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**Lyric Self-Fashioning:  
Sonnet 35 as Formal Model**

How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not? And I rather think that in themselves they never are. . . . Moving away from things until there is a good deal that one no longer sees . . . ; or seeing things around a corner and as cut out and framed . . . ; or looking at them through tinted glass or in the light of the sunset . . . —all this we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §299<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** Are we the stories we tell about ourselves? Not entirely. We aren't just a set of actions, experiences, plans, and hopes; we are also a set of beliefs, traits, capacities, and attitudes, none of which is essentially narrative in nature. We are, in other words, as much our *character* as our *life*. And while story form can help unify a messy life, when it comes to a messy *self*, we're going to need something like the form of a poem. Shakespeare's Sonnet 35 is a perfect example. Its subject is a civil war in the soul, yet it subtly hints at a deeper-going unity of character—and even manages, somehow, to find bittersweet beauty in the ambivalence. Sonnet 35 thus serves as a *formal model*, pointing us in the direction of techniques we may borrow for ourselves as we seek to transfigure internal conflict by means of art.

What does it take to be a self? What does it take to think about yourself as a single entity—a complicated entity, maybe, but an entity that is one thing, rather than a motley assortment of smithereens? Many traditional answers to this question have assumed that your “self” is the set of experiences you’ve had (and will have) over the course of your life, personal identity being a matter of seeing twenty-year-old you and seventy-year-old you as the same person, held together by an unfolding narrative that makes you who you are.<sup>2</sup> This narrative, what’s more, needn’t have anything specifically aesthetic about it; it doesn’t have to resemble a novel, but can just be like a rudimentary nonfictional memoir, where one thing leads to another in a simple causal chain. I want to suggest that both assumptions are mistaken. First of all, you are not just

your *life*: you are also your *character*. And second, bringing that character into shape—allowing it to hold together, keeping it from falling apart—sometimes requires strictly literary tricks. Shakespeare’s Sonnet 35 will help me explain.

I

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:  
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud;  
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,  
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.  
All men make faults, and even I in this,  
Authorizing thy trespass with compare,  
Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,  
Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are;<sup>3</sup>  
For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense—  
Thy adverse party is thy advocate—  
And ’gainst myself a lawful plea commence:  
Such civil war is in my love and hate  
That I an accessory needs must be  
To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.

The speaker of this poem is, shall we say, a little confused. He knows that his friend has betrayed him, but then again the friend is only human, and human beings are part of nature, and things in nature are imperfect—so the friend was simply bound to “make faults”; his betrayal was just part of the natural order.<sup>4</sup> (Look at all the lovely landscape in the first four lines: roses, fountains, moon, sun, bud.) No big deal, as we’d say today. All good.

But no, this isn’t true either. Once we get to lines 5–9, suddenly the vocabulary becomes religious (“faults,” “trespass,” “corrupting,” “amiss,” “sins”) and in 10–14 it’s legalistic (“adverse party,” “advocate,” “lawful plea,” “accessary,” “thief,” “robs”). Glowing moons and sweet-smelling roses are

long gone; the betrayal was a crime, and maybe even a sin. For miscreants and felons, there is no forgiveness.

It's not that the speaker has simply changed his mind, discarding a bad view ("boys will be boys") and embracing a better one ("you're going to hell")—rather, he holds both opinions at once. He both loves the friend and hates the friend, and the two attitudes are fighting it out in a "civil war" of the soul. He's amply ambivalent, deeply divided; all he can do, at this point, is bounce around from one position to the other.

Actually, it's even worse than that. "All men make faults, *and even I in this*": if the friend committed a crime, then condoning the crime is a transgression of its own, which means that the speaker is culpable too. He's complicit, an accessory ("accessary" in Shakespeare's English) to the harm. And that means there's a second source of ambivalence, an internal source, one that concerns himself. If the first uncertainty was whether or not the friend did something wrong in betraying him, the second is whether or not the speaker did something wrong in forgiving him. It's not just that part of him thinks "my friend is innocent" while the other part thinks "my friend is guilty"; it's also that part of him thinks "I am being a nice, charitable guy" while the other part thinks "I am being a reprehensible, enabling sucker."

So the speaker is doubly divided—either the friend is innocent, and he is wrong to accuse him, or the friend is guilty, and he is wrong to defend him—and there's no way for him to stop being so. You might think he should just pick a side, decide once and for all to forgive or condemn the friend. But the phrase "needs must be" suggests that he simply has no choice: he can't *help* being complicit in the crime. He has to keep defending the friend, even as he also condemns the friend, and that means he has to keep endorsing his forgiveness, even as he also denounces it. The double ambivalence isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

So far so bad; but it's about to get even worse. Not only is the speaker torn between love and hate for the friend, and torn between corresponding acceptance and recrimination for himself, but he can't even keep the two attitudes entirely separate from each other. When he's trying to condemn the friend (at lines

6–11), he doesn't do a particularly good job of feeling it: the alliteration and assonance in “to thy sensual fault I bring in sense— / Thy adverse party is thy advocate”<sup>5</sup> are way too gorgeous, the language too pretty, too sweet. It's measured, detached, and excessively elegant, and so it doesn't land as blame at all; the speaker's heart simply is not in it. Conversely, when he's trying to defend the friend (lines 1–4), he does so by telling him he contains, and I quote, a “loathsome canker.” It's as though he's saying “I forgive you—it's no big deal—you just have, you know, a loathsome canker inside your evil heart.” These are not entirely the words of one who has forgiven.<sup>6</sup>

So the “civil war” of the soul makes it impossible for the speaker to pick a side, to declare his friend definitively forgiven or definitively condemned, to pronounce himself innocent or guilty, to get fully behind his calm or his anger. What's more, it even upsets the form of the poetry, generating two features that are highly unusual for Shakespeare's sonnets. The first involves the speaker having second thoughts—quite strikingly—in the middle of a line. Look again at the opening of the second stanza:

All men make faults, and even I in this...

What starts out as a continuation of the first quatrain suddenly veers off course after the comma, the topic no longer being the friend but the speaker himself, and the attitude swinging from exoneration to reproach. This is a startling shift: while Shakespeare's sonnets often change direction, they almost never do so in the middle of a line.

The second remarkable feature of the poem is that its last two lines barely feel like a couplet. In Shakespeare's sonnets, the final couplet is often self-contained, both syntactically and semantically, allowing it to be recited on its own. Think, if you haven't already, of all the great opportunities for deploying one of the following in the middle of a conversation:

For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;  
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds. (Sonnet 94)

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (Sonnet 18)

Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,  
And in our faults by lies we flattered be. (Sonnet 138)

So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,  
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then. (Sonnet 146)

If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved. (Sonnet 116)

All this the world well knows; yet none knows well  
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (Sonnet 129)

But now look again at the end of Sonnet 35:

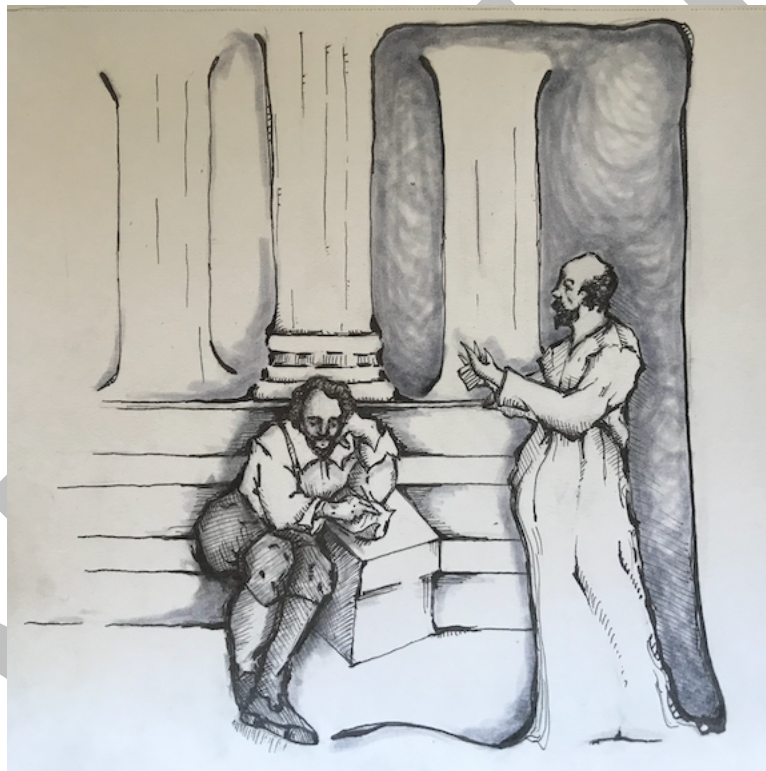
Such civil war is in my love and hate  
That I an accessory needs must be  
To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.

You can't go around saying "That I an accessory needs must be," even at the most permissive faculty meeting. It's a dependent clause, and doesn't make sense without the main verb in the line before it.

Notice, too, how solidly the lines are clamped together here, with enjambment linking first to second and second to third, and no punctuation anywhere to be found. (Every other line in the poem ends with some punctuation mark. Every other stanza too: quatrain 1 closes with a period; quatrain 2 closes with a semicolon; but quatrain 3 closes with nothing, as though it barely ends at all.) It's easy to lose the sense that "hate" is there to close the rhyme opened by "advocate," and to feel it instead as a lead-in to a new segment, one in which the final couplet stunningly refuses to float free.<sup>7</sup> The civil war has thrown everything out of kilter; this is the portrait of a man in serious cognitive disarray.<sup>8</sup>

## II

Now I want you to imagine that this poor chap travels back in time to the fifth century BCE, hops on a boat to Athens, and runs into Socrates on the steps of the courthouse. Or if you prefer, imagine that Socrates travels forward in time to 1605, hops on a boat to London, and meets our speaker outside Saint Paul's. What would Socrates have to say to a someone in such a state?



Socrates badgers Shakespeare

Image: Jacqueline Basu

Socrates, of course, was deeply concerned with problems like these. (The Socrates we meet in Plato, at least.) He knew that it's easy for human beings to develop inner conflicts, and he believed that the way to live the best kind of life involved getting rid of them. On any given subject, you only get to have one opinion; what you need to do is figure out what that opinion should be, and make sure it doesn't clash with

any other opinion you hold, so there are no contradictions between any given pair of beliefs. That way, you can end up with a single, consistent system of convictions—convictions by which you may then orient your life.

From Socrates's point of view, our speaker is at least doing one thing right: he's worrying about the state of his soul. He knows he's in a mess; he knows it's bad (indeed civil-war-level bad); and he knows that *this*, and not the friend's betrayal, is the real problem. We can infer the last part from another fascinating thing that happens in the course of the poem. While the first quatrain is all about the friend and his feelings ("no more be grieved at that which *thou* hast done"), the middle part injects a little "me" alongside the "you" ("even I in this," "thy trespass," "myself corrupting," "salving thy amiss . . . thy sins . . . thy sensual fault," "I bring," "thy adverse party . . . thy advocate"). And then, most strikingly, the finale is exclusively about the speaker ("*my* love and hate," "*I* an accessory," "from *me*"). In a dramatic reversal, the friend—the person it looked like the poem was all about—gets unceremoniously relegated to the third person, no longer "thou" (first line) but just "that sweet thief" (last line), as though the speaker stopped addressing him somewhere along the way and is now just talking to, and about, himself.<sup>9</sup>

So this is at least a start, from Socrates's point of view: the speaker's primary concern is with the state of his soul, and he's even done half of Socrates's work for him, by pinpointing the conflict within his own belief system. But other than that, I don't imagine Socrates being particularly impressed. Yes, our speaker knows he's divided, and he knows it's a problem—but he isn't doing anything about it. (Worse, he's saying that he *can't* do anything about it.) Socrates would demand of our speaker that he pick a view, make sure it is consistent with any other views he may have, and act in accordance with it. This, for Socrates, is the only way forward, the only way to bring harmony into a painfully divided soul.

### III

But the speaker of Sonnet 35 isn't about to let himself be badgered. He isn't about to say, like so many of Socrates's absurdly acquiescent interlocutors, *πάνυ γε, ὦ Σώκρατες* ("absolutely, Socrates!").<sup>10</sup> If you genuinely love someone, and that someone betrays you, you are going to feel conflicted; you will want to condemn the betrayal, but you will also feel a temptation to find excuses for it. And you can't just remove one or other of these impulses, since to do so would mean that you are either no longer a lover of that person or no longer a human being.<sup>11</sup> So it's just not acceptable, for creatures like us, to achieve integration in the Socratic way. "If that's the cost of unity," I imagine our speaker saying, "then count me out."<sup>12</sup>

Should we assume, though, that such a refusal is a rejection of all unity? That the speaker embraces internal division, foreshadowing Walt Whitman's "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)," misquoters of Emerson's "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,"<sup>13</sup> or any number of twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers? No, emphatically not. Shakespeare's speaker knows just how painful it is to be torn apart by competing impulses—it's war!—and he would vastly prefer to be out of it. He isn't abjuring unity; he's just opting for a different kind.

Where Socrates insists on a unity of belief system, the speaker opts for a unity of *character*.<sup>14</sup> Where Socrates would require him to get his opinions straight—pick a response to the friend's betrayal and stick to it—the speaker chooses the path of being who he is. Yes, at the surface level the speaker is divided (he condemns the friend, he forgives the friend), but deep down he is unified, unified as someone who loves and who is a human being.<sup>15</sup> After all, that's what you do when you are a human being and love and are betrayed: you despise and sympathize, forgive and condemn. Your impulses drag you in two directions at once. Yet because both ultimately spring from exactly the same source, your ambivalence makes you more coherent, not less, at the level of character. Without the surface-level disunity, you would no longer be a person who loves. You have to be divided in order to be whole.



#### IV

So let us imagine Shakespeare's speaker telling Socrates, in no uncertain terms, to pack his toga and return to Greece. Shakespeare's speaker is interested in internal unity—in fact he cares far more about that than about his friend—but he is not interested in the type of unity Socrates has to offer, a type of unity that he would consider not just unattainable but also undesirable.<sup>16</sup> Instead of a *theoretical* unity of self, provided by the “correct response” to the lover's misdeed, our speaker offers a *poetic* unity of self. He is unified, he would argue, as one who loves, since anyone who genuinely loves will feel, when betrayed, both a temptation to rationalize and an impulse to condemn. To the horror of Socrates, it turns out that such unity of character not only permits but positively requires, at times, a conflict of attitudes.<sup>17</sup> Removing one's anger or one's tenderness would mean ceasing to be a lover, perhaps even diminishing oneself as a human being.

Things aren't quite as bad for the speaker as they initially appeared, then; the civil war does not, in the end, go all the way down. The poem gives expression not just to the torment of division but also to something deeper, the bedrock stability of a unified self. And it does something even better than that, something we feel in our bones when the final lines come round:

That I an accessory needs must be  
To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.

There is something inexplicably serene about this closing couplet. It speaks of guilt, loss, division, and pain—the same guilt, loss, division, and pain we have seen all poem long—and yet it feels, astonishingly, like composure, self-ownership, wholeness, and calm. What is being *done* here is very different from what is being *said*. And what's being done is being done by literary form, by a set of structures that, for their first trick, are slowing everything down. After thirteen straight lines in standard iambic pentameter, the poem suddenly swaps in a spondee, yielding three stressed syllables in a row (“thát swéet thíef”), each ending in a consonant and two fed by long vowels. (Try it; you'll see it takes a little extra time to say.<sup>18</sup>)

The other thing form is doing here is imposing shape on thought. The couplet starts, more or less, with “I” and ends with “me”; sandwiched in between we find two sidelong references to the friend (“sweet thief . . . sourly robs,”), neatly linked by sound and sense; all of which produces the sequence *me, you, you, me*. A, B, B, A. A chiasmus.<sup>19</sup>

Why does that matter? Perhaps because a chiasmus is a reduplication and a reversal. Rather than just giving us A and B, the chiasmus gives them to us twice; and rather than giving them to us in the same order, it gives them to us inverted. On their own, of course, A and B are just two random objects, but when you duplicate them, they start to form a minimal structure. Not just AB but ABAB—a little system, with a simple principle of order. And when you reverse them, you create a sense of closure: whereas ABAB could go on forever, ABBA is perfectly self-contained.

So this leads me to a tentative hypothesis: that the chiasmus is the figure par excellence for the containment of explosive oppositions. It’s the perfect device for allowing “opposed ideas [to] be held in tense coexistence,” as sculptor Martin Puryear says about what he takes to be the best kind of art.<sup>20</sup> It keeps ambivalence alive, but allows its elements to “coexist” within a structure that keeps them from tearing everything apart. And this, perhaps, explains why Sonnet 35 ends in such composure, in spite of the civil war continuing to rage on all sides. What’s responsible for the magic is a figure of speech.<sup>21</sup>

It’s not, to repeat, that the agonizing conflicts have gone away. The friend is still both despicable (“sourly robs”) and lovable (“sweet”); the speaker is still both innocent victim (“steals from me”) and guilty accomplice (“accessary”). In its content, the chiasmus presents us with exactly the same two pairs of judgments. But by means of its form, it brings them into an impeccable, almost invulnerable order. It’s as though a precarious armed truce had been struck between irreconcilable factions in the soul.

And maybe, just maybe, there’s even a degree of *beauty* in the situation. Of course, we shouldn’t go too far: torment is still torment, and war is still war; it would have been far better if the friend had never strayed, leaving the speaker free from “hate” for him and recrimination for himself. And yet the ability to

perceive the situation aesthetically, to phrase the turmoil as a perfectly balanced chiasmus—that ability remains a precious source of consolation. In the same way, it helps a little bit to think, as we drop that heavy medicine chest on our foot, that there’s something painfully funny about it. That it’s not just disastrous, in a random way, but deliciously ironic. That the joke may be on us, but at least it’s a joke.

Two points from Nietzsche are crucial here. First, that art has the power to transfigure painful realities; second, that repeated experiences as readers and viewers can end up equipping us with the power to transfigure our own painful realities, training us to adopt an aesthetic attitude in our daily lives, helping us to perceive, say, the bitter irony in a bruised foot, the relentless symmetry in an impossible situation.<sup>22</sup> If there were no art in the world, suffering would only be suffering; thanks to the aesthetic attitude, however, suffering can also at times be beautiful, sublime, ironic, bittersweet.

That doesn’t mean the aesthetic attitude is going to save us from adversity. It certainly doesn’t mean it should be wielded as a weapon against other people (“stop complaining—your misery is beautiful!”). And it absolutely doesn’t mean it should be deployed in the political realm (“that president is awful, but at least he’s never boring”). But as a strictly therapeutic tool, strictly for use by ourselves, strictly as balm for our own personal miseries, it can be of incalculable value in allowing us to go on.

## V

If what I’ve said so far is true, then a number of important consequences follow for our understanding both of lyric and of identity. First of all, who we are isn’t just the sequence of events in our life—it isn’t just where we came from, where we’re going, what’s happened to us, what we’ve done, and what we plan to accomplish—and so bringing unity into our self-concept can’t just be a matter of telling the right kind of story. Yes, the conflict in Sonnet 35 has a history (“yesterday the friend betrayed me; today, in consequence, I’m ambivalent”). But that history does nothing whatsoever to help the speaker, who needs

the kind of assistance that chiasmus, sonority, and oxymoron can bring. Unlike suspense, surprise, and climax, chiasmus, sonority, and oxymoron have nothing to do with narrative.

The same goes for the other thing that bails our speaker out: a commitment to his attitudes and values. What holds him together, we saw, is the fact that he is someone who loves fully, and that isn't an *episode*; it's a *trait*. Character traits aren't stories, and they don't need to have stories behind them either, in any strong sense of the word.<sup>23</sup> Did our speaker *become*, at some point, a person who loves fully? Who knows! Who cares! The one thing we do know is that no one, in the history of modernity, has ever asked this question about Sonnet 35. No one has ever said "you can't possibly expect me to understand what's happening here until you tell me how this bloke became the person he is."<sup>24</sup>

Some traits, of course, do come into being, change, or fade away, for reasons we may be able to describe. But in the case of other traits—like color blindness or tone deafness or my body's stubborn refusal to recognize the merits of cilantro—the only "history" is one of biology. When we consider their contribution to our identity, we rarely think in terms of stories.

Imagine what's going to happen the next time you make a new friend and say "tell me a bit about yourself." (Try that too!) Chances are, you're going to hear a series of statements that fall into two categories.<sup>25</sup> Your new friend will inform you (a) that she loves Pollock, hates White Zombie, and doesn't cook very well, but can run a six-minute mile. She'll also inform you (b) that she's from Minnesota, was married once, and wants to be an interior designer. There's a narrative aspect of identity (where you come from, where you're going) and a non-narrative aspect of identity (your traits, your capacities, your values, your preferences, your habits, your dispositions).<sup>26</sup> Your life is not the same thing as your character.<sup>27</sup>

Or again, think about the way you choose an area of study, a job, a vocation, a career. One set of questions has to do with how well it fits your character (am I cut out to do this? am I good at it? is this the kind of thing I enjoy?) and another has to do with how well it fits your plan (how many people can I help by doing this? does the world really need another penguin trainer? how will it shape me, over forty years,

to spend most of my waking hours around penguins?). If you're lucky, the answers will be the same, but there's no guarantee of that. Sometimes they come into conflict, as when you'd desperately love to be the new Stephen Gerrard (life plan) but you know full well that, alas, you can barely kick a ball (capacities). And the fact that disagreement is possible shows, again, that the two kinds of consideration are distinct.

This way of seeing things actually receives some confirmation from neuroscience, which tells us that it's entirely possible to know who you *are* without having any idea of who you've *been*. Whereas events from our lives are stored as episodic memories, information about our traits—even if originally derived from observation of our own behavior in various situations—is stored as semantic memory, with the result that a lesion affecting one system need not affect the other. That, according to Stanley B. Klein, is why patient “K.C.,” who lost the ability to form new memories after an accident, could still tell you what he was like. It's also why the famous Henry Molaison (“H.M.”), who developed anterograde amnesia after surgery for epilepsy, retained a sense of self,<sup>28</sup> and why Susie McKinnon, a patient lacking auto-noetic consciousness, did the same: as Erika Hayasaki puts it, “though she doesn't remember being a part of the anecdotes that shaped her into this person, she knows very well who she is.”<sup>29</sup> “The human cognitive architecture,” speculates Klein, “may include a subsystem that is functionally specialized for the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of trait self-knowledge”; “personality knowledge can be preserved and even updated without any retrievable episodic memory.”<sup>30</sup>

Still, I know what some will say at this point: these traits of yours are already part of a story. (I'm sorry, I mean *always* already part of a story.) If you choose your career based on your preferences and abilities, then look, those preferences and abilities are causes, which is to say beginnings. Once upon a time you liked reading, and that's why you became a professor. Narrative. See? Always historicize!

Let's leave aside the highly embarrassing personal fact that I became a professor more or less by accident, thanks to a series of epic failures and embarrassing character flaws. The crucial point here is that my enjoyment of reading isn't “once upon a time”; it's an ongoing state. States like that can indeed make things happen, and they can also serve as goals, but that doesn't mean they are narrative in nature. You

can tell a story *about* such states, but the story doesn't constitute them, doesn't explain them, and needn't even help us understand what they are. The story is not what we care about.

Let's say you happen to own a nugget of gold. (Lucky you!) You could make a nice ring out of it, keep it in a box, or give yourself some tacky teeth. Who knows what might ensue (especially in the last case). But none of that would change the fact that what you have is a chunk of Au, a group 11 element with atomic number 79. A nugget of gold can set some stories in motion, but in itself it isn't a story, and stories do not make it what it is.

To put it another way, while any non-narrative element can give rise to a story, any story can, conversely, give rise to non-narrative elements, such as a Big Question About Life. (Some will say these Big Questions are always historically inflected, but isn't that "always" a bit self-defeating?) Chickens lay eggs, and eggs hatch into chickens, but that doesn't mean my omelette is made of roosters. There are two different aspects to our sense of who we are, both of which are important. And both need tending to, separately, if we are to remain more or less at one with ourselves.<sup>31</sup>

## VI

Is being more or less at one with ourselves a desirable goal, however?<sup>32</sup> Is it preferable to bring a degree of harmony into our inner life, as opposed to reveling in chaos? That's a complicated question, and I don't have space to rehearse all the arguments here, but I hope to have shown that there are some reasons to think that the answer is often yes.<sup>33</sup> Internal division, as Sonnet 35 beautifully illustrates, can feel like civil war. What's more, internal division can paralyze the will, preventing us from taking action, or prompting us to action we later come to regret, as the quintessentially conflicted Hamlet comes to regret having killed Polonius.<sup>34</sup>

Nor is this interest in relative unity and identity something foisted on us by bad old Mr. Capitalism, with a view to keeping us meek and docile. As we saw above, Plato's Socrates was already singing its

praises back in the classical period. (In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates also talks about features that individuate us, such as a “snub nose,” “protruding eyes,” and “the other things by which you are you” [τᾶλλα οὕτω ἐξ ὧν εἶ σὺ].<sup>35</sup>) In the first century CE, Seneca urged a combination of coherence in a moment and consistency across time, without, so far as I can tell, ever having dreamed of a market economy:

There are many people like the one Horatius Flaccus describes, this man who is never the same, who goes off in so many directions that he doesn't even resemble himself. . . . This is the clearest indication of a mind that lacks good sense. It goes around with no stable identity, and (what I find most dishonorable) it is inconsistent with itself. Realize that it is a great thing to act as just one person [*magnam rem puta unum hominem agere*]. . . . This, then, you should demand of yourself: keep up the part you have begun to play, right until you leave the stage. See to it that you can be praised; or if not that, at least make sure you can be recognized.<sup>36</sup>

Nor, again, is it necessarily a form of reprehensible, narcissistic self-obsession. Shakespeare's speaker embarks upon it, in what seems to me an entirely blameless way, as a remedy for psychological pain, not as a way to get more “likes” on social media. The same is true, to take another example, in the case of PTSD patients, for whom putting the self back together can be a matter of life or death.<sup>37</sup>

Relatedly, here's a fourth thing we are not talking about: mere performance. When Stephen Greenblatt writes about Renaissance self-fashioning, he rarely means the fashioning of actual selves; he mostly means the fashioning of personae, masks, public images designed to dupe perceivers.<sup>38</sup> Given the existence of writers like Montaigne, that's highly reductive (though emblematic, perhaps, of a general cynicism bias within literary studies). Not all projects of self-unification—even the ones recorded in poetry or essays—serve what Erving Goffman calls “the presentation of self.” Whatever our fashionable skeptics may have told us, many such projects are sincere, self-directed efforts to bring much-needed peace into a troubled soul.

## VII

So the project of introducing a measure of unity into a divided soul has a long pedigree; may well be authentic; need not be narcissistic; and stands to be of benefit. And, to say it again, it's a double project:

since our sense of identity has two aspects, there are at least two different ways for it to fall apart. Our *character* can lose its *coherence*, under pressure from states like ambivalence or self-deception; our *life* can lose its *wholeness*, under pressure from the kind of change that breaks a narrative.

In itself, of course, change over time is totally normal, and often desirable. (It would be absurdly limiting to stay the same our entire life, especially if we have flaws to correct in ourselves.) But it's arguably beneficial to be able to see your life as one thing, in spite of all the changes; to lay claim to your past selves, rather than disowning them; to acknowledge that what you did was done by you; and to see your future acts as things that you will perform. (Without that acknowledgment, what's going to happen, among other things, to responsibility?) It's better for you—and better even for those around you—if you're able to think of your existence as a totality, a single story stretching from birth to the foreseeable horizon. A story with many chapters, sure, but a single story nonetheless. A *narrative*, in other words, rather than just a chronicle-like series of unconnected events.<sup>39</sup>

Both kinds of unity are important, and both need achieving separately. Dr. Jekyll has an entirely intelligible life but a disastrously fractured character;<sup>40</sup> Lazarillo de Tormes, conversely, has an impressively stable character but an endlessly seesawing life, composed of chaotic and unrelated episodes, with no apparent logic to their sequence. (One way we can tell: permute the order of the episodes in *Lazarillo* and nothing much changes.) So success in one dimension needn't be accompanied by success in the other. Jekyll needs to work on his character. Lazarillo needs to fix his life.

And finally and most importantly: both kinds of self-fashioning may involve an aesthetic component. The narrative of our life that we tell ourselves *can* be a straightforward chain of causal links, but it's likely to be more resonant (and not necessarily any less accurate) if it also includes strictly aesthetic connectors such as foreshadowing, leitmotifs, and emotional cadences.<sup>41</sup> (That's a story for another time; here we're talking about lyric self-fashioning, not narrative self-fashioning.) And the shape we impose on our soul, likewise, *can* be a simple Socratic matter of logical consistency, but it's likely to be more humane and more enriching—and not necessarily any less accurate—if some of the binding is aesthetic in nature.



I hope I've persuaded you that Sonnet 35 is a poem that *does* something, as opposed to merely *saying* something. It doesn't just mention a conflict within the soul; it overcomes it, or at least tames it, in the very form of the poem itself. That, at any rate, is what the poem does for the speaker. But for us too, the poem is more than just a set of claims. The point of reading Sonnet 35 is not to learn that we can be conflicted, that such ambivalence can be painful, that it can be overcome by means of poetry, or anything like that. Such beliefs are not what's on offer from our engagement with Sonnet 35; they are, at most, only the price of admission.

The same is true of any number of other poems. There too, the point of spending time with them is not to discover the truth about life, any more than the point of going on safari is to confirm that elephants are real. Beliefs are important in situations like these—without the assumption that elephants exist, we wouldn't have traveled all the way to Tanzania—but only as premises. Once we're at the park or in the poem, our main aim is experience, not knowledge. Louise Rosenblatt and A. C. Bradley are right: an artwork is not a textbook but an event.<sup>42</sup>

So Sonnet 35 is not a treatise, not a work of didacticism telling us how to live; rather, it's a *formal model*. It offers us not wisdom but a shape (or set of shapes) that we can borrow when striving to bring the parts of our soul into newfound harmony. That's not, of course, to say that we can literally turn the warring parts of our soul into a chiasmus—whatever some may say, the brain isn't actually made of language—but syntactic structures are metaphors for mental operations, and poetry is thus, among other things, a powerful stock of formal models for the introduction of aesthetic unity into our own necessarily divided lives.<sup>43</sup>

## VIII

Lyric poems, of course, are many and various. Still, quite a few of them—including, perhaps, some of the core cases—do what Sonnet 35 does, embedding an exploration of inner conflict within a poem that,

for its part, is powerfully unified. Can we borrow that combination as a formal model? Can we adopt the habit of imposing aesthetic order on our most painful ambivalences? Can we bring it to bear not just on temporary situations but on our enduring traits and dispositions?<sup>44</sup> If so, then it's not absurd to imagine that we can think of our self as a lyric poem, just as it's not absurd to imagine that we can think of our life as a story.

To live like a poem is to achieve a higher-level stability above or beneath the lower-level complexity, and, still more, to find beauty in the combination; whenever the conflicts in our life are intractable, we may come not just to accept them but also, in a way, to celebrate them. ("This shall be called greatness," wrote Nietzsche: "being capable of being as manifold as whole, as ample as full."<sup>45</sup>) If the internal war cannot be ended, it can at least be lived with, and it can even become the source of bittersweet appeal, thanks to the imposition of form.

All of that, as Nietzsche realized, requires work.<sup>46</sup> For a start, we're going to need to read Sonnet 35 more than once. (Message-based theories of literature imply that you could give the work a single read-through, extract its "meaning," and be done with it; a sad fate for literature, especially the kind that doesn't want to teach us anything, preferring instead to serve as a formal model.) The ideal appreciator of Sonnet 35 is one who doesn't just read but rereads it, increasingly coming to notice not just the situation but also the form. The first time around, the situation sounds terrible. On the second, it feels inevitable. On the third, it suddenly becomes beautiful.

In fact, it's almost certainly necessary also to read *other* poems, to read *them* many times, to commit a couple to memory, maybe to write a poem or two (even bad ones)—in short, to live in the world of lyric, to feel our way into poetic form, to get to the point where poetry is in our blood. (In Emily Dickinson's terms, to "dwell" in poetry.<sup>47</sup>) It's not enough to understand what a given poem means; the thing we need to understand is what poetry is. Or rather, we need to *feel* what poetry is. It's at that point that we can start to import its structuring devices into the way we see our situations, begin to find the beauty in our own ambivalences, and thereby become the poets of our lives.

*It has been an inexpressible pleasure to discuss this poem with Stanford students in classes I team-taught with R. Lanier Anderson, Jorah Dannenberg, John Holliday, and Kendall Walton; I'm grateful to all of them, as well as to the wonderful students. I'd also like to thank Nancy Armstrong, Paloma Atencia-Linares, Rob Chodat, Rachel Cristy, Jonathan Culler, Tammo Feldmann, Luca Ferrero, Jeremy Glazer, Owen Flanagan, Stacie Friend, David Garrard, Zina Giannopoulou, Charles Griswold, Alasdair MacIntyre, Toril Moi, Dave O'Connor, Yi-Ping Ong, Thomas Pavel, Robert Pippin, Christopher Ricks, Fred Rush, Boris Shoshitaishvili, Allen Speight, Mimi Vasilakis, Will Waters, Catherine Wilson—and above all John Gibson and Martin Hägglund, who kindly persuaded me there's something in here that's worth saying.*

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House), 1974, section 299.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Bruner, for example, says that “self is a perpetually rewritten story” (“Life as Narrative,” *Social Research* 54 [1987]: 11–32 [15]). Oliver Sacks agrees: “each of us constructs and lives a ‘narrative . . . this narrative is us’” (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* [London: Duckworth, 1985], p. 110.)

<sup>3</sup> There is some dispute over the pronouns in this line. The Quarto reads “their sins . . . their sins”; many editors consider this a misprint and offer “these . . . these” (“theis” was an accepted variant spelling back then), “thy . . . thy,” or combinations of “thy” and “their.” Thus the New Cambridge Shakespeare preserves “their . . . their”; the Arden Shakespeare has “these . . . these”; Helen Vendler has “thy . . . their”; and Stephen Booth has “thy . . . thy.” See G. Blakemore Evans, *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: The Sonnets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 147; Katherine Duncan-Jones, *The Arden Shakespeare: Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Arden, 1997), p. 180; Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 186; Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 191. I take no view on the question, and nothing turns on it for the purposes of my reading.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Evans, p. 147. See also (to some extent) Vendler, p. 185. We don't know, of course, what exactly the friend is supposed to have done, or whether the friend is more than a friend. I personally lean toward thinking that the addressee is in fact a lover, and that the betrayal is sexual in nature, but since nothing in my interpretation depends on that, I'll use more general terminology.

<sup>5</sup> “Adverse party” means opponent; “bring in sense” means provide reasons (or rather rationalizations). (See Evans, p. 139; Booth, p. 191.) The speaker knows he's been making excuses for the fickle friend, serving as his defense lawyer when he should have been working for the prosecution.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Vendler, p. 186. “Canker,” here, means cankerworm.

<sup>7</sup> There are at most three other sonnets (71, 108, 154) in which the final couplet isn't free-standing (see Evans, p. 139; compare Booth, p. 35). Still, in all of these cases the couplet is preceded by a punctuation mark.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Booth: “like so many of his predecessors, Shakespeare compares the condition of a lover to that of a state in civil war. Unlike his predecessors, Shakespeare evokes in his reader something very like the condition he talks about” (p. 59).

<sup>9</sup> Fans of acrostics may be interested to know that the initial letters of the two central lines spell “ME.” But needless to say, that particular data point should be taken with a grain of salt.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Plato, *Lysis* 218b, *Euthydemus* 301b, and *Philebus* 56c; and compare *Laches* 198c, *Euthyphro* 5d, *Gorgias* 475a, *Meno* 85b. All of these dialogues may be found in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> As Vendler notes (p. 189), love and hate both have “a valid voice” in Sonnet 35.

<sup>12</sup> In a famous paper, Harry Frankfurt describes the importance of forming what he calls “second-order desires,” where a second-order desire is the desire to have, or to relinquish, certain first-order desires. (Thus, for example, I frequently have a powerful first-order desire to eat chocolate cake, and a rather plaintive second-order desire not to want that.) The situation in Sonnet 35 is interestingly different. While our speaker does stand back from his first-order desires—his desire to forgive the friend, his desire to punish the friend—he doesn't register a second-order

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desire to hang onto one and ditch the other. There is, as he sees it, no way to eliminate either first-order desire; that is the force of “needs must be” in line 13. He has, one might say, a third-order desire *not to have a firm second-order desire* in relation to his first-order desires. (For first- and second-order desires, see Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5–20.)

<sup>13</sup> The adjective is actually very important here—more so than some have realized. Emerson doesn’t say “consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds”; he says a *foolish* consistency is. What’s more, he doesn’t mean that we should hold two conflicting opinions at once; rather, he means that we should be willing to change our minds over time, as new information comes in. This becomes clear just three sentences later: “speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *Essays and Lectures* [New York: Library of America, 1983], p. 265).

<sup>14</sup> Here and in what follows, I’m drawing to some extent on work I did with R. Lanier Anderson in “Philosophy as Self-Fashioning: Alexander Nehamas’s *Art of Living*,” *Diacritics* 31 (2001): 25–54.

<sup>15</sup> It’s not a requirement to think of the deep-going unity as somehow innate and immutable. Still, some major thinkers and writers have seen it that way. Marcel Proust’s narrator, for example, believes in the existence of a *vrai moi*, a “true self” that accompanies us throughout our life, affects the way the world appears to us, selects our love objects, and, if we happen to be artists, generates our individual aesthetic style. (See especially Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. Terence Kilmartin, D. J. Enright, and Andreas Mayor [New York: Modern Library, 1993], p. 299); compare Marcel Proust, *Essais et articles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 253–55.) Milan Kundera’s narrator, in *Immortality*, speaks of a fundamental “Grund” (ground/cause/reason) relentlessly driving our behavior: “such a Grund is inscribed deep in all of us, it is the ever-present cause of our actions, it is the soil from which our fate grows” (*Immortality*, trans. Peter Kussi [New York: Harper Perennial, 1999], p. 237). Ralph Waldo Emerson speaks of an “aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded” (“Self-Reliance,” p. 268). Michel de Montaigne, likewise, suspected that “there is no one who, if he listens to himself, does not discover in himself a pattern all his own, a ruling pattern [*forme maîtresse*], which struggles against education and against the tempest of the passions that oppose it” (“Of Repentance,” *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965], p. 615). And even Nietzsche agreed, in at least two of his moods: “Let the youthful soul look back upon life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it? Set up these revered objects before you and perhaps their nature and their sequence will give you a law, the fundamental law of your own true self [*das Grundgesetz deines eigentlichen Selbst*]”; “Learning changes us, but at the bottom of us, really ‘deep down,’ there is, of course, something unteachable, some granite of spiritual *fatum*, of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions. Whenever a cardinal problem is at stake, there speaks an unchangeable ‘this is I’” (“Schopenhauer as Educator,” *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], p. 129; *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Random House, 1966], §231).

<sup>16</sup> Compare Harry Frankfurt: “perhaps conditions are imaginable in which a person might reasonably regard ambivalence as worthwhile in order to avoid some even more unsatisfactory alternative. . . . If your will is utterly divided, and volitional unity is really out of the question, be sure at least to hang on to your sense of humor” (“The Faintest Passion,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 66, no. 3 [1992]: 5–16 [14, 16]).

<sup>17</sup> Compare Richard Moran: “when a person is ambivalent with respect to his job, or his country, or his parents, there is always room for the argument that if incoherence is to be located somewhere it is to be located in the object of one’s ambivalence, and not in the will itself. In this way ambivalence may be seen as a positive good, or part of a healthy relationship of the will to the complexity and ambiguity of the world it confronts.” (Richard Moran, “Review Essay on Harry Frankfurt’s *The Reasons of Love*,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 463–75 (474).

<sup>18</sup> In iambic pentameter, it is of course legitimate to exchange an iamb for a spondee (or a trochee) here or there. Such a substitution will slow things down a bit, since stressed syllables in English take about fifty percent more time to pronounce than unstressed syllables. Adding to the deceleration of the phrase, all three of the consecutive stressed words—*that, sweet, thief*—end in a consonant, making them “closed” syllables; the vowel [i:] in *sweet* and *thief* is a “long” vowel, adding an extra mora (measure of duration) in each case; and since “thief” completes a unit of sense, we may expect a short pause after it. See Pierre Delattre, “A Comparison of Syllable Length Conditioning among Languages,” *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 4, no. 3 (1966): 183–98; Steven Greenberg, Joy Hollenback, and Dan Ellis, “Insights into Spoken Language Gleaned from Phonetic Transcription of the Switchboard Corpus,” *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Spoken Language Processing*

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(1996): 32–35. I am very grateful to Rachel Cristy for her assistance with this note.

<sup>19</sup> Joel Fineman mentions chiasmus in *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). But his is a strange and (let's just say) highly speculative analysis. As Fineman himself puts it, "to claim that Shakespeare's sonnets would have exerted the same historical influence even if they had never been written may seem paradoxical, but, like it or not, that is the central thesis of the book" ("Yonder Shakespeare," *New York Review of Books*, March 26, 1987, [nybooks.com/articles/1987/03/26/yonder-shakespeare-2/](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1987/03/26/yonder-shakespeare-2/)). I'll leave the reader to decide how much credence to give an approach like that.

<sup>20</sup> "I would describe my usual working process as . . . trying to make coherence out of things that can seem contradictory. But coherence is not the same as resolution. The most interesting art retains a flickering quality, where opposed ideas can be held in tense coexistence" (*Martin Puryear*, ed. John Elderfield [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007], p. 77).

<sup>21</sup> We might say similar things about the assonant oxymoron "sweet thief" and about the all-too-pretty lines 9 and 10 ("For to thy **sensual** fault I bring in **sense**— / Thy **adverse** party is thy **advocate**"). In all three cases—chiasmus, oxymoron, sonority—harmonious form palliates dissonant meaning. In Nietzschean terms, Apollonian harmony takes Dionysian strife and makes it bearable.

<sup>22</sup> Art, writes Nietzsche, "is the great means of making life possible . . . the way to states in which suffering is willed, transfigured, deified, where suffering is a form of great delight" (*The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale [New York: Random House, 1967], §853); the Greeks, he says elsewhere, "knew that only through art could even misery become a pleasure" (*Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994], §154). For art as "transfiguration," see Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), §24, p. 140. And for the idea that the experience of artworks cultivates habits we can deploy in the everyday, see *The Birth of Tragedy* §1, p. 34 ("the aesthetically sensitive man . . . trains himself for life") and *The Gay Science* §299, quoted above as the epigraph. For discussion, see Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 185–99. Nehamas's book has been an enormous inspiration for much of my work, and this essay is certainly no exception.

<sup>23</sup> For the idea that we are more than just our stories, and that it's strange to be living in a moment when some think we're not, see Joshua Landy, "Still Life in a Narrative Age: Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation*," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 497–514. Already in 1968, Susan Sontag was pointing out the dangers of ubiquitous historicization: "Ours is a time in which every intellectual or artistic or moral event gets absorbed by a predatory embrace of consciousness: historicizing. . . . The human mind possesses now, almost as second nature, a perspective on its own achievements that fatally undermines their value and their claim to truth. . . . Thus, a single work is eventually a contribution to a body of work; the details of a life form part of a life history; an individual life history appears unintelligible apart from social, economic, and cultural history; and the life of a society is the sum of 'preceding conditions.' Meaning drowns in a stream of becoming." (Susan Sontag, introduction to *The Temptation to Exist* by E. M. Cioran [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], pp. 7–29 [7–8]).

<sup>24</sup> Similarly, I don't know of anyone who fails to understand Plato's dialogues because they need to know how Socrates *became* so smart. Here I'm resisting Alasdair MacIntyre's view, according to which there's no understanding an action unless we know the story it's part of. "In successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing," MacIntyre writes, "we *always* move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories," including "histories . . . of the individuals concerned" (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* [London: Duckworth, 1981], p. 197; emphasis added). I once saw MacIntyre defend this kind of position, in conversation with a literature scholar. No action can be understood, MacIntyre said, unless one knows the story behind it; he himself grew up in Scotland but ended up in South Bend, Indiana, and anyone ignorant of what happened in between is bound to find that utterly mysterious. "Fair enough," said the critic, "but I live in San Francisco, and you don't need a narrative to explain *that*." (OK, I admit it—I was the literature scholar.)

<sup>25</sup> Compare Daniel Albright, "Literary and Psychological Models of the Self," *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*, ed. Ulric Neisser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 19–39 (21), and also Elisabeth Camp's lovely essay, "Wordsworth's Prelude, Poetic Autobiography, and Narrative Constructions of the Self," *nonsite* 3 (2011), <https://nonsite.org/wordsworths-prelude-poetic-autobiography-and-narrative-constructions-of-the-self/>. Camp distinguishes between what she calls "lives" (which are temporal) and "selves" (which are not). Selves include standing dispositions to think, act, and respond in certain ways. And these standing dispositions, notes Camp, are among the first things you mention when asked to describe someone.

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<sup>26</sup> The extent to which different individuals see their race, creed, gender, orientation, and so on as narrative or non-narrative features of identity may well vary from case to case. Either way, such features will of course tend to be extremely important.

<sup>27</sup> Compare Owen Flanagan: “both Aristotle and Dewey argued that at a certain point in development a person has character or personality, a set of relatively stable dispositions or habits of thought, feeling, perception, and action, including various virtues and vices, aims, goals, and projects” (*The Problem of the Soul: Two Visions of Mind and How to Reconcile Them* [New York: Basic Books, 2008], p. 118). “Some think that the self is narrative all the way down,” Flanagan writes later in the book. “I deny that, since I believe in true selves, selves not captured, possibly not capturable by finite human minds in any story” (p. 245).

<sup>28</sup> “There is no doubt in my mind that Henry did have a sense of self, even though it was fragmented”; “despite his amnesia, Henry had a sense of self” (Suzanne Corkin, *Permanent Present Tense: The Unforgettable Life of the Amnesic Patient, H. M.* [New York: Basic Books, 2013], pp. 207, xvii).

<sup>29</sup> Erika Hayasaki, “In a Perpetual Present,” *Wired* (April 2016), [wired.com/2016/04/susie-mckinnon-autobiographical-memory-sdam/](http://wired.com/2016/04/susie-mckinnon-autobiographical-memory-sdam/).

<sup>30</sup> Stanley B. Klein, “The Cognitive Neuroscience of Knowing One’s Self,” in *The Cognitive Neurosciences*, ed. Michael A. Gazzaniga (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 1077–89 (1077).

<sup>31</sup> In some of what I say here, I’m agreeing with Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio* 17 (2004): 428–50. I think Strawson goes too far, however, in claiming that narrative self-understanding is (for some) completely dispensable. (I present my reservations about Strawson’s paper at greater length in “Saving the Self from Stories: Resistance to Narrative in Primo Levi’s *Periodic Table*,” *Narrative*, forthcoming.) It seems to me that all of us need both forms of self-understanding, narrative and non-narrative.

<sup>32</sup> It’s worth insisting on the “more or less.” Unity is a matter of degree, not an on-off switch; but still, more unity is sometimes achievable, and it’s often a good thing.

<sup>33</sup> Even Foucault, who denies that there’s a “you” there to be discovered, doesn’t conclude that we should simply leave ourselves in pieces. Instead, “from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” interview with Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow [New York: Pantheon, 1984]: 340–72 [351]). Similarly, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio writes that “there are limits to the unified, continuous, single self . . . and yet the tendency toward one single self and its advantage to the healthy mind are undeniable” (Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* [New York: Vintage, 2000], p. 225).

<sup>34</sup> For more on this, see Joshua Landy, “To Thine Own Selves be True-ish: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as Formal Model,” in *Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Tzachi Zamir (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 154–87.

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. M. J. Levett, rev. M. Burnyeat, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 209c; my translation for the last part.

<sup>36</sup> Seneca, *Letters on Ethics: To Lucilius*, trans. Margaret Graver and A. A. Long (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), letter 120, pp. 483–84. On Seneca, see also Catherine Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny and Self-Transformation in Seneca’s Letters,” *Greece and Rome* 44, no. 1 (1997): 23–38; on the Stoics more generally, see David Sedley, “The Stoic Criterion of Identity,” *Phronesis* 27 (1982): 255–75; on ancient philosophers at large, Richard Sorabji, “Soul and Self in Ancient Philosophy,” in *From Soul to Self*, ed. M. James C. Crabbe (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 8–32. There are at least three sub-questions here: first, descriptively, how (if at all) am I the same individual across time? second, still descriptively, how (if at all) am I distinct from other people? third, normatively, is it good to be one thing? Chrysippus offers a solution to the twofold descriptive problem by saying that each of us has a set of enduring distinguishing qualities (ἰδίως ποία), both physical and mental (see Sedley, p. 260). Seneca, as we saw, answers the normative question with a resounding “yes.”

<sup>37</sup> For a narrative version of the same point, consider the character Pilate Dead in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977; repr., New York: Vintage, 2004). As a young woman, Pilate is a social outcast and finds herself hounded from state to state; every time she moves, she keeps a rock as a souvenir (p. 142). Later in life she decides to go traveling, “planting her feet in each pink, yellow, blue or green state” (p. 148) and thus completing her collection. This, the narrator tells us, is an act of taking possession: “Pilate had taken a rock from every state she had lived in—because she *had* lived there. And having lived there, it was hers” (p. 329). It’s also, I would add, a way of harnessing the power of narrative form, allowing the future to reach back in time and change the significance of earlier events. Pilate’s movements, which originally represented exile, suddenly fall, thanks to her action, under the (additional) category of *travel*. Pilate has thus redeemed that part of her past, giving it a new, positive function within the overall

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story of her life. (On narrative redemption, see R. Lanier Anderson's "Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration," in *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, ed. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009], pp. 225–58.) In my view, there is nothing remotely narcissistic about this; on the contrary, it's a perfectly healthy way to heal a deep psychological wound.

<sup>38</sup> Here's Greenblatt on Thomas More: "for More, the self is poised between an ironic, self-conscious performance, grounded upon hidden reserves of private judgment and silent faith, and an adoption into a corporate unity that has no need for pockets of privacy. In the former state, identity is a mask to be fashioned and manipulated; in the latter, it is a status firmly established by the corporate entity" (Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012], p. 157). Notice that "self" means two things here, and neither of them is actually a self. In the first case it's a "mask" we make ourselves; in the second it's a mask imposed on us by society. Greenblatt admits that More believes in something else—"hidden reserves of private judgment and silent faith"—but this something else isn't, apparently, where the fashioned "self" is to be found. (After all, Greenblatt presents More as suspecting that the hidden reserves aren't even real [p. 31]). Similarly, Greenblatt declares Thomas Wyatt's honesty theatrical (p. 160); talks about Othello's self-narration as something artificial, for the benefit of others (p. 238); and speaks repeatedly of performed identities (pp. 13, 28, 161–68).

<sup>39</sup> On the narrative/chronicle distinction, see Suzanne Keen, *Narrative Form* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 3; and compare Aristotle, *On Poetics*, trans. Seth Benardete and Michael Davis (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 1451b35, as well as Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics," trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 61–98 (66).

<sup>40</sup> Amazingly, Aristotle already recognized this distinction too. Each character in a tragedy, he wrote, should "be consistent. Even if the one who offers himself for imitation is inconsistent . . . , nevertheless he should be consistently inconsistent [ὁμαλῶς ἀνώμαλον]." (Aristotle, *On Poetics*, 1454a, p. 38.)

<sup>41</sup> For emotional cadences, see David Velleman, "Well-being and Time," in *The Metaphysics of Death*, ed. John Fischer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 329–57.

<sup>42</sup> Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 12; A. C. Bradley, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 3–34 (4). Compare also Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," in *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harvest, 1956), pp. 192–213 (213); and to some extent John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Perigee, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> The idea that poetry can serve as an imaginary resolution for implacable tensions goes back at least as far as Georg Simmel, who suggested in 1907 that "art reconciles opposites that are otherwise irreconcilable" (*Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. Helmut Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein, and Michael Weinstein [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986], p. 103). "The union which the creative imagination itself effects," echoed Cleanth Brooks half a century later, "is not logical; it apparently violates science and common sense; it welds together the discordant and the contradictory" (*The Well-Wrought Urn*, p. 18). And Claude Lévi-Strauss famously saw something like this as the central function of myth. "The purpose of myth," he wrote, "is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real)" ("The Structural Study of Myth," *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 [1955]: 428–44 [443]).

On syntactic structures as metaphors for mental operations, compare perhaps Alan Richardson: "far from constituting special and incidental features of poetic ornament, figures like metaphor and metonymy reflect basic cognitive operations" ("Studies in Literature and Cognition: A Field Map," in *The Work of Fiction: Cognition, Culture, and Complexity*, ed. Alan Richardson and Ellen Spolsky [Burlington: Ashgate, 2004], pp. 1–29 [4]).

<sup>44</sup> A great example is Charlie Kaufman's film *Adaptation* (dir. Spike Jonze, Sony Pictures, 2002, DVD). *Adaptation* purports to be the story of its own genesis, recounting how Charlie and his twin brother, Donald, came to write the screenplay of this very movie. (In real life, Charlie Kaufman doesn't have a twin.) Charlie is a purist, who wants to write something artsy, deep, and meaningful; Donald is a hedonist sellout, who just wants to entertain and make money. It's highly tempting, I think, to conclude that the real-life Kaufman is a tense amalgam of Charlie and Donald, with a war between art and accessibility being perennially waged inside his head. Yet without that war, *Adaptation* implies, the film would not exist. So it's perfectly within reason for Kaufman to see himself as unified at a higher level: just as the parts of a car belong together, however different they are, because they collectively produce forward motion, so too the parts of Kaufman belong together because they produce great screenplays. (This is a unity

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of *effect*, not of belief system.) And there's bittersweet beauty in the tension too, just as there's bittersweet beauty in the chord the movie ends on, built from a rising and a falling line.

<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §212.

<sup>46</sup> "To 'give style' to one's character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—*both times through long practice and daily work at it.*" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §290; emphasis added).

<sup>47</sup> "I dwell in Possibility— / A fairer House than Prose . . ." (Emily Dickinson, "I Dwell in Possibility," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson [Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1976], p. 327).

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