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# Actual Minds, Possible Worlds

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Jerome  
Bruner

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*Jerome Bruner*

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## Preface

This book grew out of an effort to edit a collection of essays written between 1980 and 1984. Each of the essays had been prepared for a particular occasion and a particular audience. The essays would simply be edited better to express what they had intended to say. But I discovered upon rereading them that each was an occasion-bound expression of a general point of view that I had been struggling to formulate during those years.

I decided instead to write them all over again, this time keeping my eye more on the general point of view they were trying to express, and less on the demands of the particular occasions. But all of the chapters save two started their lives as responses to particular invitations, and I should like to record my gratitude to my hosts.

"Approaching the Literary" is new, written to make clearer to myself the nature of the enterprise. "Two Modes of Thought" began as an invited address to the American Psychological Association. "Possible Castles" was first given as the Gordon Mills Lecture at the University of Texas in Austin. "The Transactional Self" had a double origin: in the Bender Lecture given in New York, and in another presented to the Erikson Institute in Chicago. "The Inspiration of Vygotsky" had its start as a presentation to a symposium on Vygotsky at the Center for Psycho-social Studies in Chicago. "Psychological Reality," like the opening essay, was written for the present book to clear up matters outstanding in my own mind, though it carries some echoes of the Katz-Newcomb Lecture given at the University of Michigan. "Nelson

Goodman's Worlds" (with Carol Feldman as co-author) was written for the *New York Review of Books* and is the exception in this volume: it is virtually unchanged from its original form. "Thought and Emotion," in contrast, started as a keynote address to the Jean Piaget Society, though nothing remains of the original. "The Language of Education" first saw life as the Bode Lecture at Ohio State University. And, finally, "Developmental Theory as Culture" grew from a seed in the form of another invited address to the American Psychological Association. I am deeply grateful to my hosts on those occasions and to the colleagues and students who gave so freely of their comments. I hope they will find echoes of them in this book.

I owe a special debt to two foundations that supported my work during the period when this book was growing. The first is to the Sloan Foundation, which provided me with an initial grant to explore the nature of narrative as a mode of thought and as an art form. The Spencer Foundation generously provided a later grant for the pursuit of these studies, the first results of which are presented in several of the chapters of this book.

Two other institutions have my gratitude. One of them, the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, is my academic home. It has provided me with colleagues, students, and the goad of classes to teach. The other, the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University, fills the bill of club, pub, and forum. Its lunches, seminars, and lectures have provided me with companionship as complex as it has been rich.

I particularly want to thank students and colleagues who participated in seminars on narrative theory and practice at the New School and at the Institute, as well as visitors who came from afar to present their ideas to us. I am especially indebted as well to the members of my research group, some of whose work is presented in Chapter 2: Alison Armstrong, Sara Davis, Gwyneth Lewis, Pamela Moorhead, David Polonoff, James Walkup, Susan Weisser, and Walter Zahorodny.

There are many intellectual debts to friends—more of them than I can ever mention, much less pay back. Eric Wanner, Richard Sennett, Dan Stern, David Rieff, Arien Mack, Oliver Sacks, John Guare, Stanley Diamond, Bonnie Borenstein, Henri Zukier, Janet Malcolm, and Diana Trilling are among those to whom I owe most. So too my

squash partner, William Taylor, who can talk convincing historiography between games even when he is behind. I also want to thank my editor, Camille Smith, for her unfailing good humor and good advice, and my publisher and friend Arthur Rosenthal, who proposed the book in the first place. Some of the themes that inform Part One of the book were given a first tryout at the University of Konstanz in June 1985, and I want particularly to thank Tom Luckmann and Wolfgang Iser for their helpful comments. Pamela Moorhead helped ready the manuscript for the Press with skill and patience.

To Carol Feldman I owe a particular debt. She has been supporter, critic, and a prodigious source of ideas and inspiration.

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*Part One*

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Two  
Natural  
Kinds





## Approaching the Literary

Czeslaw Milosz begins his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, delivered at Harvard in 1981–82, with a comment that is both emblem and warning:

Many learned books on poetry have been written, and they find, at least in the countries of the West, more readers than does poetry itself. This is not a good sign, even if it may be explained both by the brilliance of their authors and by their zeal in assimilating scientific disciplines which today enjoy universal respect. A poet who would like to compete with those mountains of erudition would have to pretend he possesses more self-knowledge than poets are allowed to have.

For the three essays in Part One of this book are about poetry in one or another of its guises. And together they constitute yet another of those efforts to look at art through the glass of those respected “scientific disciplines.”

Milosz goes on: “Frankly, all my life I have been in the power of a daimonion, and how the poems dictated by him came into being I do not quite understand. That is the reason why, in my years of teaching Slavic literatures, I have limited myself to the history of literature, trying to avoid poetics.” I doubt we can read the demon’s voice either, or even reconstruct it from the text. Freud, admitting the same point in “The Poet and the Daydream,” urges, nonetheless, that the poem in its own right can tell us much about the nature of mind, even if it fails to yield up the secret of its creation. Dostoevski’s mystical genius, Joyce’s treacherous ways with language, these can still be studied with profit,

though we do not know their inspiration. No literary sciences (any more than any natural sciences) can penetrate particular moments of inspired creation. But however they came into existence, the worlds of *The Secret Sharer* or of Stephen Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* constitute texts as well as worlds. And these texts are worthy of the disciplined attention of anybody who seeks to understand the symbolic worlds that the writer creates. If we bring to bear upon these texts the most powerful instruments of literary, linguistic, and psychological analysis, we may yet understand not only what makes a story, but what makes it great. Who would deny that Aristotle's *Poetics* helped us understand tragedy, or that two millennia later, others illuminated different literary landscapes—Roman Jakobson the sound structure of poetry, Vladimir Propp the morphology of folktales, Kenneth Burke the dramatistic “grammar of motives,” and even Roland Barthes (for all his self-mockery) the “writerly” text. This is the domain of literary theory.

But there is a second step in literary analysis that is rarely taken. Once we have characterized a text in terms of its structure, its historical context, its linguistic form, its genre, its multiple levels of meaning, and the rest, we may still wish to discover how and in what ways the text affects the reader and, indeed, what produces such effects on the reader as do occur. What makes great stories reverberate with such liveliness in our ordinarily mundane minds? What gives great fiction its power: what in the text and what in the reader? Can a “psychology” of literature describe systematically what happens when a reader enters the Dublin of Stephen Daedalus through the text of *Portrait*?

The usual way of approaching such issues is to invoke psychological processes or mechanisms that operate in “real life.” Characters in story are said to be compelling by virtue of our capacity for “identification” or because, in their ensemble, they represent the cast of characters that we, the readers, carry unconsciously within us. Or, on the linguistic side, literature is said to affect us by virtue of its tropes—for example, by metaphor and synecdoche that evoke zestful imaginative play. But such proposals explain so much that they explain very little. They fail to tell why some stories succeed and some fail to engage the reader. And above all, they fail to provide an account of the processes of reading and of entering a story. There have been efforts to explore these processes more directly, as in I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* where

actual alternative “readings” of poems were examined, but such efforts have been rare and, on the whole, psychologically not well informed. Perhaps the task is too daunting.

Let me illustrate some of the challenges—and suggest why I think that, for all its dauntingness, the task is both possible and worthwhile, and why it might shed light not only on literary issues but on psychological ones beyond the limits of the psychology of literature. Take first the issue of alternative (or multiple) readings of a story or, for that matter, of any text. It is an ancient issue and has its origin in both classical linguistics and the interpreting of biblical texts. Nicholas of Lyra proposed many centuries ago, for example, that biblical texts are amenable to four levels of interpretation: *litera*, *moralis*, *allegoria*, and *anagogia*, the literal, the ethical, the historical, and the mystical. Literary and general linguists have always insisted that no text, no story can be understood at a single level. Roman Jakobson, for example, urged that all meaning is a form of translation, and that multiple translation (polysemy) is the rule rather than the exception: an utterance can be conceived of as referential, as expressive, as conative (in the sense of a speech act), as poetic, as phatic (contact preserving), and as metalinguistic. And Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (the analysis of a single text, Balzac’s *Sarrasine*) illustrates how a novel achieves its meaning in the interplay of the interpretations yielded by at least five different “codes.” What Nicholas of Lyra, Jakobson, and Barthes are saying, in effect, is that one *can* read and interpret texts in various ways, indeed in various ways simultaneously. Indeed, the prevailing view is that we *must* read and interpret in some multiple way if any “literary” meaning is to be extracted from a text. But in fact we know little about how readers actually do so—we know precious little indeed about the “reader-in-the-text” as a psychological process. polysemy

For the psychologist of literature, the theoretical analysis of “text interpretation” (by whomever formulated, and whatever the textual data base of the analysis) yields only hypotheses about actual readers. Do all readers assign multiple meanings to stories? And how can we characterize these multiple meanings? What kinds of category systems best capture this “meaning attribution” process, and how idiosyncratic is it? Is interpretation affected by genre, and what does genre mean psychologically (a matter to which I shall turn presently)? And *how* are multiple meanings triggered? What is there in the text that produces

this multiple effect, and how can one characterize the susceptibility of readers to polysemy? These are the kinds of questions we must ask as *psychologists* of literature, and I shall return to them in the next chapter.

Take the question of genre, another ancient issue in literary theory and one that still preoccupies literary scholars in a major way. Aristotle put his hand to the question in the *Poetics*, and his characterization of comedy and of tragedy in terms of both character and plot form is still a living part of literary theory. And Freud or no Freud, Aristotle's is still an astute psychological (as well as literary) speculation—to which I shall return to often in later chapters. There are many other literary approaches to genre that are psychologically suggestive. For contrast, take the formal distinction between epic and lyric offered by Austin Warren and René Wellek in their classic *Theory of Literature*: epic is the poetry of past tense, third person; lyric of first person present tense. While it was a distinction offered only as text characterization, it is interesting in more than a purely linguistic sense. Is it the case, for example, that the generic “unity” in the world of a fictional text depends upon the maintenance of a space-time structure, and that this unity requires consistent marking of tense and person? Is “psychological” genre constituted of such space-time marking: tales-of-others in the past, tales-of-self in the present, and so on? We do not know the answers to such questions, but in the following chapters I shall explore ways of pursuing them.

One gets a sense of the psychology of genre by listening to readers “tell back” a story they have just read or spontaneously “tell” a story about a “happening” in their own lives. “Telling back” a Conrad story, one reader will turn it into a yarn of adventure, another into a moral tale about duplicity, and a third into a case study of a *Doppelgänger*. The text from which they started was the same. Genre seems to be a way of both organizing the structure of events and organizing the telling of them—a way that can be used for one's own storytelling or, indeed, for “placing” stories one is reading or hearing. Something in the actual text “triggers” an interpretation of genre in the reader, an interpretation that then dominates the reader's own creation of what Wolfgang Iser calls a “virtual text.”

What then are the “triggers” and what are the subjective forms of genre that come to dominate the reader's mind? Is subjective genre

merely a convention, and are the triggers little more than literary or semiotic road signs telling the reader what genre it is and what stance to take toward the story? Yet, there is something altogether too universal about tragedy, comedy, epic, tales of deceit, for the explanation of genre to be only a matter of convention. Nor is it fixed and “hard-wired.” Anthony Burgess says of “Clay” in Joyce’s *Dubliners* that it is a *comic* story. It *can* be read that way. Maria (its principal character) then is seen as a comic bungler caught in the ennui of Dublin. Her illusions about herself then become the stuff of Joycean black comedy. Yes, one can read it as Burgess does, or at least try to.

But stories, in Paul Ricoeur’s phrase, are “models for the redescription of the world.” But the story is not by itself the model. It is, so to speak, an instantiation of models we carry in our own minds. An undergraduate in a seminar in which I once participated interpreted *Hamlet* as an account of the bungling of a Danish prince who had become “sword happy” at his German university and who was so inept at killing the man he hated that he did in his wisest friend, Polonius, in the process. Yes, this student admitted, the play was a “tragedy,” but it was also a bungle (he was in engineering—with passion).

One rereads a story in endlessly changing ways—litera, moralis, allegoria, anagogia. (The young engineer was at moralis.) The alternate ways of reading may battle one another, marry one another, mock one another in the reader’s mind. There is something in the telling, something in the plot that triggers this “genre conflict” in readers (see Chapter 2). The story goes nowhere and everywhere. So Frank Kermode, in distinguishing *sjuzet* and *fabula* (the linear incidents that make the plot, versus the timeless, motionless, underlying theme) remarks that the power of great stories is in the dialectical interaction they establish between the two: “the fusion of scandal and miracle.” So while the reader begins by placing a story in one genre (and that may have powerful effects on his reading), he changes as he goes. The actual text is unchanged; the virtual text (to paraphrase Iser) changes almost moment to moment in the act of reading.

If we then ask about the nature and role of *psychological* genre—the reader’s conception of what kind of story or text he is encountering or “recreating”—we are in fact asking not only a morphological question about the actual text, but also a question about the interpretive processes that are loosed by the text in the reader’s mind.



Twenty-odd years ago, engaged in research on the psychological nature and development of thought, I had one of those mild crises so endemic to students of mind. The Apollonian and the Dionysian, the logical and the intuitive, were at war. Gustave Theodor Fechner, the founder of modern experimental psychology, had called them the *Tagesansicht* and *Nachtansicht*. My own research had taken me more and more deeply into the study of logical inference, the strategies by which ordinary people penetrate to the logical structure of the regularities they encounter in a world that they create through the very exercise of mind that they use for exploring it.

I also read novels, went to films, let myself fall under the spell of Camus, Conrad, Robbe-Grillet, Sartre, Burgess, Bergman, Joyce, Antonioni. From time to time, almost as if to keep some balance between night and day, I wrote essays—about Freud, the modern novel, metaphor, mythology, painting. They were informal and “literary” rather than “systematic” in form, however psychologically motivated they may have been.

Eventually, I published these “fugitive” essays as a book: *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*. It was a relief to get the book out, though I do not think its publication changed my way of working much. By day, the *Tagesansicht* prevailed: my psychological research continued. At night there were novels and poems and plays. The crisis had passed.

Meanwhile, psychology itself had gone through changes, and, doubtless for the good, the voices of the left hand and of the right came more publicly and raucously into discussion with each other. The cognitive revolution in psychology, for one thing, had made it possible to consider the question of how knowledge and experience in their myriad forms were organized. And since language is our most powerful tool for organizing experience, and indeed, for constituting “realities,” the products of language in all their rich variety were coming in for closer scrutiny. By the mid-1970s the social sciences had moved away from their traditional positivist stance toward a more interpretive posture: meaning became the central focus—how the word was interpreted, by what codes meaning was regulated, in what sense culture itself could be treated as a “text” that participants “read” for their own guidance.

And by the mid-1970s, with the Chomskian fervor spent, linguistics

returned with more powerful tools to its classical concern with the *uses* of language—among them its use to create the illusions of reality that make fiction. There followed a torrent of research, some obscure and some enlightening, addressing the great themes of “poetics” in the spirit of Jakobson and the Prague School. In time French structuralism—with Claude Lévi-Strauss taking the lead with his analyses of myth—came to dominate literary theory, only to be toppled by the more functionalist approach of the later Barthes, of Derrida, of Greimas, and of the deconstructionist critics (see Chapter 2).

These developments (and more of them to be recounted later) opened new psychological perspectives. For perhaps it is true, as academic psychologists like to say about themselves, that psychology has the courage of other peoples’ convictions. Psychoanalysts, following the earlier lead of George Klein, began inquiring whether the object of analysis was not so much archaeologically to reconstruct a life as it was to help the patient construct a more contradiction-free and generative narrative of it. In which case, what constituted a narrative, or better, a *good* narrative? And academic psychologists, inspired by the lead of David Rumelhart, began to work on “story grammars,” formal descriptions of the minimum structure that yielded stories or storylike sequences. And as if part of a *Zeitgeist*, even historians and historiographers, not notable for innovative courage, were again brooding about the powers of narrative history—Francis Parkman, say, in contrast to an analytic social economist sorting over the same period.

My old interest was rekindled. Setting out to sample this mass of new work, I discovered that there were two styles of approaching narrative, a discovery pressed upon me while I was teaching concurrently two seminars on narrative. One of them, at the New School for Social Research, was dominated by psychologists. The other, at the New York Institute for the Humanities, was made up of playwrights, poets, novelists, critics, editors. Both seminars were interested in psychological questions; both were interested in literary questions. Both were interested in readers and in writers. Both were interested in texts. But one group, the psychologists, was dedicated to working “top-down,” the other to working “bottom-up.” It is a distinction worth exploring, one that foretells something about the conflict one senses in working on narrative and on the psychology of literature generally.

Top-down partisans take off from a theory about story, about mind,



about writers, about readers. The theory may be anchored wherever: in psychoanalysis, in structural linguistics, in a theory of memory, in the philosophy of history. Armed with an hypothesis, the top-down partisan swoops on this text and that, searching for instances (and less often counter-instances) of what he hopes will be a right "explanation." In skilled and dispassionate hands, it is a powerful way to work. It is the way of the linguist, the social scientist, and of science generally, but it instills habits of work that always risk producing results that are insensitive to the contexts in which they were dug up. It partakes of one of the modes of thought to which I shall turn in the next chapter—the paradigmatic.

Bottom-up partisans march to a very different tune. Their approach is focused on a particular piece of work: a story, a novel, a poem, even a line. They take it as their morsel of reality and explore it to reconstruct or deconstruct it. They are in search of the implicit theory in Conrad's construction of *Heart of Darkness* or in the worlds that Flaubert constructs. It is not that they are occupied biographically with Conrad or with Flaubert, although they do not turn a tin ear to such matters, nor are they so taken with the new criticism that they look only at the text and its artifices, though they are concerned with that too. Rather, the effort is to *read* a text for its meanings, and by doing so to elucidate the art of its author. They do not forswear the guidance of psychoanalytic theory or of Jakobsonian poetics or even of the philosophy of language in pursuing their quest. But their quest is not to prove or disprove a theory, but to explore the world of a particular literary work.

Partisans of the top-down approach bewail the particularity of those who proceed bottom-up. The latter deplore the abstract nonwriterliness of the former. The two do not, alas, talk much to each other.

In the two essays that follow, I shall satisfy neither side, and, even worse, I can see no reason to apologize for it. Nor can I justify it by arguing that when we know enough, the two approaches will fuse. I do not think so. The most that I can claim is that, as with the stereoscope, depth is better achieved by looking from two points at once.