Sympathy for Oswald Mosley: Politics of Reading and Historical Resemblance in the Moral Imagination of an English Literary Society

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INTRODUCTION: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN READERS

In one of the best-known justifications of the public value of fiction reading, Nussbaum identifies the immersive experience of the novel reader as a central exercise in our moral and political imagination. Specifically, she argues for the ongoing importance of the cultivation of that "ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstances, be oneself or one of one's loved ones" (1995: 5). For Nussbaum, this is first and foremost achieved through the invitation to emotionally identify and sympathize with a range of characters in a literary work. By participating in these fictional lives, readers learn "to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences" (ibid.), an education that she perceives remains of essential "relevance for public thinking." Nussbaum makes two bold claims about the wider significance of the reader's immersive experience. First, she states, "It provides insights that should play a role … in the construction of any adequate moral and political theory," and secondly, "It develops moral capacities without which citizens will not succeed in making reality out of the normative conclusions" of any such theory (ibid.: 12). In her account, then, the

practice of novel reading can provide a "bridge" not just to the discernment of social justice but also to its successful enactment.

Such broad philosophical claims are always hard to translate into anthropological concerns. We might be immediately suspicious, for instance, of the "us" implied in Nussbaum's treatise, which seems to occlude a whole host of differences. Likewise, we might note the irony of a position proffered as a defense of the value of paying attention to "qualitative differences" between persons (ibid.: 28) that ultimately only works if it remains steadfastly at the level of an abstract, generalized reader. There are many other problems here. Nussbaum seems to largely rely on an assumption that literary works construct and shape reader's experiences and capacities. This prompts the obvious question of which works and how. To be fair, Nussbaum goes some way to providing an explanation, and she also makes clear that she restricts her claims to the tradition of the Anglo-American realist novel. But far more problematic, at least from an anthropological perspective, is the inferred theory of agency with which she operates. Not only is the agentive status of the reader extremely unclear throughout her exegesis, but it is hard to understand on what possible basis any shared practice of immersive reading sustains itself, unless one accepts the dubious thesis that reading publics are solely generated and defined by the works they consume. How, one might ask, for example, do specific collectivities of readers fit into her schema?

All that said, I believe there are aspects of Nussbaum's desire to treat the literary imagination as a serious moral and political project that deserve recognition. I especially appreciate her willingness to open up a positive space for popular forms of intense fiction reading experience, in a continuing context of relative ethnographic neglect. I also appreciate her efforts to take seriously some of the relationships typically identified as at the heart of popular reading practices, such as relationships of attachment between readers and literary characters but just as importantly those diverse relationships between literary characters and other kinds of persons, historical or living, in the world. Nussbaum's thesis may mean that she is almost solely concerned with the issue of whether a sympathetic imagination gets transplanted into public life. And yet, her focus might be used to draw our attention to a wider number of ways in which collectivities of readers dynamically segue between "fiction" and "reality."

In fact, *Poetic Justice* does contain an account of readers in social interaction. Central to the moral and political imagination cultivated by novel reading, Nussbaum insists, is a two-stage process. After the initial participatory absorption of the solitary reader, so closely committed to an emotional identification with literary characters that readers may experience "what happens to them as if from their [own] point of view" (ibid.: 66), there is a necessary step back. The process now involves a more reflective, detached stance toward characters and the works in which they sit, reliant on a more "external form of sympathy" (ibid.) that Nussbaum identifies as crucially requiring a communication between

readers. This is because, she suggests, readers' personal histories inevitably lead to divergent immersive experiences of the literary work in terms of not only levels of attachment to different characters but also responses, both positive and negative, to characterization itself. In order to act as a "judicious" reader, a stage that requires a non-prejudicial weighing of the worth of characters and more sober moral judgement of works as a whole, one must listen to those alternative perspectives, for instance to help address the potential pitfalls of bias, distortion, and misrepresentation in the work, or false presentations of historical fact. "This is why ideally the process of reading must be completed by a conversation among readers" (ibid.: 75), she concludes. Although she offers no explanation as to how such a conversation might take place, through what forums or modes of association, on what terms, and so forth, I find intriguing her suggestion of its essential role in the moral and political project of fiction reading, that is, as the social, more judicious act that comes after the immersive experience of the solitary reader.

That interest stems from my own longstanding ethnographic work with a group of novel readers, members of an English literary society. As fans of the twentieth-century nature writer and historical novelist Henry Williamson (1895–1977), these readers broadly fit into the category of persons consuming works from the Anglo-American realist tradition. But in this essay, I want to explore the relevance of Nussbaum's two-stage account of the reading process by considering a particular problem of sympathy faced by Williamson readers and directly linked to the experience of encountering characters on the page. As every literary society member knew, their favorite author's main historical novel-cycle, titled *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, features both Hitler and an obviously fictionalized version of Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists (BUF). The latter is a relatively prominent secondary character. That in itself may not constitute a problem in the terms laid out by Nussbaum, but Williamson readers had also to grapple with the fact that the story is told by a narrator who is at times clearly sympathetic to historical fascism. Furthermore, through the choices and attitudes displayed by the *Chronicle*'s hero Phillip Maddison—a character with a similar biography to the author who is the chief object of imaginative sympathy for many literary society members—readers could not help but encounter expressions of esteem for these fascist characters. In the case of the Mosley-inspired character, the hero's admiration remains largely in place until the postwar conclusion of Williamson's fifteen-volume novel-cycle.

This appears to be precisely the kind of encounter that ought to be addressed by a reader in judicious conversation with others. According to Nussbaum, it is the capacity to stand back from "the power of imagining vividly" (ibid.: 73), to excuse oneself from being part of the action or from feeling involved in the situation of characters, that is meant to define this "social" stage of the reading process. Elsewhere, she describes it as a form of "filtering" (ibid.: 74), or proper discrimination (ibid.: 72), by which readers collectively work out the trustworthy

and untrustworthy dimensions of their own emotional immersions in the work. As an "exercise of critical [moral] judgement" (ibid.: 76), that dialogue should also lead to reflections on who the literary work is inviting the reader to sympathize with or alternatively on who is not being made the object of sympathy, and hence ultimately to shared decisions about the suitability of their novel selection. So, if we consider Nussbaum's model, several serious dilemmas might be predicted to unfold in the reading process of literary society members. To begin with the first stage, the urgent question might be whether, as immersive solitary readers, they actually, imaginatively experienced the point of view of the Mosley character. Even if they did not, we might still ask whether in this respect they vicariously participated in the point of view of Maddison. Did they wittingly or unwittingly inhabit, for instance, the admirations expressed by the protagonist, including what it felt like to assign moral authority to a character based upon the BUF leader? Or did they immediately experience the sympathies of the narrator? Whatever the answer to these questions, which I will explore presently, we might expect this problem of sympathy to be critically examined.

As I have discussed elsewhere (2002; 2004; 2011), literary society members did place much value on the quality of immersive experience derived from reading Williamson's works. This included a strong claim for the transformative effects of the literary imagination on their ordinary lives and relationships, in significant part as it was trained through acts of identification and sympathy. They regularly insisted that reading the novels had enlarged their capacity for understanding other people's points of view, and made them for instance more tolerant husbands or wives, more sympathetic sons or daughters, fathers, or mothers, better friends, or work colleagues. It had also, they believed, made them more sensitive interpreters of historical events, including those that touched on their own autobiography or the biography of parents, grandparents, or more distant ancestors. In many obvious ways, their claims would appear to illustrate just the kind of moral and political education that Nussbaum holds fiction reading can provide. As I have also examined (2019), literary society members sometimes directly invoked a model like the judicious reader, offering assessments that self-consciously weighed the good or bad attributes of a literary character, or which sought to redeem a character from its marginal role within the narrative or from the bad opinion of fellow readers. This could even include self-presentations that invited other readers to consider their role and obligation as akin to that of jurors in a legal trial (ibid.: 74).

Such moves point to another compelling aspect of the comparison to Nussbaum's model of the reading process. In many ways the literary society was an extended conversation between readers. Whether communicating via the journal and newsletter annually published by the society or by gathering in person at one of their annual meetings, members constituted a forum for discussion. An autumn meeting always took place over a long weekend in North Devon, where Williamson lived for many years and where many of the novels

are set. There was also a spring meeting, held at varying locations depending on the works discussed, and a London "study day." My fieldwork, ongoing since 1999, has been structured by my regular participation at these three kinds of annual events. I have also taken part in their regional branch meetings, made many visits to members' homes—the sites of solitary reading and their extensive libraries—conducted over 150 hours' worth of interviews, and of course continued to engage in ethnographically informed readings of the novels and society publications.

But to return to the issue of conversation between readers, both annual and regional branch meetings typically combined informal chat with more formally focused thematic discussions. These were usually structured through a range of presentations, curated trips, talks, and workshops. Likewise, the informal conversations began over dinner, at the hotel bar, during a shared car ride or planned walk, and continued across a weekend, between meetings, and over the years. In fact, the discovery of the literary society's existence (it was founded the year after Williamson's death, in 1980) was often described by members as the start of an extraordinary transition from their status of lone reader to that of noisy fellowship within a company of readers. While those conversations might not mark a "completion" of the reading process, since members were just as likely to regard their meeting as a prompt for solitary readings or continued acts of character identification, they did signal a shift toward far more convivial mutual reflection.

To assist my exploration of the problem of sympathy presented by the presence of fascist characters in the novels, at both the stage of solitary reading and that of conversation between readers, I will also reflect across the essay upon what anthropologists have had to say about the nature of exemplars. I am particularly interested in their discussion of an "exemplar-focused way of thinking about morality" (Humphrey 1997: 38; and see Needham 1985; Mahmood 2005; Bandak 2015; Robbins 2018). That choice is partly informed by the ways in which Williamson readers talked about literary characters and ascribed to them certain qualities. For instance, in both formal and informal deliberations at the annual meetings, in our interviews, and in the reflections shared and read through the society journal and newsletter, there was a consistent focus on characters serving as "a typical or good example of something" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "exemplar"). On occasions that "something" was a specific virtue, and there were clear instances of values operating "by means of being expressed in exemplars" and of those exemplars taking the form of persons, wherein moral values could get exemplified "in relatively fully realized form" (Robbins 2018: 175). Likewise, there were other, maybe more frequent occasions when scenes between characters depicted in the novels were treated as in some fashion exemplary, for instance being identified as communicating a moral truth. We will see that literary society members sometimes assigned their favorite author a crucial exemplary status. All of which provides necessary context,

I argue, for understanding how they dealt with the apparent invitation to regard a character based on a fascist leader as another kind of moral exemplar.

As Humphrey's early article stresses, a focus on exemplar-oriented forms of morality can also provide scope for taking into account forms of moral practice that exceed the powers of description contained in rules-governed models (1997: 26). It can allow, for instance, for a more nuanced appreciation of how subjects in certain social settings can live relatively untroubled by what, from a rules-based moral perspective (and perhaps from the perspective of Nussbaum's second-stage collective critical judgement too), might look like a blatant contradiction of values (ibid.: 38). More broadly, her account gives space to the possibility of the non-generalizability of moral reflection, when based on the individual selection of diverse exemplars. As Robbins (2018) highlights, that exemplar-oriented approach may further provide other openings. Contra some current conventional models of morality in anthropology, which tend to emphasize moral regimes centered on the rigorous cultivation of virtuous behavior (often inspired by the late work of Foucault or the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics), he notes that a focus on exemplars may enable a space to better recognize that "people's moral sensibilities are more often developed in less disciplined ways" (ibid.: 191). I would add that such a focus can also spotlight the manner in which serving as a typical or good example of something can bring its own rewards, especially for those who identify it; the exemplar does not need to be "moral" for that relationship to have a moral dimension.

SYMPATHY FOR MOSLEY

> I don't think Henry ever really knew before the Second War what Hitler was really like…. And Mosley, I do not know what to make of him. Have you ever seen him on television, heard his recorded voice? He was a strange one. He came across as being very likeable, very reasonable. I mean to my parents he was an absolute bogeyman, you know a horrible chap! Should have been shot during the war, this kind of thing. But whenever I saw him on television I thought, well he seems okay to me. Yet every so often, when he was making a point, they'd be some little mad glint in his eye, which you can actually see on the television, and you thought, this guy's got a screw loose somewhere, you know. He did, there'd suddenly be a sort of glare to his eye, which was very odd.

These reflections are taken from a conversation with Paul, a long-established member of the literary society and one of the first Williamson readers I met. His observations began with a typical kind of first-person assessment of what the author knew about Hitler. The statement was phrased in such a way as to make

clear that of course *we* (i.e., myself and Paul but also the membership in general and society at large) now knew what the National Socialist leader was "really like." Paul's musings then moved directly onto the figure of Mosley and took on a more uncertain air. "I don't know what to make of him," Paul admitted. That hesitation signaled at least two kinds of distinction. First, it suggested an implied difference between the moral status or comparative negative exemplarity of Hitler and Mosley. Secondly, it invoked an overt difference, this time between the attitude of Paul and that of his parents to the ex-BUF leader, and by extension the attitude of their generation. In fact, as a young man watching Mosley closely on British television (there were two interviews broadcast towards the end of Mosley's life, a high profile 1967 interview conducted by David Frost and another one in 1975) Paul reported that he had become increasingly skeptical of the portrayal that he had grown up with. While he continued to disapprove of Mosley and the actions of the BUF, it was important for him to do so with refinement, and not in the unthinking, absolutist terms offered by his mother and father. For him, Mosley was not a "bogeyman." However, as his final comments made clear, that figure might yet have been a villain. As well as noticing the positive aspects of much of Mosley's self-presentation, he could not help but observe a "mad glint in the eye." For Paul the broadcast interviews also hinted at something sinister.

Although ostensibly drawn from watching Mosley on television, these reflections might be said to express a literary imagination. Paul shared his thoughts with me many years after those broadcast events (in the late 1990s), by which time he had read Williamson's historical novel-cycle several times and so naturally had also encountered the Mosley-inspired character on the page. In fact, it was clear to me that Paul's hesitations derived from a sympathetic attitude. Rather than condemn Mosley outright or render him, as his parents had, into a mythical object of fear, Paul was determined to evaluate the man judiciously, which for him meant, to deploy the language of Nussbaum, "seeing the person as a separate center of experience" (1995: 70). As the quoted passage above illustrates, this included scanning Mosley for signs of hidden motivation but also for complex psychology. Instead of a one-dimensional characterization, Paul looked for shading and contradictions, for instance to embrace an understanding of the man as appearing simultaneously likeable, unhinged, and reasonable. In this regard, he treated the ex-leader of the BUF in much the same way as literary society members often treated the literary characters they investigated and discussed at annual meetings. While he could have reached a judgement about Mosley by researching external sources on the history of British fascism, Paul chose to present his insights as the result of a careful reading of the personality on the screen.

All the evidence suggests that as a solitary reader Paul himself never emotionally participated in or identified in any immersive sense with the life of the character based upon Mosley. It is clear from the quoted extract above, for

instance, that Paul approached the historical figure as a puzzle. His musings on Mosley might deploy a sympathetic attitude, but they remained a set of external observations; there was no sense of them being informed by a direct imaginative experience of the character taken to depict the BUF leader. Whether or not Paul ever succumbed to an invitation to occupy the perspective of someone else, like the novel-cycle's hero Phillip Maddison, who does openly admire that fascist character, is a different question. Like many other literary society members I knew, part of Paul's enjoyment and appreciation of the *Chronicle* series rested on a close immersive sympathy for the chief protagonist. So even though the precise orientation and quality of Maddison's feelings towards the character based upon Mosley was never mentioned as an object of participatory absorption, it was necessarily the case that Paul had a broad imaginative experience of what happens to Maddison. Further, it was also the case that he had experience as if from the hero's point of view, and that this immersive experience in some ways supported Paul's general sympathetic attitude towards others. With those important caveats in mind, relevant to an understanding of the articulations of nearly all literary society members, I now briefly introduce the character of the fascist leader on the page.

> As he thrust himself forward trying to minimize a Byronic limp, all within rose to their feet the better to see the pale but smiling figure, now being greeted by cheers from those with raised arms and open hands, and boos from sections of faces below clenched fists. Phillip thought how eager he looked … but Birkin seemed more compact, more head than spirit. He might have been limping out of the first battle of Ypres in 1914 with a spiritual translation of all that horror and chaos into clarity and order, he thought, as the tall spare figure reached the platform erected in the middle of the vast floor and climbed up.
> "Fellow Britons—"

This is the first direct appearance of Sir Hereward Birkin in the novel-cycle (Williamson 1965: 139). Although the character has previously been the object of other characters' conversations and reports, the man himself has been absent. Williamson chooses to formally introduce Birkin at a mass rally of his new Imperial Socialist Party (ISP), narrated as taking place in 1934 at the halls of Olympia in London. Subsequently, Birkin makes a number of further appearances; in total, the character features or gets mentioned over one hundred and forty times across the novel-cycle. There is a scene several years later, for instance, recorded as taking place in 1937 at a local ISP meeting in Norfolk, where Birkin gives another political speech in front of Maddison. This marks the beginning of a period when the two characters begin to interact personally and have a brief series of narrated conversations; the first encounter takes place at a

post-meeting drinks hosted by a passionately fascist aristocratic neighbor of Maddison. By this time a signed-up member of the Imperial Socialist Party, Maddison goes on to attend a number of ISP peace rallies led by Birkin just before and in the opening months after the outbreak of war, and his involvement continues until in 1940 Birkin's party is banned and the leader and many of its key members are detained under Defence Regulation 18B. In the intervening war years, Maddison receives the occasional letter from Birkin, written from prison or during the period of his house arrest. And there is reference to a final meeting between the two characters where Birkin hands Maddison a copy of his prison-authored manuscript, presented as a political and philosophical thesis for a postwar New Europe.

As must be already evident, Birkin is a character whose dialogue is almost entirely given over to various modes of speechifying. As well as encountering him at mass rallies and local party meetings, his presence at social gatherings is invariably a cue to the utterance of political doctrine. When speaking to fellow guests at the post-meeting drinks cited above, for instance, Birkin lectures them on various platform issues. This includes advocating for the creation of an economic protection zone within the British Empire against international movements of capital; stressing the importance of supporting agriculture and "old values of true service to the land"; advising others of his ambitions for a "spiritual revolution of our people" and for a classless state where talent is recognized and put to use in the interest of community; offering predictions about a coming smash when financial democracy would collapse and his movement would be needed to fight communism; and finally speaking with great conviction about his recurring concern to try and prevent another war with Germany (ibid.: 305–7). There is in fact almost no communicated sense of the inner person; if Paul or other solitary readers at the literary society did try to emotionally participate in the life of Birkin, as a separate center of experience, they would seriously struggle.

But what does get presented is a picture of Birkin as exemplar of fascist virtues. This of course includes the virtue of leadership itself; the outward-facing orientation of the character could be read as affirming well-documented expectations of the fascist leader as a charismatic and forceful figure (see Gentile 1990; Griffin 1991; Paxton 2005) and accompanying expectations that the moral purposefulness of followers rests upon the leader's capacity to demonstrate he is always at the center of events or is the protagonist of history. Certainly, the leader should not overly dwell on personal weaknesses or vulnerabilities. In his drinks party conversations, the character of Birkin regularly stresses the vital role to be played by unashamed "men of action" in a national resurgence (Williamson 1965: 307). As those historians working on the cult of masculinity within British fascism have highlighted, that emphasis was normative, an aspect of dominant tropes of virility, hardness, discipline, combat, and sacrifice (see Baxter 2019:

233; and Collins 1999; Gottlieb 2004). And, of course, for the new British fascist man, Mosley was taken to be the very embodiment of that masculine ideal.

During the conversations between Maddison and other characters sympathetic to Birkin's cause, it is just such virtues that get identified. In an early exchange with a close friend, for example, we are offered a brief biography of Birkin. It chiefly stresses that he is athletic, brave, resilient, and persistent, loyal to his comrades and unafraid of speaking truth to power (Williamson 1965: 68). Birkin is also said to be someone whose virtues are crucially tested through the ordeal of having been, like Maddison and his friend, a front-line soldier in the last war, an aspect of his biography that is an essential part of any fascist ideal of the leader or hero, and of the kind of classless spiritual unity that a figure like Birkin advocates for (see Gentile 1990: 243). Likewise, in later passages, after Maddison and Birkin have met in person, we find the chief protagonist of the novel-cycle reflecting on the leader's embattled but heroic qualities. Clearly exhausted from his relentless public campaigning, with visible scars from the stone-throwing assault of opponents, Birkin, we are told at one point, still "gave Phillip an immediate impression of great and controlled strength" (Williamson 1965: 302). At least in Maddison's eyes, the success or failure of the movement will depend on whether the British public finally "sees" the exemplary qualities of Birkin that it is clear he already recognizes.

But as the consistent emphasis here makes clear, Birkin largely surfaces as a character seen from the perspective of Maddison. Even where Birkin appears directly on the page, he does so always in the company of Phillip Maddison or with the protagonist of the novel-cycle as a narrating observer of the scene. The frequency with which Maddison is placed as a member in the audience, for instance, is noteworthy, as is the way in which the reader is invited to interpret the words and gestures of Birkin through the real-time thoughts of Maddison. In the opening quoted passage, we get illustrative examples of a typical slippage between the report of a more impersonal narrator and these impressions of Phillip. One could even argue that the terms of their relationship also reproduce a fascist ethic: the expectation that followers will look toward and obey the leader with devotion, almost with an attitude of faith (Gentile 1990: 235). It is likely no accident that in this exceptional scenario the protagonist of the novel-cycle gets largely reduced to the role of attention-giver and that Birkin almost exclusively occupies the role of attention-receiver; he is chiefly the object of Maddison's admiration.

Although the lines of admiration between the two characters remain remarkably fixed, there are a few rare glimpses of a reciprocated appreciation. Most notably, this occurs in one briefest moment of reported dialogue (Williamson 1965: 317), when Birkin appears to suggest to Maddison the possibility of a future partnership.

> "'How are you Maddison?'
>
> A firm handclasp, a feeling as of a rare poured wine, words that were not heard by anyone else, 'You write, I can speak. Let us go forward together into the Age of Renaissance.'"

The idea of that partnership survives right to the novel-cycle's end. After receiving a copy of Birkin's prison-authored manuscript, Maddison enthusiastically reads aloud extracts of the political and philosophical thesis to friends and family. In fact, on the final pages of the last volume Phillip cites the manuscript, what he terms "Birkin's dream" (Williamson 1969: 360, as a key influence behind the novel-cycle or "chronicle" that he himself is about to start writing when Williamson's *Chronicle* finally comes to an end.

KNOWING HENRY

In such circumstances one might expect the conversation between readers to involve an interrogation of that Williamson-inspired literary imagination, as they have come to recognize it in common and to collectively cultivate it through membership of the literary society. While it might be potentially troubling to encounter characters based on fascist leaders and to witness a chief object of sympathy expressing admiration for a figure such as Birkin, it must surely be even more alarming to encounter such direct suggestions of a parallel: that just as Maddison's planned novel-cycle will be inspired by Birkin's dream, so the whole of the *Chronicle* might have been enlivened by the postwar political vision of Mosley. However, literary society members broadly appeared remarkably untroubled by that implication, not moved to question the integrity of the sympathetic attitude that they assumed to be a shared inheritance of reading Williamson.

While they might certainly acknowledge disquiet about aspects of the author's biography—all members knew that Williamson joined the BUF in the late 1930s, that he contributed occasional pieces to the fascist newspaper *Action*, and that much like Maddison he attended a number of local meetings and national rallies—and engage in various explanatory moves to account for that political affiliation, the reading process itself seemed to survive remarkably intact. Individuals continued to report a close emotional participation in the life and perspective of Phillip Maddison. There was no sense of their solitary acts of character immersion being adjudged untrustworthy, for instance; in fact, the quality of that experience continued to be an aspect of what bound them together. Given that fact, I am interested in exploring what direction the conversations that did take place between readers took. But before doing so, I think it necessary to dwell a little longer on the first stage of the reading process: that is, the immersive experience of the solitary reader that Nussbaum identifies as the essential starting point for the moral and political development of any literary imagination. Might

there be internal resources within that sympathetic attitude that enabled Williamson readers to feel they could proceed without recourse to the exercise of a judicious conversation or collective critical judgement? In answering that question, I will need to spend time inspecting the exemplary status assigned not so much to literary character but to the author, that figure affectionately addressed by all members as simply "Henry."

The centrality of the authorial figure to the literary imagination of Williamson readers was evident from the beginning of my contact with them. Take, for example, the narrated conversation with Paul. This occurred at his then place of work, the largest and most well-known bookshop in Cambridge. At that time in his early fifties, Paul greeted me at the entrance to the store and led us to a small back office. Upon entering, I could not help but immediately notice that its walls were decorated with a range of photographs of Henry Williamson. This included a large color image of an aged, white-haired man reading one of his books and another of the writer looking directly into camera; an old black and white image of Williamson as a veteran standing among lines of crosses in a First World War battlefield cemetery; one as a very young man in an army uniform before the outbreak of that conflict and a later portrait that looked like it was taken in the 1920s. To one side of Paul's desk, there stood a bookshelf full of Williamson works, including the fifteen-volume historical novel-cycle and in addition a back series of the literary society's journals, newsletters, and other more occasional publications.

Such a scene was not unusual, even if most of the literary society members that I subsequently met restricted the display of their Williamson collections to the home. As well as holding the complete literary works, they invariably also kept the official biography (Anne Williamson 1995) and whatever other small biographical pieces they could find. This in itself was hardly surprising. Like other literary societies constituted in an author's name, there was a heavy emphasis on biographical exegesis, which required a shared knowledge of the writer's life and times. In fact, joining the literary society was mostly welcomed as an opportunity to greatly extend that knowledge. However, in the case of The Henry Williamson Society the development of this external vantage point on the author was commonly accepted as a supplement to the prior experience of an internal vantage point, precisely presented as the outcome or achievement of the solitary reader's immersive state. That is because, much more so than the emotional, participatory attachment to literary characters, members valued this identification with the author, the sense that reading the works provided of having put themselves in the place of Henry.

Obviously, this emphasis radically recasts the nature of the literary imagination to which Nussbaum wants to ascribe a moral and political status. It certainly structured the diverse ways in which literary society members understood the author to be an exemplar. While it is not my concern in this essay to outline the quality of that immersion in any great detail, a task that has been a

central focus of much of my previous writing (see Reed 2004; 2011), it is worth highlighting a few salient points. Firstly, in describing that solitary reading experience, members typically deployed idioms of possession; they imagined themselves to be occupied or colonized by the authorial consciousness (Reed 2011: 11). Secondly, they regularly figured that happening as extraordinary; in normal circumstances one could sympathize with other persons, but one could not inhabit or know their separate center of experience as it were first-hand (ibid.: 10). For them, therefore, claims of knowing Henry usually had a two-fold dimension. There was the awareness they had of the author from the inside out, gifted to them during solitary reading and validated by the subsequent discovery, usually made upon joining the literary society, that other Williamson readers shared this individual experience of Henry. And then there was the comprehension of the man as biographical subject, knowable, like other histor-ical persons, through the history that defined him and which he left behind.

I am aware that from the perspective of a critical reader of Williamson's works these reports about the immersive nature of solitary reading might be the object of considerable suspicion. Such claims could be accused of mystifying the reading process or in a more tolerant vein of being the result of misrecognition, for instance due to a failure to properly recognize the reading experience as a strategic effect of the works. To what extent, one might ask, can the sense of being actively possessed by the consciousness of Henry be put down to the specific ways in which these readers have been invited to construct a picture of an implied author? It is clear, for example, that any consideration of "the author's 'second self'" (see Booth 1983: 71) in the novel-cycle—that figure detectable as a presence speaking or living through the works—must take into account the complex, entangled relationship between narrator and hero, and of course the consistent invitation to identify that protagonist as a version of the author. But it is important to reiterate that for the Williamson readers I knew Henry was never reducible to a literary construct, to something one could straightforwardly read off the works. This was the case not just in ignorance of conventional critical readings but often in full knowledge of such maneuvers and even despite them. The relationship to Henry was real and sustaining, quite integral to their literary imagination.

One might convey an idea of the sort of relationship, and hence also of the kind of moral exemplar Henry could be, from the ways in which literary society members continued to playfully signal "his" presence when they met. This was brought home to me once again and this time in a most immediate fashion by an incident that occurred at the last gathering that I attended, an Annual General Meeting weekend in 2019. Huddled together in the North Devon village church-yard where Williamson was buried for the annual meeting's traditional wreath laying ceremony, my attention was disturbed by an itch on the scalp. Running a hand through my hair produced a jolt of pain and upon closer inspection revealed its source, the dislodged stinger of a bee caught in the knuckle of one of my

fingers. As the joint continued to swell and I felt increasingly faint, those around me pointed to a bees' nest high on the church tower above us. My neighbor told me that he too had been stung on a previous visit, an observation that led others to straightaway comment that this must be Henry's way of reminding us both that he was still there! Latterly, the incident also made its way into a meeting report published in the society's newsletter.

Although rendered as an amusing anecdote, the story was embraced in knowing fashion, and the notion that a bee sting, something external happening to me, could be Henry's way of prompting us to recall his presence was enjoyed on several levels. On the one hand, everyone understood that this was exactly the kind of joke that matched the author's humor. That knowledge was shared both as a result of learning more together about the biography of the writer—at literary society meetings members exchange endless stories about Williamson's antics or tendency toward practical joking—and as a consequence of encountering that humor first-hand, through the books but more importantly in person during bouts of immersive reading. It worked because of the intimate ways in which they claimed to know Henry.

However, the incident also resonated because it spoke to a broader sense in which the authorial figure kept reminding them of his presence: that is, through the moral insights and lessons that they continued to receive as a result of their solitary reading. As already mentioned, oftentimes these were reported as delivered through the form and experience of powerful character attachments. On rare occasions a literary character could be identified as a moral exemplar in the strong sense described by Robbins (2018), as a direct or immediate realization of a specific value or virtue in the world. I think the purest example of such a claim that I encountered occurred in the context of a general discussion about the neglected merits of Williamson's female characters. In this case, it was the virtue of goodness that got picked out, drawing upon previous reflections published in the society journal by a member who selected the character of Hetty Maddison, the mother of Phillip, as the perfect exemplar:

> Goodness is a rare quality and is perhaps less and less easily recognized or even appreciated in our hard and calculating age. Fundamental goodness is not fundamentally changed by suffering or circumstance. It may be tried by fire but if it survives it remains bright.… Henry had so many skills and one of the best seems to me to be his superb ability to present Hetty throughout the huge achievement of the *Chronicle* as a constant. He by no means presents her as perfect: her weaknesses and failures are portrayed with the most minute observation; but in the tortured unhappiness of Phillip's saga, she glows with a gentle light of love that nothing can diminish (Smith 1991: 221).

In such an account Hetty almost takes on the attributes of an icon, a status affirmed for this Williamson reader by the constancy of the character's moral nature, but also by the loving glow that she feels Hetty emits across the novel series as a whole. That claim, which seems to assign the character a standing or influence autonomous from conventional relationships of attachment or sympathy, gets further solidified by a comparison later offered to the reader's own mother and to a special friend. Both these women, we are told, also stayed constant in much the same virtues and for exactly the same reasons as Hetty did (ibid.: 221). In this case, Henry's presence was registered by the very achievement of that autonomy or constancy and the values it realized.

The moral aspect of character attachment, though, far more commonly manifested itself through an exercise in immersive participation, of the sort more or less described by Nussbaum. Rather than an external comparison to other people in the world who personified the same virtues, moral lessons tended to emerge through sensations of sympathetic identification. Sometimes these were reported and appreciated as emotional participations in the lives and feelings of characters marked as radically different to the solitary reader. The two members with whom I discussed the merits of female characters, for instance, both also talked of their close imaginative identification with Phillip Maddison. As one of them put it, at times she "almost became that character, his experiences became very real to me." Her emphasis here remained on the insight gathered as a result of the essential non-familiarity of those sensations: "I identified with them so strongly, even though I've never had those feelings … and so I'm not identifying with any past experience of my own." Such feelings could also be articulated as belonging to Henry, in the strong sense of a direct analogue between character and author (most obviously exemplified in the relationship drawn between Williamson and the hero of his novel-cycle, Phillip Maddison) but also through a generally shared understanding of all characters as the product and transplantation of the author's emotion-fueled and experience-led imagination. In fact, it was just as common for readers to make that claim without the mediation of literary character, to invoke a direct immersive sensation of being occupied by Henry himself. Although the gendered perspective on that experience obviously mattered, the overriding stress in all these reports lay on the crucially alien status of that sentient personality.

There were apparent exceptions. On occasions readers insisted upon the moral insights granted through occupying the inner perspective of characters whose thoughts and responses to situations rather disarmingly appeared to mirror their own. As I have discussed elsewhere (2002), literary society members were sometimes fond of identifying what they termed "that's it moments" when the mood or emotions conveyed in a scene and dramatically experienced in a firsthand fashion by the solitary reader seemed to perfectly capture how they had once felt or suffered or struggled. Instead of training them to develop an other-oriented sympathetic imagination, these experiences seemed to educate or

affirm an improving self-orientation. In doing so, such moments made them feel less inhabited by Henry and more as if Henry was in some way speaking intimately and directly to them.

So, while literary society members did sometimes describe the author as an object of admiration—as Paul conceded, he "is rather a hero figure to the Society"—and celebrate what they held to be his literary genius, for them the moral exemplarity of Henry much more squarely derived from his extraordinary role as teacher-cum-companion. A version of that kind of relationship has been described in previous anthropological examinations of exemplar-oriented forms of morality. Humphrey (1997), for instance, outlined the interactions between a disciple or follower and a recognized teacher in a Mongolian context. However, that deliberation is usually presented as particular to the predicament faced by a disciple. In her account all the emphasis falls on the agentive journey of that figure, as he or she moves from an initial search for a moral exemplar to the considered meditation on any identified exemplar, including self-reflections on which aspect of an exemplar to regard as exemplary. Since Needham (1985), anthropological attention has usually been occupied by the choices made between possible exemplars and the moral decisions that ensue as a consequence of that selection. By contrast, in this relationship, grounded in the immersive experience of the solitary reader, the situation was somewhat reversed. Instead of privileging the actions or meditative deliberations of the disciple or follower, interest overwhelmingly centered on the dramatic and uncontrolled interventions of the exemplar: Henry, whose insights apparently emerged from granting readers first person experiences, thoughts, and emotions that crucially did not feel like they really belonged to them.

Various commentators have more recently finessed the description of exemplar-oriented relationships: Mahmood (2005: 148), for instance, challenges assumptions within liberal traditions of moral inquiry by foregrounding a form of exemplar-oriented morality that in large part relies on imitation and non-reflective forms of emulation. Bandak (2015: 59) invites us to consider a follower's dynamic relationship to the logic of "exemplary series," or paradigmatically closed or open and extendable listings of figures as enchained sets of moral exemplars. Robbins (2018: 178) advises that exemplars need to be appreciated as persons that actively "solicit our attention," and in fact he argues that forcefulness or "demand for appreciation from people" be regarded as an essential aspect of the moral exemplar's appeal (ibid: 180). Still, none of them have really considered the exemplar in this fashion, as a subjective presence operating not just upon disciples or followers, say in a forceful manner, but also from within them.

The distinction is helpful, since it additionally allows me to differentiate the moral exemplarity of Henry from the exemplarity Williamson readers may be invited to identify in a character such as Birkin. While the latter undoubtedly appears demanding of other characters' attention, successively soliciting

admiration from Phillip Maddison in a manner that one might argue expresses a fascist cult of leadership, there is no sense of Birkin as a subjective presence in the lives of those characters who follow him. I have already noted that the virtues attached to Birkin do not really allow for that possibility. As readers, we discover next to nothing about the inner person or private thoughts and feelings of the fascist exemplar, and certainly not in the form that makes either Maddison or Henry such a compelling companion in the eyes of literary society members. Part of the vividness of the immersive experience and the moral insights that solitary readers drew from it lay precisely in the perceived access to an interiority, an experience that in large part convinced or felt real because of the vulnerabilities and weaknesses on display. In contrast to Birkin, Henry, like his main protagonist, impressed on the very basis of a flawed personality.

Even more importantly, I think, it was that immersive experience of Henry that ultimately resolved any problems attached to the reading process, and explained why a conversation between readers, of the order expected by Nussbaum, was felt to be unnecessary. Without ever denying the presence of fascist characters on the page or the admirations expressed for Birkin by Maddison, or really the political affiliations of the author, literary society members could always point to what else they knew about Henry, or in other words to the qualitative experience of solitary reading itself. That was vital since in fact no one I met ever claimed that authorial or character-led immersion resulted in them being occupied by expressions of esteem for fascist leaders or being made to participate emotionally in the fascist cause. Rather it was the very absence of those sensations that allowed literary society members to confidently assert that they knew what Henry was really like.

A PROBLEM OF RESEMBLANCE

Although the quality of their immersive experience might have meant that Williamson readers did not feel the need to address the existence of fascist exemplars in the novels *through conversation*, that was certainly not the end of the matter. Fascist characters on the page might not threaten the sympathetic practice at the heart of their literary imagination, but these characters and the admirations they drew out, especially from the main protagonist, did generate considerable unease elsewhere. Most notably they created a moral problem at the very level of conversation between readers: at that stage of the reading process that Nussbaum identified as responsible for resolving such dilemmas. But rather than the mechanics of a judicious reading, it was the practices of an even more conventional kind of conversation within the literary society that appeared under threat. I am talking about the individual and collective focus of Williamson's readers upon what was for them the essential relationship between literary characters and historical persons. Whether or not characters took on the status of *moral* exemplars, they were expected to exemplify knowable people, to be a

typical or good example of someone. The centrality of that principle of resemblance cannot be overstated; it informed not just the bulk of conversation between readers about literary characters but also nearly all the labor that society members subsequently invested in character analysis.

On the face of it that expectation might appear entirely predictable, especially for a form of popular reading in significant part centered on the consumption of the historical novel. Although by the time of its publication—the first volume came out in 1951 and the last in 1969—the idea of such a novel-cycle was already deeply unfashionable in critical circles, it is unquestionably the case that in a broad sense *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* fits into the classic structure of that genre and the impulses it is typically reported as sustaining (see Anderson 2011). Its fifteen volumes, each well over three hundred pages long, present a panoramic vision of the sweep of historical events, from the imperial city of the late nineteenth century to the first decade or so of a postwar Britain. They also support vast panoplies of major and minor characters, some identifiable as notable historical figures. As well as Hitler and a character clearly based upon Mosley, other secondary characters include Churchill and Field Marshall Haig; several other historical figures feature too, including some from the Suffragette movement such as Sylvia Pankhust. Likewise, there is the typical interlocking narrative between public events and private lives (ibid.: 25). In fact, as literary society members often referenced, Williamson's self-declared ambition was to produce a modern English version of Tolstoy's *War and Peace.*

Envisaged in those terms the *Chronicle* reproduces other typical aspects of the classic historical novel first identified by Lukács; before he encountered Williamson, Paul's boyhood favorite author was Walter Scott, whose works of course inspired Lukács's appreciation of the genre. For example, its narrative contains known historical figures, but the central arc of action and experience is told through undistinguished and on-the-face-of-it unidentifiable characters. These middling characters are presented as caught up in huge events beyond their control, and, as in other examples of the genre, they are made to waver in a "dramatic collision of opposing extremes" and to witness "declining and ascending forms of social life" (ibid.: 24). While the outcome of Williamson's narrative is hardly affirming of a story of human progress, there is that recognizable genre-specific equation between certain characters and historical persons with all the ensuing implications for a relationship to characterization as a whole.

But what in part distinguished the attitude of Williamson readers was their desire to literalize that relationship. Most importantly, and unusually, they did so not so much by focusing on the quality of characterization in notable historical figures as by zooming in on the implied historical persons taken to be behind all the other non-marked characters in the novel-cycle (see Reed 2019). From their perspective, it was the distinguishing features assigned to the main protagonist that ultimately provided the real key to their preferred form of character analysis and conversation. Although Phillip Maddison is undoubtedly a middling

character of the sort identified as typical of the genre, as previously noted there is a clear invitation to draw a comparison with the life of Williamson himself. To those with even a cursory knowledge of the author's biography or the curiosity to find out, the implied comparison only quickened as the narrative unfolded. Readers could discover, for instance, that Williamson, exactly like Maddison, grew up in the South London suburbs, that he also started work as a clerk in the City of London and served in the trenches of the Western Front. They could easily find out that the author, like Maddison, moved down to North Devon after the war, that both determined to devote their life to writing, and that subsequently each of them left North Devon to go and farm in Norfolk. The significant point here being that after an initial hazy expectation the basis of resemblance was solidified and thickened by biographical inquiry, a process greatly facilitated by joining the literary society. And once that happened, there typically arose a normative assumption of resemblance, leading members to investigate the exemplifying status of all sorts of major and minor characters.

It is important to highlight that this expectation of resemblance was assigned not so much to the naturalizing effects of consuming the genre of historical fiction so much as to the craft or craftiness of Henry. Indeed, literary society members usually assumed that these relationships were first laid down or devised by the author; if a characterization was adjudged to be a good example of someone in particular then that achievement also belonged to Henry. Likewise, it is necessary to understand that unlike Paul other Williamson readers did not as a matter of course especially enjoy historical fiction. A good number of them came to Williamson's works out of an appreciation of the tradition of nature writing and storytelling; many of them also preferred or often enthused far more over the author's other literary novels. So the tendency to focus upon and talk about relationships of resemblance was not peculiar to their reading of the *Chronicle* or the genre of the historical novel. Instead, the practice manifest across their discussion of nearly all of the works.

By way of illustration, I introduce a brief description of one particular London "study day," my aim being to give a sense of the kind of forum society meetings provided, including the tone of presentation and of much conversation. In this case discussion was arranged around Williamson's much earlier four-volume cycle known as *The Flax of Dream.* It is relevant to note that this coming-of-age romantic novel series does not conform to the genre type of historical fiction. The event in question took place in a hired hall in Central London and attracted a usual mix of middle-aged or retirement-aged literary society members from across the society's regional heartlands of southern England and the Midlands.

On this occasion, proceedings formally began with a few words of welcome from the meeting's chairman, who stood on a raised platform at the rear of the hall. After a friendly warning that today he would be a strict timekeeper—the chairman produced a large alarm clock from his bag and with mock seriousness

thumped it down on the table in front of him—the first speaker was called. An elderly man then proceeded to analyze the first book in the four-volume cycle, which tells the story of the protagonist's lonely childhood and the consolation he found in the local countryside around his West Country home. He largely did so through an extensive discussion of the resemblances identified between the protagonist and the author, for much like the *Chronicle*, the hero of this series was also assumed to be a close version of Williamson. The next speaker, though, chose to focus on an examination of minor characters, this time in the second schooldays volume of the cycle. Almost seamlessly, his presentation turned our attention to an account of Williamson's own South London grammar school. Using an overhead projector, this speaker, in his late forties and so comparatively young, moved through a slideshow of images of the school as it once looked. This included showing us a photograph of Williamson's actual headmaster, a man identified as Frank Lucas, who nearly all audience members seemed to already know as the prototype for Mr. Roar, the dominating head teacher in the story. However, that image was merely a prelude to the next slide, an illustrative chart painstakingly put together by the speaker to match each character that taught in the novel with a teacher known to have been working at the grammar school when Williamson was a pupil there. Wherever he could find it, the speaker had added biographical information and further photographic portraits of these individuals, ending his presentation with the disclosure of a group picture of all the teaching staff that he announced he had found in the school's archive.

In fact, such revelations peppered each of the remaining talks that day. In the third presentation, for instance, it became the device by which the speaker structured nearly all her insights. Most notably, she began by inviting the audience to consider a carefully choreographed series of disclosures that the speaker teasingly referred to as her "aces." The first ace was revealed during an extended discussion of a character named Julian Warbeck, well known to audience members as the drunken companion of the main protagonist. That disclosure was initially presented through a quoted extract from Williamson's diary that described the personality of a close friend of the writer called Frank Davis, but then by the surprise addition of a photographic portrait of this man. For he was, she dramatically advised the room, the "real historical person behind Warbeck." Her "second ace" swiftly followed. This time it took the form of an unpublished poem written by Davis about Williamson, that she had recently discovered. Both disclosures were enthusiastically received. After that the remaining aces came thick and fast. These included a photograph of a terraced house in Folkestone, the same seaside town where the action in the novel took place, which the speaker informed us was the family home of her next target, a local woman named Mabs Baker. She, the speaker next declared, was in fact the prototype for Eve Fairfax, the chief love-interest of the protagonist. To rapt attention we were then treated to the projection of two paper silhouettes,

contemporary profiles of Baker and Williamson respectively, before the reveal of her "last ace," a grainy discolored photograph of Henry and Mabs sitting together on the front steps of that same terraced house.

As a moral achievement such resemblance work rested in large part upon the degree to which a character was adjudged to be a "good" example of the person concerned. To an extent this was a straightforward matter of likeness or similarity. But as the reflections of all the speakers highlighted, the goodness of that connection could also be measured by the extent to which it pleased the individual presenter or audience; the last speaker also spoke to many nodding heads of "the usual euphoria" that she got "on pinning down one of Henry's characters." A crucial aspect of the relationship between literary character and knowable person was its individual internal capacity for extraordinary expansion and enlargement; in some fashion it needed to be extractable from the overall narrative or plot. The terms of conversation between Williamson readers and the many hours or days of labor individuals often spent on researching a character *depended* upon the dynamism or tension contained within those interactions. This could occur as a result of obscurity, either through the character being very minor or the suggested figure being hard-to-track-down, or through issues of contestation. Members enjoyed nothing better than a lively debate over the source of a character; not everyone agreed, for instance, that Eve Fairfax was an exemplification of Mabs Baker. However, as in the example of Phillip Maddison, it could also occur as a result of the resemblance's apparent obviousness, in such a scenario the tension usually arose around the density of micro differences between a character and its implied person.

Yet, in all cases resemblance worked through the expectation that literary society members should be able to envisage the relationship from both sides. This could be achieved through common strategies of biographical study and genealogical research. But it could also take place because of the process of inquiry being reversed; a countermovement that was crucial to the imagination attached to the principle of resemblance. At the Society dinner at my very first annual meeting in North Devon, for instance, I was seated beside two older members who I learned had both attended the same grammar school as Williamson. Although a generation or so younger than the author, each man had known some of the teachers identified as characters in the schooldays novels. Similarly, I later met and interviewed a member who grew up in the same South London suburb as Williamson and whose mother knew his family. In fact, a generation back the two households had shared the same Irish charwoman, taken to be the model for a much-loved minor character in the historical novel-cycle. So, members' project of peopling literary characters could sometimes lead to those characters being assessed in a manner more like the way one read famous or notable figures depicted in historical fiction, for instance against an already established recorded or handed-down knowledge of that person.

To return for a moment to Nussbaum's model of the moral and political dimensions of a literary imagination, it might therefore be appropriate to identify *two quite separate regimes of sympathy* at work in the literary society. The first is a version of the kind of sympathetic imagination Nussbaum concentrates upon and which she has structuring the stages of her reading process: emotional attachment to or sympathy for a literary character followed by judicious assessment of that immersive experience, leading to an extension of sympathy toward others in the world. With Williamson readers there is of course the caveat that this process centered far more squarely upon a sympathetic engagement with Henry, the authorial figure that they picked out at the heart of their solitary immersive experiences. However, secondly, and quite distinct from the sympathetic imagination Nussbaum envisaged, *we have a regime focused on observing the dynamic sympathy not between reader and literary character (or authorial figure) but instead between character and the person taken to lie behind it.* Here attention typically fell on individual and collective recognitions of that relationship and its interactions. There was an almost Frazerian logic to the sympathies observed between character and knowable person, with principles of both similarity and contact seemingly informing or motivating the character analysis of literary society members. As well as retrospectively appearing as an effect that resembles its cause in a like-producing-like manner, literary characters could be appreciated as dynamically conjoined to their implied person. Once recognized by readers, each was perceived as capable of working on or acting upon the other, long after Henry created link between them and then severed or disguised it.

This sympathetic relationship, I would argue, was where literary society members did identify a moral problem attached to their engagement with the fascist character of Birkin. Partly drawn out as an apparently simple result of the author's decision not to name Mosley directly, that problem centered around the invitation to do resemblance work. Part of the thrill felt in pinning down one of Henry's characters derived from the sensation of restoring that implied person to life, by acknowledging their influence on a literary character and hence in some way making them impactful or present once again. To stretch the analogy to a Frazerian version of sympathetic magic a little further, members did not strive to injure or destroy an enemy by harming an image of them, but rather strove to use that image to register the effects of the person assumed to be depicted and hence in some fashion to revive them. This was normally just where the moral achievement of such sympathetic practice was taken to lay. In short, Williamson readers worried about reanimating Mosley. It is important to stress here that the character of Hitler, who like other notable historical figures in the *Chronicle* did not have a fictionalized name, never generated an equivalent level of this kind of sympathetic anxiety. But as well as fearing the inadvertent consequences of doing resemblance work on Birkin, literary society members worried over the impression that, much like their other pinning downs, this one might also feel like a restoration project ultimately designed or planned for by Henry.

Indeed, the more one concentrated on the sympathetic relationship between Birkin and Mosley, the more that suspicion tended to grow. Williamson readers who joined the literary society and started conversing with other members might eventually discover, for instance, that Birkin was undoubtedly and at times very directly voicing the political ideas of Mosley. The prison-authored manuscript that Birkin hands to Maddison, extracts from which Maddison keenly shares and cites as a source of inspiration, could in fact be revealed as verbatim lines from Mosley's postwar volume, *The Alternative*, the ex-BUF leader's attempt to communicate to the British public a rebooted political philosophy. Even more concerning, the public speeches given by Birkin at those ISP rallies or branch meetings that Maddison attends could also be tracked back to recorded passages from Mosley's BUF addresses. In the scene describing the rally at Olympia, for example, there are nearly four pages of exact quotation; likewise in an earlier scene where Maddison receives news of Birkin's resignation from the Labour government the reader is given over fifteen directly reproduced lines from Mosley's own 1930 speech to Parliament. Such findings, which in other circumstances literary society members might tout as the hard-won "aces" of character research, tended to leave them deeply unsettled.

Here it appeared that Williamson readers reached the limits of their own conversation. To many of them, the observation of that sympathetic relationship suddenly seemed to become just too risky, and on several fronts. For one, if too much of Birkin's exemplary status was revealed, that knowledge threatened to completely overwhelm the character and render Birkin as nothing more than a mask for Mosley and a mouthpiece for his political views. He would then not be a literary character at all, at least not in the sense that readers typically appreciated. But even if it was possible to control the impact of Mosley, for instance to allow for an experience of character thickening—the common ambition of much secondary character analysis and discussion within the literary society (see Reed 2019)—this would require members to spend more time with the BUF leader than many were comfortable with. Especially so since the resources potentially available to them would be incommensurably richer. In addition to the deep Mosley archive and countless histories and biographical pieces there was a published autobiography to consume. Members seemed to tacitly agree that if that character research meant attributing increasing levels of authority to the fascist leader, fleshing out Birkin through discovering more and more about Mosley, few of them wanted to bear the costs.

CONCLUSION: IMITATING MOSLEY

As several commentators have observed, the cult of leadership within the British Union of Fascists partly relied upon an imitative ethos. In the promotional materials the movement produced Oswald Mosley was typically presented not just as an exemplification of fascist virtues, but as someone whose physical

stance, gestures, and demeanor members ought to strive to more immediately replicate. To quote Gottlieb (2004: 97), "The new British fascist man was Mosley in miniature;" a point that Baxter (2019: 236–38) successfully illustrates through her close analysis of the ways in which photographic portraits of BUF officials often directly and quite consciously mirrored the images circulated of the leader. Quite literally cast in Mosley's image, his followers, it is suggested, embraced that mimetic practice as one route to accessing and displaying those fascist virtues.

Although never explicitly cast as a form of exemplar-oriented morality, in these accounts British fascism does appear comprehensible in those terms. If one accepts the idea of wider historical fascism as a form of "political religion" (Gentile 1990), that case becomes quite compelling. An anthropologist might press historians to explore those possibilities further, to consider, let's say, the relative balance of exemplary relationships within a moral tradition based upon emulation of a leader. To what extent did Mosleyites derive their adherence to the cause from the disciplines of imitation? If it was "through this mimetic reproduction that one eventually came to acquire the moral character of the exemplar" (Mahmood 2005: 148), then how were this work and its consequences invoked or recognized, not just in the example of the cultivation of a new fascist man but more broadly in the ordinary ethics of British fascism? Lastly, how did those disciplines of imitation operate alongside of, or in tension with, acts of conscious self-reflection upon the exemplar, such as emerge in liberal traditions of moral inquiry that might place a premium on linking "the notion of self-realization with individual autonomy" (ibid.: 11)? That question now has more purchase given the rise of historical interest in examining the nature of fascist concepts of "conscience" (Koonz 2003), and the respective fields of its enactment.

While such inquiries are beyond my terms of reference as an ethnographer of literary society and the practice of fiction reading, the Williamson example and the treatment of fascist characters within his novel cycle do point to some of the expected complexities. For example, despite the admiration Phillip Maddison consistently expressed for Birkin, there is little sense of an imitative practice informing the actions of the main protagonist. Maddison is far from being or striving to be a convincing miniaturization of Birkin, and at least as far as literary society members were concerned the hero of those novels hardly fitted the fascist ideal of the new man. Certainly, as we have seen, that was not the basis upon which this character (nor in fact "Henry") became an object of sympathy to solitary readers.

That said, it is important to recognize that the issue of imitation does surface in Williamson's text. In fact, it is at the heart of the only sustained formal attention to fascist exemplarity that appears in the historical novel-cycle, a cautionary analysis voiced largely through the observations of Maddison but principally centered on the example of National Socialism. While the protagonist is impressed by what he takes to be the widespread public enthusiasm for Hitler

in Germany, a creeping nervousness begins to emerge in his account. Over time he starts to articulate concerns, for instance that Hitler's followers might be mistaking "self-built" or projected images of the leader for the real thing (Williamson 1965: 196). At first the dilemma identified is not so much with the status of the National Socialist leader as moral exemplar as with the mis-recognitions inevitably prompted by the condition of following him, but Williamson's chief protagonist also increasingly worries about the integrity of such an orientation, a concern that grows in particular after war breaks out and his previous faith in Hitler appears betrayed. Maddison increasingly seems to ask himself not just who the leader really is but also who he himself truly is and whether his admiration for Hitler or Birkin might threaten that self-integrity. Although this is a highly unorthodox recovery of familiar sets of ethical concerns in the liberal tradition, it eventually prompts Maddison to realize some kind of critical reflection upon his admiration for fascist leaders, especially Hitler, and to a developing suspicion of anything that looks like unthinking imitation. As literary society members acknowledged, Williamson at various times publicly repeated the same concern. In this reassessment fascist virtues could not be faithfully accessed through the mimetic reproduction of the leader, and in fact followers had to actively resist the temptation to become little Hitlers or miniature Mosleys.

Unsurprisingly, such a problematization of the cult of leadership, while indigenous to the text, never attracted much interest from the readers I knew, and in truth they usually ignored it or met it with silence. It was clearly insufficient on its own terms as either a condemnation or recantation of fascist adherence—the character of Hitler, for instance, is never straightforwardly rejected as an exemplar of evil—but apart from that, literary society members could not help but feel bothered by the wider kinds of comparison involved. This included the suggestion, intermittently floated by the hero of the novel cycle, that his own inner struggles to consolidate a sense of self might at some level be equivalent to what he took to be the internal struggles of Hitler, and even more troubling, by the implication that everyone shared these same struggles. The idea that the positive exemplarity of the fascist leader might be replaced by an acknowledgment of our common identity with a morally conflicted Hitler was simply too much for members to countenance.

Williamson readers did nevertheless connect with more conventional critiques of the cult of leadership as they have circulated in public opinion during and since the period of historical fascism in Britain. These included the very idea of Mosley as a bad caricature or mimic, first of Mussolini and then of Hitler. Often closely tied to popular portrayals of the BUF leader as a negative moral exemplar, such counter-readings of the imitation ethos within fascism were sometimes directly referenced by literary society members, even if individuals like Paul wanted to move away from what they regarded as the too-crude "bogeyman" status with which these readings were often associated.

On several occasions I witnessed members allude to the views of one secondary character in the novel-cycle who expressed reservations about Birkin, partly on this basis. As a confidant to the main protagonist during the period of his close association with Birkin's movement, Brother Laurence sometimes communicates those concerns directly to Maddison, while at other times they appear through the narrator's account of the character's private musings. Typically, the reservations take the form of a series of unanswered questions.

> He thought that Birkin had certain powers in him, and no-one could deny his courage; but was it only the spirit of English bone, stubborn and indomitable in war? How sensitive was he behind his reserve? Was there an awareness of the still small voice within? Certainly, by all accounts, Birkin had a voice, which was used loudly and powerfully. At times he worked himself up into a frenzy, like Hitler; was this in imitation, or due to an interior frustration from his early years (Williamson 1965: 303–4)?

In this extract the inference certainly exists that imitation might be a negative instance of fascist aesthetics, a sign of slavish emulation or of psychological limitation. Even more seriously, at least from the perspective of a fascist cult of leadership, was the querying of Birkin's status. Instead of being the object of imitation, the proper role for a fascist leader, Birkin appears in Brother Laurence's ruminations as a possible imitator. Hitler-like in his frenzies, the suggestion stands that Birkin might not be an authentic, charismatic voice at all.

It is interesting the degree to which some of Brother Laurence's questions resonate with the inquiry of Paul, his puzzlement over "what to make" of Mosley, by which he meant the person within or beyond the façade of the leader. But for most literary society members the true significance of the Brother Laurence episode lay less in the nature of the doubts expressed about Birkin and more in the construction of the character that voiced them. Not only was Brother Laurence adjudged to be of good reputation, and hence a reliable witness, but in the eyes of many Williamson readers I knew, issues over relationships of resemblance *improved* the standing of those musings. Brother Laurence was one of the few characters in the *Chronicle* that members commonly conceded had an unresolved sympathetic relationship or no clear connection to a prototype. At one annual meeting I attended, one speaker opined that there was no historical person behind that character, and he was a total invention of the author. Such claims would ordinarily disturb Williamson readers' faith in the moral weight of characterization, but in this case the lack of apparent resemblance was seen as a bonus. It enabled members to reasonably reassign that doubting perspective on Birkin to Williamson, or at least to the authorial figure taken to speak through his books. If Brother Laurence was not a conventional exemplar of someone, then

perhaps he had exemplary value as a rare instance of the relatively unmediated, potentially disapproving voice of Henry.

Such a move appealed because it encapsulated in an original fashion the double movement of sympathy within their literary imagination, and possibly because it suggested some element of closure on a sympathetic dilemma. However, if that were the case it is a somewhat misleading place to end. Although literary society members did seek adequate explanations for Williamson's fascism, their conversations *as readers* were not really defined by the search for a moment of authorial awareness or critique of the fascist leader in the texts. As already pointed out, the moral discipline in both stages of their reading process did not depend on a consumption of the text in its entirety, or on attachment to the entirety of outlook ascribable to a literary character or authorial figure. Instead, what mattered most, especially in their solitary reading, was the quality of the immersive experience. One might helpfully call this process imitative in the sense that it relied upon a simulated sensation of Henry, albeit one over which readers claimed that they had no control and that they experienced from the inside out. Nevertheless, it is vital to remember that for readers it was only the identities they actually felt that carried moral insight.

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Abstract: The mid-twentieth-century English novelist, Henry Williamson, wrote nature stories but also romantic and historical fiction, including a fifteen-volume saga that contains a largely favorable characterization of Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists. This essay considers the challenge of such a fascist character through the prism of the literary imagination of Williamson readers, and more specifically through my longstanding ethnographic work with an English literary society constituted in the author's name. I am centrally concerned with how literary society members deal with the positive depiction of the Mosley-based character through the stages of the reading process that they identify and describe. Do the immersive values commonly attached to their solitary reading culture, for instance, assist or further problematize that engagement? What role does their subsequent, shared practice of character evaluation play? As well as considering the treatment of characters as objects of sympathy, I explore the vital sympathies that for literary society members tie characters together with historical persons. Across the essay I dialogue with anthropological literature on exemplars, historical commentaries on the fascist cult of leadership, and finally with the philosophical claims that Nussbaum makes for the moral and political consequences of fiction reading.

Key words: solitary and shared reading, moral exemplars, literary character, historical fiction, anthropology and literature