Literary realism depends on the way writers solve the tension between the apparent, perceptible side of human actions and the norms and ideals that guide them. We lead our life here and now, but also interact with the higher, more abstract, level of desirable Goods and guiding norms. In actual life as well as in literature, the coordination between these two levels is only partial, and just as in celestial navigation both the line linking the observer with the horizon and the place of the North Star are required for determining the observer's position, our double look at actual actions and at the ideals that govern, or at least should govern them, guide us on our life-path and, when we read fiction, help us figure out the features of characters and their actions.¹

The Double Look

The literary representation of human action – mimesis, if one uses the Aristotelian term – is quite often assumed to have over the centuries become more and more attentive to life’s perceptible side. According to Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis (1946), realism has always been on the rise. An embodiment of progress, it gradually discovered new, better ways of capturing life experience in its actual vividness. Representation of characters, we are told, went through a similar development. Independently of Auerbach, Mikhail Bakhtin argued in his „Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel“ (1937-1938) that a major achievement of 19th century Russian realism was to go beyond the old schematic characters and imagine fictional actors endowed with depth and plausibility. Calling to mind E.M.Forster’s earlier distinction between flat and round characters (Aspects of the Novel, 1927), Bakhtin’s theory, like Auerbach’s, assumes that the long-term goal of literary fiction, finally achieved in the 19th century, consists in representing human life as closely as possible to its concrete, tangible reality.

Is this assumption correct? The various forms taken by the novel from ancient times to nowadays make me doubt it. In Heliodorus’ Ethiopian Story (probably 2nd century) which narrates the convoluted adventures of a star-struck couple, the action and the characters are strikingly implausible. Theagenes and Chariclea’s flight from Greece, their stormy crossing of the Mediterranean, and their various ordeals on the way to Ethiopia, not to speak of their perfect nobility, constancy, and chastity, hardly appeal to the reader’s sense of empirical reality. We do not know how this novel fared with its original public, but when it was rediscovered in the 16th century, Jacques Amyot, its translator into French (1547), described it as one of the excellent, highly useful books which „in addition to the pleasure they bring us,
serve to file down (so to speak) and better sharpen our judgment, such that pleasure does not remain pointless". It shines in comparison with the then fashionable chivalric stories that are, in Amyot’s terms, „most of the time so badly composed and so far from any plausible appearance that they seem to be the visions of a sick man dreaming under fever rather than the invention of a man of wit and judgment“ (Amyot 2008: 159-160, my translation). Half a century later, Cervantes agreed. His last work, Los Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda, a Christianized imitation of the Ethiopian Story published posthumously in 1617, was in his view his highest literary achievement and the guarantor of a long-lasting glory. Cervantes was not alone in feeling this way about Heliodorus’s narrative art. Late 16th and 17th century readers had the highest regard for this ancient writer and his recent followers, including Sir Philip Sidney, Martin le Roy de Gomberville, Mlle de Scudéry, Anton Ulrich, and Aphra Behn.

Why did these writers and readers appreciate stories that featured overly virtuous men and women caught in a whirlwind of improbable circumstances: flights from home, disguises, abductions by pirates, shipwrecks, persecution by capricious tyrants, and discoveries of one’s true parents at the other end of the world? Amyot’s remark offers a hint: in addition to the pleasure of surprise and suspense, the adventures of these perfect characters „sharpen our judgment, such that pleasure does not remain pointless“. More precisely, these narratives sharpen our moral judgment by requiring us to consider their splendid, implausible characters and actions in the light of higher ideals, norms, and goods. Chariclea and Theagenes do not resemble people we know, the ordeals they face do not belong to our daily life; yet we do recognize, and quite easily, that they incarnate pure love, nobility, and constancy and that in the struggle against a terribly hostile world these qualities prevail. The Ethiopian Story brings into focus admirable ideals and represents them by inventing exemplary actors, circumstances, and actions. Mimesis here does not imitate only the sensorial, visible, fallible human world, but also the moral principles that give it shape and meaning (virtue, independence, resiliency) and, because the characters invariably triumph over their ordeals, mimesis includes the silent alliance that links their impregnable inner citadel with Providence.

I call this way of writing fiction „ideography“. Rather than observing only the appearance of the world, ideographic novels shape the imaginary world according to a leading idea, whose impact can be felt in every single episode. These novels’ credibility does not come from the details they describe, although quite often such details are abundant and locally believable nor from a correspondence between the events of the story and the readers’ everyday experience. Instead, readers are first invited to grasp the main idea – in the Ethiopian Story the separation between human beings and the hostile world around them – and then to ask themselves whether this idea, however grand and abstract it may seem, might not in fact relate to the actual world in which they live. Once understood, the idea is expected to help clarify the general meaning of the actual world, rather than testify to its perceptible details.
Those who believe in the long term rise of realism would argue that at some point, perhaps in the late 17th century, or in the 18th or 19th, the novel abandoned ideography and moved towards a more faithful representation of actual life. According to some, this was achieved by Cervantes in Spain (in spite, as we saw, of what Cervantes himself thought about his work), others would point to Mme de Lafayette in France, to Samuel Richardson in England, yet others to Walter Scott, Balzac, George Eliot, or Tolstoy. In fact, however, ideography was never the only method for writing fiction. The genre of the novella, for instance, always told simple stories that take place in our actual world and, striking and unusual as they might seem, remain fully plausible. Rather than representing the result of a majestic iron law of history, 18th and 19th century realism might rather have been an expansion of novella’s techniques – familiar settings, plausibility, unity of action – to longer narratives. Furthermore, the ideographic method never lost its appeal. The 19th- and 20th century popular novel and, more recently, myth-creating movies are still full of implausibly perfect beings who relentlessly struggle against the hostile world, e.g. *Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, and, closer to us, *Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien, and George Lucas’s *Star Wars*.

Even fully realist 19th century novels that place their characters in a plausible historical and social environment pay considerable attention to the ideals, norms, and values that govern or rather should govern their life. In Balzac’s *Illusions perdues*, the social constraints of early 19th century France and Lucien de Rubempré’s flaws ultimately lead him to failure, but the novel constantly reminds the reader which ideals and norms the protagonist ought to have followed, which higher goods he should have sought. In a *Bildungsroman*, these ideals, norms, and goods as well as the best way of adhering to them are gradually discovered by the protagonists themselves: Wilhelm Meister, David Copperfield, Dorothea Brooks. The novel, ideographic or not, always takes a double look at the world it depicts: it always targets both the empirical, sensorial appearance of human life and the higher principles that guide it, whether this guidance is presented as successful or not. Mimesis does not simply imitate actions or impersonate characters, but also sheds light on the ideals, the norms, and the goods pursued by these actions and characters.

Notably, the double target and the double look undermine the argument against mimesis in Plato, *Republic* (10. 598a-c), according to which art only puts us in touch with the appearance of the represented objects and not with their form (=transcendent model). But when in his *Poetics* (25. 1461 b 1) Aristotle distinguishes between representation and plausible reality, he signals that art does not simply imitate appearances („And if men such that Zeuxis depicted [cannot possibly exist (?)], the answer is that it is better they should be like that, as the artist should improve on the model“, Aristotle 1984: 2339), but can aim higher.

Another way of addressing this feature of art and literature is to notice that the worlds they evoke are always placed at a distance from the reader’s actual world. When I look at Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* in Dresden, I am aware that the figures
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on the canvas dwell far from my own existence here and now. They send me into rapture, they carry me away, as do the sights of King Lear caught in the storm inveighing against his ungrateful daughters, of Hamlet reflecting on suicide, and of Racine’s Phèdre confessing her guilty passion. Yet, unusual as they are, these sights make sense to me because they point to something that guides, gives shape and meaning not only to Raphael’s Madonna and to the dramatic characters of Shakespeare and Racine, but also to my own life. And even in the cases when art or literature projects a smaller distance meant to be easily overcome, as do Adolph Menzel’s paintings or Tolstoy and Fontane’s novels, I grasp their point and sympathize with them because the worlds they evoke are ruled by laws and ideals that I know only too well. Our understanding of art and literature requires us to cross the larger or smaller distance between our actual side and the fictional side, and we are able to jump across it by clinging, as it were, to a rope attached, high above, to the bar of ideals, norms, and goods that overlooks both sides.

Social Contracts, Individual Tasks

The distance and the double look tell us something important about the kind of beings we are. We need the double look, we welcome the distance because our life is not a mere succession of physical and mental states, but involves constant reference to the principles that orient and govern them. In order to understand any human action, we need to observe the actual moves that announce or constitute the action and, at the same time, grasp the principles according to which these moves are made.

Sometimes these principles are quite clear. Consider the following example based on the well-known distinction between my arm moving up – a physical movement – and my moving up my arm – an intentional act. („What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?“ Ludwig Wittgenstein asked in his Philosophical Investigations, §621). Let’s say that my moving up my arm signals to friends gathered in the room that they should start singing Happy birthday if we celebrate the birthday of someone present or Gaudeamus igitur if we don’t. My intentional act is thus part of an agreement („When I raise my arm all of us must etc.“) that leads to an action. Let’s moreover assume that in the community in which I live a tradition requires the guests to a dinner party always to start singing one of these two songs when, at the end of the dinner, their host lifts an arm. The guests could be said to obey the rule: „At a dinner party, when your host lifts an arm, start singing etc“. When the guests see the host performing this gesture, they are not only aware that the movement of the arm is intentional, but they also remember that in their community a rule links this movement to an action they are expected to take: singing one of the two songs.

Imagine that a person from another town happens to be present and, hearing the song, asks her neighbor at the table: „What happened?“ The neighbor would
answer: „The host raised an arm!” meaning „Don’t you know that when the host raises an arm, we all must etc“. The newcomer could then say „Right, I saw it and wondered“ or „What a nice way to end a dinner“, or, on the contrary, ask „What do you mean? How can someone’s raising an arm make people suddenly sing?“ In this last case, she would have missed the possibility that the sequence of actions she witnessed could be governed by a prescriptive agreement. Her neighbor would need to explain that all participants had at some point – recently or long ago – adhered voluntarily to sing a song when etc.

Some thinkers, including John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, argued that we live in society by virtue of such an initial voluntary agreement, an initial social contract. The double look necessary for understanding a human action would target in this case on the one hand the action and on the other hand the articles in the social contract that regulate it. These articles contain positive and negative injunctions (e.g. „act in accordance to your role in society“, „you shall not lie and steal“, etc.), as well as rewards and punishments, for the distribution of which society can count on public opinion as well as on specialized institutions from prizes to prisons.

The view that links human action to binding agreements be they recent or inherited is often present in literary fiction. Rousseau’s Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse (1761), for instance, tells the story of a young woman born in a good family who falls in love with her tutor, a man of modest origin. She gives herself to her beloved – since love is something personal – but marries the man her father chooses for her because family is a social institution. In many cases, however, literary works present social conventions in a polemical way. Tragic characters cannot bring themselves to obey the common rules, in comedies those who do so are mocked, in ideographic novels the protagonists seek happiness by running away from their land, in realist novels they fight society, in the Bildungsroman they come to terms with it only after groping around awkwardly, while in more recent literature they often do not even attempt to join the common world, as happens to Mersault in Camus’ Etranger, to Beckett’s Molloy, to Béranger in Ionesco’s Rhinocéros.

Literature thus reminds us that while the explanation of human action by reference to voluntary social agreements clarifies some aspects of collective behavior, it is less effective when it aims to understand the individual. Kant’s morality of duty attempts to solve the tension between the two levels by instructing individuals to obey only those maxims that can be applied beyond their surroundings to the whole humankind. Individuals are thus authorized to disobey the local general will if its precepts fail to achieve the required universality. Literature, however, as well as most of our active life, is less concerned with the universality of the maxims than with concrete individual impulses, decisions, and actions. These might fit well within a given social agreement and even evoke a universally valid moral law, but they rarely resemble those of Rousseau’s Julie, who prudently embraces conformity. And when the actors contradict the social norm, the transgression and its reasons call for special attention. Béranger for instance, in Ionesco’s play, by refusing
to follow his compatriots who voluntarily turn into rhinoceroses, remains at the end the only person who still hangs on to his humanity.

One of the negative injunctions included in most social agreements – and which we might want to become a universal law – is the prohibition of murder. Yet in literature murder – a central topic – is not always treated as an offense against the existing social agreement or against a universally valid moral law. Take the example of *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus, who murders his father, is not entirely guilty. Not only he does not know the identity of the man he kills in a clash on the road, but the death of Laius is the punishment the gods inflict on him for having in his youth abducted and raped Chrysippos, son of Pelops. How can the tragedy’s spectators evaluate this situation? Which star would allow them to figure out the protagonist’s position? In this case, no single fixed star is available for help. Reading *Oedipus Rex* with E. R. Dodds’ *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) in mind, we realize that Sophocles’ tragedy stages both the archaic attribution of guilt to the whole family of the perpetrator of a crime and the later realization that responsibility should be ascribed only to the guilty individual. In Sophocles’ tragedy, the involuntary sins of the son are the gods’ punishment for the sins of the father and the position of Oedipus can be measured both in the light of the old system that condemns the whole family – the frightening destiny of Laius and Oedipus having been sealed long before the latter’s birth – and according to the newer way which blames only the willing author of a crime – in which case Oedipus is a piteous victim of fate. Fear and pity: the tragedy elicits both because on the moral sky the eye cannot stably target a single star and safely navigate under its guidance.

Or think of *Hamlet*. When at the end of the tragedy the protagonist stabs Claudius with Laertes’ poisoned sword, Hamlet’s move is justified by the ancient law of blood, which punishes murder by murder. Yet, the Danish prince does not apply this law self-confidently, without hesitation. As in all English revenge tragedies of the late 16th and early 17th century, in particular Thomas Kidd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, the act of revenge is constantly postponed. This happens partly because to fill out a five act play you need some delays and suspense between the initial crime and the final punishment, partly because the law of blood, which by Shakespeare’s time had been replaced by the King’s justice, had to be presented as a repulsive act that no one would eagerly emulate. But the postponement also highlights how difficult it is to convince oneself to carry out an act of revenge. Hamlet does not rush to kill Claudius right after the conversation with the ghost of his father: he first must make sure the ghost is truthful. But even after the play *The Murder of Gonzaga* is performed at court and the king’s reaction reveals his guilt, Hamlet is in no hurry to act – or rather, using Candace Vogler’s terminology (*Reasonable Vicious*, 2002), once he has found the right reasons to kill Claudius, the prince is in no hurry to select the right strategy for acting. When he discovers his uncle immersed in prayer, he lets him live, and when someone moves behind a curtain in his mother’s room, he runs his sword through thinking that he has hit Claudius, only to realize that the victim was Polonius. In the end, having been pricked with Laertes’
poisonous weapon, Hamlet, who holds the fatal sword in his hand, is nearby Claudius, and has only a few moments to live, cannot delay anymore. He acts.

Hamlet’s final move may be considered as the consequence of a normative/circumstantial injunction: „The late king’s murderer must be punished, but since he is now the monarch of the country and there is no legal way of forcing him to pay for his crime, you, Hamlet, having been told the truth by the ghost of your father, must take the law in your hands.“ But I do not know whether it is possible to reframe this injunction as part of a social agreement or as a Kantian universal law. Hamlet, in any case, far from welcoming it, laments:

The time is out of joint. O, cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right! (I, 5, v. 196-7)

Virtues, Moral Sentiments, Incumbency

In a world governed by clear, straightforward agreements the best of which might be ripe to become universal laws people are supposed to follow them. Men are born free, Rousseau argued, and because they need protection from the dangers of savage life, they form a law-governed community, abandon all their natural rights, and willingly submit to the general will. Even criminals condemned to death salute their death-sentence as a token of their own adherence to the general will. But are humans truly born free? They are, if by „born free“ we understand „having the potential to be free later in life“. Yet at birth and for a long time afterwards, far from being free, human beings cannot even take care of themselves. Warned by oracles that his newborn son would later kill him, Laius leaves the infant to die on a mountainside with his ankles pinned together. If shepherds had not found him and taken pity of him, helpless Oedipus would have perished. Furthermore, must we, as adult members of a community, always obey the general will? And if we do not, are universal moral maxims the only alternative? Did Oedipus and Jocasta follow them when, after learning the truth about their union, she committed suicide and he blinded himself? Is shame for one’s wretched condition dictated by universally valid moral maxims? In Hamlet’s case, when he realizes that „the time is out of joint“ and it falls to him „to set it right“, does his discontent resonate with such maxims? Perhaps it does, but in an indirect, awkwardly indirect way. Conventions, laws, and universally valid moral maxims somehow cannot fully take hold of the personal circumstances and the attitudes they elicit.

To clarify these circumstances and attitudes we need to take into account the characters’ individual profiles. One way of doing it is to describe characters in terms of virtues and vices, strengths and flaws, notions that shed light on their personality features rather than on their conformity with collective agreements and universal laws. An important advantage of the ethics of virtue is that it projects a stable constellation against which the characters and their actions can be evaluated. We know, for instance, what prudence and fortitude require us to do; we can
therefore look at Oedipus and Hamlet and judge whether they proceed in accordance to them. Virtues and vices being habits (and strengths and flaws being noticeable qualities brought forward, reinforced, or controlled by these habits), Oedipus comes out as prudent – learning that he is destined to murder his father, he leaves his adoptive parents in Corinth – and strong – early, he faces the Sphinx and, later, his own crimes. Hamlet, however, hesitant and impulsive, not only lacks prudence – he thrusts his sword through the arras that hides Polonius, he foolishly agrees to sail to England, and he accepts to fight with Laertes – but also lacks fortitude – since he does not fully devote himself to his revenge. Multi-faceted, he is reckless in his behavior towards Ophelia, gratuitously cruel towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, yet friendly to Horatio, devoted to his father, and graciously severe with his mother.

Shame and self-rejection in Oedipus’ case is the attitude of a man whose prudence and strength turned out to be worthless; Hamlet’s anxiety and discontent complicate but do not distort his multi-faced profile. Habits and stable features are intimately, but not always transparently, linked to our emotional attitudes. Blaise Pascal, who knew that the heart has its reasons that reason does not fully know, drew a compelling picture of humans as self-deceptive beings who look at themselves and their environment through the veils of self-love (vanity), diversion, arbitrary customs, and imagination, and act accordingly. In this new version, the double look – towards an idolized self and towards an imaginary world – aims to avoid rather than identify our true position. Consequently, in Pascal’s universe it is very difficult to achieve or even envisage a meaningful relation between human beings. When they fathom their fallen condition and confront it, they must turn to God.

By contrast, Adam Smith’s philosophy of moral sentiments, with its emphasis on mutual sympathy, is oriented towards our life and happiness in this world. Smith assumes that we look at the same time at our fellow humans’ feelings and at our own, thus gauging whether their feelings are justified or not. Conversely, we pay attention to other people’s „censure or applause“ of our own feelings and acts, gradually learning how to approve and disapprove ourselves. Our sense of duty, our self-interest, and the influence of custom (custom being considered wise and helpful) lead to the formation of virtuous habits. We are not meant to devise truly universal moral maxims, but rather to figure out correctly how to ensure our own happiness and that of people who are close to us. Smith is aware that what he calls „extravagant passions“ (vanity for instance) can influence our behavior, but the very term he uses – „extravagant“, that is, wandering outside the bounds – places these passions at the margins of the soul.

Later, existential philosophers paid special attention to these „extravagant passions“, in particular to those that far from distorting the perception of our condition, as vanity does, reveal something important, although rather depressing, about it, as Kierkegaard did in his writings about anxiety, fear, and despair. Martin Heidegger continued this reflection on gloomy moral sentiments. He packaged it in
a heavy and, in my view, inadequate ontological vocabulary, but if the wrapping is taken away, his remarks on moral emotions are instructive.

Heidegger describes our situation in the world as an unqualified awareness of „being present“ and calls the human being Dasein, being-there. Thrown (geworfen) in the world, the human being is „always already fallen“ (immer schon verfallen, Heidegger 1986 [1927]: 18) and knows itself as such. It is nevertheless susceptible of self-development (entwerfende) thanks to anxiety and care (in the sense of worry). Heidegger's terms are Angst for anxiety – with a reference to Kierkegaard’s analysis of this state of mind – and Sorge for care, which he links to the old Latin myth of Cura and to Goethe’s use of it in the fifth act of the second part of Faust. Anxiety separates the Dasein from the world, it makes it face the challenge of being a stranger. Care (Cura, Sorge), by contrast, impels the Dasein towards the world and enables it to bestow help and assistance (Besorgen and Fürsorge). Thanks to care, the Dasein becomes capable of devotion to those who are nearby.

A practitioner of phenomenology, Heidegger considers care with a vividly attentive gaze, yet refrains from glancing beyond the inner experience of the Dasein. When one examines the human beings from outside, care – worry – turns out to have a practical dimension that goes beyond what the Dasein senses within itself. We saw, for instance, that newborns are so frail that they cannot survive without other human beings providing for them. Our biological and social condition makes it incumbent upon some human beings (the parents, but not only them) to take care of the newborn and, more generally, upon each us, in certain situations, to look after other human beings. Care is not simply a feeling within the Dasein, pushing it towards those who are nearby. It rather falls to the Dasein’s lot to help and assist. When the task of caring for is clearly defined by customs and norms, one can speak of explicit duty. But this is not always the case. Sometimes the expressions „it is incumbent on you to do this“ and „it falls to you to do this...“ convey the sense that an unexpected, difficult to explain impulse to take care comes from outside us, presses down on us, whether we like it or not.

It is perhaps revealing that the etymology of „incumbent“ resonates with this sense of pressure. Etymologically, „incumbent“ is related to lat. cubo, cubare „to lie, to be in bed“, which is the root of incumbo „to lie down, to rest upon“ and also „to give oneself to a task“ and „to press down on something with all one’s weight“ (Ernout / Meillet 1932: 153-154). The last two meanings of incumbo effectively link, on the one hand, the inner view of care as an intimate force that impels us „to give ourselves to a task“ with, on the other hand, a higher level that „presses down on us with all their weight“ the task of doing what is incumbent upon us. Like the English „it falls to you to do this“, the French word for „being incumbent (on someone)“ is échoir (en partage à quelqu’un), which comes from the family of lat. cadere „to fall“, while the German (jdm) zufallen is related to Zufall „chance“ (the English „chance“ itself originating in Fr. chance, also linked to lat. cadere) and to fallen „to fall“.
Incumbency and Assent

One can do little to counter the double pressure of incumbency: from inside as rush to care and from the outside as a task that falls upon us to perform. There is little margin of maneuver to avoid doing what is incumbent upon us to do; incumbency does not elicit choice, deliberation, and decision. It calls for assent, a term related in this context to action and meaning „tacitly accepting the charge of acting in a certain way“ rather than „believing propositions one could not fully prove or even understand“, as it does in John Henry Newman’s belief-oriented A Grammar of Assent.

Looked upon in the light of explicit duty, incumbency and assent, the tragedies of Oedipus and Hamlet acquire a new aspect. In the story of Oedipus, his incestuous marriage with Jocasta (which, unlike the murder of Laius, is not present in all versions of the myth) recedes, while Laius’ attempt to get rid of the newborn Oedipus gains visibility. Because of his earlier transgressions and their punishment announced by the oracle – the interdiction to have children –, Laius does not look after the helpless infant. Worse, by pinning the little Oedipus’ feet, Laius sends the child to his death. When later he kills Laius, Oedipus unknowingly carries out not only the gods’ verdict, but also punishes a father guilty of attempting to murder him, his son. It is quite clear that in doing so Oedipus does not perform a duty. Rather, fate assigns him the task of killing his father and, since Oedipus would never assent to it, the same fate blinds him to the identity of his victim. In Hamlet, by contrast, the young prince knows that it is incumbent upon him to avenge the murder of his father by killing Claudius. Because this task utterly disturbs Hamlet’s life, assent is difficult and, although he never formulates explicit doubts about his task, Hamlet just cannot bring himself to accomplish it until a few moments before his own death.

Incumbency is different from mere concern. The things I care for can be the things I am interested in, the things that matter to me. Harry Frankfurt offered us a persuasive theory of value based on the notion of caring about something. Robert Pippin understands Heidegger’s Sorge in terms of „(things that) matter to me“. Incumbency, by contrast, has an active dimension, it invites us to proceed. But under incumbency, taking action is not fully equivalent to discharging a duty. Duty is a general requirement applicable to all those who find themselves in the same situation. It is a universal obligation publicly known as such or privately discovered as a consequence of the imperative to do what everyone in my situation would have to do. By contrast, a certain action falls on my lot to perform when, first, I perceive its incumbency directly, as obvious to me, rather than as a conclusion that follows an argument, and, second, when it cannot be entirely identified with a duty.

I do not reason (per cognitionem, as medieval philosophers would say): a. here is a baby crying, probably because of hunger; b. babies cannot take care of themselves therefore adults must take action (or: the world in which I want to live is a world in which adults take care of babies); c. therefore I must feed this baby; but
rather I perceive (per connaturalitatem) that it is incumbent on me to take care of this infant. And when I do it I do not simply rely on a habit, the virtuous habit of feeding babies, the habit of making the proper decisions, of looking at the proper fixed stars and calculating my path in accordance. I rather feel within me the impulse to feed this baby just as, coming from the outside, I feel at the same time the weight of this task. It is not an imperative – and certainly not a categorical one. It is rather the need to answer a silent call, an inner and outer silent call, to be there, ready, when this task presents itself to me as mine. For, incumbency draws around me the borders of what is mine, of what it falls on my lot to take care of. This is a mine that indicates responsibility/incumbency rather than a mine designating possession: the set of beings it falls to me to care for, to look after, shelter, and protect is mine.

To distinguish incumbency from explicit duty, in many novels blood ties are absent between adults and the children they look after. In Heliodorus’ Ethiopian Story Chariclea has been adopted and raised by the Greek merchant Charicleus, whom she considers to be her father until, under the guidance of Kalasiris, a priest of the Sun-God, she finds out the truth. In most 17th century Heliodorian novels the protagonists do not know for a long time who their true parents are. Later, several of Dickens’s characters are orphans (Oliver Twist, Arthur Clennam in Little Dorrit, Esther in Bleak House, Nell Trent in Old Curiosity Shop) raised by relatives or acquaintances, some of which, having no blood ties with the orphans, happily assent to their incumbency (Mr. Brownlow in Oliver Twist), while others resentfully perform their family duty (Mrs. Clennam in Little Dorrit and Miss Barbary in Bleak House) or cannot bring themselves to carry it out properly (Nell’s grandfather in Old Curiosity Shop). Likewise, in Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables Jean Valjean selflessly devotes his life to raising the orphan Cosette although she is not his daughter: the task that falls to him to perform relates to something more significant than blood ties.

In the light of this tradition, consider the difficult move Isabel Archer, the protagonist of Henry James’ Portrait of a Lady, must make at the end of the novel. We know that after a visit to England where Caspar Goodwood, her previously rejected suitor, declares again his love and asks her to stay with him, Isabel returns to Rome. Will she join her husband, the dubious, deceptive, deeply flawed Gilbert Osmond, or leave him? Osmond has a natural daughter Pansy, whom he detests and sends to a convent. Whatever Isabel’s decision concerning her marriage would be, she goes back to Rome because she has promised Pansy that she will return. („Isabel considered. ’I won’t desert you’, she said at last. ’Good-bye, my child’“, Chapter LII, James 1995: 462). She made this promise because she somehow senses that it is incumbent to her to protect the child’s happiness. The reasons for this feeling are kept silent: we do not know how and why Isabel assumes that it falls up to her to take care of Pansy. But it becomes gradually clear that Pansy is hers in the particular, incumbency-linked acceptation of the word, which signals protection, not possession.
In this case, incumbency is expressed as a promise, Isabel’s promise not to desert Pansy. The deep, silent region where incumbency takes shape can give rise to a pledge, but can as well – precisely insofar as it is different from duty – dispense us from keeping one. In James’ *The Ambassadors*, Mrs. Newsome, Lambert Strether’s wealthy fiancée, sends him to rescue her son Chad from an adulterous relationship in France and bring him home to virtuous Massachusetts. Once in France, Strether gradually realizes that it is not incumbent upon him to intervene in the life of the young man. Something crucial yet difficult to put in words makes him disown his earlier promise and his own projected marriage to Mrs. Newsome.

Something difficult to put in words: some of Henry James’ characters feel their way around without giving expression to their twists and turns. Clouds, fog cover the sky above them. Yet they make the right moves, as if, in the absence of the fixed stars, an infallible inner compass guided their steps. The calls of incumbency are by nature silent, yet characters who hear them sometimes try to formulate explicit moral motivations for their actions. In *Les Misérables*, for instance, Jean Valjean reasons that he is now responsible for the orphan Cosette because earlier, as the owner of the factory that employed Fantine, the girl’s mother, he had failed to prevent his foreman from firing Fantine – without good reason – thus sending her to misery, prostitution, and ultimately death. He must take care of Cosette in order to redeem this earlier fault. Yet his devotion to his ward goes way beyond assuring her survival. Something deeper moves him, something that makes Cosette his only aim in life. The compelling power of incumbency by far exceeds explicit moral reasoning. Henry James’s characters wisely refrain from quibbling over moral motives: the silent calls alone move them. This is perhaps one of the reasons why mood and atmosphere (Gumbrecht 2012) became so crucial in 19th and 20th century novels.

I will conclude on a recent story about incumbency: Michel Houellebecq’s *Particules élémentaires* (1998), translated as *Atomised* (UK) and *Elementary Particles* (US). It describes the lives of two half-brothers whose mother abandoned them, feeling that it was incumbent upon her to take care of her own self among the hippies of the 1960s rather than perform her parental tasks. The two men conclude that sexuality fails to generate stable human ties: one son – the narrator – becomes a dejected sex-addict; his half-brother, a biologist, invents a cloning system that makes sexual reproduction obsolete. For both, humans are just particles: decaying bodies born from particles. In a recent book on Houellebecq (*Anti-matter*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), Ben Jeffery perceptively calls this writer’s method “depressive realism”. After denouncing imagination as a liar and reflecting on scientific utopianism, Jeffery rightly concludes that Houellebecq’s unusual realism misrepresents life. *Atomised* does so, I would add, because it presents a single case of misguided incumbency as the unavoidable future of humanity. What this novel suggests is that among humans, parental care is neither a mere instinct, nor simply an explicit duty: it is also something that falls on the person’s lot to do. Incumbency being a call, one can turn a deaf ear to it; one can decline to assent to
it. In wealthy, tolerant societies, those whose aim in life is to cultivate their own self are allowed to consider all other human beings, including their own children, as a mere instantiation of an infinitely distant ‘Other’ worthy of respect and indifference. What Houellebecq depicts is the incurable wound of the individuals deprived of the care in person, by the person on whom it falls to provide this care. Without it, humans turn out to be (deeply hurt) elementary particles.

I hope I was able to show that human action and the stories about it rest on a non-narrative support that gives them direction and meaning: the interplay between actual actions and starry ideals, moral imperatives, virtuous habits, or the silent calls of incumbency. The multiple ways in which humans act in agreement or in conflict with these moral guides form the topic of virtually all narratives. Does this mean that literature is always to some extent realist? Perhaps it is, insofar as it invites us to orient our double look towards ideals and towards the tasks at hand, as well as listen to the silent calls of incumbency, in order to find, possibly lose, and conceivably find again, the direction of our life-path.


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