



Faculty Forum



You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One
-Plato-

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Why Tom Hanks is a Bad Actor; or, the Trouble with Biography.

In the car the other day, during a discussion of a movie directed by Woody Allen, one of my colleagues admitted that her view of an artist's work—movie director, actor, novelist, poet, painter, composer—is colored by what she might happen to know about that person's life. In her opinion, then, Woody Allen doesn't come off too well. Tom Hanks comes off better.

Such responses are entirely valid, and the psychology of their effects reminds us that a human being stands behind the angles in a movie, the words of a poem, the strings of a musical concerto. That humans exist behind every work of art raises important questions about the relationships between art and life. Their existence raises a particular question for the art consumer: what are we to do with these people *while* we are in the midst of experiencing a work of art, watching a movie or reading a novel? Does an artist's life help us at all when it comes to the artist's art? Undoubtedly, it may. Should we then be encouraged to

make use of him or her in some way? Or, rather, might it be better if we could push the artist aside in order to get a better view of the art?

Does it help, for instance, to picture Beethoven, old and deaf, conducting a premiere of his 9th Symphony before an appreciative full house, and hearing it, in all its glory, only inside his head? Does it help to know that Stephen Crane, author of the Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, was born after the war was over? That he never set foot on any battlefield? Does it help to know that James Joyce, novelist and author of a collection of poems entitled *Chamber Music*, heard music in the sounds of a woman tinkling? Does it help to know that William Faulkner was from Mississippi? That Van Gogh cut off his ear? That all the women in Bob Dylan's songs might refer to a real woman who once was his wife? That Madonna was, is, and will be a material girl? That Tom Hanks is a real nice guy?

These historical and biographical facts are interesting, and may contribute or detract from our appreciation of the work that we connect with such real people. However, does the presence of such facts as these really help us to evaluate the art? Well, it depends on what one means by "help."

The question is undoubtedly as old as art, and it could be argued that it is

largely an academic question, since it is the essential objective of the academic to evaluate, and to question and refine his or her fundamental approach to the objects of study. Then again, all readers, listeners of music, museum-goers, and moviegoers evaluate art as they experience it. And most of us consider it desirable to size-up our experience by judging a painting or a book or a pop-song on its own merit. We recognize that historical context may supplement our interest and understanding without providing the ultimate measure of what we appreciate and disregard. Viewed in this way, then, one could say that biography helps, but perhaps it shouldn't be employed either to save or to condemn any individual work of art.

Still, can biography hurt? This is a serious question. It goes beyond exploring, for instance, whether one should like or dislike Woody Allen's movies according to whether one likes or dislikes Woody Allen himself. For matters of taste one is free to do as one sees fit. However, biographical considerations extend beyond questions of relevance and questions of individual taste. There are works of art, in fact, that seek to detach themselves from their creators. In such cases, those of us who seek to judge a work according to its own merit might do better to forget the artist while we are looking at the art.

Literary fiction provides the readiest examples of this phenomenon—of art works that remove themselves from their authors. However, readers often overlook this, and when they do, the author is likely to intrude upon the work. Such intrusions can make things pretty messy. When we put too much interest in the authors, we let the authors interrupt our reading, and these interruptions make things confusing. They take up our time and misdirect our efforts.

Biography is a painstaking thing, and, at best, a selective reconstruction of a human being's life. Literary biography presumes, as its starting place, that this is the life of a great author. Shakespeare is the man who wrote *Hamlet*, and so a biography of Shakespeare tells the life of the man who wrote *Hamlet*. Biography starts at the end and then tries to reconstruct who it was who did such a great thing. Since literary biography reads a life through the fact of an individual's written work, its selection and arrangement of biographical "facts" will always amount to a fiction.

Still, to reconstruct an author's life is a very valuable enterprise in itself. However, when it comes to reading books, the business of biography is time and effort spent away from the books the authors have written, the books the authors want us to read. In many cases, authors go to great lengths to remove themselves from their work in hopes that we might spend our time on the real prize. The real prize is the book, whose existence, let's face it, is the sole reason that we take any interest at all in the human being who once wrote some words down on paper.

A famous example of biography's unhappy intrusion upon fiction is Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*. The number of studies that explore the relationship between the life and experience of the man, Herman Melville, and the life and experience of *Moby-Dick's* famous narrator is staggering. The narrator of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, signs up for and embarks upon his first ever cruise on a whaling ship. The cruise is a tragic one. Everyone dies. Well, everyone, that is, except for Ishmael, who lives to tell his tale. Not only does Ishmael live to tell the tale, but the point is that he *does* tell it.

What's it called? *Moby-Dick*. It is an important point of the novel. *Moby-Dick* is Ishmael's story. Yeah, some guy named Herman Melville wrote the book. But he puts it in the mouth of a fictional character who makes the story his own.

This may seem like a rather simple point. And rightfully it should be, on its face (it doesn't, for all that, make *Moby-Dick* any easier to read). However, a problem continuously arises by virtue of the fact that there is this guy named Herman Melville who actually sat down and wrote *Moby-Dick*. A once living and breathing human being, whose parents named him "Herman Melville," once *invented* a guy, a sailor, who signs up for an adventure on a whaler, experiences the adventure, survives the adventure, and then tells the tale of that adventure, asking his readers to "Call me Ishmael." Nobody like this Ishmael ever lived and breathed in the physical world as we know it. Then again, nobody named "Herman Melville" lives and breathes anywhere in the world presented in the novel *Moby-Dick*.

On the other hand, in the scholarly writings about *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville keeps showing up everywhere. Scholars have spent a lot of time trying to figure out what part of Ishmael's whaling adventure has parallels in Herman Melville's own whaling adventures. It is an interesting exercise, but it begs the question: Is it surprising that this man, Herman Melville, whatever else he was and did, once sailed on a whaling vessel? Is it surprising that William Faulkner, who invented an elaborate fictional world set in a place called "Mississippi," was himself, in fact, born and raised in a place called Mississippi? Is it any more or less surprising that Stephen Crane was *not* a soldier? I think the answer is no.

These questions—rhetorical questions, it turns out—return us to the fundamental question about biography: does it really help to know these things? Most people would say yes, but when pressed to explain why, most people are hard-pressed. One could say that knowing such facts helps to generate interest, to supply a context, to establish credibility. That may be true. But isn't it the job and the measure of a well-wrought novel to do these things on its own? To say that a novel's success *depends* on an author's biography, that the novel *needs* biography, comes very close to saying that it's not a very good novel. This, of course, does not hold true. Remember, we wouldn't care about Tom Hanks if we didn't care for his art. We would not be interested in Bob Dylan if he hadn't written "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands." It shouldn't surprise us that the sad-eyed lady could be an actual woman who is part of the living man's past. Enlightening as this might be, it doesn't make "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" either a better or a worse song. It's a mighty good song.

Beyond the inconveniences caused by the intrusion of biography, there are other, more serious problems. Can biography do damage to literary works? Here, the answer is a resounding yes.

Sometimes, an author's intrusion into his or her fictional world leads to disastrous consequences. Just look at *Moby-Dick*. To go to great lengths to find the correspondences between Melville's life and his fictive Ishmael is to miss out on the world that Melville creates in that novel, because the world belongs to Ishmael. Everybody will admit that Ishmael "tells" *Moby-Dick*. Fewer readers have held faithfully to the consequences of this affirma-

tion. One simply can't get into the game of the novel if one fails to leave "Herman Melville" on the title page. As long as you're thinking about Herman Melville you can't sit up and pay attention to *Ishmael's* tale of survival. Ishmael's very existence is justified by his role as storyteller, and if we read *Moby-Dick* as Ishmael's story (which it is), then we get a rather different book from the one that most readers of Herman Melville know.

Poor Herman Melville. How he tried to keep himself on the title-pages of his novels. He struggled with the problem from the start of his career. *Moby-Dick* was his sixth novel, published in 1851 when he was thirty-two years old. His first two novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), were rather elaborate fictional constructions that drew from his own Polynesian experiences. It was difficult for a n unknown author to get his first book published. To do so, he had to convince a publisher that *Typee* was a work of non-fiction. So he claimed that *Typee* was "true." People read the book and they liked the book, and so they liked the guy whom they thought had lived through the experiences in the book. Melville became "the man who lived among the cannibals" (a label he could not escape until he was forgotten). Well, it's true that Herman Melville was once, for a brief time, a real castaway in Polynesia. But he was a fiction writer and his books were works of fiction, and so, though he passed them off as "truth" and though his readers received them as "true" accounts, many wondered whether this stuff was real or if it was, in fact, fiction. Melville's reputation began to suffer. By the time he sat down to write his third novel, he had a problem. His books had become entirely too much about him. The damage was dual: 1. They were not read as fiction, because they were shelved under

fact. 2. They were not read as fact, because readers questioned their "truth." So Herman Melville, "the man who lived among the cannibals," became a man whose credentials as an honest writer were brought seriously into question. He could have just been a novelist who wove fictional worlds out of his own experience. That's what he was. But false advertising and its consequences put such an easy definition beyond his reach.

Melville tried to deal with the damage in his third novel, *Mardi; and a Voyage Thither* (1849). He confronted the problem, but he did so in a strange and complicated way. He tried reverse psychology. In the end it didn't help him. He made a fascinating gesture in the preface to his wild and very unreal allegory, *Mardi*. It is his first (but by no means his last) concerted effort to get himself out of his books:

Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such; to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity; in some degree the reverse of my previous experience.

This thought was the germ of others, which have resulted in *Mardi*.

The man had turned to irony. He claims that since he wrote two books published as "truth" and taken as "fiction," he'd write a third one published as "fiction" to see if readers might not take it as "truth." Well, this seemed like nothing more than a jab at the readers (not the last time that poor Melville did that). However, the gesture failed to get Melville out of his books, and still today, thousands of scholars are working overtime and in shifts, spending a lot of

valuable time away from the valuable books, striving to separate the man from the myth, when instead they should maintain the separation between the author and his books.

The academics love the irony, and it turns out that such ironies growing out of problems with biography not only persist among our contemporary writers, but author's real-life problems with biography have at times become the subjects of the fictional worlds themselves. A most interesting case is that of Philip Roth, Jewish-American novelist (who, for the record, doesn't consider himself a Jewish writer, an American writer, or a Jewish-American writer).

In 1967, Philip Roth published *Portnoy's Complaint*, a riotously funny tale of an oversexed Jewish adolescent named Alex Portnoy. It is not a particularly reverent book and it is not a book for prudes. Its fame scandalized a portion of the community of readers (Jews, Puritans, academics, and others), and its author, Philip Roth, became the target of an aggressive backlash. Philip Roth and Alex Portnoy became inseparable, and, in the minds of many detractors, indistinguishable. He's been answering the charge ever since, trying as best as he can to distinguish himself from the actions and ideas of his fictional characters.

In 1993, he published a novel that works out, in its pages, some of Philip Roth's troubles with biography. In *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993), Roth attempts to sever himself from the pages of his novel by a reverse psychology that trumps even Melville. He draws attention to the distinction between biography and fiction by putting himself into his own fiction, and not once, but twice. It sounds like a paradox. How does this work? The hero

of *Operation Shylock* is a man named "Philip Roth," who says (in the first-person) in the first clause of this novel, "I learned about the other Philip Roth in January 1988..." By naming two separate fictional characters after himself, the living, breathing man who wrote the novel emphasizes and *re-emphasizes* that his life has no business intruding on his fiction. Roth underscores this fact by subtitling his novel, "A Confession ." Confession is a word and mode that we generally use to describe a highly personal work of autobiography. Roth's "confession" is a fiction that screams out on every page that this stuff cannot possibly have anything to do with the life of the real Philip Roth. So Philip Roth tries to kill himself off by canceling himself out.

Such a gesture reveals an author who is hyper-aware of the tendency readers might have to confuse an author with his work, and clearly, this author is nearly desperate to prevent the confusion from happening. Philip Roth has good reason to be hyper-sensitive and desperate. He seeks to rectify a problem comparable to Herman Melville's own troubles with biography. Readers keep confusing Roth's earlier characters—Alex Portnoy and Nathan Zuckerman (who showed up in a handful of novels in the 1980's and '90's)—with their author. Readers assume that the perverse sexual tendencies and irreverent takes on life that belong to all of Roth's Portnoys and Zuckermans are fictional representations of the author himself. Too close for comfort. Read the books and you'll see. The ingenious self-cancellation that Roth performs in *Operation Shylock* makes for an interesting read. Roth capitalizes on his troubling literary fate to construct a complex and satisfying fiction. One can say that here biography has paid off. However, the gesture clearly marks an attempt, on the author's part, to

force himself back out of his earlier novels—to use biography in order to get rid of it. He wants to get back in his proper place, and remain there, on the title page.

Poor Philip Roth. Do his cancellations work? Probably not. Do the confusions between the author and his characters damage our reading of his books? For many it did. It's one thing to have an obscene, irreverent fictional character. It's another thing entirely to have an obscene irreverent man parading himself and justifying himself on the pages of a work supposed to be fiction. Still, the books did sell. But the main point to come from these examples has to do with the books and not with the authors. It is the books, really, that want to be read, and the authors are usually only too well aware that in order for the books to get what they want, the authors need to kindly step aside.

Of course we will ever be colored by the lives and the times of the creators of the art we admire. And of course we have the right to reject the work of any artist whose life or lifestyle conflicts with our own. Philip Larkin, once the unofficial poet laureate of England and the darling of its people, died and left behind journals and letters that reveal a chauvinistic and racist personality. His value as a poet came into question, when perhaps only his character should have. The two are not one and the same. But perhaps that's just the point. Before the "true Philip Larkin" came to light, the poems were gems. The poems are the same, but they are re-evaluated in the light of new biographical evidence. Such evaluations and re-evaluations are food for debate among the academics as well. And no side can be right or wrong. On questions such as these we come back, once again, to matters of taste.

Some such coloring—light or dark—is, as my colleague said, inevitable. It can go both ways. So be it. But if we let our coloring take us out of the game of reading, which is all-too-often the case, then the problem is not one merely for the academics. We might miss the very thing that we set out to do—and that was to read the book. I try my best not to miss out on that game and so I do what I can to put poor Herman and poor Philip back where they belong. But I know I'm not free from the evils of biographical intrusion. They color my own responses to art. They color something as pleasurable, even, as my experiences as a moviegoer. Don't even talk to me about Charlton Heston. And what's worse, I strongly suspect myself guilty when it comes to old Tom Hanks—I might not think he was such a bad actor if I'd never found out that he's such a damned nice guy.

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