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Lawrence Kimmel

Trinity University, lkimmel@trinity.edu

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Repository Citation

Kimmel, L. (1996). Human kind in literature: The ideals of fiction - the fiction of ideals. In M. Kronegger & A-T. Tymieniecka (Ed.), *Analecta Husserliana: The yearbook of phenomenological research, XLIX: Life* (pp. 71-78). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.

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The Ideals of Fiction - The Fiction of Ideals

I The Times

The prophets of suspicion have done their work. Ours is a time of profound skepticism and open cynicism with respect to both the profession and promise of ideals. Too often, in the name of some seemingly worthy ideal, we have been led individually and collectively into the deepest and most devastating evils. Religious ideals of the sanctity of life and universal charity sour into zeal and foster self-righteous exclusion and persecution of the non-believer; political ideals of social and economic freedom calcify into operational ideologies that justify enslavement and genocide; moral ideals which acclaim a healthy community authorize censorship, repression, and bigotry.

As a result, Idealism, in its quite ordinary sense of aspiring to higher principles and concern for others, is argued against by thoughtful people in the interests of rational life, citing the historical perils of ideal abstraction. The complaint is that ideals tend to empower the mind and spirit to forget or ignore the simple courtesies and concrete decencies of civility. It may be a fine point whether, like power, ideals corrupt, or whether, again like power in the corrective to Lord Acton, there is only a human tendency to its abuse. The result of the intensity of passion, when abusive ideals prevail, is sufficiently frightening to give pause. Perhaps no more than pause, however, for whoever aspires to a better world must always risk a worse one. Human life and world are both framed in the temporal, so there may be no option to the continual reconsideration and negotiation of contending ideals.

The empowerment of an ideal, of an imaginatively desired possible world, inevitably puts the present world at risk; the greater the force of that ideal, the greater the risk. This seems a good argument, *ceteris paribus*, for the primary, prior, and constituting ideal of *Human Kind*, an essential kinship comprising all human beings that places “the other” as my kinsperson, as beneficiary of my genuine concern. If the ideals of human passions and projects are operational rules of life, inevitable in their occurrence, then we require a definition of *Human Kind* radically different from the exclusive legacy of excellence—of *agathos* and *aristos*—that traditional philosophy has inherited from classical Greek thought. The question then becomes whether *arete*, virtue (excellence), can be universally inclusive of the ordinary. Although the classical Greeks excluded slaves and women from the “human community” of the *Polis*, at least a theoretical framework for universal inclusion is met by Aristotle, who wisely provided two different characterizations of human-being in his *Politics*. The first includes that form of life in which all members of a community may in principle participate (the *vita activa* of labor, work and action); the second (the *vita contemplativa*) the higher life of thought, *theoria*, is open only to a select few. The latter form of life distinguishes a category of human kind and human possibility not universally shareable.

Once upon a time and from time to time, human beings have been faulted for a lack of ideals—a lack of which meant . . . what? an inability to see beyond one’s own times and interests, a lack of imagination, a failure of any sense of transcendental commitment. But there is a persistent and emergent view that, in fact, human beings may fare better without ideals. Better to stumble along with intermittent individual conflict

and turmoil than suffer the blinding rhetoric of binding ideals that spawns uniform convictions stronger than selfishness, and loosens the flood gates of collective terror and destruction. For example the scriptural prescription “. . . the righteous are bold as a lion” (Proverbs xxvii, 1), has come to mean something very different to the modern ear - not that one should be fearless in the profession of one’s faith, but that one should be fearful of the profession of anyone’s faith. Religious faith, once a vital and common resource within a community of believers, now, as a measure of passion and unreason, only escalates and aggravates the problem of conflicting ideals.

II Ideals and Passion

In discussing ideals in the modern age, we seem caught between the biting complaint of Soren Kierkegaard that we live in an age less wicked than wretched, for it lacks passion, and W. B. Yeats’ no less ominous declaration to the contrary that ours is an age in which the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity. In its simplest expression, an ideal is an idea set in or infused with passion, an idea that inspires or provokes passion. In this sense we may wonder whether there is any wisdom in it. Is “passionate idea” already an oxymoron? The studied distance of Plato’s logic in *The Republic*- in the textual convergence of *Eidos* and *Pathos* - provides the most enduring vision of the fearful interface of Utopia/Dystopia. In Plato’s ideal state we find the passionate engagement of the rational ideal of human order, which carries with it a total-authoritarian license to control, censor, and eliminate whatever does not meet with the approved ideal.

Plato is not alone, nor is he without grace in blurring the distinction between the ideal and real. In the “Allegory of the Cave”, he re-presents reality as an arduous achievement, a matter of journey and discovery not apparent nor open to the undisciplined or uncommitted eye or mind. It is the journey toward this ideal reality that determines the ideality and identity of the human kind. From Plato’s transcendental *noesis* (discovery) to Kant’s transcendental deduction (construction), the idea has stuck with us that reality can only be framed or discerned within, or understood in relation to, the ideal. In fact, however, philosophy only mirrors a very ordinary notion independent of a theoretical idealism of the sort of Hegel’s abstract equation of the Rational and the Real. Ordinary language itself contains the seeds which grow into theories of human nature, into the biased preferment's of one or another category of human kind (as rational animal, child of God, naked ape, ungrateful biped . . .) and finally into the politics and policies which so often divide us, into the unending wars of the big-enders vs. little-enders.

So far I have tried to point out that there are problems—conceptual, historical, theoretical, and practical—with the notion of the *ideal*. We are no longer automatically or simply attracted to positive associations the word once had in ordinary discourse. However, although we may rightly suspect ideals that issue from the mouths of theorist and demagogue, there remains a close association in ordinary language and sensibility between the ideal and real that we may not want to or have to abandon if we beware the undertow of abstraction.

III Ideals and Literature

Fictive literature is limited to an expression and constitution of ideality in the sense of establishing an ideal domain, a universe of discourse, an inclusive context of imagination. In this role, fiction suspends, brackets, and dissolves the bonds and boundaries of the actual and factual, creates a magic circle of intelligible unreality. Fictive literature has no part in advocacy or strategy in making an ideal operational. The genius of literature is possibility, which defaults when reduced to an instrument of program or policy. There is a politics to literature, but only in the incidental if very real sense that in its articulation of the possible it may be at cross current to a prevailing practical interest in conserving the actual present. Literature and the arts are famously and inherently “subversive” in this sense, which Plato rehearsed at great length and censored in short order. It is instructive to recall, however, that at the same time, Plato was notoriously practicing what he was condemning. The *Republic*, as a piece of literature, is a model of political subversion of the fourth century *Polis* through the articulation an opposing ideal.

In an important sense, literature is simply the idealization of ordinary discourse. This is different from the philosophical claim that (ordinary) language is already an idealization (symbolization) of the phenomena common to experience. The discourse of fictive literature is only that, of course: discourse—writing and reading. It is composed of nothing but words and ideas and sustained by nothing but imagination. Words, literary or otherwise, are not just so many things lying about, stacked end to end; rather, words come in contextual clumps and dramatic clusters, have a narrative character and continuity intended and appropriated in literary contexts in a special and intelligible way. They constitute, encumber, and people a world of ideas—an ideal world, one removed from the

busy bother, the intrusive distractions, greasy commonplaces, and laboring obligations of the work-a-day world.

Fictive literature in this way makes (*poiesis*) an ideal world, a sharable world of ideas in the original sense of creating and recreating, describing and re-describing “human kind”—possible shared meanings of “human” not subject to the current press of the factual or the crush of necessity. The fiction of story, narrative activity itself, is arguably the making and remaking of *human kind*. The human being, as *Homo Faber*, is a maker of a communal world through labor and work, as *Homo Sapiens* he is a knower of things, as *Homo Ludens* a player of games. But informing and integrating all these conceptions is the Greek insistence on the fundamental nature of the human being as an animal with speech, and by extension, a story-telling animal, a meaning-creating animal not limited to the immediate and referential. The first and perhaps sustaining task of literature is to constitute a domain of the human, not limited to the ideologies of a particular place, regime, language, or time. In literary contexts a story yokes together an intelligible cargo of thoughts, feelings, moods and actions into a time, a place, a life. There may be something primal in language itself which proclaims the human tendency to connect, compare, organize, unify—a propensity parallel to mind. For example, persons typically respond in the absence of direction to a list of arbitrary words by weaving them into a picture or meaning, just as in an interpretation of a Rorschach image, Gestalt field, or journal cartoon. This may be put in plain or provocative ways: that language is fundamentally metaphorical (Heidegger), a mobile army of metaphors, such that there are no facts only interpretations (Nietzsche), that every telling has a taling (Joyce), or that

Man is a story-telling animal (MacIntyre). The fact is that fiction is pervasive, that the ideal of *human-kind* is a convergence of full spectrum—of the real and imagined, the actual and the possible, the remembered and revealed. Fiction forms an unreal world of residual tensions between ‘to be/was/and is’; it informs the disjoints between ‘as if/should be/and might have been’. The fictive is *ideal* in the surface sense that it is not factive; it constitutes an ideal *world* in the deeper sense that it both expresses and invites a community of meaning, of understanding completed by the reader or audience out of the common resource of shared language and value.

IV Ideals in Literature

So far we have argued a simple point about the idealizing process of fiction: it has the special positive character and facility of generating spiritual possibilities and preserving cultural alternatives. But the fictive ideal brings equally the danger of confusing appearance and reality, mixing fantasy with fact, of romanticizing the violent and sentimentalizing the fantastic, of loosening or of losing sense for the consequences of abstraction. We must keep both this promise and problem in mind as we turn to the ideals of humankind, in literature. Where do we begin and how do we track and evaluate the polymorphous expressions which collectively constitute human consciousness, the labor, love, laughter and language—the residuals with which we write the history of civilization?

One might first try to ground the ideal of “human kind” in terms of a factual or empirical core, for example, does the concept of “human *species*” constitute a *fact*? If so,

it is a fact limited to comparative biological placement, phylogenetic scaling of theory. Even so committed a materialist as Marx argues that human *species life* is not a *fact*, only a projected possibility, what independently of Marx's language we could reasonably call an ideal. Whatever kinship limits may be set by biological determinants, nothing guarantees either *human life* or *human world*, the time and place within which a person can realize the potential (power, possibility) which is the meaning of her life.

If one understands fiction as possibility, as the expression of what is not yet and not now, but of what is possible (the ideal), then this ideational activity of story telling, of fictive literature, becomes a defining activity, a characteristic *way* of human-being. What may be more important than any particular ideal expressed within literature is the ideal fact of fiction itself. Two obvious and traditional ways of setting out the boundaries of human kind in intellectual history are in terms of human *nature*, and the human *project*: strategies of essential presupposition, and genealogical development. Both operate through the production of *ideal types* of persons, and of communities. Literature is an ideal presentation, as well as a representation of the ideal in the sense that it creates possible worlds. This basic sense of ideal functions to constitute a coherent realm of ideas; it frames a world in which perception is engaged by the perspective of imagination.

In a second and related sense of ideal, literature presents and represents possibilities open to and worthy of aspiration, or, on the other hand, deserving condemnation. This sense of ideal, of passion and risk, expresses the *pathos* of human struggle and ascendance. These shaping forces of ideals are connected in a way that makes literature a generative ground of cultural change.

V The Work of Fiction

The work which fiction does—both as process and product—frames an ideality of distance, bracketing immediate consequence through appeal to the fantasy of deeper consciousness, probing human purpose and possibility. The *process* has been articulated and analyzed in depth and detail in our time by, among others, Heidegger, Ricoeur, Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, and Kristeva, and all with predictably great differences among them. The *products* of literature are vastly variable, depending on election and selection. Given any literary period or theme, one may choose from an incredible range of works to exemplify what is to be found embodied there—valuational ideals which match the time or temper of a particular reading interest or writing task.

Various historical forms of presentation of ideals have come to have the “classical” character of “immortality”. The Greek concept of nobility of action—of great words and deeds—is an example of the ideal of harmonic community: of moderation and the free pursuit of excellence. This remains a fictional foundation-stone of western culture even though few actively aspire now to any such thing. Greek ideals, from the rustic almanac of Hesiod through the urban sophistication of Aristophanes are imprinted and embodied in the literature of philosophy, history, drama, poetry, and epic, as indelibly as they are in the legal legend of Solon, and the politics of Periklean Athens. While we no longer live within or aspire to attain either an heroic or tragic culture, the language of Homer and Sophocles still resonates with the tenor of human kind—one we can recognize and acknowledge without intention to realize.

While classical heroic literature with its continuing if fantastic cult of the hero seems timeless, other periods and their expressions of ideals have less hold on either imagination or aspiration. Ideals in one frame of time may appear absurd in another, and the literature of that time no less so. The *Book of the Courtier* is perhaps one such example. Although the literary cult of the classical hero may be antithetical to the ironic temperament of contemporary culture, we are still drawn to that literature for models of courage, endurance, love and despair, albeit more transformed into psychological categories than heroic activity.

Even though a mythology of first things—stories of the emergence of time and world—are no longer even peripheral to our daily lives, we still find meaning in the narratives of Hesiod and Homer. We do not live in an age of warriors, but find Achilles and Hector speaking to what is fine and fearful in us still. We do not live in an age of Kings, but Shakespeare's language of *Henry V*, of *Hamlet* and *Lear*, of *Macbeth* and *Richard II*, expresses still the stuff of our deepest thoughts, our most intimate fears, hopes, and regrets. Medieval monastic acts of faith in producing the Books of Hours, long laboring works of love in response to a sense of divinity no longer ours, Renaissance optimism in the capacities of the human spirit, Romantic passion generated in response to the beauty of nature, Victorian sensibility and morality—have all gone the way of antediluvian tides and antebellum winds, but all are recoverable in the ideality of literature, possibilities brought to life in the context of our reading.

VI The Ideals of Fiction; The Fiction of Ideals

Some ideals, then, are written on the wind, dissolve in the ebb and flow of time and change. Others appear to be foundational. We have argued that a primary grounding ideal in literature is or ought to be a universal idea of human-kind. But in what sense can fiction be a ground of anything, and what decides the priority of one fictional ideal or age over another? Fiction grounds in the sense that stories share. Ideals are essential fictions, fictions we believe to be essential. The fictions which are crucial for human life and growth are minimally of two sorts: those which provide boundaries to our ordinary sense of the human—what we share with all others—and those which provide inspiration to overcome the boundaries of the merely human, the extraordinary sense of the human which marks the genius of human kind. Ideally, and in its ideality, literature must find a way both to ground and aspire—to provide boundaries for human decency and to transcend boundaries of convention toward creative human development.

The world's great literature has recently been under attack as a restrictive Canon of Euroculture male dominion. But whatever its preferential limits, that literature has succeeded admirably in its institutional ideality to generate and sustain a framework of imaginative transcendence: to set out the domain both of necessity and possibility of human culture and understanding.

One of the presumptive ideals of the canon of world literature currently in question is its articulation and preservation of a living tradition of shared values. Critics rightly point out that this tradition has privileged male gender and shorted contributions of non-European artists. Exemplary of this at the very *arche* of classical resources is the Greek literature of the *Polei*, which as a matter of course excluded women, slaves and

foreigners. It is instructive, however, that we do not dismiss this literature for these faults, or do so at our cultural peril. Simply too much of what is crucial for very conception of the ideal of human kind is spiritually generated here. What we must argue for, instead, is a continual re-evaluation and interpretation of world literature past and present.

Aristotle's expressed ideals do not otherwise square with his regrettable discounting of women, for example, depicting social fact as a natural condition. His argument defending the practice of slavery is transparently an accommodation to the convenient economy of his time. His bogus idea of "natural slave" is in fact contradicted and discredited by his act of freeing his own slaves in his last will. The blunders of such bias do not discredit the rest of his work on moral and political ideals of justice, nor does such exclusion automatically dismiss the literature of any historical period. We should perhaps abandon reverence to a particular canon of literature, but we should not displace the tradition or substance of its literature.

There is a sense in which literature, ideally, would constitute a tradition without institution. Put another way, the healthy ideality of literature may be undermined by institutionalization. Literature must remain open on pain of the same kind of objection we made earlier to ideals of policy which become exclusive and intolerant. Works of literature that are genuine and authentic acknowledge and open horizons of understanding of human kind. In so doing, they become a definitive activity, an ideal expression of what collectively we have been, and of what we may yet become.