Speculative Essay

Biology Lurks Beneath: Bioliterary Explorations of the Individual versus Society

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A huge octopus emerges from the ocean, wraps an oversized tentacle around the waist of a young woman, and proceeds to drag her into the sea. This memorable episode from Thomas Pynchon's vast and surreal novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, has a happy ending, however, owing to the intervention of Mr. Tyrone Slothrop, who first unavailingly beats the molluscan monster over the head with an empty wine bottle. Then, in a stroke of zoologically informed genius, he offers the briny behemoth something even more alluring than a fair maiden: a crab. It works, suggesting that this particular octopus conforms, at least in its dietary preference, to the norm for its species. We learn, nonetheless, that "In their brief time together, Slothrop formed the impression that this octopus was not in good mental health."

It isn't entirely clear where the creature's mental derangement lies. After all, it behaved with a reasonable degree of healthy, enlightened self-interest in seeking first to consume the young lady, and then forgoing her for the even more delectable crab. Yet nature writer David Quammen may have been onto something when he pointed out that octopi generally - not just Pynchon's fictional creation - might be especially vulnerable to mental disequilibrium, if only because one of their distinguishing characteristics is having immense brains. Mental strain is probably not unknown among animals, but there seems little doubt that it is particularly well-developed in the species *Homo sapiens*, whose brains – like Pynchon's octopus - are especially large, and whose strain, is correspondingly (and regrettably) great.

This essay will argue that one of the major themes of evolutionary biology – the conflict between individual selfishness and group altruism – is paralleled by a comparable theme in literature, and that each usefully illuminates the other.

The tension between individual and group may also shed light on another longstanding evolutionary conundrum: Why do people have such big brains, bigger even than our hungry octopus? There has been no shortage of possible answers, including the possibility that humanity's oversized intellect has evolved as a means of facilitating communication, tool use, making war on our enemies and/or defending our friends, attracting and keeping mates, or dealing with predators as well as prey. There is even the prospect that the human intellect might be a by-product of sexual selection, comparable to the peacock's flamboyant tail feathers. Here is yet another possibility, suggested by the self/group tension: Maybe human beings owe their

mental adroitness to the peculiar pressures of keeping a very complex social life in adaptive equilibrium. This possibly hare-brained schema for explaining our human-brained selves has at least one virtue: It speaks to a long-standing question in ethics, which is also illuminated – at least in part – by evolutionary biology: How to navigate the conflicting demands of personal selfishness and social obligation?

Moreover, the question of individual *versus* group generates a useful way of looking at one of the most pervasive yet elusive themes in literature: the dilemma of self-assertion in a world that often calls for precisely the personal abnegation that our genes are generally primed to reject. This conflict between self and others, selfishness and altruism, the needs of the individual and those of society, has a long pedigree in the world of stories, as well as an equally potent basis in the world of life. *Homo sapiens* is a social creature. So, when people battle to make their way, as individuals, within a larger social group, they are doing something that all social species do (often in remarkably similar ways). Human beings are simply more aware of it than is the average prairie dog or pumpkinseed sunfish. And so, people not only live through these dilemmas, they write about them.

This essay, accordingly, suggests that when writers explore one of their favorite themes – the ever-present struggle between the individual and the larger group – they are recreating a parallel, and fundamental theme of biology.

As difficult as it must be for any creature to balance its various competing demands (to eat or sleep, attack or retreat, eat a damsel or a crab, etc.) such choices are probably most confusing in the social domain. For as hard as it may be to predict the vagaries of weather, for example, the vagaries of one's fellow creatures have to be even more complex, confusing, and stressful. And when it comes to negotiating a complicated and difficult social life, human beings are in a class by themselves. Clearly, our remarkably over-sized brains do not satisfy themselves with simply meeting the contingencies of daily life. Human neurons are obsessed with confronting all sorts of difficult issues, mostly of their own making. Small wonder that so many people, like Pynchon's octopus, are stressed.

And small wonder, as well, that so much fiction revolves around the conflicting demands of self versus group, selfishness versus altruism, callow youth versus responsible adulthood, individual needs versus society's expectation: it is a conflict that may well reside, literally, in our genes.

Stimulated by evolutionary thinking, biologists have begun to look afresh at the adaptive significance of animal sociality in general, something that used to be taken for granted. The basic idea is simple enough: since natural selection rewards genetic selfishness, living things should show a propensity for "going it alone," for seeking personal biological gain, if need be at the expense of others. At the heart of inclusive fitness theory is this paradox: gene selfishness can reveal itself as beneficence toward others, so long as those others share one's genes. This goes a long way toward providing an answer to the question: Why be social? Because in the process, genes have the opportunity to benefit themselves, via altruism.

But like most good scientific answers, this one also raises its share of

questions, such as: What happens when individuals — who, after all, make up "society" — seek to take selfish advantage of such prosocial inclinations by inducing others to identify with a group to which they are not genuinely related? (Note the widespread use of what anthropologists call "fictive kinship," as with claims, for example, that one's country is a "motherland" or "fatherland," or that one's comrades in arms are a "band of brothers.") And what of the conflict when the good of the group goes against the interest of the individual in question? After all, given that it is beneficial for individuals to affiliate in groups, we are also susceptible to the allure of such entities. As a result, individuals — especially when young — can readily be duped by the machinations of others. One possible consequence: a personal predilection for social groups, as well as vulnerability to being suckered by them, resulting in a recurrent tug-of-war between the appeal of society and the need for personal, self-protective watchfulness. (Yet another consequence: a tendency on the part of literary theorists to interpret this dilemma as uniquely inherent in literature whereas in fact it inheres in biology, whereupon it is *reflected* in literature.)

The Bildungsroman

A major writerly tradition confronts the drama of how individual selves become incorporated into their groups, especially from a developmental perspective. Of course, life itself involves just this, the maturation of head-strong, selfish, irresponsible youth into socially-oriented, altruistic, and reliable adulthood. It is a trajectory expected of every individual in a social species: wolf cubs must learn that the pack does not revolve around themselves; ditto for wildebeest or zebra calves. In this regard, it may well be that primates – species that generally take a long time to grow up – have the most growing up to do. They are also quite prone to experience the business of maturation as difficult, demanding, and noteworthy for the changes it requires, especially a need to suppress one's self-seeking inclinations on behalf of the self-submersion known as "maturity."

A noted literary example is Shakespeare's account of Prince Hal's maturation from Falstaff's hard-drinking, hell-raising, happy-go-lucky sidekick, into the regal military hero, Henry V. "The courses of his youth promised it not," observes the Archbishop of Canterbury in the first scene of $Henry\ V$:

The breath no sooner left his father's body But that his wildness, mortified in him, seemed to die too. ... Never was such a sudden scholar made; Never came reformation in a flood with such a heady currance, scouring faults.

It might have been more convincing, in fact, if Hal's reformation had been somewhat less flood-like, if his youthful faults had been replaced, more gradually, with adult responsibility, rather than the instantaneous "scouring" that the Archbishop recounts so wonderingly.

Whether because of the normal unfolding of our "innate" altruism or the gradual success of such social – and often, literary – exhortations, it seems likely that to some extent each of us (sociopaths excepted) undergoes a Prince Hal-like trajectory of decreasing self-gratification and increasing altruism as we grow up. Beginning with the infantile conviction that the world exists solely as our personal playpen, most people, over time, experience a mellowing toward increased wisdom and perspective as they become aware of the other lives around them, not all of which are oriented toward themselves. In George Eliot's novel, Middlemarch, the author notes that "we are all born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder with which to feed ourselves." Gradually, this "moral stupidity" is replaced – in varying degrees, depending on the individual – with ethical acuity, the sharpness of which can largely be judged by the amount of unselfish altruism that is generated. In short, people learn. There is nothing un-biological about this; indeed, nearly all living things with nervous systems more complex than protozoa modify their behavior as a result of experience. That is, they, too, learn. And one thing that members of the highly social species *Homo sapiens* learn is the necessity of adjusting their actions to take others into account. But it isn't easy.

If, for example, you are both a sensitive and a rebellious soul, born, like James Joyce, into turn-of-the-century Ireland, you might find yourself confronting a nation that is "an old sow that eats her farrow." Such behavior is not an especially adroit biological maneuver – particularly for the farrow – and so (if you are also a literary genius), you might describe your struggles to escape from that murderous porker, in something akin to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Leaving the suffocating snuffling of Ireland, the church, and his own dysfunctional family, young Stephen Dedalus ruminates in *A Portrait* that he is going "to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." Note the paradox here of individual and group: *his* experience, *his* soul ... but also his "race," which is to say, his group, which consists, for better and worse, of others. And not just littermates.

Whether quickly or gradually, the transition from selfish individualist to responsible group-member – and sometimes, group-leader – is the stuff of biology (what is more biological than growth?) and also that of the "bildungsroman," stories of personal maturation and development. Perhaps the archetypal such account occurs in a pair of novels by the great German writer and all-around genius, Wolfgang von Goethe. Known in English as *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*, this duo traces the eponymous hero's maturation. These books are not much read today outside of Germany, and for good reason: They are long, confusing, nearly plotless and filled with seemingly pointless digressions that expound the author's views on everything from geology, art and labor to the deeper meaning of *Hamlet*. But Goethe's two *Meister* masterworks also stand as paragons of the biological conflict between self and group, and the literary depiction of the equally biological, human transiting from "moral stupidity" to social responsibility. They are exhortatory literature, in which the author speaks for society, urging young

Wilhelm to master his selfish impulses and "get with the program." (It is society's program, however, not necessarily young Meister's: this is where an evolutionary perspective gives us a different angle from which to view such efforts, as well as the bildungsroman phenomenon more generally.)

When we first meet Wilhelm Meister, he is engaged, predictably enough, in an activity with obvious biological and possibly even reproductive resonance: a passionate affair with Mariana, an actress. As the story unfolds, he proceeds like a typical subadult primate, ricocheting from one adventure to another, nearly all of them involving a fetching young lady and various degrees of romantic entanglement: there is Philina (another actress), followed by a lovely countess married to a severe but easily bamboozled count (in one especially hilarious episode, the count encounters Wilhelm dressed up in the former's clothing - young master Meister had been hoping thereby to gain intimate access to the countess – whereupon the count retreats in distress, convinced that he has met his doppelganger). Next comes a graceful, boyish girl named Mignon, whom Wilhelm rescues from an abusive troupe of acrobats and who becomes his faithful and adoring slave, an unhappy noblewoman named Aurelia whose husband was dead and who had been abandoned by her royal lover, a beautiful Amazon named Natalia who saves Wilhelm from robbers, and whom he eventually marries. The list goes on, including an encounter with Felix, revealed to be Wilhelm's son by Mariana, the erotic centerpiece of the story's beginning, when Wilhelm had been suffering from an especially severe case of testosterone poisoning.

By the conclusion of his "Apprenticeship," Wilhelm Meister has not only had his fill of womanizing, he has also explored the world and found his place as a critic and creator. In the follow-on volume, *Travels*, we encounter Wilhelm as a mature man, now wandering as a confirmed "renunciant," who eventually facilitates the coming-of-age of his son, Felix, including (here we go again!) that young man's love-sick yearnings. At the end of his travels, Wilhelm restores a sickly Felix to health and emerges as not only a wise and responsible member of his society, but also a healer in every sense of the word, having gone from the sowing of wild oats to sewing of the social fabric.

The other great chronicler of human growth and development is Charles Dickens. There is no evidence that the two great 19th century English Charleses – Dickens and Darwin – ever met, although it is interesting to speculate what commonalities they might have explored. Darwin revealed to us the underlying meaning of what it is to be human; Dickens shows us how all this human-ness actually works, in social groups populated by conflicting streams of other humans, nearly all of whom have their own, equally selfish, agendas.

Whether it is Esther Summerson (*Bleak House*), David Copperfield, Sydney Carton (*A Tale of Two Cities*), or even Ebenezer Scrooge (*A Christmas Carol*), growing up is a recurring Dickensian motif, regardless of one's chronological age: witness adult Carton - who, in offering to die in place of another, famously decides that "it is a far, far better thing I do now than I have ever done ..." – or the altogether

elderly Scrooge. One is never too old to grow up, which means, over and again, confronting the conflicting demands of personal selfishness *versus* devotion to others. And, for Dickens, as for Goethe, casting one's lot with the latter.

In *Great Expectations*, for example, we learn how orphan Pip discovers that his self-centered expectations are altogether unrealistic, that his mysterious benefactor is actually – to Pip's immense consternation – the fearsome escaped criminal, Magwitch, who had accosted and terrified him years before, and not the wealthy and eccentric recluse, Miss Havisham, and, moreover, that the lovely, seductive, yet never-quite-available Estella isn't all that she's cracked up to be, whereas Joe Gargary, Pip's uneducated brother-in-law and father surrogate, warrants admiration rather than contempt.

In a perfect world, everyone might well follow the Dickensian dictum: emerge triumphantly and humanely from our unavoidable depths of self-involvement into the glorious sunshine of social responsibility, despite the machinations of inequitable social pressures, while also keeping one's integrity intact. Regrettably, it usually isn't that simple. For one thing, the outside world doesn't always oblige, at least in part because it is composed of other individuals, many of whom are acting on behalf of *their* selfish genes.

Maggie's Dilemma

Homo sapiens has many reasons to find social groups appealing, albeit troublesome. Wolves, functioning in a pack, can pull down an adult moose; whereas lone wolves must content themselves with rabbits. A lion pride can bring down a water buffalo, and then defend the carcass against hyenas; a lone lion is unlikely to be very lordly, or even well-fed. For relatively weak-bodied human beings, there has doubtless long been a substantial payoff to being part of a group, notably when it comes to catching prey and not becoming it. But as with the kin-selected benefits of group life, affiliating with others means that you must share, that you are sometimes vulnerable to others who try to profit from those in the group without doing their share. Moreover, you may be similarly tempted to cheat, to pretend to be a good, groupie wolf, but nonetheless contrive to keep away from the dangerously flailing hooves of a wounded moose, leaving others to run the greatest risks. The result, once again, is a deep-seated ambivalence toward social groups: needing them, needed by them, attracted yet repelled, tempted to cheat, all the while resentful of the possible cheating of others.

Even off the savannah, there are many advantages that proto-humans could have gained from social living: the opportunity to learn from others, to teach certain individuals (especially one's offspring), to establish reciprocally beneficial friendships, to profit from efficient division of labor, and so forth. But for every asset there remain liabilities: the danger of being conned, taken advantage of, contracting disease, forced to subordinate one's interest to that of others who are stronger, smarter, more devious or simply more numerous. No wonder social life is so fraught.

Despite what many theorists – psychological, philosophical, as well as literary – have argued, the reality is that these conflicts are not simply about "self-realization" in the psychic, theoretical, or fictive sense. Like so much else, they are deeply rooted in organic soil.

Accordingly, some of the most anguished dilemmas that people encounter derive from a biologically predictable array of conflicting loyalties, between what we may yearn to do and what our group tells us to do, between our desires and social expectation, between cross-cutting obligations toward one family member versus another, toward friends *versus* the larger community, and often – and of particular evolutionary salience – between ourselves on the one hand and our family on the other. A very old struggle indeed.

The ancient Hindu epic, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, tells of the anguish experienced by the warrior Arjuna, expected to fight against his own relatives. He is eventually persuaded by the god, Krishna, who urges Arjuna to proceed regardless of his qualms, to "renounce all selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of I, me, and mine." This is one way out of the conflict between self and group: expunge the very existence of self, and submerge yourself in the group.

For those of us still mired in our "ego-cages," however, Arjuna's enlightenment seems a distant prospect. Moreover, in order to avoid inflicting pain on others, most of us need something more than the juicy and distracting morsel that sufficed for Thomas Pynchon's giant octopus. Recall that evolution rewards genes that induce their bodies to contribute to *their* success, not that of others. At the same time, society presses upon us all, demanding that human beings refrain from morally repulsive excesses of selfishness. These conflicting pressures are so difficult to unravel that our species has unconsciously sought to enlist the assistance, among others, of its best myth-makers and story-tellers, whom we reward with fame in proportion as they succeed in casting light on our species-wide confusion.

This stubborn contention between selfishness and social obligation (including responsibility toward family) generates what might be called Maggie's Dilemma, after the heroine of George Eliot's novel, *The Mill on the Floss*. Maggie Tulliver could have become the wife of either of two attractive young men: Philip Wakem was artistic and knew Latin and Greek, but was also the son of her father's long-time enemy, while Stephen Guest was the handsome, well-liked fiancé of her cousin Lucy. Both Philip and Stephen – each unknown to the other – ask Maggie to marry them. Maggie, in turn, has been told by her brother that he would never have anything further to do with her if she married Philip (the hatred between Philip's father and Maggie's had resulted in the elder Mr. Tulliver's death); at the same time, she owes it to cousin Lucy to forego any further connection with Stephen.

In short, Maggie's Dilemma opposed the selfish, personally fulfilling route of individual happiness (with either Philip or Stephen) against the cost of mortifying her family, especially her rigid and disapproving brother. Alternatively, she could deny both prospective husbands (and thus, herself), while remaining true to her social obligations. Maggie's Dilemma is stated by Eliot as follows: "The great problem of

the shifting relation between passion [selfishness] and duty [social altruism] is clear to no man ..." Maggie resolves it in favor of the latter: "I cannot take a good for myself that has been wrung out of their [her family's] misery."

For most of us, Maggie's Dilemma remains very real. Gratify yourself, or your family? Be bad, and satisfy your "passion" or be good, and do your "duty"? Be self-serving or a group-oriented altruist?

Just as great oaks from little acorns grow, great-group goings-on emerge from small stories of selfish citizens. The grandest depiction of this process is probably Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a glorious soap-opera of Russian life in the early 19th century during the Napoleonic Wars. Tolstoy aimed in his masterwork to depict society's ebb and flow, through war and peace and youth and age and love and hate, as a vast panorama of individual selves individuate, yet also merge.

In the process, we are given unforgettable vignettes of small lives in the context of great events, and *vice versa*. We overhear, for example, the musings of the dashing Nikolai Rostov, dazed and wounded on the battlefield while French soldiers approach:

"Who are they? Why are they running? Are they running at me? And why? Is it to kill me? Me, whom everyone loves so?" He recollected he was beloved by his mother, his family, his friends, and the idea his enemies might kill him seemed incredible.

Here we see the individual unforgettably counterpoised against the larger social unit: patriotic love of Russia, enmity toward the French, and – even more dramatically – refusal of the self-oriented individual to accept that others do not necessarily see himself as inherently good, lovable, or even important. Evolution, no less than our own subjective experience, grants special importance to each individual and his or her constituent genes. But as Nikolai Rostov came to understand *in extremis*, this does not require that others agree: "A man said to the universe," wrote Stephen Crane, "'Sir, I exist!' 'However, replied the universe, this has not created in me a sense of obligation.""

Pierre Bezuhov (likely Tolstoy's favorite character in War and Peace), resolves at one point to assassinate Napoleon, but is instead captured when he behaves selflessly, intervening to save a Russian woman being molested by some French soldiers; during his captivity, Pierre learns humility and a kind of personal peace. Most of all, he achieves a sense of his own social obligation, Tolstoy's answer to Maggie's Dilemma: from a shallow, callow youth, Pierre grows up, into neither a mindless "do-gooder" nor a selfish boor, but a responsible adult.

The Duty Not to Kill a Mockingbird

Just as nature is said to abhor a vacuum, it abhors true altruism. Society, on the other hand, adores it. A dose of evolutionary biology not only helps clarify the origins of this ancient conflict between individual and group, it also points out how often the two are ultimately the same, since groups are frequently made up of relatives

Religious and moral systems universally teach not just the feasibility but also the desirability of being good, or at least, striving in that direction. "Turn the other cheek," we are told. And of course, virtue is purported to be "its own reward." Such sentiments are immensely attractive, not only because they depict how we would like *other* people to behave, but also because at some level, we *wish* that we could do the same.

And yet, as David Hume wrote in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "It is not irrational for me to prefer the destruction of half the world to the pricking of my finger." Such views are often put down as mere cynicism, and dangerous to boot. People generally yearn to be friendly, generous, and public-spirited – in short, altruistic. "We crave to be more kindly than we are," Bertolt Brecht noted in *The Threepenny Opera*. Thus, the stories people tend to value typically either celebrate those who behave selflessly – in all likelihood to encourage more such behavior – or at least enumerate the difficulty of doing so, perhaps in an effort to diminish the guilt of falling short ... which most of us do.

The remarkable opening pages of the novel, *Enduring Love*, by Ian McEwan, offer a rumination on these very behaviors. Joe is enjoying a picnic in the British countryside when he hears a shout for help and discovers a man struggling with a large gas balloon, being tossed about by the wind. There is a little boy in the basket. Joe and four other men grab the balloon by a trailing rope, but, just when it seems that they are going to rescue the boy, a sudden powerful gust of wind carries the balloon and its occupant over the edge of an impossibly steep slope. Joe and three of the other men let go immediately; the fourth holds on, but not for long. He falls to his death, having tried to save the boy (who, ironically, manages to survive uninjured).

As Joe reflects on the event – and how he and the three other men had released the rope, choosing to save themselves rather than the child – he acknowledges its primordial quality:

This is our mammalian conflict, what to give to others and what to keep for yourself. Treading that line, keeping the others in check and being kept in check by them, is what we call morality. Hanging a few feet above the Chilterns escarpment, our crew enacted morality's ancient dilemma: us, or me.

In this case, Joe didn't know the boy in the balloon, and certainly wasn't related to him. Therefore, "us" didn't outweigh "me." On the other hand, the same was true for the man who died, yet he didn't let go - until it was too late. Maybe he was following a different, "higher" morality (lethally elevated, a cynic might add). Or maybe he just held on too long, then couldn't let go safely even if – when? – he wanted to.

Part of the difficulty of being human is the often agonizing need to decide where to draw the line between self and society. And part of the delight of our best stories is the opportunity to watch others struggling to do just that. There, by the grace of evolution, go a large part of "ourselves," part hungry octopus, part Tyrone Slothrop, part selfish sinner and part altruistic saint, by turns big-hearted and narrow minded, self-actualizing and groveling groupie. In his "Essay on Man," Alexander Pope concluded, with some satisfaction,

Reason and Passion answer one great aim
That here Self-love and Social are the same ...

Whereas self-esteem is applauded and selfishness isn't, helping others is good but being a door-mat, we are also told, isn't. In one *Sesame Street* song, Kermit the Frog points out "Its not easy being green." Its not easy being human, either, precisely because, as evolutionary biologists have been clarifying, it's a hassle navigating between "self-love" and "social."

All of which may help explain the enduring popularity of books and plays that help us, while carrying our complex evolutionary baggage, to navigate this difficult path. A biologically appropriate wisdom begins to emerge from the various Commandments and moral injunctions, nearly all of which can at least be interpreted as trying to get people to behave "better," that is, to develop and then act upon large and generous desires, to strive to be more amiable, more altruistic, less competitive and less selfish than they might otherwise be. Not to be left behind, literature, too, can be similarly exhortatory.

To Kill a Mockingbird is both a coming-of-age story about a young girl, Scout Finch, and an opportunity to highlight Scout's father, the admirable attorney and moral centerpiece, Atticus Finch. Scout learns that seeming self-contained villains, such as the possibly deranged, mysterious and reclusive Boo Radley, can nonetheless be good at heart, while she also witnesses the complex requirements of personal integrity, as shown by her father's ultimately unsuccessful but nonetheless courageous defense of a black man unjustly accused of rape. Atticus is kind and, in his own way, group-oriented. But he isn't a wimp: He dispatches a rabid dog with one perfectly placed rifle-shot, and risks his life and reputation to confront racism. "It was times like these," observes Scout, "when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived."

Nelle Harper Lee, a descendant of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, wrote only this one book, but it became a beloved, instant classic. The enduring popularity of *To Kill a Mockingbird* has much to do with how the story is told, but especially with the story itself, which reminds us that

"Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill

a mockingbird."

In fact, the more we learn about biology, the more sensible becomes the basic thrust of social ethics, precisely because (even with the meliorating effects of kin selection), nearly everyone, left to his or her devices, is likely to be selfish, probably more than is good for the rest of us. We must be abjured not to kill mockingbirds because deep down, we yearn to do so. But whatever it may cost, it is our obligation to leave them unmolested, even if all of racist Maycomb County, Alabama, is clamoring for us to do otherwise, and even if part of our biological heritage is urging us in the same direction.

Tragedies, American and Otherwise

Since so much of the challenge of being human derives from the difficulty of navigating between the Scylla of selfhood and the Charybdis of social conformity, it is not surprising that the voyage has powered many tales of people coming to terms with Maggie's Dilemma, often at the expense of their own happiness. Thoreau wrote that the majority of men "lead lives of quiet desperation." Anton Chekhov, especially in his plays, depicted many of these lives, when – as in *The Three Sisters, Uncle Vanya, The Cherry Orchard* and *The Seagull* – people subordinate their needs and desires for the sake of propriety and expectation, being disappointed and often embittered as a result.

Or consider the novels of Edith Wharton, which typically revolve around the gulf separating the inner self of her characters and the social reality that constrains them. In Wharton's world, other people and the rigid expectations of stratified society conspire to strangle individual happiness. People find themselves victimized by cruel social conventions and, thus, stuck in bad relationships; more generally, they are unable to gratify their deeper selves because of the demands of strait-laced society. Even when not literally a matter of life-or-death, much is at stake in such struggles between individual and group. In the hands of a sensitive story-teller, the battle can be riveting and intense.

Newland Archer, the young attorney we encounter in Wharton's masterpiece, *The Age of Innocence*, had been engaged to marry the equally eligible May Welland when he was smitten by her lovely but socially ostracized and shockingly Bohemian cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska, herself married to a ne'er-do-well Polish count and – gasp! – contemplating a divorce to boot. But it was unthinkable for Newland to break his engagement to May: eminently suitable, acceptable, conventional, boring. "His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he [Newland] saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen."

Newland Archer was aware that to marry May Welland was to deny his own need for Ellen, and yet, "He did as his peers expected, and found himself trapped into a narrow and confining life. ... [A] haunting horror of doing the same thing every day

at the same hour besieged his brain." The result is one of the gentlest yet most terrifying visions in literature of a vital human being caught in a grim strait-jacket of rigid expectations:

The young man felt that his fate was sealed: for the rest of his life he would go up every evening between the cast-iron railings of that greenish-yellow doorstep, and pass through a Pompeian vestibule into a hall with a wainscoting of varnished yellow wood. But beyond that his imagination could not travel.

Newland's libido didn't give up easily, however. He craved escape through the prospect of a continuing relationship with the bewitching Ellen:

The longing was with him day and night, an incessant undefinable craving, like the sudden whim of a sick man for food and drink once tasted and long since forgotten. . . He simply felt that if he could carry away the vision of the spot of earth she walked on, and the way the sky and sea enclosed it, the rest of the world might seem less empty.

At one point, Newland Archer even proposes that he and Ellen Olenska run away together, society be damned and to hell with their disapproving families:

"I want - I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that - categories like that - won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter."

But she won't and so, they don't. Newland even ends up advising Ellen against divorcing her estranged husband; to do so would have been just too, too scandalous. What will "the others" say?

Ellen Olenska moves back to Europe, while Newland and May rear two children in a marriage that becomes – if not altogether gratifying – at least goodenough. Then, years later, May dies. Touring Paris with his about-to-be-married son, Newland Archer has one more opportunity to see Ellen, now advanced, like himself, into late middle age. But this time he poignantly lingers outside her apartment, watching the lights inside until a servant appears on the balcony and closes the shutters. His renunciation is complete, and even comforting, as he tastes "the dangerous sweetness of security."

If *The Age of Innocence* ends on a note of bitter-sweet unfulfilled longing, Wharton's other great work, *Ethan Frome*, is simply bitter, cold and dark as the Massachusetts winter in which it is set. It tells of the tribulations of Ethan Frome, stuck in a loveless marriage to the sour, gloomy Zenobia, while madly in love with her young cousin, the sprightly Mattie Silver (their very names reflect their

personalities). A relationship between Ethan and Mattie, however, is socially out of the question, and so the two seek a shared suicide, only to botch the job and end up lifelong cripples. Once again, cultural propriety wins out over personal actualization; the group triumphs over the self, an outcome that may seem "nonbiological" until we realize that biology does not necessarily operate in favor of the individual self. Society, after all, is a profoundly biological construct, too, even when it stubbornly constrains the individual or – sometimes tragically – pushes him or her toward pain and even death.

In such depictions, the group itself takes on a kind of existence, as real as any individual, and often suffocatingly restrictive. (It does not take too much imagination to picture a baboon, especially one who is somewhat subordinate, describing how difficult it is to have his or her selfish goals thwarted by the demands of baboon society, or to hear the complaints of an orca, elephant, or even a herring, whose self-realization is inhibited by the combined actions and demands of others in the pod, the herd, or the school.) To be sure, people may well feel these constraints with particular intensity, if only because our species is so self-aware.

Biologists have long been concerned about the "levels of selection," debating, for example, the comparative importance of natural selection acting upon individuals versus groups. Current scientific wisdom is that the smaller the unit, the more potent it is as an evolutionary force: Genes are more fundamental than individuals, just as individuals are more potent than groups. Yet in the realm of life as we experience it, bodies — not genes — hold center stage. Similarly, even as groups empower individuals in many ways (hence, the adaptive value of sociality), groups may also overpower individuals, to the profound disadvantage — biological as well as social and psychological — of those thereby overmastered.

In this regard, the beckoning literary panorama is immense, worth gesturing toward but too vast to explore in the detail that it deserves. Theodore Dreiser's tale of murderous and misbegotten ambition, *An American Tragedy* – based, incidentally, on a real event – is a perfect example of the individual beaten down by the larger collectivity. It describes how Clyde Griffiths, poor son of itinerant evangelists, desperately tries to achieve material and social success, in the process killing an innocent girl and paying for it with his life. Richard Wright's *Native Son* follows a similar trajectory, in which Bigger Thomas, a young African American, accidentally kills a wealthy young white woman (later, he also murders his black girlfriend) in the conflicted context of one person's yearning for success and selfhood versus the restraints imposed by society.

As difficult as it is for anyone to achieve personal liberation while enmeshed in society, the difficulty is immensely magnified when the larger social group is not merely indifferent but actively hostile. What does it take, for example, to maintain one's humanity (i.e., selfhood, personal integrity, and so forth) when all around is massive cruelty (i.e., the destructive aspects of a group)? This, in brief, is the theme of Jerzy Kosinski's modern classic, *The Painted Bird*, an account of a young child wandering through Eastern Europe during World War II. Its title derives from the

reputed practice of painting a bird then returning it to its flock, after which it is set upon and killed because it is different. A similar theme animates *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Life and Times of Michael K*, the two strongest novels by 2003 Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee.

Just as it is probably no coincidence that Kosinski experienced the horrors of World War II and that Coetzee grew up in apartheid South Africa, much of the powerful literature produced by African Americans in the 20th century continues to illuminate and be illuminated by the theme of individual *versus* others. I am thinking here especially of Ralph Ellison's *Underground Man*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, a list that is surely not complete, and probably never will be. One reason, in fact, for the efflorescence of African American writing in the mid to late 20th century is that – like *samizdat* literature in the final decades of the dying Soviet Union – this was a time when African Americans in the United States, although still oppressed socially and economically, were finally free enough to describe the conflict between individual and group, one that may only be superficially about racism, while actually speaking to a deeper dilemma, embedded in the biology of many living things, and all human beings.

Battling the Boyg

We've noted that social groups have a tendency to promote values that may actually work against the interests of many of its members. As a result, there is a built-in tension as the fledgling groupie struggles to fit in while also retaining his or her selfhood. Hamlet ultimately achieves a degree of personal integrity, paradoxically, by dying. It is a not uncommon resolution, especially for especially "strong" characters, "heroes" who are – or at least, who perceive themselves to bevictimized by a larger society into which they just can't seem to fit. Hedda Gabler, in Ibsen's play of that name, is as devoid of redeeming virtues as she assumes her society to be. "Everything I touch," she laments, "seems destined to turn into something mean and farcical." But she creates her own destiny, largely by failing to make that crucial transition away from George Eliot's "moral stupidity." Hedda Gabler is a biological self who will not accept the ameliorative requirement that she adjust to the group.

Married to George Tesman, a mediocre scholar whose career is about to be eclipsed by one Eilert Lövberg, Hedda has no compunction about burning the unpublished manuscript of Lövberg's brilliant new book. Hedda, it turns out, had been an old flame of Lövberg, who, to add insult to injury, is now married to Hedda's despised schoolgirl rival. Thinking he has lost the precious papers, Lövberg contemplates suicide whereupon Hedda helpfully loans him a pistol, urging him to "die beautifully." Instead he is shot in the groin during a brawl at the local whorehouse. If all this weren't unsavory enough, the unscrupulous Judge Brack, who had long lusted for Hedda's cool, inaccessible beauty, gets wind of the fact that she was somehow involved in Lövberg's death, and demands that she become his mistress, or

else he'll spill the beans. Hedda ends the action by calmly entering her boudoir with another pistol and dying as "beautifully" as she had unavailingly urged Lövberg to do

Ibsen's major characters – including but not limited to Hedda Gabler – inhabit that uncomfortable, and often violent zone that evolutionary genetics knows so well, between selfishness and groupishness, typically holding out for the former, regardless of consequence for the latter. In the process, they frequently excite our admiration if not imitation, while bringing ruin to themselves and others. So, in Ibsen's play, *Peer Gynt*, we have a jaunty, boastful, picaresque figure who effortlessly – and without hint or dint of conscience – deposits his overbearing mother on the roof of a house and leaves her there, makes off with someone else's bride during a wedding ceremony, abandons her, then marries, and just as quickly deserts, the daughter of the elf-king of the mountains. Peer Gynt also struggles with the Great Boyg, a shapeless, grim and unconquerable monster who represents the riddle of existence and can only be "gone around" rather than overcome. Peer proceeds to go adventuring through America, China, and Africa, selling, in turn, slaves, idols, rum, and bibles. He also hangs out with a lovely desert-dwelling dancing girl.

Not nearly finished, Peer Gynt continues his career as the quintessential self: Returning to Norway, his ship wrecked, the redoubtable Mr. Gynt clings to a floating spar that can hold only one man. When the ship's cook tries to join him, Peer – self-centered as ever – flings him into the sea, and continues his very personal drift around the Great Boyg of life, heedless of others but oddly appealing nonetheless, if only because of his vitality and exuberant selfhood. Finally, seeking to retire in obscurity, Gynt encounters the Button Molder (please direct any complaints to Ibsen, not me!), who threatens to melt the peerless Peer in his great ladle: "Friend," the Button Molder announces with a certain wry enthusiasm, "its melting time." Being not good enough for heaven but not bad enough for hell, Peer Gynt now faces the worst of all punishments for someone who revels in his individuality: being melted down into utter anonymity. He is saved, however, at the last minute, by the intervention of a faithful middle-aged woman who had loved him, unavailingly, from girlhood.

Peer Gynt is a jerk, but a lovable and unforgettable one, the kind of unconscionable rascal who delights us by the simple fact of being so absurdly uninhibited, and successful at it. He is the individual many of us would like to be if we could only shake off our obligations and responsibilities to others, if we could only act on the unalloyed imperatives of our notably selfish genes. As Ibsen sees it, Peer is an irrepressible troll:

The Gyntian self – it's an army corps Of wishes, appetites, desires, The Gyntian self is a mighty sea Of whim, demand, proclivity ... Less antic, but more intense – indeed, frighteningly so – is Ibsen's *Brand*, who proclaims "all or nothing" in his crazed pursuit of spiritual perfection and dies in an avalanche at the foot of a towering Ice Church, toward which his whole life has been tending. Earlier, Brand's single-minded obsession had resulted in the death of his wife and son. Selfish absorption can exact a terrible toll, even among trolls. More secular, but no less enmeshed in personal commitment, is another Ibsen creation, Dr. Thomas Stockmann. The good doctor insists on revealing that the Baths, source of his town's economic health, are dangerously contaminated (think of a late-19th century version of *Jaws*), then winds up standing alone against those who label him an *Enemy of the People*. Also standing alone – literally – is Halvard Solness, *The Master Builder* who lethally dared to build higher than he could climb, as well as Nora, who scandalized 19th century audiences but continues to delight 21st century feminists, by declaring in *A Doll's House* that a human being – even, heaven forbid, a woman! – has the right to demand personal satisfaction and self-actualization, regardless of others.

Part of the enduring appeal of these tales is their recognition that "looking out for number one" is not only part of the Pied Piper call of natural selfishness, but that it is also more nuanced and less easily denounced than simplistic ethical exhortations might suggest. Ibsen's heroes and heroines – even the destructive ones like Hedda Gabler – often have an appealing side, especially when, like Peer Gynt, their self-gratification is so primitively and innocently enthusiastic, or when, like Dr. Stockman, it results, paradoxically, in ultimately benefiting others.

If you think that Hedda Gabler, Peer Gynt and Brand are troublesome enough, consider Raskolnikov. As we encounter him in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, this former university student has been much taken with his private philosophy of the "exceptional person," according to which certain special people are exempt from traditional rules and expectations. None of what Nietzsche called "herd morality" for him. Raskolnikov decides to test his notion by murdering an old pawnbroker who he feels is a "leech" on society. His selfish inclinations – abetted by a supremely self-oriented philosophy – triumph lethally over his group-orientation. At least temporarily.

Raskolnikov kills the pawnbroker, and also her dim-witted sister who accidentally wanders in at the wrong time. Gradually, then, his conscience (his sense of obligation to the group), begins to assert itself, and Raskolnikov falls ill, eventually confessing his crime and getting in return a ticket to Siberia. Dostoyevsky loved to portray how excessive self-gratification and indulgence can lead people astray: witness Dimitri's riotous pleasure-seeking in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Prince Myshkin's naïve goodness in *The Idiot*, the violent and destructive nihilism of the confusing crowd of radical conspirators in *The Possessed*, and, not least, the obsessive gambling of Alexei Ivanovitch, aptly titled *The Gambler*.

At the same time, Dostoyevsky yearned to suggest the potential for renewal. Thus, the course of Raskolnikov's eventual resurrection and rehabilitation is greatly assisted by his developing romantic association with Sonia, a young woman who has

been forced into prostitution in order to help feed her family. Sonia's degradation, in turn, had been caused by the drunken irresponsibility (inappropriate and destructive selfhood?) of her father, Marmeladov. Sonia is a sacrificial, kindly soul, a victim of Marmeladov's excessive self-indulgence and thus, the perfect foil to Raskolnikov's earlier and murderous preoccupation. In a sense, Sonia is Dostoyevsky's way of italicizing the victimization that the likes of Raskolnikov sometimes inflict upon the world.

Sometimes, such pain can't be avoided, no matter how well-intentioned and even well-behaved the protagonist. The dilemma of self versus group is especially intense when the demands of the group are ill-suited to particular selves. Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, for example, gives us the tragedy of a great military hero brought down by his stiff-necked inability to credit the legitimacy – even, the collective humanity – of larger society. For Coriolanus, the people of Rome are "the mutable, rank-scented many." He is doomed by his contempt for the democratic group, although significantly, his inability to ignore his own biological connections – specifically, the pleas of his mother and sister that he refrain from attacking his natal city – is the immediate cause of his lethal downfall. For individuals to prosper, even remarkable ones such as Coriolanus, they must show at least some respect for the larger collectivity.

By contrast to the tragic grandeur of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, in *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand presented a novelistic version of her personal philosophy, which reads in some ways like a caricature of evolutionary psychology, since it sees only the merits of selfishness without acknowledging the compensating need for fitting into one's group. Coriolanus-like, and consistent with her far-right politics, Rand disdained the values and even the legitimacy of 'society," insisting that only the individual – gloriously free and self-contained – matters. "Civilization," we learn in *The Fountainhead*, "is the progress toward a society of privacy. The savage's whole existence is public, ruled by the laws of his tribe. Civilization is the process of setting man free from men." So much for the group! The ultimate good, accordingly, is independence, which is "the only gauge of human virtue and value. What a man is and makes of himself; not what he has or hasn't done for others. There is no substitute for personal dignity."

Such is the credo of *The Fountainhead's* Howard Roark, architect extraordinaire, who cannot compromise his creativity and individualism; he even dynamites his own building project when it is not constructed according to his personal specifications. Altruism is a trap, according to Roark (and Rand):

Altruism is the doctrine which demands that man live for others and place others above self. No man can live for another. He cannot share his spirit just as he cannot share his body. But the second-hander has used altruism as a weapon of exploitation and reversed the base of mankind's moral principles.

And selfishness? The only way to live:

I came here to say that I do not recognize anyone's right to one minute of my life. Nor to any part of my energy. Nor to any achievement of mine. No matter who makes the claim, how large their number or how great their need. I wished to come here and say that I am a man that does not exist for others. It had to be said. The world is perishing from an orgy of self-sacrificing.

In her second well-known novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand was similarly moved to glorify the selfish individual, depicting a nightmare fictional future in which all the great, creative, individualistic, competitive, high achieving people are oppressed by a government that yearns for collective benefit rather than personal gain, that values the social fabric rather than individual merit. In the world of John Galt, inventor and apostle of triumphant human rationality and creativity, group benefit is derided as "the god of our century. To act together. To think-together. To feel-together. To unite, to agree, to obey. To obey, to serve, to sacrifice."

"Who is John Galt?" This refrain reverberates throughout *Atlas Shrugged*, and the answer seems to be: the only one who is worth anything, the triumphant individual, whose "worth" is measured by distance from the rest of society.

The novels of Ayn Rand are not great literature. They probably aren't even good literature, nor are they good philosophy, and – from my perspective – certainly not good social policy. But that is another matter. The point for now is that in some depictions (e.g., Coriolanus, Hedda Gabler) headstrong selfhood leads to disaster, whereas in the hands of others, such as Ayn Rand, selfish individualism is celebrated. Either way, we see the working out of a fundamental organic tension whereby individual, biological beings, endowed by their evolutionary past with a propensity for self-assertion, seek to negotiate their way among other such beings, whose demands and expectations are often very contradictory. The persistent popularity of Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead, especially among college students, is certainly not due to the literary artistry of either; rather, it testifies to the magnetic power of that primal struggle between individual and group, between selfish individuals and the larger society in which they are unavoidably embedded.

"Fuck You" Literature

Finally, it is worth noting an occasional response to the dilemma of self *versus* group that seems especially appealing (or at least, grimly appropriate). When society is unrelievedly murderous and destructive of self and others, when even altruistic behavior on behalf of the greater group is either meaningless (because the group is too large and powerful) or ill-advised (because it is malign), then it may still be possible, at least in the world of literary imagination, to wrap oneself in black humor and to thumb one's nose at the whole damned business. Call it the realm of "fuck you

literature," of which the best examples may well be Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* and Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*. It is no coincidence that each of these was written in response to horrible events: World War II for *Catch-22* and *The Tin Drum* (from a U.S. and German perspective, respectively) and nuclear weapons for *Cat's Cradle*. In each case, society is simply so absurd, so dangerous, so uncaring, and its demands on the individual so grotesque, destructive and lifedenying, that the authors respond with a kind of loony, rambunctious, devastating affirmation of willful nonparticipation.

In Catch-22, Joseph Heller depicts the nightmare world of Yossarian, a bombardier in the European theater during the Second World War. He is convinced that "they" are out to murder him. And rightly so: they are. Certainly, Yossarian's well-being is not on anyone else's agenda, each being pathologically as well as comically self-absorbed. Hoping to gain personal fame and a coveted promotion, Colonel Cathcart, the group commander, keeps raising the number of missions required to complete a combat tour; he also cancels plans for daily prayers when he learns that enlisted men and officers will be praying to the same god. General Peckem is concerned only that the bombing formations be as tight as possible (because this makes for the most impressive photos). Captain Black requires that everyone sign a loyalty oath in order to pick up paychecks, eat a meal, or get a haircut. Lieutenant Milo Mindbinder, the mess officer, amasses a fortune by black market manipulations. His pièce de résistance involves renting his personal fleet of planes to the Germans and then directing the bombing and strafing of his and Yossarian's unit; this turns out to be all right, however, since everyone makes a profit.

Most of Yossarian's friends and associates end up dead, some in bizarre ways. One exception is the "man in white," a soldier wrapped entirely in bandages, so emblematic of depersonalization that it was unclear to hospital observers whether there really was anyone inside. In an especially hilarious/gruesome touch, this "person's" intravenous drip and urinary bag – fluid in, fluid out – were periodically switched; it didn't seem to matter. Surrounded by such lunacy, Yossarian determines, not surprisingly, that his goal is simply to keep from getting killed, by any means possible: "He had decided to live forever or die in the attempt, and his only mission each time he went up was to come down alive."

Most emblematic of the novel's absurdity is the title concept. Catch-22 is an Army Air Force rule, which states that anyone can be grounded if he is crazy, but anyone who uses his craziness to avoid combat duty is, by definition, not crazy and therefore *cannot* be grounded:

Concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. ... All he had to do was ask, and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. ... If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to.

From the German perspective, there is *The Tin Drum*, Nobel Prize winner Günther Grass's first and finest novel. It is, in a sense, an absurdist update of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* saga, featuring Oskar Matzerath who decided, as his personal rebellion against a crazy and violent Nazified world, to stop growing:

I remained the three-year-old, the gnome, the Tom Thumb, the pigmy, the Lilliputian, the midget, whom no one could persuade to grow. I did so in order to be exempted from the big and little catechism and in order not, once grown to five-foot-eight adulthood, to be driven ... into the grownup world.

That's not all. Oskar insists on spending hours each day pounding incessantly on a toy drum, and develops the ability to crack glass with his scream. Moreover, his picaresque adventures – involving, among other things, novel erotic uses for Kool-Aid powder – are themselves a scream of protest on behalf of the angry, anguished, alienated self.

Finally, there is Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, a funny, bitter, absurd story of the end of the world (nuclear weapons, anyone?), set against a cynical, make-believe anti-religion known as Bokonism, which is avowedly based on lies and deception. It seems that Dr. Felix Hoenikker, a father of the atomic bomb, has also invented – at the behest of the U.S. Marines – something known as "ice-nine." This substance has the useful property of instantly freezing water, thereby causing mud, among other things, to congeal; the Marines had been eager for something that would allow them to land on foreign beaches without getting mired. The only problem is that ice-nine, once released, freezes and congeals everything and everyone. (A true bit of history: before the first atomic bomb was tested, at Alamogordo, some physicists expressed concern that its intense temperatures might ignite the nitrogen that comprises three-quarters of the Earth's atmosphere, which in turn would generate an ice-nine-like reaction that could literally burn up the entire atmosphere. Others said No, it was more likely only to incinerate New Mexico.)

Wry and self-mocking, by turns hilarious and shocking, *Cat's Cradle* juxtaposes the grand and the insignificant, the cataclysmic and the trivial, as an array of angry, helpless, often resigned individuals but heads against a society made up of narrow-minded assholes whose pursuit of self-interest threatens – and ultimately dooms – the vital, living, healthy, biological interests of everyone, whether they know it or not. Yossarian wouldn't be at all surprised. Nor would Oskar Matzerath. Ditto for anyone with a sense of human nature, especially when that sense is illuminated by Darwinian insights that speak to the loneliness of selves unavoidably immersed in a confusing, conflicting world of other selves.