MY OLIVIA

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In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre offers to show how "natural it is to think of the self in a narrative mode" (205). Even in a contemporary context that tends to think atomistically about human action and sharply separate the individual from the roles that he or she plays, a concept of a self "whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative" remains "an unacknowledged presence in many of our ways of thinking and acting" (205). The cult sci-fi TV show *Fringe* (Fox, 2009-13), created by J. J. Abrams, Alex Kurtzman, Roberto Orci and, later, Jeff Pinkner and J. H. Wyman, seems to be such a case of implicitly envisioning the self as a life story. In *Fringe*, we follow multiple versions of a small group of characters across parallel universes, while they investigate paranormal crimes and incidents. The story arc of these characters and their different iterations, especially those of Olivia Dunham, presupposes a narrative conception of the self, which is being advanced against the mind-boggling thought experiments that, by having a lot of As and Bs exchanging their bodies, support most attempts at grounding personal identity in memory or psychological continuity. But although *Fringe* exemplifies MacIntyre's theoretical description of the self as a story, it does not follow the latter's suggestion that "the unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest" (219), but

rather frames the lives of its main characters within the genre of the love story. Just as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, this TV series specifies the ultimate good orienting and defining the characters' flourishing as a relationship with the loved one. Only that could account for *Fringe* being, in the end, as much (if not more) a family drama as a sci-fi show on parallel worlds and an FBI division looking into the criminal outcomes of scientific hubris.

In a decade where television had become more serialized—a trend that J. J. Abrams himself, with Daniel Lindelof, helped bring about with *Lost*—*Fringe* went against the current, beginning as a sort of *X-Files* for the new century and following a monster-of-the-week format. This initial similarity to the previous Fox procedural drama did not help *Fringe* garnering an audience, because, as Liz Miller once put it, when "you've seen one misfit FBI team investigate strange phenomena, you've seen 'em all." But the more episodic structure of the first two seasons, with the unrushed disclosing of its overarching narrative of parallel universes, a kidnapped son and the ripple effect of crossing over, plays an important role in attaching those viewers that passed the test of patience to the three characters at the core of the series. We come to know and love the brilliant, but somewhat mad scientist Walter Bishop, a pioneer of "fringe" science in the 1970's, who ended up locked in a psychiatric hospital for nineteen years; his estranged, almost as gifted, but less crazy and more streetwise, son Peter Bishop; and the reserved, tough-minded but emotionally empathetic FBI agent Olivia Dunham, responsible for putting this division, or little family, together. And for two whole seasons we see how Peter and Olivia, working together case after case, coming to know the truth about themselves and about each other, grow a friendship, which at the same time slowly develops into a deeper form of affection. Peter and Olivia, with Walter and other characters such as Astrid, Broyles or Nina, come to share a history of which we, viewers—because of the time and attention invested in following their adventures throughout numerous creepy stand-alone episodes—also take part. Their slowly-built history together is also their history to us, our history with them. By the time we see, in the season two finale, Olivia going to the other universe to fetch Peter, saying that he belongs with her, only to end up

imprisoned there and replaced by Altlivia (the Olivia from that parallel world), we find ourselves suffering and rooting for her, while getting mad at the imposter who has taken her place, no matter how alike or entitled to it she may be as Olivia's other self. Unlike John Locke's scant example of a prince and a cobbler exchanging their bodies, or Sidney Shoemaker's nondescript Brown, Robinson, and their Brownson outcome, in this case we are made to watch Olivia's story as it unfolds, and care for the Olivia whose story we came to know. Throughout the many variations we will never quiver, but always know with certainty, more so than Peter himself (who does not benefit from the viewers' transcendent point of view), which one is "our Olivia."

Through the first half of season three, in what looks like a typical exercise in the philosophy of personal identity, Olivia is conditioned to believe she is Altlivia by having the latter's memories implanted in her and made to inhabit Altlivia's historical circumstances. Meanwhile, in a more traditional case of identity exchange, Altlivia pretends to be Olivia and travels from the alternate to the prime universe (also known as redverse and blueverse) with Walter and Peter. This last case of impersonation is mirrored, in episode five, by Joshua Rose trading places with his twin brother, Matthew, after having lived for years as him, with his family. While waiting to release Matthew from the amber,[1] where he had been locked for trying to save Joshua, the reformed bank robber inhabited the circumstances of his better brother (S3E5). But Matthew's wife was never mystified by the exchange. She never gave up on her husband, replacing him by his look-alike brother. Just like Peter, after discovering Altlivia's true identity, started treating her no longer as a lover but as the enemy, and began desperately to find a way to rescue "his" Olivia. This does not prove that the body is not a sufficient condition for identity, but only that physical appearance is not the single thing one loves. What needs to be figured out is what makes "that" body, the one locked in amber or in the redverse, the desirable one.

The classical case of impersonation does not offer a lot of difficulties, except for Altlivia, with her lack of knowledge about Olivia's life and the personality that came out of it, with her slips and missteps, which lead Peter to adjust his

idea of Olivia, in order to explain the subtle changes he noticed in her. What about Olivia's body with Altlivia's memories or, later in the season, William Bell's mind (which, in this context, means the same as "memories")? It is easy to say that none of these versions is Olivia. Especially in the last case, not even the characters around her take her to be Olivia. But they do treat her as William Bell, just as before the rest of Fringe division from the redverse had treated her as Altlivia. We feel tempted to say, after centuries of cartesianism, that identity resides in the mind, thinking of the body as a mere medium, as the *embodiment* of something, with that something being, first of all, a thing and, then, the thing that matters. Yet, the producers naturally resist this idea and have the intuition that Olivia's body remains Olivia and if personhood is in any way related to memory, then there must be some form of deeper memory, underlying the transplanted one. I am almost sure the scenario they offer to express this intuition would not resist scientific or philosophical analysis, but if we take it as a metaphor (this is art, after all) we may find out something of real interest. The creators of *Fringe* seem to distinguish knowledge from what psychologists would call "autobiographic memory," looking at it as outside this type of memory, which is now Altlivia's. They place it closer to the sphere of the body, which is Olivia's, as if it were buried, engrained in it. It is Olivia's body that has its life saved in a split second because it ignored a protocol usual in the redverse (S3E3) or that knows her niece's birthday and that the Twin Towers were no longer standing (S3E5). There is of course some confusion here, because we have the more self-conscious "knowledge that" being treated as a form of the more implicit "knowledge how," while this latter is sometimes integrated by the writers in self-knowledge or "autobiographic memory," as in the case of Altlivia's shooting ability being transferred to Olivia, together with her episodic memories and knowledge of facts about herself. But what is of interest here is how knowledge is included in the sphere of the body, being, even if implicitly and confusedly, identified as a particular conceptual network of beliefs historically acquired by Olivia's body, belonging to it and not to consciousness, autobiographic memory or the mind. Going as deep as this "bodily" knowledge is also Olivia's love for Peter. Her memories of

him lost, he remains "a figment of her imagination" (S3E9): "I'm the part of you that you have to hold on to. You can't forget who you are, Olivia. You can't forget where you're from" (S3E3). Not by accident, given this coincidence of who she is, and where she belongs to, with the person she loves, it is through Peter's voice that what she knows about the blueverse, but does not remember, is again brought to consciousness. What is it, then, that remains with her body, even when her mind is not aware of it? What she knows, that is, what she has learned throughout her life even if she does not remember how, and whom she loves. All of that tells Olivia's body that she is Olivia, not Altlivia, and all of that is what makes her body the desirable one, the one Peter wants back. As to the possibility of having this body *embodying* Altlivia's or Bell's mind, we will see that it is no different from the more traditional case of acting or role playing, explaining how we can imagine scenarios like princes and cobblers or As and Bs having their bodies exchanged.

By the end of "Amber 31422," Olivia's body has regained full consciousness of her own conceptual network of beliefs, which includes her knowledge of her body's life story, and affections such as Peter or her niece. But something about her identity still does not feel right. She is yet to return to her own universe, to those bonds that help defining her, the people she has come to share her life with. To be in the world we belong to is so relevant for being who we are that, in season four, after Olivia from the alternate timeline regains her initial memories from seasons one to three, Peter is only completely certain that this is "his" Olivia when assured by September that he is in the right universe, that he has been home all along (S4E15). Notice that even if, in this alternate timeline, the world around Peter and Olivia remains a different one from the world they knew, what is important is that the world they both share is the same, the one world Walter will later join too, in season five, and out of which grew their stories with each other and us, the viewers. In "The First Person," Elizabeth Anscombe describes the word "I" as having the ability to point to oneself, to indicate "this thing here," this "living human body" as that of which propositions such as "I am standing up" can be true or false: "my idea that I am standing up is verified by this body, if it is standing up" (34). If Anscombe

is right, then the concept of self, or the use of "I," implies both the body and the world it belongs to, as evidenced by the presence of the indexical "this" in "this thing here," explaining why we had to have Olivia's body in Olivia's universe and the story connecting one to the other. As Anscombe says of herself:

> The I-thoughts *now* that have *this* connection with E. A. are I-thoughts on the part of the same human being as the I-thoughts that had that connection twenty years ago. No problem of the continuity or re-identification of "the *I*" can arise. There is no such thing. There is E. A., who, like other humans, has such thoughts as these. And who probably learned to have them through learning to say what she had done, was doing, etc. – an amazing feat of imitation. (34)

These I-thoughts, which constitute self-knowledge, or self-image, are "unmediated conceptions (knowledge or belief, true or false) of states, motions, etc., of this object here," "of the human animal one is" (34). There is no embodiment here, at least not in the sense of something (whatever it may be) being enveloped by the body. If Olivia can embody William Bell's mind is only for the same reason that Altlivia can pretend to be Olivia or, for that matter, Anna Torv play both characters—because our personal conceptual network of beliefs is based on a shareable, public language, and can therefore have parts of it being written down or voiced by someone else just as much as it accommodates or is transformed by parts of other people's personal conceptual networks.

Why are we, the viewers, in a better position than Peter himself, to identify "our" Olivia? The answer to this question may seem at first trivial. Given *Fringe's* authorial perspective, the viewers are offered an insight into what happens in both worlds and, even if the disclosure of the fact that Altlivia has taken Olivia's place is kept from us until the very end of the season two finale, we still get to know something about Olivia's story that Peter does not. And, at the end of "Olivia" (S3E1) when, after fighting to escape, Olivia eventually comes to believe she is Altlivia, the viewers remain the only ones on the blueverse team who

know about the exchange. For all intents and purposes, everything might be in the right place. Olivia, now believing to be Altlivia, is happy to be back to her work with her friends in redverse's Fringe division and to her boyfriend at home. And as Altlivia is starting to fall in love with the people she first came to spy on, we can imagine that she would in time believe to be Olivia by having become her. In a normal thought experiment of this kind we are usually asked to take the unknowing perspective of those involved (or some other ahistorical perspective), in order to accept the conclusion that the exchange is irrelevant. But in *Fringe*, the producers want us to be as God, who sees all and forgets nothing. We know the previous story of Olivia's body, and this new fact about it—that it has been the victim of an identity theft and of the suppression of her self-knowledge. By the end of *Fringe*, we will not have an Olivia that existed almost throughout the entire series apart from the two intervals during which she was Altlivia, in season three, and had the set of memories from the alternate timeline, in season four (season five's counterfactual dystopic future presents a more difficult case). We will also not have an Olivia that could be said to have always existed for remembering the times when hers was somebody else's mind, because sometimes we can see that she does not—the only thing she remembers from having been inhabited by and liberated from William Bell's mind is of Peter coming for her and recognizing her true self (S3E19); and when she regains her initial set of memories, in season four, she forgets the alternate timeline set (S4E15). What moments of her life she may have lost, as with cases of amnesia, she rebuilds through the testimony of those around. Anscombe reminds us that "'introspection' is but one contributory method" for our self-knowledge (and not even the best one) (34), while MacIntyre calls attention to how we all play a part in each other's stories, how "the asking for and giving of accounts itself plays an important part in constituting narratives" (218). If, as claimed by MacIntyre, "personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of a narrative requires" (218), then what we do have at the end is a body with a very complicated story, shared with us and other characters, that finds unity in the unity of *Fringe*, which is the unity of a love story. And if "our" Olivia coincides with

the narrative of her life, with seasons one and two establishing the reference point for every variation happening from then onwards, it is not so trivial, after all, that our vantage point came from knowing the whole story. But to what point does love play a crucial role in defining Olivia, so that the unity of her life is that of a love story?

The answer to the question of who one is cannot be answered by simply pointing at one's own body, even if the ability to correctly perform such gesture in different contexts is part of having the concept of self. Charles Taylor, in the wake of authors as Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricouer, or Jerome Bruner, agrees that an essential aspect of personal identity is "that we grasp our lives in a narrative" (47). But it is his point in *Sources of the Self*, against various forms of naturalism, that such identity cannot be understood outside of or abstracted from a morally salient world, a space of moral questions that involve "strong evaluation," that is, "discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged" (4). If Locke recognizes that we are not indifferent to ourselves, "he has no inkling of the self as a being which essentially is constituted by a certain mode of self-concern—in contrast to the concern we cannot but have about the quality of our experiences as pleasurable or painful" (49). Another essential feature of personal identity is then its orientation to the good (or some form of the incomparably higher). The answer to the question of who we are coincides also with what we value, what is of crucial importance to us: "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (27). To know who I am "is to be oriented in moral space" (28). It is within it that the story of a human being can be continuously measured, assessed and re-interpreted in its entirety, with the future redeeming the past, making it part of a life story which has sense and purpose, taking it up in a meaningful unity (51) instead of a series of disposable past selves, as imagined by Derek Parfit.

Who we are is not then just a narrative, but a narrative assessed as being one either of failure or flourishment, of moving towards one or the other within the moral space that establishes what counts as the good life. Only this can explain why Olivia, in season four, would choose to let go of her memories from the alternate timeline, borne of a past where, instead of Peter, there had been only a hole for as long as she could remember (S4E1), in favor of her regained set of memories from a shared life with him. Discussing one of her cases with Nina, Olivia explains why she will not try to resist the disappearing of those memories. Even when believing herself abandoned by Peter (who at this time is not yet sure of being in the right universe, thus with the right Olivia), she has decided to let things run their course: "I met a woman today [...]. She had let go of the possibility of love, of finding love, and I could see myself in her. I didn't like who I was. All of these memories that I'm experiencing, they're from a better version of me" (S4E15). In *Fringe*, the life worth living is a life of love. The person Olivia had become through her history with Peter, even if he was no longer there, was the better version of her she wanted to become. She chooses to be that Olivia whom Peter calls "my Olivia," the one she was not scared of find herself growing into, enjoying the feeling.

It is worth remembering that Olivia's identity is not so much in her memories of Peter (in what could seem just another version of an identity grounded on psychological continuity), but more in what that set of memories or past knowledge allows for, which is to recognize who Peter is for her and ask of him a similar recognition: "I feel incredibly close to you. I feel like I know you better than anyone else in the world. And then when you look at me, it's like none of that is true. [...] I want you to treat me like you know me better than anyone in the world too, because you do" (S4E13). It is interesting to see that, in *Fringe*, the most acute cases of dehumanization will coincide with the loss of the ability to acknowledge loved ones, as with the previously mentally disabled Milo, who becomes a genius by starting to think as a computer, but at the cost of no longer recognizing his sister: "I am not some collection of data you need to make sense of. I'm your sister! [...] You've forgotten us. Mom gave you this [toy horse] as a reminder that you didn't have to do more than you were able to, that

we loved you" (S3E3). Just as most people will become themselves again as soon as they reconnect with the history they have built with those they love. Peter helps Alice Merchant realizing that the Derek from the redverse she was seeing and thought was her husband was an illusion, and does it by asking her to remember: "You've already had what most of us only dream of, a lifetime with the person that you love. Look around you—your entire house is filled with mementos, photographs, ticket stubs, evidence of a life shared with somebody. Proof that what you and Derek had was true and real" (S3E14).

What of Peter, the boy stolen from his universe, who never knew where he belonged until Olivia brought him, first back to his father, and then to her, giving him "a place to call home" (S4E12)? He too has his identity completely defined by Olivia. When risking his life entering the machine, in the season three finale, it is the memories of her that accompany him and give meaning to his choice—he will save the world most of all to save her. And in season five, when he almost loses his humanity in order to avenge their dead daughter it is Olivia's plea and his memories of their life together that bring him back from his transhumanist Observer version (S5E8). The good life and the flourishing of these two characters lie in their shared history, grown around the unusual task of literally saving the world together (but is not that the purpose of every human life?), out of which came a joint identity mutually acknowledged. "I knew the real you would recognize me," says Olivia to Peter (S3E19), identifying his true self with the ability to recognize her; or "when I look into your eyes, I know it's you," says Peter to Olivia (S4E13), in what has now become a recurrent theme throughout the series.

In *Fringe*, it is love and not science that can lead to human flourishing, give birth to a better human being, explaining why Olivia's special abilities, even if enabled by the drug Cortexiphan, only work when she is around Peter, and why this show puts a family at the center of Frankenstein's project of creating life through science and not paternity. As one of *Fringe's* most heartbreaking deformed mishaps of scientific hubris, the invisible U-gene, says to Olivia: "All my life I've been watching them live theirs. Watching them fall in love. To be looked upon by the right person, to

connect. And to see in their eyes kindness, happiness and recognition. That's when you exist" (S4E7).

[1] Walter Bishop's first crossing over weakened the fabric of the alternate universe, causing holes to start opening in it and leading to the subsequent disappearance of whatever existed in those parts of the alternate world. Amber is an advanced substance that, starting as a gas and hardening into something similar to natural amber, was used to close the holes, avoiding the further swallowing of matter. Any person trapped in amber would not be killed but placed in a state of suspended animation.

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