text-based approach to two distinct kinds of narrative: biblical and Homeric.
Two Traditions of Narrative: Homeric and Biblical

Listening to a piece of music or looking at a painting, we can make out what sort of painting or music it is before we understand its complexities. The ear or eye registers patterns and qualities before the mind begins to gauge or analyze the details. This is why our first impression often has a wisdom in it that can only be reconstituted with difficulty by analysis. The same holds true in reading. By evaluating our first impressions, we can come to an understanding of the way the particularities of authorial personality or literary tradition condition the form and meaning of what we perceive and imagine.

Scholars agree that the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament incorporates source texts which were composed as long before Christ as the Dark Ages precede our own day. The New Testament is likewise the product of a process of compilation that took centuries to complete. Yet the Bible reveals its distinctive qualities when it is contrasted with other materialized forms of ancient tradition such as the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer. Reading the Bible alongside Homer, we can recognize the opposing pull of those ancient currents. The reader who has at least a general impression of both should try to choose the criterion that best divides the following four plots into two clear-cut divisions.

Plot 1. A lightly armed youth who has faith in divine assistance meets a mighty enemy warrior on the field of battle and kills him with a slingshot.

Plot 2. A famous warrior is angry at being unfairly treated; he refuses to fight until after his best friend has been killed in battle, whereupon in a rage and with divine assistance, he kills the greatest warrior of the opposing side.
Plot 3. Because of human wickedness, a divinely ordained flood destroys the world. One man and his family who enjoy divine favor build a vessel and sail for a time on the flood waters until finally they can land and return to a normal life.

Plot 4. Because he has fallen into divine disfavor, a man returning from a war with his companions sails from one mishap to another, until all his companions are dead; after regaining divine favor, he returns to his home to conquer it back from the uninvited guests who are pestering his wife and eating up all his livestock.

Now consider whether the four plots contrast most clearly in terms of: a. religious and non-religious, b. violent and non-violent, c. moral and immoral, or d. long and short.

For some, it might be easier to identify the plots and sources than to classify them by an objective criterion. Some might want to point out that 1 and 3 are from a religious source while 2 and 4 are not. Yet each of the four plots refers to the divine. The ancient Greeks were polytheists who believed in gods that were like human beings but immortal and altogether more powerful. And as for the criterion of violence, none of the four plots could be called non-violent, certainly not the drowning of nearly the entire human race.

What about the morality of violence as a criterion? When we compare Homer and the Bible in terms of morality, we invite controversy. With his fondness for action, Homer relishes some very brutal stories. It is true that even at its bloodiest, the Bible is not interested in violence for the thrill of it. But is Homeric violence really less moral than biblical violence? Consider God’s infamous instructions to King Saul delivered by the prophet Samuel: “Now go and attack [the people of] Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” (1 Sam 15:3). Saul disobeys by killing everyone except the
king and some livestock. The prophet lets God’s displeasure be known. Saul brings in the captured king and has him hacked to pieces. The distinctions of moral and immoral, human and animal are unimportant here. Only the criterion of obedience to God matters.

The question of the morality of the Bible has a forgotten history behind it. Recent scholarship has tried to soften the horror of God’s commandment to carry out genocide by intimating that there might be literary irony in Samuel’s claiming to speak for God. However, common sense cautions us that the Bible is not an ironic postmodern narrative. Though Homer and the Bible can both be bloody, their representations of violence differ in respects that have little to do with our standards of morality. Granted the opportunity, Homer might have handled Saul’s killings differently. He almost certainly would have offered more detail. He might have described the poor defenseless Amalekite children, screaming as they are slaughtered along with their mothers at God’s command. He might have told us exactly how the Amalekite king was hacked to pieces: perhaps an arm off, then a leg, then in half, or whatever the case might have been. Homer was fascinated by weapons and the damage they could inflict on human bodies. In the Bible, God says to wipe out the Amalekites and enough has been said. The question is not whether wiping out an entire people was moral but only why Saul failed to complete the job as directed. Not even our modern discomfort at the thought of slaughtering babies has any relevance. The attempt to dichotomize the Bible and Homer in terms of morality therefore leads to moral absurdities. But also to a deeper understanding of two traditions of narrative.

The fact is that in the Bible disobedience to God is the ultimate sin, the only real sin. The infants and cattle deserve to be slaughtered with the wicked because God says so. Since everything revolves around divine judgment, complex events or developments
in the Bible can be narrated in a few verses. Homer regards developments as interesting in themselves and therefore tells them in far greater detail. The Bible rarely takes long to say what is important about an event or person. There are a few exceptions: the Book of Job or the Book of Esther (the Oxford Annotated Bible calls it a “historical novella”), or the long “David story” of the scholar Alter and the poet-translator Pinsky—but these are the exception and most events even in these extended stories still conform to a prevalent pattern. What could be more important in the Christian Bible than the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? But you can read the full account in all four Gospels—they vary somewhat—in twenty minutes. Some may have seen Mel Gibson’s stunning film The Passion of the Christ. If the relevant biblical accounts of the Passion of Christ are so brief, how did Gibson come by his full feature-length screenplay? We will learn the answer to that question when we discuss German Romantic literature.

So far, neither the categories of religion or morality, which people are so keen to cite these days, nor the criterion of non-violence offers a clear criterion for distinguishing between the four plots. We have already hinted at our solution to the problem of dividing the four plots into two clear divisions. Though each of the four could be summarized in a couple of lines, at their source—the Bible in 1 and 3, Homer in 2 and 4—the second and fourth are longer, incommensurably longer, than the first and third. Plot 1, the story of David and Goliath, and plot 3, Noah and the Ark, are only a few brief chapters in a single book of the Bible whereas plot 2 is essentially the entire span of Homer’s Iliad and plot 4 the entirety of the Odyssey. We find a similar relation in other biblical stories. They are shorter than non-biblical literary stories which are otherwise equivalent in terms of their action. Interestingly, if we extend our comparison to the full works from which the four
plots have been extracted, the opposite relation prevails. Far longer, the Bible covers the story of the world from creation to destruction, while all of Homer is a mere pinpoint in the totality of time.

Our quantifiable contrast might seem banal but it is not. Its purpose is to bring the textual evidence to bear on our subjective impressions or moral judgments. When early chemists began weighing materials and describing their empirical properties, the alchemists who sought good or evil occult qualities in matter were dismayed. Viewed in the light of the work of Erich Auerbach, the most objective aspects of texts allow us to draw inferences about distinct kinds of narrative and recognize the authority of the values embodied in them. Physicists infer mass from weight. What can we infer from relative length? Why is a comparable action recounted so much more briefly in the Bible? Why, conversely, does the Christian Bible encompass the trajectory of the world from creation to destruction, whereas a book-length plot in Homer is a mere flashpoint in the totality of time? How does the mass of narrative material shape the individual parts of a narration, the episodes which we might think of as its narrative particles?

The mass that makes Homer’s recounting of comparable events incommensurably longer is a mass of detail, of ships and armies, scenes and actions, weapons and wounds: all of this is fascinating in itself to Homer. Why is there so much detail? Because these heroes and battles are of singular interest. Homer apparently regards them as the greatest and most glorious the world has ever known: readers through the ages have agreed. This is why there are blow-by-blow reports telling how warriors are gouged, sliced, smashed, or skewered, and it is why there are also tranquil scenes of equal interest. When Achilles refuses to fight and the Trojans are winning, we are presented with a nighttime panorama
beneath starry heavens: “before Troy, midway between the ships and the river Xanthus, a thousand campfires gleamed upon the plain, and in the glow of each there sat fifty men, while the horses, champing oats and corn beside their chariots, waited till dawn should come.” This panorama of ships, multitudes, beasts, littoral plains, fires, and a besieged city under a starry sky presents us with a simultaneous intricacy rarely found in the Bible.

What a story is about conditions how it is told. How it is told therefore helps us recognize what it is about and what it means. The most important character in Homer is the mortal hero in the here and now. This is why his stories of people, places, and events are so intricately detailed. In the Bible, the most important character is the hardest to pin down: God. God is an elusive presence, yet the meaning of all persons and things comes to light in relation to him. Since relations with God play out in the soul, human character has more depth in the Bible than in Homer. But depth is not the same as complexity. As we have seen, obedience to God is what counts.

As for nature, the desert is hallowed ground in the Bible, as significant in it as the teeming plains and seas are for Homer. In the light of Genesis, nature is a world created by God out of nothing. In biblical perspective, all things point to their source in creation, just as all the faithful bow to the Supreme Being. In the shadow of divine judgment, the detailed particularities of nature and existence shrink. Poignant biblical details acquire a symbolic meaning. The symbolic aura of things and people is thus enhanced in the Bible even as their starkly profiled being is rendered less intricately than in Homer.

The action in the Bible is brief because the action is not the point. Much has been made of Abraham’s questioning God about how many righteous people would suffice to spare the city of Sodom; but this is only a clarification of the divine justice and will, not a
refusal to accept it.\textsuperscript{9} Often there is a simple litmus test for recognizing who is godly and who is wicked in the Bible. The godly are destined to win out: the wicked will perish. In Homer, it might turn out the other way around. In the \textit{Iliad}, the good are slaughtered and the wicked win. Hector may be a better man than Achilles. Hector is fighting to defend his home. Achilles is the aggressor. Nevertheless, it is Hector who must die. Achilles is a born killer. When he gets angry in consequence of the death of his friend Patroclus, he slaughters every Trojan he can lay his hands on. But even Achilles has two sides. In a famous passage in Book 21, Achilles corners the young Trojan warrior Lycaon who begs for mercy. The hero pauses to console the poor kid, telling him that everyone, even noble Achilles, must die. Then in a fury he brutally slays his victim and tosses his mutilated corpse into a river for the fish to nibble on. Yet once again, after Achilles kills Hector and despoils his body, the killer takes pity on Hector’s old father Priam and lets him have his son’s body to take home and bury. Why does he do these things?

The reasons why people do things in Homer stem from their particular character. Even when biblical characters have the depth and complexity of Job, what counts is their good or evil disposition, which is as much as saying their relationship to God. Patriarchs, prophets, or apostles must act in order to obey God’s will and command. Their feelings, no matter how joyous or agonizing, are always subordinate. God commands Abraham in Genesis 12:1 to, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Why does he go? Though God promises him he will flourish there, there is no complexity in Abraham’s motive. He goes because God tells him to. In case there should be any doubt about it, when God later tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, the father readies his knife at his young son’s throat. God intervenes, but the point
of the terse story is that Abraham has no truck with human complexity or reluctance. He passes the test of total obedience to God. By human standards, he fails abysmally.

This is different in Homer where plot turns on complexity of character. Why does Achilles rage and kill Hector or take pity on Priam? It is in his character to rage and kill, but also to take pity on those who remind him of his own mortality. Why does Odysseus voyage to Ithaca? That is where his home is. Longing now for home, now for faraway adventures, possessing treasured weapons and beloved friends, or engaging in a combat where this one gets it in the eye, that one in the throat, and another in the groin: this is the Homeric narrative world. The complex particularity of the experienced world determines the qualities of Homeric narration. After all, even the gods look and act like humans.

So religion does have something to do with the difference between the narratives of the Bible or Homer. Homer is full of details, with every variation of good, bad, ugly, beautiful, weak, strong, cowardly, clever, and courageous. Hector is a brave and virtuous warrior. But he runs from Achilles and has to be tricked by a goddess to stand and fight. The gods in Homer come in all varieties, and they have their mood swings. In the Bible, fewer details are needed because the story is always centered in the one eternal God. The relationship to God decides what needs to be said about anything or anyone in particular. What is said is straight up or down, short and sweet. The binary, good or evil, aspects of the world as created and judged by God determines the narrative qualities of the Bible.

Just as it is a measurable fact that equivalent episodes in the Bible are shorter, it is also a measurable fact that the Christian Bible in its entirety is much longer than Homer’s narratives. It extends from the beginning to the end of the world. Why? This question is as important as our comparison of single episodes which favored Homer over the Bible in
length and detail. The Bible encompasses the entire life of the world because the Bible is all about an absolute God: the one God who is behind all things. To say this is merely to expand on the notion of divine omnipotence, which in turn can be construed as a coherent corollary of monotheism itself. A fair way to define the biblical God is to say that he is one and eternal and has made everything, including, most importantly, the human being. The same omnipotent God who launched it all must have the power to end it all.

In consequence, one might expect to find the answer to all questions and the key to the meanings of all things in God, which is to say in the Bible. In the Middle Ages, every word or image of the Bible was imputed to have a fourfold significance: historical, moral, allegorical, and mystical. The word or image of Jerusalem meant: the city itself (the historical sense), the Christian Church (allegorical sense), the Sermon on the Mount (moral-tropological sense), and the eternal world of Paradise (mystical sense). The quest to find symbolic meanings induced earlier Christians to interpret the erotic love poetry that is the Song of Songs as an allegory of God’s relation to the Church. Every particle in the narrative mass seemed as if it were inscribed with a divine trademark that declared: “this is not about me, single episode or detail that I am, this is about Him.”

As powerful as this narrative effect is, it presupposes contrary-to-fact conditions. How can the nature of God as an omnipotent being correlate with biblical narrative when scholars tell us that the Bible is far from monolithic? Few scholars now doubt that it is a collection of writings inspired by an evolving idea of God. The Bible is an ancient work compiled by human hands. In speaking of the Old and New Testaments, we impose an article of faith on the Hebrew Bible and Greek Gospels, which are one book to Christians but not to Jews. To speak of the Bible is therefore a controversial assertion of faith rather
than a citation of objective fact. And yet as *sacred narrative*, the Hebrew or the Christian Bible demands to be taken as a whole. Treating either as mere literature or as a collection of stories like any other misses the point of the sacred whole and of its parts. If we were somehow able to bracket out the effect of that debatable assertion of faith by removing its impact on human history and retroactively erasing the notion that there is, in a real sense, *the* Bible, we would eliminate the history and culture that for better or worse, made us all, believers and non-believers, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, what we are. Interpreting the sacred text was foundational for understanding the meaning and pattern of history.

For traditional Christians, the biblical narrative is a chronicle of the world from start to finish. If it were any less comprehensive, the God of the Bible might appear less than what believers believe him to be: the divine eternal source of everything. Belief in the authority of the Bible as the word of God in effect creates out of the compilation of texts the mysteriously monolithic sacred narrative. In a peculiar sense, the faithful reader of the Bible is its co-editor. In the manner of obedient subjects, the faithful seek and find the coherence that they believe in, thus *instituting* the authority of the whole, in the same way that soldiers who struggle to obey a domineering and capricious commander uphold and bolster his supremacy, and, in so doing, consolidate their own subordination. Unlike overt force or compulsion, authority only works reciprocally.

There is a parallel reciprocity of the narrative whole and the part. In Homer, each episode is of interest for its own sake. The actual moment of the action overshadows the rest of history. In the *Iliad*, Homer does not say much about how the war started or how it will end, since the battle is of interest in itself. Nearly the opposite is true of the Bible: the single episode is of interest with respect to the whole or, to put it more precisely, with
respect to the one God believed to be behind it all. All creation is the ultimate expression of a coherent divine will. The story of the courageous warrior-hero David, so attractive to scholars and poets, thus has a key point to make: faith in God is what matters. This is why David’s slaying of Goliath can be told briefly without leaving out anything decisive. When people read or hear the biblical stories, each episode has its meaning modified with reference to the whole Bible and with reference to the experience and disposition of the faithful. What holds it together is that God is understood to be behind everything. This invested center of faith radiates meaningfulness back into the parts and beyond them. If, compared to Homeric narrative, the Bible has few details, the fewer the details the greater their significance: the more, so to speak, God is vested in each detail. Invested with faith, biblical details tend to charge up with meaningfulness, as it were, and to radiate it beyond their original narrative context, thereby transmuting into symbols with a life of their own.

In the story of Noah and the Ark, nothing makes its case by itself. Nothing makes sense scientifically. But narratively, which is a different matter, it all makes marvelous sense, because the story is of a piece with the larger biblical narrative. The human race has become wicked. This comes as no surprise. God has judged, as judge he must, the whole living lot. Only Noah and his family are not so bad: they are chosen to be saved. God gives Noah a chance to renew life by building the ark. This story knows where it is going and why. Its details are directed to that end. Not only does the story make sense in terms of its internal sequencing of events; it makes sense in biblical tradition, in terms of the anticipation and fulfillment which are the narrative extensions of the familiar and the strange. Mysteriously, God had created the world by parting the upper waters from the lower ones. Though no one knows for sure what the upper and lower waters were, their
narrative significance pans out. Based on his essential nature as creator and judge, God inundates and recreates the inhabitable world by pressing “Replay” to repeat that initial chaos and parting of waters. The flood repeats the mystery of the waters of creation with which it is symbolically kindred. Do the flood and renewal of life also allude to spiritual renewal in the baptismal waters? Some Christians think so. Anticipation and repetition lend Noah’s story authority by interweaving new and old, strange and familiar. We will need to bear this narrative logic in mind when we talk about disasters in literature such as the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake and flood that inspired Voltaire’s *Candide*.

What does Noah do when he wants to find out if the flood waters have receded to expose dry land? What he does again makes narrative sense. He sends out a raven and then a dove. On a second flight the dove returns with an olive branch. Scientifically this seems dubious. If everything has been submerged for days on end, the olive trees should be wilted with no green branches. But narratively the dove with the olive branch is a fine symbolic detail. It is Noah’s voyage in miniature. It is emblematic of the leap of faith it is intended to induce. On a final flight the dove does not come back. The flood waters have receded. The dove is free, anticipating—and thereby symbolizing—the freedom of Noah and of all humankind. The detail sums up the tale of Noah, which in turn sums up the entire biblical narrative as an account of the liberating power of faith. In a narrative as compelling as Noah’s, so sparse and informed by faith in divine providence, details like the dove take flight with a symbolic life of their own. We will see the dove again.

Where do these details of the flood, the ark, or the olive branch come up again? How did the olive branch get transformed from a sign that the flood waters had subsided into a universal symbol of peace? Where else is it important in the Bible? When biblical
particulars are turned into universal symbols, they are often iconic images in painting or common figures of speech. We don’t always recognize the biblical source of the image or figure of speech, but we may sense it. Its presence can give authority to an utterance. Our speech is full of figures of speech drawn from the King James Bible. It is important to understand the pervasive presence and influence of biblical language, but the notion of some Christians that this is always good is mistaken. Take this very brief list:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Garden of Eden</th>
<th>Forbidden Fruit</th>
<th>Promised Land</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sodom and Gomorrah</td>
<td>Exile or Exodus</td>
<td>Mark of Cain</td>
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The symbolic language of “exile” and “exodus” supported the struggles of slaves for their freedom. But slavery was legitimized by citing the Bible: by the “mark of Cain” (Gen 4:15) and by the curse upon Ham, the son of Noah whose descendants were slated to be lowly “slaves” according to Gen 9:25. Even the terms for the Nazis’ Third Reich or 1000-year Reich had their source in the Book of Revelation (20:4).  

Biblical language lent authority to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King but also to Hitler. As a source of symbols, the Bible is inexhaustibly fertile. Classical myths have also been interpreted allegorically and disseminated widely in Christian times, but not with the same protean persistence. Unlike the biblical dove that flies whither it will, the classical symbols that remain in common use are bound to their original plot contexts. Few recall that Achilles once allegorically symbolized the sun, but most people still know what the Trojan horse was used for and where the common noun “odyssey” comes from.

People have been hearing about Troy and the odyssey of Odysseus (Ulysses) for thousands of years. They have been recognizing themselves in these stories and creating new narratives that extend and reinterpret the original narrative. Some recent films have
been based on the material associated with Homer. Obviously, this includes the movie *Troy* with Brad Pitt as Achilles. What about *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* If you have seen it, what did it borrow from Homer? Try to guess another film. It was set in the U.S. Civil War. It includes plot elements of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It begins with a siege, as in the *Iliad*. A young friend of the main character gets killed during the siege, as in the *Iliad*. The main character then wanders homeward where his beloved awaits him, as in the *Odyssey*. On the journey, the hero encounters mortal perils and temptations, as in the *Odyssey*. Arriving home, he has to deal with a villainous suitor, just as Odysseus had to deal with the suitors who were pestering his wife. Has anyone seen *Cold Mountain*?

Remember what we said about how readers see themselves reflected in narratives and in so doing view themselves in a new light. This will apply to subsequent narratives we discuss. It also applies to entire cultures and nations. Homer and the story of Troy are from early Greek times, so early that Rome did not exist yet. Since the Homeric stories were about the greatest heroes and battles of all time, the greatest empire of all time, the Roman Empire, had to get into the act by claiming to find its own future in the mirror of Homeric narrative. The Romans were convinced that they had been founded by a Trojan who fled as Troy was destroyed. This was good news: the Romans were part of the greatest story ever told. British, French, and, believe it or not, even Americans have tried to get in on the act in the same way by claiming some sort of Trojan kinship.

If you have seen the film *Troy*, do you remember that in the end Helen, Paris, and other Trojans flee through an escape tunnel? Paris, played by Orlando Bloom, sends Helen on ahead and then turns to a young man who is half-carrying his limping father to
ask him if he knows how to use a sword. Paris then gives him “the sword of Troy,” the symbol of the undefeated spirit of the Trojans and tells him to take it with him as he flees. Actually, the most important thing about this episode is not the sword but the father. The young man is supposed to be bearing with him his aged father, his son, and his household religious altar, a symbol of Trojan piety. The man is Aeneas who became the legendary founder of Rome. Two millennia ago, many centuries after Homer, the greatest Roman narrative poem, Virgil’s Aeneid, created a bold new literary tradition from the legends of Troy. Virgil combined certain elements of the action of the Odyssey and Iliad in a single poem which celebrates a legendary prehistory of Rome after the fall of Troy.

The Aeneid is more than a Roman sequel to a Greek Homer. Virgil’s continuation absorbs and renews the mystical power of narration and reading exercised by its Homeric prototypes. In Book One, Aeneas pauses to read the extended story of Homeric Troy out of its depiction in artfully crafted images. In Book Two, he narrates his story in the court of the Carthaginian queen Dido. The Aeneid reflects the ambivalent powers of narrative, which can either cause the destruction of Dido, when she is driven insane by her passion for the narrating hero, or yoke the past to the future, when those who know what to make of Aeneas’ story are re-directed from the fall of Troy to the rise of Rome. The Aeneid is a thoroughly literary production which absorbs and renews a pre-literary culture in which narrative tradition had been orally transmitted or embodied in sacred images and objects. As literary narrators, Homer and Virgil raise the power of the ancient oral-visual tradition to a higher potency by expanding it beyond the tribally limited circles of the spoken word or graven image, thereby engendering a new power that can either create or destroy.
We talked about biblical symbolism. What should we make of the symbolism of Aeneas escaping Troy with his household gods in hand and his aged father on his back? Are we not all carrying our parents and their household gods on our backs? John Shields wrote a book showing that around the time of the founding of the American Republic, the idea of an “American Aeneas” was as important as the Christian notion of an “American Adam” or “Noah.” What might they symbolize: a reborn Adam, a Noah who has landed on pristine shores? Or an American Aeneas, fleeing from a burning Troy with his ancient father on his back? There is truth in both models: our culture has been made anew, if out of the materials of the old. But it is the old that we tend to forget in America. There may be no greater question facing us now than whether we look back to an American Adam, who is reborn by the grace of God in the New World, or to an American Aeneas, fleeing his motherland with the living burden of the past on his back, carrying a father who is out of sight and perhaps of mind but never without a bearing on the present.

The truth is that we have inherited both narrative traditions: Homeric and Biblical. We see them constantly. They are separate strands in what I will call the “genetic code” of our narrative culture. Homer represents the narrative power of adventure, action, and violence: the here and now is where the real action is. Biblical narrative is about faith and divine judgment: the moral of the story overshadows the details and turns them into mysterious symbols of the eternal. Not the present moment but eternity is what counts: God, not man. Very early, these opposite tendencies were cross-bred. As the Homeric tradition acquired a deeper symbolic significance for Roman imperialist patriotism or Christianity, it also took on certain aspects of a moral and symbolic tale. Aeneas may
have been a pagan hero, but he was one that many later Christian authors recognized as their kind of hero, a good guy who does not finish last.

In the Middle Ages the chivalric romance was centered on heroes who were not only strong, brave, and adventurous, but also good and noble. The quest of the hero also became more sublime and symbolic. The quest was for exalted love or a religious ideal. You recognize this in the medieval epic narrations that have to do with the quest for the Holy Grail, which was a mysterious Christian symbol. Eventually, these narrations were as much about the moral perfection of the hero as about action and adventure. We can follow the Homeric line of descent all the way down to the action film—which certainly does dote on violence for its own sake. But since the modern public is ashamed to watch people get slashed, shot, and blown up just for the hell of it, the action film often borrows an element from the biblical tradition. Those who get blown up are wicked—thoroughly wicked, so wicked that we love to hate them—and therefore deserving of it. This means that we can sit back and have a hell of a good time watching all the violence and still feel that we are on God’s side. Christian America tolerates the violent action film not simply because, being puritanical, we are customarily more accepting of violence than of sex in the cinema, but also because action films tend to preserve a dichotomy of good and evil reminiscent of the Bible, thereby reassuring us that the wicked will be totally annihilated and in an entertaining fashion. Good hypocrites that we are, we get to have it both ways.

In summary, we recognized the following contrasts between biblical and Homeric narrative.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>The Bible:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Homer:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief episodes, pointed characterizations.</td>
<td>Long episodes, descriptions rich in detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Bible is a chronicle of the world.</td>
<td>Entire narration is only a brief set of events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centered on God who is outside the world.</td>
<td>Centered on humans at home in the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans are either obedient to God or evil.</td>
<td>Humans, like gods, are both good and bad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Details are significant in relation to God.</td>
<td>Details, events, persons of interest per se.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Details have profound symbolic meanings.</td>
<td>Details describe a richly textured world.</td>
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Next we should analyze contrasting episodes, Homeric and biblical, to see how their contrasting qualities determine their meaning.

**Two Narratives of Homecoming: Odysseus and the Prodigal Son**

Biologists and paleontologists can take a few fossilized bones and reconstruct a once living creature from them and find out things about its long vanished environment. Anthropologists can retrace vanished human cultures from tools or fragments of pottery. By the same token, we can take a narrative episode and confirm things about its literary-historical context. We can analyze the nature of the authority it expresses. By looking for the traces of what is not present in what is, we can also learn to examine objects and texts with more focused care and penetration. Researching the context from the excerpt, searching for the whole within the part, teaches us to read more perceptively.

Compare the episode in Odysseus’ arrival back in his home country with Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son returning home in Luke 15. Each is a mere fragment drawn from a much larger narrative. Each tells us a story satisfying in itself. Each is intended,
or can be interpreted, as a miniature of the larger literary culture or organism of which it was a part. Each touches on one of our anxiety-ridden desires: to be in our proper place.

In *The Odyssey*, Book 14, Odysseus (referred to by his Latin name Ulysses in this prose translation) returns to his island home of Ithaca as an old beggar. He does not want to be recognized until he can find a way to drive off the evil suitors who are besieging his wife and eating his livestock.

Ulysses now left the haven, and took the rough track up through the wooded country and over the crest of the mountain till he reached the place where [the goddess] Minerva had said that he would find the swineherd, who was the most thrifty servant he had. He found him sitting in front of his hut, which was by the yards he had built on a site which could be seen from far. He had made them spacious and fair to see, with a free run for the pigs all around them; he had built them during his master’s absence, of stones he had gathered out of the ground, without saying anything to Penelope or Laertes, and he had fenced them on top with thorn bushes. Outside the yard he had run a strong fence of oaken posts, split and set pretty close together, while inside he had built twelve sties near one another for the sows to lie in. There were fifty pigs wallowing in each sty, all of them breeding sows; but the boars slept outside and were much fewer in number, for the suitors kept on eating them, and the swineherd had to send them the best he had continually. There were three hundred and sixty boar pigs, and the herdsman’s four hounds, which were as fierce as wolves, slept always with them. The swineherd was at that moment cutting out a pair of sandals from a good stout ox hide. Three of his men were out herding the pigs in one place or another, and
he had sent the fourth to town with a boar that he had been forced to send the suitors that they might sacrifice it and have their fill of meat.

When the hounds saw Ulysses they set up a furious barking and flew at him, but Ulysses was cunning enough to sit down and lose his hold of the stick that he had in his hand: still, he would have been torn by them in his own homestead had not the swineherd dropped his ox hide, rushed full speed through the gate of the yard and driven the dogs off by shouting and throwing stones at them. Then he said to Ulysses, “Old man, the dogs were likely to have made short work of you, and then you would have got me into trouble. The gods have given me quite enough worries without that, for I have lost the best of masters, and am in continual grief on his account. I have to attend swine for other people to eat, while he, if he yet lives to see the light of day, is starving in some distant land. But come inside, and when you have had your fill of bread and wine, tell me where you come from, and all about your misfortunes.”

On this the swineherd led the way into the hut and bade him sit down. He strewed a good thick bed of rushes on the floor, and on the top of this he threw a shaggy chamois skin—a great thick one—on which he used to sleep at night. Ulysses was pleased at being made thus welcome, and said “May Jove, sir, and the rest of the gods grant you your heart’s desire in return for the kind way in which you have received me.”

We will compare Odysseus’ return to Ithaca with the parable of the Prodigal Son’s homecoming in the Gospel of Luke (15:11-32):
Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. And so he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to the fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; and I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what
was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Both accounts of “homecoming” are brief episodes drawn from a larger narrative. In a logical, almost mathematical way, either implicates the whole of which it is a part, just as the artifact contains information used to reconstruct an entire organism or culture.

We examined the character of detail in both Homer and the Bible. Which of the two episodes gives us the more concrete or fleshed out depiction of places, people, and things? Consider the function of enumeration in either episode. How often are precise numbers of things or persons mentioned in the one episode and how often in the other? Glancing through the Homeric passage, one finds many numbers: 12, 50, 360, four, and three. How do these numbers function? When we read the passage, do we think about the importance of these particular numbers, the importance of 360 as opposed to 370 or 450; or do we merely sense that this is a scene replete with all sorts of traveling, working, mating, feeding, or herding creatures and people? To answer this, we can ask whether it would matter to us if the swineherd had, instead of 12, let’s say 15 pig sties, or three dogs
instead of four, or let us say five workmen instead of three? For most of us this makes no difference. Now ask whether it would matter if no numbers were mentioned at all, none of the details provided and none of those objects named. If all details and numbers were omitted, the scene would certainly lose something of its life-like character; for in real life we are surrounded by a detailed plenitude. Looking around me, I estimate a few hundred books, a dozen writing utensils, one desk lamp, and three chairs. Perhaps more, perhaps less. The numbers convey a typically ordered or disordered office, a real place. Even in Franz Kafka’s mysterious stories, we will see how the detailed particularity of the world serves as an effective counterweight to the more abstract profile of the parable.

Now consider the biblical parable. How many numbers do we find in it? I only find one single number: the man “had two sons.” Would it fit in less well with the rest of the story if the man had three or five or eleven sons? Why is the number two important, and is it really a number at all? When I say “good and evil” or “lost and found” or “day and night,” am I counting things? The number two is neutral in coming after the number one and before the number three. But the duality of those pairs is not neutral. Duality is not the same as saying things are two in number. Duality can be present with many or all things or even when only a single thing can be divided between opposing aspects such as good and evil. What is important about duality is that it represents moral opposites that embody a choice. Each person in the parable faces a choice, the Prodigal Son more than once. Choices are between obedience and disobedience, stubbornness and repentance, forgiveness and hard-heartedness, love and hate. There are many dualities of this kind in the Bible. Good and evil. Flesh and spirit. Sin and forgiveness. Heaven and Hell.
So we find in the one episode numbers, details, and things and in the other duality with hardly any detail. As if one episode were in color and the other in black and white. This contrast offers a hint about the relation of the part to the whole in either case.

The parable is told by Jesus: it certainly tells us something with reference to God. Indeed, since everything in the Bible demands to be understood with reference to God, all the choices and all the conflicts must be related to one another by way of their universal relation to God. If one believes that the Bible is a revelation of God, then each episode has to reflect the same reality in a different way, since what is revealed in each episode is understood to be the same God. If this premise is accepted, then the challenge will be to decide what each episode reveals about the divine being, to uncover the whole in the part.

Consider the two sons. One is faithful to his father, the other goes astray. Which one is good and which one is evil? The one asks for forgiveness, the other is unforgiving. Which of the two reactions is good and which is bad? There are of course issues of right and wrong in the role of the two sons, but we cannot simply say the one son is good and the other is evil. The parable suggests that the relation of right and wrong is not obvious. The parable is less detailed as a story than the episode from the Odyssey, but it may well be more difficult to interpret. A parable is like a riddle. Since this story is so familiar, it is easy to overlook how elusive and hard to explain it really is. Imagine a teacher and a pupil who had never heard of the Bible or Christianity. The teacher says, “Here is a story we are supposed to be guided by.” What might the pupil conclude? That you can do the wrong thing, go astray, disobey, and expect to be rewarded? That disobedience is better than obedience? We suspect that this isn’t the message, but is the reaction implausible?
Before this parable Jesus told two others. If you owned a hundred sheep and lost just one, wouldn’t you forget about the others and go search for the one, feeling great joy upon finding your lost sheep? If a woman had ten silver coins and lost one, wouldn’t she rejoice more at finding it than for the ones never lost? Different numbers, same duality. We sense that these two parables do a better job of interpreting the sense of the Prodigal Son than would any attempt of ours to spell out a moral of the story, but it is still hard to say exactly why such parables mean what they do. Should we part ways with science?

Our preoccupation with numbers and mathematics is not intended to suggest that literature might be reduced to quantity. The world of literature is one of infinite variety. Even the dualities of the parable are subverted by its meaning. In focusing on numbers, we intend to suggest that understanding literature relies as much as do the mathematical sciences on concrete evidence. In math, it is as important to know the steps in solving a problem as to have the right answer. We can re-apply the method we used in interpreting Schnitzler’s “Boxer Uprising” by changing things in the parable in order to assess which change makes a vital difference. Suppose that it were not a son but a prodigal daughter? What if it were not a father but a mother? Wouldn’t the story still mean the same? Could we change the relationships in other ways as well? Let’s try making the prodigal son into a wayward friend of another steadfast friend who forgives his wayward, estranged friend? Would the story not still make the same point? What if we substituted a loan squandered and forgiven for the departure and return of the prodigal son? If it makes little difference, the details of the homecoming or the father-son relationship are inessential to meaning. Is even the detail of the homecoming essential to the meaning?
If we eliminated the repentance of the prodigal person or the forgiveness of the one who takes her or him back, we would do real violence to the story. Making the son a daughter or the father a friend does not affect it at all. The tale is neither about family nor homecoming. If we can alter the tale to make it about a debt forgiven, how can home be a place? The parable has more to do with the right approach to God than with a worldly home. The crux of the tale is not homecoming but the binary choice between right and wrong that hovers throughout the biblical narrative. We observed that everything in the Bible means what it does with reference to the divine central character who is an elusive presence within it. Theology suggests that God, as the infinite source of all things, must be more outside any finite biblical story than within it. As the infinite source of all, he is the author of the world and the untold teller of its tales. The sense imparted to this tale is nowhere and everywhere: applicable to all, particular to none. The non-particularity and mystery of the parable echo the theological mystery of a God more hidden than revealed.

There is another sense in which this parable appears to sum up much of the Bible. If Adam and Eve are the Prodigal Son (they disobey God and depart from Paradise), what in terms of our parable does this make the divine forgiveness that is given through Jesus? The whole human race is the Prodigal Son, all of whom are forgiven and restored through repentance and faith. Both in content and form, the episode implicates the basic meaning of the Bible for Christians. Through the ages, many would probably have found it easier to agree upon a narrative restatement of the parable (say, that “this parable refers to our return to God after the fall from grace,” or “it means the same as the other two parables”), than upon a doctrinal interpretation (such as the questionable proposition that obedience to God is less important than remorse and forgiveness). In this sense, too, the authority
of the Bible is narrative authority. If we were to ask what something means in the Bible, the best answer might be to tell another story. This is in any event what Jesus does.

Now we must have another look at the *Odyssey* episode. It takes us home by the opposite route. Unlike the symbolic tendency of the parable, the Odysseus episode leads us from a particular place to a universally individual home. Episode and parable seem to have details in common. In both narratives, people live by domesticating animals, cattle or pigs. But this is not what either narrative is about. What a story is about is its *theme*. There are themes of war, love, or quest. A literary theme might also be some particular story, that of Odysseus, Noah, Alexander the Great, or Romeo and Juliet. A *motive* is a conventional term for a key situation which makes the story go forward. If we are talking about a love theme, then the action of falling in love is a motive: a typical situation which moves the love story forward. If war is the theme of a story, a motive might be the first test of courage under fire or the soldier’s return from war.

The highly symbolic “home” to which the Prodigal Son returns might be here or there, everywhere or nowhere. Home is the kingdom of heaven which, as Jesus declares to Pilate, is “not of this world” (John 18:36). But what about the home ground to which Odysseus is returning when he comes to Emmaus? It is nothing if not a particular place. Many things can be subtracted from it but not its particularity. Even unstated particulars are essential. We can think of one particular that isn’t stated. Homer’s readers knew this particular and so do we. Anyone who has driven past a pig farm knows it. How does the fact that Odysseus comes home to a place that stinks confirm the values of the *Odyssey*? In a previous episode, Odysseus descended into the underworld where the dead lingered as mournful shades of their former selves. Odysseus conversed there with the shade of
Achilles. His shade told Odysseus that he would prefer to be a slave in the world of the living than to rule over the entire kingdom of the dead. Might this not suggest that even the pigsty could be preferable to the foreign kingdom where Odysseus was treated well?

This assertion of Achilles tells us something quite similar to the touching arrival of Odysseus in a pigsty, where Emmaus’ warm welcome is as beautiful in its own way as the banquet held for the hero by a king in a previous chapter. The notion of a home, the home sought by Odysseus, finds a parallel example in Emmaus’ pigsty. Sometimes we can only understand some immense thing by looking at the same thing on a smaller scale. Odysseus’ reunion with Emmaus helps explain the great Homeric meaning of returning home in the Odyssey. It is better to be a slave in this world than a king in the land of the dead. Home might be humble: it is still the place where we belong. The welcome given to the Prodigal Son referred us beyond this world, to God and to the kingdom of heaven. But the hospitality of Emmaus refers us to the base line of a home in this world.

This life and this world were home to the Homeric hero. But a person of absolute Christian faith might be entirely at home only in heaven or in the inner spiritual world of faith. There were so few details in the parable because it was not about a physical home, a home either inherited or built with one’s own hands. Notice this contrast: the Prodigal Son who sets off on his own in search of an independent life comes to no good; but in the Homeric world the human hero is a hero precisely because of his independence: whether abroad or at home, he shapes his existence by luck, work, courage, and cunning. Shortly before Odysseus begins the final voyage to Ithaca, Homer says that his hero is like “one who has been all day plowing a fallow field with a couple of oxen keeps thinking about his supper and is glad when night comes”—this was how he looked forward to his return
to Ithaca (Bk 13:255). The metaphor likewise explains the story by telling another story, which induces us to think of our own story. Odysseus and the average fellow human, the hero and the humble plowman, as well as the swineherd who rules over his realm of pigs and dogs and servants, are in some sense the same. Homeric home is a particular place, but it is particular with reference to each individual in the common world. James Joyce did no violence to the theme of Odysseus by recasting “Ulysses” as a traveling employee.

Even though Emmaus did not voyage abroad like Odysseus, he is like his master in making his own way and acting independently. The swineherd has built his kingdom of pigs and dogs and servants. He has fenced it off, ruling it bravely and well. Emmaus is not like the older son in Jesus’ parable who has only been a good boy and done what he was told and therefore resents his younger brother for getting rewarded without deserving it. Emmaus the swineherd is master in his domain and thus free to extend hospitality to a stranger, to a beggar, as outwardly undeserving as the Prodigal Son. The Homeric hero is the unbound master of his place in life, hence free to deviate, to depart, and to return to it.

In the parable, an undeserving son is treated like a guest of honor. This violates the standard of merit by which people get what they earn—a paradox central to Christian doctrine. There is a similar contradiction in the treatment of Odysseus by the swineherd. Emmaus has no obligation to this uninvited stranger. Why does he treat him well? Does everyone in the society of Ithaca behave so nobly? Is the swineherd acting as a servant in showing hospitality to an intruder? Servants are obliged to their masters. Sons are bound by a patriarchal order to obey their fathers. Neither the father nor the swineherd appears to be following the rules in doing the good. What does the irregular (“non-rule-bound”) action of the father or of the swineherd tell us about relationships in the society of either
narration? Are rules and obedience insufficient to create the human habitation which is more than a mere locality? Neither rules nor the texts informed by them, but rather their interpretation makes us at home in the world. We are at home in an interpreted world. In reading “The Boxer Uprising,” we identified with the reading protagonist. In interpreting our biblical and Homeric episodes, we recapitulated the implicitly interpretive activity of Emmaus or the father—their transcending of superficial relations, their freedom to make of things what they will. Similarly, our odysseys as conscious beings, our departures and returns, are guided by our reading of the world we encounter in life or literature. We can extend our comparison of approaches to life and death by comparing Plato’s account of Socrates’ trial and death with the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial, death and resurrection.

Learning to read and interpret literature is like acquiring a foreign language. It is like the flailing of a novice swimmer struggling to find bearings in a fluid medium. We struggle to understand the part as expressive of the whole, the text as continuous with a context that ultimately encompasses all tradition and history. In learning a new language, we begin with the few utterances within our grasp before entertaining countless possible ones. In pursuing the context of tradition in our reading, we begin by grasping at the few meanings accessible to us in what we read. Reading like swimming is learned by doing.

To ease the unpracticed reader into the immeasurable medium of literary history, the next chapter will consider certain elements of a tradition that vary through time. The chapter after that will examine Boccaccio’s tales within the simultaneous framework of his Decameron. By the time we turn to Voltaire’s Candide, readers should be sufficiently familiar with the framing aspect of tradition to recognize it in a broader narrative context. In effect, a tradition frames action Y and character Z in terms of antecedents A or B.
From Augustine to Dante and Boccaccio

Readers accustomed to gliding through professionally edited, smooth-reading modern fiction composed by graduates of creative writing programs are sometimes put off by the classics. Expecting to encounter a “canonical standard” of literary excellence, the modern reader is taken aback by writing that appears obscurely conceived, rough, and uneven. This is not entirely an illusion resulting from the ignorance of the modern reader or from the fact that those earlier authors were pioneering routes that had yet to be paved for the convenience of subsequent writers. In some cases, the authors of the classics were simultaneously writing in more than one mode: telling a simple story on the one hand and narrating with ideas on the other. A simple story carries us in a straightforward way from point A to point Z. Narrating with ideas may require digressions or reconfigurations that frustrate narrative flow and superimpose a second progression upon the first. In learning math, we face something similar. A math story problem is a narrative of one kind. Very different from the problem’s story is the equation that solves it by pursuing a sequence of substitutions and reductions that converge in the “$x =$,” which caps the problem as story. Impatient with this narrative math, the action-minded modern reader who expects a bold story line gets a vexing exchange of events and ideas. This is why the many digressions in books such as *War and Peace* or *Moby Dick* often get abridged by modern editors.

No better example of this mixture of story and reflection can be found than Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*. Augustine was an educated Roman from North Africa who lived from AD 354 to 430. As a young man, he converted to Christianity. His writings
as a Christian made him one of the most influential authorities for a thousand years. His account of his conversion is one of the great works of introspective literature. In it, he perfected the art of writing about the inner life and secured its place in Western culture.

Augustine’s *Confessions* are personal and digressive to a degree rarely found in the Bible; but like the Bible they have limited detail. While the *Confessions* constantly digress into prayer or philosophical reflection, action is never introduced for its own sake. Since the Bible is all about God, everything in it is of significance in its relation to him. Augustine likewise recognized only two objects as truly worthy of consideration: God and the human soul. His *Confessions* are a study of the human soul, Augustine’s and ours, in relation to God. One famous passage recalls an event from his childhood. He and his friends stole pears from an orchard next to his father’s vineyard. They stole, not because they were hungry or greedy, but simply for the fun of doing something wicked (*Confessions* II:4). Like any other child, Augustine must have done worse things than this. Why, we ask, is this episode recounted in relatively vivid detail?

In another passage, Augustine writes that before converting he had a passionate relationship with a woman with whom he had a son. After his conversion, she went back to Africa and never married. He pays a touching tribute to her piety. But we are far from satisfied. As curious modern readers, we are disappointed that he tells us so little about her. We want to know what she looked like and where they met. What was their life like together? How did they part? With a potential movie adaptation in mind, we are more interested in picturing the passionate sins of Augustine’s youth than in thinking about his unexciting childhood theft. Why then is the passage about the theft richer in detail, given that his encounters with sexual partners surely ensnared him more in the sinful life of the
flesh? To answer these questions we have to look at the details and consider the meaning of each episode. Augustine’s anecdote about stealing pears recalls an episode from the Bible. What is the connection between the biblical prototype and the anecdote?

The Christian doctrine of original sin implies that when Adam and Eve fell from grace, all human beings and human nature itself were corrupted permanently. We have inherited a perverted and corrupt human nature. The biblical account of the Fall relates to this episode of stealing the pears in terms of original sin. In reading the Bible, Augustine knew that each episode pivots on the same point: the choice between sin and obedience to God. This common denominator allowed him to personalize and universalize the Bible. Instead of merely recounting historical episodes, the Bible in Augustine’s reading also anticipated psychological and spiritual relations. In recognizing in Adam’s fall his own experience, Augustine framed personal experience in biblical terms. His personalization of the Bible influenced a long tradition of writing and culture.

Whether we read Augustine as Christians or not, it is impossible to deny that he asked profound questions about human nature. Most of us could tell stories worse than his stolen pears. We can recall having caused senseless pain to others. We can disregard Augustine’s answers and think about his questions. What is it that makes us do and say cruel things from which we derive no material benefit? Where does this malice come from? What does it take to get it under control? Are reason and education the solution? Is the meanness somehow beaten out of us? Do we get over our viciousness by learning to follow rules? Is compassion the answer? How can we acquire compassion when we are absorbed in our selves? Atheists as well as believers face questions of this sort. We
cannot ignore the fact that the tradition of soul-searching in our literature and culture has roots in Augustine and his kind of Christianity.

When Augustine remembers his childhood, he remembers it through the lens of the Bible. The child Augustine was the same as Adam who took forbidden fruit and fell from grace into a life of sin. The Augustine who converts personally experiences Christ, as does the Apostle Paul, and like him goes on to become one of the great authorities for Christian doctrine. His entire life as he understands it is an approach to, a reading of, the Bible. He looks into the mirror of the biblical narrative and sees himself in a new light. This seeing of himself transformed the tradition, making Christianity something different, almost as Augustinian as it is biblical. This conversionary aspect of reading, which all of us experience to a degree when we project ourselves into what we read and recognize the familiar as strange or the familiar in the unfamiliar, became a cultural driving force that propelled the world in a particular direction for a thousand years and more.

But whoever finds this constancy and piety edifying also has to acknowledge how remote Augustine’s piety and reading of the Bible could be. Another key passage in the Confessions recounts what people nowadays might call an out-of-body experience as his mother was close to death. The passage is characteristic for the sort of writing that loses us because it speaks in more than one mode. The human core of the experience he relates is not hard to reconstruct as a narrative. Augustine is a loving son by his dying mother’s side. He is reflecting with her about the afterlife. Confronted with the unfathomable, he draws on faith and past knowledge. The author of the Confessions seems to recall rising up with his mother through the heavens to and then beyond his “mind,” to a realm which is more of spirit than of space:
And when our discourse was once come unto that point, that the highest pleasure of the carnal senses, and that in the brightest beam of material light, was, in respect of the sweetness of that life, not only not worthy of comparison, but not so much as of mention; we cheering up ourselves with a more burning affection towards that “Self-Same” [God in Psalm 4:6] did by degrees course over all these corporeals, even the heaven itself, from whence both sun, and moon, and stars do shine upon the earth. Yea, we were soaring higher yet, by inward musing, and discoursing upon thee, and by admiring of thy works; and last of all, we came to our own souls, which we presently went beyond, so that we advanced as high as that region of never-wasting plenty, whence thou feedest Israel for ever with the food of truth, and where life is that wisdom by which all these things are made, both which have been, and which are to come. (Loeb Classics Library, IX:10.24, p. 49)

Even the most devoted reader can get lost in the labyrinth of verbiage that shifts between levels of being. Speaking of the afterlife, Augustine and his mother are spiritually lifted up beyond the realm of creation to that of the Creator. Confusion results from the fact that Augustine is simultaneously narrating his real or imagined movement upward and a progression inward, a flight to the stars and into the mind. The sentiments are pious and Christian but the language is not biblical. It owes a great deal to the Platonic philosophy he had studied before the experience. In order to come to terms with this passage and the many others that are confusing for the same reason, we need to consider how his Platonic philosophy could seem relevant during and after his conversion.
Centuries before Augustine, Plato had written or inspired fictionalized narratives that articulated the philosophical approach to truth. In one narrative, the “Allegory of the Cave” in Plato’s *Republic*, men are chained inside a cave facing the cave wall. They can only see shadows cast by objects that are being carried past a bonfire behind their backs. When they are set free, they gradually recognize first the shadowy objects, then the fire, and, at last, outside the cave, the sun itself. The sun represents the highest truth. Other Platonic philosophers proposed other ways to narrate the gradual approach to truth: as a rising higher, as a going deeper inside oneself, or a return to an ultimate source. Ancient philosophy had brought the world logic, geometry, and other self-evident and seemingly absolute truths. Augustine knew the terms and usages of this approach to truth by heart and used its language in his *Confessions* to wed philosophical truth to biblical authority in narrating what he experienced at his dying mother’s side. He was able to re-biblicize the hierarchical approach to truth of Platonic philosophy by associating it with the Apostle Paul’s account of his experience recounted in 2 Corinthians 12:3-4 of being raised up into the “third heaven.” It is important for us to observe that this was a fabricated expedient. Paul had only hinted at the nature of his extraordinary experience. No one knows exactly what the apostle had in mind. He was definitely not writing as a Platonic philosopher.

In calling attention to the fact that Augustine was confounding distinct voices into one confusing narrative, our purpose is not to dispute that he had some sort of profound experience shortly before his mother’s death. Our point is that *how he narrated* what he experienced was influenced by what he knew of. The same is true for us. Suppose that we work hard to solve some math problem. We sweat and curse, until all of a sudden it makes sense to us. How would we tell someone what *happened* when it suddenly made
sense? Cartoons show a light-bulb turning on but this is nonsense. Our sudden mastery is not an event that can be depicted or re-enacted. In telling about it, we would have to invent a narrative. The story might differ depending on whether we are fans of baseball or action films or the lottery. The way we narrate the event might influence our further efforts. If we sensed that we had struck a home run (practice makes perfect), this might guide our efforts differently than if we felt we had hit the jackpot (luck is what counts).

What might appear arbitrary in Augustine’s narrative is thus the key to its sources and significance. What makes the so-called experience at Ostia confusing is the fact that Augustine was conjoining the two essential currents of Western culture: classical thought and the Bible. Birth is a messy business, but no less important for being messy.

The most influential narratives turn into tradition and evolve in being read. It has been said that we are what we eat. It is hardly less true that our lived experience depends on the narratives we have consumed. If this seems vague, we can take an example of the way the stories we hear determine not only the things we say and think, but the very way we experience reality. The example concerns a historical situation which we can reenact, just as we might reproduce a historical experiment in the chemistry lab. It has to do with narrative and common experience during the Middle Ages.

In the Middle Ages, life was typically harsh for the common people. In Northern Europe, the Middle Ages are thought to have lasted roughly from 500 to 1500, from the demise of the ancient empire centered in Rome, with its high civilization, until the age of Gutenberg, Columbus, Copernicus, and Luther brought developments that made a safer, more prosperous and cultivated life possible. For centuries, the Roman Empire endured as the standard of high civilization. Even better than its durable highways, Rome had a
navigable waterway connecting most parts of the empire: the Mediterranean. The Middle Ages shifted the center of European life northward away from the Mediterranean and into the impassable forests and mountains of a heartland where half-savage peoples lived. In these dark wilderesses, lawless tribes, clans, local rulers, and bandits could spread terror and mayhem. In order to combat this normal terror, the medieval topography of castles and walled cities arose. Christianity idealized order and threatened eternal punishment for violations. Hell became a key aspect of the Christian worldview. Medieval churches often feature lurid, demonic depictions of Hell, rivaling modern horror films.

Now for our experiment. Imagine it is nighttime. We leave the secure world of halogen street lamps and stroll all alone down a dark path through an unfamiliar woods. Suppose we heard sounds. We would see how we experience reality through narratives which are spontaneously constructed from what we know and stories we have heard. We would establish this point by constructing vividly experienced narratives that would vary depending on whether we had been reading horror stories or studying nocturnal animal habitats. Like a time warp, darkness and terror throw us back into an archaic world.

In the Middle Ages, people reported visiting Hell. They went to Hell and came back to tell stories about it. They went to Hell in dreams or in visions or during illnesses. Nowadays we can read about out-of-body experiences and alien abductions, but not about anyone going to Hell and back. In the Middle Ages, people went to Hell and came back to tell tales so shocking and terrifying that their reports were widely published, translated into other languages, and read by concerned people. An Irish knight named Tundal spent three days in Hell. He came back to tell how the damned were ingeniously tormented by fire and ice or preyed upon by monsters that waited for them below a narrow bridge or
invaded the bodies of the damned to devour them. *Alien*-like, from the inside out. Tundal went on a Crusade, presumably after swearing off his iniquities. I will spare you further details of what people saw in Hell, but it was every bit as disgusting and horrifying as in a modern slasher movie. In the Middle Ages, there were no street lights. On dangerous pitch-dark pathways, people “experienced” things we can hardly imagine. Darkness was not empty. It was alive. What people saw and heard in medieval darkness depended on the tales they had consumed and taken to heart. Hell was a familiar place.

The greatest medieval vision of the other world, which is also widely considered to be the great literary masterpiece of the Middle Ages, is Dante’s long poem, the *Divine Comedy*. It was composed around the year 1300. It consists of three parts: the *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. Because Dante was one of the most learned men of his time, and a great and disciplined poet, no one wants to associate him with the imaginings of a half-crazed Irish knight. But in literature, knowledge and imagination do not exclude one another. The visions in Dante’s *Inferno* are as terrifying as Tundal’s images of Hell, and both visions, Dante’s and Tundal’s, reflect the culture of the Middle Ages.

Dante starts out speaking about himself: “Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood, where the right way was lost.” Being lost in a dark place was more than a metaphor in the Middle Ages, but are we to suppose that on his thirty-fifth birthday—the meaning of “midway on the journey of life”—Dante was hiking in an Italian forest and got off the track? Not at all. This is a vision he imagined. Next Dante finds a wise guide. The guide is the great Roman poet Virgil, author of the *Aeneid*. What Dante imagines and in imagining experiences is therefore guided by his reading of Virgil. Virgil knows his way around and agrees to guide his fellow poet through all the circles of
Hell and Purgatory, which is as far as a pagan is allowed to go. The tour of Hell is like visiting a museum except that here the exhibits are all animate. You can pause and talk to them. Dante and Virgil examine all the main varieties of the damned and exchange a few words with them. Each time they come upon a strange new tableau of the damned, it appears to them as something both strange and familiar, a riddle whose key is the earthly precedent to which each embodiment of damnation renders the verdict of eternal justice.

The first circle of Hell is not bad. This is where Virgil and the good people of the ancient world live: their flaw was that they did not know and accept Christ. Then come those who have committed crimes of passion. The damned whose desire was carnal or sexual are one circle above the gluttons: the object of their desire was something higher. Worse off still are those whose sins involved not passion but malice. Peculiarly, the born killer Achilles holds a slightly better station in Hell than Odysseus. Achilles killed out of anger but Ulysses-Odysseus was a man of cunning whose curiosity was insatiable. In the Middle Ages, curiosity was not considered a virtue.

Virgil takes the poet as far as the gate to Paradise. Purgatory and Paradise follow the same pattern as the Inferno, but at a higher level of being, nearer to the divine. Hell is the sensuous or physical sphere of knowledge, Purgatory the imaginative sphere, and Heaven the intellectual sphere. This abstract threefold division follows Saint Augustine’s previously mentioned Platonic interpretation of Paul’s three spheres or “heavens” as three levels of knowledge. Dante’s three eternal worlds therefore parallel Plato’s allegorical cave. In progressing from subterranean darkness to celestial light, Dante’s vision of the other world bears a real kinship and family resemblance to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave.
Plato’s Cave with its bound souls has been transformed into Dante’s cavernous Inferno, above and beyond which the light of celestial truth is gradually to be approached.

Dante’s poem is perfectly symmetrical, more like verbal architecture than lively narrative. As in the Bible, Dante’s episodes are brief, but with less action, since they are not happening in this world but in an eternal one after all history is done. Things do not so much happen in Dante as take place symbolically. The violent souls in Hell are caught up in an endless battle in a slimy lake, mired in their hatred. We know what it means to be mired in hate. As the familiar is made strange, we are induced to ponder each riddle. Discovering the key by discerning for each strange scene the precedent in common life, we recognize our life experience in a new light, the light of the eternal world. The brief episodes with few details are charged with symbolic meaning. What Dante shares with the narrative of the Bible he shares because of a similar religious worldview. The good that befalls Abraham or David or the evil that befalls Judas or the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah come about in fulfillment of divine judgment. The destruction of Sodom is no normal event: it occurs as a divine judgment on its wickedness, just as David’s victory in battle passes judgment on his faith in God’s help. The action can be told briefly, just as a verdict read at the end of a trial is brief.

The judgments on the damned are frozen gems of symbolic action. There can be no real action in Dante’s poem because action occurs in time. Hell is located in eternity. In the medieval mind, the eternal worlds of Heaven and Hell outshine and overshadowed the human world where life was short and full of misery. We like to imagine our society as a social meritocracy in which everyone rises to a level earned by talent and hard work. Dante’s vision was a medieval equivalent of meritocracy. People got what they deserved
in the eternal worlds of Heaven and Hell. Dante’s Hell has dishonest churchmen in it: he may have had fewer illusions about the Church than some people have today. But justice was done and every soul got what it deserved. Dante’s world is a harsh one which few of us can still accept, but on its own terms it made perfect narrative sense.

Now we need to consider whether it is better to live in a harsh world which makes sense than in a pleasant one that makes no sense. This is hard to say. Certainly the worst of worlds would be both harsh and senseless. Within memory of Dante’s lifetime, a great disaster swept across Asia and Europe and undermined all certainties. What later became known as the Black Death of 1347-50 is said to have killed the greatest number ever in a single disaster. The death rate was so high it threatened to put an end to the human race. The moral and religious disaster was almost as great. The best way to save your life was to get away from the population centers. If your family and friends were dying and you abandoned them, your chances improved. If you stood by your loved ones, chances were that you died with them. Priests are said to have abandoned their congregations. Faithful Christians seeking refuge or consolation in churches endangered themselves by coming into contact with the infected. Whoever believed that going to church, doing good deeds, or saying prayers would be rewarded by God in this world was slated for disillusionment. Scoundrels and cowards who fled are more likely to have been rewarded with survival.

We have all heard the saying that there are no atheists in foxholes, meaning that when faced with death everyone gets religion. If the message is that in peril everyone returns to the old-time religion that has always been the consolation in times of hardship, I have doubts about this. My great-grandfather Nathaniel was remembered in my family
as a resolute and outspoken atheist. In the Civil War, he joined the 48th Illinois Infantry with a teenaged son William who soon perished of injury or disease. Resilient in middle age, my great-grandfather campaigned for three more years before he was wounded and mustered out. To the end of his days, he adhered to his freethinking, steadfastly refusing to attend church, though to the bemusement of those who did he always swore “by God,” as if this were somehow implicit in his resolve.

The Black Death was deadlier than any war. The response to the epidemic which we find recorded in Boccaccio’s Decameron does not bear out the no-atheists-in-foxholes dictum. Everyone was faced with death but there were signs of skepticism about religion. People had believed that God would help them if they were in need in this life. When it became clear that the good were abandoned and the wicked rewarded, religion tended to be discredited. There was an enormous rise in genocidal violence against Jews who were blamed for poisoning wells and spreading the plague.11 Similar violence was directed against representatives of the Church.12 Some people thought that God was punishing the human race. Some placed credence in the saints as special helpers against disease. Some joined a cult known as the Flagellants. They marched from place to place singing dirge-like songs and whipping themselves in unison to do penance for the sins of the world.

As time went by, the plague nourished more thoughtful responses which matured and bore fruit. One was the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther rejected the idea that God owes us for good works. He stressed that salvation comes only from faith. People began to develop different expectations for religion. Since the plague was still a constant threat during the Protestant Reformation, reformers such as Luther and Osiander urged the pastors to stand by their flocks during epidemics. Another thoughtful reaction to the
Black Death of 1347-50 began immediately and continued to gain momentum. Thinking people began to reconsider the meaning of life in this world. They came to value ancient pre-Christian literature which had focused on the human being in the here and now. They acquired a new sense that life in this world is more than a preparation for Heaven or Hell. Life was more than a dim reflection of the world to come. Life was fascinating in itself.

Boccaccio lived through and responded to the great plague epidemic. In reading him, we need to bear in mind what we have said about Dante, Heaven and Hell, and the Black Death. We are surprised to learn that Boccaccio was a keen admirer of Dante. The two authors strike us as worlds apart. Dante seems closer to Tundal, the Irish knight and thoroughly medieval visitor of Hell. Dante was a paragon of piety. Though he was aware of corruption in the Church, religion was assuredly no laughing matter. Boccaccio on the other hand is as irreverent as any modern satirist of pious humbug.

In form they are worlds apart, and not simply because Dante wrote in disciplined verse and Boccaccio in popular prose. The number systems that bind their respective works are distinct. We have been considering number as a token of the hard evidence literature contains. The three parts of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* are composed in three-line *terza rima* stanzas and redolent of the medieval sense of order and measure for which irreducible primary numbers possessed symbolic and magical qualities. Three is the number of the Trinity. Seven was the recurrent numeral of cardinal virtues, mortal sins, sacraments, liberal arts, as well as planets, metals, and other aspects of the physical and spiritual orders. In contrast to prime or magical numbers, the more modern and abstract decimal system frames *The Decameron*, the tales told by ten characters on ten designated days. Ten times ten makes us think of calculations of interest by the merchants whose
dealtings were transforming the rigid feudal system in which all things and people were confined to their fixed status. Boccaccio had first-hand knowledge of mercantile society. His historical experience and the numerical system that went with it are one aspect of the framing perspective which brings his tales into focus.

In reading the Decameron, we need to apply what has been said about narrative as an art of combining the strange with the familiar. Boccaccio’s hundred stories are called novellas: tales embodying what is novel or strange. Some are novel to the point of shock and revulsion, others delight us with their unexpected happy endings. The collection of one hundred novellas is cast in a highly complex set of framing narratives. Many readers tend to skip prefatory sections; but we should do exactly the opposite, reflecting on them in advance and reconsidering them after reading the tales themselves. There is a rule of thumb for reading the classics. Imagine you are digging through family possessions in your attic, seeking objects of meaning or value. You rip through brittle paper to uncover some object that your ancestors apparently deemed worthy of preserving. Holding it in your hands, you have no clue what it is or why it seemed precious. To your chagrin, you realize that what you discarded as mere wrappings explained what the object meant. The wrappings are analogous to the framing elements which we ignore because we are eager for narrative action which we hope will speak to us more directly. The rule of thumb is to pay the closest attention to the elements that most frustrate our quest for meaning.

Framing elements are transitional zones between the reader and the alien world of the narration. First there is the Preface of the author, in which he speaks of the emotional source of his book in his youthful sufferings of love and his devotion to ladies who suffer similarly. He speaks of familiar feelings in a strikingly frank manner. Second comes the
powerful framing account of the plague, which prepares the stage upon which the seven women and three men who narrate the tales repeatedly enter and exit. With its decimal division, this third framing element is pervasive. In fact, of the Preface, Introduction, and narrative account of the ten, only the latter is a true framing narrative or “cornice tale.” But this restriction only tells us how restrictive and metaphorical the term “frame” is. It comes from the analogous structure of a painting—a poor analogy since a picture frame is often added on by someone other than the artist and may have nothing to do with the painting. All the elements which cast or recast narrative material are akin to the framing device: Augustine’s recasting of his childhood theft as Adam’s fall from grace, Dante’s symbolic recasting of ancient literary figures, or even the introductory presentation of the tone, scene, and characters in any modern novel. All these elements or devices frame the terms of narration by presenting a, b, or c in the light of x, y, or z.

We should not assume that Boccaccio’s frame is merely decorative. His account of the plague and the ten might show signs of conventionality in evoking the horrors of the epidemic. He might wax idyllic in evoking the decorous scenario of their charming retreat. But there is surely no reason to doubt the terrifying and degrading background of mass death, nor to disbelieve the resultant impulse to escape from it and find or found a state of moral and existential ease and equilibrium.

The complex of framing elements sets up a contextual counterpoint. The Preface raises the question of the service literature performs for human feeling. The Introduction adds the dimension of suffering and degradation of humankind. The brigata or party of ten constitutes its story-telling as a free social institution. Within this set-up, each of the ten days of narration frames tales of a distinct, though not consistent, character. To us the
framework suggests questions about the relation of the personal to the general, the before and after of a watershed event, and about societal and individual development effected by suffering and insight. Because the *brigata* is freely constituted, it also poses the question whether human beings can respond to desire or disaster to reconstitute a better world.

Strong contrasting impulses thus set off the novellas of the *Decameron*. In one sense, the objective of the *brigata* is amusement: the ten divert themselves, rather like the condemned Chinese prisoner reading in the face of death. But surrounded by death of such ghastly proportions, the entertaining tales reveal a common essence. They represent nothing less than life itself. Adumbrated by the all-encompassing presence of death, life appears all the more radiant in its varieties of noble and base, tragic and liberating. The varieties of life are indexed, not to the eternal key of the Dantesque verdict, in which life appeared as if congealed in an eternal gem: the noble and the base are comprehensible in reference to active human character. Dante gave us the irrevocable bottom line of each individual life. Boccaccio gives us the many pluses and minuses that add up to life as a chaotically lived whole. The appeal of each tale depends on the character of the narrator whose telling and listening are our reading, as well as on us readers whose own character is highlighted by what we read and how we react to it.

Augustine and Dante framed their narratives with *metaphysical* constructs: the mystical prayers of the former, the supernatural visions of the latter. Boccaccio gives us *human* constructs which are closer in spirit to experimental science. Science responds to random events by constructing frameworks in which they can be meaningfully studied. Boccaccio’s frame of reference contextualizes what is strange or common, unheard of or illusory. His devices adjust our reading of the narrated plots, making them appear more
worthy of attention and less inappropriate for polite society; lending them an apparent coherence to offset their checkered mixture of the high and the low, the noble and the reprehensible; and highlighting their significance in relation to questions about a society whose sacred laws and indeed very existence have been challenged.

Distributed by the frame into one hundred compartments, the tales of varying length are for the most part sparse: their density of detail lies somewhere between the compact character of the biblical episodes that bear out divine commandments and the detailed Homeric narratives which round out singular persons and events. Boccaccio’s tales are neither colossal like Homer’s epic battles, nor overshadowed by divine judgment like Dante’s symbolic encapsulations of life. Instead he gives us the ups and downs of *Fortuna*. Fortune governs lives more random and interchangeable than those of Homeric heroes or biblical patriarchs, lives more like our own. The active players bring to the table of Fortune their particular qualities of character, appearance, virtue, and ingenuity. The cards are dealt, the wheel is spun. The players carry through on the strength of their qualities. Fortune may reward the good and punish the wicked or vice versa.

Though the economy of the characterization generally gives us only what each character brings to the table to be placed at risk or played out in the fascinating twists of fortune and fate that are the decisive turning points in each narrative plot line, there are a few exceptions that defy this rule of economy. These exceptions are equally worthy of attention: they point to another level of meaning beyond the accounts of who does what to whom. Are the good rewarded, the evil punished in the *Decameron*? Was Boccaccio a cynic? Is there no virtue? Are there examples of positive characters: who are they and how are they able to do good?
Consider the first story from the Fifth Day. One day an adolescent youth named Cimone, who is hardly better than an imbecile with the habits of a beast, sees a beautiful girl. Love transforms him and makes him able to acquire the manners, virtues, and gifts of a noble gentleman. Should this be implausible to today’s students? Consider the tenth story from the Third Day, about how the would-be female hermit Alibech and the young flesh-denying monk Rustico “put the Devil back in Hell.” Rustico wanted to prove his devotion to God by resisting carnal temptation but found his desire to prove himself to God mutated into a very different kind of desire, which the two are able to fulfill in their monastic isolation. Desire can lead to grotesque, comic, or tragicomic endings. How can a pious desire be transformed into a sexual one if both are not located on the same scale of equivalence? Sigmund Freud famously theorized that our sexual drives are disguised and sublimated in higher pursuits and ideals. By making us ask how spiritual desire is related to sexual desire, Boccaccio suggests a medieval precursor to the wheel that Freud reinvented. Plato, Augustine, and medieval Christianity had their own answer to this question. Sexual love is an imperfect or misdirected form of the desire for God, but the two are still comparable. What should be sought in God is found in an inferior transient version in the realm of the flesh. Boccaccio for his part confines himself to our world, the ground floor of Dante’s universe, where vertical longings find horizontal outlets.

We should allow enough time to read the tales, each reader selecting those that have the greatest or least appeal and giving reasons for the attraction or lack of it. Then we should reconsider the framing elements and examine several of the more extreme or less typical tales and compare them with the more common ones.
Reading *The Decameron* between Faith and Skepticism

In a literature class or reading group, we would do well to preface our discussion of individual tales by testing the dynamics of Boccaccio’s structures for ourselves. We could set up a similar relationship of frame and narration by having small groups imitate the procedure of *The Decameron* by taking turns telling stories and reflecting on them within each group. The kinds of stories told (or retold from popular sources) would reveal things about the character of the story-tellers, the dynamics of their group, and the society from which it is drawn. No one would be surprised if many stories had to do with love and sex. The mandate of story-telling might enhance and focus the stories. With recycled narratives, reflection within a group might transfer authority from public sources to the critical faculties of the recounting and critiquing group. Some story-tellers might be driven to seek the extremes of shock effect or jaded knowledge. Others might exercise criticism. If we cannot reproduce such groups, we may remember having been in them as children or early adolescents telling forbidden tales.

Imagine that Boccaccio’s tales represent experimental results of this kind, we might analyze the resultant narrative “data” by looking for polar extremes. The account of the plague epidemic in Boccaccio’s Introduction states that: “the revered authority of the laws, both divine and human, had fallen and almost completely disappeared.” On the authority of institutions divine and human, the first and last tales of the hundred present extreme views of two sacred institutional bonds, the Church and marriage respectively.
In other regards as well, these two tales mark the outer limits of the hundred and reveal the extremes of an important spectrum of positions pertaining to medieval authority.

The first story of the First Day is the tale of Ser Cepparello’s behavior in life, the circumstances of his death, and his reputation after his death. How did he live and how does he die? If we had a scale of human worth marked at one end by those who do good for unselfish reasons, those in the middle who do what is good only for themselves, but without harm to others, and those at the opposite end who do harmful things for the sake of pure malice, where would Ser Cepparello fit in? And where would those who revere him after his death place him on the same scale? If the world’s judgment can be so false, why should common opinion be accepted in other matters of sanctity and morality? And if no such trust is possible, what credibility does any institutional authority retain?

Ser Cepparello is a repulsive scoundrel who does wicked things for the fun of it. Through cunning and deceit, he not only receives a church burial but is revered as a saint. His story suggests that the order that had collapsed with the onslaught of the plague had already been rotten to the core. Even prior to the arrival of the plague, appearance did not coincide with reality. Ser Cepparello shows that belief and reality were out of joint.

It is ironic that this utterly wicked man becomes a saint after concocting cunning lies in his final confession. But there are two kinds of irony: irony of fate or situation, which is an irony of how things turn out, and the verbal irony of someone speaking with mild sarcasm or tongue-in-cheek. The first is called situational irony, the second verbal irony. Clearly, we have the first kind in the story, but do we also find the second kind in the narrator’s words? Consider how the narrator generalizes at the start of the narration: “the human eye cannot penetrate the secrets of the divine mind in any way.” We should
be wary of projecting our own sense of irony and skepticism onto these words. Any great age of faith could have said the same in all sincerity. In the wake of so many revelations of church child abuse, many believers may be entertaining similar thoughts today:

It was in this manner, then, that Ser Cepparello of Prato lived and died and became a saint … God might well have had pity on him and received him into His Kingdom; this is hidden from us, but…I believe that he is instead in the hands of the Devil in Hell rather than in Paradise. And in this case we can recognize the greatness of God’s mercy toward us which pays more attention to the purity of our faith than to our errors by granting our prayers in spite of the fact that we choose His enemy as our intercessor.

But if God indeed attends more to the purity of faith than to the corruption of its revered embodiments, the locus of true religiosity is shifted inward from public sanctity toward the inner faith later championed by the Reformation. But also toward the openness and equality of the ten. In recounting their tales, the story-tellers escape from and rise above the flood of hidden filth that had burst forth with the plague. The first tale suggests that escape from the filth of a society capable of venerating a Ser Cepparello leads to the ideal society of the ten. What is the relationship between men and women or of ruler and ruled in the group? How does the openness of discourse in the society of the ten compare with a world capable of venerating a Ser Cepparello?

Boccaccio’s skepticism departs from the sacred while opening a path of return to it. No one but the most naive could believe in public sanctity after recognizing the truth of a world that reveres a Ser Cepparello and that harbors so many hypocritical members of the spiritual estate. But radical skepticism also makes it possible to believe that God
works in such mysterious ways that even the worst this world has to offer serves some
higher purpose. Believing that Ser Cepparello serves such a purpose is no more absurd
than believing that a terrible plague could prepare the ground for the society prefigured
by the ten narrators—provided, however, that human beings are allowed to reflect on it
freely. If this is the case, a subtle power is at work both in the world and the soul.

We said that the dark background of the framing tale highlighted the variety and
quality of life itself. The variety and ambivalence of the Decameron material embodies
alternatives. Two briefer tales show the astonishing range of possibilities entertained in
imagine conjugal relationships. The story of Madonna Filippa (VI.7) tells how a noble
and courageous married woman, discovered by her husband in flagranti with her lover, is
charged with the capital offense of adultery. She defends herself in court by arguing that
she has never refused the advances of her husband: it is therefore unreasonable to insist
that she discard her remaining capacity for love. Compelled by the logic of her defense,
the law is overturned and the lady freed. Her victory is celebrated by her fellow citizens.

We can compare this with IX.9. In this tale, two men, one man with a shrewish
wife and another who longs to be loved, seek out the judgment of Solomon. His cryptic
advice to the first decodes as bestial wife-thrashing. To the second, the simple advice is
to love. The contrast could hardly be more extreme. Here and in the last of the hundred
tales, the story of Griselda, the contrast defines an extreme range of possibilities. Marital
problems can be resolved by brutal subjugation or willing submission, by female or male
emancipation from the bonds of monogamy, or simply by love itself. As modern readers,
we are as shocked by Boccaccio’s radical questioning of monogamy as by the equanimity
with which the choices of love and wife-beating are placed side by side. His reluctance
to resolve the options for us suggests that his work came into being at a crossroads in the evolution of his society and culture. In a time of unbelievable events, antithetical options seemed equally possible. From one vantage point, the Decameron hovers on the margins between the medieval and the modern. From another, we are also hovering at that point.

The social composition of the characters is relevant to their degree of modernity. Commentators have inventoried the characters in The Decameron. The largest social group is of the middle class. Vittore Branca called the work “the extraordinary saga of [the] merchant class.” Though men outnumber women 255 to 83, the latter are by the standards of the time not only strong in number but dynamic in character. According to Thomas Bergin, of the 85 stories that have a genuine story character, women are either dominant or essential (that is, there would be no story without them) in 79. Bergin sides with those who see Boccaccio as an author who turns his back on the Middle Ages. The Decameron contains “no example of the spiritualized donna angelica, the inspirational, untouchable lady of Dante and the troubadours.”

One way to approach the question whether Boccaccio looks backward toward the Middle Ages or forward toward the Renaissance, and toward us, is by considering how he treats certain ideas or themes which were sacred to the old order. Historical periods are abstractions: no page is turned in history when the clock strikes midnight on New Year’s Eve. Cultural history is not a one-way, closed-access highway, but a vast open field of scattered stragglers and pioneers who shift directions and appear and disappear as if from nowhere. By considering how Boccaccio treats a figure who arguably comes closest to presenting what Bergin calls an “example of the spiritualized donna angelica,” we can take a meaningful reading of his orientation and direction.
The story of Madam Beritola (II.6:113-27) is set against the background of the “vicissitudes of Fortune,” in this case the power struggles of mid 13th-century Italy. The husband of Madam Beritola is a loyal minion of the celebrated, though illegitimate and excommunicated, king of Sicily, Manfred, a natural son of the Hohenstaufen Emperor Frederick II. When Manfred is defeated and killed in battle, her husband is captured by the treacherous Sicilians and turned over to the conquering King Charles. Fearing for his life and her honor, the “beautiful and noble” Madam Beritola flees with their young son. Pregnant, she gives birth to a second son while in flight. Journeying by sea to Naples, her ship is forced to take shelter from bad weather in a bay of the island of Ponza. When she goes ashore to mourn for her husband in “a solitary and remote spot,” pirates capture and make off with her ship, carrying away her two sons with it. When she spies from afar the ship being towed away by the pirate vessel, her grief and abandonment are complete.

Eventually, the family fortunes will be restored, first by the initiative of her nurse, who takes charge of the two boys, then by the generous spirit of the stern Currado, who discovers Madam Beritola and who unknowingly becomes first the master of her older son and (after a near catastrophe) his father-in-law; and finally by a Ghibelline military comeback which restores her husband to favor and high office. The sequence of events leading to this outcome is the main narrative. It is economical and marked by surprising turns of plot. What concerns us here, however, is the reaction of Madam Beritola to her immediate desolation. Her reaction is arguably close to the ideal of the “spiritualized donna angelica” discounted by Bergin. Moreover, her reaction breaks with the rule of the economical plot line in the Decameron. Finally, her reaction is simply odd in itself. This is how Madam Beritola behaves when she realizes that she has lost everything:
Finding herself there impoverished, alone, and abandoned, and not knowing how she would ever find any of them again, calling out to her husband and children, she fell unconscious upon the shore. There was no one there to revive her weakened spirits with cold water or any other remedy, and therefore it was a good long time before she returned to her senses, but when finally her lost strength returned to her miserable body, amid tears and lamentations she called out to her sons as she wandered, looking for them at length in every cave she found. But when she realized that her efforts were in vain and that night was approaching, she began to think of her own needs, and hoping she knew not what, she left the shore and returned to the cave where she was accustomed to cry and lament.

She spent the night in great fear and anguish impossible to describe; a new day dawned and it was already past the hour of-tierce, and because she had not eaten since the previous evening she was compelled by hunger to feed on the grass. Feeding herself as best she could, she wept as she began brooding over what was to become of her. While she was lost in thoughts, she noticed a doe which came toward her, entered a nearby cave, and then some time later emerged from it, running off into the woods; she got up and entered the cave the doe had left, and inside she discovered two roebucks, perhaps born on that very day, that seemed to her to be the sweetest and most charming sight in the world. And as the milk from her own breast had not yet dried up from her recent childbirth, she picked them up tenderly and placed them to her breast. They did not refuse her
kindness, and so she suckled them just as their own mother might have
done, and from that moment on they made no distinction between her and
their mother. Thus the gentle lady felt that she had found some company
in that deserted place, and then having become as familiar with the doe as
with her two offspring, she resolved to spend the rest of her life there
feeding on the grass, drinking the water, and weeping whenever she
recalled her husband, her children, and her past life. (II.6:115-16)
The narrator quickly moves on from this interlude: “As a result of living in this fashion,
the gentle lady had become much like an animal herself when after a number of months it
happened that a Pisan boat driven by a chance storm arrived in the same bay where she
had landed . . . .” Currado, travelling with his wife, discovers Madam Beritola. Deeply
moved by her gentleness and suffering, they persuade her to return with them to their
home. She only agrees to do so accompanied by her animal friends. Unknown to her, the
gradual upward curve toward the restoration of her family’s fortunes has begun.

As usual, one thing leads to another in the economically unfolding narrative. The
only loose link in the chain of events is Madam Beritola’s co-maternal adoption of the
newborn deer. It is peculiar in itself and because it lacks purpose within the economical
plot. She does not learn the expedient of foraging for food from the deer. Nor do the two
newborn roebucks need her for sustenance. They have a mother of their own. Madam
Beritola’s discovery and rescue by Currado will entail her defending the deer from his
hunting dogs, but obviously she could have been discovered without this. She does not
leave the island without her surrogate deer family, yet the narrator forgets about them as
soon as she has left the island. And yet again, the crew of Currado’s ship gives her the name “Cavriuola,” “Doe”—as if this were the most important thing about her.

The Decameron features other female protagonists who, when deprived of their lovers by jealous kin, transfer their passion to the physical remains of their beloved: the lover’s heart in one tale (IV.1) and his severed head in another (IV.5). In those tales, the woman’s refusal to surrender the object of passion and her transference of her affection to a lifeless surrogate result in suicidal insanity. Unlike them, Madame Beritola appears to Currado and his wife, and to the narrator, as gentle and worthy of deep sympathy. Her reactions are in most regards normal and natural. Hunger makes her eat grass: it is the only available food. Devastated maternal love leads her to embrace the baby roebucks: she possesses no other object for her bereaved affection.

We can fault her maternal reaction to the “sweetness” of the roebucks as Bambi-style kitsch. But the sentimentality is limited. Animals are absolutely no replacement for her loved ones whose loss she intends to spend her remaining days mourning in isolation. The reader is compelled to wonder how anyone could react to her situation other than by going insane or cursing life. She does neither. We can only assume that a sense of living fellowship with the deer accounts for her retaining her sanity and clinging to life. Yet her reversion to the animal condition, her seemingly pointless nursing of the two roebucks, which do not need her in any way, appears strange and embarrassing to us. What is the point of this narratively unnecessary insertion?

Simply by recognizing that this episode stands out in the Decameron as strange, we put ourselves in a better position to interpret it. Boccaccio’s readers might have found the episode both familiar and strange for other reasons. Madam Beritola’s ministering to
animals might have evoked associations with Saint Francis’ spiritualized love of nature and all its creatures. Madam Beritola’s actions might have appeared overlaid with those of Mary as the nursing mother of the infant Jesus or as a Mother of Sorrows, grieving for her lost son. Madam Beritola’s resolve to mourn for her loved ones in perpetual solitude might also have called to mind the circumstances of the female religious recluses, whose enclosed cells of perpetual devotion were attached to churches. Her behavior might even have recalled the devotion of the then famous, subsequently beatified, Angela di Foligno, who was liberated for saintliness when her entire family passed away. Only then could she devote herself exclusively to contemplating the divine sacrifice. Madam Beritola is not liberated by the loss of her family, nor does she turn her thoughts to God. We are not even told that she prays for her loved ones or consoles herself with religious devotions. She displays neither the exhibitionism of the female recluses, who clearly embraced their spectacular role in the religious community, nor the rationalization of the ascetics, who turned their suffering into spiritual drama and merit. The very fact that Madam Beritola’s behavior conforms outwardly to religious patterns should have made it seem all the more strikingly devoid of otherworldly references in the eyes of Boccaccio’s contemporaries.

If we look at this tale as a whole, we find a second breach of customary behavior when Madam Beritola’s son (whose presence in Currado’s household is unknown to her) falls passionately in love with his daughter and upon being discovered by him with her in an intimate act is nearly sentenced to death by Currado along with the daughter. His wife intercedes and the lovers are instead sentenced to perpetual confinement. When the son’s identity is discovered, Currado offers the young man his daughter’s hand in marriage. At
that point, this son of the mother who bestowed her maternal love upon animals defends himself to Currado with this appeal to nature:

    I loved your daughter, and I shall always love her, for I consider her
    worthy of my love; and if I acted with her in a manner which the ignorant
    consider to be dishonorable, I committed that sin which is always
    inseparable from youth, and should one wish to abolish that act, he must
    abolish youth as well, and if old men were to remember what they were
    when they were young and were they to measure the defects of others
    against their own and their own against others, it would not appear nearly
    so serious a sin as you and many others make it out to be—and I
    committed it as a friend and not as an enemy. (II.6.122)

Youth and love obey the laws of nature, not of social custom. Introspection and self-knowledge confirm that this is only natural and by no means a violation of what is good within the human world. A corollary point expressed in the last clause is that intentions, good or ill will, are what determine how such an act is to be assessed: Madam Beritola’s son thus did what he did with Currado’s daughter “as a friend and not as an enemy,” out of love and not out of hatred or disdain. The laws of nature and the human heart eclipse the laws of custom as well as their foundation in the divine commandments.

A similar contrast between the divine and the natural—one that is disturbing for different reasons—is found in the famous final tale of the peasant girl Griselda whose high-born husband tests her wifely submission by pretending to have their children killed, reporting invented complaints about her, counterfeiting papal divorce papers, driving her away in humiliation, and preparing to remarry. Having submitted to everything including
the simulated murder of her children, she is restored to her rightful place at his side. She has earned this by fulfilling her initial promise to live only for her husband’s happiness—as if contract agreements and a husband’s prerogatives were the supreme moral value.

As with Madam Beritola and Angela di Foligno, Griselda’s story resonates with the calamities God visits on Job or his testing of Abraham by commanding the sacrifice of his son Isaac. Throughout all her sorrows, Griselda never prays for or counts on divine intercession, not even for her infant children. She simply blesses them before handing them over to be murdered. The story places the prerogatives of the husband above every moral consideration. The narrator does not find his behavior praiseworthy in the least. He is not God. Yet Griselda is praised for submitting and placing his happiness above every personal and moral consideration. One wonders how Boccaccio’s contemporaries who praised Griselda’s conduct could have thought the life she gained was worth living. Madam Beritola was an undefeated partisan of her loved ones and unwavering affirmer of life. Griselda’s absolute submission is as morbidly passive as a living death.

What have we learned from *The Decameron* about approaches to reading the classics? In addition to examining the significance of the exceptional Madame Beritola, the comparison of stories is a text-based approach to interpretation which opens up new perspectives for us. The fact that *The Decameron* consists of one hundred framed tales encourages the approach of a precise inventoring of its contents. How many male, female, clerical, mercantile, aristocratic characters are either present or central? How do the stories break down in length? Where are certain themes or story types concentrated? With what sort of effect? What is the effect for example of the implicit criticism of established religion in the first stories of Day One? We can inventory the pivotal events,
the characterization and outcome of the stories. Exercises of this sort are not mechanical or mindless: they focus reader attention on the empirical basis of literary studies. Though the decimal number of Decameron tales might make them appear especially suitable for precise tallies and percentages, this is in fact arbitrary. The content of any other narrative can be analyzed no less precisely and with equally finite results.

After analyzing the Decameron tales, there is more than one way to compare and contrast them. We may take the tales as a convenient base for percentage tallies or view the hundred as a game board with dimensions of $10^2$. We can move across it, juxtaposing stories now this way and now that with different, but not subjective or arbitrary, results each time. For example, we can juxtapose the tale of Griselda with that of Federigo degli Alberighi (V.9), the selfless admirer of the haughty Monna Giovanna. He sacrifices everything for her love. At last, she comes to ask for the prized falcon which is the sole remaining joy of his life. Not knowing the reason for her visit and lacking a suitable meal for his visitor, he serves up his beloved falcon, thereby at last winning her cold heart. Juxtaposed with the male humility of Federigo, Griselda’s submissiveness looks less abjectly feminine and closer to the ideal of selfless love encouraged by Solomon for those who want to be loved. Compared with the other Solomonic option of wife-beating, the tale of Griselda merely substitutes the psychological torture for the physical. The fact that the stories of each Day are grouped together thematically or morally indicates that the author intended their comparison. Yet their many commonalities and differences defy any completely consistent categorization by Day.

The comparative approach may also juxtapose tales with the framing elements. If the tale of Griselda is compared with the plague and the response to it of the ten narrators,
a certain inability to respond to overwhelming tragedy shows up in the former as numbed submission and in the latter as implausible gaiety. Her abject submissiveness appears as unconvincing to us as the placid absorption of the ten story-tellers. Are we to believe that while the plague was killing those near and dear, these sensitive young people could have been so serenely unconcerned about their fate and that of family and friends? In different ways, the frivolity of the brigata and the catatonic passivity of Griselda try to find virtue in an incommensurate tragedy. To our mind both fail. But it is perhaps only the fault line of their failure that opens up the work to all the varieties of life.

The meaning of any work is appropriately framed and highlighted even by what we only now know. It is possible that the consensus in Boccaccio’s time regarded Griselda as a paragon of virtue. Nonetheless, we are not judging anachronistically or projecting arbitrarily in discerning something morbid, immoral, and life-denying in her indifference. To offer an analogy: no one in earlier times enjoyed the perspective of satellite photos or x-ray images. Yet all the things that can only now be discerned are not subjective amendments to what was visible back then. Love at the price of Griselda’s sacrifice is not reciprocal, and therefore not love in the fullest sense known to Boccaccio himself. Of course, there are limits to such comparisons. For example, in referring to Griselda as “masochistic,” Thomas Bergin makes an anachronistic judgment. Masochism is defined as seeking pleasure in pain. There is no hint of this in Griselda’s tale.

Nor is ambiguity per se subjective. There are objective grounds for agreeing with those who regard Boccaccio’s work as radically secularist; but there are also grounds for not doing so. Historians tell us that the aftermath of the plague saw a rising veneration of the saints as special helpers against it and other maladies. Boccaccio himself appears to
have later suffered a failure of nerve leading to his retraction of *The Decameron*. Aside from this, his work could only have represented a powerful assault on the false sanctity of medieval religion. For another reason too, *The Decameron* is open-ended, more question than answer. Since Boccaccio drew on and reworked various sources, his book speaks in multiple voices. Literature is polyvocal. In reconsidering its sources, it re-frames what it inherits and constitutes itself as a dialogue with its sources and with the world around it.

The *Decameron* has been compared to Voltaire’s *Candide*. Before turning to the later work, we need to consider how the tradition encompassing these two books evolved by reinterpreting biblical sources and responding to conflicts and scientific developments which led to the Enlightenment. We discussed the *Decameron* tale of Madam Beritola in detail and will do the same again with *Candide*. In conjunction with the next chapter, we will undertake an independent reading of a shorter narrative by Cervantes, *The Dialog of the Dogs*, and of some New Testament chapters.

**The Roots of our Literary Culture in the Renaissance and Reformation**

Boccaccio’s framing tale symbolizes the power of narration to defy death. Like Schnitzler’s Chinese prisoner who reads his novel while waiting to face the firing squad, or like the framing tale of the bride who forestalls her execution by telling stories in *The Arabian Nights*, the *Decameron* story-tellers set narration against death. A poor match, one would think. The fleeting ghosts of narrative lack physical durability or saving grace when set against metal weapons or stone burial artifacts. But because literary narratives and their traditions are more adaptive than material artifacts, they are resilient mainstays
of permanence. Literature is a self-perpetuating, self-modifying artifact that responds to internal and external changes, absorbing historical shocks and anchoring their impact in enduring narratives, values, and beliefs. The reverberations are discernible in culture, language, and thought and can be traced to the present.

As an international disaster, the plague was spread via trade routes to population centers. Boccaccio’s tales transcend the boundaries of countries and often occur in cities. Though cities were hardest hit, sparsely populated rural areas suffered too. When urban populations dwindled, grain prices fell. Peasants who could no longer sell their harvests fled to the cities where decimation concentrated wealth in the hands of the surviving few. Concentration of wealth and shortages or surpluses of labor stimulated innovation. The cities therefore profited even when they suffered. Bearing the brunt of the changes, they became the breeding grounds for two great cultural-literary renovations at the end of the Middle Ages: the Renaissance humanism which began in Boccaccio’s time and prepared the ground for the science and enlightenment of the coming centuries; and the Protestant Reformation which inaugurated its Lutheran phase only in 1517 but went on to dominate the post-medieval Age of Faith for a century and a half.

The impact of the catastrophic plague which coincided with Boccaccio’s burst of candor and skepticism contributed in some measure to a weakening of medieval authority and thus to the foundation of a modern intellectual culture. Even though few could read in the Middle Ages, it was widely accepted that ancient writings harbored the sources of religious and intellectual authority. Hence, when developments such as plague troubled a medieval tradition, how could its authority be restored but by purifying the wellsprings? A late-medieval quest for certainty nourished efforts to recover sources of knowledge and
faith found in the literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans and in Holy Scripture. The Reformation sought to restore and purify its biblical sources. Renaissance humanists not only recovered ancient writings but compared the knowledge gained from them with the evidence of nature and the senses. Critical interrogation of tradition by humanists and reformers contributed to the empirical foundations of modern science. Now no less than then, scholars and scientists retrace the humanists’ path from traditional authority to new knowledge by reviewing existing literature before undertaking original research. Literary studies are as evidence-based as biology or physics. Skepticism is inherent in a tradition that consciously reconsiders and recontextualizes its literary and intellectual sources.

Looking back at the long shadows cast by the catastrophe which saw Boccaccio’s *Decameron* emerge, we can speculate about the fault lines struck into the medieval order by a plague that punished the righteous and spared the wicked. Like the growth rings of a tree, literature lends a perceptible form to cultural evolution by recontextualizing what it inherits. The emerging skepticism of post-medieval centuries undermined authority and encouraged experiments in fields from industry to literature. Cervantes, an author tested by calamity, wrote the seminal novel of disillusionment in *Don Quixote*. In the circles of framing and framed tales (chivalric tales have been credited by a mad reader, ensconsed in a prosaic world, recounted by an ironic narrator, set before us by a playful author), the frames thoroughly suffuse the central plot and constitute it as the interplay of naive faith and brutal disenchantment. The madness of the protagonist is his belief that he is what he has read, as if nothing separated a story from its reception. A vividly realized contextual world delivers a brutal corrective. The clash between character and context generates the sublime humor and profound significance of the novel.
On a smaller scale, received material and framing context constitute the last story in Cervantes’ cycle of *Exemplary Novellas*, *The Dialog of the Dogs*. The conversation of two dogs is introduced in the penultimate tale as a manuscript available for reading. The situation of the dogs Cipio and Berganza is symbolic. After realizing one night that they have been inexplicably granted powers of speech, and hence of narration, they resolve to make full use of their gift while the magic lasts by reprising their life experiences.

The reader should approach *The Dialog of the Dogs* with some questions in mind. It was common in the Middle Ages to tell moralistic tales about animals in order to make a statement about human character: the cunning fox, the stupid donkey, the docile sheep. This made sense because human character was thought to be as unchanging in its patterns as animal behavior. How does Cervantes break with this tradition of the bestiary tale, and what does his departure from the tradition suggest about his view of human nature?

When Virgil framed the founding of Rome as a rebirth of Trojan civic courage, or Dante presented his journey through Hell as a tour guided by Virgil, the reader was expected to suspend disbelief. How naïve would the reader have to be to suppose that *The Dialog of the Dogs* really happened? How does this affect our understanding of what is narrated?

A picaresque narrative is a humorous and moralistic account of a servant of many masters. Cervantes renders the picaresque strangely meaningful by framing it as a dialog of two disillusioned canine friends of man, the archetypal servants who truly lead a dog’s life. Berganza has attached himself to a succession of masters whose cruelty and neglect have required him to chase the turning wheel of fortune. He recounts the wicked ways of the world. Obscure clues hint at the dogs’ true identity. Can they ever achieve human form? If so, when and how? Does humanity come from the fortunes of birth or does it
come from within, here the gift of narration and reflection? The reader should take note of the jokes, anecdotes, philosophical digressions, and discussions of style and rhetoric, and tabulate the rogues, fools, witches, misers, and corrupt officials whose immutable but varied character makes movement a precondition of scope. Even if character is invariant, powers of expression have been miraculously granted these humble but vigilant servants. In wagging their liberated tongues, the dogs defend the vernacular against the tyranny of Latin which excluded medieval lay folk from the discourse of the educated.

Just as Renaissance literature conferred powers of expression on literate dogs and lowly lay folk, the Reformation opened doors for the individual. Since, unlike medieval Catholicism, the Reformation preached salvation by faith alone, it concentrated the focus of faith in the purview of the individual who was less likely to trust or be disappointed by an institutional church. In the evolution of narrative, it is important that the Reformation translated the Bible and made it the arbiter of authority. Neither church nor pope nor the legends of the saints but Holy Scripture as interpreted by the individual was to be the sole arbiter of authority. I say was to be because people did not agree on how to interpret the Bible. The bitter fruits of disagreement included religious dogmatism, the persecution of heretics or witches, and genocidal religious wars.

The translated Bible was read by people of all classes. This encouraged popular literacy, influenced the character of the written language, and contributed both words and themes to a literature composed in the vernacular, in English, German, French, Spanish, or whichever tongue was spoken by the common people. The Middle Ages had produced plenty of religious narrative. But most writing was in Latin. The common people could rarely read their own language, let alone Latin. There were picture-book Bibles: Bibliae
*pauperum*, the Bibles of the poor. There was church art: statues, paintings, architecture, a
whole universe of symbols. The common folk would have known why a church was laid
out in the shape of a cross or that an eagle signified John the Evangelist, a dove the Holy
Spirit, an ox Luke, and a lion Mark. This church symbolism overlapped with the bestiary
tale’s notions of unchanging character. The people lived in a static magical world. They
knew that certain objects were associated with particular saints or that certain saints cured
diseases. If you had epilepsy, you had business with St. Valentine. If you were beset by
the limb-flailing affliction known as Vitus’s dance, you visited the shrine of St. Vitus just
as we would consult a psychiatrist or neurologist today. We are in no position to laugh at
their superstitions. We have plenty of our own. Our point is that the medieval religious
absorption in visual symbols was by nature more static than narrative.

With the arrival of the Protestant Reformation, people began to take charge of
their inner lives in new ways. Reading the Bible in their native language, they redirected
their devotion from images to the sacred word. In Schnitzler’s “Boxer Rebellion,” the
man who reads in the face of death acquires such a haunting presence that the officer is
driven to get him pardoned. Even if one thinks this unlikely, on the whole the power of
reading empowered the weak in some very dramatic ways. The early Reformation was a
popular upheaval fought beneath banners of truth with literacy as a weapon of choice for
all sides. Each side could point to the Bible and say: “Here I have truth directly from the
most sacred source. Kill me if you will, but I will obey nothing else.” Like the Chinese
prisoner, the newly literate people acquired a presence and authority that enabled them at
times to face down and defy every other power and precedent.
The most influential English translation was the King James Bible. Its words are remarkably good at intimating gestures and vivifying stories. Medieval art contemplated static images, but the Protestant Reformation was hostile to images. In the Bible, words do something other than visualizing. Words dramatize actions and gestures: gestures of accusing, beseeching, praying, bemoaning, despairing, and exulting. When Jesus hisses, “Get thee behind me Satan” (Lk 4:8), this evokes the equivalent of a wrenching exorcism. Listen to this sentence in which Jesus tells his apostles to stay on the move: “whatsoever house ye enter into, there abide, and thence depart” (Lk 9:4). Like a verbal rolling stone, it evokes what it says to do. The marriage injunction, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mt 19:6), joins in matrimony by opening up a chasm between the divine and human, warning against all violation. When performing a healing miracle for a woman’s daughter, Jesus pronounces, “Fear not: believe only, and she shall be made whole” (Lk 9:50). Notice the incantatory rhythm with its beats. The final beat carries over to a release from the bonds of illness and death: “Fear not: believe only, and she shall be made whole.” The Apostle Paul’s tortured reflection conjures up a writhing figure of moral agony when he confesses that in him “dwelleth no good thing”: “For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not that I do” (Rom 7:18-19). The paraphrase of Paul’s words in Dylan Thomas’ poetic refrain, “And death shall have no dominion,” (Rom 6:9), resounds like Verdi’s Requiem. Triumphing over death, the word asserts the very permanence it proclaims. Matthew, Romans, and First Corinthians can be recommended for sampling the poetic power of the King James Bible. Reading it, we are confronted as English-speakers with the heredity of our language and mentality.
Most certainly medieval Christians had also had their stories. The gates of heaven and hell stood wide open. Even the naive Tundal could tour the infernal world and come back to tell the tale. But with the Reformation’s watershed emphasis on the Bible, telling stories came to be less absorbed in seeing and more guided by the word. When the Bible was in everyone’s ear, the very words for things positioned them within larger narratives. As in Cervantes’ *Dialog of the Dogs*, talk of shepherding or flocks or of someone being a lost sheep called to mind biblical narratives. Witnessing the wickedness of the world in the shepherds who slaughter their own flocks, the dog Berganza gives voice to the vast discrepancy between what appears to be and what is: “who will put an end to this evil?” he ponders. “Who will have the power to persuade anyone that the defenders are on the offensive, that the sentries are sleeping … and that those who guard also kill?”

The lost sheep is also the Prodigal Son or Israel exiled in Egyptian darkness or the Pilgrims setting up a City on a Hill in New England. The lost sheep are all the offspring of Adam in need of salvation. The lost sheep is the single soul, the least in number and worthiness, to whom the greatest attention is devoted. Like the dove, this image passes through many reincarnations—even in a skeptical novel by Voltaire. The biblical word could set a machinery of narrative in motion. The least is greatest, the last shall be first; lordship is service; the humble are exalted and the mighty cast down. This became the animating spirit in countless narrative plots, and indeed in historical life itself, almost to the present. In the Civil War era, Americans still had the King James Bible in their ear. “A house divided cannot stand,” spoke Lincoln, from Lk 11:17. How did people take it? In the words of the King James Jesus: those with ears to hear heard.
Three exercises can be recommended for realizing the time-transcending power of
the literary word. First try reading it aloud. Choose a story by Bocaccio, a chapter from
*Don Quixote*, the beginning of Voltaire’s *Candide*, or some chapter of the Bible, first in a
contemporary translation and then in the King James. Read it consciously several times,
gradually overcoming the flatness of voice that results from habitual silent reading. As
you begin to inflect your voice, forcing yourself to speak out of character, as if you were
someone else, you will notice that you are reinforcing the authority of the text, giving it a
living voice, in a sense resurrecting it from the dead letter. When you read Cervantes or
Voltaire, you may notice that there is a tonal quality distinct from the solemnity of sacred
texts. It is analogous to a pitch-perfect voice in music. In reproducing this quality, you
approach the author by overcoming in yourself the indifference and incomprehension of
the world. There is something heroic and at the same time light-hearted in these pitch-
perfect voices that get it right as if nothing in the world could be easier. Giving voice to
literature, we begin to hear voices when we read silently. We gradually arrive at more
intimate terms with these voices than with those of our family ancestors.

Learning to hear voices and not just see words is one exercise. A second entails
learning to recognize the visual and sensory puzzles conveyed by words and reflecting on
the mystery of their origins. Many of our words derive from literature, Shakespeare, or
the Bible. Which of the following common expressions would you suspect are derived
from non-biblical sources and which are from the King James Bible: “once upon a time,”
“from time to time,” “by the skin of our teeth,” “to stand in awe,” to go “like a lamb to
the slaughter,” to be only “a drop in the bucket,” “to see the writing on the wall,” “to give
up the ghost,” to obey or resist “the powers that be,” or to see things as if “through a glass
darkly”? All except the first are from the King James Bible. These metaphors inform our narratives, confer gravity on speech, and bind us to a remote past without our being aware of it. A final exercise consists of seeking in words the mystical keys to the past.

We overestimate the significance of bloodlines and underestimate literature and language in searching for our roots. Words link us to the past in ways that family cannot. Having children late in life has extended generational memory in my family. I have been told regarding my great-grandfather Nathaniel that when his father died early, his mother indentured him and his brother for the duration of their youth, though a benevolent uncle wanted to teach him to practice law. Even in old age, Nathaniel visited a son born out of wedlock with a fellow indentured servant girl. I mentioned before that in the Civil War he served in the Union Army with his sons, one of whom soon perished. When his wife died of cholera, he went on leave from his regiment to obtain care for his young children by entering into an arranged marriage with a destitute war widow, Mary Eliza, who gave birth in 1867 to Howard, a grandfather who died before I was born. From these bits and pieces, I can surmise how unlike our time Nathaniel’s was. The loss of loved ones had to be taken in stride. Yet fathers might accompany sons into battle, just as generals died in front of the soldiers they led. The spirit of the age was grave and resolute.

But as with most unembellished family traditions, this is hearsay about remote and unfamiliar individuals who left few records of their thoughts and feelings. Why did Nathaniel’s mother indenture her sons whose grandfathers had fought in the Revolution? Did servitude and the lost birthright of freedom make Nathaniel skeptical of religion and opposed to slavery? Did his son’s death as a soldier reinforce his determination to fight on? Did war and the loss of loved ones urge him and his war bride to sow the seeds of a
new generation? One might suppose so, but these are suppositions drawn from narratives in the public domain. Without the thoughts, motives, emotions, and the spirit which was their life breath and historical atmosphere, the facts cannot breathe real life into a story.

In drawing on the narrative common domain, the fate of Madame Beritola and her sons offers an accessible and no less reliable paradigm of my roots in the past. A no less vital access to the spirit of Nathaniel’s age is the solemn fervor of the King James Bible, which I recall having had read to me during summer visits by a gentle grandmother, born in 1876. Its solemn diction informed public sentiment in the nineteenth century even for skeptics like Nathaniel or Lincoln. Words are shared by all. The latent record vested in them outlives the generational memory of any family. Ken Burns’ vivid documentary of the Civil War portrayed it less in the monochrome of its images than in the bold colors of its words. Because of the power of words, my kinship with Tolstoy is more vital and real than with his obscure contemporary Nathaniel. Words are mystical keys to the past.

In the Civil War, the imagery of the King James Bible was adapted in the Union’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which sang of the ”grapes of wrath,” based on Jeremiah 25:30 (“The Lord shall roar from on high, and utter his voice from his holy habitation; he shall give a shout, as they that tread the grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth”), and Revelation 14:18-19 (“Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth…. and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God”). With this, the biblical word took a sharp turn toward the drastic and visual, with bloody consequences. We can imagine what those terrible words might have meant to Union soldiers as they stormed into battle (“The Lord shall roar from on high”), or charged with their bayonets (“Thrust in thy sharp sickle”), or saw men mowed down like clusters of grapes swept off
a vine ("gather in the clusters of the vine"). If we think about the color of grapes and the action of the winepress, we can imagine what the "great winepress of the wrath of God" might have meant to those who sang the song and reaped the carnage.

But why did John Steinbeck choose "The Grapes of Wrath" as the title for his famous novel about the plight of the poor in the 1930s, in the Dust Bowl exodus from Oklahoma to California? In his case, the grapes of wrath had nothing to do with blood and bayonets. The motivating power of those words is not bound to the image of the sickle or grapes. Their power is not bound to images at all. Not all civil conflicts involve guns and bloodshed. Not every day of reckoning comes with cannon fire and flags. Nor is slavery the only form of oppression. The song of martyrdom which we were taught in school ends with the words: "His truth goes marching on." Steinbeck had ears to hear.

But, alas, our heritage of words and narratives is as ambivalent as our endowment of genes. Consider the impact of the frequently heard reference to "putting our soldiers in harm’s way." This old-fashioned phrase makes unjustified war sound like a hallowed American tradition. Or consider the parables of Jesus. Their sparseness of detail renders their implication universal. Take the parable from Mark 12 about the man who "planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for a winepress, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to his tenants and went to another country." What is the man’s name? Why does he leave his country? None of this matters. In fact, adding details would make the parable mean less rather than more. It is an important principle of narrative economy that less detail may yield more significance. People who say less but say sensible things can exert more authority than those who talk too much. The man in the parable sends a slave to collect his share of the harvest. The tenants beat him up. He sends another slave. The
tenants kill him. He sends many others. The tenants reject them all. What is this story about?

Finally, the man sends his son, thinking that the tenants will respect him. This seems unlikely. We are dealing after all with serial killers. But that is a psychological consideration. The narrative logic of the parable has nothing to do with psychology, no more than the narrative logic of the story of Noah and the Flood, or of The Dialog of the Dogs had anything to do with natural history. Not surprisingly, the tenants also kill the son. Who is the son? Jesus concludes his parable by predicting the man will come back and destroy the tenants. What does this mean? What did it mean that the man planted the vineyard? And who were the slaves? Much of the biblical narrative is encompassed implicitly in this one parable. With few details, it can absorb everything: the teller of the tale, the listeners, everything in the world, the creation of the world, a future yet to come. Perhaps the downfall of God’s chosen people. Perhaps the end of the world. The parable presents something strange. The reader makes it into something familiar. It refers to our familiar world. This makes the familiar world appear strange indeed.

The man planting the vineyard was God creating the world. The tenants are the human beings who are disobedient and wicked. The slaves sent by the man are prophets of Israel. They were treated badly. The son is Jesus himself. The parable anticipates the crucifixion of Jesus: the tenants kill the son. When the man comes back and destroys the wicked tenants, this presumably refers to the downfall of the Jewish people or even to the destruction of the world. The teller of the tale is revealed as central to its meaning. The listeners are implicated too. Evidently what is happening even now has been anticipated. Foreboding and self-fulfillment give this parable its powerful narrative authority.
Prophetic fulfillment is the source of the authority claimed by Jesus. There are no other proofs of the kind we require for deciding if a report is true. Even the most zealous Christian fundamentalists, if not on the defensive, might not claim otherwise. What else could there be? Is Jesus’ authority dependent on his performance of miracles? Simon Magus in Acts 8 is a sorcerer who also works wonders. The Antichrist in the Apocalypse performs miracles. The authority of any miracle or any recounting of a miracle depends upon the authority of the narrator. When creationists demand that bible-based theories be taught in schools, scientists counter that this ignores the findings of science. They might equally well respond that biblical authority presents itself as narrative authority.

The prophetic authority voiced by Jesus and his disciples pulls the listener or reader into the story. Beneath the outer appearances, the world is a cosmic crime scene investigation, a murderous struggle between God and the devil, God and the wicked world of which we are a part. The drama of the world is approaching its climax. All must choose sides, take up arms, and prepare to do battle. The parable from Mark 12 is apocalyptic, like the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation which is concerned with the struggle of Christ and Antichrist at the end of time. In the Age of Faith, this sort of apocalyptic authority contributed to genocidal confessional wars in several European countries. The bloodiest was the Thirty Years’ War in Germany which caused the death of a sizable portion of the German population. Hitler’s Holocaust and his genocidal war and Stalin’s Gulag may have killed more innocent people; but Hitler murdered people in the name of a racist ideology, not in the name of Jesus. The genocidal attempt to kill an entire people enters a new magnitude and category of evil. But murder in the name of the most sacred beliefs of a society falls in a special category of its own. Not only the killers
but their beliefs are discredited. We are more shocked when a judge murders than when a common criminal does so and more disturbed when those who claim to be the agents of progress commit torture than when those who look backward do so. The religious wars of the Age of Faith opened the way for the cultural sea change of the Enlightenment.

Modern biblical scholarship suggests that Jesus may have thought that the end of time and the apocalyptic kingdom of God would arrive already in the lifetime of his own disciples—in a matter of years. The Age of Faith saw bloody wars and rebellions fought by Christians who believed that they were living at the end of time and that their enemies were Antichrist. In the Middle Ages, oppressed folk were inspired to rise up by the Book of Revelation. But the apocalyptic scenario has been used for vicious purposes. Mark 12 can be cited against the Jews. We mentioned that Adolf Hitler’s “Third Reich” drew on the apocalyptic scenario from Revelation. The borrowed scenario of the Third Reich told people that, contrary to common sense and against all the evidence that humans are much the same, the world is in reality a battleground of absolute Good and Evil, and that fellow citizens, not beholden to the same faith-based authority, are appearances notwithstanding veritable embodiments of Evil. Few narratives have captivated so many people, and with such horrendous results, as the apocalyptic scenario. Yet looking closer to home where all criticism of this kind should begin, millions are still buying a popularized version of the apocalyptic scenario with the Left Behind books and films. Apocalyptic narratives are a force today among militant Shiites and Jewish West Bank settlers. We do not know yet whether this phenomenon entails the dilution of an old poison to a harmless stimulant, or whether a credulous public will crave doses that prove lethal to all.
The apocalyptic scenario of cosmic manichean violence reinvents itself again and again out of the raw materials of conflict and collective self-righteousness. The presence of these elements in American culture explains why our tolerance for violence has been so much greater than for certain kinds of sexuality or human diversity, or greater than for the moral varieties of good and bad, noble and base, strong and weak that are rooted in a nature we share with animals, a nature we cannot transcend without acknowledging it for what it is. With its wisdom in acknowledging what we are as human beings, in accepting that human life creates its own rules, and in appreciating that “it takes all kinds” to make a human world, the Decameron is an early, imperfect but heartening, actualization of the capacity for human naturalism and diversity. In his age of manichean and apocalyptic scenarios, when God was thought to be threatening sinful humankind with destruction, and Jews were scapegoated and persecuted as disseminators of the plague, Boccaccio’s Decameron was in its underlying tendency and spirit an anti-apocalyptic work. It lays out before us the broad spectrum of human being and behavior. It questions the earthly embodiment of judgment—the sanctified Church—and refuses to exclude or take sides against those considered outside the closed community of Christendom.

Once we have read them, the voices we hear in the Bible or in Boccaccio remain audible in the echo chambers of our life experience. Because we read by recognizing the familiar in the strange and vice versa, literature converses both with its sources and with the historical worlds it echoes and reflects. Like the proof of the pudding which is in the eating, the meaning of literature comes in the reading. In responding to all that we know as readers, literature involves us in a mystical dialog that transcends the ages.
I believe that in the study of literature we can look forward by looking backward. Many students of literature of my generation have been drawn to modern literature and to literary theory as the most advanced approaches to our discipline. I have been pulled in the opposite direction: to literature as an access to the past. Overemphasis of the modern and the secular engenders illusions analogous to fundamentalist creationism. Creationists deny that we evolved from prehuman forms, and rigid secularists that our culture evolved from religious precursors. Our culture, no less than our species, evolved from an earlier, pre-secular stage without losing the inherited proclivities of its descent. Recognizing our archaic heritage makes it possible for us to rise above it. America contrasts with Europe: we ignore history and worship its idol as myth, whereas a peaceful, secularist, and socially-minded Europe only came into being to the extent that Europeans recognized the horrors and ambiguities of their past. The successful emancipation of Europeans from their most destructive myths came about through their recurrent confrontation with cataclysms from the Black Death to the Holocaust. The trajectory of these confrontations can be traced in the history of European literature from which we too can learn.

**From Faith to Reason: Swift and Lessing**

Before discussing Voltaire’s *Candide*, we need to reconsider the broad currents of thought and imagination discussed in the last chapter. We talked about two currents that acquired force in the later Middle Ages: one was associated with Renaissance Humanism and the other with the Reformation. We suggested that the former developed toward our
secular literature and science, while the latter continued to evolve in Christian theology. We said that these two currents were destined to clash. But we also observed that their relation was and is quite complex. This same complexity characterizes the relations of sacred and secular literary traditions. Their intertwined complexities can be brought into focus by considering two literary examples.

The Anglo-Irish Jonathan Swift and the German Gotthold Ephraim Lessing were both authors of the eighteenth century who lived and wrote approximately four centuries after Boccaccio. Yet both recollected the third tale of the First Day of his Decameron, the tale of the three sons of a loving father and their identical but contested heritage. In Swift’s version (The Tale of the Tub), what is inherited symbolizes a simple Christianity which the three sons embellish and falsify. Swift’s interpretation is more conservative than Lessing’s with respect to the authority of tradition, and it exemplifies a pessimistic side of the Enlightenment that highlights the evils of the world. Like Lessing, he had one foot in theology (he held a doctorate of divinity) and another in literature (the debates of those who venerated ancient literary models with the literary modernizers engaged him). Moreover, Swift was familiar with the new philosophical understanding of the human dualism of body and mind and with the philosophical principle of relativism which holds that our qualities are relative to human perspective: the great, good, or beautiful depend on our point of view. His work manifests the diverse tendencies of Christian pessimism, literary traditionalism, and philosophical rationalism and relativism. These are criteria we should bear in mind in considering a representative passage from his work.

Everyone has heard of Gulliver’s Travels. The fact that this book is framed as a travel narrative signals its intended relevance to the real or physical world in which we
live. Gulliver travels to remote places. In one land, he is captured by the tiny people of Lilliput. The Lilliputians are people like us only the size of our thumb. Gulliver enjoys a bird’s eye view of their cities and society. Another land is called Brobdingnag. Here the people are again like us but they are as gigantic as church steeples, so big in fact that they can carry Gulliver in the palm of a hand.

A Brobdingnagian giant named Glumdalclitch is assigned to look after Gulliver. Glumdalclitch takes Gulliver to the royal court where they visit the royal maids of honor. The maids are as beautiful and well-proportioned as any women could be. They are also gigantic. Although they grow fond of Gulliver, he is not comfortable with their attention. Here is what Gulliver reports about them:

That which gave me most uneasiness among these maids of honor, when my nurse carried me to visit them, was to see them use me without any manner of ceremony, like a creature who had no sort of consequence. For they would strip themselves to the skin, and put on their smocks in my presence, while I was placed ... directly before their naked bodies: which, I am sure to me was very far from being a tempting sight, or from giving me any other emotions than those of horror and disgust. Their skins appeared so coarse and uneven, so variously colored when I saw them near, with a mole here and there as broad as a trencher, and hairs hanging from it thicker than packthreads; to say nothing further concerning the rest of their persons. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), p. 76.

When the maids of honor take a fancy to Gulliver, they strip his tiny body naked and perch him on their breasts. He is repulsed by the sight of their nipples. He complains
about their smell. It is not that these maidens are unbathed or in any way ill-formed or
that Gulliver is necessarily insensitive to female charms. It is simply that their normal
odor and natural texture are magnified for him a hundredfold. Regarded this way, these
adorable young ladies in their unadorned glory are repulsive.

How can we interpret this passage? Here are four suggestions:

1. Because of his Christian religious upbringing and theological calling, the author
has a secret revulsion for the flesh as sinful.

2. The fact that Swift is living in an age of scientific discoveries, promoted by
technological advances such as the microscope, has taught him that even things
intimately known to us such as our skin are not necessarily as they appear.

3. Because the author is living in an age of philosophical enlightenment, he knows
that every value, good or bad, is relative, dependent not only on one’s culture, but
also on one’s proximity to things.

4. The author specifically reminds us that pleasure or desire are so subjective and
dependent upon our relationship to the desired object as to be almost an illusion.

There are no doubt other ways of interpreting Gulliver’s encounter with the giant
maidens, but let’s discuss these four. A case can be made for each of the options. Swift
was indeed a Christian and his Christianity may have encouraged a certain misanthropy, a
negative and pessimistic judgment of human nature: the flesh is foul. And yet there have
been many Christians but only one Swift. This approach has a whiff of the Easter Bunny
School about it. It suggests that we have to get out our shovels and dig up some long lost
personal secret. There must have been some deep dark secret of a sexual nature in his
formative phase: he is eternally reliving it by narrating to the world how perfectly horrid
those female fleshpots are. Even if such a thing happened, this reading would make little
sense to me. To read this passage as if Swift were working out his personal shame is like
imagining that the batter is swinging at the baseball because he has something against it
personally. The interpretation overlooks the subtle framing factors of the narrative that
require the author to play by its rules.

As for Christianity, the flesh which it rejects, the flesh the Apostle Paul reviled, has nothing to do with dermatology. Flesh in the Christian sense is not skin, not naked
breasts or buttocks. Flesh is the opposite of spirit. However, flesh in the above passage
by Swift is indeed skin. Take a closer look at your exposed forearm and you will get the
idea. Flesh is the human body viewed on a colossal scale. We could download an image
from the internet and magnify it to get this same effect.

The second option offers some advantages over the first. Swift’s way of looking
at the human body indeed owes something to the rise of science and technology, to the
science of anatomy with its ability to dissect things and to the precise magnification of
things by microscope. Before Gulliver there had been plenty of giants in myth, literature,
and the Bible, but without magnifying normal human beings the way Swift does. Giants
had been question marks about the human being, embodying the mystery of our nature
writ large. In the French Renaissance novel of Gargantua and Pantagruel by François
Rabelais, the main characters are good-natured giants. Pantagruel goes to Paris to be a
student. He urinates from the tower of Notre Dame Cathedral and thousands of Parisians
drown in the flood. Doing common things on a vast scale draws attention to the body in
teasing ways. The author offers a long disquisition on the relative merits of all sorts of
things a giant might use to wipe his vast behind with. The narrator tricks even those who
despise toilet humor into considering what might be of use for this problem. But Swift’s Brobdingnagians are gigantic in a different way. Instead of monstrous, they are simply a much larger version of us. The microscope, not the myth, is the model for their fantastic. The magnification of natural things reveals the true wonders of this world, not legendary lore or miracle. But can this really be the entire point Swift is making? If so, its meaning would also soon be exhausted.

Not so with the third interpretation: *Gulliver* recognizes good and bad as relative or dependent upon who, where, what, and how big we are. The royal maids are supposed to be beautiful. Are they really? It depends on our point of view. From Gulliver’s tiny point of view, no. From the point of view of Brobdingnagian men, yes. Swift lived in an age of worldwide exploration. New cultures were being discovered. Educated people were becoming aware that what was valued in Europe might not be attractive elsewhere. The nature of good or bad depends on the culture of a society. This is underscored in a direct way by Gulliver’s encounters with the tiny Lilliputians and giant Brobdingnagians.

The fourth interpretation has advantages too. The author reminds us that pleasure or desire are so subjective and dependent on our relationship to their object that one could almost call them an illusion. Almost but not quite. Our attraction to people or things depends on our relation to them. It can change from one hour to the next. But anyone experiencing a strong attraction knows that it is real enough. Still, it is helpful to know that the power the desired object exercises over us is not in the object itself but in our relationship to it. Our degree of attractiveness is not fixed and objective like eye color or height. It depends on relationships. Less accustomed to thinking of themselves as fixed
entities, children are more aware of this relativity than adults. Adults tower over children like the Brobdingagians over Gulliver; and children change in appearance rapidly.

We could argue at length about which of these interpretations is best, and there are other possibilities as well. But we need to go back to what is fixed and ever-present: the text itself and the universal oppositions that operate in it. We said that narrative is sustained by the opposite polarities of the familiar and the strange, like an electric charge that flows, builds up, or flashes between these poles. Here we have a simple form of the tension between the familiar and the strange. The Brobdingnagian maidens are like us, only gigantic. We are like Gulliver, except that we encounter humans on our scale. In his encounter, we see how complicated the chemistry of like and unlike is, a complexity that coincides with the shifting polarities of our relations with other people. The author takes the familiar, the maidens built like us, and increases it a hundredfold to bring out the strangeness of the familiar, which is nothing more nor less than our own strangeness.

We should take an especially close look at what is happening in this encounter. Whether you look at human beings up close or at a distance, they are what they are. It is not human nature that is transformed. What is laid bare is the human ideal or appearance of beauty. Stripped of appearances, flesh is simply flesh. Not only the Brobdingnagian maidens and Gulliver are stripped. Human ideals and illusions are stripped bare here and exposed in their naked reality. Much post-medieval or modern literature confronts ideals with realities, but this can be done in many ways. Instead of magnifying the human body or placing it in a strange setting, literature takes ideals or beliefs, magnifies them, and sets them against everyday realities. The procedure is akin to the experimental science which was gradually coming to prominence at the same time. The meeting of the strange with
the familiar is the essence of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, sometimes characterized as the first or first modern novel. Don Quixote falls for the ideals of chivalry. Everyone knows how he travels around post-medieval Spain, fighting duels with windmills which are giants to him. His novella *The Dialogue of the Dogs* is even more radical, framing the world in the perspective of a dog who gasps: “I was shocked and amazed to see that the shepherds were the wolves and the very people who were supposed to be guarding the flock were tearing it to pieces” (259).

The possibilities for combining the strange with the familiar are infinite. Normal characters can be thrust into abnormal circumstances by an exceptional stroke of chance or misfortune. This brings out the hidden character of an individual, a type, a people, or society. Robinson Crusoe is a normal enough fellow, but he is shipwrecked on a desert island. The question how he would fare without the social and cultural support systems considered vital for human beings makes for an experiment of thought and imagination. Narrative subjects that never leave home can be isolated like animals in an experiment by inventing quirky narrative circumstances for them.

Aspects of human character can be carried to the extreme in order to spin out their consequences. Carry chivalric idealism to the extreme and you have Don Quixote. Carry the quest for knowledge to the extreme and you have a Dr. Faustus, who makes a bargain with the devil to discover ultimate secrets. Extreme sloth is Goncharov’s Oblomov, who takes 100 pages to get up off the couch he is lying on as the novel begins. Take a well-known story or theme from earlier times and dress it up in contemporary clothes. If the clothes fit, we learn something both about the theme and the contours of contemporary life. Turn Odysseus into a modern common man and you have James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. 
His day-long journey through Dublin from work to pub to his unfaithful wife is a modern embodiment of Homer’s tale. Epic heroism is no longer possible under modern everyday conditions, but if our everyday life is delved in all its depths in language, it is always full of risk and adventure. All literature is realism by default. There is simply nothing else it can reflect but reality. The question is only which kind, how, and to what purpose.

The author proceeds like the scientist in formulating hypotheses and then devising experiments or spinning out computer simulations. Students learn in school about the so-called “omniscient narrator.” The omniscient narrator is no more all-knowing than the scientist who formulates a hypothesis which is fleshed out with data generated by means of simulation or obtained by experimentation. Given a certain set of premises laid out in the narration, most commonly near the beginning, a development of a certain kind either follows convincingly, revealing its inner necessity, or does not, urging us to reflect on it.

The author or narrator starts with circumstances which we know or can imagine and then reveals how they bear unexpected consequences or how the expected ones come about in a way that is fascinating to follow. What we practice as readers is something we all commonly do throughout life. If I make a choice, what are the consequences? When we follow the news about current developments, we extend such reflections to the world as a whole. Given a, b, or c, what follows? If we are stuck with x, y, or z, how did we get there? Perceptive reading means looking at life with open eyes, ears, and mind.

The German Enlightenment author Gotthold Ephraim Lessing provides a second example of new approaches to narrative. Though the examples I will cite are drawn from a play and an essay, they are both continuous with previously discussed narratives. Spirit
rather than body is reinterpreted broadly by Lessing. He gives us a more positive and spiritual side of the Enlightenment. His reinterpretation of narrative sources indicates how a theme of biblical or theological origin was secularized and made part of what is referred to these days as a historical “master narrative.”

Lessing also takes us back to Boccaccio’s tale of the Jew Melchisedech and the Saracen ruler Saladin who sets out to entrap the Jew by demanding that he tell which of the three “laws,” Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, is the true one (I.3). Melchisedech, we recall, must either deny his own faith or denigrate Islam. Either way he is in trouble. But Melchisedech is clever. The narrator refers to him as “avaricious” because “the Jew” does not want to accept the terms imposed upon him by Saladin (as if the merchant class to which Boccaccio belonged would have reacted any other way). The narrator admits that he “really was a wise man.” For in response to Saladin’s entrapping question, Melchisedech tells the story of a father who loves three sons equally and cannot decide which should inherit the ring that qualifies its possessor as the heir and head of the family. In the end, the father has two identical rings made. He gives each son a ring and dies. After his death, there is no way of deciding which of the three is the original ring. Melchisedech tells this story, demonstrating that some issues cannot be resolved. Saladin admires his cleverness and embraces him as a friend. Boccaccio’s tale celebrates the ingenuity of an underdog but attaches only passing importance to the ring itself.

Around the time of the American Revolution, Lessing realized that Boccaccio’s tale within a tale had the makings of a parable, a story with a deeper meaning. Lessing was critical of religious dogmatism and intolerance, but he was a man trained in theology and biblical studies. In Germany, theology and exegesis had achieved a high level of
scholarship, with important results for the study of literature and art as well. Significant principles emerged in the tradition of biblical scholarship which were applied before long to secular texts. Biblical exegesis was keenly aware of the tension between recognizing the literal meaning of texts, thereby excluding the contrived allegorical construal, and the necessity of going beyond an authoritarian, dogmatic literalism. In the case of parables, literalism was always inadequate. As Paul says: “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.”

Originally applied to biblical exegesis, hermeneutics developed into the discipline of literary interpretation. One of its principles is that the part must be interpreted with reference to the whole. Jesus’ parable of the man who leaves a vineyard in the hands of his dishonest and murderous tenants is thus more than a story about betrayal and murder. It contains ultimate doctrines of Christianity concerning the fall of humankind, the birth and crucifixion of the Son of God, and the return of the Messiah. The parable is only a minute part of the Bible, yet it must be understood with reference to the whole, which, in its own peculiar sense, it encompasses in microcosm. The same applies to the parable of the Prodigal Son. The wayward son stands for all the offspring of Adam who have gone astray but are welcomed home by their father. This can be interpreted as an epitome of the Christian Bible. A plausible corollary of the rule of interpreting the part as symbolic of the whole might also interpret the resentful older brother as the dead letter of Scripture. The resentful older brother obeys law-like rules and resents his wayward younger brother for getting off easy. The father does not insist on the dead letter of rules, but follows the life-giving spirit of his love.
Trained in such disciplines, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing recognized that there was more to the story of the ring than Boccaccio’s narrator had gotten out of it. The riddle of the three rings had a symbolic depth. In parables, a father must be more than a father and a son more than a son, and a ring therefore more than a ring. In Lessing’s interpretation, it represents the covenant given to each of the three religions. Since Boccaccio’s father of three sons loved each one equally, he had matching rings crafted. This aspect of the parable might not appear to transfer very well. Sacred books, religions, and covenants are distinguishable. Yet their sacred *claim to authority* is inevitably historical, and hence after the fact unprovable since historical knowledge can have no access to revealed truth. The heirs living in the later age can therefore no more test the claim of authority than the three sons in the parable could hope to determine which ring was the original. About this Lessing was logical and consistent.

The three sons quarrel. What does this represent if not religious war, persecution, and hatred? The three sons consult a judge—an arbiter who stands above their dispute. He reminds them that the original ring had a purpose and meaning. It was supposed to make its bearer pleasing in the sight of God. It was out of love that the father gave one ring to each son. If the sons want to verify that their ring is the true one, they have to be true to its meaning—thus, not to the dead letter of scripture or covenant, but to its living spirit. Therefore they should stop quarreling and instead compete with one another to let the power of the love invested in the ring take full effect. They can only verify their ring as the true one by being true to its spirit: “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.”

Lessing’s parable of the ring is in his drama *Nathan the Wise*. The Jew, Nathan, is a wise man who has suffered during the Crusades but teaches the noble Saladin and a
fanatical Christian crusader about the true meaning of faith. The parable is a tale within a play. It reinterprets Boccaccio’s story and in so doing recognizes the deeper meaning of any sacred text, the Hebrew or Christian Bible or the Koran, as in essence a conferral of grace and authority on the believer.

In reference to the Christian Bible, the parable also reinterprets Christian theology in the context of the Enlightenment. Mysteriously enough, Christians believe that God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How might this peculiar doctrine be interpreted as an embodiment of the entire Bible? To Christians the Father is clearly revealed in the Old Testament and the Son in the Gospels. But the Holy Spirit has always been difficult. The Father can be pictured as a white-bearded old man, the son as a pure and virile youth. Based on biblical sources, the Holy Spirit can be pictured as a dove, an image we have seen before, or as a flame, one we will see again later. But how helpful is this really? A great many people have never had a clear idea of what the Holy Spirit is supposed to be.

Again, the dynamic of interpretation came to the rescue. Just as the Father was revealed in the pre-Gospel Bible with its ten supreme commandments, the hidden spirit of the revelation of the Father is in turn revealed in the Son’s message of love and grace. The Spirit makes an appearance in Acts 2, in association with a mysterious and prophetic speaking in tongues. On the one hand, this points toward the end of time, the apocalyptic conclusion of biblical narrative. On the other—more concretely and more intelligibly in human terms—the attendant “wonders and signs,” performed by the Apostles in Acts 2, are embodied in the Apostles’ equality of community: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). Exegesis could thus go at least two
ways: on the one hand apocalyptic destruction, on the other equality and good will to all. Lessing leaned toward the latter: the meaning of the Spirit will be revealed in and through a coming age when we do what is good, not out of fear of punishment nor longing for the rewards promised by Christ, but simply because it is good.

Lessing was aware that his interpretation was part of a tradition addressed to this very issue. From the Middle Ages on, there had been the influential theory that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit correlated with the three great ages of the world. The Age of the Father had extended from the creation of the world to the birth of Christ. The Age of the Son lasted from then onward for an equal number of years. The ultimate Age of the Holy Spirit was only on the verge of beginning: it would not only vanquish the Antichrist who ruled the world and transform the lives of people, making them freer and better.

Lessing reinterpreted this medieval scheme of history from the vantage of the Enlightenment. In the Age of the Father, the Jews as God’s chosen people were educated like unruly children who required laws and constant harsh discipline. These were meted out to them by the prophets of God and in harsh punishments inflicted on the Israelites. In the Age of the Son, that is, after the birth of Christ, people were to have matured to a more inner-directed morality with the delayed reward of eternal life now in mind. During the final age, the Age of the Spirit, people would at last learn to do good as an end in itself, no longer for rewards or from fear of punishment.

To Lessing, the age of the Spirit was the true enlightenment. You can see from this how the Age of Reason learned from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as well as from the Age of Faith that had led to apocalyptic religious wars and persecutions of non-believers. In reinterpreting the centrally important Christian doctrine of the Trinity,
Lessing not only recovered the biblical whole within the part, he not only reconfirmed, in his sense, the principle that the letter is dead while the spirit gives life; he transformed biblical exegesis into a theory of history. Moreover, by integrating his interpretation into the philosophical understanding of the meaning of history, he helped condition one of the most compelling of the so-called “master narratives”: the perspective in accordance with which human history evolves toward a final state of resolution, an end of history, when all the conflicts and brutal excesses of the past are transcended and overcome. Lessing embodies for us the positive and optimistic aspects of the Enlightenment. These aspects inherit and reinterpret from previous ages themes drawn from literature, theology, and philosophy. In the examples cited, Lessing provides a deeply humanistic interpretation of one of the most abstract, theological, recondite, and elusive of themes. The theme of the spirit ranges from psychology as the study of the soul to theology at its most mystical.

Next we will consider how Voltaire’s Candide sets up an experiment that reflects about history. Experimental science might evaluate beliefs by selecting a hypothesis and isolating an experimental subject which is exposed to an unusual amount of the variable to be evaluated. Voltaire chose a hypothesis from the optimistic thought of the German Enlightenment of an earlier generation: the thesis of the German philosopher Leibniz that our world has been fashioned by God as “the best of all possible worlds.” As a narrative experiment, Voltaire’s Candide exposes this hypothesis to the most massive doses of evil his mid 18th-century world had in store. The reader might notice that certain elements reminiscent of the Decameron are present in Candide. There is the natural and human catastrophe that tests or challenges the validity of sacred beliefs and institutions. There is
the destruction of illusions. And there is the human community that holds out a qualified hope: in the society of the ten in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* or that at the end of *Candide*.

But in Voltaire’s short novel, the narrative results to be evaluated emerge from an integrally constructed plot rather than from the successive voices and perspectives of 100 encapsulated tales; and there is one central subject perfectly designed for his experiment. Little Gulliver was small because the Brobdingnagians were large. The subject and the external world were thus constituted with respect to one another—as inverse sides of the same coin. If Don Quixote is idealistic, the world he faces is realistic in a sense which is the inverse of his chivalric idealism. If Candide’s illusions are not those of Don Quixote, what are they? What does his naiveté have in common with a naive chivalrous idealism?

In considering the Bible or Homer, we looked for the whole implicit within the part. In reading *Candide*, we should modify this orientation and look for encapsulations of traditional narratives within our exposition. We should notice episodes that recall the Bible or the *Decameron*. Like Augustine’s *Confessions*, *Candide* contains its own story problem of ideas, analogous to a math equation. We can work through it by comparing the harm inflicted by nature with that inflicted by human beings. Voltaire’s humans at times collaborate with nature in wreaking murder and mayhem. What motivates them to reinforce nature to render the toll of human suffering unnaturally awful? Nemesis was the Greek goddess of retribution and punishment. In popular parlance, our nemesis is what we have coming. Is Pangloss’ fate at the hands of the Inquisition his nemesis? Do his ideals encourage the negative synergy of human and natural evils? Is the optimistic philosopher in some sense part of the problem of a messy and miserable world?
Voltaire and the Enlightenment

We should recapitulate. In rough outline, the extended Middle Ages can be said to have lasted from the end of the Western Roman Empire to the time of Columbus and Luther (500-1500). This was followed by the Reformation and by a century of religious warfare: by an Age of Faith (1500-1650) which, depending on how one sees it, ended or extended the Middle Ages. After this came the Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason. It persisted, some say, from 1650 to around 1800. But there is an alternate way of encompassing the sweep of history: in the century or two before 1500, the Renaissance and its Humanism gradually ascended and ultimately blossomed into the Enlightenment.

We can imagine the sweep of history either as a rising arc or as the swinging of a pendulum back and forth between the poles of subjectivity (the inner reality of faith or imagination) and objectivity (the external reality of sources, science, reason, or realism). The tendencies overlap or run parallel to one another. Yet a kind of alternating variation may indeed occur to the extent that the most original minds, the most far-sighted authors, and their most perceptive readers, often reacted against the excesses and mindlessness of the prevailing tendency. For example, the catastrophic religious wars of the Age of Faith assuredly must have made people more receptive to the authority of human reason, just as the emotional sterility of Rationalism made them receptive to the creative imagination of Romanticism when it began to react against the Enlightenment toward 1800.

As a champion of the Enlightenment, Voltaire reacted against the abuses of the Age of Faith. For a variety of reasons, the Enlightenment gained a new confidence in
science and rational thought. The bubonic plague epidemics that had been devastating the world since the mid-fourteenth century subsided. There were new advances in the sciences, learning, and exploration. These things gave people a new confidence that life could be governed by rational thought and active human initiative. Enlightened people looked back with horror at the brutality and superstition of previous centuries.

Voltaire was not only a writer, he was an engaged public figure. One of his most important actions, the one of greatest relevance to us here, was his famous campaign to rehabilitate the victim of a judicial murder. A French Protestant, Jean Calas, had been tortured and executed after being wrongly convicted of murdering his son to prevent his conversion to Roman Catholicism. As a blow struck for religious tolerance, Voltaire’s defense of Calas ranks with Lessing’s inspired efforts.

Voltaire was a Deist. He believed that the world had been created by God, but he rejected all miracles, the virgin birth, and the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus. The skeptical Deism of the Enlightenment was widespread in eighteenth-century Europe and an influential tendency among some of the Founding Fathers in revolutionary America. It is known that the Deist Thomas Jefferson edited the Gospels to eliminate everything miraculous. But Voltaire’s criticism of institutional and dogmatic Christianity earned him a special and enduring hatred in Christian lore, and it persists to this day even among Protestants. The intensity of this hatred has much to do with the shock he inflicted on the authority of a religion which defined itself then as now by its humble identification with a persecuted Savior. Voltaire’s transgression lay in his selfless and courageous defense of persecuted Christians from their Christian persecutors, even as he held Christianity itself
in contempt. When the wolf takes it upon itself to defend the sheep from the shepherds, pastoral authority suffers an unbearable affront.

We began reading Voltaire’s *Candide* with certain questions in mind. We wanted to draw the balance of human versus natural destruction and to look for biblical elements in Voltaire’s Enlightenment novel. The author’s struggle against religious obscurantism and oppression was clearly one important source of inspiration. The near destruction of Lisbon by an earthquake in 1755 was another. A further motive was his contempt for the German Christian Enlightenment philosopher Leibniz and his successor Christian Wolff who had propounded an optimistic “theodicy,” a justification of God in light of the evils of the world. We need to understand how these inspirations blend together in *Candide*.

In Lessing’s drama *Nathan the Wise*, the Christian Enlightenment formulated an ideal of tolerance. Lessing was optimistic in his outlook. But it is one thing to speculate about how things should be and another thing to paint the world in rosy-tinted hues. To formulate an ideal, even a utopian one, is to express an implicit criticism of things as they now are. Formulating ideals and painting things in rosy hues by making it seem as if the world as it is cannot be improved upon are therefore opposite tendencies. The second tendency of making things seem as good as possible under the circumstances forestalls criticism by making it appear pointless. Sure, this is not a perfect world, but what is the point of trying to change it if this is already as good as it gets? This is what the German philosopher Leibniz and his successor Christian Wolff intimated with their doctrine that “our world is the best of all possible worlds”: of course our world has its flaws, but when we are reasonable about it, when we consider the big picture which is something perhaps only God can do, everything makes sense somehow or other. And it is all surely for the
best in the final incalculable analysis. Leibniz embodied one strain of Enlightenment thought; Voltaire another. In *Candide* the Enlightenment struggles with itself.

In defense of Leibniz, it must be said that there was more to his philosophy than the seemingly naïve proposition that ours is the best of all possible worlds. Moreover, the seemingly naïve proposition only spelled out consequences of beliefs many people held then and still hold now. If God is both omnipotent and good, then explaining evil, rationalizing the suffering of the innocent, becomes a problem. The solution of Leibniz was to suggest that all things are *somehow* for the best. An earthquake destroys a nation. Perhaps God is calling the nation back to the true faith. Economic globalization around the world wipes out entire industries devastating families dependent on them. But if our theories are correct, the devastation is only preparing the way for progress and prosperity.

It is true that disasters can prepare the way for progress. Certain consequences of the plague were progressive. But let us imagine a disaster wrought by deliberate agency in order to obtain a positive result at the price of innocent suffering. Most people would find the bargain of vast suffering inflicted for the sake of progress abominable. Now let us also remember that God is nothing if not the ultimate deliberate agency. Whether we believe in God’s providential will or in the economic necessity of globalization, we are confronted with the notion that the good end justifies a destructive means. Voltaire sets up Pangloss for us to laugh at. In doing so, we are laughing at ourselves.

*Candide* is several things at once: a recapitulation of literary tradition, a mental experiment, and an entertaining story. Performing the experiment coincides with telling the story, which critiques the tradition. As the intellectual equation of the experiment is worked out, the story tells itself in such a way that it becomes our own story and that of
the human race. Instead of a Decameron of tales framed by a conversation of narrators, the novel is a dialog between rationalization and reality that yields a sequence of episodes and an array of characters. First we will consider these; then we can assess how Candide and his creator choose among them to arrive at the best of all possible solutions. We will borrow for our purpose the comparative terms of Pangloss in order to rank the episodes and characters as best, better, good, bad, worse, and worst.

If the best human condition is one of innocent happiness, free of all knowledge of suffering, this state is attained at the beginning. The narrator refers to Candide’s youth in the castle of the Baron of Thunder-ten-tronckh as a “paradise.” And in a sense it is. The narrator pokes fun at the poverty and pretentiousness of the Baron’s castle and realm. It is customary to point out that Voltaire was making fun of the German petty princes, and no doubt he was. Yet focusing on this allows us to miss two significant points. First of all, the opening words, “In a country of Westphalia…,” followed by mingled intimations of a remote exoticism and self-sufficient timelessness, lends the unfolding narrative the atmosphere of a fairy tale. This is required in order to render all the extravagances and coincidences narratively palatable. In fairy tales such things happen. The princess and the pauper are a good fairy-tale match, if only they can navigate a tricky world of luck and magic. But Candide’s home is a paradise for another reason as well. He is a youth without envy and guile. Good children characteristically feel that their home is splendid. How could the Baron’s rustic dump not be the finest castle on earth? More than naiveté, this lack of guile and envy is ingrained in a lifelong devotion to Cunegund which makes the protagonist precisely who and what he is: Candide.
If the jocular account of Candide has a serious authority, this is because we sense that it is about humankind. The biblical story of human history is indeed echoed in that of Candide and Cunegund. We recall how Augustine retold a story about stealing pears as a boy and how this echoed the story of Adam’s fall from grace. Augustine stole the fruit for no other reason than the fun of doing something malicious. Augustine believed in the doctrine of original sin.

*Candide* also records a fall from grace. If Chapter One gives us Candide’s primal condition, notice how Chapter Two begins: “Candide, thus driven out of this terrestrial paradise, wandered a long time, without knowing where he went; sometimes he raised his eyes, all bedewed with tears, toward Heaven, and sometimes he cast a melancholy look toward the magnificent castle where dwelt the fairest of baronesses.” We can follow this lead backwards, back before the expulsion from paradise, and then pursue it forward to the end. Who is Adam? Who is Eve? Which knowledge of good and evil is it that Eve covets and persuades Adam to acquire? Who is the snake? How does the “devil” seduce Eve? Is the devil fiendish? If not, how is the great author of temptation evil? Here is the account of the persuasion of Eve by the snake:

One day, when Miss Cunegund went to take a walk in a little neighboring wood, which was called a park, she saw, through the bushes, the sage Doctor Pangloss giving a lecture in experimental physics to her mother’s chambermaid, a little brown wench, very pretty, and very tractable. As Miss Cunegund had a great disposition for the sciences, she observed with the utmost attention the experiments which were repeated before her eyes; she perfectly well understood the force of the doctor’s reasoning upon
causes and effects. She retired greatly flurried, quite pensive, and filled
with the desire of knowledge, imagining that she might be young

Candide’s sufficient reason and he hers.

Is this Eve and the serpent? Here we have an “experiment” performed by the clever Dr. Pangloss upon a pretty and pliant maid. It launches an experimental reenactment of the entire human biblical journey from Fall to Redemption. The biblical sense of the scene heightens the significance of what follows, while the purportedly “experimental” nature of the action at hand gleefully motions us to look for the physical behind the ideal.

We can follow the lead further. We know what Pangloss is up to, but we should not assume that discovering a sexual secret gets us to the bottom of it all so that further thought is pointless. Let’s consider whether it really is all that he is up to. Pangloss is forever lecturing. His lectures impress and influence people, including apparently the “tractable” chambermaid and the naïve—or is she really so naïve?—Cunegund. Clearly, if his lectures did not make an impression, Pangloss would not hold his appointment in the castle or find himself in a position to exploit its chambermaids. Whether by design or instinct, Pangloss exploits his ideas to arrive at selfish goals, sex in this case, otherwise three square meals and free lodging. What does this make him if not a hypocrite?

His hypocrisy is pernicious in that it exploits the highest ideals for the basest of desires. What does this say about that first cause that gets everything rolling in order to expel Candide from his earthly “paradise” and chase him and his Eve through the entire gauntlet of blows which is their existence in the world? Is the original sin the consenting sex of Cunegund, Candide, and the tractable maid (who, we find out later, was far from innocent)? Or is it the hypocrisy of those who take it upon themselves to explain God
and “the best of all possible worlds” to us? And incidentally, which will we find more of in *Candide*: consensual sex or hypocrisy? What about the Church and what about rulers who preach faith and patriotism while engaging in tyranny, torture, and war?

What about Cunegund? Notice how closely her role parallels that of Eve. First the snake of hypocrisy beguiles her. She realizes that there is more to the concept of “sufficient reason” than had met the eye. She likes what she sees. Charmingly, she concludes that “she might be young Candide’s sufficient reason and he hers.” The principle of sufficient reason means that everything has a reason for being or happening. This might be a material cause, the will of God, or the ultimate purpose of life. When Cunegund attends Pangloss’ demonstration of experimental physics, she has a flash of insight. All the learning, discoursing, and lecturing, she now concludes, has *this* as its sufficient reason. Pursuing her intuition, she conjectures that she was made for Candide and he for her in just this way.

When Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise in the Bible, the immense tale of human misery, murder, want, greed, oppression, suffering, and despair begins: this is the story of the human race, which in the Bible continues until it reaches its happy end with redemption. In *Candide*, the life of humankind is condensed, as in the parables we have discussed, into the tale of our hero. Our tale also comes to a kind of resolution in the end about which we will say more. If Candide’s tale is also a parable of the human fall from grace and of the long road to redemption of a sort, we should expect to find extremes of good and evil. There is so much evil in *Candide* that one can barely encompass it. But we can ask which characters represent what is good. What is the best such a world has to offer? What makes the bad characters bad and the good ones good?
We can begin by nailing down our scale at the lower end by choosing the worst situation of the entire novel. We should not look at this solely from a personal point of view but instead inquire where the world appears in the worst possible light. If natural disasters are bad but human destruction is even worse, what is the worst of all possible situations in the novel? The worst scenario comes when natural and human destruction team up in a double-edged assault on humanity. When could this be but in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake when the Inquisition responds to natural disaster by persecuting heretics such as Pangloss? The worst of all possible situations arrives as the nemesis of the man who taught that we are living in the best of all possible ones.

Nor is it a coincidence that Pangloss is sentenced to hang by the Inquisition in the wake of the destruction. The Inquisition almost certainly had a more compelling answer to the disaster of Lisbon, one that made far better narrative sense. Pangloss’ theory about the best of all possible worlds combined the belief in a God who is all-powerful and good with a philosophical rationalization of good and evil. His synthesis of philosophy with faith had been intended to account for evil and maintain confidence in an order in which everything must be somehow for the best. A disaster of this magnitude would certainly have undermined such calculations, threatening to expose a shocking truth. Our beliefs and the way the world really is are as different as night and day. We have been living a lie. How can that be? If commonly held beliefs no longer make sense, either something was wrong with the believers, or with those who led them to believe. The first option is bitter. The second is revolutionary.

Imagine a public debate between Pangloss and the Grand Inquisitor amid the ruins of Lisbon. Pangloss constructs an elaborate narrative in which earthquakes and floods in
subtle ways indirectly work toward a better world. The Inquisition reminds people that in
the Bible there are invariably divine reasons for a flood that destroys the earth or fire that
annihilates cities. Disavowing philosophical subtlety, the Inquisition falls back on a more
primitive way of reacting to evil in a world created by an omnipotent God: find someone
to blame and torture and execute them publicly. This answers the question on everyone’s
mind of what went wrong, at the same time that it drives home the corollary: anyone with
the illicit answer that the people have been misled will come next. Ask critical questions
and you burn. Pangloss has it coming in another sense. He shared the main premises of
the Inquisition: God is good and omnipotent; and whatever happens happens for a reason.
Proceeding from these same premises, the Inquisition wins because it tells people a more
compelling story. However, Pangloss is not finished. He escapes to reason another day.

The Church mediates between human society and the heavenly powers of God;
and it helps maintain the kings and other earthly rulers in power. The king of Portugal
has an Inquisition. The Baron of Thunder-ten-tronckh has a Pangloss. The philosopher
balances the accounts of creation with logic. The Inquisition has its tools of torture and
execution. Both serve the powers that be in ways best suited to the needs of either ruler.
There is nothing new and nothing old in any of this.

Voltaire followed his narrative experimental method by choosing a naïve figure
and setting him up against a hundredfold dosage of the evil the world has in stock. The
experiment demonstrates that, given certain assumptions, which are shared by Pangloss
and the Inquisition, the destructive power of nature can bring out the worst human evil.
The experimental results could be expressed in the formula: natural disaster + religious
bigotry = the worst of all possible scenarios. History is filled with natural disasters of a
less extraordinary but still destructive kind. There have always been epidemics. People have rarely had enough to eat. Bad weather can be counted on to ruin harvests. Without the extreme experimental conditions constructed by Voltaire, religious bigotry throughout human history always has sufficient preconditions for turning our world into a living hell.

If any situation is the opposite in this one respect, it is surely Candide’s month in El Dorado. And why is El Dorado the opposite of Lisbon? The earthquake and flood are unusual disasters, but they are only the extreme dosage of want and suffering present in history. In El Dorado the hand of the experimenter reverses the dosage: instead of want, the citizens of this imaginary Amazonian land are granted an abundance which eliminates all poverty and shortage. Jewels are no better than pebbles on the road. Gold is dirt. We might complain that this is too fantastic, but guinea pigs must find it equally unbelievable when their food supply is switched to lavish. Experiment sets the terms. The question is what happens under given conditions.

Not only are greed and oppression eliminated. In Lisbon, nature and the thinking human being were a threat to the control of the rulers. The Church brought to bear as its chief standard of control the authority of God, which was enforced on the torture rack of the Inquisition. In El Dorado nature is made to smile upon human society. Not faith but knowledge is worshipped. To help Candide continue his travels, the citizens of this land invent a wonderful machine for going over the mountains. The science of this country is capable of taming nature. El Dorado is not so much a place as an intellectual argument, a mental simulation. Its lesson: provide abundance and greed will diminish. Simply make science and knowledge our religion, and the sky will be the limit.
However, there are other embodiments of what is good in humanity or among its religious representatives. There is the “honest Anabaptist named James,” who takes pity on every suffering human being and responds to evil with kindness. He comes as close as any character in *Candide* to following the example of Christ. There is a reason, clear at that time, but lost for us now, why Voltaire chooses an Anabaptist for this role. The Anabaptists were persecuted dissenting Christians. They were pacifists who followed the example of Jesus by turning the other cheek. James argues that human beings must have deviated from the original state of innocence, since after all they did not receive guns and bankruptcy laws from God. The view that humans were created good but then corrupted by society came into currency through Jean-Jacques Rousseau during the Enlightenment. James the Anabaptist is a truly good man. He bears the name of the brother of Jesus. But his selflessness is no match for the world’s wickedness. A brutal sailor strikes James and then falls overboard himself. James pulls his assailant back on board. When the rescuer falls over board, the rescued lets his savior drown.

Who else is good? Cacambo is a marvelously faithful servant, loyal because he knows that his master Candide is “a mighty good man” (45). His loyalty is remarkable, but does it qualify him as good the way James was? Not if the highest standard is to love one’s enemies. His goodness is entirely focused on his master. Then there is Martin, the “Manichaean.” Manichaeans believed that the world is under the sway of the Devil who is in effect the god or creator of our world. This means that those in power in this world serve the devil. Martin says: “When I cast my eye on this globe…I cannot help thinking that God has abandoned it to some malignant being” (75). Candide learns from honest Martin, but the strength of the Manichaean is knowledge, not love or kindness.
There is the old Turkish man at journey’s end. This mufti or dervish replies to the question of evil by comparing the world to a ship which has been sent on some voyage by a king. What does it matter to His Highness that the ship’s hold is full of rats. The world is on a voyage which we cannot comprehend. The rats, the evil beings of this world, are of no consequence to God. It is not so much what the old Turk says, but the way he lives that impresses Candide and Pangloss. James, the old woman, the noble Venetian, Martin, Pangloss, and the old Turk: all represent answers to the question how we should come to terms with a world of evil. Which answer is the most acceptable one for Candide in the conclusion? Does Candide adopt something from each of these positive characters? We talked about the best conditions experienced by Candide. There was his initial condition before he knew about the world. There was El Dorado. And there is his final condition. Could it be argued that his concluding condition is the most fortunate among the three experienced by Candide, happier than the beginning and indeed more fortunate even than El Dorado, because it is not based on ignorance of the world? What does Candide reflect or receive from James, Cacambo, Marti, and the old Turk?

We should think about one additional question. How are we to assess Voltaire’s presentation of human suffering? He presents horrible things in a jocular tone. Terrible things are made to sound funny. There is the fate of the old woman: one of her buttocks has been amputated and cannibalized during a siege. This is a horrible thought but also a ridiculous fate. Was Voltaire heartless? Was suffering merely an idea to be played with? Does he evince no real compassion for human suffering? Examining the conclusion of *Candide* will help us draw the balance of knowledge and suffering.
In order to define our hierarchic scale of best, better, good and bad, worse, worst, we have to take the whole story into account. What about the ending of *Candide*? It is a very famous ending. Pangloss recapitulates the “concatenation of all events in the best of possible worlds” that has led to the happy reunion of Cunegund, Candide, and Pangloss, leading to their all being there “to eat preserved citrons and pistachio nuts” on a thriving little farm near Constantinople. To Pangloss’ summary disquisition, Candide replies: “Excellently observed…but let us cultivate our garden.” Those are among the most famous words in world literature. The line reminds us that Voltaire wrote for the stage. His words say much by saying little.

As we have seen, when a symbolic expression from the Bible or literature takes flight on its own, we may forget where it set off from. This was true of the dove in the story of Noah and the Ark. It is true here as well. “Cultivating our garden” has come to mean, Let us stop trying to understand or change the world and instead worry about our small domestic sphere. But was Candide really ever on a quest to understand or reform the world? He was simply trying to stay alive and find his beloved Cunegund. And what is the nature of the “garden” he intends to cultivate in the end? It is not the kind of flower plot that people plant and weed to forget about their worries at the office or to ignore the latest broadcast of depressing news. This garden is a working commune. Each member of this little community of fate performs to the best of his or her abilities. All share in the produce to the benefit of each.

Moreover, Pangloss reminds us in the last pages that “the garden” has had other meanings. It was in another garden that the miserable “concatenation of events” began in the world, both for Pangloss, Candide and Cunegund, *and for Adam and Eve* and all their
progeny. Pangloss offers a long disquisition at the end on the vanities of seeking human grandeur. He lists the biblical kings who came to a fateful end and adds the Romans and modern kings who meet similar fates. With that, the biblical story that began with Adam is extended to modern history and translated into the parable of Candide.

The symbolic conclusion therefore echoes the symbolic introduction. This is how Pangloss replies to Candide’s assertion that, “we must cultivate our garden”: “‘You are in the right,’ said Pangloss, ‘for when man was put into the Garden of Eden, it was so that he should work in it; and this proves that man was not born to be idle.’” This puts a nice twist upon the exegesis of Genesis. The Garden of Eden was not for leisure but for labor. Productive labor is apparently the real ticket to paradise, such as it is in this flawed world of ours. This seems to signal a new attitude for Pangloss. The real Paradise is when we stand on our own feet, do our job, and take care of our own. Well said indeed. Though we are left wondering what Pangloss’ job description in the little commune might be.

In any narration, it strikes an elegant figure to return to the beginning at the end. This is especially so when the return revises or corrects a mistake made at the beginning. Correction: it was not for idle speculation or hypocritical sexual dalliance that we came into this world, but in order to work, in order to improve our small station in life and to share what we produce with our comrades in toil. We notice a newly confident tone in Candide’s reply to Pangloss’ last discourse: “Excellently observed…but let us cultivate our garden.” Nevertheless, it is debatable how much Candide’s character evolves. The German term for a narrative centered in the inner psychological maturation of the main character is Bildungsroman or educational novel. Though Candide is not an educational
novel, his words tell us by understatement that the protagonist is in some way a changed man after completing his odyssey through the storms and cliffs of an ocean of evils.

Whom does Candide resemble, and from whom has he learned? I would think least of all from Pangloss (although the solution of cultivating one’s garden is concretely the best of all possible answers to the evil of the world). Certainly Candide has learned much more from the pessimistic Martin. And obviously also from the old Turkish man. Moreover, like the old woman, Candide responds to loss and suffering without cursing life itself. A natural affinity of character also links him to the loyal Cacambo. Candide’s own greatest loyalty is inspired by a love as selfless as, though more particular than, that of James the Anabaptist. Like James, Candide is frequently stirred to pity and action by the sight of human suffering and injustice. But his greatest love is for one: his Cunegund. This might make Candide less good than James, but it makes his goodness more human and more viable.

After Candide had lost the hundred sheep he brought from El Dorado, he was able to rescue only one single sheep. The narrator observes that, “Candide felt more joy at the recovery of this one animal than he did grief when he lost the other hundred” (76). This formulation is reminiscent of a parable we discussed. What does this detail capture about Candide’s character? It is true that he is deeply distressed by the sufferings of the world, but his grief is still outweighed by the joy he feels upon recovering the one who matters most. James the Anabaptist has a divine Christ-like love for all of his fellows. Candide has a human love for the one he loves best. This love saves him from being destroyed by selflessness or by grief for the sufferings of all.
In the end, Candide responds to the evil of the world, not by trying to help or change the world, and not by despairing, but by “cultivating his garden”: by devoting himself to the well-being of his little community of friends and fellow sufferers. Very near the beginning of his tale of woes, we saw Candide journeying out into the wicked world, “with a little provision in his pouch, and Miss Cunegund’s image in his heart” (10). Which of these things in the end has carried him farther on his way, the bread in his sack or the love in his heart? The Gospel says that we do not live by bread alone. What has Candide lived by?

We intended to think about another question. Is Voltaire’s treatment of suffering in *Candide* too flippant and unfeeling? Think about the old woman with a single buttock, whose other buttock has been cannibalized during a siege. This is horrible, but it is also ludicrous. Is it therefore cruel? I am wondering whether some feel that this is typical of the jocular tone in which the book chalks up atrocity after atrocity. Maidens are ravished repeatedly, their bellies “ripped open,” their bodies probed by greedy fingers in search of hidden gems. They cavort with apes. When Candide shoots two such apes, the women whom he had intended to save are grief-stricken and outraged. This implies that people not only suffer, they suffer without dignity. They might even desire the very things that make them suffer. One could of course debate this. Domestic violence is a very real and terrible crime. Ask social workers or police officers how often they intervene in violent domestic disputes only to have the quarreling couple unite against outside interference.

We can construct the arguments for and against Voltaire’s treatment of suffering. Voltaire is a rationalist in his condemnation of the evils of the world. It has been said that rationalists tend to love the human race in the abstract but have little love for their
fellows in the concrete. They love humankind but cannot stand their fellow men. Is this Voltaire’s problem? An argument could be made that he has difficulty imagining what suffering means subjectively because his presentation of character is too shallow. His characters are a bit like cartoon figures. Do his characters represent ideas without flesh and blood and without real feelings? The victims keep score and register complaints, but do they feel anything convincingly? Do we feel their pain? All those who vote against Voltaire in this respect can find examples to make their case with.

What case can be made in response to this? We might point to more impressive depictions of suffering than the ludicrous fate of the old woman. But this is beside the point. It is not Voltaire’s intention to have us beating our breasts and crying woe. He wants us to think. For the Enlightenment, thinking was both amusing and useful: useful in that it struck a blow at the hypocritical enemies of reason, oppressors of humankind; and amusing just as the experiments and explorations of the age were not only exciting adventures in a quest for truth but entertainments for an enlightened public.

There are two views of Voltaire. I am in no position to hide the fact that I am on Voltaire’s side. But I know people with knowledge broader than mine and with excellent taste and judgment who do not share my view. This is worth arguing about. Not because there is only a single answer. It is worth debating because the parties to the disagreement reveal the gap between the sensibilities of the Enlightenment and Romanticism: rational thought versus compassionate feeling.

The Romantic philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer invented a thought-provoking little story to illustrate the question of the true source of morality. Does the source of morality lie in principles or in compassion, in intellect or in feeling? Two men are both
madly in love with two different women. In both cases, the lover is losing out to some rival. Jealously is driving either man to plot to kill the rival. Both can get away with it. In the end, each decides not to commit murder; however, the two decide against murder for different reasons. The first cites the kind of principles philosophers such as Kant or Fichte founded their moralities on. In explaining his reluctance to kill his rival, the first thwarted lover says something to this effect: I couldn’t do it because I could not elevate the principle of my act to the status of a universal principle applicable to all humankind. The first might cite any other principle that is abstract or rational. He might cite the Ten Commandments or the beatitudes of Jesus. But the second thwarted lover simply says: I looked at that poor fellow and couldn’t bring myself to do this to him. I felt sorry for him and couldn’t make him suffer.  

After describing the reasons given by the two frustrated lovers for their restraint, the philosopher puts this question to us: Which of the two is the better man? Answering this question, Schopenhauer thinks, should tell us which is the better morality. We might object and ask, What does it matter? The only important thing is that neither did it. But it will make a difference, if not in this instance, in others. The first man acts on universal principle, the second is driven by personal feeling. In desisting from murder, the first man might remain indifferent to his rival as a human being. But the second sees himself in the other and feels for him. Compassion means to suffer vicariously with another. The first kind of morality ignores concrete human beings in following its rules and principles. It responds specifically to inconsistency, which is a matter of logic and not feeling. If no principle is violated (let us suppose that the suffering in question does not entail broken laws or violations of justice), the first morality in its purest form might react with a cold
heart. The second morality would feel for the sufferer even if no injustice were involved, even, perhaps, if the sufferer deserved it.

We know both types of moral character. When we talked about the parable of the Prodigal Son, we said that it might be easier to explain its meaning by recounting another story, even one from our own life, than to reduce it to a doctrine. A story is concrete and appeals to our imagination. A doctrine is abstract and impersonal. The alternatives are not merely about the question of why we do not murder. It might be a matter of how we reform society, conduct our lives, get married, or end a relationship. We stand between the two grounds for decision making when faced with any choice. The first man has an affinity with the Enlightenment and its orientation toward objectivity and universal rules. The second is closer to the critical opposition to Rationalism, whether of the Sensibility Movement that stressed compassion and feeling, or Romanticism itself.

One way to approach Romanticism is to recognize what it is in us that responds to it. The Romantic soul emerged at a certain point in cultural history and gave expression to a characteristic phase of the personality of individuals in our culture. We know what it means to be dissatisfied with humdrum predictability and to long for unattainable things. Even if we are secure and successful, the predictability of life might not satisfy our secret longings. It is in the nature of longing to have an unclear idea of what we want or how to get it. Even if we are old, we can recall a moment in our youth when we felt enslaved to the reasonable norms of working, studying, getting ahead, and eking out our place in the world: dreary to a young person of feeling and imagination. We know we have it in us to be other things, a hero, saint, criminal, artist, poet, or musician. If only we were stronger or better looking. If only we had been born earlier or could run away and become a poet,
martyr, or member of a criminal gang. We despise the self-satisfied mentality of family and classmates and prefer the company of outlaws and non-conformists who at least live life to the fullest. Extreme conditions offer a way of experiencing life intensely. Yet any radical adventure entails the possibility of either a dream come true or a living nightmare. Our yearning attracts us to a fantasy world of exotic adventure, dream, and nightmare. At night, dreams, desires, and nightmares reveal a natural association and common source.

Our personal consolation is that we at least have a few close friends who share our feelings. Friendship is more important than success. With those few friends we can create an alternate world of fantasy, magic, poetry, or music. Childhood and olden times also hold a promise which is lost in the humdrum world of reasonableness. Dissatisfied with drab reality and filled with irrational or inexplicable longing, we seek to redeem the lost dreams of childhood. All we know is that what we want is the opposite of everything familiar to us. Latter-day Romantics may be driven to seek in travel, drugs, or a cult.

We all have some vestige of this “Romantic soul” in us. Two centuries ago, when the Romantics explored these aspects of human nature, their discovery was sensational. It was not simply a matter of style but of ultimate truth, no mere mood but a world unto itself which clashed with the tedium of reason and common-place realism. Next, we will discuss what this meant and why.

**The Romantic Worlds of Tieck and Brentano**

We defined the narrative classics as the most original and influential tales through the centuries. One aspect of their influence is an apparent ability to parallel or reflect the
individual developmental process to yield something like a biography of humankind. It is as if each phase of our personal evolution from childhood on were enlarged and rendered absolute. Hegel built his complex philosophy of spirit on this insight. We can recover some sense of it simply by looking first at the world of Homer’s warrior heroes in which we see the life phase of children’s war games enlarged to heroic proportions. The heroes of the Homeric world are arguably the most complete representation of the strengths they embody. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are classics because their embodiment of heroism and adventure establishes the profile of these themes for future generations.

Similarly, the world of the medieval chivalric romance mixes heroic adventure with a naive idealism compounded with the amorous yearning which we recognize from our own adolescence. By the same token, the Enlightenment exalts an ethos of education and responsibility, and in doing so represents the developmental phase of our schooling, the socialization, intellectual training, mental play, and worldly irony which train us to become what we are. But this is not the end of our development: intellectual discipline cannot suppress adolescent idealism and amorous yearning without resulting in sterile pedantry. Every school child indulging exotic or erotic fantasies in class knows this.

Just as medieval romance combined the heroic adventure of Homeric or pagan epic with a new idealism and amorous yearning, Romanticism combines the intellectual sophistication of the Enlightenment with the half-suppressed but resilient yearning and imagination of the young adult. Early Romanticism embodies the ambivalent relation of the nostalgic young intellectual to the remembered promise of childhood. Scholars have debated the concept of Romanticism. We suggested that a non-specialist could approach it by considering the state of mind of a disaffected young adult. Bored with school and
the predictable paths of life, a certain kind of young adult is fascinated by faraway places and fantastic scenarios. Repulsed by the conformist crowd, the individualist associates with like-minded outsiders or is secretly attracted to someone whose response means heaven or hell. The Romantic knows that the condition of the soul means the world.

The sophisticated young German intellectuals who were in the vanguard of the Romantic Movement in the decades before and after 1800 had impressive grounds for believing that the nature of the world and our existence in it were a matter of inquiry and agonizing contention. Two achievements of the Enlightenment had made this case. The French Revolution of 1789 had violently challenged the old order and opened the door to utopian and imaginary perspectives. And Immanuel Kant’s revolution in philosophy had posed no less radical questions about the nature of knowledge and experience.

In terms of Schopenhauer’s moral dichotomy, the French Revolution offered an extreme example of the rationalistic moralist who cold-heartedly performs radical surgery on the body politic. Proceeding from the Enlightenment’s demand for justice within a rational order, the Revolution implemented terror in the name of reason and sanctioned Napoleon’s bloody wars of conquest. A famous drawing by Francisco Goya shows a young man dozing over a book as nightmare creatures ascend in inner darkness. “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” signals that the dark side of Romanticism emerged in response to the exhaustion of the Enlightenment. Repelled by the excesses of reason, those prone to suffer under the conflicts of the age were attracted to new ways of living, seeing, and feeling, to new movements in literature and art. Precisely because of its roots in the political and philosophical struggles of the day, the legacy of Romanticism would prove deep and lasting.
For a variety of reasons, the Germans played an original and creative role. Other nations were preoccupied with building modern institutions and fighting political battles. Germany was too backward and divided to follow their example. There was no German nation state in 1800 but merely an aggregate of divided and largely archaic territories, the German Empire or Holy Roman Empire. *Candide*, we recall, satirized the backwardness of the German lands: “The Baron [of Thunder-ten-tronckh] was one of the most powerful lords in Westphalia, for his castle had not only a gate but even windows…” (3). But for what it is worth, the Baron’s modest castle supported a philosopher. While other nations acted in the political or economic spheres, educated Germans engaged in philosophy and literature. At their best, they were leading other nations in these fields. While the French were still pursuing their optimistic dreams of reason, German philosophy was exploring the limits of human reason.

The German Immanuel Kant was the last great philosopher of the Enlightenment. His revolutionary *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in 1781. The title speaks both of a *pure* manifestation of reason and of its *critique*. Kant recognized two sides of reason: its bright side shines without any shadow of doubt, while its dark side lies beyond the limits of knowledge, as inaccessible as the dark side of the moon. On the bright side, reason is absolute and self-sufficient. The truths of logic and mathematics cannot be conceived of as false. Yet the light of pure reason cannot penetrate to the inscrutable “Thing in Itself,” which we oversimplify in designating as external reality. Reason is incapable of knowing what lies behind appearance and rationality. To the Romantics, this inaccessible reality encompassed both external nature and an irrational inner life.
These days philosophy only captures the attention of the public if it becomes associated with popular culture. In popular discussions of the *Matrix* films, their scenario of a realm of virtual reality was compared to the worldview of Kant. Actually Kant was more thorough and radical. Films such as *The Matrix* ask us to imagine that computers, drugs, or technology can recreate a virtual reality indistinguishable from the real thing. Kant challenged the very notion of reality. Our knowledge of the world consists of our mind taking sense data and making it into our representation of a world. Since we have no direct access to the source which may be utterly different from our representation, we cannot know whether the world we see, hear, and touch is real or illusory. The deeper reality of the world is hidden from us, unless a route distinct from those of reason and the senses can be found. When the German poets and philosophers began to explore the implications of Kant’s philosophy in the decades before and after 1800, they introduced a revolution of thought and imagination which is still in progress today. After Kant, the Romantics were able to assault the shallow verities of the Enlightenment with the most sophisticated weapons forged by the Enlightenment. This is why, when they turned their gaze back toward the worlds of childhood and the distant past, they produced something radically new and sophisticated.

Romantic literature and art responded to Reason in terms that suggested the following: You devotees of Reason have forgotten the transcendent world of imagination and belief, of love, feeling, fairy tales, and inspired visions. You have also forgotten the dark world, even while opening the door to it. The dark world is the shadowy side of human nature, the nighttime world of dreams or nightmares. Just as Romanticism was both naïve and sophisticated, both nostalgic and avant-garde, so, too, its artistic vision
had Janus faces. One was turned to the idyllic, the other to the grotesque and horrible. It is said that the Romantics added the element of the strange to the concept of the beautiful.

The Romantic’s intellectualized recapitulation of the child’s world of imagination, longing, fear, and delight is realized nowhere more openly than in the Romantic literary fairy tale. Unlike Kant’s philosophy, the fairy tale is a vivid narrative form. As such, it is capable of transmuting the themes of appearance and reality, of rational and irrational, from abstract into concrete terms. If traditional folk fairy tales are for oral presentation to children, Romantic literary fairy tales are for mature readers. In the traditional folk fairy tales associated with the Brothers Grimm, plot is characteristically motivated by the most rudimentary needs or desires. The protagonists, often children, have poor or cold-hearted parents or none at all. They lack food or shelter. They are tempted by generic treasures or carte blanche offers of wish fulfillment, or threatened by monsters, witches, or ogres. The scenario of the folk fairy tale reminds us that our most primordial need is to stay high on the food chain, to eat rather than be eaten. When there is a love interest in a folk fairy tale, it is usually equally rudimentary. Magic and desire qualify the simple peasant as a perfect match for the prince or princess. This is the child’s world of terror and longing.

In contrast to the simple world of the folk fairy tale, the Romantic literary fairy tale reflects the concerns of a more mature—but not fully formed or jaded—individual. Instead of seeking after a square meal and a roof over one’s head, the protagonist of the literary fairy tale must find his or her place in the world between illusion, fantasy and reality. Instead of the simple formula, love-plus-magic-equals-happiness-ever-after, the world of the Romantic fairy tale revolves around complex questions concerning the latent force of desires or the incompatibility of lovers and their inability to resolve the crises of
their relationships. Where the folk fairy tale propagates a linear morality according to which the good desire of the good protagonist leads to a good outcome, the literary fairy tale recognizes that between the apparent good will of the protagonist and the issuance of desire, dark force fields, impenetrable realities, intervene to effect stunning turns of fate.

This is what we find in Ludwig Tieck’s literary fairy tale *Eckbert the Fair*. From the following quotations extracted from their context, we can see how the characteristics we have discussed are transformed into narrative ambience and plot.

The flames filled the chamber with a light glow and playfully lit the ceiling above; the black night peered in at the windows and the trees outside shivered in the damp cold. (36)

It conjured up spirits in my mind, who would show me hidden treasure or give me tiny pebbles that were transformed into precious stones. (37)

For the first time my young soul began to comprehend something of the world and its wonders. (40)

It never felt as if I were awake but seemed instead as if I was sinking into another even stranger dream. (41)

Which of these four passages might we associate with the problem of knowing external reality, with the naïve spirit of the folk fairy tale, with the sophisticated motivation of the literary fairy tale, and with the radicalized divorce between consciousness and reality?

Even without the characters and actions of the story, traces of a progression of ideas may be evident in the perspectives of the narrating voice and the listening consciousness.

In *Eckbert the Fair*, the protagonist of that name leads with his dear wife Bertha a life of secluded moderation. Although they are middle-aged, the key events in their lives
occurred in adolescence or early adulthood. Like certain staid couples known to most of us, their fate was set during the treacherous passage between adolescence and adulthood, which they falsely believe to have behind them. They behave reasonably, following their set routines and attempting to steer clear of conflict. Yet below the surface of their placid existence, an inferno of hellish trouble is lurking to swallow them up.

The reasonable and positive impulse that sets the tale rolling has to do with their friendship with Walther, the couple’s occasional house guest. The trouble begins with a normal and universal desire for intimacy on Eckbert’s part:

There are times when it troubles a man to keep a secret from a friend, a secret which, until then, had been guarded with the utmost care; his soul is overcome by an irresistible desire to confide completely, to bare his innermost emotions to that friend, so that their friendship can become ever closer. It might be the case, in such moments, that those more tender souls will come to appreciate one another more, yet, sometimes, it might also drive one party to shy away from acquaintance with the other. (35-36)

All quite reasonable, all vexingly irrational. Encouraged by Eckbert, Bertha recounts the story of her early transition from a deprived childhood to their marriage. We are initially led to assume that we are getting the whole story down to the couple’s present existence.

Though she begins by admonishing, “Yet, do not take my story for a fairy tale, however strange it may sound…,” Bertha’s tale is reminiscent of a folk fairy tale. As a young girl, she fled her impoverished and abusive father, became lost in a terrifying wilderness, and discovered the magic sanctuary of a pious but uncanny old woman who takes her in and raises her without ever revealing her identity to her charge. The veritable
“paradise” of her refuge is guarded by a pet dog and a magic bird that sings a song about “forest solitude” and lays precious stones instead of eggs. Upon reaching puberty, Bertha is aroused by reading romantic tales to imagine a splendid knight as her suitor. Betraying the trust of the old woman, she steals the bird and sets off in search of her parents, whom she hopes to make prosperous and happy. Her parents are dead, but she meets and falls in love with Eckbert. They are happy together, though for some reason the heavens do not confer children upon them—as if their harmony had to be purchased at a price.

Bertha’s tale within the tale already differs from the usual folk fairy tale in its emphasis on guilt, adolescent character development, and the gap between knowledge and the obscure external reality. After she completes her tale, a chain of events is set in motion. Bertha’s desire to return to her childhood home and redeem her parents’ lot and Eckbert’s longing for intimate friendship are apparently good impulses that are rendered poisonous by the significance of powers and events unknown. Guilt turns Eckbert’s existence into a monstrous nightmare. The question of reality overshadows everything and destroys any basis for the resolution of the mystery of his existence.

There are at least two ways to interpret *Eckbert the Fair*. One takes its cues from the description of the valley in which the old woman dwells as Bertha arrives in it. She twice refers to it in terms reminiscent of key biblical symbols: “It was as if I had come out of Hell and walked into Paradise.” The beauty of nature is magical: “the woods and the leaves of the trees were still, and the clear sky resembled a beckoning Paradise” (40). The old woman teaches Bertha both to pray and to read. Reading gives flight to her romantic imagination, which leads to her temptation and fall. Yet her fall has far deeper
roots which we can construe as an interpretation of original sin—a sin passed by fathers to their children. The fruit of the tree of knowledge leads to expulsion from Paradise.

A second route of interpretation opens up as soon as we ask ourselves how we should understand the uncanny old woman, who is, it seems, at least two other people. Is she an agent of God or an embodiment of some evil power that rules the world, hidden in the crevices separating appearances from unknowable reality? There are terms that apply to this second interpretation. The idea that our world is ruled by a mysterious evil power is referred to as “gnostic” or “manichaean.” It is also the typical worldview of the horror story. A valuable exercise would be to inventory textual evidence favoring the Christian interpretation on the one hand and the gnostic-manichaean horror story interpretation on the other. If our balance does not resolve which interpretation has more evidence, this is because the Romantics were torn between their magical worldview and their longing for a pre-Enlightenment Christianity. The Romantics developed new ways of combining the familiar with the strange. Fairy tale and common existence intermingle, as Eckbert finds at the end of his tale: “Wondrous things were mixed with the most ordinary” (51).

Tieck’s tale, published in 1797, is open-ended. The later German Romantic Tale of Honest Casper and Fair Annie (1817) by the lyric poet Clemens Brentano favors a Christianity which is not only anti-Enlightenment but laced with pious superstition. It is less a fairy tale than a novella set in a German territorial capital in the time shortly after the Napoleonic Wars. Eckbert the Fair was set in an unspecified time reminiscent of the Middle Ages. Brentano’s tale is post-Napoleonic in showing how the common people in the German states were aroused and seduced by the ethos of honor that accompanied the German Wars of Liberation. The tale is late-Romantic in its insecurity about the role of
the poet in society, its Catholic renunciation of worldly aspirations, and its vague hope that the gifts of the artist or poet might inspire the German rulers to govern more justly.

In Tieck’s *Eckbert the Fair* or Brentano’s *Tale of Honest Casper and Fair Annie*, one tale is borne embryonically inside another. There is a framing effect; but it involves neither an extraneous cornice tale nor a minor tale inside a major one. Here, one full tale is hidden within and grows to converge with a second full tale. The inner tale acts upon, transforms, and exerts a beneficent or catastrophic impact on the outer tale. In doing so, the inner tale exemplifies the power of art or imagination to transform ordinary reality.

Whose story is Brentano’s *Tale*? The title offers us one answer: a young man and woman of the common people who were intended for one another but separated by his going to war, by her seduction and infidelity, by his suicide after discovering dishonor in his own family, and now by her impending execution for infanticide. Theirs is the inner tale. The outer tale is sustained by the poet-narrator and the old peasant woman whom he chances to meet at the end of a night on the town. She tells him the story of her grandson Casper whose exaggerated notions of military honor led to suicide, and of Annie, whose no less misguided notions about personal honor led her into the arms of the unscrupulous Count Grossinger. Since the old woman is encamped on a city street to bring her appeal to the duke at the crack of dawn—an appeal soon embraced by the compassionate poet-narrator—the inner tale is tightly encoiled in order to unwind into the outer, as the poet desperately rushes to convey the truth he learns to the duke and halt Annie’s execution. Failing this, the poet witnesses a turnabout in the affairs of the duke and—we are led to suppose—in ducal governance, a change contingent upon commiseration and remorse.
The reader can marvel at the tightly coiled mechanism of Brentano’s *Tale*. In its causal sequence one key symbolic element floats unconnected. What is it and how does it relate to Brentano’s manifest purpose of involving poetry (embodied in the narrator-poet) in the project of changing and improving the external world? The key to such an outcome is the refined feeling for beauty and poetic truth that accesses the outer world through a song, image, person, or poignant fate. Brentano’s *Tale* is of the same epoch as Schopenhauer’s ethics of compassion. It was an interval that specialized in such feelings, projecting them in the art of Goya’s *Disasters of War* or Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*.

Brentano’s *Tale* is instructive in permitting us to consider the limits of a social ethics based on compassion. Sympathy may embrace its object in a penetrating spotlight of feeling, but what lies outside the blinding circle or in the shadows within can be lost or distorted. A closer look at Brentano’s *Tale* indicates this. The pious old grandmother is evidently intended to serve as the repository of true compassion. But when the narrator realizes that Annie, the old woman’s godchild, is about to be executed and rushes to save her, the poet elicits this response: “‘A pardon?’ said the old woman coldly. … Do you hear, dear friend, justice is better than a pardon; what use are all the pardons on earth; we must all face judgment one day…” (151). The grandmother leaves no doubt about what mercy means to her. Her kind of compassion appears all the more pitiless when we learn that the seducer had drugged his female victim. For the duke, who had been carrying on an illicit affair with Grossinger’s sister, a conversion of the heart sets everything straight. Annie gets the axe. Like any passion, compassion is intense but limited in scope.

Because compassion is so circumscribed and so intense, it can be pressed into the service of doctrines and ideologies that manipulate our sense of good and evil. Brentano
himself is a good example. Shortly after writing his *Tale*, the poet, like his narrator, came under the influence of a religious figure by the name of Anna Katharina Emmerich. Like the old grandmother in his *Tale*, Emmerich was a deeply pious peasant woman. Famous for her compassionate visions of Jesus, she was achieving an unofficial status as a saint of Catholic Romantic circles. He remained at her bedside for five years until her death. Ten years later, he published a work purporting to be her visions of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. It became a devotional mainstay and nearly catapulted her to sainthood, until the church officials in charge of examining her qualifications were obliged to conclude that the work was largely the poet’s, and that his relations with the ex-nun were unsavory. Of greater import to us now, Emmerich and Brentano combined their message with the anti-Semitism of their time. Their compassion for the sufferings of the Savior necessitated a framework of clashing good and evil powers and persons. The evil roles were assigned in the visionary Passion narrative, as tradition would have it, to a heartless Jewish mob, even though in Brentano’s day and place Jews were in fact the victims of mob violence.

Knowledgeable scholars consider Emmerich’s *Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* a forgery. Actor-director Mel Gibson discovered the book and turned it into the spectacular and highly successful 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* that galvanized Evangelical Christians and Catholics, even while retaining its sharp anti-Semitic edge. The extraordinary impact of the film testifies both to the lasting power of Romantic art and to the ambivalence of an ethics of uncritical compassion.
The Transitions of Mary Shelley and Jane Austen

The Romantic period magnified themes of individuality and the outsider pining after love and home in an alienating world. Though Romanticism was a male-dominated movement, its non-conformist ethos and interest in the inner life opened up opportunities for women writers. Books by two women present versions of the transition from the ambivalent developmental phase between adolescence and adulthood into the more adult life upon which narrative Realism would soon focus. Both are classics in terms of their originality and in their persistent impact down to the present day. Only the first, Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*, is a Romantic work. Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice* displays a poise and sobriety that contrast with the eccentric figures and passions of Shelley’s novel.

The central plots of each are so well known that they need to be de-familiarized for better understanding. Frankenstein has become the monster whose legendary image has eclipsed his literary matrix and all but obliterated the memory of the fictional Victor Frankenstein who was his creator and the novel’s Romantic protagonist. This fact could of course be attributed to ignorance or sensationalism; but the displacement has a deeper significance. Just as the monster went on a murderous rampage wreaking havoc upon the world of human order, his legendary presence has overrun and annihilated the thoughtful concerns of Shelley’s book. In fairness to a forgetful public, her novel, like the monster’s body, was spliced out of disjointed pieces, then jump-started with artificial shock effects. *Frankenstein* the book lurches and bounds its way through episodes as improbably linked
as the Arctic ice floes across which the monster flees at the opening and close of the narrative. For all of this, the story implicates questions that refuse to leave us in peace.

Before reading *Frankenstein*, we need to remind ourselves, forcefully, of our rule of thumb for reading the classics: pay closest attention to the elements that frustrate our search for gratification or meaning. What was true of Augustine’s spiritual regeneration is equally true of the literary birth of the monster: how things come into being is no less important for being messy and confusing.

Shelley’s tale has long since become our own. Everyone is familiar with the crux of the plot: a monster is created and then goes on the rampage, destroying its creator. This central action is ensconced and bound up within a sequence of framing narratives. It all begins with the letters written home by the polar explorer Robert Walton, who has a Romantic spirit and a glint of madness in his epistolary tone. Though of no significance for the central plot, this excitable young Englishman with his eccentric autodidacticism and unhinged obsessions provides us with our bearings at once. Walton is spellbound by his vision of the North Pole. Obsessed by the icebound world at earth’s extreme limit, he writes fervently to his sister that he expects to behold nature’s profoundest forces and most exhilarating beauties bathed in the perpetual polar light.

The framing narrative confronts us with symbols that have a long tradition, but common knowledge is sufficient to make clear sense of them. We only need to place the images in their cosmic and geographical context. Reading the symbolic coordinates, we know that the light that sends Walton into transports of joy is inexorably followed by a relentless polar darkness. The dark aspect of his quest is intimated by the loneliness that shadows Walton’s bliss, the light aspect by evocations of an angelic love or friendship.
The first of these evocations is in the characterization of an Englishman whom Walton has put in charge of the ship, a man whose saintly love transcends all selfishness. Other examples of this noble species follow. We have to overcome our annoyance with the overwrought sentiments of these paeans to selfless love; but they will enable us to take our bearings in a quest for meaning which turns inward with the progression of the framing narrator, as well as with the other narrators who successively come into play.

When Walton’s ship is temporarily entrapped in arctic ice floes, its crew spots at a distance a gigantic figure fleeing northward in a dogsled. On the following day, they spot another figure of more natural proportions. This is the exhausted and tormented Victor Frankenstein. The excitable Walton takes him on board, nurses him back to health, recognizes in him the refined soul he desires to have as a friend and brother, and coaxes him into telling his tale. Victor first recounts his family history of privileged and noble circumstance. The striking goodness of Victor’s family and friends would be out of place in a modern horror film; but they suggest that intense love of some presupposes exclusion of others. He then begins the tale of obsession which brought him to this pass. Inserted into Victor’s report is the monster’s own direct narration of its experience of coming into being, its acquisition of human knowledge, and its brutal exclusion from human love.

Walton, Victor, and the monster are all autodidactic readers, formed or deformed by their reading. Even the monster is half-humanized by its literacy. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* reveals to it the creature’s diabolical rebellion against its Creator. Plutarch’s *Lives* instructs it of the common human virtues and vices. Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* articulates the loneliness and inability of the sensitive outsider to exist without love and companionship. This extraordinary power of literacy in *Frankenstein* is akin to Balzac’s
Romantic mysticism of words and reading in *Louis Lambert*. The monster attempts to befriend noble human beings but is violently rebuffed. Banished from the celestial world of love, it vents its hatred in murder. Confronting Victor in the Swiss Alps, it recounts its travails and demands that its creator produce a suitable female companion. Victor at first agrees but then recoils and destroys his half-completed work. From then on, the tale piles horror upon horror, ending in Victor’s quest for vengeance across the arctic ice floes.

All these elements and more contextualize the events that are familiar to us in the popularized monster story. In reading the original *Frankenstein*, each reader may discover vivid and inexplicable details which allow for various plausible interpretations. Considering some of the alternatives will bring the features of the novel to light.

1. The novel is a critique of the Enlightenment ideal of progress that elevates the mortal human being to the status of the Creator, thereby destroying all human innocence.

2. The novel is about contemplating and creating works that transcend human measure, a theme reflected in Shelley’s references to Faustian figures of the Renaissance. In this monster of a book, the transgressive Renaissance magician inspires and converges with the Romantic ethos of the artist as a kind of god.

3. From the point of view of the shunned monster, the novel is about exclusion and oppression. The monster declares war on humankind because humankind has exiled and declared war against it.
4. The novel is about a monster who is both like and unlike a human being, and therefore more terrifying than a wild beast, ghost, or other supernatural creature.

The first interpretation can find supporting evidence in Walton’s quest for the North Pole. To his mind, this is a scientific pursuit of ultimate knowledge. References in the novel to Victor’s studies of chemistry and galvanism implicate the striking scientific advances of the Romantic era. The experimental application of electricity to simulate animate reactions in detached frog legs seemed to reveal a force that mediated between inert matter and spirit. Moreover, *Frankenstein* appears to be prophetic in anticipating modern issues of cloning and biogenetic engineering.

But Victor’s uncanny and obsessive project also looks backward in time. The second interpretation extends the issues of creation and transgression. Victor is inspired not only by the new sciences but by the medieval or Renaissance natural philosophy of Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa, and Paracelsus, who, he relates, became “lords of my imagination” (22). These figures were of an age preceding the separation of magic and experimental science, when the natural philosopher attempted to fathom the secrets of nature and tap the forces of a realm intermediate between matter and spirit, God and Satan. Victor’s equal fascination with science and occultism reveals what these have in common: a desire to obtain mastery over nature and human life. Many of the constructs of gothic fiction and science fiction writing, including the notion of alternate worlds on other planets were anticipated as early as the Middle Ages. Looking forward to modern science and backward to medieval philosophy, we recognize the theme of knowledge as transgressive power. Inspired by his readings, Victor attempts a godlike act of creation.
His hubris plunges him from the paradise of love and friendship into the hellish cycle of hatred and revenge. The bizarre chase scenes at the beginning of the novel are equivalent to Dante’s tableau scenes of the Inferno. What follows explicates the earthly meaning of those initial symbolic scenes. As so often before, here we again recognize that a theme from Genesis has been transformed and elaborated in order to raise new questions.

Of itself, this Bible-based approach should yield an unequivocal interpretation: human defiance of the God-given order of creation is appropriately punished. Victor, the “Modern Prometheus,” as the full title originally read, goes against God: the monster’s crimes merely project the consequences. However, the third interpretation, which takes the point of view of the monster, reveals that the novel is about exclusion and oppression. This perspective has the advantage of responding to the narrative at the heart of the book, the first-person narration of the shunned creature. In its own voice, the monster explains its crimes. Excluded from the human realm, deprived of all love and companionship, the creature responds in kind by destroying humans, specifically targeting those who embody the beautiful world of love and friendship. Refusing to include him in their sphere or to allow him one of his own, the monster stands for all the wretched outcasts of the human race. There is logic to this interpretation. It has been formulated even more specifically: the monster symbolizes the monstrosity of the French Revolution which, when attacked from all sides, adopted a Reign of Terror and went on the offensive against its attackers.²⁴

But while helpfully surrounding the heart of the tale with a circle of reference that highlights important features, this interpretation still fails to hit on the central point which should be the focus any reading. The creature may be the product of scientific hubris, the fruit of primal transgression, the victim of human insensitivity. But what is the creature
in and of itself? This brings us to the simplest form of the fourth interpretation which is
not that of a popular Marxism or Freudianism that substitutes what we deduce in theory
for what we see before our very eyes. Any child reading *Frankenstein* or watching a film
version comes face to face with the following:

> How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the
> wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form?

His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful.
Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of
muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of lustrous black, and flowing;
his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more
horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same
colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled
complexion and straight black lips. (35)

Any child registers the heart of the matter: here is a creature which has the attributes of a
human being yet is not. Something is missing, something that humans must have. What
might that be? Like me, this creature suffers loneliness and frustration. I can imagine its
pain of being excluded and deprived of love. Would I also respond as it does?

What is missing is the human soul imparted to it by God. The horror inspired by
the monster’s countenance fixes upon its “watery” and indistinct eyes. The eyes are said
to be the windows of the soul. They serve our capacity to establish human rapport with
another. Far more than the monster’s shriveled complexion, its alien eyes inspire horror.

The horror that this creature inspires in Victor—whose misdemeanors stand in no
proportion to his paralyzing sense of guilt—cries out for an explanation. In the Romantic
era, physical appearance was still thought to correlate with moral character. But this is at best half an explanation. What is horrible in the monster is that it or he (we do not know which pronoun is applicable) is in every empirical sense human, yet in accordance with previous teachings about humanity not human. The monster poses two questions that are merely two sides of the same fundamental mystery. First, what makes the human being truly human? And second, as a direct corollary, if this soulless creature is in fact human, do I, does anyone, possess a soul? What in me requires or confirms the belief that I have a soul? Only the implicit negative resolution of this second question—there is nothing—adequately accounts for Victor’s loathing of the monster or for the shame and revulsion that paralyze him from their first encounter on. If this monster is in every respect like a human being, then nothing about the human being requires us to believe in a human soul.

Upon first approaching Victor, the monster is not aggressive: it reveals itself to be docile and childlike. Victor might have consulted with his professors and appealed to the authorities for help. His social standing would have assured sympathy and cooperation. He has no reason to remain silent, and no inclination to shield or spare his creature from harm. He could have contained any damage done, put his unfortunate experiment behind him, and returned to his loved ones. Instead shame and revulsion make him secretive and oblivious to public safety. This reaction, more than the experiment itself, has disastrous consequences. Victor acts as if he had committed an unforgivable crime. And indeed he has. He has murdered the human soul.

Grotesque horror is rooted in the dissolution of vital categories: the un-deadness of the vampire, the animate unconsciousness of the zombie, or the humanoid affinity of the artificial creature. Another Romantic tale that exploited the ambiguity of the lifelike
nonhuman creature is E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman*. It inspired Freud’s influential theory of the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*). Even at their most fantastic or sentimental, such stories are capable of raising philosophical questions. H. G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man* parallels the tale of the ring of Gyges told by the cynical Glaucon in Book II of Plato’s *Republic*: if there were a ring that would make its bearer invisible and therefore capable of committing any sort of crime undetected, and if we were to give such a ring to a just man, would he remain just? However sensationalist or sentimental the narrative answer might be, the suspense of the narration derives from this clear question at its core.

The narrative of *Frankenstein* echoes and anticipates a long tradition of mythical or narrative speculations around the core question: What makes the human being human? It extends from the late-medieval authors read by Victor to the latest science fiction films. Whether Paracelsus’ account of humanoid elemental spirits that attain a soul by receiving the marriage sacrament with a human, or the humanoid “replicants” in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, or the “mechas” in Kubrick and Spielberg’s *Artificial Intelligence*, or the tale of Pinocchio which is alluded to in the latter film, the answer points to sacramental union, self-transcending love, self-sacrifice, or forgiveness. These answers might seem doctrinaire or sentimental, but they hint at the common matrix of anxiety which links the horror novel to the novel of manners: the fear of social or romantic failure. The question, in what sense are we human, taps into deep anxieties. The terror of the lost love or failed match is at the root of both *Frankenstein* and a novel which seems altogether different.

Turning our attention to Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, we may feel as if we had just stepped out of an unnatural darkness into the familiar light of day. We blink and grope for new bearings. *Pride and Prejudice* is another narrative planet and atmosphere.
If we look closely enough, there are shared fears of social or marital failure, but in place of Shelley’s satanic darkness and angelic radiance, a mild light illuminates everything in Austen’s novel. Even after two centuries, it still all looks familiar to us: we recognize real emotions, natural hindrances, and commonplace resolutions of our own conflicts.

Despite Jane Austen’s lasting popularity, her normality and accessibility have been perceived as limitations. There have been expressions of disappointment at the narrow and domestic range of her themes, which is like criticizing Mozart for insufficient use of percussion; expressions of relief that, yes, Austen does mention property, money, power, and even colonies, as if forgetting these things for a few hours would destroy our equilibrium; and episode-by-episode appraisals of character flaws and improvements in Elisabeth, Darcy, and the other personages, which is of course appropriate for a novel of manners but as tiresome as the post-game analysis of a tennis match.

How will the skills acquired from older narratives help us orient ourselves here? The garish contrasts, overwrought visions, and larger-than-reality themes of Shelley are unthinkable in Austen’s universe. There are no more jarring shifts between inner and outer narrative frames. There is no framing narrative at all. With an afterimage of the framing perspectives of *Frankenstein* in mind, we can ask now whether there is such a thing as a more general framing function, which would be more basic and more universal than the cornice device itself: a function or functions that must be filled with or without that device. We can begin by looking for this framing function. Among other things, a framing narrative functions to set the tone and the terms of the main narration. In more recent narrative, the function evolves into that of the “hook”: the narrative has to begin in a way that seizes and holds the reader. But a framing device above all serves to transition
the reader from an everyday use of language into another use as distinct from the first as
dream is from waking. In some cases, the framing narrative provides coordinates for the
unique narrative world. Without a formal cornice device, the first sentence of *Pride and
Prejudice* provides us with coordinates in the generalization of its opening sentence: “It is
a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must
be in want of a wife.”

With this generalization, we are introduced to three realities. First, there is the
material reality of property, possessions, and marriage. Unassisted by Marx or Freud, we
know what this generalization is telling us: people are engaged in a constant, but more or
less discrete, pursuit of wealth, security, status, and sex. Second, we are presented with
the ambiguity of conventional belief: people believe what is in their interest, in this case
that a single man with wealth must be in need of a woman, not vice versa. And finally,
implicit in that statement, embodied in its amused irony, there is the inner superior reality
of those who see through social pretenses, the consciousness of those of us who are aware
of the games people play. Perhaps we find their games amusing. Perhaps we play along.
Perhaps we refuse. In any event, our ironic awareness sets us off from others. But, alas,
perhaps also from one another. From the start, there are at least two parties who possess
this ironic awareness: the narrator and the discerning reader. Before long we can deduce
that the two principal characters also possess an ironic consciousness. The three realities
that emerge in the first sentence are those of the power of self-interest, the force of social
convention, and the play of irony. In league with a narrator who has complemented our
intelligence and discretion, we, the initiated readers, are placed before the proscenium of
action, eager to see how things unfold.
The next sentence tilts generalization toward circumstance: “However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering the neighborhood, the truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.” We know what the game is. We will expect to be introduced to the players. Five Bennet daughters are mentioned, and there are others in this starting position. We all know the prize. Which young lady or daughter will succeed? The question taps anxieties as deep as anything in Shelley.

But this question pertains only to the surface action. As the story develops, the realities disclosed in the first sentence come into play as nature and convention. The first two characters to be introduced personalize the play of realities: Mrs. Bennet is wholly absorbed in the game, her mind guided by perceived interest. Mr. Bennet is all irony and cynicism. Other characters are altogether dominated by convention. Episodes and even minor figures are molded in diverse ways by the interaction of nature and convention. For example, about a minor character, Sir William Lucas it is said that, “though elated by rank, it did not render him supercilious… . By nature inoffensive, friendly and obliging, his presentations at St. James’s [his being knighted for giving a speech] had made him courteous” (12-13). In other words, his being honored conventionally with some sort of silly peerage has gone to his head and the effect has been, well…remarkably positive. Such details should warn against oversimplifying the contrasts of nature and convention.

The opposite relationship of interest and convention is evident in the words and behavior of the Bennets’ relation, Mr. Collins, who is slated to inherit their property since their estate is entailed to pass to a male heir: “I am very sensible, madam, of the hardship of my fair cousins,—and could say much on the subject, but that I am cautious of
appearing forward and precipitate.” Summoned to dinner, Mr. Collins’ admiration of everything “would have touched Mrs. Bennet’s heart, but for the mortifying supposition of his viewing it all as his future property” (45). This supposition extends completely to his admiration of his fair cousins as appropriate objects for his courtship and possession.

The two main characters, Elisabeth and Darcy are in distinct ways representatives of the ironic consciousness—the third reality implicit in the opening. They are like the ironic narrator and the discerning reader. They are vivid figures in a story problem: can those who see the games people play for what they are, who recognize the self-interest behind them, who prefer books to arid social rituals, can they overcome their own self-imposed distance, their proud independence and playful and ironic consciousness, to attain the common bond of love and marriage? Parallel to and implicit in the resolution of this question, there is a narrative of ideas, with its variation on the themes of nature and convention, independence and respect for the feelings and interests of others.

The resolution takes a familiar but no less gratifying form: the education of love. Through wounded pride and frustrated desire, lovers are compelled to see themselves in the eyes of others. The capacity for love and its educating process are marked by the evolution of conversational language in Pride and Prejudice from an impersonal reliance on abstractions and conventional wisdom to communications of “I” and “you.” Consider, for example, the one extreme of the response of Elisabeth’s stuffiest and most ambitious sister to her spontaneous intention of walking through the countryside to attend to her ill sister at the Bingleys: “‘I admire the activity of your benevolence,’ observed Mary, ‘but every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason; and, in my opinion, exertion should always be in proportion to what is required.’” Signifying nothing more than, “You mean
well, but it’s not worth it,” the pedantic Mary filters her opposition through a medium of abstraction representing the sterile aspect of Enlightenment culture. To this, Elisabeth offers no other response but doing it.

The clash of spontaneity and abstraction reveals itself as a social conflict in Elizabeth’s scandalous reply to Darcy’s aunt, Lady Catherine, who is bent on prohibiting a misalliance between the two: “And if I am that choice, why may not I accept him?” To which her elder and social superior responds, thereby letting the cat of material interest out of the bag of social convention: “Because honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it.” Convention is exposed as an instrument of interest.

The language is least abstract and most personal in the touching exchanges of Elisabeth and Darcy in their betrothal episode. He confesses to her: “What did you say of me, that I did not deserve? For, though your accusations were ill-founded, formed on mistaken premises, my behaviour to you at that time, had merited the severest reproof. It was unpardonable. I cannot think of it without abhorrence.”

Compared to the tone of previous conversations in Pride and Prejudice, a window has been thrown open. We can almost feel the fresh breeze caressing the two lovers. But wait a moment. How fresh is it really? Even at his most personal and passionate, Darcy still speaks as if he were parsing syllogisms in stating that her judgment was “ill-founded, formed on mistaken premises.” Why does a large contemporary public still respond as if Jane Austen spoke our language and spoke directly to us? We are after all accustomed to stronger and cruder fare. And we have so much of it to choose from.

One reason is that Jane Austen captures the threshold of our modern culture of courtship which is an affair of young people coming together on their own initiative and
choosing partners by interacting freely, engaging in activities aimed at testing the waters and evaluating choices, and having fun while doing so. Essential aspects of this modern culture are in the foreground in *Pride and Prejudice*. Family and fathers either abdicate their normative role in marriage selections (this is the case with Mr. Bennet as long as no overt scandal is involved), or they are expelled from that role (Lady Catherine). Though class did, and still does, have an impact on choices, that impact is not rigid. Otherwise the union of Darcy and Elizabeth would have made a greater stir. The more freedom of choice available (that is, freedom from family or societal constraints), the more courtship ceases to be a means to an end and becomes an end in itself. The young eligible people in *Pride and Prejudice* are clearly having fun with their visits, games, and gossip, though then as now the fun could have a down side. Games are fun. But players risk losing. In *The Decameron*, losing was often a matter of absurd bad luck. In *Frankenstein*, the loser was an outcast and figure of grotesque horror.

It would certainly be an exaggeration and oversimplification to say that *Pride and Prejudice* appeals to us because it shows the heroic founding epoch of dating. Dating is an American institution of the modern era. But the overstatement is close enough to the truth to lend poignancy to a graphic short story and satire by T. C. Boyle, “I Dated Jane Austen,” which can be viewed and read on the T. C. Boyle website. Boyle is among the best and funniest writing today. He has an instinct for dissecting the appeal of whatever catches the public eye. His vignette is less a satire of Jane Austen’s style than a parody of the contemporary identification with her world, which though chillingly remote is still somehow appealingly relevant to our own. His little satire works where an equivalent satire on the theme of “I went out with Juliet before she hooked up with Romeo” would
fall flat because of its silly inappropriateness to the Shakespearean culture of courtship, which for all its beauty and passion was hardly free of paternal domination and therefore neither a matter of choice nor an end in itself, but a perilous all-or-nothing leap into the void. There have been several competent and even delightful film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*. An interesting exercise would compare one or more scenes in the novel with the same scene in a film adaptation and analyze the touches that have been added in order to make her world seem more like ours.

**Tolstoy and Realism in Russia**

We have been comparing literary tradition with the phases of individual personal development. Considered in this way, mid-nineteenth-century literary Realism represents the approach of mature adulthood. Setting aside fantastic dreams and ideals, abandoning metaphysical rebellions and the excitements of courtship, the emergent adult accepts or at least confronts life as it is. The Realist looks to the institutions that bind us to everyday life: class, profession, possessions, marriage, family, and all the specifics of one’s region, times, and station in the world. In doing so, Realism gains new ground for literature by registering the existence of the common people and taking up themes formerly deemed unworthy of serious literary treatment. In the pendulum swing from subject to object, Realism compensates for the excessive subjectivity of Romanticism by shifting all the more decidedly toward neglected varieties of objectivity. The turn toward Realism also encourages new and more modern forms of narration. These eschew the forced symbols
and artificialities of the framing tales and tales within tales of the Romantic narratives of Tieck, Brentano, or Shelley. Not by chance, photography emerged in the era of Realism.

Our analogy with personal development might make it appear as if Realism were a stereotypical phenomenon, everywhere the same; but this is as untrue of literature as of human individuals. Realism took on a distinct character in France, England, or Germany. No European national literature achieved greater depth and variety under the guidance of the Realist esthetic than Russian literature. The reason for this becomes evident when we consider nineteenth-century Russian literature as a whole and in the European tradition of which it was an integral part. The influences of Western European literature only spread gradually to Russia. Arriving later, the literary and philosophical impulses of the West European Enlightenment, Idealism, and Romanticism converged with and assisted in the formation of a nascent Russian Realism. The Russians examined what came from abroad to discover its application to their peculiar social conditions. Their Realism was enriched by their seeking relevant interpretations of motives and ideas which might otherwise have remained derivative, abstract, fanciful, or sensationalist.

Western Romanticism had brought the fantastic and dreamlike into the purview of literature but had tended to regard narrative as an avenue of escape from the humdrum of everyday life. With the Russians, a countervailing movement takes place. When Pushkin writes a fantastic poem about a statue of Czar Peter I springing to life and persecuting a wretched government clerk, or Gogol tells about an ambitious official whose nose deserts him for an upwardly mobile career of its own, the fantastic is situated squarely in political and social life. When Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky approach the philosophical questions of the Enlightenment or German Idealism, or when they fix their attention upon the meaning
of Christianity, they divest these themes of their abstract or otherworldly dimensions and embody them in the lives of highly individualized characters who are situated squarely in a vivid Russian historical world. Fantastic elements, philosophical theories, and religious questions no longer take flight from everyday reality but instead acquire their appropriate context in a world which seems every bit as real as our own.

This convergence of traditions and of the abstract with the concrete gives Russian Realism its wonderful depth, breadth, vividness, and universality. I can personally attest to its universal appeal. Growing up in the Middle West, the Russian authors attracted my attention while I was still in high school. To buy them in cheap editions, I drove to the nearest city with a substantial paperback section in the rear of a newsstand. The world of Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov seemed like a parallel universe, similar and dissimilar to mine. In both, there were vast homogeneous expanses, extending east in one case and west in the other; in both, the same unresolved historical conflicts, serfdom and imperial subjugation in the one, slavery and the conquest of native peoples in the other; in both the same isolation of the few reading and reflecting individuals, the “superfluous men” of the Russian intelligentsia—or myself and the like-minded souls I hoped to meet someday. Pechorin, Levin, Pierre Bezukhov, Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamazov, and Myshkin were more familiar to me than neighbors. Three decades later, my happy sense of a common culture with the Austrian I married owes something to our shared love of these authors. When my relatives in Southern Illinois persuaded me to hunt deer with them, my initial alienation was ameliorated by the unforgotten Russian literary mystique of hunting as a return to rural common life. Before FaceBook, readers
took from their book choices a sense of belonging to an invisible universal culture as well as, in my case, a sense of the world as a conundrum of questions and problems.

Leo Tolstoy is one of the greatest Realists. Some consider him the greatest writer who ever lived. Even if qualifications like that are debatable, his stature is beyond doubt. He lived from 1828 till 1910. What he either heard of from his elders or experienced and wrote about spanned the nineteenth century, from the Napoleonic Wars at the beginning, to the radical modernizations toward the end of the century. The titles of his books give an idea of the nature of his themes: *War and Peace*, *Resurrection*, *Master and Man*, *What Men Live By*, or *Family Happiness*. Tolstoy the imaginative writer is the same as Tolstoy the truth-seeker. The sort of truth he sought was not scientific truth. His questions were rather, How should human beings live? What is the meaning of life? The answers were more important to Tolstoy than success or art. This is what made him a great writer, and it is also what made him abandon his previous writing at the very peak of his success and look for more radical approaches to the problem of living.

Love of truth led to his conversion to a radical, individual form of Christianity in 1879. He wrote a short book on this, *My Confession*, which is one of the most moving accounts of spiritual experience ever recorded. The same love of truth led to his break with the religious and political establishment of his time and his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church. Tolstoy was a radical who might be equally unacceptable to our moral-religious establishment. Of course, our procedure for excluding people is ignoring them: excommunication is not being invited to appear on the talk show circuit.

Tolstoy’s life is often divided in two: before and after his conversion experience of 1879. However, the later crisis and conversion had been foreshadowed much earlier in
*The Cossacks.* We should not assume that Olenin, the main character of *The Cossacks,* is identical with the author. But like Olenin, Tolstoy was a well-to-do young noble, at loose ends during the 1840s. Like Olenin, he fled from the aristocratic Russian circles to serve as a soldier in the Caucasus region and in the Crimean War (a war between Russia and an alliance of France, Britain, and Turkey).

During the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire was engaged in extending its rule over the mountain peoples of the Caucasus region, the region wedged between the Black and Caspian Seas, the immense Russian steppes in the north and Persia or Turkey to the south. Some of the Caucasus peoples, notably the Chechens, were Muslims who resisted fiercely and were brutally suppressed. The wars of mid nineteenth century are at the root of current conflicts in Russia. They are at the root of Chechen terrorism.

The Cossacks were Ukrainians or Russians who lived in villages near borders that required defending. Those in Tolstoy’s novel belong to a Christian Orthodox sect called the Old Believers. The Cossack Old Believers were lower-class outsiders, persecuted by the official church, a fact alluded to in *The Cossacks,* but proud of their freedom and independence. Engaged in perpetual guerilla warfare with the Muslim mountain warriors (*abreks*) who had declared a jihad against Russia, the Cossacks not only fought against but interacted with their enemies and, according to Tolstoy, respected them more than their Russian overlords.25 There are some foreign words in the novel which reflect the Cossack interaction with the Muslim Tartar mountain peoples: *aoul,* a Tartar village; *beshmét,* an undergarment with sleeves; *dzigít,* a Tartar warrior skilled at horsemanship; *kizyák,* fuel of straw and manure; *kunák,* a sworn friend or adopted brother; *yok,* “no” or “not.”26 Linguistically accurate details of this sort characterize the Realism of the novel.
From the very beginning of The Cossacks, the Romantic counter-theme engages with the dominant Realist theme. In place of a framing tale, a brief prelude in Moscow contextualizes and launches the action: “All is quiet in Moscow. The squeak of wheels is seldom heard in the snow-covered street.” The narrative panorama of the nocturnal city concludes with this contrast: “Workmen are already getting up after the long winter night and going to their work—but for the gentlefolk it is still evening.” Working people live one life; the noble gentlemen who converse and dream into the wee hours live another. Celebrating his departure from the city, Dmitri Andreich Olenin is a young nobleman disappointed by love and filled with yearning for meaning. “I am beginning a new life,” he announces to his friends, to which one replies: “Which you will again make a mess of” (87). The narrator sets this telling rejoinder in perspective by noting that, “the traveller went on talking about himself, without noticing that this did not interest the others as much as it did him.” The exhausted restaurant attendant listens to them all, “wondering why gentlefolk always talk about one and the same thing” (87).

With this, we are sufficiently informed about the objective of the plot, the factors set against the protagonist, and the likely outcome. And yet despite his egotism, Olenin is portrayed with warmth and sympathy. We can identify with his alternation between a longing for adventure and his worried recollections of the debts he owes his tailor. We wonder and doubt whether he will succeed in finding a new life; and we know from the prelude what militates against his success. Yet we still hope for his success because we cannot help recognizing our desire for a different sort of life in his Romantic longing.

The Cossacks is from an early phase of Tolstoy’s work; in it he anticipates the technique referred to by Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky as “alienation” (ostronenie).
In Shklovsky’s theory the devices of alienation are applicable to all genres of literature, but they have a classic example in Tolstoy’s mature works. We can find the alienation device at work in the Moscow prelude to *The Cossacks*. The life-style of Olenin and his friends, their egotism and congeniality, are not unfamiliar to us; in fact they are probably so familiar that we fail to think about them as such. For a Hollywood-type remake of this novel, we would have no difficulty inventing the equivalent character types. However, the point of the alienation device is to make things appear less familiar and hence more worthy of study or reflection. Refracted through the eyes of the weary servants who wait on the three young gentlemen in a Moscow restaurant into the wee hours of the morning, we recognize the incomprehensibility of their egotism, and perhaps of our own. How can these indolent young gentlemen be so unaware that their benevolence and generosity are constantly being indulged at the expense of others?

Tolstoy’s technique of revealing the strangeness of the familiar by presenting it in particular personal and situational perspectives has its most famous example in young Natasha’s experience of an opera in Chapter Nine of Book Eight of *War and Peace*. The following is in effect a circumlocution for, “Then the opera commenced”:

The floor of the stage consisted of smooth boards, at the sides was some painted cardboard representing trees, and at the back was a cloth stretched over boards. In the center of the stage sat some girls in red bodices and white skirts. One very fat girl in a white silk dress sat apart on a low bench, to the back of which a piece of green cardboard was glued. They all sang something. When they had finished their song the girl in white went up to the prompter’s box and a man with tight silk trousers over his
stout legs, and holding a plume and a dagger, went up to her and began
singing, waving his arms about.

Here the familiar world of the theater is made strange, and the remote consciousness of a young girl in a Moscow opera at the start of the nineteenth century is made familiar. As an experiment, the reader might describe any familiar activity (attending class or playing a sport), as if its nature and purpose were completely unknown and observe how doing so tends to cast a critical light upon the activity. Tolstoy’s characteristic play of perspective unites radical social criticism with an extraordinary human empathy.

This empathetic and critical power is equally focused in Tolstoy’s presentation of war. War and Peace is among other things a great novel of war that draws on Tolstoy’s wartime experiences, as well as on history. At Austerlitz in 1805, Napoleon defeated the combined Russian and Austrian armies in a decisive battle. As the battle turns against the Russians, Prince Andrei, one of the central characters, is shamed into leading a desperate charge against the French forces. His experience of this great and decisive battle is like a prism that resolves its heroic brilliance into several seemingly trivial details which reveal to us their critical symbolic significance. These details involve the regimental standard (a banner heavier than anything the aristocratic Andrei is accustomed to carrying); a canon “mop” (a ramrod used for cleaning and loading the barrel); and the sky above (which in Russian is referred to by the common term, vysokoe nebo, simply “high sky”).

“Hurrah!” shouted Prince Andrei, and scarcely able to hold up the heavy standard, he ran forward with full confidence that the whole battalion would follow him.
And really he only ran a few steps alone. One soldier moved and then another and soon the whole battalion ran forward shouting “Hurrah!” and overtook him.

A Russian sergeant takes up the standard from him but is immediately killed, so Prince Andrei again has to lug his unwonted burden. From his inner point of view, we next get a distinct and estranged version of events. While charging forward, his gaze is fixed upon what is happening in the contested battery up ahead. A Russian soldier is struggling with a French soldier over the mop. Watching them during the de-temporalized seconds of his charge, Andrei falls into a dazed reverie and observes that the two men are equally beside themselves. They appear suddenly incomprehensible to him.

He could distinctly see the distraught yet angry expression on the faces of these two men, who evidently did not realize what they were doing.

“What are they doing?” thought Prince Andrei as he gazed at them.

When another French soldier with a bayonet arrives at the battery, Prince Andrei expects to see the Russian killed. He has become so absorbed in the scene as he charges forward that it is as if he were watching a peculiar stage performance, like Natasha in the opera.

But Prince Andrei did not see how it ended. It seemed to him as though one of the soldiers near him hit him on the head with the full swing of a bludgeon. It hurt a little, but the worst of it was that the pain distracted him and prevented his seeing what he had been looking at.

“What’s this? Am I falling? My legs are giving way,” thought he, and fell on his back. He opened his eyes, hoping to see how the struggle of the Frenchmen with the Russian gunners ended…. But he saw nothing.
Above him there was now nothing but the sky—the lofty sky, not clear yet still immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds gliding slowly across it. “How quiet, peaceful, and solemn; not at all as I ran,” thought Prince Andrei—“not as we ran, shouting and fighting, not at all as the gunner and the Frenchman with frightened and angry faces struggled for the mop: how differently do those clouds glide across the lofty infinite sky! How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing, but that. But even it does not exist, there is nothing but quiet and peace. Thank God! ...”

Those are his thoughts as he loses consciousness and Chapter 16 of Book Three comes to an end. “Thank God” is not a prayer of thanks for personal salvation. Andrei is grateful that he has finally discovered what is essential in the world: the infinite sky appears to be an embodiment of reality and truth.

Brief scenes like this sum up Tolstoy’s life and work, which in turn sum up much of the nineteenth century, everything from the philosophy of the late Enlightenment and the individualism of the Romantics to the social conscience of the nineteenth-century reformers to the poetic experiments of turn of the century poets and Formalist critics who found in his work models for the experiments with what they called alienation technique, understood as the art of making familiar objects strange and symbolically significant. Though Tolstoy is very much a writer of the nineteenth century, the experimental poets and revolutionary playwrights of twentieth-century literature had their precursor in him. Moreover, his influence extended well beyond Western literature. The above passage is
expressive of Tolstoy’s fervent Russian patriotism. In the original, the Russian soldiers are simply called “nashi,” “ours.” But the passage anticipates Tolstoy’s radicalism and universal pacifism, his ideas that are alien to present-day patriotisms and that influenced important modern thinkers including Gandhi.

Natasha’s estranged view of the opera and Prince Andrei’s of his skirmish in the Battle of Austerlitz are strange because their usual meaning has been voided. Meaning is missing. In *The Cossacks*, Olenin sets off precisely in quest of a missing meaning of life. Any young person progressing from school or college to adult life should recognize what is at stake. The question is essentially, when does the real life begin?

In pursuit of the real life Olenin leaves Moscow. He catches a glimpse of it in his first clear view of the mountains of the Caucasus: “From that moment all he saw, all he thought, and all he felt, acquired for him a new character, sternly majestic like the mountains! All his Moscow reminiscences, shame, and repentance, and his trivial dreams about the Caucasus, vanished and did not return. ‘Now it has begun,’ a solemn voice seemed to say to him” (97). But he is not there yet. Meaning recedes before Olenin. He seeks it in the primitive life of the Cossacks, in friendship with the young Cossack Lukashka, in the wisdom of old Cossack Eroshka who regrets the loss of life and does not accept Christian notions about sin, in his love for Lukashka’s presumptive bride Maryanka, in his thoughts of self-sacrifice for the common good, in his experience of nature, and in his worship of beauty. The reader can follow the sequence of experiences which announce ecstatically and prematurely, Here is the real thing! Their imagery and associations form a chain in Olenin’s thought.
Midway through the novel, Olenin experiences an especially intense condition of this kind. Hunting deer in a forest, he is bitten by countless mosquitoes and enters a state of spiritual ecstasy in which he feels that he is both entirely unique and somehow united with all living creatures. For an ecstatic moment, he ceases to be the man he was and merges with all of nature. Much of what he realizes is no more than this simple truth about life: All living things are part of a whole. All living beings live, die, and desire happiness. Olenin is overcome by a sudden desire to live for others by doing good. One reason for his epiphany is that he recognizes that what is good or bad is only good or bad with regard to the whole of things, all of nature:

These myriads of insects were so well suited to that monstrously lavish wild vegetation, these multitudes of birds and beasts which filled the forest, this dark foliage, this hot scented air, these runlets filled with turbid water which everywhere soaked through from the Terek and gurgles here and there under the overhanging leaves, that the very thing which had first seemed dreadful and intolerable now seemed pleasant.” (163)

Another reason is that he recognizes that he is not what society defines him as being, but is instead a small part of a living whole:

And it was clear to him that he was not a Russian nobleman, a member of Moscow society, the friend and relation of so-and-so and so-and-so, but just such a mosquito, or pheasant, or deer, as those that were living around him. “Just as they, just as Daddy Eroshka, I shall live awhile and die, and as he says truly: ‘grass will grow and nothing more.’” (164)
Most important of all, Olenin recognizes that overcoming the false identity that Moscow society forced upon him means that, “Happiness lies in living for others” (165). This is a central tenet of his later Christian period. Tolstoy wrote it before his conversion of 1879, but the conversion was implicitly on hand waiting to happen. It is anticipated in many places in his early novels. But does Olenin’s conversion take hold? Does he arrive at a state of resolution? Does he become a true friend of Lukashaka? If not, why not? What does his failure say about his relationship to the life of nature as a whole?

Other scenes must also be read in relation to the overall question of truth. We need to consider the symbolism of the bountiful harvest, the scene in which Olenin meets with Maryanka and gets closer to her. It is not only the melons that are ripening in that scene. In the letter Olenin writes in Chapter 33, he is beginning to realize that his love of nature and a natural life is the same as his love for Maryanka. In order to be happy, we need very few of the things that civilization thrusts upon us. But we do need to be useful and live for others. For Tolstoy, participating in producing what little we all need to live and living for others is the same as living life meaningfully, living in truth. As Olenin recognizes in his sudden vision of the mountains, nature is infinite and sublime. The infinite is not only up there but everywhere down below and in human community.

Notice how Olenin relates to Maryanka in and after the harvest scene. We need to read very carefully when Olenin tries to explain his feelings for her in the letter he writes in Chapter 33. The two draw close when he comes out to work in the harvest, but Olenin is repulsed when she is drawn to the erotic party games organized by his fellow aristocrat Beletski. He is revolted by what he calls “falseness,” which is the opposite of the truth he is searching for associated with nature. Why is Olenin unable to win Maryanka’s heart?
In answering this question, consider a scene near the end. Chechen raiders have been chased down and trapped in the steppes. The steppes are the vast Asian-Russian plains where for centuries one people fought another, where one man’s gain was another man’s loss, one man’s life another’s death—a world in which one had to stick to one’s kind to survive. Tolstoy’s scenes extract their symbolism from the interaction of the characters with their world. The novel is structured by their symbolic development, which raises questions without necessarily forcing an answer upon us. The reader might describe from personal knowledge friends, acquaintances, or relatives who resemble Olenin, Maryanka, or Lukashka in terms of reflection and alienation or instinctive action and group loyalty.

Another exercise in interpreting Tolstoy is to focus upon the moral problems that inform his work. This need not mean embracing his solutions. It can simply mean giving serious attention to the questions he raises. In his later Confession, Tolstoy’s insistent focus on the absent meaning of things allows him to look back upon the activities of the Russian intellectual class to which he belonged. His words, which offer another example of his alienation technique at work, could apply equally to our universities:

At the time we were all convinced that we had to speak, write, and publish as quickly as possible and as much as possible and that this was necessary for the good of mankind. Thousands of us published and wrote in an effort to teach others, all the while disclaiming and abusing one another. Without taking note of the fact that we knew nothing, that we did not know the answer to the simplest question in life, the question of what is right and what is wrong, we all went on talking without listening to one another. (20-21)
Tolstoy’s *Confession*, though rooted in his conversion experience of the year 1879, can be read in conjunction with Olenin’s search for meaning in *The Cossacks*, a work written many years earlier. What are we to make of the fact that Tolstoy’s account of his conversion resembles the fictional Olenin’s ecstatic experience in the forest in the much earlier work? The later biographical conversion experience could almost have been the prototype for the much earlier fictional experience. The conversion is recounted in these words: “I remember one day in early spring when I was alone in the forest listening to the sounds of the woods. I listened and thought about the one thing that had constantly occupied me for the last three years. Again I was searching for God” (74). The inner dialog leads him to the conclusion that, “To know God and to live come to one and the same thing. God is life” (74). He struggles on with belief and unbelief, rejecting dogma, affirming the faith of the common people, and gradually arriving at his new practice of faith, which, as with Olenin in *The Cossacks*, involves living for others. What are we to make of the fact that, at least in its rough outline, the presumably fictional conversion of Olenin was *imagined* long before the biographical one actually *took place*?

It seems to me that this ambiguity is rooted in the same state of affairs as Olenin’s recurrent, and thus futile, arrivals at the real life, the life that always recedes before him. No matter how moving his experience of the mountains or of arriving in the Cossack village or of transcending his old identity while hunting in the forest—without lasting consequences the meaning of any experience fades. Since he is not one of the Cossacks, his fraternizations do not retain their first meaning. He is a loser in love because he lives in a society where peasants and servants are losers in life. Tolstoy imagined a conversion which would only became real in consequence of a lasting change in shared life.
The meaning of an experience is not intrinsic to it, but only emerges *narratively* through time. The first meeting with someone we fall in love with retroactively acquires greater and greater significance the longer and more intense the relationship becomes. If the relationship is broken off and the feeling it inspired lost or turned into its opposite, everything fateful or magical about the first meeting is retroactively cancelled. Similarly, impressions that accompany genuine turning points in our life are often associated with a kind of spontaneous personal symbolism: the open road before us the first time we drive off on our own, or anything associated with a major life change. Tolstoy is so universal that we can interpret his work by considering the patterns of perception in our own lives.

*The Cossacks* is a very early work and *Master and Man* (1895) a work of the late, post-conversion Christian and moralistic period. Vasili Brekhunov is a greedy provincial merchant. In the middle of the Russian winter during a snowstorm, he decides to hitch up his sled and ride over to make a killer deal on some property up for sale. He takes his workman Nikita with him. Though a drinker, Nikita is utterly good-natured. His wife collects his wages but lives with another man. Though his master cheats him at every turn, Nikita is incapable of taking offense or holding a grudge. He embodies Tolstoy’s radical Christian ideal of non-resistance to evil and of turning the other cheek.

As it grows dark, they begin to lose their way in a dangerous snowstorm. Vasili refuses to give up on his killer bargain. Finally, it is night and they are trapped in a dark region of ravines and snowdrifts. They can no longer see or walk in the blinding snow. Their horse cannot pull the sled. They have no choice but to spend the night in the open. After a while Vasili realizes that he cannot survive. He unhitches the one horse and rides
off into the blinding snowstorm. He loses his way and becomes utterly terrified at the prospect of death. The horse carries him in a full circle back to the sled where Nikita is already half frozen. Expecting to die, Nikita calmly asks his master to pay whatever is owed him to his wife and son.

Confronted with death, Vasili spontaneously experiences a change of heart. He lies on top of Nikita in the sled and thereby prevents his freezing. By exerting himself to save Nikita, he rids himself of his terror but freezes to death. As the rich man is dying, in the words of the narrator, “it seemed to him that he was Nikita and Nikita was he, that his life was not in himself but in Nikita” (498).

Master and man and the peasants they meet along the way are plausible. Vasili does what he does to save Nikita because he is terrified of death: he realizes instinctively that only human community and his self-sacrifice can vanquish his terror of the symbolic and real void of darkness into which he had erred. As he is freezing, he experiences an indescribable joy never before known to him. It is akin to the joy in Olenin’s moment of ecstatic insight in the forest. Though Master and Man is moralistic to the highest degree, everything in it makes sense because of its realistic circumstances and minute attention to physical and psychological detail. Even Mukhorty the horse, whom we get to know quite well, is a convincing character. Whether we embrace it or not, Tolstoy’s altruistic ending could find more support in our biological science than could creationism; and his ethic is surely closer to the heart of Christian doctrine. Anyone inclined to regard his Christian ethics as anachronistic in the era of Modernism would do well to consider that no less an icon of modernity than Ludwig Wittgenstein carried Tolstoy’s The Gospel in Brief with him as an army officer during the First World War.
All of Tolstoy’s narrations are unique, but they typically turn on the notion of an ultimate moment of truth. In *Master and Man*, a famous detail indicates the subtle nature of Tolstoy’s symbolism. Vasili and Nikita keep getting lost and circling back through the same village by mistake. An image repeats itself: “At the end house of the village, some frozen clothes hanging on a line—shirts, one red and one white, trousers, leg-bands, and a petticoat—fluttered wildly in the wind. The white shirt in particular struggled desperately, waving its sleeves about” (464). They pass through the village again and now, “the white shirt had broken loose and was now attached by only one frozen sleeve” (466). On the last false transit through the village, the white shirt is gone.

Tolstoy rarely overdoes his symbolism. In *The Cossacks*, most contemporary writers would have made more of Olenin’s visiting with a Maryanka who sits perched on an oven ready to be stoked and fired up in Chapter 26. The struggling shirt betokens the worsening storm and increasing desperation of their situation. The darkness into which Vasili errs is as real as it is symbolic. Its symbolism derives from its reality. The shirt is a real shirt, but it is also a warning of the deadly power of the storm and an admonition to Vasili of the inner man struggling to break free of the false life in the face of death.

The radical Christian ideal of non-resistance to evil is also expressed in the last story in the collection of *Great Short Works*. “Alyosha the Pot” is about a poor young fellow who has nothing going for him at all and whose life is a set of misfortunes that he accepts as God’s will. His father turns him into an indentured servant for another man. He accepts all this. Another unfortunate soul, a cook, falls in love with him and they want to get married, but his father forbids it. Alyosha accepts everything. He takes a bad tumble from a roof and lies dying. But he accepts everything as God’s will.
For most of us, this is certainly hard to take. The story is only four pages long. The remarkable thing is its total lack of irony. There is no tongue-in-cheek quality and no laughter at Alyosha’s expense, only the pure Christian ideal: “blessed are the meek.” Why is this so hard to take? Not because the existence of an Alyosha is necessarily inconceivable, but rather because Alyosha is a sap and loser. We all prefer not thinking about someone like him. The unspoken point may be that the pure Christian ideal is hard to take. Even Christians find it unbearable.

The Realism of Flaubert

Tolstoy’s Cossacks is a work of transition from Romanticism to Realism. Olenin begins as a Romantic hero, searching vaguely for love, adventure, and altruistic ideals. The novel then takes us to the very concrete world of Cossack society. We come to the realization that part of Olenin’s problem is that, unlike the Cossacks, he has no place in the social world. He takes no part in everyday life. Maryanka in contrast is thoroughly involved in it. She is a product of her community and its life. When something tragic happens to her community—Lukashka is killed—she is instinctively drawn back into it and instinctively hostile to the outsider Olenin. It is not Olenin’s fault that Lukashka was killed. Far from it. But in the moment of crisis Maryanka senses that it is really a matter of “us against them” and Olenin is one of them.

The French and Western European Realism of Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) is similar to and at the same time very distinct from Tolstoy’s. In his famous tale, A Simple Heart (from Three Tales, 1877), we can look for parallels, but superficial resemblances
only highlight the distance of Flaubert from Tolstoy, and indeed of West European from Russian Realism. Who in Flaubert’s Realist narrative is seeking answers to or obsessed with questions about the meaning of life or the relation of the individual to society? The political views of the characters in Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* are more like social symptoms or nervous ticks than philosophical questions; and the quest for knowledge of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is quixotic and pedantic rather than uplifting.

Flaubert did have a side that was fascinated by the exotic, evident in the classical orientalism of his *Salambo* or in the tormented imagination of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. But in his portrayal of the middle class milieu in *Madame Bovary* or *A Simple Heart*, things are what they are. In *A Simple Heart*, one might look for trace elements of bygone times and mentalities, distinct from the narrative present, when Madame Aubain is introduced as the widow of a “handsome but impecunious young man, who died at the beginning of 1809” (3). Her sentiments are fixed on her departed husband, who had a flair seemingly akin to the Romantic sense of life. But this reference has nothing of the spirit of Romanticism; just as the fiery old revolutionary Père Colmiche is now nothing but a “dribbling and shaking” old man living in a “pigsty” (28-29). There were indeed exciting and stirring days, distinct from the present. But the reality of time has flattened everything out and reduced it to its real material essence. We could call this cynical if it were not realistic. At least Frankenstein’s creature could bewail its fate. Flaubert evokes an existence which is not even reflective enough to be aware of its own meaninglessness.

A second and related way in which Tolstoy’s Realism differs from Flaubert’s is in the latter’s greater reluctance to intrude upon the narration with authorial commentaries. This distinction is a correlative of the quest for meaning in Tolstoy and his characters,
and of the general absence of such a quest in Flaubert’s narrative world. Tolstoy is an intrusive narrator, Flaubert a more reserved one. In *A Simple Heart*, this results in the absence of a framing narrative or anything like the framing prelude of Olenin’s last night in Moscow. There are no moments in which the meaning of life, or even the question of the meaning of life, flashes before us, and no preliminary episode where the premises of such questions can be highlighted. Everything before and after, inner and outer, mental and material, individual and social is part of the same natural flow of life which in time flattens all things out. This understanding of the world has its stylistic counterpart in Flaubert’s narrative structure and style.

Nevertheless, a narrative has to begin somehow. It has to introduce its characters, situating them in time and place and providing readers with terms and a perspective that orients them in the narrative flow. If these functions were filled by the framing tale or in a prelude to the action, we can expect to find them filled here as well. Flaubert’s first sentence—“For half a century the good ladies of Pont-l’Évêque envied Madame Aubain her servant Félicité”—gives us the name and station of the central character, the “servant Félicité,” her employer “Madame Aubain,” and the milieu of middle-class Pont-l’Évêque, as well as a narrative time span of “half a century.” Why the “good ladies” should have envied their friend is explained next. The servant is an amazing bargain, doing every sort of task for her disagreeable mistress and receiving little in return.

Time, place, class, and possessions are the coordinates of this realistic world. Next it is fleshed out with an inventory of Madame Aubain’s house and possessions worthy of the shrewdest realtor. Madame Aubain’s human existence is implicit in her property and status. Félicité’s human existence, including her dawn visits to mass, are
wholly integrated into her industrious work routines and the inexpensive habits and dress that make her meager pay quite adequate.

Only after all these details of property have been inventoried and her work and routines set forth in their relevance to the costs and benefits of her service is her person brought into focus: “She had a thin face and a sharp voice. At twenty-five she was taken for forty. Once past fifty she could have been any age; and with her perpetual silence, straight back, and deliberate gestures she looked like a wooden dummy, driven by clockwork” (4). Félicité, it seems, has nothing going for her except her service. At the outset, she is virtually reduced to one more piece of furniture or machine. She is “like a wooden dummy, driven by clockwork” (4). Félicité concludes the inventory of things.

Félicité is comparable in station to Tolstoy’s humble servants, Nikita or Alyosha the Pot; but her comparability to them raises the question of Flaubert’s intentions or implications. Realism, whether in Russia or France, took the lower classes, the humble servants like her, seriously. But what does that mean? The poor can serve as models of Christian meekness. They can be viewed as oppressed and downtrodden workers who should rise up and overthrow the society that oppresses not only them but others of their class. The humble can be regarded as afflicted individuals in need of corrective public intervention. Or they can be understood as sadder exemplifications of our own human futility. *A Simple Heart* is a straightforward narrative, yet readers may find support for all of these interpretations of Félicité: as a saint, as an oppressed proletarian, as a sick or neurotic individual, or as a kind of Everyone, whose delusions and disappointments are merely more blatant than those shared by all.
The fourth interpretation flies in the face of our American sense of optimism, but it derives some support from the sentence that follows the characterization of Félicité as a wooden mechanism or thing: “She had had, like anyone else, her love story” (4). Hers is the saddest imaginable love story, but it nonetheless determines the course of her life and offers a hint of a capacity for love that manifests itself later. As we proceed on, more and more traits distinguish her from the mere thing or mechanism. They come to light in her relationship with Madame Aubain’s two children, in her apparent capacity for happiness, and in a particular incident when Madame Aubain’s family is attacked by a bull. Félicité distinguishes herself by heroism. But such distinctions remain implicit. Flaubert does not dwell on them or use them to give a moralistic characterization of Félicité.

We recall how Natasha’s view of the opera stripped it of its cultural meaning, and how Prince Andrei’s experience at Austerlitz implied a critique of the meaninglessness of heroism and war. Flaubert presents something akin to this when the young Félicité views a country dance as “this mass of people all hopping about in time” (5), or when her unselfconscious valor contrasts with the unheroic behavior of all the men in Flaubert’s narration. But unlike Tolstoy’s reflective characters, Félicité is conscious of nothing of the sort. It is up to us to read these valuations out of her bewildered or unselfconscious responses. The discerning reader and the unobtrusive narrator are linked by a bond of irony. Both see through the pretenses and illusions of the characters without any need of overt indications, intrusive commentaries, or forced points.

Nevertheless, it soon becomes apparent that Félicité lives in a world of her own. Accompanying Madame Aubain’s daughter to religious instruction for first communion, Félicité listens with wonder to the priest’s “summary of Sacred History.”
In her mind’s eye she saw Paradise, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, the cities destroyed by fire, whole peoples dying, idles overthrown; and this dazzling vision left her with lasting respect for the Almighty and fear of his wrath. Then she wept as she listened to the story of the Passion. Why had they crucified him, he who loved children, fed the multitude, healed the blind, and had been willing, in his meekness, to be born among the poor, in the muck of the stable? Sowing, harvesting, pressing, all these familiar things of which the Gospel speaks were part of her life; God had sanctified them with his passing presence; and she loved lambs more dearly from love of the Lamb of God, doves because of the Holy Spirit.

Since Félicité’s illiteracy makes her impervious to all dogma and to everything abstract or invisible, she encounters difficulties making sense of the Holy Spirit: “She found it hard to visualize what he looked like, for he was not just a bird, but was a fire as well, and at other times a breath.”

Later, in her old age, she has lost all the human objects of her love and is left only with her beloved talking parrot Loulou. At this point, her inability to make sense of the Holy Spirit leads to the striking but ambiguous climax of the tale. The ending leaves the reader with a demanding task of interpretation. When Loulou dies, Félicité has him stuffed and keeps him as precious company. As her senses become dulled from age and loneliness, the bird is transformed in her mind:

In church she always gazed at the Holy Spirit, and noticed that he looked something like the parrot. The likeness seemed still more evident
in a popular print of Our Lord’s baptism. With his purple wings and emerald green body he was the very image of Loulou.

She bought the print and hung it up in place of the Comte d’Artois, with the result that she could take them in together with a single glance. They became associated in her mind, so that the parrot became sanctified from this connexion with the Holy Spirit, which in turn became more lifelike and readily intelligible in her eyes. (34)

The reader should pay close attention in the tale’s conclusion to the convergence of the elements of Félicité’s character and the carefully drawn contrast between her life and that of her social superiors. Her death occurs as a religious process outside sends clouds of incense wafting into her room; it is summarized in these terms:

A cloud of blue incense smoke rose up to Félicité’s room. She opened wide her nostrils as she breathed in deeply, in an act at once sensual and mystical. She closed her eyes. Her lips smiled. Her heartbeats grew steadily slower, fainter every time, softer, like a fountain running dry, like an echo fading; and as she breathed her last, she thought she saw, as the heavens opened, a gigantic parrot hovering over her head. (40)

In Tolstoy’s tale of the meek Alyosha, there was no irony, no sense of amusement at Alyosha’s expense. Is this also the case in Flaubert’s A Simple Heart? If we assume that the story takes religion seriously, how are we to take Félicité’s kneeling and praying before her stuffed parrot, a practice the narrator refers to as “idolatrous.” If the narrator does not take Félicité’s religiosity seriously, can we avoid the conclusion that the ending
of the tale is cruel at her expense? Evidence can be found for either conclusion. Finding and weighing it is an exercise in the study of narrative detail, tone, and irony.

Flaubert and Tolstoy are both authors of the first magnitude. We can compare the differences that are brought into sharper focus by what they have in common. First of all, Tolstoy makes the servant exemplary for Christian humanity. Flaubert instead treats her with apparent irony, leaving it for us to resolve the ambivalence of her life.

Second, Tolstoy, especially the older Tolstoy, rejects literature as an end in itself and adapts it to the moral purpose of serving humankind. Flaubert harbors no illusions about harnessing literature for moral improvement. Literature is an end in itself, therefore style is more important than content. Alongside his realism, Flaubert displayed a revived Romantic strain that was fascinated by the exotic and the immoral.

Tolstoy not only invents a socially conscious Christian literature; he anticipates the socialist novel which elevates the downtrodden, the masses, into a protagonist in their own right. This leads to the literature of protest and the narrative of naturalism. Zola or Gorky, in writing of the people, could look back to Tolstoy. In Zola’s great novel of a mining strike, *Germinal* (1885), the oppressed miners are not so much attuned to nature: they are a force within it. After they have been defeated and their ranks devastated by a disaster which has buried them below the earth, the novel concludes with this prophetic and revolutionary vision: “Men were springing up, a black avenging host was slowly germinating in the furrows, thrusting upwards for the harvests of future ages. And very soon their germination would crack the earth asunder.”

Between Tolstoy and Flaubert, narrative realism begins to branch off in opposite directions. Flaubert’s canonizing of style and art as ends in themselves anticipates what
is referred to as the narrative of Decadence. Published with *A Simple Heart*, Flaubert’s tale *Herodias* is derived from the beheading of John the Baptist in Matthew 14 or Mark 6. John is a prophetic voice, denouncing iniquity, supported by the people, imprisoned yet protected by the waffling Herod. His daughter Herodias, a decadent spoiled brat, dances for him, pleasing him so much that he promises her anything she wishes. She demands the head of John (Mark 6:14-29). As in Aubrey Beardsley’s turn-of-the-century ink drawings of a half-naked dancer cavorting with John’s severed head, the amoral ethic of Decadence symbolically triumphs over the ethic of prophetic social protest.

The narratives of Decadence and of its close relative Symbolism took many forms with subtle connections to the literature of protest. In Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *Against the Grain* (1884), an esthete withdraws into an artificial world of beauty, exquisitely refined taste, and drug-induced sensations, to the point of near-insanity. In V. M. Garshin’s novella, *The Red Flower* (1883), a mental patient is convinced that all evil in the universe is concealed in a poppy flower growing in the courtyard of the mental asylum. Gathering all his powers, he destroys the flower but expires in the act. Decadent insanity may arise from frustrated humanism. In Anton Chekhov’s novella, *Ward Six* (1892), a provincial physician tries to reform a ward for the insane but ends up himself committed in it by a society that resists all change. The Symbolist protagonist thus falls prey to a madness expressive of the futility of moral endeavor. The Decadent not only cultivates the art, beauty, and culture of the past, but shuns a world in which their values are out of place. The Portuguese Modernist Ferdinand Pessoa’s *Book of Disquiet* embodies the poetic and essayistic powers of Modernist Decadence. Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, despite the
misunderstandings of this Sixties cult classic, expresses a profound humanism and protest against the rise of fascism and the tyranny of modern mass culture in general.

**Urban Narrative and Paradox in Chesterton**

Tolstoy’s breadth as a writer suffered from one major gap. He was not at his best in writing about the culture and society of people in cities. Industry, to the degree that it intrudes in his rural world in the form of railroads, is negative. Industrial workers, who were generally less willing to live as the humble servant, were scarcely in his repertoire. Tolstoy was one of the great writers of rural life. The way he wrote and the questions he asked about life were tied to his understanding of nature. Cities and their society corrupt. To live according to nature is to live in truth. This ideal of nature does not begin or end with Tolstoy. Behind it a long tradition extends back to the ancient world.

However, there is another tradition of narrative that began to flourish early in the nineteenth century and continued through the twentieth: the tradition of urban narrative. This is a narrative that is not only set in cities but derives its themes, characters, and even forms from the modern city. The city in urban narrative is an antithetical environment, problematic and puzzling. Urban narrative devolves from our understanding of the cities as unnatural, and it is fueled by their increasing centrality in modern social and cultural life. Though urban narrative has its beginnings in the late Romantic period, it reaches its zenith in Modernist novels such as Andrey Byely’s *Petersburg* or Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin. Alexanderplatz*. Urban narrative is by no means passé, for it anticipates the urbanization
of the entire world: the inexorable transition from an agricultural environment closer to
nature to the artificial global system in which much of the earth’s population now lives.

Nineteenth-century urban narratives were set in the gloomy London of Charles
Dickens, in the unnatural St. Petersburg of Gogol and Dostoyevsky, or in the dog-eat-dog
Paris that Balzac characterized as a predatory hell. The life depicted in these early urban
narratives already stood at the furthest remove from the old ideal of a life close to nature.
Life in the city seemed unnatural, contradictory, and full of paradoxical and bewildering
alternatives. In earlier centuries, the cities had liberated the individual from rural custom
and tradition. In contrast, the modern urban world increasingly resembled a labyrinth in
which individuals were entrapped. People in cities can be lonely yet part of a vast crowd;
outwardly free yet invisibly entangled. Created to serve and liberate human society, the
city instead absorbs and dominates it. In the greatest of urban narratives, the unnatural
labyrinth of the city can also signify the complexity of the human mind.

In Dickens’ novel *Bleak House* the metropolis is a spider web of laws, courts, and
prisons. In Russia, there is a long tradition of this kind of urban writing. It is associated
with the imperial capital of St. Petersburg, which was built from the ground up 300 years
ago on the orders of Czar Peter I. In Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Petersburg is
a maze of reason and logic that entraps and stifles the human heart. A student intellectual
named Raskolnikov, short on cash, decides that his brilliant potential justifies murdering
a wretched old pawn-broker. In Dostoyevsky’s novel, the teeming streets and squares of
the city, with their weirdly shaped houses and rooms, strike the reader as a projection of
Raskolnikov’s tortured reasoning and guilt.
Urban narratives produced a fantastic literature with their own kind of fairy tale. An example is the theme of the double in a novel of that title by Dostoyevsky. What is a double? A real life double might be someone who dresses and acts like us. A fantastic double would appear if we went to the office and encountered someone who looked and talked exactly like us. Gradually our double might elbow us aside and take over our job and life. The fantastic theme of the double reflects the fact that in an urban world people are both conformist and self-seeking. We already mentioned Gogol’s *Nose*, in which an arrogant St. Petersburg state official wakes up one morning, stares into the mirror, and discovers that his nose is missing. When he goes looking for it, he passes it in the street. Wearing the uniform of an even higher official, his nose refuses to stop for him. In urban narrative, human beings are caught up in a struggle of all against all. In the dialectic of the urban narrative, this entails a struggle of each against him or herself as double.

The themes of the urban narrative are ultimately nothing more than the themes of modern life and can therefore be incorporated into narratives set outside the city or found in common experience. Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed* and Kafka’s *The Castle*, though set in a non-urban world, embody themes resident in the urban narrative. As in Kafka’s narrative, our everyday experience is urban whether we live in a great metropolis or not. The modern architect Le Corbusier called houses machines for living; by the same token, cities are machines for living together. And ideas are devices for sizing up and finding our bearings within life and the world. People make machines that dominate the lives of their makers. Similarly, people develop and implement ideas that acquire, Frankenstein-like, a life of their own. They become ideologies that control and limit our thought. The
physical and mental world we construct for ourselves is a labyrinth and web of illusion which has its ideal narrative objectification in the city but can be set elsewhere as well.

Other aspects of the city are important for the urban narratives we will consider. The metropolis is an appropriate setting for detective and crime stories. In British urban narratives, there is an element of humor in the imagined city. This was as true of Dickens as it is of the contemporary British humorist Will Self, author of *The North London Book of the Dead*: the narrator gradually realizes that the dead do not vanish from London; they are reincarnated in different neighborhoods. This touches on something significant for G. K. Chesterton. As the city of man or the city of God, the urban macrocosm can subsume everything the mind conceives of: heaven and hell, past and future, God and the human creature. Dante’s *Inferno* has been illustrated and adapted to the tunnels, alleyways, and lost souls of San Francisco by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders. The paradox of means becoming ends makes this broad symbolism meaningful. Cities were created by human beings: once created, they absorbed the functions of God, fate, history, and providence.

G. K. (Gilbert Keith) Chesterton (1874-1936) was an English author influential in the early twentieth century. During his early career Chesterton brushed shoulders with the artistic and philosophical currents of the turn-of-the-century era. He associated with both the Decadent art for art’s sake crowd and with the social reformers before eventually ending up as a committed convert to Catholicism. Around the time he wrote *The Man Who Was Thursday*, he was in the process of returning to Christianity, an important thing to remember in reading *The Man Who Was Thursday*. Moreover, Chesterton provides us with something in short supply: a sense of comedy needed in approaching the dark world
of urban narrative. Since his novel can be read as a joke with philosophical implications, I will avoid spoiling it for the reader by giving away too much at the start.

*The Man Who Was Thursday* begins in a London suburb, then moves to the city, and then after veering off on a broad arc returns to the same suburb by way of the idyllic English countryside. The importance of the city for framing the plot is evident when we consider the opening scene in the suburb of Saffron Park. This is a new London suburb, an artificial and artsy place, characterized by the narrator as “a written Comedy.” “[T]his unreality fell upon it about nightfall, when the extravagant roofs were dark against the afterglow and the whole insane village seemed an invented place, designed to embody an idea.” These are strong words: “unreality,” “insane”—and above all Saffron Park was “designed to embody an idea.” Saffron Park is a mental world where people inhabit or play at ideas. It is what we would call a theme park community. Here and in London, various strange and imaginary aspects of the cityscape come up repeatedly.

The city is a mental place, encompassing heaven and hell, past and future. When the plot moves to the city, we read that, “When Syme stepped out on to the steam-tug he had a singular sensation of stepping out into something entirely new; not merely into the landscape of a new land, but even into the landscape of a new planet” (28). Syme, the main character, has merely crossed the river from one part of London to the other. And yet: “The great stones of the Embankment seemed equally dark and gigantic…. They were big and black against the huge white dawn. They made him feel that he was landing on the colossal steps of some Egyptian palace; and indeed they suited his mood, for he was, in his own mind, mounting to attack the solid thrones of horrible and heathen kings.” The city is a mythical place. It is as if Syme were crossing not the Thames but
the river Styx into the netherworld or into the human past or the subconscious mind. In Chesterton, the narration starts out realistically enough, only to take a sharp turn into the world of myth, the past, or the concealed determiners of events.

*The Man Who Was Thursday* was published in 1908, six years before the First World War. In Chesterton’s time, many people were optimistic that all the social and intellectual problems in the world could be resolved. All knowledge could be combined into one inclusive system. The entire world could be made safe and secure. But it was also becoming clear to skeptics that if one carried any idea to an extreme, the idea itself could get out of control and mutate into its opposite. Chesterton’s time was like our own in this respect. Today many people believe that all knowledge can be combined on the Internet without losing anything in the process, or that it is possible to eliminate evil or terrorism from the world.

We can consider two examples of historical or logical paradox from Chesterton’s time. Mathematicians in his era were attempting to combine logic and mathematics into a single system. In the field of mathematical set theory this meant that the same invariant principles had to apply to every conceivable aggregate or set, real or postulated. But just when the job was almost done, the following question came up: what about the “set of all sets that do not contain themselves as a member.” If the set of all sets that do not contain themselves as a member does contain itself, it does not. If it does not, it does.

One definition of paradox is of an irreducible contradiction that undermines logic. Another definition is of a statement that appears to be untrue but is actually true, and vice versa. The ancient Greek philosophers recognized that when one talks about totality or infinity using finite terms, one ends up contradicting oneself. Chesterton has been called
a master of paradox. *The Man Who Was Thursday* exemplifies this. Those who appear to be terrorists and enemies of the lawful order are actually its guardians. The anarchists who are supposed to be enemies of all order have the most rigid organization imaginable.

This brings us to a second historical paradox, which lies in the realm of politics. In Chesterton’s time, as in our own, there was a tremendous fear of terrorism. Anarchist terrorists were an eminent threat. Some were anarchist intellectuals who believed in an ideal of freedom and therefore attempted to overthrow a repressive order by assassinating heads of state. One of the czars of Russia was blown up. Empress Elisabeth of Austria was stabbed to death. U.S. President McKinley was shot and killed. There were many other victims of a terrorism carried out by anarchists, socialists, nihilists, and nationalists. The assassination of an Austrian Grand Duke by a Serbian nationalist terrorist ignited the First World War. Overreaction to the assassination committed by a violent young idealist touched off an entire chain of overreactions that led to the wars, revolutions, and disasters of the twentieth century.

We have two paradoxes. Stated roughly: If one attempts to know everything, one can end up knowing nothing; and if one attempts to change, or maintain, the entire world by eliminating evil or bringing about complete freedom, one can end up being eliminated oneself, or at least on the wrong end of the process one has set in motion. In customary parlance, we have a label for someone trying to know everything or be a final arbiter of all good and evil in the world. We call this *playing God.* In the old days before religion was turned over to entertainment artists, people knew that whoever “plays God” ends up acting as the devil in disguise. One of the names for the devil was “God’s ape”—God’s imitator. The devil was understood to be a self-appointed wannabe god whose imitation
of God turned everything on its head: good became evil, order turned to chaos, freedom to bondage. Theological minds recognized that there was a paradoxical reverse side of this imitation. The real God who is all-powerful and all-knowing is pulling the strings which lets “God’s ape” do his routine. Presumably God does this in order to teach the disobedient creature a lesson: If you want to be me by playing God, go ahead and see where it gets you! Traditionally, theologians have recognized that thinking about the infinite being of God leads to paradoxes.

We have several ways of approaching Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*:

1. It is an *urban narrative*: the city symbolizes the mental world of myths, plans, and ideas, past and future, that have become embodied, like Saffron Park, in the city.
2. It is a story about *resisting evil*: a young man resolves to risk his life in order to fight against forces bent upon destroying his society.
3. It is a *paradoxical narrative* which shows how our ideas about freedom and order, like the cities we build, end up leading to the opposite conclusion. In the words of Chesterton’s contemporary, George Bernard Shaw “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”
4. It is a *political satire* that shows how the anarchists, who are supposedly enemies of the established order, are actually rigid authoritarians; and how the police, who supposedly want to defend order, are actually swelling the ranks of anarchy.
5. It is a *theological or philosophical* allegory, which shows how those who would play God become the devil’s agents, and vice versa. (Remember that the author was in the process of returning to Christianity.)
6. Finally, it is a metaphysical joke which demonstrates how self-righteous people, who believe they have God on their side—the anarchists who want to become god or the police who think they can eliminate evil—fall victim to a practical joke that they are playing on themselves. Because The Man Who Was Thursday has the character of a farce, there is a lot of absurd humor in it. In Modernist narrative, of which Thursday is an early example, the world is absurd and incomprehensible. If we ignore the thought that this novel is among other things a joke, the joke ends up being played on us.

In reading The Man Who Was Thursday, we will see if these terms can be applied to the book. The urban narrative frames The Man Who Was Thursday as it begins in the bohemian community of Saffron Park. In obscure London streets and concealed rooms of buildings that are not what they seem, Lucian Gregory and Gabriel Syme advance the story by conversing about their anarchist schemes and ideals. Since they are poets, they remark the covert identity of form-defying Decadent poetry with terrorist anarchy. They compete to occupy the most extreme position. Gregory announces as the ultimate goal of anarchy: “To abolish God!” But the even more skilled dialectician Syme is able to defeat this bid to fill a vacancy on a secret anarchist Council whose members go by code names of the days of the week. Syme becomes the man who is Thursday, and the tale starts off as a satire on modern poetry, bohemianism, and intellectual radicalism around 1900.

Soon, however, we learn that Syme is in fact a committed opponent of anarchy and terrorism. He became these things first by way of a “rebellion against rebellion”—in which he rejected the faddishness and artistic self-realization of his parents—and, second, by experiencing a terrorist bombing:
His hatred of modern lawlessness had been crowned also by an accident. It happened that he was walking in a side street at the instant of a dynamite outrage. He had been blind and deaf for a moment, and then seen, the smoke clearing, the broken windows and the bleeding faces. … He did not regard anarchists, as most of us do, as a handful of morbid men, combining ignorance with intellectualism. He regarded them as a huge and pitiless peril, like a Chinese invasion. (22)

Syme is therefore a type familiar to us now. Encountering pure evil in a terrorist attack, he has committed his life to fighting against this “pitiless peril, like a Chinese invasion.”

So far, we recognize the elements of urban narrative and resistance to evil, but the elements of paradox and political satire also come into play. They manifest themselves in the thematic center of the tale as we become acquainted with the anarchist Council in which Gregory applies all his rhetorical skills to vying for the seat of the anarchist code-named Thursday. Gregory compares the Anarchists to early Christians. There is satire in the rigid hierarchy and self-sanctification of the Anarchists, but more so in the paradoxes of their thought which equates nonviolent humility with terrorism. Syme, recognizing the nihilist undertow of the anarchist movement, rides it to victory by announcing:

I do not go to the Council to rebut that slander that calls us murderers; I go to earn it (loud and prolonged cheering). To the priest who says these men are the enemies of religion, to the judge who says these men are the enemies of law, to the fat parliamentarians who says these men are the enemies of order and public decency, to all these I will reply, “You are
false kings, but you are true prophets. I am come to destroy you, and to
fulfill your prophecies.” (19)

This gives a hint that absolute anarchy and absolute order define themselves in opposition
to one another, in a sense creating one another. But this is a state of affairs that exists in
the realm of ideas, not in that of any plausible real-world political organization. On the
whole, Chesterton’s anarchists and policemen are cartoon figures, distinguished only by
their extravagant and sinister appearances: the shaggy beard, the degenerate’s face, the
opaque round glasses, and so on. Their speeches are not those of real radicals but token
gambits by players in a game of which the object and rules are as yet unknown.

As one anarchist after the other reveals his true identity as an undercover police
agent, the pattern gradually shifts from satire to allegory. Satire exaggerates the traits of
criminals and police. Allegory exploits the relationship of criminals and police to refer to
a relationship which exists at an entirely different level. Behind all apparent chaos lies
some deeper order. Order and anarchy are not real political forces but ciphers awaiting
decryption. The political premises are at last abandoned altogether as the six police agent
anarchists pursue President Sunday who escapes in, of all things, a hot air balloon. The
mystery of Sunday is said to be the mystery of the world (110). We begin to realize that
in terms of allegory only a supreme being can be postulated as the hidden source of order
and disorder. Our suspicions are confirmed in an elaborate dress ball which is to be held
at Sunday’s country estate, a masque in which the six anarchist-police agents appear in
allegorical costumes alluding to the six days of creation in Genesis.

Finally, all mental associations fall into place. Like avant-garde poets, anarchists
reject order. Police are agents of order, but like the anarchists they work in concealment.
Concealed behind nature’s anarchic chaos of all against all is a serene being who allows strife and rebellion to reveal his nature to those who do not know him and their nature to themselves. Coming full circle, poets, like God and Chesterton, create and reveal. Since this is surely a Christian vision, the reader must ask whether and where Christ and Satan fit into it. How does their presence or absence come to light and what does it mean?

The conclusion moves from theological allegory, expressing the paradox of a God of order behind the chaos of the world, through a conclusion that is playful in spirit, and finally to a glorious dawn rising for Syme in the English countryside near Saffron Park, as he espies Gregory’s lovely sister, “the girl with the gold-red hair, cutting lilac before breakfast, with the great unconscious gravity of a girl” (190). In 1908 England, no terrorist assault and no theological-philosophical conundrum could spoil the good cheer. Life was too good. The reader must ask: does Chesterton’s novel justify this optimism?

If we ask what point *The Man Who Was Thursday* might make today, at least two divergent messages could be addressed to our present situation. The one takes Syme’s ardor to fight against terrorism seriously. This is the post-9/11 interpretation. It would be a more convenient interpretation if it were not for the fact that Chesterton combined his ardor against evil with a strain of dislike for things foreign including a foreignness he attributed to Jews and to the Yellow Peril. Many feel these days we need to return to the simplicity of a patriotic mentality which pits us against them with few questions asked. Chesterton can serve as a reminder of the pitfalls of this mentality.

The second interpretation abstracts from this content and focuses on the central paradox of order and anarchy. The “coincidence of opposites in God” is an old mystical trope which neatly sums up the intent of the final chapters. However, paradox per se is
an abstract idea which can be inverted and filled with new content. Paradoxes are quite reversible. The set of all sets that do not contain themselves does not if it does, but also does if it does not. If absolute anarchy mandates order, absolute order also sows chaos. Given this reversibility of the central paradox, we can add to the post-9/11 interpretation another that opposes the War on Terror by pointing out that this war was and is directed against former clients, notably Osama Bin Laden, whom the CIA created on its previous crusade to eradicate Evil. This interpretation has been validated by contemporary history, but it is of course not the sense Chesterton intended for his novel, and perhaps not a sense he would have agreed with. Nevertheless, with or without our interpretation, his novel is a valid reminder that history repeats itself and that things are not what they seem.

No one talks these days about the great fear of terrorism one hundred years ago. There might be something comforting about the fact that the world survived a great wave of terrorism a century earlier and then went on to forget about it. What is less comforting is the fact that one of the last great terrorist assassinations in which the Serbian nationalist killed the Austrian imperial heir apparent and his wife in a Sarajevo street in 1914 caused an overreaction that led to the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the rise of Hitler, the Second World War, the Holocaust, eighty years of Communism, and forty of the Cold War. The world has forgotten that wave of anarchist terrorism because for the better part of the century it was diverted by the worse things that resulted in part from overreaction. Chesterton’s theme can be summed up in the generalized point of his contemporary and rival George Bernard Shaw: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

Nonetheless, neither Chesterton’s The Man Who Was Thursday nor literature in general is prophetic in any sense other than in its ability to reflect fundamental aspects of
reality as it was and is. Everything in literature borrows from experience. Romanticism and its fairy tales, even Eckbert’s madness and Bertha’s bizarre childhood experiences, relate to the anxieties and dreams that all of us share. Literature reflects historical reality because it is the reality familiar to any author. This is why when modern authors write historical themes, their own culture rubs off on the historical theme. In Flaubert’s version of the beheading of John the Baptist, the third of the three stories beginning with Simple Heart, his characters from the Gospel sound as if they lived in nineteenth-century France. Clemens Brentano’s forgery of the visions of the last twelve hours of Jesus reads in the printed version like the reveries of a Romantic poet, and Mel Gibson’s recent plagiarism of Brentano’s forgery comes across like a Hollywood action film with the same emphasis on sensational violence. There might not be anything wrong with this, if Gibson and Brentano had been honest enough to admit they were imagining their own version of Christ’s trial and execution instead of claiming their work came from a divine source. Claiming to take one’s authority directly from God or some other ultimate source is and always has been the recourse of scoundrels and hucksters, whether they were selling snake oil or bad policies to the electorate.

It is a matter of common sense that when we refer to real people by referring to literary narrations, we do not think real character is the same as a narrative character. For example, if we talk about some person as having a Cinderella story, we are not thinking about glass slippers or carriages that turn into pumpkins at midnight. We mean that there is a certain type of real human story which is like the rags-to-riches narrative of the fairy tale. Again, this is common sense, but if we bear it in mind, it helps us think about the relationship of literature to reality. Literature reflects historical reality, but narrative also
focuses aspects of the human condition within larger-than-life images. These narrative models help us think about ourselves precisely because they are like us, but also not us. They represent human possibilities Writ Large, projected in absolute form. They reflect reality but at the same time focus and magnify it.

This may be what Chesterton means when he writes that the most “dehumanized modern fantasies” only make sense because they include something human. He writes this about the bizarre world of his anarchist conspirators and their demonic urban world:

even the most dehumanized modern fantasies depend on some older and simpler figure; the adventures may be mad, but the adventurer must be sane. The dragon without St. George would not even be grotesque. So this inhuman landscape was only imaginative by the presence of the really human. To Syme’s exaggerative mind the bright, bleak houses and terraces by the Thames [River] looked as empty as the mountains of the moon. But even the moon is only poetical because there is a man in the moon. (28)

This is another way of saying that everything fantastical in literature, whether it is fairy tale or science fiction or absurd modernist paradox, only makes sense to us because it relates in some way to real life, including the beliefs that people hold.

This relationship of literature to reality (the fact that literature both reflects reality and focuses it into larger-than-life prototypes which we measure ourselves against) is so basic that it has become integral to the English language. The way we talk about life has been influenced by the great literary narratives of the past. Here are a few examples of words in common use taken from literary narratives:
Word: odyssey  Literary source: Homer’s *Odyssey*  Generalized sense (cf. Merriam-Webster):
A great, episodic journey, often homeward (intellectual or spiritual wandering or quest)

A mystical object of quest or endeavor (an object of an extended or difficult quest)

Word: quixotic  Literary source: Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*  Generalized sense (cf. Merriam-Webster):
A quest based on quirky or insane idealism (a foolish or impractical pursuit of ideals)

A quest or bargain at the price of one’s soul (done for present gain, despite future costs)

A bureaucratic labyrinth that blocks a quest (having a nightmarish or illogical quality)

These salient concepts and terms from narratives trace a progression that points to Modernism as the senescent phase of an imagined outline of human development. From the journey or the odyssey to the holy quest to the foolish pursuit of the ideal to the quest or bargain at the price of the soul, we arrive at the peculiar quest and world that condition one another to constitute the classic form of literary Modernism: the stories and world of Franz Kafka. Though Modernism need not be a literary movement of the old, any more than the oldest classical narratives were carried by or written for or about the young, there is something senescent in Modernism. It is the old who are confronted with deeper tragic and paradoxical backgrounds and ramifications of the one narration into which all our stories flow. Kafka’s name stands for the irrationality of the rational in modern life, for a human striving that leads into a labyrinth where means become ends, where every route
loops back into itself. In the Kafkaesque narration, human beings are trapped in a never-ending odyssey which leads nowhere. In the Faustian bargain, you at least knew where you would end up. In a clear-cut deal with the devil, you sold your soul and you paid the price. In the Kafkaesque narration, you are damned if you do and damned if you don’t.

**Modernism as a Crisis of Realism: Franz Kafka**

The Kafkaesque historical situation is the world of the urban narrative carried to its conceptual extreme. The means or paths have become the goals or ends, merging into a labyrinth of pathways without exit. A surveyor arrives at a castle where he claims to have been summoned into service: he never progresses beyond his attempts to enter the castle to discover the terms and conditions of his service. The harder he tries, the further he deviates from his object. This is the story of Kafka’s novel *The Castle*. The world he narrates is rendered real by the seemingly random particularities of human existence in the here and now. With respect to our comparison of biblical and Homeric narrative, the particularities of Kafka’s world recall the Homeric tradition. Yet the mysterious plots of his novels and stories appear to be austere parables, closer in form and spirit to the Bible. Thus narrative opposites merge in Kafka’s Modernism, just as disparate realms exist side by side in his worldview. The particularities of existence in our common world combine with the symbolic pattern of the whole to render human existence mysterious in itself.

Modernism takes many distinct forms, but Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is considered by some the purest example of the Modernist. As a Jewish German-speaking citizen of
Prague, a key city in the Austrian Empire and after 1918 the capital of the Czechoslovak Republic, he was an outsider, a Jew within the city’s German minority and a German speaker within the anti-German, predominantly Czech city. Prague is the quintessential old world city, formed of the layers of distinct cultures and diverse historical periods. If the world is a labyrinth, time is experienced as one confusingly distinct passageway after another. In living memory, Kafka or his family passed through a labyrinth of time. His father was a self-made businessman who worked his way up during the period after the Jews were emancipated in 1848. Though the family had already achieved a degree of commercial success, Franz advanced further by studying law and becoming an official of the Workers’ Compensation Insurance Institute. His free time and nights were devoted to literature. For most of his life, he lived with parents and family in an apartment, never marrying but writing beautiful letters to female friends.

A World War destroyed his world but also left it in many ways intact. Empires, including his Austrian Habsburg Empire, collapsed in upheavals. The Habsburg Empire had been held together by little more than its ancient ruling dynasty. This made it fragile in an age of nationalism and world war. A new Czechoslovak Republic was established. Kafka kept his job and continued writing. Long after his early death from tuberculosis, some surviving family members perished in the Holocaust. In his lifetime, he witnessed the forceful arrival of the twentieth century with all this entailed: industrialization, social transformation, technological advancements, revolution, world war, alienation, and anti-Semitic violence. He was keenly aware of the technical and social aspects of modernity, including the growth of bureaucracy, of which he was a part, and the rise of technology,
which he confronted in his profession and saw turning into an end in itself. He read Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, and Tolstoy and also watched early Charlie Chaplin films.

The first of his three attempts at writing a novel was published posthumously under the title *Amerika* (spelled with a k). In newer editions, it is known more properly as *The Man Who Was Lost*. It is about a young man who gets shipped off to America after he has been seduced by the family’s maid. “*Amerika*” is the urban nightmare, the labyrinthine city of the future. The young immigrant Karl Rossmann experiences life as a rollercoaster. In transit he forms an attachment to a lowly ship’s stoker and attempts to defend his rights. Landing in New York, he is rescued by a rich American uncle whose existence had been unknown to him. Soon after the uncle kicks him out forever because of an act of unintended disobedience. Karl goes through further ups and downs. In the immigrant’s America, everything is larger, faster, more promising or more threatening. The Statue of Liberty holds a sword aloft instead of a torch. The women are pathetic victims, sexual predators, or domineering tyrants. Technological advances proceed faster than human beings can possibly adjust to. Kafka never finished the novel but at the end of the fragment, Karl may find his salvation in a traveling road show known as “The Great Nature Theater of Oklahoma,” a kind of traveling troupe with edifying overtones. My hypothesis is that it is modeled on the American Chautauqua movement of the time, a hybrid of popular education and entertainment known even in Europe. In Kafka’s novel, there is a place for everyone in the Great Nature Theater. Whichever instrument you play or act you perform, you can join in. Some critics suspect that the Great Nature Theater would have proven one more American swindle, but I am not so sure. In all of Kafka’s
unfinished novels, there are small rays of hope, even if unattainable. The Great Nature Theater means art if it means anything, and art was certainly Kafka’s personal salvation.

I mentioned his last unfinished novel *The Castle*. The novel I would recommend to anyone who only intends to read one by Kafka is *The Trial*. Kafka began writing it just as World War I was starting. The streets of Prague, Vienna, London, Paris, or Berlin were filled with singing, cheering crowds. This is how *The Trial* begins: “Someone must have denounced Josef K., because without his having done anything wrong, he was arrested one morning.” In *The Trial*, the main character Josef K. is arrested one morning but told that he can go about his business for the time being. He tries to discover the charges and evidence against him. He fails in this but finds that agents of the courts are everywhere, on the attic floors of the city’s slum housing and even in hidden rooms in the bank where he is employed. Gradually it becomes evident that it is not a matter of what Josef K. has done but of what he is or of how he exists. The tale is about his existential situation in life and the world. This would hardly have appeared problematic to him if he had not been arrested. Even now he refuses to think about his existence as a whole. Yet through his trial, the world itself becomes mysterious. Life itself is his trial and the world the court in which he is prosecuted. The human being is a stranger in a strange world or, in the biblical phrase, “a stranger in a strange land.”

Kafka combines the banal with the inexplicable to bring out the strangeness of the modern world. One of the main interpretations of his work, which we will return to later, is embodied in the term “alienation.” This is an old concept with biblical and theological roots, which has been revived and adapted in modern social theory and Existentialist philosophy. Akin to the theme of the double, alienation or estrangement can mean,
among other things, one’s losing touch with one’s true self or authentic human existence. Kafka’s main characters are as if crying out in the words of Psalm 119: “I am a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me.” In *The Trial*, Josef K. attempts to discover the charges against him and the nature of the law by which he is to be judged. Over the novel hangs a question, much like Tolstoy’s: how should life be lived?

There is a parable-like story within the novel told in the second half of *The Trial*. It tells about a Man from the Countryside who tries to gain access to the Law. He arrives at the outer gate of the Law but a powerful Gatekeeper stops him and tells him that he is not allowed in. Even if the man made it past this first gatekeeper, there would be another and another and so on, as if to infinity. The Man from the Country spends the rest of his life stationed at the gate. The Gatekeeper humors him and even takes his bribes but never allows him any further. Just before the man dies, the Gatekeeper starts to shut the gate. Why would he close the gate now? It is because this gate was intended for the Man from the Country alone and for no one else. This is a quintessential Kafkaesque parable.

Remember that a parable is a simple story, often like a riddle, that teaches a moral or theological lesson. The parable of the Law suggests that for each of us there is some commandment, purpose in the world, or higher truth. The problem is that it is impossible to discover it. This is a paradox insofar as being chosen is the same as being condemned. The story of the Man before the Law is a parable-like story within the story, parallel to the larger situation of Josef K. It lends the novel as a whole the character of a riddle and parable. Biblical parables, and in fact biblical narration as a whole, contain, as we have seen, few details, which, due to their proximity to the highest authority, tend to charge up and radiate their symbolic meaning beyond their immediate context. This was as true of
Noah’s dove as of Tolstoy’s dark region of icy ravines in *Master and Man*. But whereas Tolstoy’s symbolism was integrated into a seamlessly realistic presentation of life and the world, in Kafka’s case there is a gap between the aspect of his narration that figures as a charged parable and the aspect that evokes commonplace experience. Life and meaning, these two realms of existence, are embodied in two stylistic planes of realism and parable which appear to co-exist side-by-side without intersecting like waking and dream.

The fact that the German title of Kafka’s novel *The Trial, Der Prozess*, means both “the trial” and “the process,” confirms the novel’s character as a parable: it is both about a trial and about the process or transformation which is life itself. Living in this world is a trial and a process. In this regard, the Bible tells us the same thing about life in the world as do Karl Marx and the modern sociologists: we are alienated. In Kafka, we are alienated from the world of ultimate truth which we seek in vain to discover. This is suggested both by the title and by the stable inscrutability of everything that happens in the novel; and it is confirmed by the insertion of the parable of the Man before the Law which parallels and symbolically summarizes the novel without giving us an answer to the questions which circumscribe the central meaning of the work.

The reader should bear in mind what has been said about biblical parables: sparse detail and symbolic intensity go hand in hand. The reader may also recall that one way of interpreting parables and narrations consists of telling related or equivalent stories. With this in mind, we can try our hand at interpreting the following brief narrations by Kafka. One way of doing this is to imagine an encompassing tale in which the parable might serve as a key tale within the tale, as does the parable of the Law within *The Trial*. 
A Small Fable

“Alas,” said the mouse, “the world is getting smaller every day. At first it was so big I was afraid. I ran on and on and was glad when I finally saw walls to the left and right up ahead; but those walls are now closing in so fast that I’m already in the last room; and over there in the corner is the trap that I’m heading into.” “You only need to change your direction,” said the cat and swallowed him.

My first inclination is to invent an encompassing narrative about a “Mr. Safe” who is so obsessed with financial security that he invests his scattered resources in properties that appear more stable, only to find their value annihilated by an economic crisis. The bank official who comes to confiscate the property of Mr. Safe casually remarks that his less scattered investment prior to his quest for security was more advantageous. But perhaps “A Small Fable” is not about material security at all. Perhaps what Mr. Safe loses is the true opportunity of human existence which is not material.

Next the reader might try interpreting another Kafkaesque parable which contains interesting psychological aspects such as the unpleasant sensation of discovering that a perfect stranger knows something about us:

Give Up On It!

It was very early. The streets were clean and deserted. I was on my way to the station. Comparing my watch to the tower clock, I noticed that it was much later than I had thought. I had to rush. Alarmed by this discovery, I became unsure of the way. I was still new here. Fortunately, a policeman was nearby. I rushed up to him and asked him about the way.
He smiled and replied, “Do you expect to find out the way from me?”

“Yes,” I said, “because I can’t find it myself.” “Give up on it, give up on it,” he replied, turning away with a great gesture, like a man who wants to be alone with his laughter.

In the first parable and perhaps in the second, there is an element of dark humor. There are indications that Kafka and his friends thought his stories were funny. The first parable was an example of a bestiary tale, an old genre that usually contains a moral (the fox and the sour grapes). The second does not seem to fit any pattern, but in it everything can be taken both literally and figuratively: the stranger’s status in the city, “the way,” the equivocation of time, the sudden uncertainty about the hour, the disconcerting mixture of familiarity and superciliousness in the official’s reply, his oracular advice. I am not sure how I would interpret or contextualize this second parable; but there are many details and aspects which make me think about my own life experience: the situation of rushing in an unfamiliar city, of being late for an appointment, of underestimating distance and time, of noticing suddenly that the two are out of joint, and of discovering that someone I do not know seems to know all about me. Because of these resonances with my life experience, I am left with the suspicion that I may have overlooked something important in my own existence which makes me unable to interpret this parable. Is the policeman an angel of God sent to admonish me or an agent of the federal government who has been studying my file? Perhaps the answer will come to me some day in a flash of insight. Perhaps a generation living in a world of one-way mirrors constituted by the ambient technologies of Face Book and Twitter is better able to interpret this parable than I.
Now we need to consider how the two narrative realms of detailed realism and symbolic parable fit together in Kafka. Does the one somehow frame or encompass the other? The title of his famous tale *The Metamorphosis (Die Verwandlung)* is both literal and symbolic. Let us consider its opening lines:

When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin. He was lying on his back as hard as armor plate, and when he lifted his head a little, he saw his vaulted brown belly, sectioned by arch-shaped ribs, to whose dome the cover, about to slide off completely, could barely cling. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, were waving helplessly before his eyes.

“What’s happened to me?” he thought. It was no dream.

As this tale opens, we cannot say that the real is framed by the symbolic. Or by anything else. We are confronted with a seemingly frameless narrative. Without any sort of introductory device or prelude, we leap headlong into the narration. And yet the story lands on its feet, obeying its own laws so surely that the narrator can state, convincingly, that, “It was no dream,” thus lending his narration the most startling frame imaginable: as nothing more nor less than waking reality itself. We need to consider what this leap into absurd reality means and why anyone might be inclined to trust such a narrator.

We also need to consider why this passage and tale might be funny. When people speak of Kafka’s humor, what can this mean in such a grim story? If we understand the humor, this might help us understand why the narrator can assert that, “It was no dream.” Humor, dreams, and waking perceptions depend on the logic and coherence of details. If
a giant insect were to enter our space for real, the cohesiveness and stability of the details surrounding its appearance would inform us that we were not dreaming. If dreams tend to lack a fullness and cohesion of details, waking experiences by contrast are marked by the broad coherence of their details. Humor is somewhere between waking and dreaming in terms of coherence. In humor, the cohesiveness of the incoherent arouses laughter by intimating that something is not right and jolting us to restore it. Think about the joke in which a nurse enters the doctor’s office and announces that an invisible man is in the waiting room, to which the doctor matter-of-factly responds, “Tell him I can’t see him.” The perfect logical and semantic coherence of the exchange, combined with its absurd psychological and evidential premises, makes it funny.

Consider the example of a humorous film in which insects, an entire race of them, are main characters: *Men in Black*. Remember the first two scenes of the film: an insect buzzes in from outer space and then along a Texas highway at night. It dodges trucks but finally goes splat on a truck windshield. The smear of blue-green bug goop infuriates the driver. Everyone knows what happens when you turn on wipers to get rid of bug goop. The driver curses: “Damned bugs!”

Soon we discover that such insects from outer space are a species of illegal alien, an illegal immigration problem that makes the Mexicans dashing across the Rio Grande look like a church picnic. In the next scene an apprehended Mexican morphs into a giant alien insect twenty feet tall. The giant bug lunges at the immigration cops. When the special agents (“men in black”) fire at the alien insect with their special high percussion guns, the blast is the equivalent of a giant truck windshield slamming into it. The giant alien insect splatters and everyone nearby is drenched in blue-green bug goop.
Why is this funny? It is of course slapstick to see men in business suits drenched in disgusting fluids. But it is also funny because of its mathematical rigor. If a two-inch bug splatters out into a four-inch smear of blue-green goop, a twenty-foot alien bug will splatter into a forty-foot blue-green splash, drenching everyone around in blue-green bug goop. Another point of logic in the humor of the film proceeds from the premise that no one likes it when others despise one’s group. If bugs had group feelings, they would be outraged by humans who curse “damned insects,” who swat flies and crush cockroaches under foot. This plays into the climax of the film where Will Smith does his routine as an African-American species chauvinist cursing bugs like an ironic racist. What interests us here is everyone’s untroubled casual acceptance of anthropomorphized insects, as well as the dark humor arising from the coherence of details based on an outlandish premise.

From this we can draw two essential conclusions. First, it is not, or not only, the absurdity of The Metamorphosis that makes it funny. It is its solid logic. If you woke up transformed into a giant insect, then, like Gregor, you might have a hard time getting out of bed. If you could not roll off your domed back, your tiny legs might wiggle helplessly before your eyes. Since in your mind you would be human, you might shut your eyes to your spindly appendages. If your bug body were larger than your human body, then your room, like Gregor’s, might look smaller. This follows the logic of the forty-foot splatter of bug goop. If your digestive system were that of an insect, you might shun human food for garbage, as does the metamorphosed Gregor. All of this is entirely natural. All of it follows logically from one non-negotiable premise. The coherence of the incoherent in Kafka’s Metamorphosis is its dark humor.
Readers therefore err when they say they cannot understand *The Metamorphosis* because it is a bizarre story about a man who turns into a bug. We recall *The Dialog of the Dogs*. There have always been stories of this kind and people rarely have difficulty making sense of them. The ancient Roman poet Ovid wrote his own *Metamorphoses*. It is full of human-to-animal or human-to-plant transformations. Hardly anyone complains that Ovid is hard to understand in the way that Kafka is thought to be difficult. In one of Ovid’s tales, a vicious man is transformed into a wolf. This makes perfect sense to us: in character he was already lupine, behaving like a wolf to his fellow human beings. The difficulty is not in the simple fact that Gregor is transformed. This is old hat for us. The difficulty lies in the question why it ought to make sense for him to be transformed.

Our problem in understanding Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* has nothing to do with the unusualness of the transformation or the fact that an insect thinks and talks like us. The problem with the story is that Gregor Samsa is *too much* like us. His existence might be yours or mine. Since his life is no different from ours, the dark joke threatens to be on us. Notice how he reacts when he wakes up. What does he worry about? He worries that he will be late for work. He is so alienated from his true human needs that he can only think of the external obligations imposed on him—all the terrifyingly alienating conditions of his life about which we soon learn and which he accepts as if they were natural. Not lupine character, but his normal alienated human existence makes sense of his transformation.

Gregor’s transformation has nothing to do with anything that he has done wrong. He is like Félicité. The sum total of his sins would not make for exciting reading. The problem lies in how he exists. To understand this, we must return to our concept: Gregor exists in a state of *estrangement* or *alienation*. In popular terms, he needs to get a life,
get in touch with his self. He seems close to his family, but what sort of family is it? They exploit Gregor and dump him when he needs them. Gregor is alienated not because he is an outsider in his apartment. He is alienated because his family was already a sham in which a son was pressed into the role of a parent without parental dignity. This is the Existentialist approach to Kafka, one of the earliest and, I believe, best interpretations. Gregor’s waking up with a human consciousness inside an insect’s body objectifies the disconnect between his inner human being and his actual insect existence. His life is not authentic. That this is so is only revealed by the extreme transformation.

However, there are problems with this interpretation. Why should such a fate only befall poor Gregor? Why not his family? Are they less deserving of such a hideous transformation? We might answer that Gregor’s family indeed is hideously transformed along with him. They are transformed into a family whose son is an insect. This brings out their inner character just as his transformation objectifies his. Gregor’s problem was that he did not have a life. Their problem is that they have no soul, that is, no decency in the moral sense of that usage. Gregor wastes away and loses his life. They soon thrive without him, but they become more and more soulless as they do. Is it better to have a life but no soul than to have a human soul but no life?

We can see from this example that Modernism transcends Realism in much the same way that the x-ray surpasses the photograph. Kafka’s technique in combining the familiar with the strange is comparable to the scientific use of computer simulations to project an abnormal stress on a material that cannot occur under real circumstances. The artificial simulation reveals hidden properties or flaws in the material which would not
normally become apparent. Kafka wrote famously that books are not there to make us happy: “A book should be an axe for the frozen sea within us.”

This is by no means the only possible interpretation of Kafka. There have been many others in every category from the psychological of every stripe, to the social, to the biographical, to the political. One singularly important interpretation focuses on Kafka’s status as a conscious and threatened Jew, in a period of worsening peril for Jews in his part of the world. Notice, however, that the concept of existential alienation does not clash with the focus on Kafka’s Jewishness but rather complements and concretizes it.

With the complementarity of approaches in mind, let us consider one more brief narration. In reading it, think of Kafka’s status as a Jew who sympathized with Zionism. Imagine his life as a diurnal bureaucrat and nocturnal author. Consider the dissonance of his writing in a prophetic vein. Consider also how his less nervous contemporaries were still dreaming of secure futures or rosy utopias. Think finally of the universal dimension of the experience of a transitory and threatening world. What was experienced acutely by European Jews was—and still is to a degree—the fate of all: alienation and marginality between times and worlds. With these things in mind consider the narration.

At Night

Immersed deep in night. As one’s head sometimes sinks in meditation, that is how utterly immersed in the night. All around people are asleep. It is a harmless affectation, an innocent delusion, to imagine them sleeping in houses, in safe beds, under a secure roof, stretched out or curled up on mattresses, between sheets, under blankets. In reality they have gathered
as they once were of old and as they again were in a desert region: a camp
in the open, a great multitude, a host, a people, under a cold sky, upon cold
earth, cast down where they had stood, forehead pressed against arm, face
to the ground, sleeping peacefully. And you are watching. You are one of
the watchmen. You find your next comrade by brandishing a burning
stick from the brushwood pile next to you. Why are you watching? It is
said that someone must watch. Someone must be there.

After applying the possible grids of interpretation to this narration, consider whether it
bears formal resemblance to a biblical parable, a Homeric episode, a canto from Dante’s
*Comedy*, or a Romantic fairy tale. If so, how does the affinity affect our interpretation?

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) was a fine Argentine Modernist whose story “The
Book of Sand” we will consider now. The modern influence of Kafka has been immense.
Writers have tried to capture the mysterious atmosphere, the paranoid scenarios, and the
austere outlines of his narrative. Borges is unusual in that he apprehended an essential
structure of Kafka’s narrative world in time and space. It has to do with the paradoxical
nature of infinity considered from a finite vantage. Borges wrote that the true heroes of
Kafka’s fiction are actually Zeno’s arrow or Achilles and the tortoise. These were figures
of Zeno’s paradoxes of infinity and motion in ancient Greece.

Borges’s insight goes deep. The protagonists of *The Trial* or *The Castle* advance
as if on a treadmill, with every step forward issuing in a reversal. The hierarchical field
of their action expands subtly around them through implication and insinuation. The path
extends itself with their every step. The Surveyor K. in *The Castle* learns of ever more
minutely ramified tiers of hierarchy that impede his progress. The authority of the castle hierarchy, which is always above him, of which no highest official is known or named, grows and recedes, becomes more banal and more inaccessible at one and the same time.

According to a characteristic paradox of Zeno, the arrow can never reach its target because first it would have to traverse half the distance, before that half of half, before that half of half of half and so on to infinity. The paradox stems from illicitly transferring what is true of the finite to what is thought of the infinite. If the distance is eight meters, the arrow cannot go four before going two, and cannot go two before going one. In finite distances, this would describe an actual delay. But the infinite multiplication of the finite does not have a proportionate retarding effect because as Saint Augustine or the Christian Renaissance philosopher Nicholas Cusanus well knew, there can be no proportion of the infinite to the finite. If one insists upon thinking as if there were, paradoxes result. This disproportionality of the finite and the infinite bears witness to the inadequacy of human reason and hence for believers to the need for faith in God, as was the case for the devout seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal. Or the same insight may confound philosophy, theology, and mathematics, as happened with the set theory and theory of transfinite numbers of Georg Cantor, a mathematician beset by religious obsessions at the dawn of the twentieth century. Tolstoy dreamed of two infinities, an abyss below which terrified him and an infinity above which comforted him: “I gaze into the abyss of sky and try to forget about the one below, and I actually do forget” (93).

Borges’ “Book of Sand” (1975) is objective. It is puzzlingly autobiographical in tone and scarcely more than four pages in length. It begins as follows:
The line is made up of an infinite number of points; the plane of an
infinite number of lines; the volume of an infinite number of planes; the
hypervolume of an infinite number of volumes. . . . No, unquestionably
this is not—*more geometrico*—the best way of beginning my story. To
claim that it is true is nowadays the convention of every made-up story.

Mine, however, *is* true. (445)

The narrator then tells where he resides, which seems to be the same as Borges’ residence in Buenos Aires. He recounts how a Scottish Bible salesman from the Orkneys knocked on his door late one evening a few months back. For many, a door-to-door Bible vendor evokes a comic mix of the proselytizing, the commercial, and the professional; but the narrator, like Borges a bibliophile, would trump his visitor by announcing that there are several Bibles in the house already, Wyclif’s, Luther’s, and a Latin Vulgate. This implies a well-stocked library of sacred writings in need of no addition; and it intimates that the gentleman of the house is aware that there is not merely one Bible. Holy Scripture exists in variant editions, translations, and versions. The Word of God does not possess the exclusive cachet touted by its street hawkers.

The salesman, whose aspect is “gloomy” and businesslike, counters by offering him a sacred book he has acquired in Bombay from an illiterate Untouchable who used it as a talisman. It is handwritten in an unfamiliar script. Its peculiar feature is that one can never open it twice to the same page. Nor is it possible to open it to a first or last page. It is an infinite book. As the vendor remarks, “The number of pages in this book is no more or less than infinite. None is the first page, none the last.” The gloomy vendor goes on,
“as if he were thinking aloud … ‘If space is infinite, we may be at any point in space. If
time is infinite, we may be at any point in time.’” (447).

The salesman demands a large amount for “The Book of Sand.” The narrator
offers him a precious Wyclif Bible and the amount of a month’s pension check which he
has just cashed. The salesman eagerly accepts and departs. The remainder of the story
describes the negative effect of this acquisition on the narrator and his deliberations on
what to do with it. Eventually he manages to lose the “monstrous” book in the shelves on
the stairwell of the Argentine National Library.

It is a very short story with relatively few details to be puzzled over. We can ask
what each means beginning with the “nightmarish object” of the infinite book itself. I
will venture one gambit to interpret the book, not because I am convinced I know the
answer better than anyone else, but because it is an answer that accords with deliberations
in this survey. All reading is tied to the text, but the ways of contextualizing texts are
infinite. Beyond the many ways of comparing the parts to one another and to the whole,
there are infinite points of view and points of external reference, each of which brings
other aspects to light. The Book of Sand is any book or all books, understood in the light
of the infinite aspects that can be revealed. Because we differ from moment to moment,
from person to person, we can no more open the book twice to the same place, than, in
the words of an ancient philosopher Heraclitus, we can step twice into the same river.

Is it significant that the narrator trades Holy Scripture for the Book of Sand?
What is the significance of its pagination, its rare illustrations (an “anchor” is mentioned
in one case, a “mask” in another). Why does the narrator call his acquisition “an obscene
thing that affronted and tainted reality itself” (448)? And what does it mean when he
speculates, “I thought of fire, but I feared that the burning of an infinite book might
likewise prove infinite and suffocate the planet with smoke” (448)? Is this logical? We
have seen that the fewer the details the greater load of meaning they may carry. Is the
opposite somehow true as well? Does infinitude preclude meaning?

Kafka at the outset of the twentieth century and Borges nearer its end represent
certain pronounced aspects of Modernism: its distinction from and extension of Realism;
its penetration of surface appearances to reveal a hidden reality or a reality projected by
concepts such as infinity, paradox, relativism, or the unconscious. This is the Modernism
that consciously sets out to transcend the terms of Realism.

But there is another strain of literary modernity. It transcends nineteenth-century
Realism but does so by striving to come to terms with twentieth-century mass phenomena
which were inconceivable to a culture and mentality inherited from the past. In writing
about imperialism, modern warfare, Communism, Fascism, genocide, and the Holocaust,
modern writers distill experience into narrative works which are both striking monuments
of their time and timeless reflections on human nature. Since in these cases, the mass
phenomenon of imperialism, Communism, or Fascism is as essential as the idea of the
infinite for Borges, some historical digression will be necessary.

**Joseph Conrad and the Human *Heart of Darkness***

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is surrounded by so much controversy that
placing it onto a short list of classics or choosing it for an undergraduate introduction to
narrative literature can only be provocative. The Polish born Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)
is one of the most important early Modernist authors. As a young man, he adopted the
language, experience, and nationality of a British seaman, a background that became the
foundation of his career as an author. *Heart of Darkness* reflects his experience during a
brief stint as a transport employee in the service of the Belgian colonial enterprise. His
novel, as Ian Watt has observed, was reckoned as the cutting edge of anti-imperialism
upon its appearance and for the first three quarters of a century of its influence. Then,
in 1975, the Nigerian Nobel Prize-winning novelist Chinua Achebe called attention to
racism in *Heart of Darkness*. For example, the narrator Marlow typically speaks of his
shock upon realizing that the natives of the interior were human beings. His descriptions
of them, by our standards highly offensive, conform to the racial prejudices of the age.

It is not difficult to counter Achebe’s charges. The narrator and his companions
appropriately share the racism of their period: the focal point of the novel is the dawning
awareness which comes to these minions of imperial power that their enterprise is evil, as
problematic for Europeans as for Africans. The Europeans in the novel can only come to
the realization as the men they are, not as saintly moralists outside of their time. Implicit
self-condemnation is surely more devastating because of its source than if it came from
the purest opponent of racist colonialism. Achebe’s attribution of racism to Conrad’s
novel ignores the basic facts of its structure: the objectionable opinions are voiced by a
fictional narrator, not presented as objective facts by a voice that transcends the narrative
 confines of the work. Despite its racist language, and precisely because it is written from
the perspective of racist imperialists, *Heart of Darkness* is therefore capable of presenting
a more sweeping condemnation of colonialism than the more revolutionary perspective of
Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, even though it truly gives voice to an African people.
Having said this, it is still problematic to assign and discuss *Heart of Darkness* in a large undergraduate class. References to Africans as “niggers” and grotesque allusions to them as savages, especially when voiced by the staid and judicious Marlow, have the appearance of racial contempt. They risk making incendiary language acceptable in the classroom. Students of African origin and all students sensitive to the offensiveness of racism may feel insulted and humiliated. They have a right to their feelings. When there are so many books to choose from, is this one really indispensable?

In my opinion, *Heart of Darkness* is indispensable. It is certainly indispensable for a survey of Western literature that incorporates the topics of racism and colonialism. Relegating such a topic, say, to books by African writers could have the effect of defining it as their problem, not ours. Conrad presents an invaluable literary testimony of crimes on a vast scale, of which the terrible consequences are still unfolding today. Excluding *Heart of Darkness* from the curriculum to avoid giving offense undercuts the valid sense of justice at the root of the offended sensibilities. In assigning Conrad, I would suggest following the example of a physician or lawyer who prescribes an unpleasant procedure: acknowledge the pain it causes and apologize for it with all due compassion. But above all explain its necessity. Any lawyer who excluded some vital testimony because a client was offended by the racist speech or demeanor of a key witness would betray the client’s and the public’s far greater interest in justice.

Again and again, the most seminal and serious studies of African genocide and its consequences have cited and recognized Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Hannah Arendt’s *Imperialism* (from her *Origins of Totalitarianism*) drew on Conrad to interpret the impact of African colonialism on the European character as it evolved toward Fascism, Nazism,
totalitarianism, and the Holocaust. Sven Lindqvist’s “Exterminate All the Brutes!” took its title and its thesis from *Heart of Darkness*. Lindqvist shows how the genocidal events anticipated by Conrad were widely characteristic for the colonialist treatment of African peoples. Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost* is the most pertinent of these studies. Hochschild recounts the origins of the Belgian Congo. His account has a familiar ring for us today. King Leopold promoted the Belgian colony as a Free State. It was supposed to end Arab slave trading in one of the last great un-colonized regions of Africa. Managed from the start as a business venture, the initial revenues came from the ivory trade. Soon, however, the colony was the chief source of lucrative rubber sap tapped from trees in its vast jungles.

For Europeans the climate could be deadly. The Belgians relied on native labor to exploit rubber, and on native troops to maintain order. Native laborers could be made to dig or carry while under guard or in chains. But oversight and chains made it impossible to collect rubber in dense forests. Native troops were therefore directed to take villagers hostage until their men collected specified amounts of rubber. Since native troops were unreliable—they might turn their guns on their white officers or expend ammunition on hunting—each native soldier was required to return a severed black right hand for each cartridge expended. True to the entrepreneurial principles of the Free State, a cottage industry for supplying severed hands sprang up. Reports of mutilations and stockpiles of severed hands, some of them children’s, appeared in the world press and encouraged a worldwide campaign against conditions in the colony.

The millions of Africans decimated during this period, the ruthless exploitation of the Free State, the lack of preparation for independence, and the American and European
support for the dictatorship that followed after independence—these are the prehistory of an underreported conflict which has been causing millions of deaths and untold civilian suffering in recent years in the very region where *Heart of Darkness* reaches its climax. The conditions described by Lindqvist or Hochschild form the background of Conrad’s writing of his novel and of its early reception, as well as the background of the current genocidal violence in the heart of Africa. The conflict in the center of Africa lacks the cachet of Darfur, where international attention was bolstered by initial reports of Muslim Arabs killing Christian Africans, or Zimbabwe, where it was encouraged by the fact that the massive repression of the entire population included expropriations of white-owned farms. Like much else in Africa, the ongoing genocidal violence in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo appears to confirm how unlike us these unfortunate African peoples are and how little their history or lack of history has to do with our own history and with us. Conrad’s novel testifies powerfully against such complacency.

The testimony of *Heart of Darkness* is not documentary. Neither the colony nor its mother country is given a name. Conrad’s achievement is in revealing the inextricable connection between the mind, history, and essential humanity of peoples remote from one another. He does this by means of the brilliant symbolic figure contained in the title of his novel and by carefully framing Marlow’s story of his African journey upriver to find the European colonial agent named Kurtz at the “Inner Station.” The Africa into which Marlow journeys was known in his time as “Darkest Africa.” His journey took him into the heart of the “Dark Continent.” In recounting his story to his friends, Marlow makes it abundantly clear that his experience became for him a journey into the human heart and the heart of his own civilization. What he found in the heart of one exemplary specimen
of his own world, an excellent embodiment of European culture and its brilliance, was *darkness*. The meaning of this darkness is elaborately evoked in the novel, but it resists exhaustive accounting. As Marlow indicates at the end, the final balance is not yet in.

The framing narration begins with the old friends whose livelihood has derived from the sea on a pleasure outing, waiting on the deck of their yacht for the tide to turn on the Thames. The river at dusk and the brooding city behind them are evoked with all the visual brilliance and nostalgia of a Turner seascape. By the time Marlow begins his tale, the coordinates of sea and sky and darkness and light have been assigned distinct values which establish the universalized context of past and present, of near and far, and of the remote place of Marlow’s journey with the familiar and cherished world of these men of custom and respectability. The reader can perform a valuable exercise by sketching the panorama evoked in the framing narration, diagramming the associations of the river, sea, darkness, and light with the values introduced in the framing episode. It is not enough to show the boat and river; the sea and sky are part of the framing panorama. Students who read *Heart of Darkness* struggle with the apparent incoherence of shifting references and unfinished thoughts. These are often like the ragged edges in one of those picture puzzles that trick us with light-dark contrasts into missing an image in the fringes. It is helpful to single out and analyze examples of passages where references are confused and shifting.

The narrator who stands outside of and encompasses the framing tale is one of the men on the outing; he announces that the meaning of the tale launched by Marlow resides more in context than content, more in what frames events than in the events themselves: “*Marlow was not typical . . . and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale* which brought it out only as a glow brings out a
haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (18). The words to which italics have been added confirm that the true significance of the tale to follow lies in context. The un-italicized words suggest that the emergent meaning is somehow evanescent and spectral, visible only “sometimes,” only in rare and peculiar configurations of darkness and light.

The reader is advised before proceeding with Marlow’s tale to read and reread the framing episode as often as needed from the beginning to the point where the “we” of the first narrator states that, “He [Marlow] broke off” and then, “we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” (20-21). With this, we have been forewarned to attend to Marlow’s contextualizing comments and not to expect that the story itself will be “conclusive.” The comments reflect the fact that Marlow is not merely recounting events but searching for their meaning. This is why his journey is dual: into the heart of Africa and into the human heart, the secrets of which must be disclosed to his intuition by whatever it is that external experience arouses in him. This includes Marlow’s judgment, enunciated in the framing tale, that his journey abroad coincides with a journey back in time into a remote European or British past. We soon become aware that Marlow’s recapitulation of the recollected scenes and experiences presents them less as factual reports than as plays of association or as symbolic tableaus of meaning, a technique used, we recall, by Dante.

Marlow’s tale does evoke his ambivalence about the humanity of the peoples in a remote interior of Africa. His prejudices are racist; but without his self-acknowledged questionable views, we might be unable to recognize in Kurtz anything but a renegade agent or madman. Marlow can interpret Kurtz for us because he is both like and unlike
him. Sharing a culture and its prejudices with Kurtz, Marlow on balance condemns both the man and the culture that produced him. Our “politically correct” reluctance to follow Marlow in this progression resembles the heirs to a fortune who shun their ancestor from whose vulgar achievements their own higher standards derive. This is surely more a sign of moral uncertainty than a demonstration of moral superiority.

Because the tale told by Marlow recounts both a voyage abroad and within, the pacing of his narration is counterpointed with his intensifying efforts of interpretation: by this I mean that the nearer his destination, the more the pace of narration slows. Early in his tale, only a few pages cover a voyage of thousands of sea miles. Approaching his climactic encounter with Kurtz, Marlow expends many pages on the last few leagues of his journey upriver. Finally, after he succeeds in bringing the dying Kurtz on board and returning downriver, the final moments of the dying agent give us neither action nor the progression of flowing discourse. The last words of Kurtz are elliptical: “The horror! The horror!”

The counterpointing of Marlow’s dual, external and internal journeys merge as he recounts them in the symbolism of the scenes he has witnessed. Readers might perform a valuable exercise by selecting any of the scenes and analyzing the components that give it a dual aspect: the descriptive elements of a travel scene on the one hand and the evocative elements of a journey inward in search for meaning and context on the other.

There are allusions in Marlow’s symbolism to Dante and to Jules Vernes’ Journey to the Center of the Earth, but the symbols do not require an arcane or expert knowledge. They are what he means by them. What he means, though not always clear to him or us, is certainly a function of the nature of his intentions, experience, and feelings. Most of us
can recount memorable experiences, the full meaning of which is not entirely evident to us. If we were seated vis-à-vis someone telling us a story in such impassioned terms, we would know enough to look for the meaning of the terms in the impassioning experience rather than in a lexicon of literary symbols. The same applies to Conrad’s narrative.

One important symbol is introduced in the framing narration and maintained throughout. It is the symbol of water. Though this is a venerable symbol, the reader would still do well to study above all how the narrator and Marlow use it. In Tolstoy, we noticed symbols—the darkness or the storm—which mean what they mean because they are what they are. The icy darkness into which Vasili erred meant death in more than one regard: the life-threatening power of darkness could therefore effect an existential crisis in the man who encountered it.

If waters, rivers, and seas are natural symbols, what do they signify and why? Among the possibilities are time and transformation, what is necessary to life or inimical to it; the origin of life and the destination of all things; or the relationship of the finite to the infinite which is said to be like the proverbial drop in the sea. In Heart of Darkness, we notice that mention of waters and waterways, of two great rivers, and of the sea recurs at least as often as the symbolic darkness. Water links the framing to the main narrative and gives rise to its suggestive meaning. The narrative flow coincides with Marlow’s floating or voyaging on the continuous waterways of his life. What does it mean that he tells his present tale on water rather than land?

For the seaman-storyteller Conrad, water is the symbol of all symbols. Another of his novels Lord Jim tells of a young Englishman living in disgrace in a faraway exotic place. His secret is failure in a disaster at sea. Another character is a wise old merchant,
the trader Stein. In German-ordered sentences Stein speaks symbolically of life: “A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns—nicht wahr? … No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up” (154). Does the water offers a kind of parable here? Can it be read by itself, like the parables of Kafka or Jesus? If so, what could this mean? Can we recall what it felt like learning to swim? Do we not also use swimming and sinking as metaphors to describe engaging in life?

It is instructive to consider images of water or darkness. Slightly more difficult, but no less significant, are Conrad’s ironic allusions to the sacred or the religious. Who are the “pilgrims” and why does Marlow refer to them as he does? To what does the allusion to the “snake” refer when Marlow recalls being tempted by the map of Africa? (“…a large shining map, marked with all the colors of the rainbow. … I was going into the yellow. Dead in the center. And the river was there—fascinating—deadly—like a snake.”[7]) Equally critical is Marlow’s depiction of the Company bookkeeper. The words of Marlowe should be read aloud and in the context of the preceding episode in order to capture their intention: “I shook hands with this miracle, and I learned he was the company’s chief accountant, and that all the bookkeeping was done at this station. … this man had truly accomplished something. And he was devoted to his books, which were all in apple-pie order” (15). When this exemplary soul’s accounting methods run afoul of the native world, he gives vent to this sentiment: “Then, alluding with a toss of the head to the tumult in the station yard [he said], ‘When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages—hate them to death’” (16).
There are also passages in which the crimes of colonialism are exposed without symbolism or irony, as when Marlow says early in his narration that: “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (4). But he adds: “What redeems it is the idea only.” In Africa, in the proximity of the bookkeeper, Marlow witnesses “the gloomy circle of some Inferno”: “They [the African laborers] were dying slowly. … They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now,—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts … These moribund shapes were free as air…” (35). Notice what the allusion to the Inferno introduces here. Who has created this Hell? What is it constructed from? Is it made out of savage jungle or of the abstract medium employed by bookkeepers and Company agents?

After pursuing the dual traces of the white man’s quest, after being guided on the one hand by the “idea” of order and civilization embodied grotesquely in the bookkeeper, and while remaining cognizant of its victims on the other, Marlow at long last makes the acquaintance of the bold and brilliant representative figure of whom he says: “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz.” The reader should read carefully the pages devoted to the encounter. Consider the strength of Marlow’s characterization of the Inner Station and compare this with how much clearly and overtly happens in this encounter. How much of the meaning of the encounter is revealed by the action and how much by a narrative context evoked by Marlow? We should not forget where, when, and to whom
Marlow is recollecting his encounter. We adjust our own reports to the foolish or wise sensibilities of others, telling them what they need to know. What might that imply here?

Before he became ill, Kurtz imposed his atrocious reign of terror around the Inner Station. The “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs” had once commissioned a report from him. Marlow finds the draft among his things and marvels at its eloquence and high sentiment. He reads Kurtz’ declaration that, “By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded…” (83). In the wilderness of the interior, Kurtz found and became intoxicated with boundless freedom. At the end of the last page of the draft, Marlow reads its final note: “It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’” (83-84). This became for him the ultimate expression of the redeeming “idea” of colonialism.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the wilderness is a litmus for what is in the heart. The alien world of the African interior is a catalyst, not a corrupting influence. Kurtz is no more corrupted by African savages than the bookkeeper whose racism was his own baggage. Kurtz’ downfall stems from his belief in his voluntaristic supremacy. Africa gives him the invisibility of Gyges in Plato’s parable. Immersed in the unknown and freed from moral constraints, his faith in the power of benevolent intentions evolves first into an unfettered will-power, which cannot build but only accumulate or destroy, and finally into a perverse faith in the power of the arbitrary will, of which the ultimate exercise is genocidal extermination: “Exterminate all the brutes!”
Marlow’s terror and loathing in the interior of Africa is that of a white European with all the prejudices of his time, but the uncanny presence he senses there conveys the apprehensions for humanity of a man who, in groping forward blindly, is guided by the echoes of his inner self in the strange and inexpressible new world he has entered:

There were moments when one’s past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. (30)

Among Marlow’s reflections upon penetrating deeper into “the heart of darkness” is his dictum: “The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future” (32). It is not the seemingly timeless native peoples of whom this is said. His word that the mind contains all things is intended as a revelation with respect to the Europeans whose world is historical. Containing all things, the mind is both savage and sophisticated. Latent in the mind is the uncivilized past and a future in which men like Kurtz will seek to confirm the power of their will by exterminating entire peoples. About Kurtz it is said by one who has known him in the wilderness that, “He electrified large meetings. He had faith. … He could get himself to believe anything – anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party” (116).

Claims of literary prophecy are vacuous unless the future is latent in the material of a writer. By seeing through the propaganda of his own time to the genocidal brutality
of African colonialism and recognizing what it meant for the world, Conrad became a
prophet of the worst the new century had to offer. In 1904, the Germans attempted to
wipe out the Herero people in the colony of South West Africa (Namibia). The father of
Nazi potentate Hermann Göring had been the first administrator of that colony. When
Hitler and his lieutenants conceived of their Final Solution of the European Jews, the
precedent of African genocide had already been tested. *Heart of Darkness* exemplifies
the power of literature as cultural memory: its power to focus and concentrate historical
developments in symbols that summarize the past as a moral problem or milestone.

**Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon***

We need a literature that can symbolize and conceptualize the moral problems of
the past for us. Though barely over, the twentieth century is already disappearing from
the fund of common knowledge to which instruction and public discussion can appeal.
The great events and developments of the last century are filtered in the consciousness of
students and the public at large by selective memory and oversimplified moral contrasts.
What Hobsbawm called the “short twentieth century” (1914-1991) broke sharply with the
nineteenth, unfolding as global tragedy in a chain of clearly demarked stages. To many
of our students and considerable portions of the public at large, the twentieth century has
now become a murky prehistory of our own moment, a present instinctively perceived as
beyond or outside history. We are left with the impossibility of understanding the present
or the future without reference to a century that has barely ended. Even though literature
cannot be reduced to history, sociology, psychology, or politics, it can and should be read as a source of knowledge complementary to theirs.

A serious symptom of our disassociation from the recent past is the characteristic inability of students to distinguish between Fascism and Communism. If the origins, similarities, and differences of these two movements cannot be distinguished, much of the past century is indecipherable. The simplistic bent of mass culture plays a role in obscuring their character. Fascism in its most virulent form as Nazism is identical with Hitler, World War, and the Holocaust. In the number of its victims, Communism, which held sway over larger populations for much longer than the terrible twelve years of the Third Reich, is judged as equal to or worse than Nazism. The same standard might be used to condemn Christianity and nationalism for all time. The quantity-based equation of Nazism with Communism reduces the past to a moral fable. In narrative history, it is like the simplification of Roman history recounted in the Gesta Romanorum, a medieval collection of anecdotes which typically open with “Erat quidam imperator,” “There once was an emperor.” The Gesta ignored all the particular periods, institutions, and forces of the past, transforming it into moral fables of good and evil, like the legendary lives of the saints and their persecutors, and indeed like our representations of the past. Reading the modern classics can free us from this moralistic tutelage, much as the recovery of ancient literature liberated the Renaissance humanists from medieval moralism by enabling them to recoup the more complex realities of antiquity.

Both Fascism, with its roots in nationalism, and Communism, with its roots in international socialism, were nourished by the immense senseless slaughter of the First World War and the resultant exhaustion and disillusionment that arose in Europe. At the
end of that war, Communism triumphed in Russia by promising peace, land, and bread. In defeated Germany, die-hard military officers and nationalists led by Hitler blamed Socialists and Jews for the German humiliation and shaped the Nazi Party to take power and exact revenge. At its inception, Fascism *reaffirmed* war and endeavored to militarize the nation against real or imagined enemies. Communism at its inception *rejected* war in favor of class struggle, rejected nationalism, and promised to unite all peoples in the spirit of proletarian socialist internationalism. Both were obsessed with enemies of the people. To the Nazis, the enemies were Jews and Communists; and to the Communists bourgeois capitalists, imperialists, and Fascists. Since in either case the hypothetical enemies of the people justified the state in eliminating the freedoms—and lives—of real people, the two movements might appear to be mirror images of one another. Fascism and Communism indeed evolved in arch rivalry and mutual influence. Yet for us an important distinction is in danger of being obscured. We look back with revulsion on Communism because it failed to fulfill its promises of peace, equality, justice, and progress. We look back with revulsion on Nazism because it did fulfill its promises of racist nationalism, inequality, militarism, and war.

If revulsion is our only guide to the past, we lose access to the choices, hopes, and disappointments of the living. There were times in the twentieth century when people of liberal sentiments could recognize a valid alternative in Communism—as long as certain evils could be ignored or rationalized away as necessary for achieving a good end. After 1917, the Russian Revolution seemed to be a valid alternative to war and nationalism—if only one ignored its political violence and repression. In the early 1930s, Communism seemed to be an alternative to worldwide depression—if one ignored that its industrial
progress required the forced collectivization and oppression of Soviet peasants. In the late 1930s, the Soviet Union seemed like an alternative to the rise of Hitler in Germany and Fascism throughout Europe—if one ignored the fact that Stalin’s feckless radicalism prior to 1933 had paved the way for Hitler’s triumph, and that the non-aggression pact between the two dictators in 1939 made world war possible.

What swept each of the contingencies of what seemed to the conviction of what had to be was an analysis and belief in a driving force of history that predestined human sufferings as the birthpangs of a dawning age of equality. The German *Internationale* or battle hymn of the Communist movement exhorted the “nations” to “hear the signals,” to rise “up to fight the final struggle.” In English, it exulted: “the last fight let us face/ The *Internationale* unites the human race.” Even in wars fought by democratic countries for reasons of self-defense, it is deemed necessary to do evil things, to kill those innocent of offense. Exploiting this rationalization, the Marxist-Leninist narrative of a doomed and destructive world capitalism, lashing out in its monstrous death throes with imperialism, impoverishment, fascism, and war, seemed to justify the counter struggle of international Communism, even with all the human and moral sacrifices such a struggle entailed.

What this logic could not justify, even on its own terms, was the readiness of a movement controlled in Moscow to sacrifice its adherents when they threatened to depart or appeared capable of departing from the party line of First Party Secretary Josef Stalin. Those thought capable of threatening his absolute power met the same fate as the Fascists and counterrevolutionaries who were sworn enemies of Communism. The Communist movement demanded absolute submission to centralized authority, no matter how inept. Thus, when overzealous Communist tactics enabled Hitler to come to power and smash
the German Communist Party, its struggling remnants were still obliged to adhere to the Communist Party line which had led them to disastrous defeat in 1933. When in the late 1930s, Germany grew powerful enough to threaten the Soviet Union, Stalin abandoned a popular policy of fighting Fascism in Spain and elsewhere and signed the non-aggression pact which allowed Germany to attack its neighbors. Communists loyal to the policy of fighting Fascism were sacrificed. This is precisely the historical background of Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*—a background familiar to the former Communist author through his international work for the Party and his imprisonment in Fascist Spain.

In the global-historical tragedy of the twentieth century, Koestler, like Conrad, discovered a crucial moral problem and an appropriate symbolic treatment. The moral problem is the question whether a good end may justify an evil means. Koestler’s way of symbolically contextualizing the problem relies on evoking the parallels of the history of Communism and that of other periods or movements. The reader notices that the novel begins with a simple framing device. Its chapters are preceded by epigraphs. The first epigraph cites the French Jacobin revolutionary Saint-Just: “Nobody can rule guiltlessly.” This effects a dual contextualization. The epigraph recalls the well known resemblances of the French and Russian Revolutions. Both progressed from a popular uprising which benefited from a degree of international sympathy to a Reign of Terror that climaxed with the French phase of Thermidor. This was the phase in which Saint-Just and Robespierre, idealistic advocates of terror, were executed: the Revolution devoured its own children. The events of *Darkness at Noon* are framed by the understanding that the Moscow Purge Trials are a Russian climactic phase between the French Terror and Thermidor.
However, in citing Saint-Just Koestler’s novel also universalizes its problem by implicating the question whether there can be power without guilt. An epigraph to the penultimate chapter echoes this question by citing Machiavelli, the Renaissance theorist of statecraft, to similar effect: “Occasionally words must serve to veil the facts. But this must happen in such a way that no one become aware of it; or if it should be noticed, excuses must be at hand to be produced immediately.” The lies and manipulations of the revolutionary state and the guilt of its rulers are thereby set into a universal philosophical context. The question arises whether power over others is by its nature guilty.

The juxtaposition of revolutions in the framing epigraph and the philosophical universalization of its themes resonate throughout the novel and extend to the core of its subject matter. Its intellectual characters, Rubashov and Ivanov, are forever appealing to history as their witness and source of authority. Their self-legitimation as professional revolutionaries is based on their claim to have scientifically and objectively grasped the laws of history and grounded their political action in their understanding. Their god of history is ruthless, building on misery and human suffering to forge a path for progress. The disciples of history live by an ethos that excludes sentimentality and compassion. They are the radical surgeons who cut and burn in order to heal the patient, humankind. By their heartless ethos, the professional revolutionaries have no right to spare others or themselves. They themselves think persistently in terms of historical parallels. History in this sense frames the actions and events of the novel even as it acts as a force within it.

But Koestler does not stop with these parallels. He sets up another which gives his novel far greater depth and resonance. Communism is paralleled and contrasted with Christianity in reference to their respective doctrines, histories, and contradictions. Long
before Koestler, the thought that Christianity and Communism bore certain similarities had acquired currency both with Marxists such as Friedrich Engels and with the Christian critics of revolutionary radicalism such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In Koestler’s hands, the parallel of the new faith with the old evokes their mysterious affinities. His rank-and-file Communists are like persecuted primitive Christians. The marriage of Communist fervor with state power in Russia is comparable to the alliance of Christian faith with Roman power in a medieval Catholic Church that crushed its critics as heretics. The struggle of Communism to win the final battle of history resembles in its pathos the struggles and sacrifices of chiliastic Christians who were capable of heroic sacrifices and extravagant illusions. Both Christianity and Communism promised to give birth to “the New Man.” For both, the crux of power over their followers lay in the coherence of their authority. In the most categorical phases of either, Communism and Christianity both derived their authority from a radical re-definition of reality, from a set of beliefs which established a unique value system, divided the world between those inside and those outside its fold, distinguished surface appearances from underlying reality, encompassed all of history, pointed the way toward universal salvation, and proclaimed the glorious coming of a final age. Without this categorical worldview that calculated in millions and centuries rather than in individual lives, Communism could hardly have commanded the iron allegiance and self-sacrifice of its adherents. When the movement overextended its claim on reality by stretching the principle of the good end which justifies the bad means to the breaking point, its authority began to crack in its most perceptive adherents. This is in essence the tale of the old Bolshevik Rubashov in Darkness at Noon. The novel does not attempt to report on the millions of victims of Communism. It is rather about “the god that failed.”
The plot is inaugurated by Rubashov’s arrest. The narration begins when he is shown into his cell and imprisoned on trumped up charges. It ends when he is delivered from prison by execution. The main action takes the form of Rubashov’s dialog with his interrogators, in words that are deeds, and with himself, as he recalls and contemplates his words and their deadly effect on comrades who have been sacrificed. His true prison is not made of stone and barbed wire but of ideas and beliefs. Upon entering his cell, he experiences imprisonment as a relief from the recurrent nightmare of impending arrest. Rubashov prefers to face a brutal but predictable reality than to be tormented by dreams over which he has no mental control. Knowledge draws him more than death frightens him. This catalyzes his inner transformation. The prison yard or his cell window allow him to glimpse fragments of external reality, a strip of the Milky Way, snow crunching beneath the boots of a sentry, the voice and hands of a fellow prisoner, or the messages tapped out from cell neighbors whose fate resembles and differs from his own.

The outstretched hands of a prisoner jar his memory by reminding him of the supplicating hands of a Pietà in a German art museum where he clandestinely met with a local underground leader of the routed Party struggling to resist Hitler. Rubashov recalls the young comrade’s desperate faith in him as a leader of the party. He recalls the young man’s tormented knowledge that his pregnant wife has been arrested by the secret police. He recalls summarily expelling him from the Party and warning him to remain clear of its underground organization. He recalls in consequence the young man’s subsequent arrest.

*Darkness at Noon* echoes and borrows from the philosophical detective novels of Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment, The Possessed,* or *The Brothers Karamazov,* and it is also reminiscent of Kafka’s *The Trial.* As in *Crime and Punishment* or *The Trial,* the
suspense is less in the outcome than in the protagonist’s way of arriving at it. The public that read Koestler’s novel was well aware of the widely reported mystery of the purged Old Bolsheviks: men and women who had withstood torture and imprisonment for the Communist cause confessed to fantastically trumped up charges in Stalin’s show trials of the late 1930s. Some even petitioned for their own execution. Why had these hardened revolutionaries confessed? This mystery was material for a political detective novel.

As the imprisoned Rubashov carries on his dialog with memory and ideology, he submits to three interrogations, first twice with his old comrade Ivanov who comes close to extracting a confession by means of logic and ideological argument, and then with the younger, blindly committed Gletkin. As the New Man of the post-revolutionary era, Gletkin uses humiliation and harsh measures to effect Rubashov’s abject submission. As in a detective novel there are clues and plot threads involving Rubashov’s resistance and capitulation to false charges, his past record of sacrificing the innocent, and the concealed struggle of Ivanov and Gletkin. But the overriding question concerns the significance of Rubashov’s capitulation. We think of any false accusation as inherently unjust. But in this case, we have to consider not only the criminality of the Communist system but the beliefs, actions, and evolving consciousness of the human being Rubashov. Is it possible to be innocent as charged yet guilty in a real sense and deserving of punishment? Can the tyranny of a ruthless regime fulfill a higher justice?

With this question in mind, the reader should proceed from the surprising twists of plot to the framing narrative of ideas expressed in Rubashov’s journal entries, in the epigraphs placed at the head of Koestler’s chapters (or “Hearings”), and in the recurrent religious allusions. These include the motif of the Pietá near the beginning of the novel
and the quotations from the Gospel account of the humiliation of Jesus and the betrayal of Peter muttered near the end by old Vasili, Rubashov’s neighbor and former comrade in arms who recalls his heroism as a revolutionary commander by citing the Gospel Passion. When we consider the implications of these allusions for the author’s paradoxical parallel of Christianity and Communism, the contextualizing allusions have the effect of making the moral problem more complex, challenging, and mysterious.

*Darkness at Noon* goes beyond topical polemics in its contextualization of the moral problems of the novel. There are two epigraphs which reveal the timelessness of Koestler’s theme of ends and means. The first is from a medieval churchman’s book on combating schisms within the Church:

> When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality. With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even cunning, violence, simony, prison, death. For all order is for the community, and the individual must be sacrificed to the common good. (Dietrich von Nieheim, Bishop of Verden, *De schismate libri III*, 1411)

The second is from the nineteenth-century German socialist, Ferdinand Lasalle’s political tragedy of the German Reformation, *Franz von Sickingen* (1859):

> Show us not the aim without the way.

> For ends and means on earth are so entangled

> That changing one, you change the other too;

> Each different path brings other ends in view.
Although the first epigraph recalls the measures adopted to maintain the dominance of the Catholic Church, outside of which there could be no salvation, neither of the citations is, in my opinion, intended by Koestler primarily as a critique of Christianity. This would be beneath his purpose. His intention is to concentrate and focus the theme of revolution by distilling from it its essential universal moral problem of ends and means.

By now, the crimes of Communism are sufficiently known. *Darkness at Noon* sheds light on the power of the ideas that lay at their root. It is an emotionally powerful and engaging novel because its ideas and presentation run counter to the simplified moral *exempla* of history. As a novel it has a perfect right to humanize its villains. Rubashov is guilty, but in his own way sympathetic. Gletkin is a figure to be studied and understood. *Darkness at Noon* is too narrowly characterized as an anticommunist classic, just as Shakespeare’s tragedies would be too narrowly described as classics of the feudal system.

For an exercise in textual interpretation, the reader can compare the content of the novel with the biblical passages it cites and with passages in Tolstoy we have discussed that resemble Rubashov’s experience of conversion at the end of the novel. A contextual approach might ask how Koestler strikes a balance on the question whether compassion or abstract principle is the foundation of morality. How has the context of this question evolved? In an interconnected global society, Koestler’s theme of ends and means is more relevant than ever. We should have no difficulty finding examples for discussion in the realm of domestic or foreign policy or the global economy.

We need to consider one additional aspect of *Darkness at Noon* before turning to our final narrative. There is a question about the relationship of Rubashov’s experience to claims made by the author regarding his own. As Rubashov awaits execution after his
confession and trial, his consciousness is altered and extended. The Old Bolshevik
acquires a new sense of human solidarity with his neighbor in cell 202, a reactionary
czarist officer known only by his cell number. 202 is a man as remote as possible from
Rubashov’s intellectual and political world. He is obsessed with personal honor and
desperate for sex with a woman. In accepting a kind of fellowship with 202, Rubashov
implicitly acknowledges his own creatural mortality.

But this is only one way in which Rubashov opens up. He also contemplates the
mystery of the human self or “I.” He taps the word in code on his cell wall. As a Marxist
and materialist, he has long regarded the self as a “grammatical fiction.” Now, however,
he attempts to recover his communication with his “silent partner,” this other who is his
own elusive being. Reaching out for “him,” as if his hidden self were sequestered in an
adjacent prison cell, the condemned man is characterized as approaching the “I” by way
of a kind of mystical illumination:

And yet there were ways of approach to him. Sometimes he would
respond unexpectedly to a tune, or even the memory of a tune, or of the
folded hands of the Pietá, or of certain scenes from his childhood. As if a
tuning fork had been struck, there would be answering vibrations, and
once this had started a state would be produced which the mystics called
“ecstasy” and saints “contemplation”; the greatest and soberest of modern
psychologists had recognized this state as a fact and called it the “oceanic
sense.” And, indeed, one’s personality dissolved as a grain of salt in the
sea; but at the same time the infinite sea seemed to be contained in the
grain of salt. The grain would no longer be localized in time and space. It
was a state in which thought lost its direction and started to circle, like the compass needle at the magnetic pole; until finally it cut loose from its axis and traveled freely in space, like a bunch of light in the night; and until it seemed that all thoughts and all sensations, even pain and joy itself, were only the spectrum lines of the same ray of light, disintegrating in the prisma of consciousness. (213-14)

Koestler claimed to have had an experience of this kind while living in constant expectation of death in his Spanish prison cell. The apparent mysticism of the passage and his claim that it was based on his own experience exposes Koestler to the criticism that he only renounced the false god of Communism to embrace another god of esoteric knowledge.

But there is a different way of looking it. Statements made elsewhere by Koestler are helpful in interpreting his prison experience and its literary reflection in Rubashov’s “ecstasy.” Because the background of Koestler’s “mystical experience” has a great deal of relevance to the experience of reading, both merit closer consideration. The reader of this survey is therefore asked to be patient with a digression which will bring us full-circle from our first discussion of reading to its final reflection in the work of Primo Levi.

After his release, Koestler wrote to the German novelist Thomas Mann that while in prison his recollection of certain passages in Mann’s writings had made it possible for him to retain his sanity. In particular, Koestler mentions a passage from Mann’s novel *Buddenbrooks* in which its deeply frustrated protagonist, Consul Thomas Buddenbrook, discovers and reads the work of the philosopher Schopenhauer and through it experiences a kind of illumination in which he transcends the limits of the self by comprehending his
oneness with all of life. Oppressed by failure and by the death of his son, Buddenbrook suddenly intuits the true meaning of the philosopher’s theory of the transcendence of the metaphysical will. In Schopenhauer’s philosophy, the will is both an unknown self and the innermost reality of the world. In Mann’s fictional episode, recollected by Koestler, Thomas Buddenbrook is a mystical reader, who, through Schopenhauer, experiences an ecstatic joy, realizing that beyond death the individual is one with all life. In Rubashov’s ecstasy, we are in effect reading of a reading of a reading of a reading. We might begin to suspect that the crux of the matter is as much the reading as what is read. Koestler’s remembering reading Mann’s Buddenbrook’s reading Schopenhauer diverts him while awaiting death. His reading informs the similar fictional experience of his Rubashov.

What the Spanish prisoner Koestler presumably recognized was that the literary ecstasy in *Buddenbrooks* revealed something of its significance to him and, in so doing, liberated him inwardly from the oppressiveness of his condition. Though few of us gain our literary insights on death row, the sudden comprehension of the meaning of a passage is not an unusual experience for readers. Readers know how a passage can unexpectedly resonate with them. If the experience coincided with a trauma or turning point in life, the discovery of meaning might acquire a heightened intensity under the circumstances. The validity of the content is not at issue. There are sober-minded individuals who reject all mystical utterances as irrational and unintelligible; but even assuming that they are right to do so, the fact remains that readers really can be moved by what they read, sometimes long after reading it, and even when what has been read is irrational. Common responses to popular songs indicate that an intense experience of the simplest turn of phrase can be ecstatic and revelatory.
This is nothing new to us. We have come across related things throughout this survey. Augustine’s experience was informed by his knowledge of Platonic philosophy. Balzac evoked the ecstasies of reading in *Louis Lambert*. We recognized the incantatory power of the King James Bible. Tolstoy encountered in life what he had conceived of while writing his novels. What the reader experiences in reading is surely close enough to what the mystic experiences that we could not refute or reject the ecstasy of Koestler by observing that it was conditioned by his reading of Mann’s novel. If drug-induced ecstasies can be intense without bearing any real authority for those experiencing them, the sudden awareness of literary meaning, whether in the Bible or Thomas Mann, is the sudden perception of its authority. Historically, so-called mystical experience has often coincided with sermons, prayers, or religious exercises; and usually it has been associated with crises of authority. This is the case with the disillusioned Koestler and his creation Rubashov. The question whether mysticism in literature is authentic or “merely literary” should therefore be turned on its head. It is authentic because it is profoundly literary.

As for Rubashov’s fictionalized experience, the oceanic imagery and the notional transcendence of time, space, and self are tropes which Koestler could have learned from Schopenhauer, Thomas Mann, or other sources. Rubashov’s experience is described in borrowed literary metaphors. But why should this make his experience or Koestler’s any less plausible or meaningful? Unlike the New Man Gletkin, but like Koestler, Rubashov is a cultivated man. His ecstasies are triggered by thinking about music or remembering the image of the *Pietá*. Art and music have ways of meaning which are remote from the dialectical reasoning of the old Bolshevik. Rubashov is released from the mental prison of ideology and tentatively returns to the intuitive authority of the “I.” Like Schnitzler’s
Chinese prisoner, he is inwardly free in the face of death. I have belabored this point in order to suggest why it makes good sense to speak of a mysticism of reading, in which the reader not only transcends time and space but self. Mystical reading is the recognition of our selves and our world in a profoundly new light.

Finally, we should ask in this context whether it is artistically appropriate that Koestler should draw upon the mystical tradition to convey Rubashov’s experience. It seems to me that it is appropriate for the same reason that his epigraphs are appropriate. His allusions resonate with the time-transcending affinities that link Communism with Christianity. Although these affinities appeal intuitively, they are a mystery that Koestler wisely desists from claiming to resolve fully. The scope of their affinity encompasses the historical revolutions on the one hand and Rubashov’s mystical turn on the other. The medieval adherents of Joachim di Fiore resembled Communists in that they believed in the imminence of a final struggle and rejected the official Church as the Antichrist.

But the authority of the medieval Church was also challenged by mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Heinrich Suso, or Johannes Tauler. Their approach to God by way of the soul tacitly undermined the Church. Instead of seeking to overthrow its institutional order, they silently negated it by turning inward, teaching of an inner individual path to a paradoxical deity both omnipresent and hidden. Rubashov’s elusive god of history has remained as hidden from him and the Party as the god of the mystics from the medieval Church. Rubashov’s ecstasy before his execution hints at his evolving approach to the elusive power that had inspired his struggle. His reflections on history contemplate a mystery that has not been and perhaps cannot be resolved.
In the final analysis, the business of any narrator lies in contextualizing real or imagined experience by means of language extracted from life and tradition. Mystical literature is a valid source of language. It can be written, read, and appreciated without undergoing metaphysical space flights and without renouncing reason. Many of us did neither thing when we read the above passage. Astronomy is also favored by Rubashov. Astronomy stands out among the mathematical sciences in captivating the public with its allure of an immediate intuition of the ultimate limits of the universe. Both astronomical speculation and mystical literature embody our longing to confront ultimate truths of the universe directly and personally. Few might believe that this is possible. Yet impossible desires are a vital stuff of literature because of what they actualize within us. By placing ourselves in Rubashov’s situation, we transcend our sense of living after the termination of history, when all the secrets of the universe are as good as disclosed.

We will have occasion to remember this episode in our final narrative work.

**Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man***

The original of Primo Levi’s memoir which in English translation bears the title *Surviving in Auschwitz* is the very different Italian *Se questo è un uomo*, meaning *If This Is a Man*. Beyond its intrinsic literary merits and its considerable value as a testimony of the Holocaust, Levi’s memoir offers a fitting capstone for a survey of modern European narrative. In Conrad and Koestler, we encountered narrative responses to imperialism and Communism respectively. Levi’s is a narrative of Nazi genocide from the vantage of a survivor of Auschwitz.
Though non-fictional, *If This Is a Man* is literary: it is thoroughly molded by reflection and point of view. The world it conveys is more brutally realistic than that of the harshest naturalism and stranger in its way than the dreams of the Romantics. Like the Modernists, Levi’s narrator endeavors to reveal a hidden or forgotten reality, which, even if unique and unparalleled, sheds its own light on human possibility. The elliptical title *If This Is a Man* may be completed: if this is a man, then what does this mean for our understanding of humanity or normal life or the human world? Levi not only records the burning desire of those who experienced the death camps to convey their experience to others. By means of conditional intimations, he involves the reader in reflecting on the consequences: “If from inside the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this: take care not to suffer in your own homes what is inflicted on us here” (55). Beyond warning against a repetition of crimes against humanity, Levi is a narrator of the human condition. This aspect connects him to the tradition of the classics and finds expression in echoes of earlier literature present in his work. In examining the human condition, *If This Is a Man* also puts the realism of the classics in portraying the human condition to the test.

The “Author’s Preface” begins with grim irony: “It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944.” Because of a shortage of labor, it was more advantageous to exploit prisoners as workers than to kill them wholesale or on a whim. The narrator then launches his account by chronicling events on the one hand, beginning with his capture by the Italian Fascist Militia in December 1943, and placing them within a narrative of ideas on the other. As to the first, we should go back further and extend the perspective to include the rise of Fascism in Italy in 1922 and its more virulent German
form in 1933. Both variants of Fascism militarized the nation and sought unity against enemies within and without. German National Socialism differed in its brutal efficiency and its obsessive anti-Semitism, which made Jews by nature and racial definition the quintessential enemy behind all enemies: the string-pullers and agents of sedition and corruption behind Germany’s democratic opponents and the core of the international Communist conspiracy. Though prior to his capture, Levi had lived in relative isolation due to the anti-Semitic racial laws in Italy, Italian Jews were not subject to the constant assaults and extreme humiliations of Jews in German-controlled lands. In September 1943, Italy surrendered unconditionally. The Germans occupied Northern Italy and imposed a harsher regime. Without relevant experience or knowledge, Levi attempted to join the Italian anti-Fascist partisans in the mountains. Upon capture and deportation, he therefore made an abrupt transition from the life of an idealistic youth who had hitherto “cultivated a moderate and abstract sense of rebellion” to the reality stranger than dream of Auschwitz.

As Levi launches his account of the journey that leads from Italy to Auschwitz and ultimately back to Italy, he simultaneously sets what he has seen and remembered in the context of his reflections on the human condition. In the latter aspect, the narration is not guided by the suspense of what is about to happen but by the relationship between the extreme and the universal. The more than six hundred Jews awaiting deportation know for the most part that regardless of age or health they and their families face death. Levi compares their circumstances on the eve of departure with the minimal dignity and peace accorded to those about to be executed. To the Jews calm and dignity were not granted. In the same context, the author surprises the reader with a startling reflection: just as
everyone discovers in life that a state of perfect happiness cannot be attained, an equal but opposite corollary reveals that perfect unhappiness is impossible: “The obstacles preventing the realization of both these extreme states are of the same nature: they derive from our human condition which is opposed to everything infinite.” Opposed to the realization of perfect unhappiness is our uncertainty of the future and our certainty of death which puts an end to all suffering. Moreover, the material cares and needs of existence which usually undermine the stability of happiness also distract the human being from even the most hopeless and wretched condition. One cause of suffering hides behind another, so that whoever is hungry only thinks of hunger and so that the next care only emerges when the first has departed (73). “It was the very discomfort, the blows, the cold, the thirst that kept us aloft in the void of bottomless despair, both during the journey [to Auschwitz] and after. It was not the will to live, nor a conscious resignation: for few are the men capable of such resolution, and we were but a common sample of humanity” (17). In traditional reflections on the human condition, death itself presents the extreme limit because it terminates human life. In this case, death meliorates what might otherwise extend to the negative absolute. Like pure joy, “pain in its pure state” is known only in dream (60).

The reader of *If This Is a Man* can compare Levi’s generalizations and note the way in which they shape and guide his narrative account of events. The generalization of an immediate experience ascribed to all focuses his point of view: what he has not seen (including well-known and terrible events such as the murder of the women and children who arrive in his transport train) is not described. What he experiences is usually characterized as the experience of “we.” For example, after passing through insane
procedures of induction into the camp, his mental state is characterized thus: “By now we are tired of being amazed. We seem to be watching some mad play, one of those plays in which the witches, the Holy Spirit and the devil appear” (25). The exhaustion of the ability to wonder at things which yields to passivity or indifference may be assumed as a universal reaction; but the comparison of the second sentence obviously cannot. In other passages as well, it is evident that what Levi remembers experiencing he generalizes to his fellow prisoners. He does offer evidence in places that extreme conditions actually led to a remarkable uniformity of reactions. For example, the dream of attempting to recount to indifferent or uncomprehending relatives what he is going through is, he discovers, a dream shared by his friend Alberto. But often his generalizations are articles of faith or expressions of solidarity. He cannot say with such certainty that his fellow passengers were beyond fear by the time their train arrived at its destination (19).

Similarly, the narration drifts between past tense and present and between chronicle and essay. The universalized “we” of his narration is that of a spokesman for the dead or the silent.

The reader can gauge the degree to which theme and form condition one another by summarizing the relatively trivial events which are recounted in Levi’s Chapter Seven, “A Good Day,” and then considering how much more the chapter means than it recounts. The generalizations which introduce this and the following chapter serve as the frame for what is recounted. They wring from the paucity of the events a narration of great import, much as the hunger and deprivation of Levi’s universalized “we” engenders the purpose, signs, and symbols of human experience out of its very deprivation. In Chapter Seven, a
minute episode illustrates this generative power. It is an episode of Chaplinesque humor which surprises us, given the somber nature of the material.

Unfortunately, the existing commonality which allows the narrator to speak in its name tends drastically toward the level of the dehumanized animal. The common state of affairs in the death camp is that “All are enemies or rivals” (42). Notice that, as he begins to chronicle the measures and behaviors that maintain this or that individual above such a level, the “we” reverts to “I.” If the way down is shared by all, the ways of staying afloat or rising are distinct. The chapter entitled “Initiation” tells of an encounter with an older decorated veteran the Austro-Hungarian army, Steinlauf, who despite his Iron Cross for heroism must struggle to maintain himself as a Jewish death camp inmate. According to him, because the camp is a “a great machine to reduce us to beasts,” one must maintain discipline by rigorously washing oneself and remaining as neat as possible, no matter how futile the exercise might be. There is irony in that this entails voluntarily following the regulations of the oppressor. To Steinlauf only such discipline allows the human rather than the beast to survive and bear witness. The narrator registers his personal sense of confusion: must one have a system, or “would it not be better to acknowledge one’s lack of system?” (41)

Between the extremes of passive resignation and one’s brutal self-assertion at the expense of one’s fellows, certain individuals stand out and acquire the status of types by virtue of the narrator’s generalization and through their similarity with other individuals. These types are of central importance in Levi’s narrative. They also have affinities with themes discussed elsewhere in this survey. Though their relevance is, I believe, obvious, to treat these cases as answers to questions raised by us elsewhere would ignore what it is
that Levi’s account shares with great literature: the ability to raise questions in a way that shows their inevitability.

The reader should recall what has been read or written and draw her or his own consequences. In some cases, we know or can assume that Levi knew the literary sources we have read. This is certainly true of Dante and probably of Boccaccio. When Levi’s narrator uses the metaphor of “sidereal space,” we may suspect that he is familiar with Galileo’s elegant prose. As a trained and devoted chemist, he was in any case aware of the beauty and truthful spirit of the best scientifically inspired writing. The Bible and mythology have echoes in his work. In reading Levi, it is not far-fetched or inappropriate to recall Madam Beritola’s desperate partisanship for life in the Decameron, or Candide’s naïve encounter with the wickedness of the world, or Mary Shelley’s imaginings on what it takes to make a human being. It makes sense to think of Tolstoy’s ethical rigorism, Kafka’s contemplation of the human being with reference to infinity and the influence of the soul-challenging transformation, or Conrad’s journey to the heart of darkness. One can argue by comparison without positing any direct literary influence.

With this in mind, we should consider Primo Levi’s episodes that present typical reactions to evil and suffering. Though he was a secular humanist in the Italian tradition, it seems to me that certain passages evince a profound respect for the religion of his fellow Jews. He offers a moving account of an extended family on the eve of their deportation. They are Jews from Tripoli. The men are carpenters who carry their tools and musical instruments with them into exile so they can work and celebrate after working: they are “happy and pious folk.” In full knowledge of the fate that awaits them, the women prepare rapidly for the deportation journey. The family then lights its candles
according to the customs of their ancestors and mourns. From these religious folk, the “we” of the secularized Italian learns “a grief that was new for us,” that of people without land whose exodus is periodically renewed (15-16). Without necessarily adopting the piety of these distant coreligionists, Levi is deeply moved by the realistic and communal nature of their religion. It expresses and strengthens their identity as a family and group. They are surely not wrong to mourn. In doing so, they face reality and, in full awareness of their fate, reaffirm their identity in defiance of their persecutors. The narrator speaks with respect of the knowledge and lore of Polish Jews, rabbis, men versed in Talmudic tradition and lore. Their knowledge and tradition likewise bind them to their past and to their people.

Altogether different is the religious exercise of an older Jew named Kuhn, whose bunk neighbor, a young Jew named Beppo, has been marked for death: “Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see that Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it…. Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again? If I was God, I would spit on Kuhn’s prayer” (130-31). Kuhn is praying aloud, rocking back and forth, thanking God that he was not chosen for death. The difference here is that Kuhn’s prayers of thanks turn the abomination into God’s will. Since a limited number of victims were to be selected for the gas chamber, Beppo’s being marked is a precondition for Kuhn’s being spared. Levi’s conclusion: “If I was God, I would spit on Kuhn’s prayer,” is an expression of contempt in the spirit of justice for a religion which, unlike that of the mourning Jews of North African origin,
here rejects reality and places the individual not only above but in implicit conflict with one’s fellows. In offering prayer of thanks, Kuhn imagines his being spared at Beppo’s expense as God’s will. For Levi, neither God nor man can cleanse the abomination. In its implications, Levi’s rejection of Kuhn’s prayers cuts a broad swath. God’s will is the ultimate theoretical reconciler of good and evil and of means and ends. The abomination cannot be made good by anything divine or human.

A second impressive case, which again acquires the force of the typical and focuses other persons or incidents around it, involves the gentile Italian laborer Lorenzo, who works for an Italian building contractor and is therefore not one of the prisoners. Without regard for his own advantage or safety, Lorenzo comes to the aid of the narrator and his friend Alberto. He offers to serve as a go-between to Levi’s mother and performs material kindnesses such as securing for them extra rations of soup. With Lorenzo there is certainly physical help; but even beyond his “material aid,” the narrator relates that, “by his natural and plain manner of being good, [Lorenzo reminded him] that there still existed a just world outside our own” (121). Lorenzo reminds the narrator that there exists something in life worth surviving for. Scholarship has succeeded in tracing and documenting the man who was Lorenzo as a poor and uneducated fellow from a deprived and harsh rural background. Perhaps his having endured hardships himself caused him to sympathize with and come to the aid of his countrymen.

Equally noteworthy is the narrator’s best friend and fellow prisoner Alberto, whom the narrator characterizes as “the rare figure of the strong yet peace-loving man against whom the weapons of night are blunted” (57). Other prisoners may be meek or lack malice, but Alberto struggles and to a degree triumphs. This gives his goodness a
value theirs lacks. In the narrator’s world, only goodness that is capable of self-assertion counts for anything.

Yet why these men are good is as inexplicable as, on the other side, the gaze of the German Dr. Pannwitz, who examines the narrator to determine his suitability to work in the chemical laboratory. Having stood face to face with this polite but inhumanly cold German official, the narrator recalls that the look exchanged between the two was “not one between two men,” but rather more comparable to peering through the glass of an aquarium that separates distinct worlds. The narrator writes that if he had known how to account for the nature of that look, he might have “explained the essence of the great insanity” of the Third Reich itself (105–6). What could this imply if not that the core of the insanity lies in the inability to look at and respond to another in human terms, even while remaining completely indifferent to the humanity of the other? When Levi and his fellow Italians are herded into the camp upon arrival, they are astonished that it is possible to strike another human being coldly without anger. Not hatred but indifference astonishes. No less than Levi’s portrayal of religion, these characterizations of the inexplicable nature of the good or evil in human beings bear comparison with certain other narratives we have read. Lest we overestimate the moral power of literacy, we should note that Dr. Pannwitz is undoubtedly more literate than Lorenzo.

Finally, a third episode resonates powerfully if ambiguously with the themes of our survey. This is the episode in Chapter 11 in which, on a day of relative ease, the narrator attempts to recall the Ulysses canto from Dante’s *Inferno*. He does this for the sake of a fellow prisoner, a French youth named Jean who holds a somewhat privileged rank among the prisoners, yet exercises that rank for the benefit of his less fortunate
comrades. The narrator begins by attempting to teach Jean a few words of Italian. For reasons he cannot explain, the canto of Ulysses, canto 26 of *The Inferno*, comes to mind as the narrator struggles to recite it and recall lines that evade his memory. He recollects the lines which evoke the heroic quest for knowledge of Odysseus and his men (“for brutish ignorance Your mettle was not made; you were made men, To follow after knowledge and excellence”). These lines give rise in him to a sense of exultation. It is as if he were hearing them for the first time, “like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God” (113). For a moment he forgets who he is and where. Jean, apparently recognizing his emotion, indulges him and does his best to follow the translations and explanations.

Momentarily as if outside of time and place, the narrator struggles to remember Dante’s verses, feeling that it is a matter of life and death that he recall forgotten lines of the canto and that he explain not only the lines but their allegorical meanings (“Virgil is Reason, Beatrice is Theology”—112) and even their historical context of “the Middle Ages . . . the so human and so necessary and yet unexpected anachronism” (115). In his moment of rapture, the narrator senses something even greater, something barely glimpsed “in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today…” (115). What this might mean remains suggestively open.

As for the specific content of the Ulysses canto with its apparent celebration of the boundless quest for enlightenment and knowledge, Jonathan Druker has observed that it is at root ambivalent and by no means unequivocally suitable to serve as an uplifting message. The *Inferno* itself, with its apotheosis of poetic punishment, can also be seen as an ambivalent vehicle for transcending the hell of Auschwitz. Here it should be
enough to place this episode first in the immediate context of *If This Is a Man* and second in the selective context of the other works we have discussed in this survey.

No urge is more powerfully evoked by Levi than the prisoners’ craving to tell their story and to have it be told. No nightmare is more terrible than that of recounting it to others who cannot or will not understand (60). Only this dual compulsion to tell and be told of can explain the role of the “story-teller” Wachsmann. Among the prisoners who earn bread by tending to the needs of their comrades is Engineer Kardos who cures their wounded feet in the barracks at night. He is followed by a story-teller, around whom at night a small but attentive crowd accumulates. Wachsmann recites an “interminable Yiddish rhapsody” which is always the same. It consists of rhymed quatrains composed by the story-teller himself, “in which he has enclosed all the life of the Lager in minute detail” (58). Some give him bread for his recital, others listen attentively but give nothing. Wachsmann is a Homer or Dante of the Lager. His role confirms the force of a human need which is prototypically literary yet shared even with children: the need not only to tell but to be told to and told of, and thereby to abide within the narrative life of the world.

The moment of ecstasy in which the narrator forgets where he is and apparently infects Jean with his enthusiasm resonates with other passages we have discussed from Schnitzler to Koestler. It also recalls the dual role of words which have the power to create a community when spoken but which can also be guarded, preserved, and read in silent memory. The contemporary historian of reading Alberto Manguel recounts that in the ancient world silent reading was uncommon. Reading was usually done aloud. When men of the early Church, accustomed to silent meditation, acquired the technique of silent
reading, this sometimes took on the force of a mystical exultation. Here is an account of this new experience by Saint Isaac of Syria, an early silent reader: “I practice silence, [so] that the verses of my readings and prayers should fill me with delight. And when the pleasure of understanding them silences my tongue, then, as in a dream, I enter a state when my senses and thoughts are concentrated. Then, when with prolonging of this silence the turmoil of memories is stilled in my heart, ceaseless waves of joy are sent me by inner thoughts, suddenly arising beyond expectation to delight my heart” (Manguel, 49). We should take note of the apparent mysticism of Saint Isaac’s claim: the outer world disappears and the reader is transported as if into an inner world.

The Ulysses canto ends tragically for the bold men of knowledge, but their fate does not go untold. In the telling and the hearing arises whatever meaning can be found in the obscurest fate, whatever unity adheres to human beings who can be killed but not deprived of their recountability in time and space, who, like the last prisoner executed as the Russians approach, can at least cry out, “Comrades, I am the last one!” (149) This is not the sort of meaning which the old Kuhn ascribes to his having been spared death: it is not his implicit equation that it must be God’s will that one has been chosen for life and one’s neighbor for death. It is rather the sort of meaning found in what the narrator says were the hundreds of thousands of stories, too distinct to be retained in all their detail. About the “sorrowful, cruel and moving” tales told by the prisoners to one another, the narrator asks the reader whether these are not the “stories of a new Bible” (65-66).

Bibles, new or old, can be interpreted in countless ways, and also abused in many ways. Few historical events are as familiar in America as the Holocaust. It is a theme in countless books and movies. American schools have Holocaust education. It is common
to know of gas chambers and yellow stars with the word Jude on them without knowing which countries fought on either side in World War II or why the war took place. People have a mental image of Hitler and SS-men in black uniforms but no idea of the historical origins or doctrines of the Nazi Party. The Holocaust is thus acquiring the character of a medieval morality play in which the wicked are easily identified and the strong feelings they arouse reassure us that we are not at all like them. Looking any closer might risk our recognizing something of ourselves in the prisoners who are all enemies and rivals of one another, or even in the so-called “good Germans,” in whom we might recognize our own thoughtless submission to authority and indifference to the injustices which do not conform to the patterns and categories we have been conditioned to respond to. A good exercise for the discussion of Levi’s If This Is a Man would be a comparison of his book with any of the countless popular presentations of the Holocaust in the American media.

The most influential representation of the Holocaust is probably that of Steven Spielberg’s film Schindler’s List. The film fits its theme into a standard pattern of the American conceptualization of good and evil: these are thought of as distinct not only in the logical sense that evil is evil but in the illogical one that pure evil only acts against or upon good with the result that persecution naturally ennobles its victims and opponents. Spielberg’s Schindler is based on a real historical figure, but he is also a stock figure of American cinema, one we might appropriately call “the scoundrel with a heart of gold”: the familiar happy-go-lucky bad boy who witnesses pure evil and rises to the occasion by resisting it nobly. The same pattern accommodated Hollywood’s treatment of the fateful CIA involvement in the war of the Afghan mujahidin against their Soviet occupiers in the recent film about a lovable scoundrel who recognizes pure evil and launches “Charley
"Wilson's War," just as, not very long ago, it accommodated the happy-go-lucky Texan scoundrels with hearts of gold who fought foreign evil in the latest film production of *The Alamo*. The same pattern accommodated the first Iraq War in the film *Three Kings* which was promoted as an anti-war film, while serving as propaganda for the second Iraq War: Three Desert Storm soldiers in Iraq set off to find Saddam’s gold. Typically, the apostles of opportunism come face to face with pure evil and do the right thing, as does the variant who is the Christlike curmudgeon with a heart of gold of Clint Eastwood’s *Grand Torino*. Ensconced in our cushioned theater seats, thrilled by an uplifting film score, dazzled by breath-taking cinematic images, we movie goers with no patience for history are flattered to see someone like us recognizing pure evil and nobly doing the right thing.

With the loss of historical knowledge, the Holocaust is deprived of its context and begins to acquire a semi-mythic status outside history. Does this elevate or diminish the important truth of the Holocaust? It is increasingly forgotten how widespread the racial ideology that led to the persecution of Jews in Europe was at the time. In our country, a similar racism was directed against non-whites, especially people of African descent. But this is just history, and history has already become something suspicious to us. Historical awareness, like natural science, demands causal explanation; and causal explanation as such endeavors to be dispassionate. These days, objectivity and historical analysis raise suspicions of relativism, reminding us of the exculpatory dictum that understanding all things means forgiving all things. We avoid the putative relativism of historical thinking by talking about the Holocaust more and more in terms of pure evil, recognizable in that its victims and foes (and by extension we their sympathizers) are by nature on the side of good.
The more we see pure evil as something distinct and foreign and above all as effortlessly recognizable, the less we have to think and the more we feel that by character and instinct we are on the side of the good. Like the scoundrels with a heart of gold, we cannot help being good: it is in our nature. Given the centrality of Holocaust memory in our historical consciousness, we seem to be on the way to incorporating it into a kind of supra-historical national Passion Play which vindicates American power in the world, much as another supra-historical Passion bearing the inscription *In Hoc Signo Vinces*, “In this sign you will conquer,” vindicated the Roman Empire after Constantine’s battlefield conversion to the new faith. The eager adoption of the Holocaust by Christian America—which claims it as a warning against the sort of liberal relativism that excuses, ignores, or explains away evil—risks exploiting the Holocaust for political purposes.

In contrast to the American ideological appropriation of the Holocaust, Levi’s *If This Is a Man* resists exploitation precisely because it insists that what happened cannot be redeemed or expiated. If God cannot balance the accounts of history or redeem it as a reserve of moral justification, neither can any nation, religion, or individual.

**In Defense of Serious Reading**

There is a lingering belief among many that reading the classics somehow signals devotion to hegemonic, Eurocentric values, or that it implies an exclusion of non-Western literature. Historically, however, the concept of a nation-transcending “world literature” originated with Goethe, the archetypal embodiment of the literary classics whose impulse to delve ever more deeply into Western tradition led him to transcend it in seeking out the
classics of non-European cultures. There can be no conflict between reading European literature and reading the authors of other cultures. An overall interest in the one should correlate with interest in the other. Not only the classics but reading as an end in itself is on the wane, receding to the margins of our cultural life. This is a problem that cannot be solved by stigmatizing serious literature of any kind. We should not rationalize away the decline of reading. Nor hysterically overinflate it.

Despite the decline in the culture of the book, reading is not likely to disappear or to become altogether marginal. Nor will assigning blame to the promoters and addicts of online products halt the deterioration of knowledge and skills caused by the absorption of the population in digital culture. The new computer-based learning has been around long enough for the results to have cast doubt upon most claims for a new style of learning and knowledge, or for the internet as a replacement for books. The internet might diminish literary culture and undermine popular literacy, but it is still far from replacing books and reading. Studies conducted by consultants for business and industry have borne out what many observers long suspected: internet users scan instead of reading. The best evidence suggests that the tide of online activity is not even engendering new technical and online skills with a bearing on knowledge, as opposed to entertainment, let alone supplementing or replacing traditional reading-based skills. If the fervent embrace of online technology by schools and universities nonetheless shows no sign of abating, the margin between the relentless claims and the dismal results reflects a collective will guided by a blind faith in technological progress and harnessed to the irresistible twin forces of amusement and the market. The market will not be scolded, nor will entertainment be deterred, by statistical reports of failed learning objectives or by our finger-wagging recriminations.
What the market does allow and in fact requires, as we are painfully relearning in the sphere of finance, is honest marketing. Even the most optimistic advocates of the internet as a replacement for reading books not only admit but proudly boast that online skills are not the same as book-based skills. Even if we assume that there is no difference between reading from a bound codex or a computer screen, and even if we concede that readers have always skimmed, skipped, and multi-tasked, the triumph of the computer screen (which triumphed at a time when it was still cumbersome, before the hand-held reading devices) betokens a preference for immediate interconnectedness at the expense of the deeper dimension of past time embodied by the book and its extended narratives. The extended behavior and culture of reading are distinct from online culture or technical literacy. Individuals and institutions should insist on the difference between traditional literacy and internet-based technical literacy. Because reading skills and reading-based knowledge are acquired in a learning curve of longer duration than are the internet-based information-gathering skills, those who achieve the former have less difficulty acquiring the latter than vice versa.

Students, colleges, universities, and institutions of every kind should insist on the distinction between the two emerging patterns of literacy. Courses and curricula should be classified and designated in terms of the kind of literacy they encourage and develop. Students have a right to know the extent to which a prospective college is characterized by a traditional book-based literacy or by a technical literacy that relies heavily on online information and activities. Institutions and students alike have an interest in the matching of curricula to the candidates for admission. Instead of asking prospective students to list all their social and extracurricular activities, the admissions officers of universities could
learn more of academic relevance by having applicants list in any meaningful pattern the books they have read. It would be easier to spot-check or ask follow up questions about books than about the activities if and when confirmation is deemed necessary.

Instead of taking literacy for granted as a self-evident prerequisite of academic study, schools and universities should acknowledge that there are not only kinds but also degrees or levels of literacy. Academic instructors should overcome the stigma attached to “remedial” teaching and acknowledge literacy as a skill which it is their proper role to cultivate. Cognitive gains from humanities components of university general education curricula can be appropriately assessed by pre- and post-testing the ability to comprehend the meaning, context, and implications of reading passages. In light of the demonstrated correlation between reading and writing skills, businesses that complain about inadequate writing skill of employees would do well to ask applicants how much and what they read.

Reading is not a replacement for the ability to act. Reading is not the salvation of the world. That this is not the case is itself a theme of the most serious literature. Let us not forget the contrast of Primo Levi’s Lorenzo with his Dr. Pannwitz. Readers are not better human beings than non-readers. This is no more the case than that cosmopolitans are morally superior to provincials. What is equally certain, however, is that they are not the same; and we should acknowledge as much. provincials who pass themselves off as cosmopolitans or more generally those unaware of their ignorance and contemptuous of learning are at best ludicrous and at worst dangerous when power and influence come into the hands of the seriously deluded. In the marketplace, plastic will always retain its rights alongside wood and continue to be preferred by many to wood. Plastic can indeed claim qualities that wood lacks. But plastic is not allowed to sell itself as wood.
Colleges and universities should provide students choices in the literature courses offered and not marginalize the European classics for ideological reasons. It is no longer the case that the so-called Western canon rules the roost and that non-canonical or non-Western literature is excluded. There are English Departments at American universities in which the majority of the faculty specializes in studies which were not included in the curriculum thirty years ago. There are departments that claim the European classics as their domain when read or taught in English translation, yet disdain them because their “Eurocentrism” is not in conformity with the multicultural or postcolonial approach to world culture. Eurocentrism is a sin that many who are innocent to a fault grossly flatter themselves in renouncing. Its abjuration goes hand in hand with the unchecked tendency toward America-centeredness in our curriculum and culture.

We are obligated to educate our students about the world. But what of a middle school which, in pursuit of globalized education, celebrates Egypt Day by showing Walt Disney’s *Prince of Egypt*? Only slightly less problematic is the characteristic pursuit of our global and multicultural objectives by assigning narratives in which far too often one plot line prevails: the touching story of the European, Asian, African, or Latin American protagonist who either longs to come to America or is forced to make a difficult journey that leads to America or pines for Western or American culture or becomes an American whose children then look back on and reconstruct their pre-American heritage, which is thereby incorporated into the rich multicultural tapestry of American life. Conservatives are mistaken when they associate this multicultural predilection with Marxist influence. If the multiculturalists were more familiar with the intellectual instruments of Marxism, they might recognize that their approach in fact reproduces the oldest colonialist pattern.
We absorb the literary raw materials of other cultures and sell back the finished product with our branding and mobilization of desire.

Many of the multicultural books are excellent narratives in their own right. Who can resist the gripping family saga of *The Kite-Runner* or the clandestine internationale of letters in *Reading Lolita in Teheran*? Not only do these books demand to be read on their own real merits, they echo long traditions of exile or hybrid literature. Such perspectives are not to be disdained. Blaming their gifted and conscientious authors for the America-centered structure of the international cultural exchange would be as unfair as denouncing the struggling coffee growers of Ghana and Honduras for the omnipresence of Starbucks. The question is rather whether the Starbucks patrons should be congratulating themselves so heartily for ordering the Multicultural Blend. When we take stock of how much of our *bien pensant* curriculum is based on the variations of the same out-of-darkness-into-light-immigrant story, when we find ourselves looking out at the world, only to focus on what reflects back on us or wants to become what we are, there is surely a disconnect between ends and means. It would do more for the valid concerns behind the multicultural agenda if, instead of unthinkingly congratulating ourselves on our America-centered “pluralism,” we learned to read literature in which the West engaged critically with itself.

It is also possible that the objective of a general introduction to reading is actually better served by the narrowness of introducing the reader by way of European literature. The globe can be circumnavigated by many routes, each with advantages of its own. If the single-voyage tourist is well advised to visit every continent, the apprentice mariner might be better prepared for a life of criss-crossing the globe by training on a carefully circumscribed route. This approach recognizes that a sensitivity to traditions and the
authority they engender is essential to an empathetic reading of any literature understood on its own terms as an embodiment of a more or less familiar culture. We cannot expect to overcome our cultural ethnocentricities by ignoring the genesis of our literary culture, any more than we could expect to surmount a personal egocentricity by disregarding the documents and events of our past. Those novice readers capable of acquiring a sense of their historical limitation by immersing themselves in Chinese or Indian literature are rare but they deserve unqualified praise and support.

The trend toward increasingly specialized, esoteric, and exotic literary studies is conditioned by the need of young academics in the humanities to publish and to a lesser extent by the prestige-based interest of their doctoral advisers to maintain the theoretical approach or school they have invested their careers in. It is too soon to assess the long-term merits of these new approaches; but the worst side-effect of their ascendancy is the rise of a specialty-based antipathy toward traditional literature and the classics. A similar side-effect results from the flowering of creative writing programs. It is not unusual to encounter undergraduate students in American English departments who are engaged in writing novels while acknowledging that they have read very little literature. Neglect of the old diminishes the quality and profile of the new. An understanding of this paradox was shown by the executive director of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, David Fenza who, in announcing guidelines to promote reading the classics of literature, remarked: “I think it is safe to say that some [university] classrooms are devoted to the systematic humiliation of literature.”33 A subtler humiliation of literature is its reduction to an accessory in the star system of self-promoting academic personalities.
What is left of the study of literature by non-literature majors takes place either in the general curriculum or in private reading groups. In the general education curriculum, literature should be taught as a subject matter contiguous with other subjects: the themes and knowledge of literature border on those of history, philosophy, religion, art, and the social sciences. General education literature courses are perhaps the only access students still have to classical learning. These courses can complement and vivify themes studied in history, art, religion, or philosophy courses. Reading Parzifal, The Decameron, or Sir Gawain and the Green Knight can give students an impression of medieval society. In a literature survey course, they can learn that the Reformation created our modern religious institutions, the Enlightenment our political and scientific institutions, and Romanticism our understanding of art, literature, and imagination. If the past no longer seems relevant to students, novels and stories may be studied as artifacts of historically remote cultures. Recognizing through the study of past culture that our character is not god-given, natural, and timeless prepares students to understand other living cultures. Universal themes can also serve as a basis for comparing Western and non-Western literatures. Understanding our selves is a precondition of understanding others. We have nothing else to go on.

What remains after the last general education literature course or defunct reading group has disappeared is what always remains: the readers themselves, the self-sufficient ones who do not look up from their book when their flight is in turbulence and carry their inner worlds with them to the least hospitable environments, into jungles and alien cities. For them the teacher of literature only needs to share suggestions for further reading.

Like the ecological world, the cultural-intellectual one that invisibly surrounds us is suffering losses, but it is easier to picture the disintegrating ice cap or the extinction of
Amazonian species than the transformations and losses in the cultural-intellectual world. The destruction of the physical world is more serious because it threatens life itself. But cultural devastation can also be irreversible and engender a passive, uncritical mentality. Those who literally come face-to-face with the shifting cultural-intellectual climate in the bored incomprehension of their students are at a loss to convince others that patterns of learning centered in the reading of complex expository prose and extended narratives are becoming more difficult to teach and less self-evident in value. The demise of an ancient culture of reading is no sooner evoked than catastrophe-fatigue arises, to be comforted by the assurance that everything is becoming newer and better. Old literacy will be replaced by the new visual literacy of future generations. To an older generation of educators and readers, visual literacy is as contradictory as content-free learning: a reincarnation of the medieval social-cultural regime in which the illiterate masses were tyrannized by images, while a scholastic elite practiced subtle exegesis on increasingly fetishized texts. Indeed, a tyranny of images and a scholastic exegesis of fetishized texts already await teachers or scholars in the classroom or at the professional conference.

Whoever depicts the falling trend of literacy in apocalyptic hues cedes the future to the blind optimists of change: they at least have a programmatic vision, even if it is no more than a layer of bright water-resistant paint on a sinking ship. Between the extremes of catastrophic hopelessness and oblivious optimism, there is no avenue of action for the educator but the individual, who, even when seated in a lecture hall alongside hundreds or scattered anonymously throughout the land, remains the focus of education. The only consolation is that no other focus has ever existed.
Notes


2 Signs of the crisis began to claim the attention of the public in recent years. See “Study Links Drop in Test Scores to a Decline in Time Spent Reading,” New York Times, 19 November, 2007, B1 (the results of the National Endowment for the Arts survey, “To Read or Not to Read”). On the related drop in reading skill, see the previous article, “Literacy Falls For Graduates From College, Testing Finds,” New York Times, 16 December 2005, A28: “When the [National Assessment of Adult Literacy test] was last administered in 1992, 40 percent of the nation’s college graduates scored at the proficient level, meaning that they were able to read lengthy, complex English texts and draw complicated inferences. But on the 2003 test, only 31 percent of the graduates demonstrated those high-level skills.” The idea that the market knows best encourages the assumption that unengaged students are customers no longer buying an outmoded or poorly marketed product. This view should be measured against survey findings indicating that the steep decline in reading skills correlates with declines in writing and math skills. If students are no longer “buying it,” the truth is that they lack purchase on knowledge and skills vital to higher education.

3 My approach to narrative in this book is indebted especially to the Formalism of Viktor B. Shklovskii’s *Theory of Prose* (Elmwood, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991) and to Erich Auerbach’s classic *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Bern: Franke, 1971). These are seemingly opposite theories of literature which in fact complement one another with respect to content and form.
The typical textbook is called “Introduction to Literature” or a variant thereof. It has at least 1,000 pages divided by genre, sometimes with subdivisions that illustrate character, plot, or theme. The readings are of high-quality, drawn from world literature but favoring English and American. The commentary displays scholarly depth and practical teaching lore. Yet the evolution of these textbooks has gone from the era of New Criticism to that of Deconstruction without confronting the notion of literature as part of an evolving human saga. See An Introduction to Literature (Reading the Short Story, The Nature of Drama, How Does a Poem Mean? The Character of Prose), ed. Herbert Barrows, Hubert Heffner, John Ciardi, Wallace Douglas (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959); or The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature (Reading, Thinking, Writing), 4th edition by Michael Meyer (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1997). With its sections of advice on reading, analysis, and writing, it exceeds 1,500 pages.


A century ago, Mark Twain’s agnostic Letters from the Earth was still capable of responding frankly to the horror of divinely commanded mass murder by juxtaposing God’s commandment Thou shalt not kill with the divine order given to Saul and with similar injunctions, and then asking what the contradiction tells us about the moral authority of the Bible. We have become more subtle and erudite in reading the Bible as literature, but our erudition serves to bolster the euphemism of the Sunday School. Students interested in the Bible as narrative can find an overview and new translation of The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel, by the scholar of sacred and secular literature Robert Alter (New York: Norton, 1999). However, Alter lapses compared to the rigor of Mark Twain’s Letters to the Earth by suggesting that the nature of the reports of divine injunctions to Samuel and Saul “open up a certain margin of doubt” as to whether the blood-curdling orders are Samuel’s idea or God’s (p. 95). The reader can decide for herself whether the biblical account is an ironic narrative intended to cast doubt on the point of view of the prophet Samuel. A literary retelling of the story attracted the American poet and translator of Dante’s Inferno, Robert Pinsky.

See above, note 3. Auerbach’s Mimesis is of course vastly more subtle and penetrating than mine.
8 Cited from *The Iliad*, VIII [542], from *The Iliad of Homer and The Odyssey*, trans. Samuel Butler, in *Great Books* 1 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.: 1952), 56. (Citations are to this volume.)

9 The New Oxford Annotated Bible offers this commentary on Genesis 18:22-23: “Like Moses (e.g. Ex 32:9-14), Abraham negotiates with an angry God, appealing to God’s righteousness. In this case, however, the terms he ends up winning—aversion of disaster if ten righteous people can be found—does not avert destruction. Thus, this text appears to be a theoretical reflection on God’s righteousness and how many righteous people are required to save a broader group; Ezek 14:12-13.”

10 The term “Third Reich” comes from the title of a political book by the German National Conservative author Moeller van den Bruck, *Das Dritte Reich* (1923), whose term was appropriated by the Nazis. It refers not only to a projected Reich or empire which is to follow third after the medieval and 19th-century German empires, but also to a medieval tradition that linked the German or Holy Roman Empire to the chiliastic scenarios of Joachim de Fiore and the Book of Revelation.

11 The plague-era persecution of the Jews, its roots in Church history, and the ambiguous attitude of the Church itself, which saw the pope attempting to defend them against scapegoating, are retold effectively in John Kelley’s *The Great Mortality: A Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

12 The 14th-century Dominican, Heinrich Seuse (Henry Suso), in chapter 25 of Book One of his *Vita*, reports being assaulted by a mob which was ill-disposed toward men of the cloth and nearly lynched him as a poisoner of wells.


14 Marilyn Migiel’s *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* calls attention to Boccaccio’s use of Paulus Diaconus’ account of ancient plague as a model (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 17-19.


17 Bergin, 169.

18 The trends summarized here are depicted in David Herlihy’s succinct The Black Death and the Transformation of the West, ed. and intro. Samuel K. Cohn, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

19 From Alister McGrath, In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture (New York: Random House, 2001), pp. 263-64 (Ezek 4:10; Job 19:20; Psalm 4:4, 33:8; Isaiah 53:7; Isaiah 40:15; Daniel 5:5; Mark 15:37; Romans 13:1; 1 Corinthians 13:12).


21 Arthur Schopenhauer, Preisschrift über die Grundlage der Moral (1840). Werke 6 (Zurich: Diogenes, 1977), pp. 271-72. Schopenhauer also introduces among the alternatives available to the first lover fear of divine punishment or desire for divine reward to make the point that only compassion is an unselfish basis of morality. To a large degree, however, the alternatives are abstract principle versus fellow feeling.

22 For details, see Andrew Weeks, “Between God and Gibson: German Mystical and Romantic Sources of The Passion of the Christ,” German Quarterly 78:4 (Fall 2005): 421-40.

23 Balzac’s mystical and apparently self-referential account of Louis Lambert ascribes to the young reader, the protagonist who consumes the Bible, dictionaries, or Swedenborg with equal intensity, the clairvoyant powers of a Romantic poet and artist. The intensity of reading transports the wretched youth beyond time and space, by the power of spirit that informs words enabling him to experience the Battle of Austerlitz as immediately as if he were present and as dramatically as if it were the Apocalypse.


29 I have made this argument based on writings of German mystics from Hildegard of Bingen, Eckhart, Tauler, Seuse, Jacob Boehme, Oetinger, and others, in Andrew Weeks, *German Mysticism From Hildegard of Bingen to Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Literary and Intellectual History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

30 Carole Angier, *The Double Bond: Primo Levi – A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 319-324. Angier writes that the man Lorenzo was found to be “silent and withdrawn, given to drink and fighting …. behind his roughness, his obstinate, sore-headed isolation, he was absolutely upright, generous, and kind” (321).


32 See Bauerlein, *Generation*, for a well-documented survey of the catastrophic effects upon reading (“The New Bibliophobes,” pp. 39ff.), online scanning (142ff.), and the failure of online experience to engender online skills valuable for education as opposed to entertainment (113ff.).