How Monsters Might Read

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In the days of yore, there existed witches and ogres. More accurately said, there were outcasts, the ones shooed out of town: the ugly, the strange, the mystical. They were the ones the real townsfolk wrote tales about, but excluded from the tellings. And the tellings were wonderful. Storytelling was social, extroverted, the center—no—the climax of mealtimes. But as time passed, the communal structure changed. And the medium of stories changed, from voice to print. All the while, on the periphery, ogres and witches learned to write, since there was no one around to listen.

Charles Bukowski is a fine specimen of what might be called the modern ogre. Growing up, he had nasty acne and boils on his face, no friends, and, naturally, no girlfriends. Naturally, because when people are physically ugly, they probably have bad skin genes, bad genes in general, bad genes to procreate with—just bad. Ugly, bad. In some ways, our thinking has not evolved much from the time nature programmed us with a linked understanding of form and content, face and character.

But looking at nature does not explain the statistical phenomenon of loneliness amongst seven billion people, in a world literally connected by wires. Funnily enough, though, Bukowski has the gall to call his book of poems You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense.

At first glance, most Bukowski poems seem nothing more than a few crass words, catchy nonetheless. We see how he leaves all letters lowercase, except for the I’s (and the occasional cat names—“Ting, Ding, Beeker, Bleecker, and / Blob”—perhaps selected as a gag on rhyme and consonance (19-20)). We see the word “whore” frequently, even titling one of his poems, and sometimes we catch those shocking, miniscule words, “the wife.” Boy, you think, he must care more for his cats and whores than he does for his wife. But you continue, reading about whores, about booze, about horse races, and sometimes you get these gems of questions: “what kind of writer is that? Reading his pages to a lady? this is a violation . . .” (30-31). He must be a misogynist. But then we get the poem called, “I’m not a misogynist” (186). He shares fan
mail with us, from women who praise his writing, describe their bodies, suggest how they could pleasure him. They are starfuckers. They are the same shallow women who would not come close to him before he was “almost famous,” when he was just a pockmarked ogre. But now they see how much he could offer a lady. Now he could provide them with more than they could ever provide for themselves, in our age of self-sufficiency. Only now they will listen. He has seen the worst of the way humans work.

So we forgive him for his hostility, because we can begin to empathize with him. And we read on. We find the poem “beasts bounding through time”—seemingly just a list of names, of dynamite writers, of male writers (21). Maybe we forgave him too quickly. We experience a moment of anger, shame for having been seduced by Bukowski—then in the middle, right in the center, we get the name Sylvia, for Sylvia Plath. Her name splits the poem in two, emanates from the page even after we’ve finished. She is only one woman among seventeen men, but maybe through this layout, this emphasis, we can see how he respects some idea of women, some anima ideal stored inside him—he has just never faced her. We get not only a betrayal of his tough, masculine shell, but also a moment of tension where form overpowers content. If he had listed a page of female writers, of whom there are a few, and inserted a male in the middle, we might have exclaimed, Now, Bukowski, do you think females are simply accessories for males?

But he didn’t. He created a structure in which a female, a single name, outshines a list of men. He shows that form and content can work against each other, through some inverted law of gestalt, to create a greater whole.

It is a dangerous game he plays, trusting us to challenge what we read with what we see. He trusts us to overcome the confusion he creates, to work through it. We usually do not enjoy discovering evidence against our animal logic, the subtle, balanced equation of appearance and actual substance. In a way, this discernment forces us to lose touch with a part of ourselves, just as ogres, witches, outcasts lose their animal sides, the sides programmed to howl for the social and the sexual. But Bukowski shows us a new light. Marginalization (or affordable self-exile, for the modern introvert) is not dehumanizing. It is, for lack of a better word, humanizing. It is a life of learning, through distance, about what it means to be human and how to press their buttons—how to please them. Please us.

So, it is almost no wonder that this misanthrope, Bukowski, knows how to tease our instincts and turn them against each other, how to get us to react, to question, to feel with more depth than we would otherwise, given harmony of form and content. This loss of our wits, our senses, our time-stamped
mores, is the bliss literary critic Roland Barthes calls for in *The Pleasure of the Text*: “the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts” (14). Bliss—the synapse of tension Bukowski creates by weaving form and content against each other.

This model would never work for DreamWorks. As we see in Lawrence Weschler’s collection of essays, *Uncanny Valley: Adventures in the Narrative*, there comes a point in animation when form must be completely in sync with content. The term *uncanny valley*, coined by master of robotics Masahiro Mori, explains the problem these artists hit when human faces surpass a point considered 95 percent real (15). Up until this point, we can sympathize with a character. Weschler lists *Shrek*, for example, who exhibits human expressions, emotions, the works, but who also has green skin and ears. An ogre. *Shrek* does not pretend to live in our world, though he looks quite real. But then we get a character from beyond that 95 percent mark, a purely human character from the movie *Final Fantasy*, which, as Weschler reports, was a flop. Its animation is too realistic-looking, so much so that we not only lose sympathy for the characters, but begin to feel suspicion, hostility, towards them. We view them as uncanny imposters (16).

Our perceptual systems have evolved to look for such flaws in the world. It is a skill that stems evolutionarily from the necessity to fish out hidden predators. So when we see such a pristinely animated face, a “million-sided polygon” trying to fit a circle, something still does not feel right (Weschler 2). Our visual processing overrides our critical thinking. We cannot pay attention to the action because of the form.

Weschler ascribes this challenge to animation’s inability to give characters souls, anima. So it seems we must settle for mediocrity until we can reach perfection, at the risk of entering the *uncanny valley*. “But we don’t have to,” Weschler quotes an animator. “Our job isn’t to simulate an actual human face with 100 percent fidelity. Our job is merely to fool the audience. Once you believe it, we’re done” (7). Now Weschler, taking this principle back to the world of journalism, wonders how this theory might reflect upon writing narratives. He leaves us wondering whether it is possible to make us believe in a story fully, maybe to fool us into believing.

To fool. It sounds so negative. But it does not have to be; in terms of narration, at least, foolery, “artful deception,” is one of the highest levels of mastery a storyteller can achieve. This is the technique that Ford Madox Ford likens to magic, the fantasy of the Middle Ages when “a craft was called a mystery” (“Techniques” 57). But in the Middle Ages, craft (carving, baking, butchering) was also a social necessity, in the same grain that storytelling was
a social activity. Supermarkets did not exist, and neither did single-serving novels. And so, if narration is to be as climactic, as captivating, as it seems to have been in the Middle Ages, we must consider storytelling as an affirmation of our social nature. It was an affirmation that we are not all so alone as Bukowski says we are now.

Writing at its best is an affirmation of a voice offered and a voice received. It has to make us feel that wetness, that trembling in our ears, has to make us feel that we actually have ears, a body, as part of the body of the text, as Barthes describes. So when Weschler talks about anima being impossible to capture, in characters, in narrators, I wonder if it is because the narrative is not calling upon our anima enough.

I wonder this because of another phenomenon in the world: 500 million gamers, people who play video games on-and off-line. So we have 500 million gamers, predicted by game developer Jane McGonigal to become 1.5 billion in the next hundred years. McGonigal is a savvy representative for the 43% female gaming demographic. In her online TED Talk video “Gaming Can Make a Better World,” she claims that the values gained in play can be applied to real life. These values include “urgent optimism,” “social fabric,” “blissful productivity,” and “epic meaning.” And a fraction of these blissful, optimistic people inspired Final Fantasy, originally a very successful video game, which as a film had us cringing. What happened? What’s the big difference between a movie and a video game?

First, in a video game we have teamwork. There is actually a whole network of people playing live, at the same time as we are, all around the wired world. These are people who are willing to help us out, get to the next level, stay alive in the game. And we’d better play nicely, in the world of gaming, because of the Golden Rule: You do something for me, I’ll do something for you. Differently phrased, Cross me, and I’ll cross you. A network emerges, built on mutual necessity and understanding, in the same way craftsmen used to cultivate tight-knit relations to fulfill each other’s needs; the needs of bread, meat, shoes, clothes, which they could not all possibly attain by themselves. And through this necessity we get “social fabric,” one of the rarest fabrics in existence today.

And second, we have choice. Granted, the choices are limited. When we play the combat video game, Call of Duty, we do not find an option that allows us to grow a garden, as we can in the online game Farmville. Free will is limited in games, and rightly so, as it seems to be limited in life. But even with this tamed free will comes the supposition that we, the gamers, imbue a sort of executive soul into the characters hopping around the screen; and our
response to choice is only enhanced by knowing that they influence the network of gamers playing alongside us. We see our choices play out, come to fruition like pieces of artistry, craftsmanship, and feel a sort of creative value—or, in Jane McGonigal’s words, “productivity.”

This is the soul, the anima that bridges the gap between the effects of almost perfect animation and full belief, the self-invested engagement with video games. It is the fulfilling social aspect that works for gamers, usually assumed to be introverted. Introversion, a term popularized by Carl Jung, has made loneliness somewhat acceptable since it can be considered a biologically determined trait (hypersensitivity to external stimuli, causing inward retreat). So now we have a cloud of luxuriously lonely, self-exiled men and women prone to solitary activities like gaming or reading. If we want to tell stories in a way that makes us feel bliss, we might want to consider a model of game design that makes that telling a social activity again.

We can already find a version of this model in Ford Madox Ford’s novel The Good Soldier. At the center of this story—“the saddest story I have ever heard,” as our narrator Dowell laments—we have a quartet: two women, two men; two couples constantly turning about in a “minuet de la cour” (1, 3). Dowell, admittedly “horribly alone,” does not use “you” to refer to us as his readers (3). No, he actually makes us a character: “You, the listener, sit opposite me” (7). It is a challenge. But we have choice. We do not have to join him in this ever-turning dance of “impressions,” he hints, when he speaks of his wife Florence’s soul: “And my function in life was to keep that bright thing in existence. And it was almost as difficult as trying to catch with your hand that dancing reflection” (8, emphasis added). The verbal contract is not consummated until we decide, in all honesty, to lend our hand, to stay in step with Dowell.

If we do accept, there is great responsibility and great reward. Even if our own impressions conflict with his, he would rather have us be the engaged reader than the escapist reader. The escapist reader picks up different books all at once, never actually staying with the text at hand to reach that deep, visceral understanding of the author’s words, intentions. This escapist reader is the so completely modern reader of replaceable parts and uncontemplated affairs; Dowell, by contrast, cannot leave them uncontemplated, cannot stop revisiting them and analyzing them in his story. These affairs haunt him. They lead to the suicide of the only person he ever might have truly loved, Edward. And yet, he admits, “I suppose that I should really like to be a polygamist; with Nancy, and with Leonora, and with Maisie Maidan and possibly even with Florence. I am no doubt like every other man; only, probably
because of my American origin, I am fainter” (140). He does not list his dream affairs in a crass way; each woman gets her own pocket, her own identity, through his use of “with ___.” He could have just listed “Nancy, Leonora, Maisie Maidan.” But through this construction, through this separation, he suggests that he sees each woman as different, special. So, maybe affairs are inevitable, valuable even. We, after all, are having an affair with Dowell by consuming his book, finishing off his faintness with our own impressions. And by becoming this corresponding character, this partner in the undying minuet, we become helplessly engaged—right where Ford wants us, in an illusion of free will, fully believing what we read.

But where is Ford in the end? Dowell, who introduces himself as a poor writer, who constantly apologizes for his clumsy storytelling, eventually develops his own voice, and somehow he seems to kill Ford in the end. Ford is that perfect *DreamWorks* animator Weschler describes, so skilled that his craft remains hidden, unnoticed, making the story believable. And through the dissolution of the author’s ego, Ford’s ego, we allow our own egos to step aside for a moment, and fully transfigure our spirits into the avatars we assume in the story. We now believe Dowell is a complete storyteller, because we have been a dutiful “listener.” We feel we have created something.

This is what allows Dowell to be so alive in us, filling in our own faint spaces, our own loneliness.

And so, as video games knit people together and thus might be used to understand each other—to someday help each other, as Jane McGonigal hopes—so can novels become a means of connection. They can go beyond entertainment, beyond the academic, and reach the realm of everyday life by lodging something into our spirits. But what?

*Our spirits.* We see that neither gaming nor storytelling will remain solely in the realm of the male. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with the male voice, but we might like to outdo the power of storytelling as it existed in the Middle Ages, when women really did not have much of a voice. And so, to get a real conversation going, to fill that lonely “space” Bukowski describes throughout his poetry, that “faintness” Dowell feels, we have to add another, a female, perspective.

Virginia Woolf suggests that the most effective authors are those who write with “androgynty”: Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Keats among them. In her speech-turned-essay collection, *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf asserts, “Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father.” Like form and content, “Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated” (7, 8). Wisely, however, she does not pretend to categorize what might constitute “female writing”
as opposed to “male writing.”

But writing, as Ford tells us, is an activity of craft; craft requires intention. And for some reason, both Bukowski and Ford have crafted their narrators to be lonely, lonely souls who seem to need our company to go on, until they get to the point that “it just makes sense.” It being self-annihilation, perhaps. So, to increase their chances of seducing somebody, anybody, to stop feeling so alone, the narrators must write in a way that excludes neither male nor female. More optimistically phrased, their writing must be crafted to seduce both male and female, anima and animus. They must write with the androgyny that Woolf considers essential.

It is a difficult tightrope balance to achieve. It comes to the point that sometimes it seems Dowell is so completely effeminate, “regarded as a woman or a solicitor” by Edward, that we fail to see his male nature, his animus (15). He consistently offers “suggestions of happenings on suggestions of happenings,” wombs within which we can plant our impressions, impose our judgments (“Techniques” 287). Yet, in the midst of it all, he sometimes contradicts himself, overshoots his femininity with a surge of male ego, musing, “Before he spoke, there was nothing; afterwards, it was the integral fact of his life. Well, I must get back to my story” (Soldier 68). So desensitized by his calmness, his sympathy, we are thrust into a sort of shock by that possessive “my,” that dismissive, sterile, “Well.” It is so shocking, so phallic a force; it is so attractive to the female. Meanwhile, this same female spirit, or anima, reads Bukowski and is completely offended. The animus, the male in her, might be nodding along, understanding, but the female side gets in the way, unless it can recognize the anima in Bukowski. She might recognize it in the literal spaces he gives us, filling the page with silence, with openness. In the gentle pauses in his meter, where we can add our own thoughts. In the way he admits, “there is hardly anything as beautiful as / a woman in a long dress” (145). He offers us such vulnerability; we just have to acknowledge it.

So if we want to read those androgynous authors, those authors who somewhat give up their egos to provide us with narrators more consistently complex than themselves, we need to be aware of how we shape our own “reading avatar.” At the beginning of most video games, we get to physically craft this avatar, pick our own name, outfit, gender. We actually get more choice than in real life. But when reading, we need to remain conscious of our own egos, and not just in the beginning, but continually throughout our experience, keeping in check the forces of anima and animus constantly at play within us, letting them grow, but not dominate or die. We need to let these four forces, the animus and anima of our own avatar and those of the author's
narrator, dance together in a minuet. To both allow ourselves and force ourselves to see every possible angle of the text. To be confident that, despite our male or female bodies, we have a rich duplicity of forces in us, when we read and even when we stop reading.

I think it may also be a great comfort to read in a way that helps us become more aware of our anima and animus in modern, everyday life, in a way that will keep us somewhat less lonely in the self-destructive way while still maintaining the space, the self-sufficiency that has become so attractive in modern times. In an age defined by constant knowledge acquisition, that space gives us the advantage, the potential, to think our own thoughts and form new ideas. We are continually pressured to contribute innovations, not just consistent skill or craftsmanship, to remain relevant, in touch with society. In a society where companies are not just looking for profits, but increases in profits. In a society where it is not enough to understand quantum dynamics and Newtonian physics, but to find a way to connect the two. In a society where animation and robots are pressured to match reality. It is, in a comparison made by astrophysicist Martin Rees, a society mimicking the form of ever-growing complexity that followed the supposed big bang: a chaotic universe hatched from an atom.

There is no way around it. In a way we need that space to think, to keep up. But we can prevent that space, with which we cushion ourselves in order to partake in innovation, from growing cancerously. From completely separating us from each other. We cannot forget that that space also houses the faint filter through which we can listen more deeply to others’ ideas, women’s ideas, men’s ideas, really learn how to listen, so that in the race to remain relevant, we might not only learn how to enunciate ourselves properly, androgynously, to reach the most ears, but also to understand each other. And to start it all off, before we already announce the death of the narrative, we could begin to read in a way that embraces both genders, cultivates both voices inside us, so that our own beings grow with the complexity of technology; so that our fairytale age of ogres, of witches, does not become a sci-fi horror of supercomputers and human slaves.

WORKS CITED
