

More Than Food For Thought: Mind-Metabolism In Literature

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The purpose here is to provide a new, unconventional way of seeing a literary text—but not to reinterpret it completely, according to some trendy approach. The literary characters' needs, demands, and responses are to be considered in terms of metabolism; the same will apply when the author is speaking as one of the characters in the piece. Metabolism involves a pair of contrasting processes: catabolism, the wearing or tearing down of what gives integrity and stability to the organism (in this case, the mind as a regulatory mechanism for wholesome psychological survival), and anabolism, the building up or restructuring of what gives integrity and stability to the organism or the mind. Certain poems and works of fiction will be examined in the light of this alternative approach to literary study.

metabolism: “the sum of the physical and chemical processes in an organism by which its substance is produced, maintained, and destroyed, and by which energy is made available.” Random House Webster's College Dictionary, McGraw-Hill Edition, 1991.

“You may be growing: you require food to build up tissue. You may be going: you require energy. Both growing and going are change, metabolism. But building is an assimilation process; you construct or repair something: that is constructive metabolism, or anabolism. But the exhibition of energy involves dissimilation; by converting complex substances into simple ones you destroy something: that is destructive metabolism, or katabolism.” George A. Dorsey, Why We Behave Like Human Beings, 1925.

In Robert W. Lewis, Jr.'s 1938 article, “What to Say About Fiction,” he suggests a question that opens up all manner of possibilities: “What ideas seem to be unconscious assumptions of the author and thus operate tacitly?” My focus in this paper is a literary topic, a way of reading the text, which I feel may be discussed more effectively in metaphorical terms than in a routine manner. Putting it thus unconventionally, it is a matter of psychological nutrition and mind-metabolism in literary characters and their authors. What do their minds require in order for them to function well or at least adequately? That is the question. But what does this business of mind-functioning have to do with feeding and other life-maintenance processes in living organisms? Of what use is such a far-fetched analogy, which is actually only one example of a vast system of creative comparisons (other examples being those of the late critic Kenneth Burke, “literature as equipment for living” and the behavioral study of the late psychiatrist Eric Berne, Games People Play)? Can it help students and instructors bent on a more enjoyable and productive trip down the road to knowledge?

By looking into what I have called the mind-metabolism of selected literary characters and/or their authors we can gain an appreciation of how important in the shaping of the literary text are certain psychological menu-items (figuratively speaking) needed to keep the mind (at play in the text) on an even keel. We can also gauge the effect on the individual and on the literary work of a dietary deficiency in regard to those items. This literary perspective, I feel, deserves to take a place along with other fashionable perspectives, such as gender, economics, genre and form, narratology, and the numerous other angles of approach used in dealing with literary works. But before looking at two particular cases of faulty mind-metabolism, for openers, why not begin with an ancient and well-established literary reference to the functions of eating (ingestion) and digestion, which bears closely on the subject of this paper? Thus writes Francis Bacon, in his short essay “Of Studies” (1625 version): “Some

books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention."

One of the most influential literary works of the seventeenth century was Miguel de Cervantes's serious satire of an "ingenioso hidalgo," *Don Quixote de La Mancha* (part one, 1605; part two, 1615). He fed his mind richly and bountifully, but with the kind of food that disabled him from functioning the way all those around him, of lower and higher degree, functioned: in a realistic and effective manner. The opening pages of this classic, in the revised edition of the Ormsby Translation, describe what happened to his mind-metabolism. He spent almost all his leisure time "reading books of chivalry—and with such ardor and avidity that he almost entirely abandoned the chase and even the management of his property." So far "did his eagerness and infatuation go that he sold many an acre of tillage land to buy books of chivalry to read, bringing home all he could find." From such "folderol the poor gentleman" no longer had control of his senses, and "used to lie awake striving to understand it and worm out its meaning . . ." Thus "he became so absorbed in his books that he spent his nights from sunset to sunrise, and his days from dawn to dark, poring over them; and what with little sleep and much reading his brain shriveled up and he lost his wits."

So great was the influence of Cervantes's quasi-epic, and the hero's personality profile (excessive bookishness, fondness for romance and adventure, impractical drive to right great wrongs), that besides operatic and musical versions, a number of literary imitations and an indelible personality stereotype followed. One example is Tabitha Gilman Tenney's 1801 novel, *Female Quixotism*, the saga of Dorcasina Sheldon: orphaned daughter (and only child) of a wealthy Philadelphia-area businessman whose own bookishness leads to her dependence on romantic fiction, which results in her becoming the ridiculous victim of conniving fortune-hunters, and wrecking her life. At novel's end, utterly lacking in self-esteem, and having abandoned any hope of marriage at some future date, Dorcasina writes a contrite confessional letter to a friend. Her father, she reveals, "Attached to novels himself, as a source of amusement, from which he had received no injury," neither foresaw nor suspected "the mischiefs they might produce, in a young girl like me, ignorant of the world, and of a turn of mind naturally romantic." This led to her unrestrainedly satisfying her taste for such reading matter and bringing about her own ruin. She recognizes, that she has lived her "life in a dream, or rather a delirium," and has "grown gray in chasing" an ever-fleeting shadow, looking for "an imaginary happiness [*i.e.*, in marriage]" impossible to find on earth. "The spell is now broken; the pleasing illusion has vanished." Dorcasina seeks Heaven's forgiveness if she is "sometimes half tempted to ask its curse on the authors of the writings, which [*have*] so far perverted [*her*] judgment and depraved [*her*] taste," that she rejects "an advantageous connubial connection."

William Wordsworth, a major romantic poet of the late 1790s and early 1800s, experienced bouts of depression and marked mood shifts during his productive years, but had the initial advantage, when he was in a "down" mood, of being able to call directly or indirectly on some feature of natural creation for a restorative. In an early poem, "The Tables Turned" (1798), after depicting a certain nature-zone as a supreme educator ("One impulse from a vernal wood/May teach you more of man,/Of moral evil and of good,/Than all the sages can."), Wordsworth in the next stanza cautions against allowing the mind to malfunction, which suggests the kind of faulty metabolism (in our metaphor) that disrupts the normal processes of judgment and perception. Thus: "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;/Our meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—/We murder to dissect." He dealt with these episodes candidly in his poetry, attempting to explain what restored a wholesome state of mind. In "The World Is Too Much With Us; Late and Soon" (1807) he seems to have lost his mooring. "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:/Little we see in Nature that is ours;/. . ." So forlorn, he would even choose a pagan creed, if it enabled him to see something

that could connect him with things (i.e., to feed his spirit) such as those mythic seagods Proteus and Triton, in action. “I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud” (1807) offers the sight of golden daffodils at the lakeside, under the trees, dancing in the breeze, that feeds his spirit and makes him gay once more, because he is “In such a jocund company.” Whenever his spirit droops again, he’ll need only a recollection of his being with those daffodils, a flashing “upon that inward eye,” to nourish him back to a healthy, cheerful state. In “My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold” (1807), the sight of “A rainbow in the sky” is his connection, as it always has been and as it should continue to be, with the necessary source of his spiritual nourishment.

A striking instance of Wordsworth’s mood swings, suggesting momentary metabolic breakdown (due possibly to a biochemical imbalance, temporarily remediable, if some type-specific aspect of nature is introduced) occurs in his poem “Resolution and Independence” (1807). Wandering on the moor, “happy as a boy,” he suddenly underwent a change. “But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might/Of joy in minds that can no further go,/As high as we have mounted in delight/In our dejection do we sink as low;/To me that morning did it happen so;/And fears and fancies thick upon me came;/Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name.” Then he encountered a poor old man gathering leeches from a pond, and was moved to engage him in conversation about his occupation in so lonely a place. The leech-gatherer’s answer somehow did not comfort Wordsworth, whose “former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;/And hope that is unwilling to be fed;/Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;/And mighty Poets in their misery dead.” Struck by his sense of the sadness of the old man’s precarious existence, the poet—“Perplexed and longing to be comforted,” renewed his question of how he lived and what he did. The leech-gatherer explained. On learning of his increasingly serious problem of finding leeches, and his determination to persevere in his occupation, the poet—reacting also to the lonely setting and to such a seemingly hopeless pursuit—was troubled afresh. Then, hearing a repetition of the leech-gatherer’s account, with “other matter blended,/ Cheerfully uttered, with demeanor kind,/But stately in the main,” the poet suddenly became revived: “I could have laughed myself to scorn to find/In that decrepit man so firm a mind.”

What kind of nutritional substance could this have been for the poet Wordsworth? One answer is provided by Shakespeare and O. Henry, who not only used the morale-lifting, mentally energizing Shakespeare line, “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin” (from Troilus and Cressida, III, iii, l. 175), as the title of one of his stories, “Makes the Whole World Kin” (1904), but applied it in at least another one of his tales, “The Marry Month of May” (1905). In the Wordsworth poems quoted here the dispirited speaker is temporarily strengthened and cheered up by the mental equivalent of a pick-me-up snack: the process of identifying with an unlikely Other: just what it takes to counteract the feeling of loneliness and sadness that we find from time to time in Wordsworth’s autobiographical poems.

A specific example of psychological (here, constructive, spirit-elevating) metabolism, i.e., anabolism, is found in a 1955 essay by Marius Bewley, reprinted in his 1970 essay collection, Masks & Mirrors. Bewley was referring to the poet Wallace Stevens and how he raised his mental state to a higher level. “Traditional American Transcendentalism . . . if it stood for anything as a movement, it was for the capacity to apotheosize the soiled pragmatic world, to justify the grubby fact in a higher realm of intuition. Such a transcending process is essentially a motion, a becoming. But it is not necessarily a flight from material reality. It can be an intenser apprehension of life—a kind of spiritual metabolism by which the boundaries of the physical are canceled, its substance becoming a part of some ultimate, central vision that is the highest life. For Stevens the exercise of the creative vision was the means towards achieving this intenser state of being.” [Note: my central thesis was not suggested by Bewley’s reference to spiritual metabolism; this paper in an earlier form was completed long before I happened to come upon Bewley’s essay.]

Thus far the process of constructive and reparative metabolism: anabolism, involving nutrition and assimilation, has been exemplified here. However, in the last example from Wordsworth's poetry, "Resolution and Independence," the destructive aspect of metabolism, catabolism, involving dissimulation, is also suggested. A very special instance of catabolism, involving "one touch of nature" as a restorative, is found in Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" (1681). Speaking of the many delights to be obtained in his garden, Marvell points out that his mind, now operating in such a desirable locale, has access to the entire range of living creatures, in microcosm, and can even improve on that happy condition: "Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less./Withdraws into its happiness;/The mind, that ocean where each kind/Does straight its own resemblance find;/Yet it creates, transcending these,/Far other worlds and other seas,/Annihilating all that's made/To a green thought in a green shade." (By way of added explanation of the third and fourth lines given here, the footnote in the text from which the poem was quoted offers a useful insight: "As the ocean supposedly contained a counterpart of every creature on land, so also the ocean of the mind." But it all boils down to the reductive "green thought in a green shade.")

A very interesting example of catabolism and anabolism on the level of group or metropolitan psychology (rather than individual psychology), with an added physical representation, occurs in Booth Tarkington's novel The Magnificent Ambersons (1918). Toward the end of the story he deals with the too - rapid growth, in the early twentieth century, of the community he has been referring to as a (or the) "Midland town": based, probably, on Indianapolis, Indiana. Environmental pollution and other related urban maladies were now besetting this formerly clean and quiet burg, and Tarkington criticizes "the idealists" for erecting grand commercial edifices, for boasting about it, and for welcoming the prosperity that was bringing so much dirt to this Midland town. He writes that the idealists "were happiest when the tearing down and building up were most riotous, and when new factory districts were thundering into life." Actually, their city began to resemble "the body of a great dirty man, skinned, to show his busy works, yet wearing a few barbaric ornaments;" this kind of "figure carved, coloured, and set up in the market-place, would have" served adequately as this new people's god. In fact, they really had made one such as he "in their own image . . . But while the Growing went on," he "was their true god, their familiar and spirit-control." They knew neither "that they were his helplessly obedient slaves," nor that they could "ever hope to realize their serfdom (as the first step toward becoming free men)" before making "the strange and hard discovery that matter should serve man's spirit."

But as for Wordsworth's mind-nutritional needs expressed poetically, they may be compared with the needs-and-poetic-response pattern in Matthew Arnold, writing several decades later. Two of Arnold's poems, published eighteen years apart, reveal contrasting needs, with the passage of time, for the right diet to minister to a mind that is ill at ease. What is possibly the most direct treatment of this subject is found in the 1849 poem "To a Friend." "Who prop, thou ask'st, in these bad days, my mind?" the poet inquires, troubled (it has been thought) by the tenor of the times, changes occurring in certain fundamental beliefs. He names three individuals. First is "the old man, who, clearest-soul'd of men,/Saw the Wide Prospect, and the Asian Fen,/And Tmolus' hill, and Smyrna bay, though blind." Homer, according to the interpreters. Next is "That halting slave, who in Nicopolis/ Taught Arrian, when Vespasian's brutal son/Clear'd Rome of what most shamed him." This is taken to refer to the Greek stoic philosopher Epictetus. But Arnold's "special thanks" go to the one who throughout his life was proof against the dulling effect of business and against being made wild by passion, he "Who saw life steadily, and saw it whole;/The mellow glory of the Attic stage,/Singer [and child] of Sweet Colonus": Sophocles.

Hardly less illustrative for our purpose is Arnold's best-known poem, "Dover Beach" (1867), with its sweeping rejection of the mind-menu of the world, "which seems/To lie before us like a land of dreams,/So various, so beautiful, so new," but which "Hath really neither joy,

nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;”—in favor of sexual love and being true “To one another!” Though critics and commentators have had various opinions on the identity of Arnold’s unforgettable love-object—was she his own bride, an enchantress he referred to as “Marguerite,” or some other *belle inconnue*?—his plaintive hunger-cry has resounded through the ages.

We turn again to prose fiction: the familiar opening of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851). Ishmael speaks, of times when his objects of interest on land become practically exhausted. “Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword. I quietly take to the ship.”

In Edward Everett Hale’s short story “My Double and How He Undid Me” (1859), Frederic Ingham, a Protestant minister, feels he is unable to function psychologically unless he frees his mind from the morass of social and public duties his “calling” has laid upon him and his wife. He hires a shiftless, dull-witted man who looks strikingly like him, to be his stand-in, to attend ceremonial functions and give a few simple responses when spoken to by strangers . . . so that he himself can have the peace and quiet of mind he so badly needs. But Hale, a Protestant minister himself, beset by just this problem, which he worked into a number of his stories, spoils the fun. As in the old anecdote underlying this plot, this substitute (minister) utterly lacking in understanding gets caught in his deception. The real culprit, Rev. Ingham, is banished to a tiny, remote parish, where only his wife and daughter are the parishioners.

Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s story “Miss Mehetabel’s Son” (1873), set in New Hampshire in October, 1872, features a colorful, eccentric old-timer staying at an isolated country hotel. He explains to the narrator (a temporary guest at the hotel) what keeps him going, in fact lively and enthusiastic a good deal of the time, except when he remembers his experiences with Miss Mehetabel and their little boy (figments of his imagination), who died early. “Don’t I find it a little slow up here at the Corners? Not at all, my dear sir. I am in the thick of life up here. So many interesting things going on all over the world—inventions, discoveries, spirits, railroad disasters, mysterious homicides. Poets, murderers, musicians, statesmen, distinguished travellers, prodigies of all kinds turning up everywhere. Very few events or persons escape me. I take three daily city papers, six weekly journals, all the monthly magazines, and two quarterlies. I could not get along with less. I couldn’t if you asked me. I never feel lonely. How can I, being on terms of intimacy, as it were, with thousands and thousands of people?” He sums up the matter thus: “Existence may be very full to a man who stands a little aside from the tumult and watches it with philosophic eye. Possibly he may see more of the battle than those who are in the midst of the action.”

The narrator in O. Henry’s short story “Confessions of a Humorist” (1903) is a bookkeeper who quits his job and turns good-humorist, dispensing his jocular remarks and anecdotal observations *live* to fellow workers and others he comes in contact with, and *on paper* to readers of various publications. In time his comic muse deserts him, his writings are no longer wanted by the editors, and he has to scrounge for comic material from whatever source. One day, downhearted and jokeless, he wanders into a funeral parlor owned by an acquaintance, to rest a bit. Going into the back room, he finds himself becoming transformed: relaxed and unburdened to the point of calm contentment, with no demands being made on him to produce the usual journalistic copy. Not long after, quite conditioned to the new place, he is at last freed from his “habit of extracting humorous ideas from [his] surroundings.” This changed man, whose mind is now fed by different nutrients and whose mood is catalyzed by stimulating

elements in his environment, becomes part owner of the funeral establishment and—a jolly good fellow as in former times—feels that he has found his niche at last.

Sinclair Lewis's "Young Man Axelbrod" (1917) is the saga of a sixty-five-year-old Scandinavian backwoods farmer who the year before had developed a strong desire to fulfill his deepseated craving for higher learning, and had somehow managed to get accepted into Yale. But what he thought would feed his mind and his spirit with sorely needed nourishment, unavailable elsewhere, turned out after a while to be unsuitable to his system. There were too few kindred spirits for him—considering his age and background—on the New Haven campus, even allowing for one or two genuine friendships. And his self-confidence and morale were brought down by a pernicious PhD professor of history who shamed and humiliated Knute Axelbrod in class, making him sadly aware that he was not in the right social medium for the proper nourishment of his mind, whatever educational benefits he might obtain at Yale.

A number of other excellent stories of the twentieth century might be cited, among them Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" (1905) and another Sinclair Lewis story, "A Letter From the Queen" (1929), but I shall conclude with an exemplary short fiction of far more recent origin, Pam Houston's "How to Talk to a Hunter" (1989). Here a young woman tells, by means of a step-by-step do-it-yourself guide, what it means and how it feels when the rugged, macho lover, once so marvelous to be with, to have and to hold, starts slipping away, and the woman has a dire need to stabilize herself, restore her spirit. What nourishment then, for the discarded woman's mind and body too? The advice for rebuilding is implicit, so subtle as to be easily missed by the superficial reader. "He will have lured you here out of a careful independence that you spent months cultivating; though it will finally be winter, the dwindling daylight and the threat of Christmas, that makes you give in." "This is what you learned in college: A man desires the satisfaction of his desire; a woman desires the condition of desiring." The story concludes: "You'll wonder if he knows enough to stay in his dog house. You'll wonder if he knows that the nights are getting shorter now." But the deepest, most poignant aspect of this fictive view of catabolism and potential anabolism of the woman's psyche, her strenuous attempt to restore herself to herself, is not found in the text of "How to Talk to a Hunter"; it is found, rather, in the author's note about the writing of the story, at the back of The Best American Short Stories 1990. The story came to her, Pam Houston says, "out of [her] life's first moment of real desperation."

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