

Fiction as Soul-Truth, or Theology has a lot to learn

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The writers who matter most to us are those who enlarge our consciences and our sympathies and our knowledge....Literature, I would argue, is knowledge – albeit, even at its greatest, imperfect knowledge. Like all knowledge. Still even now, literature remains one of our principle modes of understanding. A major novelist is one who understands a great deal about complexity: the complexity of society and the complexity of the private life – of family bonds, family affections, the powers of Eros, the many levels on which we feel and struggle. Susan Sontag

“The greatest tragedy in theology in the past three centuries has been the divorce of the theologian from the poet, the dancer, the musician, the painter, the dramatist, the actress, the movie maker.” Father M.D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*

I. Introduction--Why Read Fiction

A while ago, my friend Alice and I were in prison.

THE GUARD brought us through two thick security doors, emblazoned with the words: **ALL WEAPONS MUST BE LEFT HERE**. Our numerous bags had already been searched, our coats and keys removed and stuffed in a locker. We were certified weaponless. THE GUARD escorted us up the elevator to the second floor, where she deposited us in the stark room frequently used for hearings---perfunctory processes, no doubt. There was a dais up front—replete with gavel. Faded blue plastic chairs were scattered about, as if some high school had just done a mock trial. A door marked “LADIES,” inscribed with a black marker, completed the stage. “Wait here,” THE GUARD ordered, and with a turn of her key and the slide of a bolt, we were temporarily abandoned.

As we obediently waited in the room for the guard to return and finish processing us, Alice and I walked over to the window and looked down upon a gloomy little concrete yard whose brick walls were topped by rolled barbed wire. After a while, Alice, the better conversationalist of us two, asked me what I was up to these days.

“I’m writing a novel,” I replied.

“Oh really?” Alice asked in the high-pitched, melodramatic voice I had learned to love, well tolerate. “You know, I have to tell you,” she switched into a lower, confidential tenor: “I’ve never read novels. I read only biographies and spiritual writings, because I figure, why read something that didn’t really happen?”

Ouch.

I’d learned to expect that Alice and I looked at the world differently. She and I were the unlikeliest of friends. The bumper sticker on her car read: Abortion stops a Beating Heart. The one on mine was: I took the trip to Woodstock ’99.¹ Alice and I were about as different as the tea and coffee we respectively preferred. It was prison that brought us together.

But, still, ouch.

Then, my pious friend threw one skinny leg over the other, leaned forward, and trained her soft blue eyes on me. “But, I really want to know why you’re writing a novel and why you think other people should read them.”

And, here you have it: the whole point of this paper. I want to answer Alice’s question, ‘Why read fiction.’ [By the way, the above events *did* happen..] And then I want to talk some

about what I think fiction does and what the qualities of good fiction are and how those good qualities also make for good theology. Theology can do a lot worse than to take its cues from fiction, and in fact, I think it often does do a lot worse. Sometimes theology becomes BAD FICTION. [Alas, today I have not left MY weapon, my sharp tongue, at the door!] These themes are merely starting points for some dreaming: I imagine an entire project --- the Fiction as Soul Truth Project --- that works on these issues, and more. Here are the seeds.

Well, back to prison, and Alice's question. Lucky for me THE GUARD was so late, we had plenty of time to talk. We sat and sat, and I justified my . . . really my existence, since writing novels, or my novel, had become such a central part of what energized me.

I said to Alice, "Novels aren't fact in the way we think of facts, but they are true. They tell stories about true experiences, feelings, conflicts, pains and delights. They hit us deep in our souls." I told her about my favorite novels, *Brothers Karamazov*, *Middlemarch*, *Accidental Tourist*, *Glittering Images*, *Prince of Tides* (though, one look at the cover, and I think my slightly prudish friend will put that one back down!). I talked about the life tensions these stories played with, and how, even though they were other peoples' stories, they were my story too. [Okay, I admit I make myself sound smooth and slightly eloquent, when I was really more hesitant and groping, but do you really need the 'ums,' 'uhs,' and, 'wells'? If so, go ahead, add them. "Uh, well, novels aren't fact in the way we, um, think of facts. . . ."]

Then, I told her something that my youngest son once said: "The Bible's not really true," he announced. "That story about creation, the guy didn't even mention the dinosaurs. And Noah, God would never destroy all those animals. I think the Bible is kind of like the story Nathan told King David---after the mess with Bathsheba. You know, the story about the little lamb that the rich man stole from the poor man. Nathan was getting to a point, but it's not a point that really happened. It's something he's trying to get David to realize. That's what some of the Bible stories are like. So, in a way they're not true but in a way they are." So, I concluded, unabashedly borrowing from my favorite theologian (Paul Hess): *novels are not true, but in a way they are*.

I don't know if I convinced Alice that fiction was worthy reading or not. The rest of the day was a downer, and I *will* tell you how it ended. Later. But, for now, I'm going to take Charles Dickens' advice about story telling --- he said: make them laugh, make them cry, but above all . . . above all . . . make them wait. I'm going to make you wait. I want to continue the point I started to make with Alice: fiction is a source of truth.

II. Fiction as Truth

Fiction tells truth because it is the truth of life that goes into making good fiction: love, hate, fear, courage, delight, sorrow, betrayal, loyalty, confusion, choice, circumstance, luck, injustice. When Tobias Wolff described the common characteristics of the authors he brought together in a collection of American short stories, he described the truth-telling nature of fiction: "They write about fear of death, fear of life, the feelings that bring people together and force them apart, the costs of intimacy. They remind us that our house is built on sand. They are, every one of them, interested in what it means to be human." In her book *A Sense of Wonder: On Reading and Writing Books for Children*, Katherine Paterson relates that a friend of hers thought that the two creatures most to be pitied were the spider and the novelist --- their

lives hanging by a thread spun out of their own guts.² Alternatively, you've probably heard the widely quoted (and widely attributed) quip: it's easy to be a novelist, all you have to do is slice open a vein and bleed on the page. Good stories come, metaphorically, from guts and blood, emotions and wounds. When we read into the souls of characters in books, we become privy to more about a person than life would ever divulge to us. In a sense, then, we gain a kind of knowledge at a level of depth that we rarely, maybe never, get in life experience.

Now, perhaps you're feeling railroaded into hearing me justify to you, like I did to Alice, a key project in my life's work. You may even be feeling---how metaphorically appropriate that Alice was stuck in prison when she was being propagandized. Oh, pardon me for a moment, I feel story coming on. *Two women visit prison; woman one justifies her existence to woman two; guards let them out; woman one keeps justifying; woman two runs back into prison.*

Okay, where were we? Oh yes, you may be wondering if I am exaggerating the value of reading fiction. And, here I do want to pause and clarify: despite my passion for reading and writing fiction, DON'T hear me saying that reading novels can substitute for experience.

Although I believe reading makes a person richer in diversities of experience, a point I will reiterate later, reading cannot replace living, doing. As Zora Neale Hurston's character Janie says at the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

"Course, talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when you can't do nothin' else . . . Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo papa and yo mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got to go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves."

You got to go there to know there! Reading is an awesome, dangerous adventure, but it's not the end all of being. I once [honest to goodness, this, too, is a true story] attended a talk a novelist gave, and he said that if he were to tell the story of his life, it would go something like this: I read this book, then that book, then that book. Now, that's an important part of life. If I were to tell you the story of my *education*, I probably would start with when I read *Anna Karenina* and got turned on to what one of my friends referred to as "those depressing Russians." [Which lead me to that depressing American, Theodore Dreiser.] And my *life* story would definitely include my reading of George Eliot and Jane Austen. But, I wouldn't want to live my whole life through books [well...okay, I would *if I could*]. Still, it's too ironic, I think. After all, would we want to read a book about someone who did nothing but read books? I guess it could be interesting to have a running commentary on what someone thought about the books they were reading, but still the story would lack richness. Even Michael Cunningham had to add a little more to *The Hours* than the impact *Mrs. Dalloway* had on Laura Brown. [Though that was, you have to admit, quite fascinating.] Maybe Flannery O'Connor is right when she says that anyone who has survived childhood has enough information about life to last them the rest of their days and thus enough to write about. As far as my own childhood, I kind of agree. But, I think we need a little bit, maybe not much, but a little bit more life experience. We like to read about people's experiences, the people they rub up against, the challenges they face, the risks they take or don't take. In fact, I'm not sure an armchair novelist is any more good than an armchair theologian, the latter of whom, as you'll soon find out, I utterly disrespect.

That being said, still, in the main, I agree with Robert Louis Stevenson. "The most influential books, and the truest in their influence, are works of fiction. They do not pin the reader to a dogma which he must afterwards discover to be inexact; they do not teach him a

lesson which he must afterwards unlearn. They repeat, they rearrange, they clarify the lessons of life itself.”

And speaking of dogma, let's return to prison. Recall, as we left off in the saga of Carol, Alice, and THE GUARD, I've just tried to convince Alice --- who asked me 'why read fiction' -- - that fiction is as true as fact. Perhaps, in the gaps of the story, you are imagining: Pious Alice is praying for THE GUARD's speedy return.

Well, eventually someone heard those prayers. THE GUARD did finally come back. We heard the key turn the lock, we heard the door scrape open.

And, then. THE GUARD kicked us out of prison. [Not the first time, I've been kicked out of prison, but that's a story, and a metaphor, for another day.] THE GUARD, the one we always hoped wasn't on duty when we were there, in her no-nonsense attitude and staccato voice, tried and sentenced us right there: “There's been a riot, it has to do with a pen you GOOD LADIES brought in last week. Go home, you can't visit today. And no more pens. NO MORE PENS.”

A little dejected, we grabbed our two push-carts full of puzzles, Bibles, devotionals (we weren't allowed to bring novels!), and the now contraband pens. Although the guards and the inmates always called us the “good ladies,” (we were an ecumenical group that visited weekly) we referred to ourselves as the “bag ladies,” which was visually truer and theologically more satisfying to me. We were a sight, let me tell you! So, we bag ladies obeyed our orders. Alice grabbed me and we high-tailed it. [I think Alice was afraid we'd get caught for the prohibited item she *knowingly* sneaked in --- eyeglasses, to give to one of the inmates. Alice's piety had its flexibilities, and for that I liked her very much.]

As we pushed our wares and our way back to the car, Alice then asked again about the novel I was writing. Disregarding Ben Desraeli's claim that the only thing worse than a novelist talking about her writing is a mother talking about her child, I went for it!³ “It's titled *Deserving*, and it's the story of a daughter of Holocaust Survivors, they call them Second Generation, who tries to come to terms with the ways that being a Second Generation has unconsciously shaped---and misshaped---her.”

“So, it *is* an autobiography!” she screeched hopefully.

“Well, no, it's a true rendering of character, written by someone who knows, but it's not my exact story.”

“Well, that's sort of like a true story, I think I'll read it when it comes out.” Bless her flexible pious heart!

Now, of course, there is a way in which all novels are autobiographical, just as Fredrick Buechner says all theology is autobiographical. And here I'd like to go a second round with the “fiction is truth” theme. Novelists write about events that evoke feelings they know. While literary theory itself has moved beyond reducing literature to covert autobiography (that is, there was a time when it was assumed that great works are masked tales about the Great Men who wrote them),⁴ it is nevertheless the case that good literature comes from the deep realities of the author's experience and feelings. In fact, Katherine Paterson was once asked by her mother why she never wrote a story about the heart-wrenching time in first grade when she didn't get a single Valentine at school on Valentine's Day, an event Katherine's mother grieved over all her life. “But, Mother,” Katherine responded. “All my stories are about the time I didn't get any valentines.”⁵ When writers draw on deep experiences of pain and joy, the truth of their feeling

communicates broadly.

Sometimes, the resulting verisimilitude is more a burden than a gift. In fact (pardon the pun), works of fiction often resonate so well that readers, even astute ones, believe the author must be recounting actual events in life. In David Lodge's novel, *Small World*, we are privy to a scene where a woman, a professional literary critic, believes that the work of a particular female author *must* be autobiographical. So this literary critic projects the events of the novel onto the woman's husband, convinced that he is the, uh, well-endowed lover in the novel. Desperately, the husband of said author tries to convince the critic he is not the male character in his wife's novel. Alas, to protect his own privacy, the husband bad-mouths the enterprise of novel writing. "Novelists exaggerate. . . . Novelists are terrible liars. They make things up. They change things around. Black becomes white, white black. They are totally unethical beings."⁶

To take one further step back, in his own critical reflections on this novel, David Lodge demurs again from blurring the worlds of novel and author. "For the record, this episode in *Small World* has no source in my own experience, but was generated entirely by the needs and possibilities of the narrative."⁷ Lodge goes on at length to confess that, yes, he was at various historical places mentioned in the novel, but not in the same way the hero of the novel was, and he never met anyone like the woman and never did the things the hero did. [Methinks he protesteth too much!] So, I suppose you could say, the good novelist might get hoisted on her or his own petard and generate such a believable world that the novelist---and, perhaps even more so her family--- is projected to have lived in that world.

Now, it is true in one sense, novelists are liars. They make things up. But, they are wonderful, not terrible, liars. The artist Pablo Picasso is reported to have said: art is a lie that makes us realize the truth. Artists and writers are 'imagers' who get us to look at painful truths we might not otherwise see. I would say that the mark of a 'bad' novelist is that they present either a glorified world or a rigid morality/vision for the world. *Such are lies*.

Flannery O'Connor abhorred it when people suggested that Christian writers should only write about the beautiful and perfected aspects of life and provide exemplars of purity and virtue. "Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't write fiction. It isn't grand enough for you."⁸ So, perhaps the mark of a 'good' (though I use that term cautiously) novelist is that she has gotten dusty with life.

Novelists are required to open their eyes on the world around them and look, says O'Connor. If what they see is not highly edifying, they are still required to look. Then reproduce, with words, what they see. "Now this is the first point at which the novelist who is a Catholic may feel some friction between what he is supposed to do as a Catholic, for what he sees at all times is fallen man perverted by false philosophies. Is he to reproduce this? Or is he to change what he sees and make it, instead of what it is, what in the light of faith he thinks it ought to be? Is he, as Baron von Hugel has said, to 'tidy up reality'?"⁹ O'Connor considers such a tidy work a "sorry religious novel." We need heroes and heroines who get dirty. John Milton once wrote: "we cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised . . . that never sallies out and sees her adversaries, but slinks out of the race."

Novels can be more true than memoirs, biographies, even histories, which are selective and imaginative construals. I once heard an author describe a memoir as needing to be true to the feeling but not necessarily the particular detail of the life. I know of one author who wrote a

memoir, meant to be a tribute to her parents, and she left her screwed-up brother out of the story. [So, give me a break for leaving out a few ‘ums’!] Memories are stylized in memoir and facts are interpreted in biography. The subjects of biographies often don’t recognize themselves in a story that slants negatively, and the intimate associates of the biographed (if this isn’t a word, it should be) often don’t recognize the subjects when a story borders on hagiography.

Even history is not always more “true” in the conventional sense than fiction. Growing up in Northern California in the 60s and 70s, I learned a very different Gold Rush than my children growing up in the east in the 90s learned. Mine was a triumph of western expansion story, theirs a harsh study of the razing of land and the exploitation of Native American and Chinese people. Similarly, a seminary student once told me that his family moved from the North U.S. to the South (U.S.) between his junior and senior years of high-school, and he ended up studying the Civil War two years in a row. He was chagrined to find out he didn’t have a jump-start on the material, and in fact he hardly recognized it as the same war, the two perspectives from which it was taught were so different. History, like memoir, is told selectively, from a perspective, and often with a particular *discrimen* or imaginative construal (to use David Kelsey’s term for theological construction) of what it’s all about.¹⁰ While there was a time when historians thought they were just telling us what happened, with the impact of critical studies, most historians today realize there is no simple, objective presentation of facts---all history involves interpretation. It only takes a skimming of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* to see the difference it makes when history is told from the perspective of those who are not its official victors.¹¹ The key to historical “accuracy” is not purity from bias but rather honesty about one’s biases. That’s the unavoidable nature of the Beauty (or the Beast), it is a hermeneutical activity like every other form of fact gathering, reporting, and analyzing.¹²

So, novels can be just as true as, or even more truthful than, memoirs, biographies and histories. I’m not finished. I even have the gall to make the outlandish claim that Theological and Philosophical writings, those Truth-providers with a capital “T,” are not necessarily more truthful than good fiction. In fact, I believe that novels can be more true than theology, which, in some forms, has some truth-denying habits. Theology can lack “soul-truth.”

Soul Truth

It is in novels, and other forms of fiction, that I most often find “soul truth.” What is soul truth? I’d like to build up to my definition by looking at some of the things that other bibliophiles have said about fiction. We’ll start with what Eudora Welty called “home truth.” Welty wrote:

“A novel says what people are like. It doesn’t know how to describe what they are not like, and it would waste its time if it told us what we ought to be like, since we already know that, don’t we? But we may not know nearly so well what we are as when a novel of power reveals this to us. For the first time we may, as we read, see ourselves in our own situation, in some curious way reflected. By whatever way the novelist accomplishes it---there are many ways---truth is borne in on us in all its great weight and angelic lightness, and accepted as home truth.”¹³

Arnold Weinstein, Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University, tells us in

his new book *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches us About Life* that literature, and art as well, live as “a magic script that allows us both to sound our own depths and also to enter the echoing storehouse of feeling that goes by the name of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Dickens, Munch, Proust, [I would add Eliot (George), Morrison, O’Keefe] and all the great writers and artists whose work exists to nourish us. I see great books as a feast for the heart.”¹⁴ Pain and pleasure, writes Weinstein, are the central currencies in our lives, yet they are often stored beneath the surface. Soul is everywhere, yet shrouded, “and the mission of the artist is no less than to illuminate it, make it more available.”¹⁵ As such, art and literature are “a gift like no other.”

The “shrouding” of soul that Weinstein names has been noticed by others. Lynne Schwartz, in her provocatively titled book, *Ruined by Reading* (where of course, she argues just the opposite, that she was saved by reading) relays how hushed up so many subjects in life were for her as a child, and how she often lived in the child’s liminal place between knowing and not knowing what was going on, sensing but not being told that something sad, like death, was happening around her. She tells how poetry, fairy tales, and stories probed forbidden topics. “Death was the untold story, grief not graced with words. No wonder I read. In books I found explicitly, flamboyantly, everything censored in life.”¹⁶

Though novels are commonly considered entertainment, it takes a certain degree of courage and energy to read novels. As Flannery O’Connor once remarked in an interview: “People without hope not only don’t write novels, but what is more to the point, they don’t read them. They don’t take long looks at anything, because they lack the courage. The way to despair is to refuse to have any kind of experience, and the novel, of course, is a way to have experience.”¹⁷

Many novels make us “take a long look” at things, they make us feel and think. They are not only soul-truth, they are soul-work. And, sometimes we’d rather not feel or think. William Willimon, in his little book *Reading with Deeper Eyes: The Love of Literature and the Life of Faith*, identifies the problem of the modern world as its ruthless, yet gutless, search for unassailable “facts.”¹⁸ “That’s the truth the modern world wants, truth which is self-evident, available to all without risk, or journey, or cost, or conflict. Truth, free-standing, nonconflicted FACTS.” But, of course, novels are life, and they deal in journey, cost, and conflict. They leave one expanded, and thus less certain, far less certain. They especially leave us religious ones less certain. Who can read *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Beloved*, *Ceremony* --- or *The Runaway Jury* for that matter --- and not raise questions about the nature of God’s providence? Of course, many novels ask those questions with us. “What God have in mind, I wonder,” muttered Amy, the poor white girl in *Beloved*, who sees the pregnant runaway slave’s back torn open by the brutality of her slave master’s whip. “What God have in mind?” Novels, perhaps better than any other literature, bring us to the doorstep of theodicy.¹⁹

In her 1983 essay “Fictions of the Soul,” philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that certain forms of fiction take us into the soul in a way that other forms of discourse cannot. Contrasting the views of Plato (whom Nussbaum describes as seeking soul truth from a position “above” the emotions and “above” forms of discourse eliciting emotions) and Marcel Proust (who sees the journey into pleasure and pain as essential for soul truth), Nussbaum summarizes Proust:

“The claim that only a novel can convey psychological truth is not just the claim that it can get around certain impediments more cleverly than a philosophical text; it is the claim that there is at least some knowledge, some important human knowledge, that it provides just in virtue of its being a novel, that is to say a work that leads its reader into laughter and into suffering, that cannot even in principle be provided in another more intellectual way.”²⁰

Soul truth, then, takes us home. It lifts the shroud we put over the parts of our lives that go deeply into our souls. It “sounds our own depths” and also invites us to “enter the echoing storehouse of feeling” of others. Soul truth is *revelation*; soul truth is insight into important life questions, struggles, joys, yearnings, and desires. This revelation can be painful, as in Flannery O’Connor’s short story, pointedly titled “Revelation,” which invites ‘righteous’ folks to see their unrighteousness mirrored. Or, the revelation in fiction can be a blend of sorrow and pleasure, such as I experienced when reading *The Secret Lives of Bees*, a story that struggles with the loss and recovery of ‘Mother.’

Now I realize it is historically naïve and culturally presumptuous to maintain the argument that some literature conveys time-less, universal truths. As Lois Tyson notes, most literary critics today reject as “bogus” the argument (put forth by devotees of “New Criticism”) that some literature has “universal significance; such “universality “was determined by, and thus too often limited to, white male American experience.”²¹ When works are canonized as classics, our interpretation of what is universal and timeless is limited by the boundaries of the canon. Thus, while I certainly agree that some writing has long-lasting, far-reaching resonance (including many of the works deemed classics), I think our understanding of what is “classic” needs both cultural critique and multi-cultural expansion. So, I make a more modest claim that “soul truth” is resonance with or the provoking of life’s deep questions and experiences, often leading to an enlarged or changed perspective.

For Martha Nussbaum, who is Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, novels are not just sources for personal and psychological knowing. Novels are also sources of knowing for law and other forms of public discourse which seek justice in the public realm.

Nussbaum extends my argument. She helps us to see that novels not only explore common human experiences, but they also *enlarge* our particular experiences.

III. Fiction and Justice

In her 1995 work, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Nussbaum argues that there is an “ingredient in public discourse” that is too often “missing” --- storytelling and literary imagination.²² She argues that novels, by laying the claim of another’s story, can play a crucial role in public reasoning. Novels cultivate the imagination, which Nussbaum argues contributes to and deepens the capacity for moral reflection. She focuses on “the characteristics of the literary imagination as a public imagination, an imagination that will steer judges in their judging, legislators in their legislating, policy makers in measuring the quality of life of people near and far.”²³ Nussbaum goes so far as to assert: “If we do not cultivate the imagination in this way, we lose, I believe an essential bridge to social justice.”²⁴

Why *novels* for public discourse? Though other forms of art and literature would serve

public discourse quite well, Nussbaum notes that the novel is a living form and in fact still is “the central morally serious yet popularly engaging fictional form in our culture.”²⁵ Moreover, “the novel is concrete to an extent generally unparalleled in other narrative genre.” Because the novel is concrete, its narrative helps those who are reasoning and theorizing to negotiate between the general and the particular. Good novels --- Nussbaum privileges realist novels with “social and political themes” --- portray a complex picture of human life that theories obscure. They are akin to qualitative analysis. Therefore, novels, and the imagination they invoke, *should be* incorporated into theoretical reflection. Nussbaum does not disparage reason or “the scientific search for truth.” Yet she does, trenchantly, criticize “a particular scientific approach that claims to stand for truth and reason.” She argues that an abstract and generalized approach to theory building “fails to stand for truth insofar as it dogmatically misrepresents the complexity of human beings and human life.”²⁶ The imagination then, according to Nussbaum, is both creative and “veridical” --- truth producing.

I want to underscore one of the primary contributions novels make to theory building and public reasoning: novels introduce us to the lives of those different than we are, and they thereby both enable us to sympathize with the characters and gain a critical perspective on reality. To quote Nussbaum again: “The novel, so different from a guidebook or even an anthropological field report, makes readers participants in the lives of people very different from themselves and also [makes readers] critics of the class distinctions that give people similarly constructed an unequal access to flourishing.”²⁷

Nussbaum teaches a course on Law and Literature, and she assigns novels for the purpose of introducing people to the lives of others. Thus, her focus is on using novels to educate leaders and decision-makers. In connection with literature, her classes discuss “compassion and mercy, the role of the emotions in public judgment, what is involved in imagining the situation of something different from oneself.”

As noted above Nussbaum prefers realist novels, especially Anglo-American novels with social and political themes --- and in *Poetic Justice* she focuses on Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*. *Hard Times* offers plural and qualitatively diverse measures for assessing human functioning.

A novel like *Hard Times* is a paradigm of such assessment. Presenting the life of a population with a rich variety of *qualitative distinctions and complex individual descriptions* of functioning and impediments to functioning, using a general notion of human need and human functioning in a highly concrete context, it provides the sort of information required to assess quality of life and involves its reader in the task of making the assessment. Thus it displays the kind of *imaginative framework for public work* in this sphere within which any more quantitative and simplified model should be formulated. At the same time, it both exemplifies and cultivates abilities of imagination that are essential to the intelligent making of such assessments, in public as well as private life.²⁸ (emphasis added)

Hard Times is especially illuminating because it exposes the limits of theories (facts) devoid of engagement with concrete and complex reality. In one scene, Louisa, daughter and dutiful student of Thomas Gradgrind, champion of the reigning fact-obsessed utilitarian philosophy of the day (mid-1800’s), encounters the working class people (“The Hands”) in the

other part of town in a way that renders them human to her for the first time:

For the first time in her life Louisa had come into one of the dwellings of the Coketown Hands; for the first time in her life she was face to face with anything like individuality in connexion with them. She knew of their existence by hundreds and by thousands. . . . but she knew from her reading infinitely more of the ways of toiling insects than of these toiling men and women. Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there it ended . . . this she knew the Coketown hands to be. But, she had scarcely thought more of separating them into units, than of separating the sea itself into its component drops.²⁹

As this excerpt demonstrates, novels, as opposed to other forms of literature, tell of ordinary, even insignificant people. Michael Cunningham, author of *The Hours*, named this as the particular genius of Virginia Woolf's writing. Woolf "knew that everyone, every single person, is the hero of his or her own epic story." Woolf, according to Cunningham, realized:

there are no ordinary lives, just inadequate ways of looking at them. . . most of our lives look ordinary from the outside, but . . . to us... they are anything but; to us our lives are enormous and fascinating, even if they appear to be made up largely of work, errands, meals and sleep. [Virginia Woolf] spent her career writing the extraordinary, epic tales of people who seem to be doing nothing unusual at all. . . . Through her books we understand that the workings of atomic particles are every bit as mysterious and enormous as the workings of galaxies --- it all depends on whether you look out or look in.³⁰

Fiction, then, contributes to the form and content of justice. It ignites imagination, enabling greater sympathy for others; and it exposes us to others, enlarging our knowledge and understanding. Leslie Silko, a novelist whose Pueblo upbringing and Pueblo/Mexican heritage has led her to an interest in achieving social justice for Native Americans, initially studied law until she realized that literature would be a more effective tool for her. In an interview included in Ellen Arnold's edited volume *Conversations with Leslie Silko*, Silko states that for her, writing a story is more effective than political activism. Or, rather, that it is her form of political action.³¹

I'd like to extend Nussbaum's discussion of the form of fiction by placing into alongside Iris Young's discussion of justice as political inclusion. And, I want to connect Nussbaum's discussion of the content of fiction by drawing on Seyla Benhabib's discussion of the 'concrete other.'

In her work, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Iris Young argues that political inclusion requires openness to a plurality of *modes* of communication.³² When argument is the preferred form of discourse in public arenas, persons not groomed for argument can be "internally excluded" even if they are invited to participate. *Internal* exclusion refers to the "ways that people lack effective opportunity to influence the thinking of others even when they have access to fora and procedures of decision-making."³³ Young argues that an inclusive conception of democracy requires concerted attention to, and description of, forms of communication *additional to making assertions and giving reasons* that can contribute to political discussion "that aims to solve

collective problems justly.”³⁴ Young suggests that narrative and story-telling increases inclusion. “A norm of political communication under these conditions [mass society with little knowledge of others] is that everyone should aim to enlarge their social understanding by learning about the specific experience and meanings attending other social locations. Narrative makes this easier and sometimes an adventure.”

Young argues for testimony type telling of stories in public arenas, and I have utilized a form a testimony in this paper. But, I want to extend her argument. I argue that fiction can also increase inclusion -- inclusion of the absent. Fiction can bring stories of those silent, those not present, those who have a right to be included in discussions concerning their lives. Leslie Silko’s stories, for instance, make aspects of Native America available to those who are not Native American.

The use of novels in educational and political arenas, furthermore, develops the habit of learning through story. When we read novels in law school, business school, theological schools, and even churches, we accustom ourselves to learning through narrative – which opens us up to hearing and learning from those groups who are story and narrative (rather than theory and argument) oriented.

Seyla Benhabib argues that moral reflection, if it is to be truly ‘just,’ requires the presence of *concrete others*. That is to say, mature moral development – morality that seeks justice -- requires more than abstract reflection on ethical behavior, it requires numerous and particular encounters with concrete persons who are different than oneself (the “concrete other”).

Performing what she describes as an immanent critique of Kohlberg and Rawls, Benhabib notes that the moral self, when viewed as a disembedded and disembodied being (ala Rawls, Kohlberg) is incompatible with the criteria for reversibility and universalizability advocated by defenders of universalism. Rawlsian theory is “disembedded” in that it asks us to reflect morally by stripping ourselves of our particularity. So, for instance, we are to determine what distribution of material goods would be most rational and reasonable to adopt if we knew that our society is such that we may be a single mother on welfare raising children in the inner city. The theory, however, does not actually ask: what would it really be like to reason from the perspective of a welfare mother? In Benhabib’s words, it doesn’t really call on us to “face the ‘otherness of the other.’” “Neither the concreteness nor the otherness of the ‘concrete other’ can be known in the absence of the *voice* of the other.” A general or abstract understanding of the “other” doesn’t really bring us into engagement with otherness or lead to the kind of knowledge one would need to have to make decisions on behalf of those who are very different. Thus, “a universalistic moral theory restricted to the standpoint of the ‘generalized other’ falls into epistemic incoherencies that jeopardize its claim to adequately fulfill reversibility and universalizability.”³⁵ Moral decision making, in order to be ‘just,’ requires engagement with concrete persons.

It is important here to state that face-to-face interactions, such as Louisa’s encounter with the working class in *Hard Times*, are perhaps a greater source of imaginative and moral enlargement than literary engagement. And, my paper is not intended as a call for the replacement of face-to-face interactions. In a world where the number of face-to-face interactions required for universal justice is near impossible, however, fiction can give us a concrete portrayal of lives different than our own. Fiction doesn’t stand alone, it has its limits,

but as a source for conveying the concrete other, it promotes moral reflection.

While this portion of my argument bears further development, here is the claim: the use of fiction in theory-building and moral discourse can further the cause of justice. Fiction does so by: concretizing and deepening abstract theory, developing an appreciation for story-telling and narrative, and providing a way for silent and absent voices to be at the table.

IV. The Question of Criteria: An “Ethics of Fiction”

At this point, you may be wondering, Which fiction? Whose novels? [With thanks to Alasdair MacIntyre] Isn't at least *some* of what is peddled opiate for the masses or trash for the mind? Aren't at least *some* writers terrible liars or shallow hacks? “How can anyone read John Grisham?” a speaker at a reputed writer's conference I attended asked, nose wrinkled and mouth turned down in disgust.

Now, here I need to pause and admit that novels, of course, can be flat, shallow, stylized portrayals of reality that leave out (or alternatively magnify) the guts and gore of life. I'm not exalting novels over other genres of writing --- well, okay, I sort of am. But, I don't deny that any project promoting the truth of fiction has to grapple seriously with issues of criteria. As Martha Nussbaum argues in *Poetic Justice*, even good novels are fallible and incomplete, and “we need to exercise critical judgment in our selection of novels, and to continue to the process of critical judgment as we read, in dialogue with other readers.”³⁶ There are both aesthetic and moral questions raised about literature and its capacity to shape our imaginations.

Caroline Gordon, a Southern “sister” and contemporary of Flannery O'Connor, in her work *How to Read a Novel*, makes a distinction between entertainment and art. She claims that the person who spends an evening reading Sherlock Holmes in an easy chair in front of a warm fire is not likely to act differently toward fellow human beings the next morning, no matter how much that reader loves Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's masterful creation. On the other hand, she suggests, the person who finishes *War and Peace* may not feel the same afterward, and may experience something like a conversion toward other people. And, that's what marks the difference between art and entertainment, art has the power to change life, convert experience.³⁷

Writer Carol Bly goes so far as to argue for an ethical awakening in American Literature. Describing the more aesthetic interest of writers now, Bly condemns “slivery little stories made up of shards of experience, quickly picked up, experienced by the reader the way a jogger sees the glitter of mica in clay.” She scorns the focus on small details --- “grass from the mower blade, oil spitting in a pan, congealed eggs on one's plate” --- taking descriptive writers to task for giving scant attention to moral issues in characters' lives.³⁸

There are all kinds of stories, and some to be sure are of greater value than others. I favor stories whose characters are---to use E.M. Forrester's distinction---round (ambiguous) rather than flat; stories which raise issues without promoting ideologies; stories which reflect both the pains and delights of being human; stories which expose the complex questions of life rather than offer simplistic answers; and stories with realistic struggles rather than idealistic or moralistic solutions.

As much as I would like to support Carol Bly's disdain of details --- being that my writing style is a little impatient with details (I'm sure you were dying to know, and disappointed not to be privy to, the bland beige dress Alice donned and the faded Levis and clogs I was

wearing, in the prison story above) --- I can't. Although the distinction Gordon has made between art and entertainment has some heuristic value, I don't completely buy it. As I have learned from literary critic Terry Eagleton, the tradition of belles lettres has always been laden with a particular set of interests, none of which are immutable.³⁹ I, for one, am loathe to cast Sherlock Holmes into the subordinate realm of mere entertainment. It is from Sherlock himself that I trace my indomitable belief that most puzzling situations should be worked on and mulled over rather than resigned to and given up on.

Furthermore, Anne Lamott, who wrote the Bible on writing as far as I am concerned (*Bird by Bird*), would take exception to Carol Bly's damnation of literature which focuses on details. For Lamott, the capacity to notice details is part of *reverence* for life. "I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. ... Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. . . . This is our goal as writers, I think, to help others have this sense of---. . . ---wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds. . . . Try walking around with a child who's going, 'Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned-down house! Look at that red sky!' And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, 'Wow! Look at that crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud.' I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world---present and in awe."⁴⁰ Writers of detail help us learn reverence. [I should probably say that my older son, Nate, a writer in his own right, thinks Lamott commits the other of Disraeli's sins far too much in *Bird by Bird*. "If I hear one more story about her son, Sam..."]

Even books that seem like "rubbish," entertainment and escape, reveal human conflicts and yearnings. *The Firm* exposes how hunger for recognition and success can be exploited and *The Street Lawyer* offers a powerful description of the emptiness of workaholicism (yes, I confess, I read John Grisham); *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (yes, I confess, I read it) gives a poignant portrait of some of the elements in a mid-life crisis; *The Horse Whisperer*, which I read twice, (despite the book's vapid ending, repaired in the movie) gives a glimpse into the way in which tragedy tests us. I think you should know that so-called trashy novels have an entire theory to justify their existence. Known as "Rubbish Theory," it culls value from the seeming triteness of escape-seeking and entertainment-driven literature.⁴¹ At the very least, I think we should ask: why are best-sellers so compelling, what needs are they meeting? And, I have to say: though I like them, I have never found detective novels to be a source of escape; guns and dead bodies just don't send me off in a reverie of joy filled fantasy. They generally cause me to lock my doors.

In the writer's conference I mentioned above, a very clear dichotomy was drawn between popular fiction and serious fiction. Popular fiction was described as: plot driven ("high concept"), possibility seeking, patterned according to a predictable genre, historically oriented, sympathetic characters who are either good or bad, triumphalistic (good triumphs), wordy (actually the exact term used was *schmaltzy*) and within a stylized world. Serious or literary fiction (the kind the leaders of this conference wrote) is language driven, has a simple plot, challenges any genre expectations, focuses on the characters' state of mind, has unsympathetic characters who are ambiguous, remain in an ambiguous world, is written in lean and simple in language, and reflect real life. So, my friends, if you can't wait to read what happens in the story, feel good at the end, or fall in love with the characters in the novel you are reading, you are probably reading . . . popular fiction.

The man sitting next to me, after hearing this polarization, muttered to me: in other words, popular literature sells and theirs doesn't. Ah, I thought, that explains the acerbic tone the lecturer used when delineating the dichotomy---and the hatred for John Grisham.

Somerset Maugham had less lofty goals for art than Caroline Gordon. He stated that the aim of art is to please. Not to instruct, merely to please. Perhaps Charles Dickens, quoted earlier, strikes a good middle: you must make them laugh, make them weep, but above all, make them wait.

These discussions and arguments focus more on aesthetic and intellectual issues, but there are also moral considerations.

Any project such as mine needs to grapple with what Wayne Booth---recognizing the gift, the power, the risk, and the danger of fiction---calls "an ethics of fiction."⁴² Many of us are familiar with controversial novels. Does *Huck Finn* have racist overtones? Is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* too simplistic and sentimental? What do we do with the fact that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has a preponderance of negative female characters? Even if we agree on these assessments, are these novels still valuable? Are they recommendable?

Like the Bible, literature has a checkered history in terms of the purposes for which it has been written and used. Some literature can be compared with the prophetic works in the Bible, it exposes and critiques society; other literature is more like the pastoral letters, it aims to keep society in a prescribed line. Of course, as the deconstructionists tell us, no literature, and no theology, transcends its culture entirely. Like the Bible, the canons of Literature have reflected the interests of certain people and not others. Some literature was deliberately intended as a servant of British imperialism, to both shore up and display English superiority. Or, some literature aimed to take over what Terry Eagleton described as the "pacifying influence" of Victorian religion, "fostering meekness, self-sacrifice and the contemplative inner life."⁴³ Actually, from Eagleton's Marxist perspective, more writers than I cared to hear were characterized as fascists or authoritarians. [Leading, of course, to the equally necessary move to read critics critically.]

In my view, two of the most important ways in which to get a critical handle on literature are to read widely in it and to converse widely about it.

I am extending ethicist Sharon Welch's claims about ethical systems. She notes that there is no transcendent system by which we can judge ethics. Rather, we need to get outside perspectives and different moral positions in hard conversation with each other. "In order to determine which interests or positions are more just, pluralism is required," states Welch. "[Pluralism is required] not for its own sake, but for the sake of enlarging our moral vision."⁴⁴ Welch argues that in order to see the flaws of our ethical systems, we need to listen to the experiences of others.

Now, this movement has a double purpose in the overall argument of my paper. As I have stated, novels can introduce us to the lives and values of people who are different than we are, and they can therefore help us keep our moral systems in check. But, we also need novels, and their critics, to keep other novels in check. No work is pure, even a good novel; no work transcends cultural limitations and partial perspectives, even a good novel. So, when we read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with its exposures of the greed and savagery of European colonialism, we also need to read Chinua Achebe's exposure of Conrad's inadvertent racism --- and we do well to read Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, an anti-colonialist novel from an African

perspective, alongside *Heart of Darkness*.⁴⁵

This is why, in addition to reading novels, I value the work of literary critics. As Lois Tyson tells us, literary criticism, especially those theories that work to change the world (Feminism, Marxism, African American criticism, Queer criticism), will sometimes expose both deliberate and inadvertent oppressive ideologies in literary works. As stated above, good fiction is incarnate in the culture; even as it critiques, it does not transcend the context from which it is written. The flaws, however, can be studied in a way that enables us to understand how oppressive ideologies operate.⁴⁶

Wayne Booth also argues for reading alongside others, a process he calls “coduction” (a term my spell check doesn’t like at all!). Coduction, Booth explains, is the process of evaluating works of literature through comparing one’s experience of it with the experience of others. This can expand our understanding, or it can, as it has with Booth’s reading of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* “diminish one’s estimate” of a novel when (in this case women) voices outside one’s experience give an alternate perspective.⁴⁷

I will say, at this point, I do have ‘ethical’ criteria for choosing fiction --- though there will always be exceptions and an openness to modifying these criteria. Morally valuable novels raise good questions but do not offer absolute answers, take the shroud off of issues pertaining to deep issues in life, lay bare our own souls, introduce us to the lives of those who are different than we are, tell of an ambiguous world, and are peopled by complex characters.

V. Theology has a Lot to Learn

Though I’ve dropped some hints along the way, I want to look now more closely at what fiction can teach theology. Nussbaum argues that storytelling and imagining can be central ingredients in a rational argument. I agree, but I want to make a stronger claim about the relationship between theological discourse and fiction. I believe that the essential qualities of good fiction (both aesthetic and moral) are the qualities of good theology. [This incite, or rather insight, is also the topic for an ongoing seminar.] Novels are: concrete, set in a time and place, struggle with life questions, are ambiguous and complex. According to Frederick Buechner, good theology really begins here --- in the concrete, the located, the questioning, the ambiguity. But, for many theologians, this isn’t a lofty enough place and they leave it behind. Buechner writes:

At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography. Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Tillich, working out their systems in their own ways and in their own language, are all telling us the stories of their lives, and if you press them far enough, even at their most cerebral and forbidding, you find an experience of flesh and blood, a human face smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before something that happened once . . . But for the theologian, it would seem, what happened once, the experience of flesh and blood that may lie at the root of the idea, never appears substantial enough to verify the idea, or at least by his nature the theologian chooses to set forth the idea in another language and to argue for its validity on another basis, and thus between the idea and the experience a great deal intervenes.⁴⁸

I think that when theologians and practical theologians leave out and leave behind their concrete starting points, they run the risk of creating bad theology --- and I call bad theology fiction in the pejorative sense of the term. Universal statements about humanity without attention to the particular, the pretense of impartiality, the claim of pure revelation as starting point, propositions and answers --- these constitute for me the places where theology becomes bad fiction.

Several years ago, I read *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, the saga of a minister who lost his faith and the consequences to his family.⁴⁹ Some commentators characterize the book as the story of a minister (Clarence Wilmot) whose loss of faith is banal. “The novel is a tragedy of those who refuse to rage against the night. Disbelief ought to be made of sterner stuff,” William Willimon complains. Now, Clarence may not have raged, but I did at his story. I was enraged at the education Clarence Wilmot received.

Clarence Wilmot, the preacher-protagonist of the novel, a “spent-Calvinist,” came to see his turn of the century Princeton Seminary education as a farce. The God he was taught --- rationalistic, all-powerful, and in control --- stopped making sense to him. He helplessly, hopelessly wondered why his genteel professors had concealed the fact that the stuff they were peddling “might be twigs of an utterly dead tree,” such “sad sap,” “paper shields against the molten iron of natural truth.” He even flirted with, then was captured by, the possibility that “Presbyterianism right back to its Biblical roots [might be] one more self-promoting, self-protective tangle of wishful fancy and conscious lies.” Clarence Wilmot, in a sense, came to believe that *the theology he had been taught was fiction*. “The doctrine had for these years past felt to Clarence like an invalid, a tenuous ghost scattered invisibly among the faces that from sickbeds and Sunday pews and oilcloth-covered kitchen tables of disrupted, impoverished households beseeched him for hope and courage, for that thing which Calvin in his Gallic lucidity called *la grace*.”

I was raging against the night in relationship to this novel because the novel itself seemed to me more revelatory, more probing, more honest, more *deep* than the truncated form of Reformed theology Clarence, and----gasp----I myself had read.

Sadly, the seeds of a different style of faith were there, when Clarence, at one point in his ministry, decided against expanding the church buildings and mused: “Why add to all the echoing, underused ecclesiastical structures in Christendom when Irish and Polish immigrants slept six to a room a few blocks distance?” But, apparently his Princeton education did not provide him the wherewithal to see in that question any link either to his faith or to his ministerial calling. The litany, *There is no God*, keeps repeating. He could not see beyond, had not been liberated to see beyond, the God of the doctrines he was taught. He couldn’t even conceive the possibility that *even though the God he was taught to believe in didn’t exist, there might still be a God*. Such flexibility was precluded by his education.

Clarence Wilmot stops struggling with the difficulties of his faith, and he is almost relieved, even if numb, that he has no faith. Here is the sloth for which William Willimon indicts him. His physical tuberculosis, which puts him in bed all day, matches his spiritual decline. Body and spirit supine, no one can tell by looking in on him whether he is dead or alive. “I’m having a selfish rest, while my family keeps up the struggle. If feel guilty, sometimes, to be having so good a time, lying here on my side. . . “He dies quietly, slipping away in the night, “like an unmoored boat on an outgoing tide.”

William Willimon concludes that *In the Beauty of the Lilies* is “a saga of twentieth century American disbelief, the piteous disengagement from the struggle with God, a depiction of the flotsam and jetsam of late capitalist culture.” But, I think the novel is more subversive than that. I think it’s a saga of the way in which certain religious traditions, which purport to be an alternative to culture, are actually baptisms of the culture. Clarence Wilmot’s training, though theologically conservative, was rationalistic and it took place in a privileged, protected environment, “fox-hunting country, surrounded by estates and lettuce farms, cut off from the real, urban, industrial world.” The rigidity of his education left no room for an evolution in his understanding of God, so he confused the loss of his rigidity as a loss of God altogether. As the moderator of the presbytery in the novel remarked: “You imbibed conservatism there [at Princeton], and it limits your thinking now. The two Hodges, and Benjamin Warfield . . . cannot *bend*, Mr. Wilmot, and those that cannot bend, break.” Indeed, Clarence had earlier reflected on his learnings: “The rational alternative to absolute pre-election, it was painstakingly demonstrated by more than one lecturer, was a God somehow imperfect, maimed, enfeebled, confined to a quarantined corner of things.” So Clarence, unable to believe in either predestination or providence in the way he was taught, was faced with a maimed God or no God. Of course, the irony is that theology taught in proud places forgets that it is indeed, precisely a maimed God that Christians worship---and maimed persons that this God calls. So when the moderator tells him, “there is nothing in your beliefs or unbeliefs that can’t serve as the basis for an effective and deeply satisfying Christian ministry,” Clarence can’t see it. In fact, as opposed to William Willimon, I think Clarence’s problem is more pride than sloth: he can’t believe in a maimed God, and he can’t accept his own maimedness as an essential part of his Christian life. He learned about an all powerful, unmaimed God, and in that protected fox-hunting milieu, what he really swallowed was the mirage that ministers too should be all powerful, unmaimed. When his own doubt and limits were exposed, he lost faith in the God whom he did not believe could sustain such.

I don’t put all, or even most, of the blame for this bad theology on the Reformers themselves. I have my problems with and departures from Calvin, but I have more problems with Calvinists. I think Barth was not only accurate, but foreseeing, when he insisted: I am not a Barthian! The “ists” and the “ians” [including Christians] often reduce rich and complex theologies, and I think both Hodge and Warfield were painfully guilty of this. This wasn’t, of course, accidental. Warfield, as David Kelsey’s detailed analysis uncovered, hid the rich and complex origins and foundations of his own theology.⁵⁰ Trying to prove his theological propositions derived from pure revelation, he stripped his work of the flesh and blood that might have given Wilmot the very human, yet pulsing heart beat he needed.

Updike has revealed to us that Clarence Wilmot’s theology lied to him. *Lied to him*. In it’s abstractness, inflexibility, and lack of engagement with the wideness of human spirit, Wilmot’s theology told untruths. Too bad Clarence didn’t have the wisdom to read a good novel like *Hard Times* and find this out for himself.

Picasso, as noted earlier, said that “art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.” But, the opposite can also said: “art is truth that makes us realize the lie.”

¹ Woodstock ’99 was a rock festival held in the summer of 1999, patterned on the rock festival that took place near Woodstock, New York, the summer of 1969, which became a symbol of the 1960’s in the United States.

²Katherine Paterson, *A Sense of Wonder: On Reading and Writing Books for Children* (New York: Plume/Penguin, 1995), 70.

³Disraeli's quip is quoted in Katherine Paterson, *A Sense of Wonder*, 33.

⁴"Indeed much traditional literary criticism had held this view in one form or another. Great literature is the product of Great Men, and its value lies chiefly in allowing us intimate access to their souls. There are several problems with such a position. To begin with, it reduces all literature to a covert form of autobiography: we are not reading literary works as literary works, simply as second-hand ways of getting to know somebody." Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction, Second Edition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 41.

⁵Paterson, *Sense of Wonder*, 110.

⁶David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Romance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), 134-135.

⁷David Lodge, *the Practice of Writing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 24.

⁸Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), 68.

⁹Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), 177.

¹⁰David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Fortress Press, 1975), 167-169.

¹¹*A People's History of the United States: 1492 – Present* (Perennial, 2003). First published in 1980, this work traces history from the perspective of women, the working class, Native Americans, and African Americans.

¹²I am indebted here to Lois Tyson's discussion of New Historicism in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 278-287.

¹³*The Eye of the Story*.

¹⁴Arnold Weinstein, *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches us About Life* (New York: Random House), 2003, ix.

¹⁵*A Scream Goes Through the House*, xxv.

¹⁶*Ruined by Reading: A Life in Books* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 44.

¹⁷*Mystery and Manners*, 78.

¹⁸*Reading with Deeper Eyes: The Love of Literature and the Life of Faith*, (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998), 87.

¹⁹True, history, when we pay attention, moves us to do soul work as well; when history tells us about the particular or when historians use a narrative style, we are gripped in our souls. Reading history can require the same amount of courage and energy. In fact, I think historians and novelists make good partnerships.

²⁰"Fictions of the Soul," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 256.

²¹Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 151.

²²Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

²³*Poetic Justice*, 3.

²⁴*Poetic Justice*, xviii

²⁵*Poetic Justice*, 6.

²⁶*Poetic Justice*, p.44.

²⁷*Poetic Justice*, 46.

²⁸*Poetic Justice*, 52.

²⁹Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* [1854] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 209.

³⁰Michael Cunningham (2002), *The Hours: Why Virginia Woolf?*, www.thehoursmovie.com, page 1.

³¹Ellen Arnold, ed. *Conversations with Leslie Silko* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 8, 23.

³²Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.

³³Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, 55.

³⁴Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, 77.

³⁵Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge), 152.

³⁶*Poetic Justice*, 76.

³⁷Caroline Gordon, *How to Read a Novel* (New York: Viking, 1957), 12. Quoted in Katherine Paterson, *A Sense of Wonder*, p. 54.

³⁸ Carol Bly, *The Passionate Accurate Story: Making Your Heart's Truth Into Literature* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1990), 6.

³⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction, Second Edition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (Anchor, 1995).

⁴¹ "Rubbish Theory" is referred to in David Barratt, Roger Pooley, and Leland Ryken, eds., *The Discerning Reader: Christian Perspectives on Literature and History* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1995), 39-40.

⁴² Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁴³ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction, Second Edition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), Chapter 1.

⁴⁴ Sharon D. Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 64. See also Welch's earlier work, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

⁴⁵ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977): 782-94.

⁴⁶ Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 6.

⁴⁷ Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 70-77. This is a part of my argument I wish to develop more fully.

⁴⁸ *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 79-80.

⁴⁹ John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (Ballantine Books, 1997).

⁵⁰ David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Fortress Press, 1975), see especially pp. 18-24, 141-143.