

INTRODUCTION

He knows who has experienced it how bitter
Is sorrow as a comrade to the man
Who lacks dear human friends.

-*THE WANDERER* (ANGLO-SAXON POEM)

Ours is the era of unprecedented sharing. Now, as never before, we are connected "virtually" by posts, messages, and tweets-all delivered instantaneously as beams from the sky. And the word we use to describe this new connected state of being? Friendship. Indeed, friendship has become the metaphor of the Internet age. We say "friend" when speaking of an individual we may have never seen nor are likely to meet. Responding to bids landing in our electronic devices, we join an amplitude of information and allow our tastes, interests, and needs to be transformed by algorithms of affection and profit. Friendship abounds.

Yet, if we dig deeper into the strata underlying the digital network, we discover glimpses of disconnection. The ubiquity of friendship as trope belies its very vulnerability. Friendship is the most unencumbered of our relationships. It is the most freely entered into and the least underwritten by legal or religious codes. Moreover, people may have hundreds of virtual friends yet lack the protocols for friendship. They may communicate with countless users while fearing that intimacy sidetracks them from practical

goals. In a world of split-second velocity, friendship appears to dally and waste time. There is a disparity, in other words, between our elevation of friendship into an icon of digital connectivity and our experience of friendship in reality.

This paradox notwithstanding, it is significant that friendship is the word we use to designate communal life on the Web. For this choice expresses confidence in the potential of human communication and understanding. Friendship has always connoted the possibility of imagining the mind of an unrelated person. In friendship individuals arrive in someone else's house, step into unfamiliar corridors, and learn the layout of that person's life.

Friends are the first individuals we bond with outside of the family. As children, we learn to play and negotiate with boys and girls to whom we are not obligated by links of blood or law. In so doing, we begin to live socially, beyond the known world of relatives. Our initial playmates, later the buddies of adolescence, and the companions of adulthood help us transcend the familiar and imagine a larger neighborhood of camaraderie. Friendship, then, engages us with people outside of our house, in relationships not underwritten by law, religion, or the state, in attachments formed through love, pleasure, and possibility.

This capacity for imagination and invention is what makes friendship a natural ally of literature. In many ways, making friends resembles the process of engaging with fiction; both ask you to project yourself into the mind and heart of another. Is it a coincidence, therefore, that friendship and poetry took their first breaths together? Friendship witnessed the birth of literature, and poetry sang of friendship. Both the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad*, two of the earliest extant literary creations, tell stories of comradesly love.

In *Charlotte's Web* E. B. White develops the special rapport between fiction and friendship. Charlotte, the spider-web writer, imagines herself in Wilbur's hooves, and then in a supreme act of self-sacrifice she spins her fiction to save his life. As author and reader, she projects herself on her friend while also apprehending her friend's own projection. In this, White proposes that the urge toward friendship reiterates the literary. Charlotte seems instinctively to understand the empathic link between art and friendship. The narrator stresses that "it's not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both" (White

1952, 184). The urge toward friendship and an engagement with fiction are two parts of the same impulse.

Although of a different species, Charlotte empathizes so much with the pig destined for slaughter that she devises a strategy for his salvation. What is it? Writing, of course—the enchanting words she fashions over Wilbur such as "Some Pig" or "Radiant" that persuade the farmer and then visitors to the fair of Wilbur's special qualities. To be sure, all of this is a ploy, a product of Charlotte's artistry, but it succeeds in rescuing her friend. When a grateful Wilbur asks Charlotte why she wove her webs for him, she answers that she did it because she wanted to "lift up" her life a trifle (164). It is the transcendence I referred to earlier.

The story of Charlotte and Wilbur proposes that friendship signifies meaningful fellowship between two individuals. It is a way of saying that somebody matters, that someone outside of the home is concerned for you, that she engages in a dialogue that's neither predictable nor scripted by familial obligation. Friendship is an attempt to forge a connection between self and other, to chisel a resemblance with what is different, to develop a reciprocal tie with someone outside the blood group. This emphasis on reciprocity is what ultimately distinguishes friendship from other types of relations. For you could be in love with someone who does not return your feelings, but a nonreciprocal friendship is hard to imagine.¹ Of course, people fashion other types of relations in the workplace, in courtship, and in marriage. But friendship can't count on the legal, religious, and social infrastructure that family can. **Nor** is it motivated by the endgame of sexual fulfillment and reproduction, like marriage. Finally, it does not rest on professional alliances. Even though you may become friends with your boss or your teacher, the inequality is likely to strain, if not hobble, the relationship.

Although *Charlotte's Web* chronicles a few short weeks in the lives of two creatures, it assigns this period of companionship a monumental intensity. If friendship is a relation, then the relationship has a temporal as well as a spatial delineation. People experience periods of profound friendship the way travelers, transfixed by the panorama unfolding before them, recognize a border between one domain and another.² A person entering a friendship is like the speaker in John Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816), who "had travelled in the realms of gold" but had not known what travel was till he heard "Chapman speak out loud

and bold." Now he feels like a "watcher of the skies," fixing on a new planet, or like "Cortez" (Hernan Cortes) staring out to sea.³ Exploration disorients the two individuals, demanding of them a new alertness to their surroundings. Friendship and literature similarly defamiliarize daily life.

In personal narratives as well as literary descriptions, the journey often serves as the trope for friendship. The friends not only undertake an adventure together but they also see their relationship as an odyssey in itself. They regard friendship as a departure from hubris and habit, a transition from certainty to reverie, and a plunge into the unpredictable.

My aim in this book is to reflect more closely on this link between our need for friends and our desire for fiction. I wish to examine how the capacity to appreciate someone else's position, to enter the mind of another person, closely resembles our ability to invent and enjoy alternative worlds. Literature and friendship both occupy structurally similar positions in society, each being nonessential and nonproductive human activities, squanderers of time. People engage with literature and make friends even though neither offers them much instrumental advantage.

Our First and Only Noncontractual Relationship

We embark on friendship for no other goal than the relationship itself. In other words, the arguments we give for the justification of friendship are circular. Again the comparison with travel is apt. For the longest period of human history, people moved from one place to another for a particular reason: to conduct trade, wage war, escape conflict, undertake a pilgrimage, or engage in a scientific mission. In the modern epoch, however, those with the means began to journey for the experience itself. In a letter from the Greek territories of the Ottoman Empire, Lord Byron (1788-1824) writes to his mother that his Turkish hosts "have no idea of traveling for amusement."⁴ But for Byron the journey has become the purpose itself.

Friendship too posits its own worth within itself. It is a legally, religiously, and economically inconsequential affiliation. There is no fixed beginning or end of friendship, no rite celebrating its appearance, and no covenant sealing its existence. We are free to enter into and leave it without any social, legal, professional, or religious sanctions. For this reason I refer

to it as *an institution that does not resemble an institution*. It is the important unimportant, the peripheral centrality, the tardy contemporaneity of life.

To a certain extent friendship has always been an incongruity—a social riddle, an evolutionary conundrum, and a personal tug-of-war. Why does it seem so contradictory? Primarily because friendship functions as an exchange between the self and the other, an interdependence that implies both cooperation and conflict. The friend is, as Aristotle says, another self. But it is precarious in more ways than Aristotle could have imagined. He presupposed a political and social foundation for friendship and a homogeneous society of citizens that no longer exists, if it ever existed. Lacking broad public or philosophical recognition, friendship roams in the passages of our social categories, the spaces between kinship and law, matrimony and professions, productivity and leisure. It is betwixt and between.

The time of life that casts friendship's ambiguity in starkest relief is the period between childhood and adulthood. Individuals passing through this transitional moment (or, as the anthropologist Victor Turner called it, an "interstructural situation") find themselves amid the different forms of regulations and conventions. Having an unclear status, they exhibit a blend of categories of male and female, the same and the different, of high and low. This merging of classification makes it, temporarily, a condition of confusion, paradox, and ambiguity. Not surprisingly, societies develop rituals—rites of passage—to help individuals through these transitional moments

As a dialogue of the similar with the other, friendship exhibits many characteristics of rites of passage. But the intermediary nature of friendship constitutes a permanent structural feature rather than a temporal marker. The neophytes are concealed, physically secluded during the ritual period before entering adulthood, whereas friendship is visible and invisible at the same time, socially significant and insignificant. It attempts to integrate the normative and the unconventional rather than being a stage between them, as the case of Charlotte and Wilbur shows. Finding herself in the company of a pig, Charlotte spins for him a companionship, even with her dying breaths. It is this attempt to bridge the normal with the extraordinary that makes friendship fragile. Thus, whereas the neophytes return to the community as adults, friends proceed always as a mode of comparison, first between self and social order, then between the friend and the other, and finally between an actual and imagined self. Friendship

exists as a relation rather than an end product, a metamorphosis rather than a conclusion.

In this process of linking the "I" and the "You," two uniquely human functions come into play, the faculty of the imagination and the emotion of empathy. The friend has to envision an affective tie with another person in the absence of an institutional infrastructure. Lacking the scripts and maps available, say, to marriage or a business partnership, friends are forced to make up their own rules. They have to imagine how a situation should be and compare this with the way it is now. If structural paradox enforces a distance on the friend from the social order, empathy struggles to minimize this distance. Charlotte becomes a friend when she successfully imagines what a runt pig feels and needs.

This aspect makes friendship a prototype for all nonblood relationships, a testing ground for the possibility of voluntary links outside of blood and law relations. Whereas we are born into our families, races, nationalities, and religions, we choose our friends.