CHAPTER 2

An Evolutionary Apologia pro Vita Mea

In an interview for his online forum Neuronarrative, David DiSalvo asked, “What is your favorite work of literature?” The following essay is my answer.

I’m going to fudge on this question, expanding it to take in more than one genre and more than one phase of my own imaginative life—not a single “favorite,” but some few favorites. The most intense and vivid imaginative experience I ever had was in reading the major poems of Wallace Stevens’ culminating visionary phase, especially “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” I’ve also had some fine high moments with Keats, sensually rich and meditatively pure. Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles gave me my richest, warmest, most lyrical and emotionally absorbed experience in reading a novel. When I first read George Eliot’s Middlemarch, I had the kind of epiphanic experience—expanding my own imagination to its limits—that I had also with the late visionary poetry of Wallace Stevens, though the mode, of course, was different. I have to confess that when I first read Stevens, I was a half-witting participant in the late Romantic effort to preserve some imaginative realm for “spiritual” experience. As I was writing my book on Stevens, that belief faded and failed, and I had to finish the book in grim scholarly determination just to tell the truth about Stevens, a truth few other critics had even glimpsed—the simple observation that he is essentially a religious poet. Something similar
happened in my history with _Middlemarch_, which has a divided worldview. One view is shrewdly realistic and ironic (a perspective embodied in the character Mary Garth). The other is idealistic, spiritual, moralistic, a perspective embodied in Dorothea Brooke. In the moralistic vein, Dorothea does what Stevens did in the visionary, lyrical vein—offers a secular imaginative approximation to a religious worldview. I bought into that, thus giving evidence that at that time, in my early twenties, I was still only gradually withdrawing from a religious worldview. That “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” has been a chief trajectory of the modern imagination. My own trajectory recapitulated it in brief and in small. Nowadays, Dorothea’s ardent spiritual yearnings just get on my nerves. Stevens doesn’t, though. I wrote an article for a Cambridge Companion to Stevens a few years ago and revisited all his work and my own writing on it. It was like reliving the most intense love affair of one’s youth. As in a museum, perfectly preserved, un tarnished, lovely in memory, but no longer part of the actual world.

I lost all literal religious belief—became a confirmed atheist—when I was sixteen, but it took another fourteen years or so to drain out the last of the late Romantic imaginative spiritualism. In this gradual fading, my own experience is something like that of Darwin, who never underwent any convulsive loss of religious faith (unlike many of his contemporaries). The final paragraph of _On the Origin of Species_ invokes “the Creator.” After that, as Darwin explains in his autobiography, his sense of things faded into the light of common day. That kind of perspectival change radically alters one’s whole repertory of imaginative response.

Reading _On the Origin of Species_ and _The Descent of Man_ were transformative experiences for me. When I was sixteen, I had read in a biology textbook that all features of all organisms were the product of interactions between genetically transmitted dispositions and environmental conditions. That observation had instant, axiomatic conviction for me, and it was the first step in completely altering my metaphysical perspective—leading to the loss of religious faith. (If all behavior is ultimately determined in this way, “free will” in any ultimate sense is illusory, and the idea of divine punishment and reward is outrageous.) Then a few years later I read H. G. Wells’ _Outline of History_, a big two-volume work that started with the history of the earth and went
on through the evolution of hominids before settling into the standard rise and fall of civilizations. Wells was T. H. Huxley’s student and had an excellent grasp of the logic of adaptation by means of natural selection—hence his classic science fiction works *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *The Time Machine*. I absorbed Darwin’s theory through Wells. So, I was a Darwinian at that point without ever having read Darwin. I first read *The Origin* and *The Descent* in 1990. I had already been working for a couple of years at reconstructing literary theory from the ground up—trying to rescue it from the postmodernists, but working only with broad general categories of theme and genre. Reading Darwin made vividly apparent to me that all things human, including the products of the human imagination, simply had to be conceived within the total evolutionary development of all living things. Wells was good, but not *that* good. Darwin gave me my first real imaginative sense of deep evolutionary time. When I speak about the way imaginative works help us organize the sphere of our experience, that’s the sort of thing I have in mind. It’s one thing to understand a theory, be able to recite its terms, and even believe it. It’s another thing to have an imaginative grasp of that theory so that you never see anything in the world in quite the same way again. Darwin had a vision of deep time, and he located all living things in that vision. As has happened with tens of other theorists—biologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and now literary and aesthetic philosophers—the imaginative power of Darwin’s vision has fundamentally shaped my own sense of the world. That would worry me a lot if I weren’t as certain as I can be that Darwin got it right, as right as it can be gotten at the present time.

One of the main ways science has fundamentally altered our imaginative experience over the past few centuries is that simply getting it right now counts for so much. The Romantics rebelled and wanted to insist that passion and aesthetic quality are themselves ultimate arbiters of imaginative vision. Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That’s a mistake. The current adherents to this sort of mistake are less likely to be aesthetes than utopian ideologues. The postmodern version of Keats’ dictum would go something like this: beauty is politically correct, political correctness is beautiful, and truth is a bourgeois fiction. For evolutionists, in contrast, truth comes first and is nonnegotiable.
The truth is, humans are a tiny blip in the most recent moments in the almost unimaginable trajectory of deep time. Nonetheless, in our miniscule habitation in a remote corner of the universe, we are able to look back over deep time and recognize our own place in it. That makes us special. So far as we know, within the horizon of all our discoveries, there is nothing quite like the human imagination anywhere else in the universe. If there is, we shall be most interested to find out about it. Meanwhile, we make sense of what we know. The imagination is one of the things we know, and it is the means through which we know everything else. It is worth a lot of study, and really, we have only just begun to think about it.

Stevens, Eliot, and Darwin have been among the major relationships in my imaginative life, but I have been highly promiscuous, with lots of little affairs along the way. I love movies and had rich imaginative moments, in my youth, with early Bergman, especially *Wild Strawberries*. When I first saw it, Jancsó’s *The Peach Thief* was one of the finest films I had ever seen. Kronenberg’s *The Fly* has a “touchstone” value for me, forming a symbolic cluster that stimulates creative thinking even to this day. I have a personal fondness for Anouaud’s *Quest for Fire*. Anouaud succeeds in imagining what it might be like to be a scarcely articulate early human shivering in a swamp, with nothing to protect you but your own wit and courage and the few simple tools you can construct. Despite everything that can legitimately be said against it, I think Polanski’s *Tess* is a cinematic masterpiece. I probably won’t live long enough to see that judgment vindicated. And of course, maybe I’m wrong.

Heinrich Heine’s cultural histories captivated my imagination. Friedrich Schiller’s aesthetic theory in *Über Naive und Sentimentalische Dichtung* so enthralled me that I named my first dachshund Friedrich. Guy de Maupassant’s earthy sensual human warmth still seems to me one of the great good things in life. Matthew Arnold, despite his mutton chops, remains a guiding star in my sense of what a cultural, critical vision can do. When I was a child, I loved and annually reread *Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Men*, *The White Panther*, *Rifles for Watie*, *Half Magic*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*. Having kids of my own gave me a welcome opportunity to revisit those wonders and add many others, including *Across Five Aprils*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and *The Adventures of Stanley*.
Kane. Some things you can come to early; for others you have to wait. I was middle-aged before the symphonic, orchestral magnificence of King Lear became imaginatively intelligible to me. In contrast, when I last reread Little Men and followed it up with Jo’s Boys, a couple of years ago, Alcott’s insidious strategy for undermining and suppressing specifically male motivational dispositions, as personified in Dan, irritated me. What was I thinking, at the age of ten?

Der Zauberberg, Catch-22, Le Siècle de Louis Quatorze, Tom Jones, La Jument Verte, The History of Mr. Polly, Salammbô, the Annales of Tacitus, Coming Up for Air. . . . Once one starts down memory lane, it’s hard to stop. Becoming a professor of literature is something like taking a vow of poverty. There are so many of the “good things,” as Trollope lovingly calls them, one must give up—money, status, security, fine houses, rich clothing, ease, and luxury. But then, one gets to spend one’s life having love affairs with books.

Over the past twenty years or so, I’ve branched out and had passionate flings with works in personality psychology, sociobiology, and anthropology. Doing that has been fun, but it has also helped solve a very serious problem I had been having for many years—the problem of finding things to do in literary study that weren’t just fun but also serious, constructive, adult. In Middlemarch, one of Eliot’s protagonists, the medical doctor Lydgate, has serious scientific ambitions. “He was fired with the possibility that he might work out the proof of an anatomical conception and make a link in the chain of discovery.” I know just how he felt. There is a passion for discovery, for constructive, creative thought. Close reading satisfied that need in literary study for just a little while, a few decades in the middle of the previous century. During that same period, people could do serious scholarly work, not the most exciting kind of thing, but solid, constructive work, producing editions, collecting letters, writing biographies. Then, in the last quarter of the century, “Theory,” as it rather fatuously designated itself, gave people the exhilaration of creative, speculative thought, but the whole enterprise was shot through with sophistical fallacies, so the excitement was febrile, half delirious, corrupted. How to produce serious, real knowledge, constructive knowledge, within the field of literary study? By incorporating it within the whole
broader field of the evolutionary human sciences, retaining
what is peculiar and special to the nature of literary experience,
making full professional use of all one's own experience, but
integrating all that with the broader world of empirical, scientific
knowledge about human nature.