

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

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1 happened in my history with *Middlemarch*, which has a divided
2 worldview. One view is shrewdly realistic and ironic (a perspective
3 embodied in the character Mary Garth). The other is idealistic,
4 spiritual, moralistic, a perspective embodied in Dorothea Brooke. In
5 the moralistic vein, Dorothea does what Stevens did in the visionary,
6 lyrical vein—offers a secular imaginative approximation to a reli-
7 gious worldview. I bought into that, thus giving evidence that at
8 that time, in my early twenties, I was still only gradually withdrawing
9 from a religious worldview. That “melancholy, long, withdrawing
10 roar” has been a chief trajectory of the modern imagination. My
11 own trajectory recapitulated it in brief and in small. Nowadays,
12 Dorothea’s ardent spiritual yearnings just get on my nerves. Stevens
13 doesn’t, though. I wrote an article for a Cambridge Companion
14 to Stevens a few years ago and revisited all his work and my own
15 writing on it. It was like reliving the most intense love affair of one’s
16 youth. As in a museum, perfectly preserved, untarnished, lovely in
17 memory, but no longer part of the actual world.

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

29 Reading *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* were
30 transformative experiences for me. When I was sixteen, I had
31 read in a biology textbook that all features of all organisms
32 were the product of interactions between genetically transmitted
33 dispositions and environmental conditions. That observation had
34 instant, axiomatic conviction for me, and it was the first step in
35 completely altering my metaphysical perspective—leading to the
36 loss of religious faith. (If all behavior is ultimately determined
37 in this way, “free will” in any ultimate sense is illusory, and the
38 idea of divine punishment and reward is outrageous.) Then a
39 few years later I read H. G. Wells’ *Outline of History*, a big two-
40 volume work that started with the history of the earth and went
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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 con-
 ceived 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.

1 The truth is, humans are a tiny blip in the most recent
2 moments in the almost unimaginable trajectory of deep time.
3 Nonetheless, in our miniscule habitation in a remote corner of the
4 universe, we are able to look back over deep time and recognize
5 our own place in it. That makes us special. So far as we know, within
6 the horizon of all our discoveries, there is nothing quite like the
7 human imagination anywhere else in the universe. If there is, we
8 shall be most interested to find out about it. Meanwhile, we make
9 sense of what we know. The imagination is one of the things we
10 know, and it is the means through which we know everything else.
11 It is worth a lot of study, and really, we have only just begun to
12 think about it.

13 Stevens, Eliot, and Darwin have been among the major relation-
14 ships in my imaginative life, but I have been highly promiscuous,
15 with lots of little affairs along the way. I love movies and had rich
16 imaginative moments, in my youth, with early Bergman, espe-
17 cially *Wild Strawberries*. When I first saw it, Jancsó's *The Peach Thief*
18 was one of the finest films I had ever seen. Kronenberg's *The Fly*
19 has a "touchstone" value for me, forming a symbolic cluster that
20 stimulates creative thinking even to this day. I have a personal
21 fondness for Annaud's *Quest for Fire*. Annaud succeeds in imag-
22 ining what it might be like to be a scarcely articulate early human
23 shivering in a swamp, with nothing to protect you but your own
24 wit and courage and the few simple tools you can construct.
25 Despite everything that can legitimately be said against it, I think
26 Polanski's *Tess* is a cinematic masterpiece. I probably won't live long
27 enough to see that judgment vindicated. And of course, maybe
28 I'm wrong.

29 Heinrich Heine's cultural histories captivated my imagination.
30 Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic theory in *Über Naïve und Sentimental-*
31 *ische Dichtung* so enthralled me that I named my first dachshund
32 Friedrich. Guy de Maupassant's earthy sensual human warmth
33 still seems to me one of the great good things in life. Matthew
34 Arnold, despite his mutton chops, remains a guiding star in my
35 sense of what a cultural, critical vision can do. When I was a
36 child, I loved and annually reread *Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Men*,
37 *The White Panther*, *Rifles for Watie*, *Half Magic*, and *A Wrinkle in*
38 *Time*. Having kids of my own gave me a welcome opportunity
39 to revisit those wonders and add many others, including *Across*
40 *Five Aprils*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and *The Adventures of Stanley*
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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

1 broader field of the evolutionary human sciences, retaining
2 what is peculiar and special to the nature of literary experience,
3 making full professional use of all one's own experience, but
4 integrating all that with the broader world of empirical, scientific
5 knowledge about human nature.
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