A Relational Analysis of Storytelling

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Abstract: Out of all the questions that can be asked about how we create and engage with narrative fictions, there is an important one that I believe has been overlooked: how do we interact with each other by creating and engaging with narrative fictions? As an answer, I work to develop a relational analysis of narrative fiction. I begin with three normal cases of storytelling and appeal to the literature on care to develop my account. I show how we can use the nature of care to understand the relationships that hold between the creator of a narrative fiction and someone engaging with that fiction.

To introduce my project, I'll begin by putting name to a theory. It's a theory that no one accepts and plenty have argued is fatally flawed, but, I believe, it still has considerable influence within aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

This theory is about the nature of our interaction with narrative fiction, though it is a version of a broader theory regarding our interactions with art in general. Now, I use 'interaction' as a general term covering the sorts of things both the creators of narrative fictions and the consumers of narrative fictions do. So, we interact with a narrative fiction by writing it, filming it, telling it. We also interact with a narrative fiction by reading it, watching it, listening

to it. This unnamed theory is intended to cover all these different sorts of activities we undertake with narrative fiction.

What this theory maintains is that interacting with a narrative fiction is, by nature, a solitary act. This theory is most comfortable with the example of a literary novel. Whether you imagine an author writing a novel or a reader reading it, what you likely picture is a figure, sitting hunched over paper, in an otherwise dark and unpersoned space. That person—reader or author, whichever—is solitary. What this theory holds is that this image of this solitary person includes all of the components necessary for a thorough account of the nature of narrative fictions and how one interacts with them. It holds that the interaction can be fully analyzed through a two-place relationship: x interacts with y, where x is a person and y is the fiction.

With this view, the metaphor of the atom is apt. Our focus is put on the relationship between the single individual and the narrative fiction without reference to anything or anyone else. And so, let's call this theory literary atomism. Literary atomism holds that a thorough analysis and evaluation of an individual's interaction with a narrative fiction, whether that interaction takes the form of creating the narrative fiction or engaging with it, requires reference only to the individual, the narrative fiction, and how that individual relates to that narrative fiction.

Like I said, I don't think anyone actually accepts literary atomism. For a number of reasons, it's an untenable theory. Over the last several decades, there has been a growing appreciation for the inherent sociality to our use of narrative fiction. Narrative fictions are *authored*: they exist for us to engage with only because they were created by others. Artefactualism, a la Thomasson (2008), is quite popular. And even if one doesn't accept the particular metaphysical landscape provided by artefactualism, still one should agree that, at least

as a contingent fact, every narrative fiction you or I have encountered is available to us thanks to the creative activity of some person. The point is perhaps best put by Carroll when he says (regarding not just narrative fiction but art in general), "When we read a literary text or contemplate a painting, we enter a relationship with its creator that is roughly analogous to a conversation" (Carroll 2001: 174). What concerns us is not a two-place relationship holding between a person and an artefact, but a three-place relationship covering at least two persons, creator and engager, as well as the artefact.

So, in light of a considerable amount of contemporary work regarding the nature of fiction and narrative, literary atomism must be rejected. Stronger: literary atomism *has been* rejected. The problem is that literary atomism has been rejected *as a theory*, but it also functions as a pre-theoretic model. Even if one is committed to the rejection of atomism, one's project might still be shaped by an atomistic set of assumptions. Atomism creeps in, often through the very questions that are asked and the method through which those questions are answered.

Take, generally, how one goes about developing an account of narrative fiction. The first step is to divvy up the different forms of interaction possible: creating a narrative fiction is recognized as distinct from engaging with one. Then, each distinct form of interaction is subject to its own set of questions. Regarding the creation of a narrative fiction, we ask:

How does one create a narrative fiction?

Does the mode of creation affect the creative act?

What distinguishes writing a narrative from filming one from telling one, etc.?

Is it in fact creation, or is it discovery?

What power does the creator have to determine the meaning of the finished product?

What value is there to such creation?

Regarding engaging with a narrative fiction, we ask:

What differences are there between reading, watching, listening to, etc.?

What is the nature of the engagement—is it imaginative, emotional, cognitive?

Are there limits to what one can imagine, feel, believe about a narrative fiction?

How does the engager determine what inferences to draw, what to accept?

What value do we derive from this engagement?

All of these are worthwhile questions. Each does in fact deserve an answer, if our goal is a thorough analysis of how we interact with narrative fiction. However, each puts emphasis (only) on the relationship between one person (either creator or engager) and the narrative fiction. Each question fits comfortably within an atomistic model, and so these questions, taken as a total set, presuppose an atomistic model. What is missing, what is ignored, is the very sociality of our interactions with narrative fictions.

For an example, consider Currie's *Narratives and Narrators* (2010). Here, Currie offers an incredibly forceful rejection of literary atomism. It is in the very first sentence: "Narratives are the product of agency; they are the means by which someone communicates a story to someone else" (1). This is Currie making very clear that our interactions with narratives must be understood as involving as least two individuals; the activity of creator and the activity of engager must be analyzed in light of the other. But, despite this, Currie's analysis still proceeds in much the same manner as would any atomistic account. Chapter 2, for example, is about the nature of narrative: what is a narrative? Chapter 3 is about readers' expectations in relation to a narrative: how does a reader relate to the narrative? Chapter 4 is about authors and implied authors: how does the author relate to the narrative? And so on. The parceling of chapters reveals

the atomistic assumption. Despite Currie's forceful and explicit rejection of atomism, the very approach he takes subtly reinforces it.

I happen to like Currie's analysis. My point is just that there is something missing from it. If we take seriously the denial of atomism—if we take seriously that our interactions with narrative fiction are *social*—then we need *more* than an analysis of engagement along with a separate analysis of creation. We need an analysis of the sociality, itself. We need an analysis of how creator and engager relate—of how these persons affect one another, rather than just how each affects or is affected by the artefact alone.

We can't disrupt literary atomism just by showing that it is false. Fortunately, this isn't just a problem for the philosophy of art. Atomistic frameworks are deeply entrenched in Western philosophy, as feminist philosophers have highlighted, notably, with regard to metaphysics (in general and specifically regarding the self), ethics, and social and political theory. In light of this broad philosophic bias towards atomism and individualism within Western philosophy, it only makes sense that our analyses of art would largely presuppose atomistic frameworks as well. Atomism in these other domains has been disrupted through the development of alternative models that presuppose, instead, a relational ontology. I suggest that we should disrupt literary atomism in a similar way, by developing a relational account of narrative fiction. To thoroughly appreciate what it means to say that our interactions with narrative fictions are social, I suggest we consider how such interactions fit within a relational ontology.

My project is to develop such an account. My goal is to analyze the social elements of our interactions with (and through) narrative fictions. This, in turn, will help elucidate how narrative fiction fits into our lives as social animals.

I. Where To Start

Literary atomism feels most comfortable with the novel as its primary example, given how it is so easy for us to picture an author or a reader interacting with a novel in complete isolation. To develop a relational account, I believe it will be worthwhile to start with a different sort of example, an example that highlights rather than downplays the interaction between creator and engager. The best example for this, I believe, is when one person literally tells a story to another. And so, I will structure my analysis around examples of storytelling.

I use 'storytelling', here, the way that is relevant when a child begs his parent, "Tell me a story!", or when we settle down around a campfire and say, "Let's tell ghost stories", or when we admiringly say of a stand-up comic, "she's a great storyteller". I use 'storytelling', then to refer to a specific aesthetic project that is centered around the verbal expression of a narrative fiction. Distinguish this usage from how narratologists use the word 'storytelling'. The narratologist's definition of 'storytelling' covers any sort of activity through which information is processed in a particular way. This is too broad for my purposes: I am concerned, specifically, with that aesthetic project we undertake that involves conveying a narrative fiction orally.

My usage is also designed to rule out some acts that are occasionally called storytelling. When someone lies to us, we might say they are telling us a story. But the liar is not producing the narrative as an aesthetic activity; the goal, instead, is to dissemble. So, my project is not meant to cover the activity of liars, con artists, or the like.

In what follows, I will say that what a storyteller tells is a story. This is largely because 'story' is a nice, simple word while 'narrative fiction' is a cumbersome phrase. Given the standard distinction between a story and a narrative, it is most appropriate to say that storytelling is the expression, via a narrative, of a particular story. However, my project requires no careful attention to the distinction between narrative and story, so I'm comfortable with the simpler

phrasing: storytellers tell stories. I refrain from entering into any debates about the metaphysics of stories, fiction, or narrative.

The primary question that concerns me is: how does a storyteller and her listener relate to one another, through the act of storytelling?

II. The Storytelling Relationship

One way to answer this question is to pick out the necessary and sufficient conditions for storytelling. This would involve focusing on edge cases, to find the correct measure for distinguishing between what isn't the occurrence of storytelling and what is. But I don't think that is the right approach to take. The sorts of edge cases that could be useful in developing a logical analysis of storytelling would be the sorts of cases where the relationship between teller and listener is the most frayed, the least established, the furthest from what we imagine when we think about storytelling. To account for the nature of this relationship, it will instead be most useful to focus on those cases where everything goes the way it is expected to go. What I want is a description of storytelling as it normally is expected to be, or ideally expected to be. This will of course readily lend itself to a prescriptive analysis, as I will discuss later. But for now, I construct an analysis as a description of three normal cases.

First, that most ordinary case, the bedtime story. Suppose a mother, Julia, is cuddled with her child, Abel, telling him a story (the genders here are irrelevant). Julia and Abel are entwined in a more comprehensive relationship than just that implied by the storytelling, that between parent and child. Julia, as part of her role of raising Abel, tells stories. She undertakes the task of telling a story for Abel's sake. If Abel is obsessed with trains, the story is about trains; if he is obsessed with insects, the story is about bugs. Julia tells these stories not because *she* finds trains or bugs particularly rewarding. Instead, she tells these stories and finds doing so valuable

because *he* finds them so rewarding. Abel's experience and the benefit he receives from it determine how successful storytelling is for Julia. For this reason, Julia stays focused on Abel's experience throughout. She watches for yawns or surprised gasps, fidgety wiggles or rapt attention. She remains focused on his engagement with the story to see how it is received, how well it is going, how successful she is.

Abel's participation is not wholly passive. As Julia tells the story, he listens. If she makes a joke, he laughs. If the story confuses him, he asks questions. If it is calming, he falls asleep. After the story is told, he may express gratitude—or, he may sigh and say he did not like it. Regardless the specific contours of his reaction, he reacts.

A second case: imagine a professional storyteller. You can use Homer—not as he really was (if he existed at all), but as we imagine him. Suppose he is a wanderer, telling stories in exchange for payment. He has no broader relationship with his listeners, as a parent has with her child. Despite this, his storytelling relationship with his listeners has the same features as did the Julia's with Abel. During the storytelling, Homer is responsible for determining the story's progression. By taking on the role of teller, he takes on an obligation to shape the experience his listeners have through his telling. Just as Julia focuses on providing a story that will benefit Abel, so does Homer focus on providing a story that will benefit his audience. The difference between Homer and Julia, as tellers, is epistemological: Julia knows her child, his perspective, and what he needs far better than Homer knows any individual in his audience. It is more difficult for him to ensure that his story meets his audience's needs, but, provided some shared cultural context or understanding, it is not impossible. Homer can know who his audience is and what sorts of stories will be of interest to them, at least demographically. Thus, Homer, like Julia, remains

focused, to the best of his ability, on who his audience is and how he can shape the story to be most valuable for them.

Homer's audience offers some reaction throughout and after the storytelling, just as does Abel. The audience members gasp and laugh, pay attention or fidget. Homer attends to these reactions for information about how the storytelling is progressing. If the audience laughs at his jokes, he throws more in. If they are solemn and sincere, he turns more somber. In this way, audience and storyteller work together. At the end, the audience will applaud, expressing its approval. This lets Homer know how his work has been met, how successful he has been. By providing Homer with some payment, the audience shows further appreciation.

Finally: consider kids swapping ghost stories in the dark. We can expect these children to be friends, but they may not be. What is relevant is that one at a time takes on the role of teller, as does Julia, as does Homer. Let's suppose Gloria is currently the teller and her friends are her listeners. In one sense, Gloria's goal is to scare them. But, more accurately, her goal is to delight and entertain them: her goal is to scare them so as to satisfy them. To do this, she must stay focused on their experience of the story. Do they appear bored? Then she alters the progression of her telling, throwing in more startling revelations or spooky descriptions. Are they rapt? Then she stays the course. Alternatively, are her listeners growing *too* scared? If so, then she lessens the horrific impact, offers fewer descriptions, or throws in some humorous asides. For their part, her listeners pay attention. They respond as is appropriate, and, when she has concluded, they tell her what they think. Likely, there will be no formal applause but instead a release of pent up energy through laughter or squeals. Some commentary may be provided. Upon ending her story, our teller is no longer in charge of the event. She returns to just one among friends. One of her companions will pipe up, "My turn!", and he will then take on the role of teller for the group.

These are three cases, in which we can see how storytelling progresses. Each case offers a different social milieu, but each highlights how teller and listener interact together, through their mutual interaction with the story.

Now, it will be valuable to analyze these cases through the lens of a more general account of interpersonal relationships. For this, I will appeal specifically to the work that has been done to develop a relational analysis of care.

III. Care

The literature on care provides perhaps the most well-established model for the relational analysis of interpersonal activity, which is why I use it to structure my relational analysis of storytelling. Specifically, I assume an account informed significantly by Tronto's analysis of care (Tronto 1993) and Held's analysis of care as a practice (Held 2006).[1]

Care is an activity by which one meets the needs of some other. Caring relationships are built from the carer's activity and the cared-for's response. Caring is a practical activity—it is meant to result in a changed state of affairs, in the cared-for's need being met. For this reason, the carer must be *effective*, the carer must effectively meets the cared-for's needs. Of course, whether a carer is effective is purely a matter of luck unless she understands the cared-for's needs and what will help meet those needs. For this reason, the carer should be aware of the particularities of the cared-for's needs and perspective; the carer must be *attentive* to the cared-for. Finally, since care is a practical activity whose success is determined (at least in part) by whether the cared-for's needs are met, it is important that the cared-for makes clear whether they

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[1] Tronto's account has been criticized for counting too many types of activity as care. However, one may take the broad nature of care as evidence that care is a central element to human life—see, e.g., Skærbæk 2011.

have been. The cared-for must be *responsive*, providing some indication of how the carer's efforts are met.

These then are three conditions for the activity of care and caring relationships: *attentiveness, effectiveness,* and *responsiveness*. The carer attentively and effectively meets the cared-for's needs, and the cared-for in return responds. Of course, there are cases where care does not meet these conditions—Held provides the example of caring for one so mentally ill that he is incapable of responding (Held 2006: 36). This is an attempt to analyze the ideal of care, or care as we believe it should be.

Caring relationships are built from particular acts of care, but they are subject to an additional condition: *reciprocity*. The presence of reciprocity is taken to mark mature care and distinguish it from altruistic care.[2] An altruistic caring relationship is "one-way": the carer gives and gives only, the cared-for takes and takes only. In mature care, however, carer and cared-for are positioned so that each recognizes the other as having needs to be met. Mature care need not include exact equality in the participants' caring activities. As Petterson and Hem note, it is a practical impossibility, for instance, for a nurse to be cared for by his patients the way that he cares for them (Pettersen and Hem 2011). But it is possible for his patients to see him as a particular being with needs just as important and morally-salient as their own. What should be reciprocated is not necessarily the activity of care itself but instead a sort of caring attention. Of course, accepting reciprocity as a condition for care does not rule out the possibility of altruistic care. Instead, it just means that altruistic care is not taken as the ideal.

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[2] Mature care was first raised in Gilligan 1982. For more, see Pettersen 2012; Hem, Halvorsen, and Nortvedt 2014.

Are there more conditions to be met by care? There are some possible additions that I leave out. For instance, Tronto holds that an additional condition is *responsibility* (Tronto 1993). The carer, to be identifiable as a carer at all, must take up the role; she must assume responsibility for providing for the cared-for's needs. I leave this condition aside because I do not believe further discussion of it will be useful, given my particular focus. It is obvious, I take it, how a storyteller takes on responsibility for telling a story.

Another distinct condition may be *respect* (Engster 2005). A caring relationship in which either the carer or the cared-for disrespects the other intuitively is lacking. I am sympathetic to this view, and there is room within the analysis that follows for the additional condition of respect between carer and cared-for. However, I leave this possibility aside, in order to avoid the complicated project of determining what, exactly, respect is.

I assume thus that this is a sufficient description of care. Care, ideally, is the meeting of a need, marked by attentiveness, effectiveness, and responsiveness, and caring relationships are reciprocal. We can use this description of the ideal as a standard to which specific cases of care can be compared. An ethics of care, then, evaluates specific instances of care by how they match this ideal. My claim is that this holds for storytelling: the features of care, as we expect it should be, are the features of storytelling, as we expect it to be, and we can evaluate specific cases of storytelling by comparing them to this standard.

III. Storytelling As Care

Care is a constructive, practical activity: it is the meeting of a need. Similarly, storytelling is a constructive, practical activity: it is the meeting of a need—namely, the need for stories. This may seem too strong a claim; it may strain credulity to think of stories as *needed*. However, there is a wide and rich body of literature, spanning back to Aristotle, that justifies this claim (Aristotle

and Sachs 2006). Creatures like us have substantial aesthetic, social, and moral needs that are met by stories and by listening to stories.[3] This is not the claim that *every* story is one that meets our needs. But there are many needs that we have that are met by stories told to us by others.

So, storytelling constitutes the meeting of a need. Furthermore, it is the meeting of a need that is marked by attentiveness, effectiveness, responsiveness, and reciprocity. To see this, consider how these conditions are featured in the three cases above and how far those cases fall from our ideal when these conditions are missing.

a. Attentiveness. As storytellers, Julia, Homer, and Gloria all attend to their listeners, and it is (in part) because of their attentiveness that the storytelling is a success. It is because they are attentive that they know how to mold their stories to best meet their listeners' needs. Suppose, however, each were inattentive. Suppose Julia tells stories only about bugs, despite Abel's protestation that he cares only for trains. Or suppose Homer ignores stifled yawns from his audience, as he carefully explained Odysseus's complex finances. Or suppose that our campfire ghost storyteller forgets that her audience is a collection of emotionally-fragile children, rather than jaded adults. In each case, the listener—the cared-for—becomes bored, frustrated, confused,

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[3] A complete citation for work regarding the irreplaceable value of stories would function nicely as an encyclopedia on the history of aesthetics. For a smattering of accounts of the different sorts of needs met by stories in aesthetic contexts, see: Carroll 1990; Nussbaum 1990; Tirrell 1990; Witherell and Noddings 1991; Hoffman 2001; Smuts 2007; Stump 2012. Some analyses of care rule out the meeting of the sorts of needs met by storytelling. See, e.g., Bubeck 1995; Waerness 1996. More commonly, however, they do not. See, e.g., Fisher and Tronto 1991; Schwarzenbach 1996; Engster 2004.

or distressed. Given the teller's inattentiveness, the listener is left with unaddressed aesthetic needs and something goes very wrong with the storytelling.

Attentiveness, of course, involves more than simply noticing what the cared-for claims to want or need. One must, after all, recognize that the cared-for's *actual* needs are likely different from the cared-for's *stated* needs and wants. Note that attentive parents require their children to eat broccoli, despite firm protests that ice cream is tastier. The same is true about storytelling: it goes best when the storyteller has keen insight, knows better than her listener what he needs. We need surprises, aesthetic wonders, and sometimes to be confounded. Often, the storytellers we appreciate the most are those that meet needs we didn't previously recognize or understand. Storytelling goes especially well when tellers are attentive in this way. Storytelling relationships can struggle, fracture, or disintegrate when they are not.

b. Effectiveness. It is built into the three cases above that our storytellers are effective: they tell good stories that do in fact meet their listeners' needs. And obviously, storytellers can be ineffective. Homer can lose his voice; Julia can be exhausted of train-related adventures; Gloria might forget how her story ends. A teller might have a poor vocabulary, or her metaphors might not line up right, the significance of her plots lost. These are some possibilities. There are many ways for a teller to tell a bad story; in each case, the teller is ineffective. When the teller is ineffective, the listener is left unsated and the teller likely experiences frustration or disappointment. If the teller is ineffective often enough, it can harm or destroy the relationship.

c. Responsiveness. The response is different throughout the three cases, but some sort is present in each: Abel offers commentary or falls asleep; Homer's audience applauds and offers payment; Gloria's listeners shriek and laugh. Of course, in the case of inattentive or ineffective storytelling, the response may not be positive: a 'boo' is as much a response as a cheer. Imagine

what it would be like, though, if the listener provided absolutely no response. Imagine telling a story to a child who sits blankly throughout. One would be unsettled, worried. Suppose Homer's audience offers no applause, no payment, not even a grumble. Such a lack of response will likely be disquieting, *frightening*. One might take the child to the doctor; Homer may flee from town. This shows how important the listener's response is to storytelling.

d. Reciprocity. This is where we see variation among our three cases. The campfire ghost story involves exact reciprocity. Gloria and her friends literally swap roles, one telling a story after another. If Gloria were to dominate the role of teller, her friends would grow frustrated or bored. Alternatively, if Gloria's friends were to *insist* that she keep up that role, she would grow tired or overwhelmed. In this sort of informal setting, storytelling is often expected to be a mutual endeavor, and it exhibits reciprocity like all forms of mature care.

In Homer's case, while there is no swapping of roles, there are still ways for listeners to reciprocate. Homer may grow tired, parched, worn out. Provided his relationship with the listeners is reciprocal, they can do something to help. A member of his audience may offer him a glass of water, for instance, as the telling progresses. Upon noticing that Homer appears tired, she may refrain from requesting an encore—and definitely will not *demand* one. Reciprocity is also involved in the listener's very act of listening. After all, there is a very serious human need to *be heard*, and this is a need listeners can meet through active, attentive listening. Finally, provided the care is reciprocal, the listener will recognize that the teller too has aesthetic needs, and she will be motivated to see these aesthetic needs met.[4] When a storytelling relationship is

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[4] There are non-aesthetic needs to tell stories, as well. See, e.g., Walker 2010, Frank 2013, Boje 2008. Also, consider the claim that expression is a form of self-care; see Chambon and Irving 2003.

reciprocal, even if the teller and listener do not literally swap roles, then the subtle give and take of long term interaction leads to the stories that are told taking a form that is beneficial to both participants.

When storytelling is not reciprocal, it is taxing for the teller. This is why, despite its considerable rewards, telling stories to young children can be draining. Note that Julia's relationships with Abel is not reciprocal; he is too young and immature, incapable of understanding whether yet another story about trains will benefit Julia. Julia stands at risk of being over-taxed, as is any caregiver for a young child. Of course, the relationship hopefully will develop reciprocity later, as Abel develops. That, however, takes time and maturity. As much as we may cherish the opportunity to tell stories to our children, we can recognize that this activity, like all parenting, is liable to wear us out.

From the above, then, we can see how attentiveness, effectiveness, responsiveness, and reciprocity factor into the three cases highlighted above. Furthermore, we can see how cases which falter with regards to one (or more) of these conditions suffer. By using care as a model, we can analyze how teller and listener interact, ideally, and we can recognize what distinguishes this ideal from subpar cases.

This is my relational analysis of storytelling. While it is particularly limited in scope, built out of only three central examples, I think it can provide a basis for a more expansive model. With the above analysis of storytelling as a guidepost, I believe it is possible to account for our interactions with narrative fictions more generally.

IV. Extending the Model

So far, I have intended 'storytelling' literally, but note that we often use the term to cover the act of producing and disseminating narrative fictions more generally. Count up those

individuals held as great storytellers. Your list will include figures such as JK Rowling and Stephen King—authors—or Stanley Kubrick and Sophia Coppola—filmmakers. Given this, I'll shift now to using 'storytelling' to describe the creation and dissemination of a narrative fiction, regardless the medium used, and I'll use 'face-to-face storytelling' to refer to that specific act that involves literally *telling* a story to another. Of course, film and literature are only two examples; there are many different ways through which we tell stories to one another.

Just as we can use care as a model for developing a relational analysis of face-to-face storytelling, so too do I believe we can use it as a model for storytelling in general, regardless the medium used. Just as face-to-face storytelling, ideally, involves attentiveness, effectiveness, responsiveness, and reciprocity, so do the relationships between authors and readers, filmmakers and film-watchers, and so on. I'll show this by, again, considering each condition.

a. Meeting a Need. Notice that, in that significant body of work in aesthetics about the value of stories, stories literally told gain far less attention than do plays, novels, poems, movies, soap operas, etc. Aesthetics is not lacking for explanations of just how vital for us are the stories provided by novelists, filmmakers, etc.

b. Effectiveness. Literary and film critics can be understood as analyzing how storytellers through different media can be effective. So, leaving such critical work to the critics, I happily point to them as proving how effectiveness is a factor in creating films and novels.

c. Attentiveness. Just as the face-to-face storytellers in my examples above are attentive, so too must be the filmmaker and novelist. The difference is that the filmmaker and novelist may be in a worse epistemological position. Face-to-face storytelling permits immediate information about the listener's perspective, but storytelling through other media does not. Instead, the novelist and the filmmaker must rely on their background understanding of who their audience

is, what needs it has, and what will best meet those needs. Much of this will be a matter of understanding one's genre. The audience (or market) for romance novels, for instance, has different needs that can be met in different ways than the audience/market for detective novels, or blockbuster action movies, etc. There are also countless decisions tellers face in constructing a particular work that require attentiveness. Consider, for instance, the significance of comic relief in a tragedy. It's called *relief* for a reason: there is a point during a tragedy at which the audience needs some levity. Without comic relief, the tragedy is overwhelming. With too much, it is tinny. The teller of a tragedy, regardless the medium, must keep in mind when and how her listeners will need comic relief. All the choices that storytellers make—from specific word choices to larger concerns regarding structure, character, and genre—are determined by who the audience is and how it will experience them.

Again, note that often the best carers recognize and understand needs better than the cared-for. A good carer, a good storyteller, surprises us. We rely on storytellers, whether we know them personally or not, to understand better than we do what sort of story will benefit us. This, I believe, underlies the praise GRR Martin receives for *A Game of Thrones*: he surprises his reader, developing the story's plot in ways the reader would never want or even expect, yielding a story meaningful in ways the reader could not have anticipated.

Recognizing the significance of attentiveness to storytelling permits us to express and appreciate criticisms of certain forms of commercialization that surround some narrative fictions. Imagine the producer of a big-budget Hollywood action flick who shouts out, "Who cares about the script? Just throw in enough explosions and release it on July 4th, it's bound to make money!" This producer is failing to be attentive in a striking way. Or consider the author of a famous novel who (privately) admits, "I really can't stand these characters anymore, and I'm writing

sequels just to fulfill my contract." This novelist is equally inattentive, but perhaps in a more sympathetic way. We can appreciate how the works by novelists and filmmakers are affected by economic factors in the same way that care often is—see, for instance, Held 2002 and Claassen 2011. More generally, recognizing the significance of attentiveness shows the work a care-based ethics of storytelling could do.

       d. Response. Novelists and filmmakers cannot always gain the sort of immediate response face-to-face storytellers do, and it is particularly easy to ignore an audience's response within an atomistic framework. But, an audience's response is incredibly important for both creators and audiences alike. Note how a novelist isn't immediately relieved upon presenting her finished manuscript to readers. Instead, the novelist sits anxiously, biting her nails, until finally gaining their response. In return, we *want* to let novelists and filmmakers know how valuable we find their works. Suppose you notice your favorite author in public. You might not confront her with your praise, but would you not at least feel some desire to do so? This is the desire to offer response, as is appropriate when participating in a caring relationship. Note that, sometimes, audiences clap at the end of good movies: though the filmmakers cannot hear the applause, the audience still feels the pull to act out their role in the storytelling relationship.

       Sometimes, tellers gain no response from listeners, like when a novelist's works are published posthumously. John Kennedy Toole, for instance, wrote *A Confederacy of Dunces* and then killed himself, believing his novel to be a failure. Toole's life is once tragic, as a case of suicide. It is doubly tragic, as a case of a teller never receiving his audience's response. We feel pity for a teller who never garners a response within his lifetime. The extent to which we feel such pity and the extent to which we regard Toole's life as an horrifically ironic tragedy show

how significant we take a listener's responsiveness to be when it comes to storytelling, regardless the medium used.

There are important issues to be worked out, in understanding how responsiveness factors into the relationships famous storytellers have with their fans. The relationship may be incredibly personal for each individual fan, but the fans' responses may affect the teller more in the aggregate than individually. Additionally, how the teller is positioned to receive any individual response may be determined by what other responses from fans the teller has previously received. Even the most heartfelt and unassuming expression of appreciation from a fan may have an unintended effect on a teller who is swamped with letters, e-mails, Twitter replies, and so on. The larger the audience, the easier it is for the teller to receive a response, but also the easier it is for the teller to be overwhelmed by the response. A care-based ethics of storytelling could permit us to thoroughly evaluate how fame and a wider audience affect the relationships between the teller and her many, many listeners.

Of course, we should not lose sight of how important the response from any single individual can be, even for the most famous of storytellers. In interviews, famous novelists and filmmakers often refer to some specific feedback they received—some single piece of fanmail, some random encounter on the street—that struck them and stayed with them. All the hardship and struggle of production can be made worthwhile, provided just one poignant show of appreciation.

c. Reciprocity. It is very rare for an individual audience member to have the opportunity to reciprocate. Novelists and filmmakers can have millions of listeners, making literal reciprocity impossible. But there are means through which audiences can acknowledge and act in response to a teller's needs. Audiences can recognize that tellers too have aesthetic needs that can be met

through storytelling. Audiences fail to reciprocate, for instance, if they respond with anger or self-righteousness when a teller puts off writing a long-wanted sequel for the sake of some other project. Fans fail to recognize a storyteller's aesthetic needs when they insist loudly, firmly, or even violently that the teller work on the specific sorts of stories the fans want most. Furthermore, reciprocity requires listeners to recognize that tellers, even famous ones, are whole persons with a wide host of other needs and concerns. Audiences fail to reciprocate if they fail to recognize that tellers have more to their lives than just their aesthetic projects and that the teller's needs can be more pressing than the audience's need for good stories.

This is another place where a care-based ethics of storytelling would need to account for fame and an audience as an aggregate. We often talk about how filmmakers or novelists are treated by their fans as a whole, and we evaluate how their fans, as an aggregate, reciprocate or not. For example, the relationship between GRR Martin and his fans, as an aggregate, is currently under strain: fans are growing ever more insistent in their desire for Martin to finish his epic novel series. I don't have an analysis of the complex interplay between a famous storyteller and his many fans, but I believe taking seriously the relationship storytellers have with their listeners and the role of reciprocity in these relationships can help structure such an analysis meaningfully.

Thus, the storytelling relationship, regardless the medium, is marked by the attentive and effective meeting of a need, responsiveness, and reciprocity. This gives us a way of analyzing how tellers and their listeners, writers and their readers, filmmakers and their audiences relate to one another through their aesthetic activities. We are not isolated atoms, insofar as we create or engage with narrative fictions. Instead, we can interpret our encounters with narrative fictions as a form of reaching out, of connection, between one who offers and one who receives.

V. Objections and Responses

As a conclusion, I'll highlight three general kinds of objections that I anticipate and my general responses to them.

First, there are objections built from unusual cases of storytelling. Consider a misanthrope who writes novels only to burn them, or *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which was intended to remain secret, or a street urchin who hides outside a window, listening in, as a parent tells bedtime stories inside. These are just a few cases where storytelling does not fit the above model; plenty more are available. However, again, what I have drawn out is a model of storytelling as an ideal. These are non-ideal cases. Note that these cases are all *weird*: the misanthrope's activity is peculiar; Anne Frank's diary is public only because of the terrible circumstances surrounding it; the street urchin elicits our pity. We should desire an account of storytelling that can explain why these cases are weird, and this my account can do.

Second, one may build an objection by attacking the analysis of care that I presuppose. Perhaps one prefers an alternative analysis of care—say, perhaps, an analysis with conditions like proximity or embodied interaction.[5] Analyses including such conditions could include face-to-face storytelling but deny that storytelling is care through all media. Or, perhaps one prefers not to talk about care at all. Perhaps one prefers a relational ontology that distances itself from the term 'care'. If so, then one may object that my whole analysis misses the point.

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[5] For some examples, see Bubeck 1995; Noddings 2003; Groenhout 2004. For more on proximity, or the nature of care on a global or social scale, see Clement 1996; Silk 1998; Silk 2004; Raghuram, Madge, and Noxolo 2009; Milligan and Wiles 2010. For a discussion of care through mass media, see Steiner 2009.

Now, while I have used the literature on care to structure my analysis, I am not inextricably wedded to it. My primary goal is to show that our interactions with narrative fictions involve the formation and maintenance of relationships and thus deserve a relational analysis. I have used care to structure what I believe such an analysis might look like. While it would be nice if my reader accepts this analysis, I'll consider myself successful if all I have done is emphasize that telling a story (regardless the medium) is the sort of activity that deserves the same sort of philosophic treatment as do activities such as preparing a meal, nursing a wound, teaching, parenting. If one's goal is something like reflective equilibrium, then, at the weakest, I hope I have shown that our sharing of narrative fictions is something that should factor into one's reflection regarding these other forms of human interaction, and, furthermore, that how we understand human interconnection through these other sorts of activities should factor into one's reflection regarding the nature of novel-writing, filmmaking, and story dissemination in general.

A third objection may be built around my focus on narrative fiction: why this? Note that the quotation from Carroll right near the beginning is about the production of art in general, not just narrative fiction. So, one may suggest that my thesis should be expanded to cover art in general. This suggestion may be presented as a friendly amendment or, instead, as a reductio. As a reductio, it goes like this: If one accepts a relational analysis of narrative fiction, then one should also accept a relational analysis of artistic expression in general. This in turn means evaluating all artistic expression by the standard of care, but that surely would be absurd. And so, the original position should be rejected: it is a mistake to accept a relational analysis of narrative fiction, as I have been developing.

To begin with, I'm not sure about the conditional that starts off the reductio: I am not certain that our interactions with narrative fiction are relevantly similar to all other art forms such

that the above analysis of narrative fiction also applies to art in general. That is a claim in need of justification and beyond the scope of my current project.

More substantially, however, allow me to address what I take to be the motivation behind the above reductio. We tend to think of art, whether in the form of a narrative fiction or not, as produced for its own sake. We imagine the artist as an aesthetic daredevil, someone who seeks after only beauty-for-its-own-sake, consequences be damned. We glorify the single-minded artist: a man unfit, unkempt, socially malignant, but all for the sake his art. This image does not fit comfortably with our image of a carer. The imagined artist has no concern for others and thus has no interest in whatever relationship holds between him and whomever may encounter his art. If *this* is what we think an artist should be like, then a relational analysis is out of place.

It is noteworthy just how comfortably this misanthropic artist fits within an atomistic model. Provided one presupposes atomism, then this *should* be what an artist is like—what else, after all, is there for the artist to focus on than his art? And so, the extent to which artists are conceived in the public imagination like the above misanthropist may indicate just how thoroughly entrenched atomism is within our culture.

However, while this may be generally how we picture the mad/brilliant/despicable/glorious artist, note that he is open to criticism. The criticism is often worded crudely, something like: he has his head stuck where the sun don't shine. This criticism seems, to me, to beg for a relational analysis. It seems to be a way of saying that he has turned his attention too far away from the world around him. He has lost sight of others—those others whose perspectives and attitudes, needs and wants, are relevant to his creative endeavors. [6]

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[6] Also relevant is the critical work by feminist aestheticians on the notion of an ideal reader or viewer, as is overviewed in Devereaux 1990.

So, to sum up: I hesitate to suggest that all art forms deserve a relational analysis, as further inquiry is needed to determine whether all art forms are relevantly similar to narrative fiction. But it strikes me as worth considering. Take seriously Carroll's point: conceptualize art as a conversation. Take seriously that our interactions with art are social and that the broader theory, aesthetic atomism, is just as flawed as the narrower theory, literary atomism. From this perspective, it becomes undoubtedly worthwhile to consider how we fit into each other's lives through the artworks we create.

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