

Response to William Sullivan #1

Susan Currier

California Polytechnic State University

Perhaps because my discipline is literature, one of the most compelling ideas for me among the rich lode in William Sullivan's presentation is the notion of vocation as "the master narrative of middle class aspirations"—a narrative which carries "force" in American culture, a narrative with which all students and faculty must "struggle," and, I'd add, a narrative that has informed many of the most famous texts of literary and popular Western culture, particularly since the last quarter of the eighteenth-century and Rousseau's co-optation of the instruments of science for study of the self.

Some of the most obvious western literary manifestations of "the narrative of the calling" are the *bildungsroman* and *kunstlerroman*. One of the most popular and widely read of these in the twentieth-century liberal arts education of America's middle and upper-middle classes was James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Indeed it also became an avatar of Alex Zwerdling's "modern liberation plot" or "fable" (207). In these narratives, young men (more commonly and successfully than young women) mature by identifying and rejecting false claims upon their identities, spirits, and selves. Most important, they seek authentic vocations in new realms beyond those populated by the forces that would subvert the purpose of their lives. In *Portrait*, Stephen's false claims are the "nets" of his family, his Church, and his country that would impede a mythic flight toward his Dedaelian destiny as artist (203). By the end of the novel, Stephen has counter-posed a list of misogynistic philosopher-theologians to duty towards his mother, reduced Ireland to the "old sow that eats her farrow" (203), and dismissed the church as "chill" and "passionless,"—the "mirthless reflection" of a "sunken day" (160).

Stephen's flight from the vocations institutionalized within his culture is a Pyrrhic liberation fraught with dangerous pride and ending, if not in destruction, only in his re-emergence in Dublin, searching for a father in the opening pages of *Ulysses*. Nevertheless, Stephen's narrative is important because it speaks to the mythic roots of the modern, and, according to the lights of some theorists, the male ideal of the separate, or in William Sullivan's words, the "detached self." Whatever his particular style of narcissistic grandiosity, Stephen appears as a modernist dude still "wandering" between Arnoldian dead and unborn worlds, but further out on the fringe than his Victorian predecessors.

Across the Atlantic from Ireland, a long line of American folk and literary heroes anticipate Stephen. These include Huck Finn, Natty Bumppo, Captain Ahab, and others. All experiment with life on one frontier or another, beyond not only women but also cultural and religious communities, the "social whole" within which William Sullivan hopes young people will discover their vocations. This American fantasy reappeared as recently as last month's "state-of-the-union" address complete with a space agenda to include one-way manned flights to Mars. But a "social whole" remains elusive, as Bill Readings attests in his 1993 *The University in Ruins*, where he attributes decimation of belief and authority in the university itself to postmodernism and the deconstruction of our culture.

So what and where is the culture or “the social whole” towards which we ought to train our students’ talents? If, unlike Stephen, they abjure the fantasy of a separate self, and if, unlike Stephen, they agree to serve something else, what will that be? On the one hand, it’s arrogant and presumptuous to try to conjure a worthy world, especially for others. On the other, we’ve already waited at least a century and a half. So very humbly I propose a few of what seem to me the best ideas already conceived on the subject. I imagine that the human inhabitants of this new world will value and defend diversity in all sorts of dimensions including the social, biological, and physical. I think sustainability will be a paramount concern for all kinds of systems, biologic and otherwise. I claim no special expertise as an environmentalist, but some of the discourse from the environmental movement resonates with another fancy of mine. I like to think that the human inhabitants of this new world will celebrate the relational state of intersubjectivity and that as a controlling ideal it will inform not only human relations but also new psychologies, philosophies, and narrative forms to replace our current versions and the subject/object dualities on which they depend.

In *The Bonds of Love*, a reworking of classic psychoanalytic theory and modern psychology, Jessica Benjamin traces the dynamics of alienation and domination in our culture to our reduction of mother to mirroring object *vis a vis* her children in our psychological theory and our generalized consciousness. In this model, children, especially sons, begin to regard other as an extension of self, an object that exists to fulfill their needs. To gain vicarious recognition, daughters connect themselves to other male subjects who value them as mirrors. In becoming useful objects, they then sacrifice their own subjectivities. Finally, this is all not so much an issue of gender inequity as it is a recipe for despair for us all. As Benjamin explains, “Establishing myself (Hegel’s *being for itself*) means winning the recognition of the other, and this, in turn, means I must finally acknowledge the other as existing for himself and not just [as mirror] for me” (36). Affirming oneself requires acknowledging others and acknowledging others contradicts the existence of a separate or absolute self. Inter-subjectivity requires mutual recognition of similarity and difference.

Other fictions of our time celebrate inter-subjectivity and experiment with narrative embodiments of its dynamics. These are important in the education of our students toward lives in which individual fulfillment and social responsibility affirm rather than contradict one another. Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (Davenport) and Margaret Drabble’s *The Waterfall* provide two good examples. But that’s the subject of another paper.

Works Cited

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