How does the mind work? What is consciousness? What is self-consciousness? What is what we think of as self – as the conscious me? What is a person, conceived of as an individual conscious entity? How to think of mind, consciousness, me? How to talk of this? The so-called cognitive world – that convergence of artificial intelligence researchers, neuro-physiologists, philosophers of mind, psychologists, anthropologists – is extremely busy trying to figure it out. 'Consciousness is all the rage just now' said Jerry Fodor in 2007, and he was right (Fodor, “Headaches have Themselves” 10). The contemporary furor is to figure out consciousness in the base sense of finding out, of working it out. A figuring out which, strikingly to the literary-minded observer, has a way of also being a figuring out in the rhetorical sense – an investment in figure: in metaphor, in analogy and story. Which is a knowing, or professing to know, mind and consciousness, as if they were something else.

And that is, of course, to do poetic work, the work of the story-teller, of the novelist. “We are all virtuoso novelists”, declared the loudest consciousness expert Daniel Dennett, notoriously, in his 1988 TLS piece, “Why Everyone is a Novelist” (1029: it was incorporated into the last section of his influential Consciousness Explained of 1991). He was referring to our allegedly universal practice of self-fashioning through telling stories about ourselves. This may or may not be true as a universal technique of self-knowing. The philosopher Galen Strawson has resisted that story-telling notion as simply nonsense, a “fallacy of our age” (Strawson, “A Fallacy of Our Age”). What, though, is pretty clear, is that attempting to describe consciousness (or mind, or self, or person: the equating and overlapping of terms for this item, this ‘thing’, is common) turns the generality of would-be describers (all of Jerry Fodor’s motley clutch of observers: “philosophers, psychologists, phenomenologists, brain scientists, MDs, the Dalai Lama … neurologists … priests, gurus and (always) people who used to do physics” (Fodor, “Headaches have Themselves” 10)) into fictionists – into story-tellers, novelists, or at least quasi-novelists.

Thomas Nagel, in that most influential invitation to a thought-experiment, “What Is It Like to be a Bat?”, talks of this practice of “explaining what is” hard to explain or even incomprehensible, “in terms suited for what is familiar and well understood, though entirely different”, as a human weakness (Nagel; Heil 528). But it is rather, I would say, from the evidence, seemingly inevitable – especially when we are faced with what has come to be labelled the Hard Problem, the problem of consciousness. Or when faced
with the Really Hard Problem (as Dennett has it: *Sweet Dreams* 162) of What Happens Next - the sequelae of the brain functions which have themselves become in such large numbers apparently easy to scan, and capture in action, and describe. What’s It Like? (“w.i.l.?” in what seems to be the jargon), i.e. what is the nature of the case: the transition from brain to mind, from neural state to mental state, from spatial event in the brain to non-spatial event in the mind or consciousness (in the description of the philosopher Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame* 115)? So far, at least, it has proved impossible to say, as such. This transition, or passage, remains a mystery indeed. It merely begs the question to point out, or point to, the neural, material, physical events in the brain, in an act of what Fodor dismisses as "bottom-up ontology" (Fodor, *In Critical Condition* 3) – or *physicSalism* in Galen Strawson’s neologism (e.g. Freeman 4). Neuro-psychologist-philosophers don’t get rid of the problem either by simply sneering at the problem’s describers – people like Colin McGinn – as feeble-minded New Mysterians (Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* 273). What we can say of consciousness (or mind, or self) – what, it would appear, we can only say in place of saying what consciousness is actually like – is what it’s like, i.e. what it resembles, in analogical terms, in description by means of similes and metaphors. Not *as is*, but only *as if*.

And that is what we do say – pouring metaphors over the otherwise unspeakable case. Which is a sure instance of what George Eliot, in that momentous moment in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) called the (to be lamented) fact, “that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor – that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else” (Bk. II, Ch. 1). Which is, indeed, poets’, story-tellers’, novelists’ work.

Arrestingly, as David Lodge’s essay “Consciousness and the Novel” (in his *Consciousness and the Novel: Collected Essays*), finds it easy to point out, the history of the novel is utterly cognate with the history of the modern discussion of consciousness. Consciousness has ever been the business of literature, but it became a main concern of the Novel. “The novel is arguably man’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time” (Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel* 10). Lodge is right. The Novel, as the West knows it, is resolute that its subject is knowing, or seeking to know, the mystery of persons. From the start in the hands of Daniel Defoe, the Novel is convinced of the existence of an I, a self, that is potentially knowable, possessable, ownable. It is “my self” – as Robinson Crusoe has it – mine, my own; me, uniquely me, an individual private me; me on my own; me as my own property, properly me, my propriété, a complex of my properties, my selfhood components, knowable features like the properties of atoms, or of God in The Prayer Book, “whose property is always to have mercy”. Novelists have acted on the assumption that each of us has what George Eliot thought of in *Middlemarch* (1871-2) as a unique “centre of self” – what Eliot’s Dorothea finds hard to feel in relation to Mr Casaubon: “that he had an equivalent centre of self” – equivalent to her strong sense of
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her own particularity - an otherness which makes “the lights and shadows ... always fall with a certain difference” (Ch. 21).

This “self”, this major concern of novelists, this knowable, or at least explorable, thing, is from the beginning of the English Novel perceived as not a simple entity; but rather as a combined complex, in fact, of body and mind, of feeling and thinking; never as a matter of a dualistic either-or, a splitting of the spatial and the non-spatial (to use those McGinn terms). The Novel fails to recognise an absolute “Cartesian” cogito ergo sum. And of course the combination makes this “self” all the more difficult to access. Crusoe’s conversion, for example, takes place as a totally combined event of mind and body. A sick man; reading his Bible; thinking about his bad behaviour to his father; feeling sorry for his sins; repenting of his primal disobedience to the father; finding the joy of salvation for the “soul” and also recovering from his bodily ill as he drinks copiously of a rum and tobacco mixture: here’s a spiritual, mental and physical cure all in one. It’s no more separable into a dualistic body-event and a mind-event than when Crusoe sees the footprint in the sand, and is grossly panicked, running for his life back to his den, and unable to recall how he got there. Spatial and non-spatial events, simply - or rather complexly - interact, both of them, all together: the complexly mixed nature of which, the way the connection works, is way beyond easy explication. (The history of Defoe criticism is, of course, a history of misguided separation of the two: Crusoe’s “conversion” being seen now as wholly material, now as wholly spiritual.)

George Eliot’s Dr Lydgate, the Middlemarch neuro-physiologist, wants to get to the bottom of this complex – to expose the connectivities, the transition place or places. And he never does get to the bottom of the puzzle. He’s rather like George Eliot’s common-law husband George Henry Lewes, whose own effort to engage the tricky combination of physiology and psychology in the human being – what he called sentience (the neuro-muscular activity) and consciousness (or “reflection”, “the particular mode of Sentience”) - was going on even as George Eliot was writing Middlemarch. Lewes’s life proved too short for him to crack the problem. He managed to produce only three volumes of his projected big work, the Problems of Life and Mind (1873-7), before he died in November 1878. Struggling, he was wont to call his project “the key to all psychologies”, after Casaubon’s unfinished “Key to all Mythologies”. (The last two volumes of The Problems, The Study of Psychology and Mind as a Function of the Organism, which appeared in 1879, were ‘edited’, anonymously, by Eliot herself: the latter volume is in places no more than mere notes and jottings.) It’s Lydgate’s delusion that he can do better than Lewes in solving the spatial/non-spatial mystery. This task is, by definition, a matter of trying to inspect the invisible; it takes Lydgate into mysterian territory; the microscope is no help; what’s required is the highest kind of imagination (not just any old cheap narrative, or what we might call a too-casual thought experiment):
Many men have been praised as vividly imaginative on the strength of their profuseness in indifferent drawing or cheap narration: reports of very poor talk going on in distant orbs; or portraits of Lucifer coming down on his bad errands as a large ugly man with bat’s wings and spurts of phosphorescence; or exaggerations of wantonness that seem to reflect life in a diseased dream. But these kinds of inspiration Lydgate regarded as rather vulgar and vinous compared with the imagination that reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of Energy, capable of bathing even the ethereal atoms in its ideally illuminated space. He for his part had tossed away all cheap inventions where ignorance finds itself able and at ease: he was enamoured of that arduous invention which is the very eye of research, provisionally framing its object and correcting it to more and more exactness of relation; he wanted to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness. (Ch. 16)

‘Arduous invention’. What’s required in this pursuit is useful metaphoricity, the highest and best kind of fiction. Metaphor is necessary. “Metaphors were not wanting”, says Middlemarch’s narrator of Banker Bulstrode and his self-justifying course of unethical trading as a money-making pawnbroker (Ch. 61). And according to George Eliot metaphors never are wanting, certainly not in novels. Such is the fictionist’s way, the fictionist’s view. “[W]e all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors”, says that narrator, again, of Casaubon’s misunderstanding of what marriage will bring him. He “had imagined that his long studious bachelorhood had stored up for him a compound interest of enjoyment, and that large drafts on his affections would not fail to be honoured” (Ch. 10). And he was wrong, wrong in the expectations his metaphors brought along. Fatally wrong, as George Eliot would put it. You have to be wary of metaphor, because metaphor changes things. A thing becomes what you metaphoricize it as; i.e. metaphor does as metaphor is. The novelist knows this well. This is story-teller’s truth, the as if truth which fiction offers the reader. It’s the contention on which George Eliot powerfully reflects in that astonishing passage in The Mill on the Floss (1860) about a necessary but tricky metaphoricizing of the brain. Maggie and Tom Tulliver are at Mr Stelling’s school; Tom is no good at Latin or Geometry – his Eton Grammar and his Euclid; and so

Mr Stelling concluded that Tom’s brain being peculiarly impervious to etymology and demonstrations, was peculiarly in need of being ploughed and harrowed by these patent implements: it was his favourite metaphor, that the classics and geometry constituted that culture of the mind which prepared it for the reception of any subsequent crop. I say nothing against Mr Stelling’s theory: if we are to have one regimen for all minds his seems to me as good as any other. I only know it turned out as uncomfortable for Tom Tulliver as if he had been plied with cheese in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it. It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor! Once call the brain an intellectual stomach, and one’s ingenious conception of the classics
and geometry as ploughs and harrows seems to settle nothing. But then, it is open
to some one else to follow great authorities and call the mind a sheet of white pa-
per or a mirror, in which case one’s knowledge of the digestive process becomes
quite irrelevant. It was doubtless an ingenious idea to call the camel the ship of the
desert, but it would hardly lead one far in training that useful beast. (Bk. II, Ch. 1)

This is the metaphorical fix. And Eliot goes on to expostulate with Aristotle
for praising “metaphorical speech as a sign of high intelligence” – in that
passage in the Poetics where metaphor is hailed as “the token of genius”,
because “the right use of metaphor means an eye for resemblances” – but
failing at the same time to lament “that intelligence so rarely shows itself in
speech without metaphor, - that we can so seldom declare what a thing is,
except by saying it is something else” (Bk. II, Ch. 1).

The metaphorical fix. The novelist is right in it. Like the mad serial killer
in Philip Kerr’s brain-theory expert crime story, A Philosophical Investigation, a
novel which gets fearfully deep into a sadist’s mentality:

It’s a fascinating area, brain function ....

Viewed from the top, your brain most resembles something from Dante’s Inferno,
a pit to which lost souls have been consigned, their fleshy bodies coiled together
with hardly a space to separate their desperate agonies of damnation. It is a sight
such as might have greeted the liberators of Auschwitz as they stared into the
mass piles of naked, unburied corpses. A ghastly, pressed jelly of humanity, this
pâté de foie gras of thought.

Seen from the side, your brain is a dancer, or an acrobat, impossibly muscled – will
you look at those biceps and those pectorals – bent into a foetal position, the arm
(the temporal lobe) wrapped round the leg, the head (cerebellum) resting on the
shins (medulla oblongata).

From underneath, your brain is something obscenely hermaphrodite. There are the
frontal lobes meeting like the labia of a human vagina. And beneath them, the
pons and the medulla longata that reminds you of a semi-erect penis.

Dissected, sectioned coronally from ear to ear, the imperfect symmetry of your
brain is like a Rorschach inkblot, that diagnostic tool of unstructured personality
tests once favoured by psychologists. (97-8)

Metaphor – figure, fiction – are all the story-teller has to think of mind and
consciousness as. According to the novelist – and for that matter any artist,
any aesthetic producer – it’s all any of us have: the truth of fiction; fiction as
truth. In her epigraph to Daniel Deronda (1876) George Eliot writes of the
difficulty of imagining the beginning of things, of the cosmos, of as it were
the Big Bang moment, the moment, as she puts it, of transition from 0 to 1 (a
kind of parallel to that ‘hard’ moment of the move from neural to mental);
but difficult as it is, we do, as she says, need to imagine it: we have to have a
“make-believe of a beginning”. We have to make do with make-believe; we
can’t do without imagining, without metaphor, without (as we would now
put it) the thought-experiment. The Oxford philosopher Kathy Wilkes has protested powerfully against the extravagant unreality of so many thought-experiments in philosophy (Wilkes, vii, 46, 126, 198). And surely there does come a reality checkpoint, when if you can’t see the colour of a metaphor’s money on demand, it gets thrown out of the game. Metaphors do indeed point back at some reality that they are also pointing towards – or they’re of limited good. And the novelist might agree – perhaps should agree; but meanwhile he/she has to act as if the as if is all there is, because it’s all we’ve got, really, to go on.

The fictionist is locked in metaphor. But so too, arrestingly, are the scientists – scientists of all sorts – who are trying to come to terms with the human, how it is, how it evolved, especially with the relation of body and mind: the cognitive army in whose vanguard are the neuro-scientists and their close allies the philosophers of mind. All of them are locked in metaphor, sometimes awarely, sometimes less than awarely; but whether aware of it or not, all of them are in servitude to metaphor.

For thinking of any kind, it would seem, does not occur, and does not progress, without metaphor, analogy, story. Metaphor is what the Wittgensteinian philosopher Peter Hacker has hailed as the “go-cart of creativity” – at the same time as he deplores the “mythology” of the common contemporary metaphorical set of computer analogies for neural activities – hard-wiring, hard-drives, soft-ware add-ons, and so forth (Hacker). Hacker is just one of those philosophers of mind who agree with Jerry Fodor that “The Mind Doesn’t Work That Way” (Fodor, The Mind Doesn’t Work That Way): strong objectors who haven’t stopped the popularity of the computational model. And the go-cart of this particular sort of mythologizing, not least the hermeneutic practice of reading brain/mind/self through metaphor, is indeed unstoppable. And the metaphors – genuinely insightful and revelatory and just ones; colourful student-graspable ad hoc ones; ones merely cheap and cheerful, merely fun; even rather satirical ones (brain as meat, for instance, or porridge (Ridley) or “yeast-cells in a lump of dough” (Dennett, Sweet Dreams 2); I think of Richard Feynman’s imagining the conservation of energy as a beach-story of towels which won’t dry you because they’re already wet: Feynman) – they all of them, the good and the bad and the ugly, get instantiated, more or less, as describers of the case because, as with George Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke or Dr Lydgate or schoolmaster Tulliver, they are all our imagination has to be going on with. Primal soup, black holes, strings, selfish genes: there was no soup; genes do not have selves, emotions, desires; the brain has no hard-wiring; it’s not porridge, it’s only like porridge.

They’re made out of meat.”
“... the brain is made out of meat.”
“So ... what does the thinking?”
“The brain does the thinking. The meat.”
“Thinking meat! You’re asking me to believe in thinking meat?”
“Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat! Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you getting the picture?”

The consternation of Alien Centre in Terry Bisson’s satirical story “They’re Made Out of Meat” (a story much featured on the Internet and in the cognitive literature) when they hear from the alien earth-visitors about what earthling’s brains are made of is understandable (Bisson; quoted by McGinn, The Mysterious Flame 6-8, quoting Pinker, How The Mind Works). It’s often hard to take such metaphors seriously, but we have to because they’re the best our imaginations can come up with. They’re like legal fictions, and like legal fictions they do have their point, which is the illumination of the reality they claim to be rooted in. They strain to offer the illumination we crave of realities which would otherwise remain dark.

There’s no need to go as far as Roger Jones in his Physics as Metaphor in supposing that there is only metaphor, only figures of the imagination: which is the extreme allegation of some post-modernists and ultra-relativists, the argument towards which the important work of George Lakoff and his associates tends (Lakoff & Johnson, Metaphors We Live By and Philosophy in the Flesh; Lakoff & Nuñez, Where Mathematics Comes From; Lakoff & Turner, More Than Cool Reason) – Lakoff the ‘messiah’ of metaphoricity, as Steven Pinker calls him in “The Metaphor Metaphor” chapter of The Stuff of Thought, which nicely balances the pros and cons of metaphoricity fundamentalism (235-278). Metaphorizing by its very nature must assume there is something there in the first place to be analogized. But where Jones and Lakoff and others – Jones builds for instance on that arrestingly sceptical work of Owen Barfield’s, Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry – are right is in pointing to the metaphoric as our necessary access to reality, the reality which comes to exist for us only as if. It is indeed, in the arresting formula of Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors that we live by (Lakoff & Johnson, Metaphors We Live By).

We can’t, it seems, begin to think, can’t imagine, for example so-called black holes without the aid of the notorious Black Hole of Calcutta which grants them their vivid, graspable, and of course ingeniously inventive, metaphorical life. (An inventiveness that goes on and on: how delightful to learn that the stretching which would happen to any object, a human body say, sucked into a black hole, has been dubbed spaghettification!) And the more elusive the object, the more challengingly indescribable it is, the more the metaphorical attempts at description need to accumulate about it. Consciousness, mind, self are like, say, theological persons, God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New, in attracting necessary heaps of metaphors, all seeking, on and on, with no finally consoling end in sight, to pinpoint and pin down a felt reality. And how the metaphorical catalogue for consciousness expands, with what its devisers hope is revealing, convincing, force. So we get Roger Penrose’s fetching analogy of the conscious self as “the chairman of some large corporation who is presented only with highly processed and simplified data” coming from “the whirring computer of the brain” (Penrose, “Minds, Machines and Mathematics”). And Colin Blakemore and Susan Greenfield’s
story of the mind-brain relationship as like the conductor-driver of a one-
man bus (Blakemore & Greenfield, “Ideas”). And Greenfield, among others,
thinking of brain activities as water that turns into the wine of consciousness
(Greenfield, “Minds Meet”). And Daniel Dennett – arch-metaphoricizer –
analogizing consciousness as gravity, or as a pop-up toaster, and so on and
on (Dennett, Consciousness Explained). All of them stories, fictions – without
which, it would seem, the discussion, our thinking about consciousness, and
so forth, could not proceed, because the mental life these fictions narrate
exists for us, at least pro tem, only as it is imaginable in these ways: as the
notorious Brains in the Vat of Hilary Putnam (Putnam, “Brains in a vat”), or
as what Frank Jackson’s Mary the Colour Scientist gets up to (Jackson), or as
denizens, it might be, of John Searle’s famous Chinese Room (Searle, “Minds,
Brains, and Programs”).

What all our vigorous analogists crav e for their thought experimentation,
their figurative work, is ontological usef ulness. Which is limited, observably,
by all this metaphoricity’s perennial and inevitable contemporaneity. All
thinking-by-metaphor is, of course, willy-nilly time-bound. The bright cut-
tting-edge of the modernity which is necessary to a metaphor having any
force inevitably goes blunt with time. So forceful metaphors may come, but
they also go. As John Searle pointed out in his 1984 Reith Lectures, our now
fashionable computer-model is only the latest in a long-line of mechanistic
latest-technology models for brain work which have all had their day – from
the Ancient Greeks who thought of the brain as a catapult, to Leibniz who
thought of it as a mill, and Freud who envisaged it as a hydraulic or electro-
magnetic system. Searle lists Charles Scott Sherrington, the great neuro-
physiologist and mind-body dualist – not accidentally, and not at all by the
by I would say, a bibliophile and minor poet, greatly influenced by his
schoolmaster the Victorian poet Thomas Ashe – who liked likening the brain
to a telegraph system. John Searle himself was told as a boy that the brain
was a telephone switchboard (Searle, Minds, Brains and Science 44, 69). Won-
derfully and revealingly, George Eliot thought of the memory as a magic-
lantern picture show: Protestant Dorothea recalling in later life the nightmar-
ish redness of Roman Catholic Rome, which hit her eyesight “like a disease of
the retina”, in “images which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pic-
tures of a doze” (Ch. 20). But Eliot’s analogy, like all the rest ever, only
speaks loudly to the time of its author which gave it its life. Consciousness as
a stream, the metaphor which so powerfully incites the fictional practice of
Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce, and originates appar-
etently with Henry James’s brother William the philosopher of mind, is utterly
of its time too, when dominant philology thought of language as existing as a
diachronic temporal flow. Just so, Daniel Dennett’s story (Sweet Dreams
136ff.) of consciousness as a condition of fame contingent upon the brain as
television (as it were consciousness’ appearances on the brain’s TV reality
show) could not be more of our time: day-time television watchers, especially
US vintage, for the use of. One hears much less nowadays than formerly of
'brain-grammars' now that Noam Chomsky’s theory of language-users’ inherited deep-grammar-programmes has less of the glamour and force it once enjoyed. And so it goes. Our pictures of consciousness are – rather pathetically – geared to our contemporaneity, our current mundaneness. They inevitably run out of steam (to use an old metaphor, itself already running out of steam as steam-trains fade from memory); they have (to use more recent metaphors from the contemporary worlds of shopping and manufactures) a terrible short shelf-life, a woeful built-in obsolescence.

As does the textuality of the large metaphorical field so greatly favoured by cognitive people in recent times. Our science fictionists, as we have to label them, the mind philosophers and psychologists who are such masters of the metaphorical universe, are truly Science Fictionists, Sci Fi merchants. Their thought-experiments arrive densely peopled by aliens and Martians, zombies, robots, thinking thermostats. Their stories dwell in Other Dimensions, Other Worlds, in parallel universes, among the Twin earplings of Hilary Putnam’s Twin Earths (Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘meaning’”). Our science fictionalisers are always at some futurist flick-house. Of course Mary the Colour Scientist makes a comeback in Daniel Dennett’s pages (Sweet Dreams 103-129) as RoboMary (Robocop: Robomary). And if they’re not putting yet one more futuristic DVD into their player, they’re relaxing with some Sci Fi tome. They seem to read mostly Sci Fi novels. They are, to be sure, familiar with certain more canonical novels. Though from their quotations and referrings you notice that their canonical reading is limited to a rather tiny bunch – Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Borges – the kind of texts non-literature majors get to read on their compulsory literature courses. But still it is striking how greatly some textual source or another, films and novels, provides the going strong metaphors and analogies, the examples and illustrations which fire, which become, what are in generic terms the short stories, the nouvelles, the little fictions of our cognitive people. Where does Thomas Nagel get his (foundational) idea of wondering what it’s like to be a bat, except from Kafka’s Metamorphosis? (The subatomic particles known as quarks took their name from the German curd-cheese called Quark, via their discoverer Murray Gell-Mann’s familiarity with the poem beginning “Three quarks for Muster Mark!” on p.385 of Finnegans Wake – as explained in his letter to the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary, who reproduce it in their Second Edition’s entry for quark. ‘Bottom’ and ‘Top’ Quarks were at first labelled Beauty and Truth: someone in the lab, perhaps the Joyce-reading Gell-Mann himself, was up on Keats.) Steven Jay Gould thinks of these stories as Just So Stories, after Rudyard Kipling. Daniel Dennett happily recycles the “semitic materialism” of the literary-theorist Robyn in David Lodge’s novel Nice Work to illustrate his story of “the Self as the Centre of Narrative Gravity” – odourless, colourless, authorless and so forth (Dennett, Consciousness Explained 410-11). And so on: everywhere literary parasitism and plagiarism; the thoughts and works of novelists manqués. Like Daniel Dennett, whose story of consciousness-as-TV-fame comes illustrated by the ‘tale’ of Jim the first-time
Valentine Cunningham

novelist bumped off the Oprah Winfrey Show and the cover of Time Magazine by hotter news of a San Francisco earthquake (Sweet Dreams 141-143). Jim the disappointed novelist; Dan the disappointing one. (Colin McGinn, sharpest of the philosophical mind-experimenters, keenest attender to Sci Fi movies and stories as well as devoted fan of Martin Amis, is also that rarest of cases, the philosopher of mind who is also a real novelist. He’s the author of the very Martin-Amisian The Space Trap.)

It’s inevitable, I suppose, for these would-be novelists – and occasional actual novelist – to have their sights so firmly fixed on literature. Inevitable, too, by the same sort of token, that their metaphoricity, their figuring, should not only keep drawing on literature for inspiration and example, but should draw, in a most revealing self-referential way, on poeticy, on textuality, on literariness itself. “There is a poetry in genetics”, says Jonathan Kingdon, the anthropologist – to the approval of Daniel Dennett’s hero, the biologist Richard Dawkins – who stars Kingdon in his new Oxford Book of Modern Science Writing, a volume devoted not just to metaphorizing scientists galore, but to the idea that scientists either produce wonderful writing themselves or are the cause of wonderful writing in others. And if there is a tendency to ‘poetry’ in cognitive writing – and there is – it involves a leaning also to a self-conscious poeticy. The going metaphoricity is, in other words, self-referentially textual, literary, linguistic, bookish, to an extraordinary degree. The great model and example here, as so often in these discussions, is Charles Darwin himself, in On the Origin of Species, in that wonderful extended analogy – metaphor piled upon metaphor – for the brokenness and fragmentariness of the geological record:

For my part, following out Lyell’s metaphor, I look at the natural geological record, as a history of the world imperfectly kept, and written in a changing dialect; of this history we possess the last volume alone, relating to only two or three countries. Of this volume, only here and there a short chapter has been preserved; and of each page, only here and there a few lines. Each word of the slowly-changing language, in which the history is supposed to be written, being more or less different in the interrupted succession of chapters, may represent the apparently abruptly changed forms of life, entombed in our consecutive, but widely separated, formations. (Ch.9)

At a base level, in our time, there’s all the talk about brain grammar and syntax and semantics: what Roy Harris calls the “neuro-nonsense about grammatical programs in the brain”; “a linguistic dud cheque that no scientific bank in the world will ever cash” (Harris). Here, characteristically of the linguistic-metaphoricity tendency, is Sydney Brenner, colleague of DNA pioneer Francis Crick, in his piece “Theoretical Biology in the Third Millennium” (it’s in Dawkins’s anthology): “Biological systems are information processing machines and this must be an essential part of any theory we may construct”; “not only must we use the vocabulary of the language machine but we must also pay heed to what may be called the grammar of the biological system” (Brenner). Must, must, the felt imperative, the call, of the lan-
guage analogy; a summons pervading the discussion utterly. Daniel Dennett is just one of its numerous respondents. Central to his influence are, of course, his brilliant textual analogies: consciousness, for example, as an author writing multiple drafts of a text, Dennett’s very fetching model offered as a replacement for the old Humean model of the “Cartesian Theatre” which Dennett so derides (itself, obviously, an aesthetic and literary analogy) (Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* 101ff.). And what about memes? Richard Dawkins, of course, disowned, or at least covered up, the linguisticity of that instantly popular invention of his, the *meme* the alleged “unit of cultural transmission”. Memes arrived as a lateish thought – almost an afterthought – in *The Selfish Gene*. What to do with all those things like “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes-fashions, ways of making pots or building arches” (Dawkins’s first list was a slim one), especially the aesthetic, linguistic, cultural aspects of evolving human life and mind patently cared about by materialist Dawkins, as by so many of his materialist cognitive colleagues, but outside the materialistic, physicalist reckonings of selfish genetics? Tunes and rituals and so forth are patently spread by imitation – their essence is that they are copyable, replicatable, mimable – so they could be thought of as like genes. Dawkins first thought of calling them *mimemes* for their mimable, mimicable nature, but cut *mimeme* down to *meme* to get it to rhyme with the *gene* whose functions it allegedly parallels. Which had the effect of concealing the metaphoricity of the item, and its birth in the textualizing intellectual climate of the Mid-Seventies. Dawkins helped on the obscuration by apologising, as he puts it in *The Selfish Gene*, to his “classical friends” for cutting into the Greekness of *mimeme* to produce *meme* and asking us to think of ‘memory’ or even the French word *même*. But it’s not any lamed ‘Greekness’, nor even the Frenchness of *même*, that’s at stake but rather the Frenchness of the *mimeme* that *meme* started out as.

Stephen Jay Gould disconcerted Susan Blackmore (strong advocate of *meme*, not least in her enthusiastic *The Meme Machine* – a book self-congratulatingly and enthusiastically foreworded by Dawkins) by dismissing meme as “a meaningless metaphor” (the metaphor that has spawned *memetics* as a branch of study, pursued by professional *meme theorists*, those speculators preoccupied with what are now known as *memeplexes*, complexes of memes such as the self or religions). Blackmore objected to Gould’s “meaningless” (surely all metaphors have some meaning ...), but failed to see the importance of the allegation of metaphoricity (Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* 17). She is also quite ignorant – like every other cognitivist commentator I know – of this metaphor’s roots in the francophiliac Seventies, when Theory under the dominating influence of structuralist and post-structuralist thought held that everything was (in the notorious formula of Jaques Lacan) “structured like a language” (he was talking explicitly of the unconscious). And structured on the basic Saussurean signifying unit of the phoneme – or phonème – ally of a whole kin of phoneme-like structuring units coming in from linguistics, *grapheme, lexeme, sememe, semanteme, morpheme, toneme* –
which enjoyed renewed life across the then fashionably language-modelled, textualising spectrum, spawning new \textit{emic} offspring, \textit{ideologeme} and such. So Dawkins’s brainwave, the mimeme, was born into a busy linguistic-textual cousinhood, only to have its ancestry smothered at birth in its rebaptism as meme. The selfish mimeme, passing itself off as the merely selfish meme.

Memes comes in all sizes. The question of how big a meme is permeates Blackmore’s \textit{The Meme Machine}, and the answer is ‘any size’, from a musical tag (the opening four notes of Beethoven’s \textit{Fifth Symphony} are a meme-world favourite example) to a whole religion (the Roman Catholic Church is another meme-ist favourite). Daniel Dennett cheekily suggests there’s a meme for \textit{Moby Dick} (\textit{Consciousness Explained} 203). But whether jingle-sized or \textit{Moby Dick}-huge or even religion-gigantic, it’s impossible to think of memes as really having intentions and emotions, as the attribution of gene-type selfishness suggests. All of those things, jingles, novels, churches, are persons, have personality, only by dint of metaphor. Colin McGinn does cite memes as “mind-fucking” entities in his new book \textit{Mindfucking} but he’d be the first to deny actual personal desire – the desire actually to have sex with your \textit{mentalité} – to any of the memetic, “mind-fucking” things whose invasiveness he so deplores. Literary critics do indeed talk of texts as having intentions – ‘what \textit{Moby Dick} intends’ – just as any commentator might speculate on ‘the ambitions’ of Roman Catholicism, and so on – but to do so is, of course, to indulge in what John Ruskin labelled the “pathetic fallacy” of “personification”. When Ruskin invented that potent label in his \textit{Modern Painters} (Vol. III, 1856, Part 4, Sect. xii) he was chastising poets, Wordsworth, Charles Kingsley, Tennyson, for ascribing personality, emotion especially, to non-personal things, to natural objects. Such personification was for Ruskin simply a category error. Rivers and flowers are not persons. But Ruskin’s vexation was aesthetically shortsighted. For personification, which ancient rhetoricians knew as \textit{prosopopoeia}, is a basic trope of poetry, of fiction-making, as it is of theology. Maybe Ruskin was troubled by the quasi-theological implications of personification, by what this allegorising of persons, of otherness and others, into being might lead to conceptually, by leading you down a path of belief in otherness leading, in the end, to accepting the existence of a transcendent otherness, something like a deity. Prosopopoeia is the bringing into being, a presencing, of non-present, absent persons, or ‘characters’, \textit{for} the life of your poem, your drama, your novel, of your belief-system of any kind (persons who are addressed, invoked, brought on stage, made present, instantiated, by the ancient device of \textit{apostrophe} – which is the trope, of course, of prayer). Nothing could be more intrinsically and fundamentally poetic than the work of prosopopoeia. And the personification of the meme – as of the gene – is an extreme, but utterly characteristic, example of the aestheticizing, whether explicit or implicit, that goes on in the cognitive discussion. (And it follows that Dawkins and Dennett, as committed atheists, have to take up the cudgels intensively against the religion and deity which such devoted personifyings as theirs might be thought of as allowing in by the
back door: “Devil’s Chaplain” Dawkins (hero of Latha Menon’s 2003 selection of Dawkins essays, A Devil’s Chaplain) in his extended stretch of God-dismissing encounters, beginning in the pages of The Selfish Gene itself and culminating in The God Delusion; Dennett in Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon.)

Daniel Dennett does come clean in the matter of analogy and metaphor right at the end of his Consciousness Explained. His analogies – “intuition pumps” as he calls them – are “more art than science”. His efforts haven’t replaced “metaphorical theory, the Cartesian theatre, with a nonmetaphorical (‘literal, scientific’) theory. All I have done, really, is to replace one family of metaphors”, the Cartesian Theatre and so on, “with another”: software, virtual machines, multiple drafts and all that. So it’s all “just a war of metaphors?” (Consciousness Explained 455). But of course it is. And one thinks of how his story, and set of stories, of consciousness, are precisely an affair of metaphor-wars and story-wars, of how eager he is to offer counter readings, midrash, on the standard cognitive narratives, the Chinese Room and Mary the Colour Scientist, doing so in a whole splurging syndrome of Mary-midrash upon Mary-midrash (that Mary – Dennett’s Robomary – she just won’t go away: there’s now a whole school of Mary-Studies). Defiantly, Dennett insists that “metaphors are the tools of thought”. He could be George Eliot. “No one can think about consciousness without them, so it is important to equip yourself with the best set of tools available. Look what we have built with our tools. Could you have imagined it without them?” That’s Dennett’s cocky last word in Consciousness Explained (455). He’s happy to be thought of as what Burton Voorhees calls “the Devil” who reduces the Self to “an abstract ‘Centre of Gravity’ which is itself nothing but a convenient fiction” (Sweet Dreams 146). Convenient fiction. And so we are to think of cognitive thought-experiments, these so ‘convenient fictions’, as the best tools for imagining consciousness? As better than the Novel, for instance, the old technology of cognitive investigation? I wonder.

Utterly apt to the question is the often flawed way of the typical neuro-scientist with fiction. Take the neuro-physiologist Edmund Rolls in his Emotion Explained. He’s “one of the most cited neuro-physiologists in the world”, so one of the best. And he thinks that you read novels and poems, and go to plays, in order to acquire the adaptive, evolutionary beneficial nous that comes from “unravelling the thoughts and emotions of others” as they’re depicted in fiction, and from having “empathy” with them. Which is just another of the reductive and crudely instrumental explanations amply available on the cognitive stage – those Just So Stories rightly lampooned by Jerry Fodor: “‘We like telling stories because telling stories exercises the imagination and an imagination would have been a good thing for a hunter-gatherer to have’. ... ‘We like music because singing together strengthened the bond between the hunters and the gatherers (and/or between the hunter-gatherer grownups and their hunter-gatherer offspring)’. ‘We talk by making noises and not by waving our hands; that’s because hunter-gatherers lived in the
savannah and would have had trouble seeing one another in the tall grass.’ ...

‘We don’t all talk the same language because that would make us more likely
to interbreed with foreigners (which would be bad because it would weaken
the ties of hunter-gatherer communities)’ ” (Fodor, “Why Pigs Don’t Have
Wings” 22). How can you rely on ‘imaginative tools’ offered by analysts
whose critical theorising and practice, whose textuality and linguisticity,
whose readerliness and imagination, are as poor as that? The likes, as a matter
of fact, of Daniel Dennett – illustrating the complications of self and self-
naming with the ‘analogy’ of Moby Dick (for which, according to Dennett, as
one recalls, there is a meme, i.e. a motor of replication, which helps you
mime, mimic, repeat it): “Pick up Moby Dick and open it to page one. It says,
‘Call me Ishmael’ “ (Dennett, “Why Everyone is a Novelist” 1016). Well, no, it
doesn’t; that’s not what page one of Moby Dick says; that’s not Melville’s
actual make-believe of a beginning. There are two other characters who pre-
cede Ishmael, an usher in a school and a sub-sub librarian, and pages of
whale-etymology and literary quotations about whales. Dennett is making
up his own page one. So much for miming, mimicking, repeating. Dennett,
like so many others of his ilk, is by no means as good as he thinks he is with
how novelists actually do their make-believings of the self.

And Melville, and his kind, I’d say, do it better than Daniel Dennett and
his kind. As does, I allege, the Novel at large. Which is the good point of
David Lodge’s novel Thinks... Thinks... stages the confrontation between
Ralph Messenger, hot-shot director of the Holt Belling Centre for Cognitive
Studies of the University of Gloucester, a dynamic exponent of the cognitive,
Artificial Intelligence, and all that (strongly modelled, one guesses, on Daniel
Dennett, Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University),
and Helen Reed, novelist and Visiting Professor of Creative Writing. Both are
shocked by the other’s take on the mind, consciousness, self. Messenger
preaches the cognitive, PhysicSalist, futurist, Artificial Intelligence gospel.
Reed prefers trudging, as Messenger thinks it, along the old paths of the
traditional Novel. When she’s roped in to attending the big cognitive confer-
ence Messenger has organised, she’s gobsmacked by papers on subjects like
“The PreFrontal Cortex as a Basic Constituent of the Self”. Aesthetic woman,
she’s naturally warmer to the paper asking “Is the Brain like a Bucket of Shot
or More Like a Bowl of Jelly?” Meanwhile, it turns out that the traditional
Novel keeps providing models for human being and behaviour which really
do work better. For example, Helen Reed happens by chance on Messenger
and his mistress in a café and makes out their adulterous relationship, in a
wonderful replay of the moment in Henry James’s The Ambassadors when it
slowly dawns on Strether as he sees Chad and Madame de Vionnet out boat-
ing that they are having a transgressive affair.

As for Reed’s Creative Writing students, they can outstrip the cognitive
thought-experimenters, any day. She gets them to compose stories on the
grand cognitive themes, “Mary the Colour Scientist”, and “What Is It Like to
be a Bat”, and in the style of any contemporary novelist. “Mary” from the
famous, and in Helen Reed’s view deeply skewed thought experiment, emerges from these student stories as a variously conceived real person. As such, in one of the student stories she has no trouble at all with the colour red – nub of the original thought-experiment’s problematic – because, like all real women, she menstruates. And what, according to these young fictionists and their fiction, is it like being a bat? Even the most ephebic of novelists can tell you easily; it’s quite simple for a novelist to imagine being a bat, any and every kind of bat – freetail bat, vampire bat, blind bat. Novelists do this kind of imagining all the time, and these young ones exploit the genre’s old capacities – in the style of Martin Amis, Irvine Welsh, Salman Rushdie and Samuel Beckett. Their triumph comes from using the old technologies, so to say, of the Novel: the perpetually new technologies of the Novel. (A normative outdoing that’s cognate, of course, with the way contemporary robotics, with its dreams of emoting and self-reproducing machines, fails to achieve in practice what have long been clichés of the imaginative achievements of the Sci Fi trad of novels and movies our roboticists are so inspired by.)

Works Cited


    Extract in Dawkins 2008, 188-190.