

### ***Patterns Among the Passages***

*For some time since her operation, and without publication its goal, she had been jotting down without order or pattern, anecdotes gleaned from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, noting down those matters or events which moved her. One day these notes and fragments of thought might form a coherent mosaic and reveal to her her own spiritual autobiography as well as biography of her time.*

Frederic Tuten *The Green House*

I had a friend attempt to categorize my books once and she said she had a much deeper appreciation for me as a person when she was done.

William Boyd *Brazzaville Beach*

Independently of my own reading proclivities, the Commonplace Book that I have kept for many years stands alone as a collection of noteworthy ideas, some thoughtful, some provocative, some a little odd, or clever or novel in some way. The significance of the passages that I have copied does not depend on the fact that I selected them. Rather they are the words of writers of serious literature, both fiction and non-fiction that might give anyone pause for thought. I secretly harbor the wish that my collection might one day be read by readers who share an interest in this sort of material or perhaps a student who is investigating contemporary commonplace books might find something of value in it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In his New York Times article on commonplace books, Cole notes that: “There is no extensive literature on the commonplace book. I have a friend who [reports that] she could find nothing about commonplace books from her colleagues nor from any of the usual lit histories.”

In one sense my Commonplace Book has become something of a substitute for a personal journal, a document that long ago I abandoned. For instance, not a day goes by now that I don't think of the experience of growing old and what it is doing to me. And were I in the habit of keeping a journal I would no doubt write far too much about it. Instead, every once in a while I read something about ageing that strikes me as especially relevant to my life and so it becomes a passage in my Commonplace Book, subsequently to be classified under the category of Aging. The same is true for almost all of the categories that appear most frequently in my collection

It is also true that my Commonplace Book is an account of the increasing importance of literature in my life. Why did I even bother to begin this record and now why do I continue? It is no more than appreciating the thoughts, ideas, and questions that I encounter on the pages of the literature I read. I want to preserve them, revisit them, and reconsider them now and again. The experience is not unlike one of viewing any attractive object. I want to take another look or look a little longer. So I mark the passage and eventually add it to my Commonplace Book so that I can reread it again and think further about it as often as I like.

To be sure, the passages were selected and thereby valued because of my idiosyncratic personality and background. I wanted to save them, gather them in, squirrel them away. Others feel that way about antiques or fine cars or wine or works of art. I feel that way about ideas. I collect them like others collect rare books. Indeed, the ideas are often rare and for that reason take on additional value. The process has become as much a part of my life as eating and sleeping. No doubt other readers of the same materials would squirrel away a different set of passages. And some of them may be attracted to the passages that I have marked for reasons that have little to do with mine. Perhaps a comparative study of the

passages marked by readers of the same book might shed light on this very interesting process.

As I have gone through the passages, I have begun to get a handle on why I was drawn to them in the first place. While some are simply amusing or witty expressions or written so well I simply had to make note of them, the majority convey an important truth, a truth that I have found in literature or a proposed truth that calls for inquiry. Like other readers, I am drawn to literature for many reasons but among the foremost are for the truths that I find there. I never know when they will be found or what writers and in which of their books, I will chance upon these truths. Their discovery is unpredictable, unexpected, surprising. The experience is one of the most powerful effects of reading literature. On review, I've concluded that the majority of these truths are for the most part propositions that fall into one of four categories, each of which is defined below, followed by an example.

***Belief Confirmation:*** A passage that reinforces a belief or value that I hold, often one that is not widely held, or one that becomes clearer when seen on the page.

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* contains a great many passages of this kind. I marked forty-five separate passages in this intellectually rich novel about a single day in the life of Henry Perowne, a British neurosurgeon. Throughout this tale Perowne muses about his discipline, his family, the routine chores that occupy his day, and the troublesome times in which he lives during the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In turn, I was led to reflect on those same topics as I paused to place my marks in the margin and then to ponder his musings and the extent to which I agreed with them or not. As a result, although it was not a very lengthy novel, it took me forever to read—a pleasure devoutly treasured by this reader.

Throughout, McEwan speculates about the origins of human behavior and difficulties of identifying them with any precision. Since I have been concerned with those very same issues throughout my professional life, I marked a goodly number where McEwan writes about this issue.

*It's a commonplace of parenting and modern genetics that parents have little or no influence on the characters of their children. You never know who you are going to get. Opportunities, health, prospects, accent, table manners—these might lie within your power to shape. But what really determines the sort of person who's coming to live with you is which sperm finds which egg, how the cards in the two packs are chosen, then how they are shuffled, halved and spliced at the moment of recombination. Cheerful or neurotic, kind or greedy, curious or dull, expansive or shy and anywhere in between; it can be quite an affront to parental self-regard, just how much of the work has already been done.*

*Who could ever reckon up the damage done to love and friendship and all hopes of happiness by a surfeit or depletion of this or that neurotransmitter?*

*But can anyone really know the sign, the tell of an honest man? There's been some good work on this very question. Perowne has read Paul Ekman on the subject. In the smile of a self-conscious liar certain muscle groups in the face are not activated. They only come to life as the expression of genuine feeling. The smile of a deceiver is flawed, insufficient.*

**Personal Confirmation:** A passage that reveals something about myself (or one that I had not recognized before), as well as a correspondence between some

aspect of my life and a character in a story, most likely one that I identify with in some respect.

For example, in this analysis I recorded twelve separate descriptions of what I call the two-selves experience. I classified them in the group labeled *Self* and taken together they constituted a little over a quarter (27%) of the forty-five *Self*-related passages. My favorite is drawn from a famous Chekhov short story:

*He had two lives; one obvious, which every one could see and know, if they were sufficiently interested, a life full of conventional truth and conventional fraud, exactly like the lives of his friends and acquaintances; and another, which moved underground. And by a strange conspiracy of circumstances, everything that was to him important, interesting, vital, everything that enabled him to be sincere and denied self-deception and was the very core of his being, must dwell hidden away from others, and everything that made him false, a mere shape in which he hid himself in order to conceal the truth, as for instance his work in the bank, arguments at the club, his favorite gibe about women, going to parties with his wife---all this was open.*

Anton Chekhov, *The Lady with the Toy Dog*

Others have also describe the experience well:

*Always while one part of him spoke, another part stood on one side and wondered, "Is this who I am speaking? Can I really exist like this?"*

Graham Greene, *The Man Within*

*Everyone he knew carried with them the aura of another life which was half-secret and half-open, to be known about but not*

*mentioned.....He remembered the shock when he first came to know Paris, the culture of easy duplicity, the sense he got of these men and women, watched over by the novelists, casually withholding what mattered to them most.*

Colm Toibin, *The Master*

These passages were also marked because they correspond to an enduring duality in my life, between my work as a social scientist and as a newly arrived student of literature. Trying to embrace these often-contradictory forces has been a continuing challenge, one that I do not shun, but rather quite worth exploring. I ask myself: Are these two cultures really incompatible? Cannot one hold simultaneously to the different forms of truth, to the general truths of science and the specific truths of literature?

In writing to me about this topic Audrey Borenstein quotes the following passage from her book *Redeeming the Sin: Social Science and Literature*:

*The social scientist, too, needs experience, observation, and imagination; and the best of social science, the works that will endure, are those in which all three are interwoven. Yet, while the risk for the social scientist is that he may miss seeing the detail—the trees, the risk of the writer is that he may miss seeing the forest. It would seem that the social scientist and the writer work from different directions toward the same achievement, the discovery of the universal. Ultimately, however, the distinction between artistic and scientific endeavor is arbitrary and spurious...The crystal and the molecule, the spinning earth, the leaf moving in the wind are rightful subjects for both poet and naturalist: artist and scientist are not two beings, but one.*

I have also come to believe that it isn't necessary to choose between these two cultures, that they go hand in hand, much like so many other so-called dualities that are said to characterize contemporary life, say for example between solitude and socializing, between marriage and autonomy, between the public and the private self. Clearly the issue has entered my Commonplace Book in a very salient fashion.

***Hypothesis/Question:*** The passages in this group pose a question or put forward a hypothesis that seems original or usual in some respect, one that warrants inquiry or confirms a finding that I have read about before.

I often make note of such passages because they seem on occasion to be both surprising and illuminating. We don't normally think of literature as a source of hypotheses. Indeed, I know of no social scientist that carries out empirical research on literary issues or draws upon literary insights in any systematic fashion. The various social science disciplines might be enriched if they did. I have taken a few easily testable hypotheses drawn randomly from some of the works of fiction that I've recently read that illustrate this third class of passages from my Commonplace Book

*Let's say there is only one thing we know about men: that they feel a tension between monogamy and promiscuity. Let's further say that the balance of that tension is different in different men, and that possibly the balance is inherited, and it changes as the men age, sometimes from monogamy toward promiscuity and sometimes from promiscuity toward monogamy.*

Jane Smiley, *Why Marriage?*

*As civilization advances, poetry declines.*

Debra Weinstein, *Apprentice to the Flower Poet*

*There is nothing worse than having been truly happy once in your life.  
From that moment on, everything makes you sad, even the most  
insignificant things.*

Maxence Ferminé, *The Black Violin*

*Envy and cruelty inevitably accompany fame, however small that fame  
may be.*

Siri Hustvedt, *What I Loved*

*...the last thing we ever learn about ourselves is our effect.*

William Boyd *Brazzaville Beach*

*Their inability to dance well is a sign of their inability to adapt  
themselves to the needs of their partners.*

Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

*...essentially you could not persuade anyone to give up something  
that gave him intense pleasure.*

Joseph Epstein, *Fabulous Small Jews*

In each instance, an intriguing proposition is proposed, one that lends itself to empirical inquiry. Several of these notions are non-obvious, some are provocative, while others may seem patently false. Still they are sufficiently in doubt in my mind, as well as sufficiently interesting, to warrant study. To be sure they appear in the books I read in a fairly unsystematic fashion, almost totally out of the blue it would seem. And because they originate in literature rather than science, they do not enter the research mainstream. The only place they make an appearance are in the books I read and then in my Commonplace Book, where they reside until perhaps one day they will be investigated empirically.

**Noteworthy:** There are, of course, other types of passages that have captured my attention or moved me deeply, but either by virtue of their mystery or distinctiveness do not fall into one of three other groups. Nevertheless, they are among the most important encounters that I've had as a reader.

*That winter, when it was all over, I would walk or ride a bus past her building. Sometimes I'd think how lucky I'd been to have spent a year with her there and how gladly I would give everything I now had to be back with the same woman, staring out those windows whenever she went sulking into the other room, imagining and envying those strolling outside, never once suspecting that one day soon I might be a stroller, too, looking in envying the man I'd been there once, knowing all along, though that if I had to do it over again, I'd still end where I was, yearning for those days when I was living with a woman I had never loved and would never love but in whose home I had...invented a woman who, like me was neither here nor there.*

Andre Aciman *Pensione Eolo in False Papers*

### **Summing Up**

The truths conveyed by these passages may also be uniquely true for me. That is the wonderful thing about literature: it makes no claims of universality, it is not true or false in the way an empirical proposition is. Rather we read ourselves *into* literature without concern, as we are in science, for whether or not the passage is true for others, and if so, for how many and to what degree. Instead, the truth of any given passage is immediately true to the reader because it corresponds to his or her experience or provides a language for it in a way that had not been available before. "Yes," we say, "that is true for me. This is my story. That's exactly the way I felt. I had not realized its truth until I saw it on the page."

Phyllis Rose expresses a similar view in her recent book on Marcel Proust.<sup>2</sup>

*...but what I looked forward to most in reading Proust were revelations about myself.....Proust understood that every reader, in reading, reads himself. Far from minding this, he saw it as the writer's task to facilitate it. Thus the writer's word is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book he would perhaps never have perceived in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is proof of its veracity. [Italics mine.]*

Here Rose suggests that the power of literature lies in confirming those truths about our self that we rarely encounter in our daily experience. In a certain respect, then, reading is not unlike the practice of science. In doing science we seek to test our ideas and when they are confirmed, we experience a considerable source of pleasure. Similarly, it is no less a pleasure when in reading we see our self reflected on the page. In both cases there is a delight in the correspondence between a belief about nature or the self, a confirmation that sustains us in our endeavor to make sense of the world in which we live.

Literary truths are not organized as a body of knowledge as they often are in a scientific discipline. They are usually hard to pin down, to remember, and to apply when you might want to, although some are memorable than others. Yet readers differ widely in what they regard as a literary truth. Additionally, it is often claimed that the truths one finds in literature are unlikely to be found elsewhere.

*Its [literature] cultural importance derives...from its success in telling us things about ourselves that we hear from no other quarter.*

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<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Rose, 2000. *The Year of Reading Proust*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press.

Salman Rushdie

*He liked novels because they dealt with the incommensurable in life,  
with the things that couldn't be expressed in any other way.*

Richard Ford

*We look to fiction for images of reality...that more factual,  
explanatory accounts cannot quite supply.*

John Updike

There may be little disagreement about this once it is recognized that literary and “factual” accounts have entirely different goals. In a recent interview Daniel Gilbert, an experimental social psychologist, comments that “most of what science has to tell us about human behavior already has been divined by writers with great insight.”<sup>3</sup> In response to a later question Gilbert admits that there’s nothing about “human behavior or the experience of the mind that you cannot find in literature. But on the other hand you can also find the opposite in literature. Everything that can be said about the human condition has been said by some writer.” He notes that after reading his most recent book, *Stumbling on Happiness* where he liberally quotes Shakespeare, a literature professor said, “Given that Shakespeare saw all this stuff, had these insights, why do we need science?” Gilbert replies “Well I could also find ten places where he said exactly the opposite. If you say everything, some of it winds up being right.

The purpose of science then is that it “helps us confirm writers were right and which were wrong, but it rarely tells us something that a writer of Shakespeare’s caliber didn’t come up with first.” But even science, at least the science of human

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Gilbert Powells Bookstore Interview: [www.powells.com/interviews/danielgilbert.html](http://www.powells.com/interviews/danielgilbert.html)

behavior, is stuck with considerable empirical uncertainty. Facts and theories come and go with further research; what is held to be true today will in due course shown to be false or incomplete or require revision tomorrow. As Gilbert later admits, he always begins his freshman course, *Introduction to Psychology*, by telling the students “that half of what I teach them will turn out to be wrong; the problem is I don’t know which half.”

This is precisely what he said about Shakespeare. Indeed, in the psychological sciences the level of inconsistency and disagreement between accounts is scarcely distinguishable from literary accounts. A literary truth is always right, right for its fictional depiction, and right for a reader who finds it expresses something true for them. It may not be true for another reader, let alone many others. But a writer has no designs on formulating general truths, as is the case for science.

