The Treacherous Imagination

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Conclusion

I came upstairs from the scene between Tommy and Molly and instantly began to turn it into a short story. It struck me that my doing this—turning everything into fiction—must be an evasion. Why not write down, simply, what happened between Molly and her son today? Why do I never write down, simply, what happens?


*I want to do this with honour, if I possibly can.*

—Alice Munro, “Home” 153

As Munro’s narrator in “Home” attempts to describe a visit with her father and his second wife, she is simultaneously bent on producing an ethical narrative and doubtful that the dictates of writing truthfully will allow her to complete her story without causing harm. It is no wonder that authors such as Doris Lessing’s protagonist in *The Golden Notebook* turn to writing fiction instead. But because fiction has a flirtatious relationship to facts, it too must also flirt with ethical failure: not least, a failure to fulfill whatever obligations its authors might have to depict or protect their intimates’ lives. I draw this inference from the metafictions considered in this book, few of which seek to depict a satisfying rapprochement, never mind a full-blown concord, between authors and their intimates. In A. S. Byatt’s *The Game*, Cassandra kills herself after her sister writes about her, and although in Raymond Carver’s “Intimacy” the narrator’s ex-wife tells him that he will have to go on writing about their
shared past, she seems to do so with resignation rather than approval. In that regard, metafiction about the ethics of writing one’s life seems consonant with Anton Chekhov’s precept that it is fiction’s job only to ask questions, not to provide solutions.1 In terms of autobiographical fiction’s function in confessional culture, though, one might respond to Chekhov by saying that fiction is not asking or answering questions so much as it is both an intervention and a symptom. On the one hand, its ambiguous referentiality frustrates desires to reduce its narratives to the factual, and it encourages readers to embrace metaphor. It rejects the reticence and propriety of intimacy norms even while breeding intimacy of a different kind with its audience. As a site of play for authors and readers alike, autobiographical fiction problematizes identity, and it models for people an alternative to the limited selves they are able to perform in interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, authors often pander to an audience’s desire for scandalous personal narratives, traducing intimates in the process. A form of cultural dream-space, fiction is a provocation and a balm, a way for society to rehearse and also to examine its ambivalence around privacy and confession, verificationism and fantasy, iconoclasm and conformism, free speech and reputation. It is by attending to the complexities of this ambivalence that one might locate autobiographical fiction’s ethical impetus at the cultural level.

Because the ethics of autobiographical fiction is bound up with literature’s public life as much as its private reception, I have argued that authors cannot be solely blamed for their fiction’s misdeeds. Publicity material, journalistic commentary, and readers’ preexisting biographical desire contribute to the offense fiction gives. Especially in the mass media, authors are assigned the role of poètes maudits, condemned and scapegoated for transgressing social norms most people find difficult to embrace. What is more, nowadays it is inevitable that many intimates of authors not only find their alter egos lurking in fiction but are also drawn into the public sphere themselves and urged to express their reactions to putatively offensive texts. If I have paid considerable attention to the role of paratexts and commentary in the life of fiction, it is with a sense that intimates and authors alike face a relatively new challenge in working out how to participate ethically in the promotion of literature through the mass media, and that any account of literary ethics needs to attend to this challenge.

1. Chekhov writes in a letter to Alexei Suvorin: “You are right to demand that an author take conscious stock of what he is doing, but you are confusing two concepts: answering the questions and formulating them correctly. Only the latter is required of an author” (117).
But I have argued further that if paratextual performance creates ethical complications, it also opens up possibilities for ethical action. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, although what people “can or cannot do is largely determined by the structure in which they are placed and by the positions they occupy within that structure,” that is not to deny the possibility of individual responsibility or efficacy (54). Likewise, Charles Taylor accepts the insight that “much of our motivation—our desires, aspirations, evaluation—is not simply given” but insists that people are still responsible insofar as “it is always possible that fresh insight might alter my evaluations and hence even myself for the better” (36, 39). At the same time that this conception of agency complicates ethics, it provides further grounds for an ethics attuned to cultural contexts as well as personal motives.

Although the love triangle that autobiographical fiction creates between authors, intimates, and other readers is a precarious one, I have suggested that it is not without its rewards and possible successes for all, such that intimacy between any two of the parties involved need not come at the expense of the third. In particular, authors and their loved ones need not maintain narrative monogamy—an insistence on telling a static story about themselves, and only to each other—to enjoy narrative intimacy. This is especially true if authors and intimates can bring to fiction the same sense of playful collaboration that authors often share with their general readership. Certainly the metafictions I have discussed in this book confirm that fiction seldom ruins intimacy on its own; rather, the trouble fiction seems to cause is often already lurking in the practice of intimacy. At its best, fiction is a unique vehicle for redeeming the past, paying tribute to loved ones, and engaging with their complexity and otherness as well as one’s own. Still, a recurring theme of this book has been that infidelity is pleasurable and intrinsic to creativity and that autobiographical fiction has always gone hand in hand with trespass. It might be said that at a fundamental level, any act of remaking of the world is a betrayal of the world as it is, and so fiction based on intimate relations is bound to betray another person’s facts. Moreover, misrepresentations of others seem unavoidable because it is not quite clear what a “correct” representation in fiction would look like. And if fiction is a space of hypotheticals and suppositions, then it is sometimes a space in which authors try out not only new ways of being people but also new ways of hurting people, however tentatively, ambivalently, and indirectly.

To the extent that autobiographical fiction insists people pay attention to the complexities of their various selves, it has provided a model for this present book, in which I have sought to foster a greater consciousness
about the ethical issues fiction raises. For instance, I have drawn attention to biographical desire in readers and authors alike with the hope that when this desire draws them toward certain approaches to—and judgments of—fiction, they may be more cognizant of what is happening. Bourdieu believes that “if people became aware of them, conscious action aimed at controlling the structural mechanisms that engender moral failure would be possible” (56). Similarly, authors and intimates who are more self-conscious and more articulate about fiction’s problems are more likely to forestall or resolve conflicts. The problems of writing metafiction identified in chapter 3 make it clear that self-consciousness is not enough and that public self-reflexive discourse on the part of authors can in fact exacerbate rather than alleviate their trespasses. But at least for some authors, self-consciousness can be more ethical if articulated within the intimate sphere, before the mutual alienation, power imbalances, and unpredictable consequences of publication. Having said that, in this book I have argued that universalized prescription is of little use. Instead, I have presented historical and cultural contexts in which autobiographical fiction’s dilemmas can be situated, a vocabulary for discussing these dilemmas, and a variety of possible approaches to solving them. I have done so with the hope that as a result, individual cases might be considered with greater sophistication, nuance, and sensitivity. Often the feelings of uncertainty and intense, sometimes excruciating intimacy that autobiographical fiction can create are bound up with a sense of betrayal, but they also constitute fertile ground for a reexamination of intimate relations, as well as of the stories we tell in and about those relations. Autobiographical fiction holds the capacity both to harm and to help people in unique ways, and the same referential ambiguity that is its most vexing characteristic is also a potentially ethical one. The space of uncertainty that fiction creates is also a space of potentiality, a space where nothing has been decided and so everything might be discussed.