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Philosophy that satisfies its own intention, and does not childishly skip behind its own history and the real one, has its lifeblood in the resistance against the common practices of today and what they serve, against the justification of what happens to be the case.<sup>1</sup>

—Theodor W. Adorno

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Why Still Philosophy,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 6.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation contends that North American culture is in the grip of a reductionism that neglects plurality while seeking after pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality, exemplified by the apparently contradictory tendencies to take as normative what can be generalized and to deny universally applicable normativity. I pay special attention to gender stereotypes, in which the particular (individual) becomes irrelevant, ignored, or perceived as a threat unless it can be treated as part of the general (stereotype). I argue that philosophical fiction—and, in particular, young adult fiction—contributes to a principled plurality in both lived and academic philosophy. It does so through its imaginative power to enlarge perspectives, criticize from the margins, and galvanize readers to engage with injustice. I focus on young adult fiction because of its wide reach, relevance for ethical formation, and exceptional tendency to question stereotypical understandings of human existence. After explicating the distinction between lived and academic philosophy and situating my project in the larger conversation about fiction and philosophy, I argue for the ethical significance of philosophical interaction with story. In conversation with Martha C. Nussbaum and Hannah Arendt, I draw together three themes—the integrality of form and content, the ability of storytelling to act as critical thinking in context, and the key role of particularity in the context of plurality—in order to emphasize the need to approach fiction in its intrinsic plurality without losing the possibility of shared criteria. A causal model is insufficient in this regard. Drawing on Lambert Zuidervart’s conception of imaginative disclosure, I show that art both suggests and requires interpretation and that fiction’s

ethical contribution to philosophy needs to be understood as thoroughly hermeneutical. I settle on “narrative companionship,” a variation of Wayne C. Booth’s metaphor of stories as friends, as a helpful noncausal metaphor for interaction with fiction. Then I seek to demonstrate the fruitfulness of this metaphor, in contrast to academic philosophy’s traditional approaches to fiction as either a tool or an example, by commenting on several stories that have informed my own lived philosophy.

## **Acknowledgments**

I am immensely grateful to my father, John Van Dyk, for freely sharing his wide knowledge and experience in philosophy as I worked on this dissertation. Our conversations in person and via email were instrumental in helping me focus, clarify, situate, and articulate my ideas and their expression. His dedication to my project was a lifeline when the going got rough.

The mentoring and support provided by Lambert Zuidervaat have shaped and immensely improved my academic experience at the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS). His encouragement and insightful comments on several drafts of this dissertation greatly assisted its development. Likewise, the helpful questions, comments, and suggestions of my second promotor, Bert Musschenga, were instrumental in bringing this dissertation into its current form.

Without my beloved husband and life partner, Benjamin Groenewold, I would never have articulated many of the ideas that motivate this project in the first place. His commitment to working together in every aspect of our lives gave me both the opportunity to work out my ideas in conversations together and the hours to research and write while he took primary responsibility for our two small children.

## 1. Introduction of the Problem

Buckled into a stiff airplane seat overlooking the St. Louis tarmac, waiting for a slightly delayed takeoff, I focused on the book in my hand and studiously ignored my fellow passengers and the flight attendants bustling back and forth. I have often found the forced inactivity of air travel an ideal time to read the books that sit on my shelf waiting for me to get around to reading them some day. A flight attendant paused by my seat, apparently fixated on the tiny corner of the book's cover that was visible from the aisle. Bemused, I looked up at the chubby, pink-cheeked face beaming down at me.

"Is that *Catcher in the Rye*?" he burst out fervently. "I *love* that book! I re-read it every year. I recognized it right away from the cover. Isn't it *great*?" He paused, his gaze moving dreamily toward the luggage rack over my head. "Holden Caulfield, you know? He's so, like, *real*."

I stared after him as he moved off, still glowing. Returning to the sarcastic, conflicted Holden Caulfield in the book, I found the image of the cheery, chatty flight attendant hovering in the back of my head in incongruous contrast. As the airplane began to taxi down the runway, I wondered: What is it about a good book that can bridge such a gap? Somehow the ebullient, non-fictional adult felt a deep connection to the troubled, fictional teenager, bridging gaps in age, personality, and reality.

When I look around me at interactions in politics, economics, and religion—and even hobbies, sports, and education—I see many more walls being built than bridges. In communication, relationships, and institutions, walls are built to separate people; rarely



do we focus on bringing people together through the building of bridges over the gaps between us. One of the biggest walls I see is the dire suspicion with which North America's statistics-loving culture regards deviation from the mean, leading to rejection of those who are not considered to be on the "right" side of the wall. Yet North America is also a culture of writers and readers, telling and responding to stories that bridge many kinds of gaps. Writers can, of course, build either walls or bridges, but even in nations of wall-building, North Americans value novels for their ability to build bridges. At the simplest level, a bridge is built between the reader's world and the world of the book, and in traveling over this bridge, readers are given the possibility of an expanded perspective on their own lives and the world around them. Although not every reader self-consciously reflects on this phenomenon or articulates a philosophical response to fiction, many recognize that these are philosophical concerns.

In this context, I explore in this dissertation the relationship between fiction and philosophy with special regard to the role of young adult fiction in forming or altering people's philosophies of life. I seek to align myself with the imaginative power of story for enlarging perspectives, criticizing from the margins, and galvanizing people for the fight against injustice. And finally, I seek to demonstrate that a certain kind of young adult fiction does indeed help to inspire the resourcefulness we need in order to accept difference and imagine alternatives to oppression wherever it exists.

I focus on young adult fiction primarily because of its wide reach and particular relevance for ethical formation. Literary critic Karen Coats says it well: "Young adult literature exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation, and yet we still pay more critical scholarly attention to *Antigone*

(Sophocles, c. 442) and *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925) than we do to the potentially life-changing books our teens read on their own. It seems to me that if we believe that literature has something to say about what it means to be human, and if we further nuance that belief with the idea that national, ethnic, and women's literatures say something about the character and preoccupations of nations and the experience of being a certain ethnicity or gender, then we ought to approach YA literature with the same careful scrutiny, even if it is written about and to young adults rather than by them."<sup>1</sup>

Considering both the extreme popularity of and the important philosophical themes addressed by young adult literature (consider the Harry Potter series, for example, which thoughtfully addresses death, power, violence, and otherness), it is surprising that the genre has received so little philosophical attention. So far, calls for serious theoretical engagement with young adult fiction<sup>2</sup> appear to have been largely ignored by the majority of philosophers and literary critics.<sup>3</sup> By taking up young adult literature as an important

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Coats, "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, in Theory," in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, ed. Shelby Wolf, Karen Coats, Patricia A. Enciso, and Christine Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 2011), 315–16.

<sup>2</sup> Again, Coats says it well: "[J]ust as children's literature is viewed as both an entrée into more sophisticated reading for its intended audience and a viable area of academic study in and of itself, so literature aimed at young adults should be afforded the same dual valuation. Like Hunt (1996), I would like to see a more robust critical conversation emerge that treats YA literature as a destination literature, rather than an in-between phenomenon that is useful for pedagogical applications and/or diverting entertainment before readers enter into the more serious work of studying capital L literature. ... It's certainly not a question of sacrificing richness in character portrayal, beauty of the language, or depth of thematic significance. All of these things can be found in carefully chosen YA literature. The major difference seems to rest in the assignation of cultural value to certain texts and genres and not others, and the development of a critical literature than keeps texts and ideas circulating in academic contexts" (Coats, "Growing Up, in Theory," 317).

<sup>3</sup> A few thinkers have both given and responded to the call to address young adult fiction as worthy of philosophical attention. Foremost among them are Robyn McCallum, who takes a Bahktinian approach to young adult fiction (*Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent*

philosophical contributor in its own right, I am responding to Coats's insight on the need for exactly that: "What remain rare in the critical discourse are studies that seek to theorize YA fiction as a type of literature that has its own constellation of concerns that mark it as distinctive from literature for either children or adults."<sup>4</sup>

"Young adult" literature deals with themes that are relevant far beyond adolescence, however. Themes of power, personality and selfhood, relations between the self and others, death, gender, ethics, and ideology are consistently front and center in this genre. As Robyn McCallum, a literary theorist who focuses on children's and adolescent literature and film, puts it, "Most of the novels I am concerned with are complex and sophisticated in their narrative techniques and thematic concerns, and many of them express or reflect highly complex philosophical and psychological ideas."<sup>5</sup> In particular, young adult fiction tends to question universalist and essentialist understandings of human existence, a question which—as will soon become apparent—is a guiding theme in this dissertation, as well.

At the heart of the issues I am taking on is the prevailing wind in contemporary Western thought that neglects plurality. This can be seen in two apparently contradictory trends. On the one hand, people tend to take as normative what can be generalized. Particulars are gathered up into descriptive generalities, which are then interpreted as prescriptive universal claims: "Most children read by the age of six; therefore, all

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*Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* [New York: Garland, 1999]); Roberta Seelinger Trites, who takes a Foucaultian approach to young adult fiction (*Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000]); and Coats, who takes a Lacanian approach to young adult fiction ("Growing Up, in Theory").

<sup>4</sup> Coats, "Growing Up, in Theory," 317.

<sup>5</sup> McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity*, 8.

children should read by the age of six.” On the other hand, people tend to deny the existence of universally applicable normativity. Each person is a world alone, having no normative connection to anyone else: “What’s right for one person may not be right for someone else.” These two deep-seated tendencies—though opposite—do nothing to keep each other in check, since they come from the same root: North American culture is in the grip of a reductionism which privileges pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality at the expense of plurality.

Let me briefly clarify my use of several of the terms I have just introduced. “Plurality” refers to a number of particulars that are grouped together but maintain their individuality, not as isolated individuals but always within the context of each other. I treat “individual” and “particular” as largely synonymous, referring to a single instance, item, or person. I take “general,” on the other hand, to refer to what can be said about what many individuals have in common—what is widespread but does not necessarily hold in every case. (The field of statistics, for example, derives general statements from empirical particulars.) Plurality cannot be reduced to a collection of autonomous particulars or to the general similarities that may be found between those particulars.

I take “universal” to refer to what is always the case or always applicable. What is universal has no exceptions. Genuine universality, as I see it, is expressed by a sense of normativity to which everyone is responsible. “Pseudo-universality,” then, refers to what is taken to be universal when it actually is not. Likewise, “pseudo-individuality” refers to what is taken to be individual, but this apparent individuality is not genuine. Genuine individuality exists within the context of plurality—individuals are unique but connected to a context, not isolated and autonomous. I suggest that pseudo-universality arises when

what is general is treated as universal, and that pseudo-individuality arises when particulars are taken out of the context of plurality. Again, both pseudo-individuality and pseudo-universality fail to take into account the reality of plurality, making it difficult to find a real connection between individual and context on the one hand, and between individual and normativity on the other. These cultural tendencies set the stage for my project.

I have referred several times to “normativity.” Briefly, I use this term to refer to the sense that I (and many other people) have of a universal call to which all human beings must respond.<sup>6</sup> Normativity has to do with the way things should be—how human beings should act and interact, whatever that may mean. In the context of this project in particular, in other words, I am talking about what might be termed ethical normativity. I examine the matter of normativity in more detail in Chapter 4.

In describing the basic problem this project seeks to address, I map out in this first chapter the specific issues that provide the background for the more detailed discussion in the following chapters. I have referred to North American culture as “statistics-loving.” I first confront this cultural distortion, which demonstrates intolerance of deviation and stifles imaginative alternatives, and indicate how it is a manifestation of pseudo-

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<sup>6</sup> I use this term in line with Lambert Zuidervaat’s definition of “societal principles”: “By ‘societal principles’ I mean fundamental expectations that commonly hold for people and that people hold in common. These expectations hold and are held in the context of historically developed cultural practices and social institutions. Economic resourcefulness, public justice, and ethical solidarity are examples of such principles at work in contemporary Western society. . . . Societal principles such as public justice are historically constituted and future-oriented callings in which the voice of God can be heard, and traces of a new earth can appear” (Lambert Zuidervaat, “Earth’s Lament: Suffering, Hope, and Wisdom,” *The Other Journal* 14 [January 2009]: third and fourth paragraphs under “Social Critique,” <http://theotherjournal.com/2009/01/27/earths-lament-suffering-hope-and-wisdom>).

universality. In this discussion, I give special attention to the example of coercive gender distinction as an example of why pseudo-universality is a problem. Then I turn to the relationship between philosophy and story to clarify how fiction can offer a valuable corrective to pseudo-universal tendencies in academic philosophy as well as people's philosophies of life.

I then turn more briefly to questions of implementation. Here I come up against the other side of the reductionism that fails to sufficiently take plurality into account. First, I briefly address concerns about diversity of interpretation; then I look at the question of whether it is acceptable to read (or tell other people to read) books for the purpose of some kind of improvement. In this discussion, I too make use of generalizations—generalizations from experience—as I sketch the issues I am addressing, since I am of course basing my perspective on how my context appears to me through my own experience. I hope that these general statements will be taken as just that—expressions of my experience and part of a conversation—rather than as claims of universal, incontrovertible fact or as mere private, subjective opinions to be dismissed at will.

### *The statistical mindset*

I live in what I feel is a culture of inevitability. I see this most poignantly in the way that, for most people in North America, the most reliable basis for truth remains the proclamations of science in the form of “studies,” which are disseminated with varying levels of accuracy through various forms of media. These studies are our proof texts and our guides. They support our opinions and direct our choices. However, it is not always

easy to discover a recognizable truth in the tangle of studies and rhetoric that surrounds contemporary research. Take an example: The authors of a popular anti-attachment parenting book, *On Becoming Babywise*, reference the American Academy of Pediatrics and a National Institute of Child Health and Human Development subcommittee to support their stance against parents and babies sharing a bed. According to “studies,” they imply, bed-sharing is dangerous for your baby and may increase the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)<sup>7</sup>—a thought to strike fear into any parent’s heart. On the other side of the issue, attachment parenting groups such as La Leche League and the *Mothering* magazine community report just the opposite, citing “studies” which demonstrate the benefits of sleeping with your baby, including reduced risk of SIDS.<sup>8</sup>

“Don’t believe *those* studies!” yelp the authors of *Babywise*, explaining that the studies cited by attachment parenting groups were drawn from third-world countries whose warm climates would reduce the risk of SIDS in any case.<sup>9</sup> Yet *Mothering* magazine questions the validity of the studies cited by those who believe bed-sharing is risky, pointing to Japan—certainly neither a third-world country nor a tropical climate—where bed-sharing is the norm and the rates of SIDS are the lowest in the world.<sup>10</sup>

The underlying concern for both sides, of course, is the question of how *best* to accomplish one’s parenting goals—particularly the goal of keeping the baby safe and healthy. Unlike in cultures that understand life to be something that happens to people and about which they can do little, for people in North American culture, achieving one’s

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<sup>7</sup> Gary Ezzo and Robert Bucknam, *On Becoming Babywise* (Louisiana, MO: Parent-Wise Solutions, 2001), 196.

<sup>8</sup> Peggy O'Mara and Wendy Ponte, *Having a Baby Naturally: The Mothering Magazine Guide to Pregnancy and Childbirth* (New York: Atria Books, 2003), 108.

<sup>9</sup> Ezzo and Bucknam, *On Becoming Babywise*, 195.

<sup>10</sup> O'Mara and Ponte, *Having a Baby Naturally*, 108.

aims is understood to be a cause-effect relationship which presumably can be controlled. We believe that if you work hard, you are likely to achieve your goal. This expectation is different from conventional wisdom in China, for example, where the Confucian-based viewpoint says that everyone is given a certain place in society and has certain obligations that go along with that place; to attempt to change one's fate disturbs the entire fabric of society. In other words, in Chinese culture, each individual's life is seen through the lens of what is good for the entire nation. North American culture, on the other hand, tends to make sense of individual lives through the lens of media-filtered statistics—"studies show that doing such-and-such will reduce/increase your chances of such-and-such." This "statistical mindset" tends to mistake a general statement for a universal norm. We are dealing, then, with a form of pseudo-universality.

What distinguishes the statistical mindset from the scientific practice of statistics is the addition of a normative element: that what is the case for the majority should be the guiding ambition for everyone. While both make use of actual statistics, the statistical mindset is distinct from a perspective that seeks to base action upon scientific evidence. An evidence-based approach to action seeks to use statistics to discover what is actually the case and then decides upon a possible course of action that takes these discoveries into account. In other words, statistical findings have no direct prescriptive force; they inform evidence-based action but do not control it. The statistical mindset, on the other hand, seizes upon the generalities revealed by statistics and universalizes them, insisting that the way things are for most is the way things should be for all, and ignoring both the need to reflect upon how what we learn from statistics might be translated into action and the fact that even though something may be the case for a majority, a minority still exists.



As can be seen from the bed-sharing discussion above, evidence-based action is not always a simple endeavor, both since the statistics themselves may present conflicting descriptions of reality and because they are always directed and presented contextually, with certain aims and interests governing both what is studied and how the results are presented. The statistical mindset bypasses this complexity, considering statistical findings to be easily translatable into normative recommendations.

The statistical mindset's tendency to ignore the importance of the particular in bypassing this complexity has two key effects, the first having to do with the overall context, and the second having to do with the particular instance. First, the statistical mindset's focus on the pseudo-universal—seen especially in its treatment of what is average—allows it to ignore what a more careful attention to the particular might reveal about the importance of the overall context and societal structure. Although the field of statistics is clear that correlation does not imply causation, to the statistical mindset, this distinction is irrelevant as long as we feel assured that the correlation holds in the majority of cases. In the statistical mindset, we recognize the existence of contingency in our world, but we do our best to mitigate its effects. Thus, we reason, if we act in response to statistical averages, we are as close as we can come to guaranteeing the desired effects. We seek a universal standard, and take statistical averages to be such—or at least to be our best guide to such. For example, if the media announce that “studies show” that eating an apple a day may reduce your “chance” of getting heart disease, we understand this to mean that the majority of people who eat an apple a day will not get heart disease. Therefore, by eating an apple a day, we hope to join that majority.

Now, eating an apple a day in an effort to help avoid heart disease is not necessarily a bad thing. However, the way the statistical mindset works is to focus attention on these small, individual changes that people make in an effort to get on the right side of the study, so to speak, thereby distracting attention from potentially larger, even systemic issues. Take the example of the ideal of the nuclear family that is often associated with the 1950s in the United States. This social structure dictated that men worked outside the home, children went to school, and women stayed home to cook and clean. We now recognize that for some of those women, housekeeping to perfection was a life of boredom and drudgery. The statistical mindset would look to majority solutions to relieve the problem of women being unhappy doing (only) all the housework. For example, if studies showed that most women—in colloquial language, “average” women—who got a washing machine were relieved of much of their laundry burden, the assumption would be that every woman should get a washing machine to reduce drudgery and therefore be happier. Larger, systemic issues of whether the social structure itself might be a problem would thereby be avoided. If someone were to get a washing machine and not be happier, she could safely be ignored—rather than seen as pointing to larger issues—because in the statistical mindset the matter of concern is always the majority, and the majority is understood to be represented by what is “average.” The statistical mindset is not interested in minority instances; the “average” person is the one to focus on as the trusted representative of the majority. And in the statistical mindset, the “average” becomes the “standard” for everyone. Averages by definition assume that there are occasions other than the average, while standards are goals set for everyone to meet, or at least gather around. In the statistical mindset, then, the minority experience becomes

irrelevant, rather than being potentially indicative of deeper problems and potential ways beyond these problems. Taking statistical findings as universal norms circumvents the demand that norms place on us to be responsible not merely by emulating a standard but by actually responding to the situation at hand in all its complexity. The statistical mindset therefore represents a reduction to pseudo-universality. Our desire for statistical findings to be universal norms, I suggest, erodes our ability both to accept the other-than-average and to imagine alternatives.

The bed-sharing issue is a good example of the way in which people arm themselves with “scientific” artillery to prove their points and throw doubt on the opinions of those with whom they disagree. The statistical mindset’s de-emphasis of particularity does not merely lead to ignoring issues of context and the structure of society; it also covers up the way the statistical mindset conditions the particulars. This is the second effect of the statistical mindset’s disregard for particulars. A further example can demonstrate this even more troublesome facet of the statistical mindset: its coercive tendencies. The statistical mindset is not directly coercive, but resonates with the sort of simplified perspective that sees the world in stereotypical categories. This is the sense in which it is coercive, since although it does not coerce people into particular opinions, it does encourage thinking in terms of stereotypes. A stereotype, being a fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing, works to impose one myopic viewpoint on other viewpoints by discounting other ways of seeing that person or thing, paralyzing the ability to imagine other perspectives. This is precisely how the statistical mindset works, as the following example of gender stereotypes can show.

The importance, relative worth, fluidity, and scientific determinability of gender have been under debate for conceivably as long as human beings have been gendered. In contemporary North American culture, it is perhaps the paradigm example of both the prevalence of and the problems inherent to the statistical mindset. I have a young daughter and a young son, and carrying a baby around in public quickly taught me that most people in North America need to know a baby's gender before they know what to say about her or him. The belief that boys and girls are fundamentally different is deeply ingrained. Girls wear pink, are pretty, sweet, and well-behaved. Boys wear anything but pink, are active, loud, and rambunctious. Girls like dolls. Boys like trucks. The individual traits, tastes, and talents of small children are largely disregarded, and their activities and interests urged in some directions and not others based entirely on gender.

For now, my husband and I have chosen not to dress our daughter in pink. Pink in our culture is often a symbol of the type of coercive gender distinction which we actively oppose for our daughter. As children, my husband and I both found gender-based expectations very oppressive, since neither of us conformed to most of the stereotypes associated with our respective genders. This experience cannot be uncommon in our culture, and yet the stereotypes persist. There are many reasons for this perdurance, I am sure. Part of it probably has to do with the innate human desire for secure boundaries, part has to do with issues of hoarding power, part has to do with the unabated power of sexuality even in our sex-saturated culture, and I suspect much of it has to do with the profits made from selling discord and difference and then advice about how to resolve them again.

All of this goes to illustrate the predominance of the statistical mindset in mass culture, for if there is any area in which deviation from the mean is suspect, it is gender. “Studies” showing that “most men” display certain traits and “most women” display certain other traits quickly become “men should” and “women should” in people’s minds. The “studies,” conflicting and ever-changing as they are, are not necessarily the problem; rather, the problem is our desire to interpret them as normative: to take them as gospel truth, to be both passionately believed in and conscientiously adhered to. The particularity of the particular instance is both ignored and coerced into conforming to the pseudo-universal.

Again, the studies seek to examine aspects of the complex reality of human gender. We see this complexity in necessarily simplified terms, and as we seek to find our bearings in this intricacy and map out an understandable interpretation of our own experience, we often fall into seeing aspects of this complex reality in stereotypical terms. The statistical mindset picks up these stereotypes and treats them as normative. In the statistical mindset, then, the particular (individual) becomes irrelevant, ignored, or perceived as a threat unless it can be seen as part of the general (stereotype) and be treated as such. This suppression of particularity is an indication that general statements are being taken as universal norms—that what is the case for most should be the case for all.

In the case of gender, then, studies that dwell on gender differences work to reinforce cultural stereotypes that men and women are deeply and intrinsically different in people who already adhere to this opinion. On the other hand, studies that demonstrate that gender differences are social constructions do not necessarily have the effect of

weakening preexisting stereotypes in those that hold them. In both cases, the focus is on general trends, which in the statistical mindset provide fodder for pseudo-universality. Real change, however, can come through the experience of plurality. It is through personal experience of alternatives, rather than abstract knowledge, that stereotypes diminish. The tendency to reject factual information that goes against preexisting stereotypes has been thoroughly demonstrated in the field of politics, for example—an area in which people hold opinions that are similarly strong.<sup>11</sup> What this seems to come to in daily life for many people is that they find themselves in a kind of imaginative paralysis; they have very little room to explore their own sense of self apart from strong cultural stereotypes urging them to conform to the gender expectations of our society, unless they experience an alternative to these stereotypes either by responding creatively to a sense of being oppressed by them or through interaction with a real or fictional person who demonstrates that other possibilities exist.

Stories offer a compelling antidote to the problem of imaginative paralysis. As I shall argue, stories have the power to push us beyond ourselves and our own experiences, expanding our perspectives and our understanding of the world. We need each other's stories to enable us to imagine possibilities that our faith in statistics obscures.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32 (2010): 303–330, doi: 10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2; John Sides and Jack Citrin, "How Large the Huddled Masses? The Causes and Consequences of Public Misperceptions about Immigrant Populations," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 2007), <http://home.gwu.edu/~jsides/huddled.pdf>; Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in Political Information Processing," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006): 755–69.

## *Philosophy and stories*

Story is one thing our statistical culture still loves. Our faith may be in statistics, but our hopes and desires come out in our stories, and through interaction with stories we can develop the philosophy that orients our daily lives. I claim, then, that one way to re-orient our faith in pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality toward a fuller understanding of plurality is through interaction with stories.

I have described philosophy as what orients our lives. For many people, connecting the discipline of philosophy with daily life may seem bizarre to the point of unintelligibility. Academic philosophy, for the non-academician, is usually associated with dry, dusty tomes hidden away in dim libraries, addressing issues that have little or nothing to do with most people's daily lives. Even for professional philosophers, the connection between inter-academy debates and the basic questions of how we should best live our lives has often become indistinct, if not invisible. Part of this disconnect is related to a distinction between philosophy as it relates to daily life (as in one's "philosophy of life") and philosophy as it is studied in the academy. I further explain this distinction between "lived philosophy" and "academic philosophy" in Chapter 2.

For most people, if we want to think deeply about life and how we live it, we turn not to academic philosophy, but elsewhere—like to a good book. And yet, this instinct by itself does not appear to have made much progress in breaking through our cultural fascination with pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality. The nature of the connections between fiction and philosophy, both academic and lived, must be considered carefully. This connection is a complex one, and it needs to be adequately analyzed. Sometimes fiction and philosophy seem totally unrelated, sometimes one makes use of the other, and sometimes, I suggest, they are one and the same. Over time

their relationship has changed and mutated. Nowadays, fiction seems for the most part to show up in academic philosophy in the “being made use of” category. Stories are treated as tools in the service of philosophy. I identify two basic aspects to this relationship: the story-as-hammer and the story-as-example. I briefly introduce these aspects here; I address them more fully in Chapter 6.

The story-as-hammer is very straightforward: Stories are written or analyzed as analogies to philosophical issues—or, one might even say, as allegories. This strategy is particularly common in two areas: feminist thought, and the use of science fiction as commentary on contemporary society. In this approach, the author already knows what he or she wants to say and uses a story to draw attention to a systemic problem. Most often the stories are used very pointedly; for example, to make explicit the oppression of women and to hammer the point home. The story-as-hammer is directed toward something external to the story—the reader’s assumptions or cultural systems being common targets.

The second common way that academic philosophy relates to fiction is the story-as-example, which makes use of stories through analysis. Stories are taken apart to make manifest the insights they hold within themselves, and these insights are translated into philosophy. This approach shares with the first a common assumption that fiction is a tool of philosophy. In most cases, a philosopher turns to a story in the context of an essay or book that addresses an issue for which the story can be a useful illustration. In a sense, the philosophy is distilled out of the story-as-example. The issue of how form and content relate to each other, which I discuss more fully in Chapter 3, is key here.



In both these cases, what is important is not the story itself, but what the story can relay. I suggest that a different approach, though relatively rare, has the potential to be both more literarily appropriate and often more philosophically rewarding than treating story as a tool: Story-as-companion is a drawing together of fiction and academic philosophy as mutually beneficial partners. Recognizing that fiction addresses important philosophical questions in a way that standard academic philosophy does not, while at the same time appreciating the value of a philosophical discussion of good books to make manifest their contributions, story-as-companion stands in contrast to the story-as-tool approaches of much of traditional academic philosophy.

A key question this dissertation wrestles with is how philosophy and fiction can usefully respond to the question “How should we live?” Answering this question, I suggest, is not merely a matter of making lifestyle choices that we find personally satisfactory. Rather, it is a question of how we can be guided into living well in response to a normative call. The prevailing wind in academic philosophy that privileges pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality at the expense of plurality leads to a tendency to try to answer the question of “How should we live?” by either identifying principles that appear to be universal and that can be abstracted from one context and applied to many others or by denying the possibility of sharable criteria in responding to this question. However, I suggest that guidance implies not merely following principles but trusting in the reliability of that which guides. When philosophy does not trust fiction to contribute in its own way, fiction becomes merely a tool.

The prevailing wind toward pseudo-universality in academic philosophy frequently shows up in a tendency to esteem supposedly universalizable definitions, even

in response to a basic life question such as “How should we live?” Now, attempting to make sure that we are talking about the same things when we have a conversation is undeniably important. Identifying differences and similarities, categorizing, and seeking clarity are all useful tools. The difficulty arises when the definition, whether deliberately or not, attempts to completely delineate the word or concept in question. This endeavor is frequently both inaccurate and unhelpful, but remains an ideal for much of academic philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

Take, for example, Susanne Langer’s insistence that “speech” is unique to human beings; animals communicate, she says, “but not by any method that can be likened to speaking.”<sup>13</sup> This extreme delineation between human and animal communication debars exploration of potential overlap or the philosophical import of potential overlap, as well as denying the overlap that exists. If wild turkeys, for example, use distinct sounds to

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<sup>12</sup> In her discussion of Jürgen Habermas’s and Hannah Arendt’s conceptions of plurality, philosopher Veronica Vasterling summarizes both this ideal and the importance of Arendt’s response to it: “Philosophers like Habermas tend to elevate consistency to an absolute standard: thou shall not commit contradictions, performative or otherwise. Yet, our lived experience is not an exercise in logic. From the almost endless range of characteristics applicable to the lived experience of human beings consistency is maybe the most unlikely: whose biography is consistent? What history is consistent? Unlike most philosophers, who need to be reminded of this, Arendt tries to do justice to the thorough contingency of human existence, the unexpected new turns one’s life and the world one inhabits may take. That’s why she rejects the central place, the superior power, accorded to reason—the way Habermas does and so many other philosophers do. Arendt’s point is not that the reasoning game, including its standard of consistency, cannot be part of the articulation of interpretational perspectives which realize plurality. Her point is that it is often very difficult to do justice to our lived experience in this particular genre or language game. She doesn’t exclude it; she deflates the bloated importance it tends to have in philosophy” (Veronica Vasterling, “The Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach to Plurality: Arendt, Habermas, and Gadamer,” in *Phenomenological Perspectives on Plurality*, ed. Gert-Jan van der Heiden [Boston: Brill, 2015], 168–69).

<sup>13</sup> Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 104.

identify different kinds of snakes, must we insist that this does not count as “speech”?<sup>14</sup>

Langer’s absolute definition of speech is a prime example of an attempt at complete delineation that is both inaccurate and unhelpful. A more recent and perhaps less deliberate example is Seyla Benhabib’s discussion of “situated criticism,” which she conceptualizes as the view that social critics speak from within a monolithic, homogenous culture or tradition.<sup>15</sup> Nancy Fraser astutely points out that Benhabib’s conception is unnecessarily delineated, overlooking other understandings of situated criticism.<sup>16</sup> Of course, there are wide variations in the ways different areas of philosophy approach definition. The prevailing wind of pseudo-universality, however, blows even in philosophical fields where it might not be expected.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Joe Hutto, *Illumination in the Flatwoods: A Season with the Wild Turkey* (Lander, WY: Vast Horizon, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Seyla Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 26.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Fraser, “False Antitheses: A Response to Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Even philosophers who do not claim universal validity for their theories tend to spend large portions of their work responding to that expectation. A significant thrust of the postmodern and feminist movements, for example, has been in trying to undermine universal claims. This in itself indicates the prevalence of pseudo-universality as something that dominates philosophy; its presence is the context to which all philosophers must respond. For example, the introductory comments to selections from Gianni Vattimo, Joseph Margolis, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Derrida in *Truth: Engagement Across Philosophical Traditions* state, “Few doubt that truth is to be understood propositionally. But this idea seems to rest on the twin assumptions that truth begins with language, and that language is essentially propositional. Each of these claims is strongly contested here” (José Medina and David Wood, eds., *Truth: Engagement Across Philosophical Traditions* [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005], 161). Or take Judith Butler’s brilliant work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), in which she seeks to point out that simply categorizing all people into either male or female genders is inaccurate. In making her case for the uniqueness of each person’s self-expression of gender, she does not seek to absolutize particular forms of gender expression, but expresses a thoroughgoing recognition of the reality of plurality. These examples demonstrate why I use the metaphor of a prevailing

One of the greatest strengths of storytelling is that it communicates and makes recognizable ideas without completely defining them. I suggest that when philosophy moves away from attempting to universally define in responding to the question “How should we live?” while still holding out the possibility of shared normativity, it can come into its own as an orienting force. It can orient both the expectations we take to stories and our philosophical engagement with them. Stories allow us another avenue to respond to the question “How should we live?” that does not simplify the complexity of life but offers companionship as we seek to navigate unique situations.

At the same time, philosophy can work in companionship with story as it clarifies the issues under consideration without denying the unique role that story has to play. Acknowledging the philosophical place of good books in lived *and* academic philosophy is an important correction to the reductionist tendencies toward pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality, in academic philosophy as well as in the wider cultural context. Giving a place to fiction both fosters plurality in a quantitative sense by allowing more contributors to have a hand in the conversation, and recognizes the deeper plurality in the reality that a question such as “How should we live?” does not have a simple, single answer.

### *Diversity of interpretation*

The other side of the story, of course, is that giving priority to plurality may run us into other kinds of problems. An intensified sense of the importance of the particular must also avoid the other danger: falling into pseudo-individuality. There is already

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wind, which blows both on those who are blown along with it and those who are struggling upwind.

plenty of argument about traditionally academic philosophical works and how they should be taken. How much more argument will there be over matters of interpretation when it comes to stories? People love to discuss what they think about books they have read. Diversity of interpretation is indubitably a fact of life. If, as I have suggested, we are facing a vital need for genuine plurality, how do we have a constructive conversation without seeking generalizations that we try to treat as normative, thus falling into the trap of pseudo-universality?

Diversity of interpretation creates another opportunity for reductionism to flourish, this time in the form of the relativism that denies any universally applicable norms. Taken to the extreme, the idea that each person who reads a book is an isolated pseudo-individual whose interpretation is not accountable to any shared norms would mean that an attempt to discuss the book would simply be another chance for people to talk past each other. At first glance, this appears less insidious than the quest for pseudo-universality, because it gives the impression of distributing rather than accruing power, and therefore seems to create less opportunity for oppression. However, diversity of “opinion” often becomes an opportunity for the loudest voices to simply drown out the rest, as we see in the mass media, for example.<sup>18</sup> In this way, the particular becomes perceived as the general while maintaining a mask of individuality, in much the same way as the statistical mindset, manifested by the idea of an average, obscures the particular. And, of course, it remains an instance of reductionism in its denial of any universally applicable normativity, and is consequently to be avoided if possible.

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<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to Lambert Zuidervart for this insight.

I am pointing to a practical side of the issue in my framing of the question: How much argument will result from letting every reader's opinion have priority over what can be generalized about a book? The answer to this question, of course, is that there will be endless argument, since each reader will claim priority for his or her own perspective. This is an issue that must be dealt with if my suggestion that some works of fiction be considered serious contributors to philosophy be taken seriously. This is true whether we are talking about academic philosophy or people's philosophies of life. If a book is to be a contributor to the philosophical conversation, the idea that each person can interpret the book without reference to other people's interpretations is supremely problematic. On the other hand, it is surely incorrect to return here to the quest for pseudo-universality by assuming that all readers should read a book alike. Both extremes shut down, rather than encourage, conversation.

The idea of story-as-companion as I have introduced it is at the heart of the issue in question. Mediating between academic and lived philosophy, the intention of story-as-companion is to promote appropriate plurality in terms of questions such as "How should we live?" This means that the conversation should not be shut down by denying certain contributors (such as works of fiction) access to it in an inappropriate quest for pseudo-universality. It also means that those involved in the conversation should bring their contributions together in genuine interaction, rather than merely spouting opinions in an inappropriate assumption of pseudo-individuality. Companionship involves authentic

conversation, in which the conversation partners converse about a shared topic to which each expects the others to bring a unique perspective.<sup>19</sup>

### *Reading with purpose?*

It should be clear by now that I am seeking to treat certain works of fiction with great respect. I do believe that reading books influences people, and I desire the contributions fiction makes to be taken seriously. Certain kinds of fiction, at least, meet a real and worthwhile need both in people's lives and in academic philosophy, as I demonstrate in the chapters that follow. If I am suggesting, then, that people read books in order to better answer the question "How should we live?" and to add insight to the work of philosophers, how does this differ from the other ways I have described in which philosophy treats fiction as a tool?

The long-standing but uneasy relationship between fiction and philosophy is a key facet of the issues I have described. Martha C. Nussbaum summarizes the history of this relationship as follows:

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<sup>19</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer describes the active way in which the conversation partners in a genuine conversation seek to understand each other's unique perspective (not each other as such): "Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d, rev. ed., trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [New York: Continuum, 2004], 387). Likewise, Gadamer points to the fact that a conversation is always more than what the conversation partners themselves bring to it: "We say that we 'conduct' a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. ... No one knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation" (*Truth and Method*, 385). Thus genuine conversation offers more than a simple uncovering of something universal or insight into an individual, as valuable as these may be.

Philosophy and literature have had a very uneasy relationship throughout the Western philosophical tradition. Already in the Republic (c. 380–370 BCE), Plato's Socrates refers to a 'quarrel of long standing' between the poets and the philosophers—which he then pursues, expressing both a deep love of literary art and a reluctance to admit it into the instructional plan of the ideal city. So central was this debate to subsequent Greek and Roman philosophers that one could write the history of at least the ethical portion of those traditions as an extended conversation about this theme. Later philosophers in the Western tradition continue the conversation, never without considerable ambivalence, but usually with a lively sense of the ethical insight that literature may possibly offer. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger—all these major Western philosophers, and many others, have contributed to keeping the conversation alive. Only in twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy has the relationship between the two disciplines been virtually neglected. Analytic philosophers sought to write in a nonliterary style and rarely discussed the contribution of literature to understanding; literary authors and writers about literature felt, with much justice, that philosophy offered little that was relevant to their concerns. With the exception of figures such as Iris Murdoch and Stanley Cavell, always treated as eccentric and marginal, there was little sustained cross-disciplinary conversation.<sup>20</sup>

In short, though fiction and philosophy have met as something like equals (though rival equals) in the past, in the present North American climate they seem to be following two separate sets of concerns—as separate as the seemingly unrelated regard for the autonomous individual of pseudo-individuality and the general-turned-normative of pseudo-universality. In subsequent chapters I elaborate on two aspects of this seeming separation. In my above discussion of prevailing winds in academic philosophy, I began to address the first aspect; that is, the relationship between academic philosophy and fiction. I began to explore the way in which academic philosophy's methodological infatuation with pseudo-universality prevents it from taking the philosophical value of story seriously. A second aspect of the seemingly separate agendas of literature and

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<sup>20</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "Ralph Cohen and the Dialogue between Philosophy and Literature," *New Literary History* 40, no. 4 (Autumn 2009): 757.



philosophy has more to do with the relationship between fiction and what I call lived philosophy. It comes to the fore when we consider the purpose a person may have for reading fiction. Here we find a similar danger in that pseudo-individuality may prevent the reader from allowing the story to do more than act as a tool for the reader's own purposes. To read or teach books for the potential philosophical improvement they can bring us could easily fall again into the problem of dividing form from content, a common field mark of the story-as-tool approach.

In turning to books with an eye to the possibility of what they can contribute to philosophy, both lived and academic, I suggest that it will be helpful to work with an imaginative framework that goes beyond the conceptual structure of a tool. The statistical mindset, as I described it above, tends to view the world through the lens of cause and effect. My hope is that the story-as-companion metaphor will provide the framework for an alternate approach that takes into account the thoroughly hermeneutical nature of fiction as an art form. That is, when we interact with art, we are neither passive recipients of what it has to offer, nor do we merely mine it for its meaning. Rather, it is through our conversation with and interpretation of art that its meaning is disclosed. We tend to believe that relationships with people we think of as good people can be beneficial, but this does not mean that we are treating these people as tools for our own improvement. In the same way, we can recognize that spending time with good books can be good for us, beyond simply using them as tools for our benefit.

### *A look ahead*

I have described the inattention to and undervaluation of plurality as a key problem in North American culture. In the following chapters, I more fully describe the way I see philosophical interaction with stories as having the capacity to break through the imaginative paralysis induced by this reductionism.

In Chapter 2, I situate my project on the philosophical map. With the aid of Sander Griffioen's thoughts on worldview and world picture, I elucidate my distinction between academic and lived philosophy. This distinction provides a starting point for later chapters' examination of how we can interact with stories philosophically. I then provide a brief tour of the contemporary terrain in the field of philosophy and literature, showing where my project intersects with other thinkers' approaches and indicating why I chose the major interlocutors I converse with in the following chapters.

In Chapter 3, I introduce many of the basic themes I claim are important in the relationship between fiction and philosophy. By drawing Hannah Arendt (partly via Lisa Jane Disch), Martha C. Nussbaum, and Richard Kearney into conversation about what storytelling is and does, I seek to clarify how fiction can be understood as philosophical. I describe the kind of philosophical commentary that can partner with fiction in order to best contribute to the philosophical conversation, highlight the critical importance of the connection between form and content, and discuss the importance of and relationship between particularity and plurality.

In Chapter 4, I situate these themes by seeking to connect them with a larger normative and societal framework in light of the need for a noncausal model and hermeneutical for how literature and philosophy relate. I bring Lambert Zuidervart's ideas about imaginative disclosure and art's place in society into the conversation in

order to provide a setting for my discussion of fiction's unique normative interaction with philosophy. I return to Arendt, and especially to Nussbaum, as I seek to set the stage for a normative perspective on fiction. I seek to put fiction into the context of art in all its forms, while paying special attention to the distinctive potential I see in young adult literature.

Chapter 5 brings us back to some of the questions I started with about how philosophical fiction can have a positive normative influence without being treated simply as a tool. I turn to Wayne C. Booth, a seminal thinker on the subject in contemporary work on philosophy and literature, in order to help us think through how these themes interact. Booth's metaphor of narrative friendship creates space for a discussion of criteria and character. I then bring Nussbaum back into the conversation once again in order to clarify the strength of Booth's model and address potential criticisms.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I bring into the conversation some fictional voices through my own attempt at philosophical commentary, which endeavors to make explicit the philosophical import of several stories. Cynthia Voigt's *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*<sup>21</sup> and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Tehanu*<sup>22</sup> have informed my own philosophy of life, and both stories explore Arendtian themes of natality and "going visiting" in an exemplary fashion.<sup>23</sup> Through my

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<sup>21</sup> Cynthia Voigt, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *Tehanu* (New York: Simon Pulse Paperbacks, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> I am not alone in considering these authors important contributors: Trites, for example, names both Le Guin and Voigt as "among the many authors writing in English who have created texts that are in one way or another pivotal in the Anglo-American YA canon" (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, xiii).

discussion of these books and a short story, “No Woman Born” by C. L. Moore,<sup>24</sup> I demonstrate the philosophical potential of treating a story as a philosophical companion rather than simply a tool, whether hammer or example.

It is my hope that this manner of proceeding will make clear the imaginative yet philosophical power that story has to offer—a potential that might be not only philosophy-changing, but world-changing. Further, it is my hope that this project itself can function as something of a bridge between the present relationship of philosophy to fiction and a more inclusive engagement between the two that might develop into something like a friendship.

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<sup>24</sup> C. L. Moore, “No Woman Born,” in *Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction: Utopias and Dystopias*, ed. Judith A. Little (Potsdam, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 47–90.

## **2. Situation of the Project**

Before beginning a journey, it is appropriate to look at a road map. A map shows where others have gone ahead, traced out useful paths, and settled down. Looking at a map can help a traveler identify where the action is and may point to some areas that he or she will want to avoid. In this chapter, I create something of a road map for the journey that is to follow, charting out where others have gone before—and which of those paths I try to avoid, as well as where I seek to meet conversation partners, often at the crossroads.

I begin by defining the map's legend with a clarification of my approach to the term "philosophy," paying particular attention to the distinction I have suggested between "lived philosophy" and "academic philosophy." My interest in both sides of this distinction is one of the main motivations for the project as a whole. Both lived philosophy and academic philosophy have important roles to play in answering the question "How should we live?" Via a brief discussion of Herman Dooyeweerd's concepts of theoretical thought and naïve experience, followed by a tour through Sander Griffioen's reflections on worldview, I elucidate what I mean by academic philosophy and lived philosophy, setting the stage for my discussion of how they interact with each other and with story in the following chapters.

Next, I map out some of the philosophical terrain regarding the relationship between philosophy and fiction. I am far from alone in my interest in the topic in general, but a survey of various thinkers' areas of focus shows that the ground I cover in this dissertation has not been heavily traversed. I situate my project in the larger discussion through a brief introduction of various philosophers' approaches to the relationship

between philosophy and fiction, indicating where I am on the map and which fellow travelers are mostly likely to offer fruitful conversations.

### *Academic and lived philosophy defined*

Can philosophy be a potentially life-changing activity? To address this question, I suggest an important distinction. “Philosophy” in its broadest sense is not just an academic discipline, but an integral aspect of our daily lives. Indeed, philosophy is as much a part of life as biotic existence or social interaction is. Consider the example of biotic existence. We easily make the distinction between the academic discipline of biology and the undeniable fact of our biotic selves. Perhaps physics is an even better example here, since many people react to the discipline of physics just as they do to the discipline of philosophy, seeing it as an esoteric, distant realm for “smart” people. But we all know that when we drop things, they fall, and that the discipline of physics seeks to understand this experience theoretically. For philosophy, too, I make a distinction between the discipline (what is generally known as “academic philosophy”) and the philosophical facet of ourselves that is just part of our lives (what I call “lived philosophy”).

What makes academic philosophy academic? When we think of an academic field in contrast to our everyday experience of life as a whole, we recognize that what we call academic tends to be theoretical, abstract, and focused on a delimited area to the exclusion of at least some other dimensions of life. The framework for my understanding of academic philosophy as abstract and focused, and of lived philosophy as immediate and experiential, arises from Herman Dooyeweerd’s description of the difference

between pre-theoretical experience and theoretical thought. I find this distinction very helpful; in this context, I am making use of it somewhat uncritically. Put simply, the pre-theoretical attitude of “naïve” experience is characterized by the experience of empirical reality as an integral whole, while theoretical thought separates empirical reality into its different aspects<sup>1</sup> through analysis.<sup>2</sup> As in my example above, we experience biotic and physical life in an integrated way, but when we study these areas theoretically, we focus on and analyze the biotic and physical aspects of life in a delineated, systematic way.

In an analogous manner, I understand academic philosophy to be the study of the “philosophical aspect” of life—the philosophical facet of our everyday existence. Following the broadly reformational understanding of philosophy, I understand philosophy to address fundamental human questions and the way all of life fits together. Academic philosophy addresses this side of human life in a way that is focused, purposeful, abstract, theoretical, and systematic. Of course, academic philosophy is informed by context and assumptions, but its theoretical and systematic character is what identifies it as academic. Lived philosophy, in contrast, also has to do with fundamental human questions and the way life fits together, but does so in a relatively unsystematic, unfocused, and holistic way.

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<sup>1</sup> “Modal aspect” is a technical term in Dooyeweerd’s philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> “[In] the theoretical attitude of thought we analyze empirical reality by separating it into its modal aspects. In the pre-theoretical attitude of naïve experience, on the contrary, empirical reality offers itself in the integral coherence of cosmic time. Here we grasp time and temporal reality in typical total-structure of individuality, and we do not become aware of the modal aspects unless *implicitly*. The aspects are not set asunder, but rather are conceived of as being together in a continuous uninterrupted coherence” (Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Necessary Presuppositions of Philosophy*, vol. 1 of *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, trans. David H. Freeman and William S. Young [Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969], 38).

To clarify what I mean by lived philosophy, I briefly detour through the related concepts of worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and world picture (*Weltbild*). According to Sander Griffioen's recent, wide-ranging study of the subject, a worldview is a conscious stance, signifying both an inner conviction and an outlook on the world.<sup>3</sup> A worldview provides orientation, guides action, integrates experiential fragmentation, and calls for public recognition; its orienting and guiding function indicates that it plays a normative role. A world picture, on the other hand, is an unconscious stance—often widely shared—that does not have an overtly normative element.<sup>4</sup> An example of this would be any of the widely held contemporary assumptions based on scientific theory, such as that the earth is a sphere in space.

Somewhere in between worldview and world picture we find “embedded worldviews,” which are habitual rather than conscious, but still promote certain courses of action and block others.<sup>5</sup> Griffioen points out that embedded worldviews are often lodged in standard procedures, going unnoticed except by those with minority worldviews. This phenomenon is common in scientific research, Griffioen notes: A naturalist, for example, would tend to prioritize a certain type of research, whereas an anthroposophist would prioritize another; however, these priorities tend to be hidden by accepted practices, so that the differences rarely come out into the open.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, I suggest that this situation is common to most or all science-based fields, including medicine, anthropology, and engineering. All of these fields place high value on standard practice, and alternative or minority viewpoints struggle greatly to find a

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<sup>3</sup> Sander Griffioen, “On Worldviews,” *Philosophia Reformata* 77 (2012): 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



footing. The statistical mindset, especially in regard to the assumption of gender stereotypes that I addressed in Chapter 1, is another prime example of an embedded worldview. It is for the most part habitual rather than purposeful, but still functions to promote certain courses of action and block others; in other words, it retains a normative element.

Embedded worldviews tend to be problematic because they act as unrecognized guides to action. This means that people are in effect religiously<sup>7</sup> but unconsciously committed to certain perspectives, leading them to believe that practices and processes are inevitable, when in fact they are human artifacts—and therefore always mutable. Griffioen signals this appearance of inevitability as a distinctive characteristic of an embedded worldview: “Here then appears the difference between a manifest and an embedded worldview: the latter veils the existence of alternatives. Although embedding seems to be a normal process, in line with routinization in general, yet its effect is detrimental because it suggests that social processes follow their own irreversible tracks irrespective of human assent.”<sup>8</sup>

Griffioen distinguishes between worldview and (academic) philosophy in that a worldview is inherently a guide to action, while philosophy does not guide action as such and is therefore not required to prioritize tasks.<sup>9</sup> A philosopher of politics or morality such as Martha C. Nussbaum, who specifically defines philosophy as seeking to answer

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<sup>7</sup> The term “religiously” is used here in line with the tradition of reformational philosophy, which understands religion to be the deep-seated orientation that organizes life into what is more and less important, indicating what life is all about, what we should spend our time doing, and so on—and more than this, it is a response to a transcendent call. One’s worldview, then, is rooted in one’s religious orientation, which has to do with whom one serves. The reformational catchphrase is “All of life is religion.”

<sup>8</sup> Griffioen, “On Worldviews,” 24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 26.

the question of “How should one live?” would certainly beg to differ with this characterization. However, I suspect that Griffioen is simply trying to distinguish between the abstract, theoretical nature of academic philosophy and the normative aspect of worldview in order to insist that worldview is still an important concept, a matter that he takes to be in question. At the same time, since he recognizes border crossings among worldview, embedded worldview, and world picture,<sup>10</sup> I suspect he would not deny that these border crossings exist in other areas of life—even in academic disciplines—as well, including in philosophy.

This brief summary of Griffioen’s descriptions of philosophy, worldview, embedded worldview, and world picture demonstrates that we approach the world with variable consciousness and focus. Lived philosophy involves ways in which we approach the world within the range of worldview and embedded worldview—it is the action of living out the dimension of our lives that involves orientation, goals, integration, and discussion of these matters with other people. Like academic philosophy, lived philosophy retains a relationship with theorizing in that it involves critical reflection on our lives and worldviews, although this reflection does not tend to be systematic. Like a world picture, lived philosophy involves how we see the world, but it does not suffer the loss of its normative character. Lived philosophy is the activity of living out both manifest and embedded worldviews—it is the thinking about, discussing, and decision making that arise from the existence of worldviews.

Lived philosophy, then, is related to the basic approaches to and assumptions about life that we demonstrate as we go about our daily business, with abiding,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 22.

fundamental human questions, and with the ever-present question of how we should best live our lives. It overlaps with various aspects of our lives, including ethical and rational dimensions, but cannot be limited to these aspects because—as a form of philosophy—it has to do with how everything fits together.

With this bird’s-eye view of philosophy, both lived and academic, in mind, let us take a closer look at what others have to say on the specific topic of fiction and philosophy.

### *Mapping the terrain*

Where is my project situated in relation to recent thinkers on philosophy and fiction? After briefly surveying the philosophy-and-fiction terrain, I discuss several of the major thinkers whose goals, methods, and topics overlap with mine in order to situate my project in the larger conversation.

The relationship between philosophy and fiction has arguably been a topic of academic discussion since Plato. Interest in the topic continues unabated, as publication in recent years attests.<sup>11</sup> Thinkers from a wide variety of fields are interested in the

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<sup>11</sup> This interest (as evidenced by my choice of dissertation topic) continues to the present. For example, see Raymond Barfield, *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Elisabeth Bronfen, *Night Passages: Philosophy, Literature, and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Noël Carroll and John Gibson, *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011); Philip Davis, *Reading and the Reader*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Richard Gaskin, *Language, Truth, and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Peter Kivy, *Once-Told Tales: An Essay in Literary Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Michael Mack, *How Literature Changes the Way We Think* (New York: Continuum, 2012); and Anthony Uhlmann, *Thinking in Literature: Joyce, Woolf, Nabokov* (New York: Continuum, 2011), all published within the past five years and all addressing some aspect of the relationship between narrative, philosophy, and human life.

subject of fiction, each taking an angle on the subject that depends largely on what other areas he or she is interested in. Fiction does indeed seem to offer something to everyone. Some of the variety in approach and resultant variety in theory is simply a matter of taste and experience, but there are also a number of significant debates that frame the way people think about fiction.<sup>12</sup>

The way I frame these various approaches to fiction is based on my own research interests and experience. Other thinkers on the subject of philosophical interaction with fiction frame the matter in other ways. Some thinkers, like Joshua Landy, for example, map out the landscape according to what people “get” from fiction; he divides the various accounts of how people interact with fiction into exemplary, affective, and cognitive branches.<sup>13</sup> Another commonly suggested intuition is that there is fundamentally a more-or-less simple division among thinkers, and everyone will come down on the side of either Plato or Aristotle. One could also distinguish between those who place the main emphasis on the author or text and those who emphasize the reader’s role or mind; or one could map out the territory geographically, or trace historical developments.

For my purposes, it makes the most sense to chart the terrain by way of fields of interest. From my perspective, every thinker who offers a philosophical account of fiction

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<sup>12</sup> The debates that could be considered significant are too many to enumerate, but a few examples include the nature and existence of fictional characters (see, for example, Paisley Livingston and Andrea Sauchelli, “Philosophical Perspectives on Fictional Characters,” *New Literary History* 42, no. 2 [Spring 2011]: 337–60); how important is the author’s intention (see, for example, Jukka Mikkonen, “Intentions and Interpretations: Philosophical Fiction as Conversation,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 7 [2009], <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0007.012>); and the relationship between literature and truth (see, for example, Bo Earle, “Plato, Aristotle, and the Imitation of Reason,” *Philosophy of Literature* 27, no. 2 [2003]: 382–401).

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

does so from the intersection of his or her other areas of interest, and can be widely grouped into a number of families. In order to clarify where my project fits on the landscape, I have grouped these thinkers into three main clusters, which I call the cognitive/analytic, the historical/narrative, and the moral/political families. Of course, these families necessarily overlap where their members share points of interest. In particular, we find members of each family who are interested in ethics, which, along with fiction itself, finds a central place on the map. Let's take a brief tour through each of these clusters to see what they are talking about and where I situate my project in relation to them.

In the cognitive/analytic family, we find members who are interested in topics like philosophy of language, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy of mind, ordinary language philosophy, speech act theory, literary theory, phenomenology, aesthetics, cognitive science, and linguistics. Members of this family tend to be highly interested in method, and also tend to emphasize the reader's side of the reading equation, focusing on what happens in the reader's mind or psyche rather than on the author's intentions or the text in abstraction. Of course, there is extensive variety even within the group. Matters related to fiction, narrative, and literature are major topics in the cognitive/analytic family. A brief survey of several key representatives provides some insight into their concerns.

One of the foremost members of this family is Peter Lamarque, who places himself at the intersection of philosophy of language, aesthetics, and philosophy of literature. Lamarque has sought to articulate "philosophy of literature" on the same footing as other "philosophy ofs," identifying it as a subset of philosophy of art. At the

same time, he recognizes that it is an unusually complex “philosophy of,” falling somewhere in between philosophies of disciplines (such as science or history) and philosophies of fundamental concepts (such as mind or action).<sup>14</sup>

Lamarque’s approach is broadly analytic—unusually broad, but still distinctively analytic in that he is focused on the “logical foundations” of literature, with no interest in connecting his inquiries with those of literary theorists. He specifically mentions Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Michel Foucault as “luminaries” of the kind of literary theory that, he says, has little direct connection to philosophy of literature.<sup>15</sup> This disconnect is perhaps one of the clearest indications that Lamarque, while seeking to survey the entire realm of philosophy of literature, in actuality remains firmly within the subset of philosophical approaches to fiction that I have named the cognitive/analytic family. Although he addresses literature specifically as art and seeks to emphasize the importance of context for theorizing about literature, he does not move in the direction of a specifically hermeneutic understanding of art (except as a “controversy”) or the relevance of philosophy of literature for broadly cultural themes—both of which are aspects of literature that particularly interest me. In other words, he is interested in literature “for its own sake,” while I am more interested in the way in which interaction with literature relates to cultural and ethical dimensions of human life.

In contrast with Lamarque’s declaration that philosophy of literature is not directly related to literary theory, other members of the cognitive/analytic family approach literature from that very intersection. Two major recent thinkers in this general

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

area are Stanley Cavell, at the intersection of ordinary language philosophy, literary theory, and psychoanalysis, and Joshua Landy, at the intersection of literary theory, philosophy of mind, and linguistics. Cavell has long been known for grounding his philosophy in and through literary works, with his primary areas of literary interest being American film and Shakespearian plays. He addresses philosophy and literature conjointly not simply because he is interested in both, but also because he believes that they have in some sense grown together; the arts “increasingly take on the self-reflective character of philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> Cavell’s abiding interest in the ordinary, whether it be language, film, morality, or romance, is culturally attuned in a way that Lamarque’s is not, but still distinctively analytic in approach—although Cavell happily converses with some Continental philosophers.

Joshua Landy appears on the other side of the intersection of literary theory and philosophy, on the border between the cognitive/analytic and the historical/narrative. Landy is pointedly uninterested in the ordinary, and is in fact strikingly elitist. In reaction to what he sees as a widespread, naïve desire to mine the “messages” out of fiction (indeed a problematic endeavor, as I show in later chapters), he has articulated a theory of what he calls “formative fiction”; that is, he argues that (some) fiction acts as an instrument to improve the (sufficiently intelligent, right-reading) reader’s mental capacities, especially the capacity to live on a metaphorical plane.<sup>17</sup> This theory is in effect an attenuated, strangely snobbish version of Wayne C. Booth’s wide-ranging theory of fiction as it relates to character, which I address at some length in Chapter 5.

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<sup>16</sup> Stanley Cavell, “Something out of the Ordinary,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 71, no. 2 (1997), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions*, 10, 58.

Coming from a background in linguistics, Landy does not address many of the larger, ongoing analytic debates about literature, but his emphasis on instrumental method and the inner workings of the mind make him a recognizable member of the cognitive/analytic family, even while some aspects of his approach overlap with the historical/narrative family.

Gregory Currie, another well-known member of this family, is at the intersection of aesthetics and philosophy of mind. He is distinctively part of the cognitive/analytic family in approach and interests (for example, he emphasizes that narratives are artefactual—a word that acts as a field mark for analytic philosophy). Yet he is also on the edge of the historical/narrative family in that he focuses not simply on stories themselves but on the relative “narrativity” of all things—particularly in terms of communication—that have narrative structure.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, his account relies heavily on evolutionary psychology. However, these interests arise in his work with a decisively analytic flavor: He is primarily concerned with charting out and distinguishing technical characteristics of narrative, as well as determining external and internal psychological interactions in narrativity, rather than considering questions of individual or cultural impact and import.

On the very edge of the cognitive/analytic territory we find Iris Murdoch, who is at the intersection of aesthetics and psychology, like many members of the cognitive/analytic family, but also at the intersection of metaphysics and moral philosophy. Murdoch is well known as a philosopher, and even better known as an author of novels. Many author-philosophers specifically choose to work out philosophical ideas

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<sup>18</sup> Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 34.



through fiction, while others, like Murdoch, insist that the two fields are entirely separate. What Murdoch means by this is dependent, of course, on her definition of philosophy, which she sees as intrinsically abstract—in contrast to novels, which deal with the details of human life.<sup>19</sup> In fact, she does not deny that many novels, including many of her own, both deal with philosophical themes and address themes philosophically. For her, the distinction between philosophy and fiction is one of style rather than content.

Members of the cognitive/analytic family, then, tend to address technical issues of how the human mind interacts with narrative, seek to define logical foundations, and emphasize matters of method and instrumentality. In contrast, members of the historical/narrative family emphasize the narrative nature of human existence apart from the written word, and tend to problematize the social and political aspects of life via studies of power, oppression, taboos, and the like. Members of this family meet at the intersections of ethics, philosophical anthropology, history, phenomenology, hermeneutics, literary criticism, critical theory, comparative literature, linguistics, post-structuralist studies, and psychoanalysis. Many of the “luminaries” of literary theory that Lamarque discarded from his philosophy of literature are formative figures in this area: Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault, for example, are often particularly important thinkers for members of this family. Henry Sussman is representative of the current generation of intellectual descendants from what might be called the “original deconstructionists.” At

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<sup>19</sup> S. B. Sagare and Iris Murdoch, “An Interview with Iris Murdoch,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 47, no. 3 (2001), 697.

the intersection of literary criticism and critical theory, Sussman picks up on Derrida's readings of fiction in relation to philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

On the less deconstructionist side of the historical/narrative territory, Paul Ricoeur is one of the major figures. Ricoeur writes on a number of different subjects, primarily at the intersection of hermeneutics and philosophical anthropology. His work on various forms of both discourse and action lead him to articulate the "narrative unity of human life," at the heart of which is "care."<sup>21</sup> He is a seminal thinker in the philosophical approach that considers ways in which human life is like a book, rather than ways in which books interact with human life; my own focus is much more on the latter.

One of Ricoeur's disciples, Richard Kearney, takes up these themes of narrative identity in his own work on story. Kearney is a border figure in all three families—intersecting with aesthetics, ethics, and history—but fits best in the historical/narrative family due to his abiding emphasis on themes such as violence and reconciliation, imagination, and otherness, all of which topics are field marks of this philosophical family. Kearney is one of the few members not firmly within the moral/political family with whom I interact in this dissertation. I have chosen him as an interlocutor largely because his interests do have the ethical, cultural bent that I am particularly interested in and because, although his professed philosophical aims are very similar to my own, his methods are very different. This allows my interaction with him to demonstrate the strength of the approach I am proposing by clarifying what is distinctive about my emphasis on form, discussed in Chapter 3.

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Sussman, "Pulsations of Respect, or Winged Impossibility: Literature with Deconstruction," *diacritics* 38, no.1-2 (2008): 44–63.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 163.

The third family group according to my classification is the moral/political family, and is the family in which I would most directly fit. Topics of interest for members of this family include moral philosophy, political philosophy, literary criticism, social theory, sociology, and—of course—ethics. At the intersection of social theory and sociology, we find a thinker like Susan Mizruchi. Like many historical/narrative thinkers, she addresses connections between fiction and society, but from a sociological perspective rather than a psychoanalytic or deconstructionist perspective.<sup>22</sup> On the more distinctively political side are thinkers like Patrick Deneen and Joseph Romance, who specifically address questions of political democracy in relation to literature.<sup>23</sup> While these areas of interest are more closely related to mine than are the interests of the cognitive/analytic and historical/narrative families, I am even more specifically interested in the philosophical interaction of individuals with literary works, rather than in broad, strictly sociological or political issues. In terms of this brief mapping out of the territory, then, I am at the intersection of moral philosophy, literary criticism, and ethics—with a specifically cultural focus on individual interaction with literature.

This survey of the terrain would be incomplete without pointing out one of the mountains whose lower slopes I will be traversing: the hermeneutical tradition. I have already mentioned Ricoeur, a leading figure in the hermeneutical tradition, whom I have grouped in the historical/narrative tradition (which, in fact, he could be considered to have founded). Ricoeur himself has engaged in various ways with the views of other towering peaks whose work I do not address directly in this dissertation: Martin

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<sup>22</sup> Susan L. Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Patrick J. Deneen and Joseph Romance, *Democracy's Literature: Politics and Fiction in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jürgen Habermas. Although a direct engagement with these philosophers is beyond the scope of my project, I engage with their legacy via the work of my own mentor, Lambert Zuidervaat. The main route of my engagement with these giants of the hermeneutical tradition is through my addressing in some detail Zuidervaat's conception of imaginative disclosure (see Chapter 4), which he has developed through a critical examination of many of Heidegger's (and to a lesser extent, Gadamer's) insights on artistic truth and disclosedness.

Specifically, Zuidervaat's description of artistic truth as "a multidimensional process of imaginative disclosure" is rooted in Heidegger's understanding of truth as "disclosedness," along with Theodor Adorno's idea of "truth content." In drawing on Heidegger's conception for his own theory of artistic truth, Zuidervaat pays particular attention to truth's hermeneutic character.<sup>24</sup> Zuidervaat's critical engagement with Heidegger's conception of disclosedness is also informed by Habermas's take on John Searle's speech-act theory. As I show in Chapter 4 via my discussion of Zuidervaat's hermeneutical understanding of art, attentiveness to art's hermeneutic character also helps make clear the ways in which engaging philosophically with fiction makes a significant ethical contribution to philosophy, both lived and academic.

Although my insistence on a hermeneutical model for our interaction with literature does place my project within the overarching hermeneutical tradition, I seek to follow Zuidervaat's lead in critically engaging with thinkers from various traditions in order to work out my own ideas on a topic that I see as relevant and significant. Again, I follow Zuidervaat in boldly suggesting that this kind of border crossing is both necessary

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<sup>24</sup> Lambert Zuidervaat, *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7.

and fruitful in today's world, in which both people's lived experience and the state of contemporary philosophy tend to be, in Zuidervaat's words, in an "unruly condition."<sup>25</sup>

While a deliberately cross-disciplinary approach almost automatically invites criticism from those in the various disciplines whose borders I am crossing, I believe that the potential for fruitful engagement between interlocutors who may not otherwise talk to each other vastly outweighs the risks. In particular, I share the methodological assumption described by Zuidervaat that a cross-disciplinary engagement with thinkers is to the benefit of all: "By constructing a dialogue, even where a dialogue did not exist prior to the interpretation, one can achieve a more nuanced understanding of both positions and a stronger articulation of one's own position, whether this agrees in sum or in part with either position, or whether it forms an alternative to both."<sup>26</sup>

And although this kind of cross-disciplinary project does not allow the depth of engagement with central figures of the hermeneutical tradition such as Ricoeur, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Habermas that a single-discipline project does, I am by no means unaware of the fact that the path I am navigating owes much to their work. I do not discuss them in depth because I have made a hermeneutical judgment about the relative importance for my project of the specific insights of the interlocutors I do engage with, while recognizing that many other projects engage more directly with the giants of the hermeneutical tradition. Once more, I follow Zuidervaat in this regard.<sup>27</sup> For these

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 12. Interestingly, Zuidervaat specifically names Martha Nussbaum, perhaps the single most important of my interlocutors in this project, as one of the contemporary philosophers who "either transgress philosophical subdivisions or navigate nimbly among them."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>27</sup> Expressing a concern to remain intelligible to his analytic colleagues, and noting the relative absence in his choice of texts of central figures such as G. W. F. Hegel, Friedrich

reasons, I have chosen to engage directly with key thinkers who are claimed by a number of different disciplines in the hope that the resulting conversation will lead to steps in a fruitful direction.

### *Key intersections*

The intersection where I place myself is precisely where the focus of my project overlaps with some of my primary interlocutors. At the intersection of literary criticism and moral philosophy is Wayne C. Booth, a seminal thinker in the area of how we relate to the books we read.<sup>28</sup> His understanding of books as friends who influence us for better or worse brings the conversation through several thickets and into a space of clarity and genuine communication. He plays an important part in helping to discern the specifics of a normative conversation among diverse interpretations.

Situated at the intersection of moral philosophy and political philosophy is Martha C. Nussbaum, who is one of my main interlocutors throughout the following chapters. I focus particularly on her arguments regarding the place of literary works in philosophy, rather than on the political side of her work. She has defended (some) novels as having an indispensable place in the canon of moral philosophy. I have taken up a form of her

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Nietzsche, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and even, relatively speaking, Theodor W. Adorno, Zuidervaat writes, “their relative absence from the discussion does not signal a lack of appreciation for their insights. But it does indicate a hermeneutical judgment about what one can reasonably hope to cover and still remain intelligible.” Ibid., 13.

<sup>28</sup> According to the University of Chicago Press website, “Wayne Booth wrote some of the most influential and engaging criticism of our time, most notably the 1961 classic *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, a book that transformed literary criticism and became the standard reference point for advanced discussions of how fiction works, how authors make novels accessible, and how readers re-create texts” (“The Essential Wayne Booth,” <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/E/bo3770832.html>).

question “How should one live?” as an excellent expression of the guiding question for lived philosophy, and for much of academic philosophy as well. Nussbaum insists that academic philosophy place appropriate value on particularity, and that taking stories seriously as philosophical contributors is a vital aspect of this valuation.

Apart from philosophers who specifically address philosophy and literature, I interact with a couple of other thinkers whose insights greatly add to my project. Hannah Arendt is an important contributor on several fronts.<sup>29</sup> Taking on the statistical mindset, she distinguishes clearly the primacy of plurality and the absurdity of taking generalizations as universal norms that could be applied to particular individuals. Her notions of natality and “going visiting” and her brilliant description of impartiality help to clarify the way that stories can break open prevailing ways of thinking and thereby resist oppression.

As I mentioned previously, I also bring into the conversation Lambert Zuidervaat, whose hermeneutical understanding of art and conception of imaginative disclosure add important dimensions to my consideration of fiction and normativity. His framework for art’s normative place and significance, as well as his insistence on the integration of different aspects of life, bring to light a normative perspective on the potential of art to be a catalyst for ethical transformation. This frame of reference is then

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<sup>29</sup> Veronica Vasterling suggests that Arendt’s work is situated at the intersection of political theory, anthropology, and hermeneutic phenomenology (“The Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach to Plurality: Arendt, Habermas, and Gadamer,” in *Phenomenological Perspectives on Plurality*, ed. Gert-Jan van der Heiden [Boston: Brill, 2015], 159). This is a reasonable placement, although Arendt is also claimed by thinkers in a variety of other fields, including existentialism and even feminism. For this reason, and because Arendt herself refused to name herself a philosopher (calling herself a political theorist), much less a philosopher in a certain field, I hesitate to situate her in these terms.

applicable to the narrative works of fiction I am specifically addressing in that they are works of art. Thus, in Zuidervaat's view, they are interpretive and inform our lives by way of interpretation. These insights do the vital work of binding my project together by articulating a frame of reference which recognizes the impact that our relationship with art has on us without assuming that this impact must be directly causal.

The insights offered by Arendt and Zuidervaat clarify some gaps in the wider philosophical conversation on philosophy and literature. Arendt's thoroughgoing emphasis on plurality points to the limitations of focusing solely on the methods and minds of individual readers, as is often the case in the cognitive/analytic family. Zuidervaat's noncausal hermeneutical model circumvents the difficulties that arise when the pattern of human interaction with art is seen as universal and inevitable, as is often the case in both the historical/narrative and moral/political families. I seek to address individual philosophical interaction with fiction within the context of plurality, and demonstrate the potential for fiction to contribute to both lived and academic philosophy in a thoroughly dynamic way.

How can fiction contribute to philosophy, both lived and academic, through philosophical interaction? How, specifically, can fiction be understood as philosophical? If this chapter has constituted something of a road map by which we can locate a starting point and route through these questions, the next chapter begins to follow that route.



### 3. Fiction as Philosophy

What is it about fiction that gives it the potential to inform people's lived philosophies? In this chapter, I place in conversation with each other Martha C. Nussbaum, Hannah Arendt (partly through the eyes of Lisa Jane Disch), and Richard Kearney. By examining how they have understood the significance of storytelling, I seek to clarify how fiction can be understood as philosophical and how it can contribute to the philosophical conversation in partnership with explicit philosophical commentary. Kearney, Arendt, and Nussbaum all desire stories to be socially transformative. I believe the differences between their approaches, however, are so important that it is well worth our time to consider them in detail.

In order to highlight the uniquely significant perspectives that Arendt and Nussbaum offer, I lay out a detailed overview of what Kearney understands story to be and what purposes he has for it; then I address a few difficulties with his approach. I briefly make note of the main themes which arise in Arendt's and Nussbaum's views of story. Then I elucidate the critical importance of the relationship between form and content<sup>1</sup> for what I refer to as "philosophical fiction" through a comparison of Kearney's,

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<sup>1</sup> I follow Nussbaum's use of the phrase "form and content" as meaning that the philosophical import of a work cannot be understood outside the context of the particular literary manifestation or genre of that work. Thus, when I talk about "form" in this dissertation, I am focusing on the contribution the specific manifestation of a work makes to its overall meaning. For example, the "form" of young adult fiction in this sense includes aspects like a focus on character development and themes of power, selfhood, and ideology. My discussion of form and content, then, should not be taken as referring specifically to "form" in the sense of technical literary devices or mechanisms that a literary specialist would analyze. Although these kinds of literary devices are certainly part of the form of a work in the sense that I am using the word, a specific discussion of literary techniques would be outside the scope of this project. Of course, pursuing the connection between literary techniques and the thematic content of a work would also be

Arendt's, and Nussbaum's views, as well as examining the key role of an emphasis on particularity instead of consensus. Finally, I consider the significance for philosophical fiction of Nussbaum's and Arendt's differing emphases on particularity and plurality through an examination of their understandings of compassion, love, and solidarity.

The term "philosophical fiction" refers to fiction that invites philosophical response or is experienced and interpreted philosophically, though not necessarily in a formal way. Philosophical fiction is not meant to be a clearly delineated category; although some books will almost inevitably be included, firm exclusions will almost never be appropriate. For example, Lois Lowry's *The Giver* would be a clear instance of fiction that invites philosophical response, but even one of the massive, vapid, ghost-written series—all too common in North American culture—might spark philosophical response in a certain context, making it at least temporarily a form of philosophical fiction.

Although the direction of my discussion is in the end focused on a particular kind of story—young adult fiction—the terms used in this conversation vary by interlocutor. Nussbaum's arguments are primarily concerned with realistic novels such as those by Henry James and Charles Dickens. Arendt speaks of storytelling, and makes use of various forms of story, ranging from the novels of Dostoyevsky to actual historical anecdotes; Lisa Jane Disch takes up the threads of Arendt's thought with a particular focus on narratives told by oppressed or marginalized people in opposition to dominant, often political narratives. And Kearney uses the term story to encompass almost anything the word could suggest. In the following discussion, I respect each interlocutor's use of

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useful. However, in this project I focus on the philosophical import of the work as a whole—simply put, that how you say something is inseparable from what you are saying.

terms, but I treat “story” as an overarching term that applies to what each thinker is addressing in the broadest sense. Philosophical fiction, then, is assumed to be more or less a subset of the category “story” as discussed by Kearney; what I conclude about stories in general will be taken as applicable to philosophical fiction.

What kinds of stories these interlocutors focus on gives a clue as to what they expect from story, and what they want to do with story. Nussbaum, with her focus on the ethical development of individuals, looks primarily to realistic, literary novels. Kearney, who is more concerned with tolerance at a cultural level, focuses on historical and mythic narrative. Disch has a similar concern with a more political thrust, as can be seen by her stress on the self-told stories of marginalized groups. Interestingly, Arendt’s use of story is extremely varied, ranging from poetry to fiction to historical narrative. This indicates her faith in the written word to communicate in its own way, and shows her thoroughgoing emphasis on plurality. Although each of these thinkers focuses on different kinds of stories, they can be considered part of one conversation by reflecting on what it is they expect to accomplish through their commentaries on these stories, and in particular, on the ethical significance of interaction with various forms of story.

### *Fiction as philosophy and philosophical commentary on fiction*

In her writings on various subjects, Hannah Arendt often turned to stories or poetic images to explore a concept, theme, or event. She practiced a kind of philosophical commentary on story that allowed her to address difficult questions in an especially relevant way, while bringing out the kind of contribution that literature can make both to how we think things through and to the frameworks for thought that we use, often

without thinking about them. Nussbaum, while never discussing Arendt's commentaries directly, has defended theoretically exactly the kind of commentary Arendt practiced.

According to Nussbaum, Western philosophical inquiry into ethics began with the simple question "How should human beings live?" Until Plato, says Nussbaum, it was the poets rather than the philosophers to whom people turned as the principal ethical thinkers and teachers.<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum describes the ancient Greek poets and philosophers as both addressing the question of how human beings should live, but coming up with answers—and especially, approaches—that many saw as incompatible.<sup>3</sup> The debate that developed between the poets and the philosophers had as much to do with the form as with the content of their work, says Nussbaum, since the literary form of an ethical statement had much to say about one's view of ethical truth. A tragedy, with its invitation for the audience to weep or rage with the hero, presented a view of life which believes that it is right to love and grieve, and that some things in life are beyond our control. Nussbaum points out that Plato's *Republic*, on the other hand, left out the grief of Achilles over Patroclus's death, presenting a view of life that does not believe that things outside of human control have ethical significance.<sup>4</sup>

Looking for an equivalently appropriate level of depth and kind of questioning about the relationship between forms of discourse and views of life on the contemporary philosophical scene in the late twentieth century, Nussbaum found little to do with the form of ethical writing, although the ethical debate itself was becoming more complex.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 15–16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

For the most part, her work on form and content, which led her to articulate the value of literature as a variety of moral philosophy, moved through uncharted territory.

Nussbaum addresses the question of form and content in her extensive introduction to *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Nussbaum argues that how you say what you say is a part of what you are saying, and that form is as intrinsic to content in philosophy as it is in literature. Because this connection seems to have been largely ignored in recent philosophy, or because Western philosophy had turned so entirely toward rationality for a time, many philosophers end up writing strangely self-contradictory work, Nussbaum says: "An article, for example, argues that the emotions are essential and central to our efforts to gain understanding on any important ethical matter; and yet it is written in a style that expresses only intellectual activity and strongly suggests that only this activity matters for the reader in his or her attempts to understand."<sup>6</sup>

The burden of Nussbaum's argument is that (some) novels have an indispensable place in the canon of moral philosophy; particularly, philosophy which seeks to answer the question "How should one live?" While not claiming either that all philosophical inquiries, even about how to live, will be best answered by novels, or that all or only novels will be helpful, Nussbaum argues persuasively that novels do something which looking to abstract treatises, philosophical examples, or life itself will not accomplish.<sup>7</sup>

Nussbaum's insistence on the inseparability of form and content in well-written works means not only that novels are unique in their ability to address certain themes or aspects of human life, but that a philosophical style of commentary that is allied with

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 45–47.

them must build on and not undercut the claims of the literary text. Yet as part of a rigorous philosophical response to the question of how we should live, literary works do need an ally which can—through explanation and explicit description—draw attention to the relevance of the novel’s features in contrast to philosophical alternatives. This ally is, says Nussbaum, “a type of philosophical commentary that will point out explicitly the contributions of the works to the pursuit of our question about human beings and human life, and their relation to our intuitions and our sense of life.”<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that we can only read, think clearly about, or benefit from novels with the aid of academic philosophy, but that in order for novels to be appropriately positioned in the canon of academic philosophy, their contribution should be specifically articulated.

Nussbaum’s approach to philosophical fiction is part of the more general approach to the question of how human beings should live that she espouses. She refers to this approach as the Aristotelian inclusive dialectical method, and it always begins with the question of how human beings should live. Nussbaum wishes to invite people into conversation about this question, making the conversation as inclusive as possible. The idea is to hold up alternative positions against one another and against the participants’ beliefs, feelings, and sense of life. Rather than looking for a view that corresponds to some sort of extra-human, transcendent reality, participants look for “the best overall fit between a view and what is deepest in human lives.”<sup>9</sup> They are asked to continually question what they can least well live without, and what is more dispensable, seeking for “coherence and fit in the web of judgment, feeling, perception, and principle,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 25–26.

taken as a whole.”<sup>10</sup> Appropriate philosophical commentary will point out the contributions of literature to this dialectical task before the investigation among conceptions can be thoroughly entered into. Nussbaum believes that novels best make their contribution to moral (academic) philosophy in conjunction with this more explanatory style.<sup>11</sup>

This combination of literary richness and explanatory commentary can take many forms. It could combine both elements into a literary whole, or it could be written as separate literary texts and explicit commentary, or it could take the form of commentary on works by others. As Nussbaum points out, much depends on a philosopher’s own narrative ability, as well as his or her commitment to the project of investigating alternative ethical conceptions. In any case, the style of philosophical commentary will likely differ both from standard philosophical writing and from the novels it discusses. It will differ from much philosophical writing, says Nussbaum, in that “it will have to be non-reductive, and also self-conscious about its own lack of completeness, gesturing toward experiences and toward the literary texts, as spheres in which a greater completeness should be sought.”<sup>12</sup> This may be more difficult than it seems on the surface, I suspect, since not a few philosophers have attempted to be self-consciously non-reductive and aware of incompleteness while failing, as Nussbaum sees it, to match their stylistic form to the claims they make. Appropriate philosophical commentary will

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

also, though, differ from novels in order to clearly and convincingly contrast the distinctive features of the novels with the features of other philosophical works.<sup>13</sup>

### *Fiction as critical thinking*

Having formulated a similar idea before reading Nussbaum's work, I am in substantial agreement with much of what she says. Her focus, that story can sometimes be a more clear and helpful exploration of a topic than a non-fiction philosophical treatise could be, is only one way in which fiction plays a vital role as philosophy, however. We see another aspect, the role of story as its own kind of thinking, in Hannah Arendt's ideas about story. Arendt did not explicitly theorize her interactions with story like Nussbaum has, but her work is littered with examples of philosophy and story working in companionship. To help express and clarify her ideas, she turned to a wide variety of story forms in her writing, ranging from novels to poems to Shakespeare's plays, and she often emphasized the idea of telling the stories of human lives. This last aspect has frequently been taken up by political thinkers to express the importance of allowing marginalized groups to tell their own stories.

In *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, Lisa Jane Disch investigates the function of storytelling in Arendt's thought as a form of critical theory.<sup>14</sup> She shows that for Arendt, storytelling is a practice of critical thinking in context. This stands in contrast to understandings of storytelling as merely the handing down of tradition or the expression of a personal point of view. Disch takes seriously Arendt's statements about

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).



situating herself in opposition to some of the key components of traditional Western philosophy. In particular, Arendt used story in contrast to what Disch calls “Archimedean philosophizing.” Archimedes recognized that a lever allows our ability to move an object to increase the farther we are from the object. Says Disch, “Arendt objects to Archimedean philosophizing because it purports to be outside the web of plurality and, as such, confuses power with leverage and makes abstraction a condition of reliable knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the Archimedean ideal, Arendt’s understanding of storytelling provides a conception of knowledge that is both situated and critical. Both the teller of a story and the audience are closely, even emotionally, involved in the story’s plot and characters. At the same time, a story can provide the opportunity for calling into question the status quo and the dominant narratives of power.

Disch is not the only recent thinker who has noticed the importance of story for Arendt’s ideas about theory. Lynn Wilkinson has examined Arendt’s admiration for author Isak Dinesen with an eye to the relationship between story and theory, pointing out that Arendt’s written references to Dinesen suggest “that Arendt viewed storytelling as inextricable from theorizing, but that her notion of storytelling was ... self-conscious ...”<sup>16</sup> Wilkinson also points to the way that Arendt valued stories that display a certain lack of closure,<sup>17</sup> and that Arendt viewed the critic’s role as working with stories to bring

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>16</sup> Lynn R. Wilkinson, “Hannah Arendt on Isak Dinesen: Between Storytelling and Theory,” *Comparative Literature* 56, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 97, <http://www.jstor.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/stable/4122287>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 85.

out their meaning while not suggesting that past and present events are the result of an inevitable development.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, in some ways Arendt was a storyteller herself—a critic who recognized that form and content are inextricable, that stories have a powerful voice, and that the voice of the interpreter must be in tune with the stories under consideration. As Seyla Benhabib puts it in a discussion of Arendt and narrative, “The moral resonance of one’s language does not primarily reside in the explicit value judgments which an author may pass on the subject matter; rather such resonance must be an aspect of the narrative itself. The language of narration must match the moral quality of the narrated object. Of course, such ability to narrate makes the theorist into a storyteller, and it is not the gift of every theorist to find the language of the true storyteller.”<sup>19</sup> Like Nussbaum, Arendt was very much aware that how you say what you say is extremely important. She contended that abstract theories always have their beginnings in particular experiences, as Disch notes, and that consistency and abstraction are rhetorical effects rather inherent properties of rationality.<sup>20</sup>

Arendt has brilliantly described impartiality as based not on abstraction but on the capacity to imagine oneself in other people’s shoes. Arendt speaks of the possibility of impartiality, then, not as an “objective” perspective outside people’s views but as the enterprise of taking others’ viewpoints into account. Storytelling is a key method of helping people to understand each other’s perspectives. Stories allow us to vicariously experience through the characters’ experiences circumstances that do not directly touch

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>19</sup> Seyla Benhabib, “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative,” *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (Spring 90): 186, <http://simplelink.library.utoronto.ca/url.cfm/287320>.

<sup>20</sup> Disch, *Limits of Philosophy*, 2–3.

our own lives. As Nussbaum says, “[W]e have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial.”<sup>21</sup> The more perspectives we take into account, the better we are able to assess a situation, since not only are we less likely to be missing relevant information, but the practice of walking in others’ shoes equips us for right response to whatever problem is afoot. Arendt also used the term “enlarged mentality” for this approach. Again, this conception stands in contrast to claims that philosophy has a privileged position of disinterested impartiality, and it is also distinct from a postmodern emphasis on all stories being merely matters of interpretation. Arendt’s view of storytelling allows for real differences and varying viewpoints without abandoning the possibility of developing criteria by which to discern better and worse.

Nussbaum and Arendt are not alone in their view that storytelling is an important part of human life. However, they are exceptional in the holistic clarity they achieve in how they understand stories philosophically. Nussbaum’s groundbreaking work in the 1980s has contributed to a growing interest in some areas of philosophy in the importance of narrative for human existence. Philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, for example, have dedicated much of their work to demonstrating the integrality of narrative to human understanding. Yet much of the work done in this area drifts away from some of the insights that inform Nussbaum’s claims about narrative as a form of moral philosophy that adds to our ethical self-understanding in a way that nothing else does. For example, a thinker like Kearney, while agreeing with Nussbaum’s sense of where narrative can bring us, has a different understanding of what story fundamentally is, which puts his work on

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<sup>21</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 47.

a different trajectory.<sup>22</sup> Kearney claims that narrative is what provides us with identity and concord in the face of postmodern fragmentation, and is indeed what makes us human.<sup>23</sup> While it is not inaccurate to claim a role for narrative in giving meaning to scattered experience, Kearney tends to absolutize this aspect of narrative, and, as I shall show, he thereby weakens the possibility of its fulfilling his hopes that story can be a salvific bringer of tolerance and understanding. His argument would be stronger if his method showed a deeper awareness of the plurality available in storytelling.

### *Stories as history and fiction*

In his book *On Stories: Thinking in Action*, Kearney discusses several senses of story, which intersect in various ways. In his introductory section on where stories come from, Kearney mentions myriad aspects of story and why story is important for human

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<sup>22</sup> Part of the reason that the trajectory of Kearney's work is different from that of my own project and that of most of my other interlocutors is that we express our overall goals for philosophy in different terms. While I am focusing on how philosophy and story can interact as two distinct voices, Kearney wants to write philosophical stories. Put another way, while Kearney seeks to tell a philosophical narrative that will impact ordinary thought, I ponder how narrative influences ordinary thought philosophically. I deeply appreciate Kearney's overall goal of getting philosophy and its "others"—such as art, religion, and psychoanalysis—to talk to each other (*Strangers, Gods and Monsters* [New York: Routledge, 2003], 7). Likewise, I appreciate Kearney's emphasis on the hermeneutic nature of our interaction with story—in his words, that "storytelling invariably involves some kind of hermeneutic interpretation" (*Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 231). His method of diacritical hermeneutics, which explores the "possibilities of intercommunion between distinct but not incomparable selves" with the aim of making us more hospitable to others (*Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 18) also mirrors my emphasis on conversation among unique particulars. However, as I will discuss in the rest of this chapter, Kearney's approach seems to me to be always attempting to weave together disparate phenomena into a common story. I, via Arendt's concept of plurality, take that commonality as given, if never entirely conceptualizable. For Kearney, literature is always drawn into the philosophical narrative he is constructing, while I approach our interaction with literature as a set of irreducible conversations, each potentially having philosophical import.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Stories: Thinking in Action* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3–4.

life. He states that stories are what make our condition human,<sup>24</sup> and that our personal stories are the response to the question of who we are.<sup>25</sup> He declares that every life searches for a narrative to introduce concord, and that stories provide individual and communal identity in the face of postmodern fragmentation.<sup>26</sup> He waxes lyrical, claiming, “Stories were a gift from the gods enabling mortals to fashion the world in their own image.”<sup>27</sup> He asserts that stories try to give answers to the unanswerable questions of life,<sup>28</sup> and that even children work out inner confusions through imaginary events in fantastical bedtime stories.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, for Kearney the role of story is wide-ranging and fundamental to human existence.

As he moves into a discussion of actual narratives, Kearney distinguishes three senses of storytelling: 1) inherited stories, which are “purveyors of tradition and heritage or of ideological illusion and cover-up”; 2) stories serving the purpose of creation; that is, self-invention; and 3) stories as creative solutions for actual problems, in which fiction can be “healing and transformative fantasy.”<sup>30</sup> The first sense is one he connects closely with primitive and often violent nationalism or religion. The second, somewhat overlapping the first, has a psychological overtone and comes to the fore in much of Kearney’s discussion of actual narratives. The third appears to be his hope for the future, particularly in contrast to the first sense of narrative, which, in Kearney’s view, is the cause of much need for healing and transformation.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 6–7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 29–30.

Apart from these three senses of storytelling, Kearney frames his perspective in terms of an overarching distinction between historical and fictional narrative, both of which he describes as arising from primordial mythic narrative.<sup>31</sup> Although he insists that this distinction is of pivotal importance for his discussion, the details of the distinction are sometimes difficult to work out. Historical and fictional narrative have in common a mimetic function, says Kearney, which he defines as “creative redescription of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold.” This is closely connected to narrative’s mythic function, which he describes as “transformative plotting of scattered events into a new paradigm.” Thus the role of mimesis-mythos that narrative assumes offers “a newly imagined way of being in the world” through which we experience catharsis.<sup>32</sup> The cathartic power of stories, as Kearney recounts, is that they transport us to other times and places to allow us to experience what it is like to be in someone else’s place through vicarious imagination.<sup>33</sup>

This description is very important for Kearney’s discussion, a large part of which centers on narrative remembrance of the Shoah. Stories, says Kearney, “singularise suffering against the anonymity of evil” through the key function of empathy, which he defines as “a way of identifying with as many fellow humans as possible—actors and sufferers alike—in order to participate in a common moral sense.”<sup>34</sup> However, after introducing the importance of empathy, he identifies what he sees as the central problem to be addressed in this approach: the question of “how we can move from micro-narratives of multiple singular testimony to certain quasi-universal narratives that might

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 62–63.

be shared by as many people as possible without succumbing to the illusion of some absolute scientific consensus.”<sup>35</sup> Kearney appears to feel that the disparate particularities of multiple narratives must be somehow fused together in order for people to experience empathy for each other. One can even see this desire in the way he words his definition of empathy as participating in a *common* moral sense.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>36</sup> I suspect that Kearney finds this move necessary because of his understanding of philosophy as having the task of uncovering the formative “concepts” (*The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* [London: Routledge, 1994], 14), “archives” (*Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 6), or “myths” (*Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 7) at work. Kearney is certainly avoiding a naïve and straightforward attempt to derive universal truths from particular instances or to get in touch directly with the formative structures that condition our actions. In seeking to avoid this sort of “encyclopedic” approach (*The Wake of Imagination*, 17), Kearney takes a more flexible genealogical approach to this uncovering. What is uncovered in this narrative explication is not the structures themselves but instead something that gives us a sort of indirect access to them—the more narratively conditioned things he calls “concepts,” “archives,” or “myths.” Thus, while individual instances remain important for him (in many of his philosophical writings, it is precisely through a close reading of several individuals or particular stories from several different epochs that Kearney develops his genealogy), their importance is not *as* individuals but as indicators of these formative paradigms. We can see this in the way he frames his projects. In *The Wake of Imagination*, for example, Kearney says, “Thus, instead of attempting the encyclopaedic task of providing an exhaustive inventory of every formulation of imagination known to Western culture, we have chosen the more modest proposal of selecting a sample of thinkers who seem to best represent the ‘ideal type’ (Weber) or ‘epistemic structure’ (Foucault) which exemplifies the functioning of imagination during a specific epoch” (17–18). In *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Kearney describes his task as larger than—but based on—uncovering these formative influences, claiming as primary the pursuit of an appropriate philosophical response: “My purpose in this book is more than the investigation of certain formative archives in the Western genealogy of the stranger. My main task is actually to explore possibilities of responding to the problem of the stranger in terms of some kind of philosophical understanding” (*Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 6). Kearney again goes on to emphasize philosophy’s task of telling the story of that which is formative as he calls for a new hermeneutic understanding of melancholy: “One of the best ways in which this may be done is by looking at the formative myths which epitomize this fundamental experience of alienation” (7). In short, Kearney’s intention is neither merely to uncover these formative functions nor merely to respond to them, but to do both, creating a narrative retelling that both describes and responds to these forces of formation.

Through this discussion, Kearney concludes that narrative can either reinvent the past or represent it as it really was. Here he gives fiction the role of reinvention, and historical testimony the role of telling it like it really was. Distinguishing between the two, Kearney attests, is ethically crucial.<sup>37</sup> Obviously, when it comes to historical testimony, reinvention cannot be the guiding paradigm.

Kearney seeks to complexify the distinction between historical testimony and reinventing the past through a discussion of how historical communities constitute themselves through stories.<sup>38</sup> His hope is that recognizing their own narrative character will allow communities to reimagine themselves in less violent ways.<sup>39</sup> Kearney endeavors to bring his discussion back to the ethical tension he described earlier between historical and fictional narrative, but his understanding of story displays some ambivalence at this point. He calls for a critical dialogue between “history” and “our mythological memories” in order to avoid either “capitulating to the blind conformism of fact” or “idolising ideological doctrines” that are “sundered from the real.”<sup>40</sup> This objective makes sense, and yet it is difficult to connect this critical dialogue to the ethical tension between “history” and “fiction” Kearney described earlier without giving rise to questions about the nature of this distinction. Whether or not the pairs map directly onto each other, Kearney’s earlier call for historical narrative to “represent the past as it really

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<sup>37</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 69.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 82. Likewise, Kearney says in *The Wake of Imagination*, “Any project for future alternatives to the paralysis of the present needs to remain mindful of the narratives of the past.” Kearney sees “ethical imagination” as tasked with mining history for seeds of “possibilities now erased from our contemporary consciousness” (394). Although this is not necessarily what I see as the primary task of ethical imagination, I strongly agree that it is a worthy part of its mandate.

<sup>40</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 90.



was” makes one question his disavowal of stories which cultures tell about themselves as “true.” How can one distinguish between authentic historical narrative that conveys the “facts” and a culture’s mythological narratives of identity? Surely history is not a-cultural; and if it is narrated from a cultural background, as it must be, how can it be strictly demarcated from cultural ideology?

Part of the difficulty may be in Kearney’s wide-ranging use of the word “story” to refer to almost anything that is not said directly. In a broad sense, a story is something we tell; a story is something we can change. But are our deep cultural roots and inexpressible assumptions literally stories? It seems to me that these things can be expressed only if we are no longer being driven by them, or if we have undergone profound spiritual transformation. Kearney’s identification of traditions and ideologies as “inherited stories” recognizes a metaphorical similarity between ideology and narrative, but does not allow for the inexpressibility and deep-rootedness of the fundamental assumptions—even intuitions—that shape our lives.

In Lisa Jane Disch’s account of Arendt’s understanding of story, we can see that ideology is not simply a story: Stories, in contrast to accounts that pretend neutrality, also refrain from giving the appearance of unquestionability and inevitability.<sup>41</sup> In this way we can see that Kearney must be using “story” as a metaphor for the engrained assumptions of tradition and ideology. Since he doesn’t flag his transitions between story simply put and “story” used metaphorically, he leaves the reader to imagine that these deep assumptions can be changed in the same way that one can retell a story with a different ending. Because of the deeply rooted nature of tradition and ideology, however, they

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<sup>41</sup> Disch, *Limits of Philosophy*, 4.

cannot be changed so simply. Rather than attempting to see our ideological “narratives” as stories that we can retell in different ways, replacing the old story with a new one, someone like Disch would more realistically seek to tell other stories along with the potentially problematic narratives that arise from assumptions that cannot be easily and directly changed. Listening to more stories, I believe, is more likely to call problematic ideologies into question than simply treating these ideologies as narratives to retell directly. It is not simply that we try to remedy one set of stories with another, but that reading the new stories can actually help us go back and hear the old stories in a new way and see them in a new light, which also has the potential to inform our ideologies and assumptions on a deep level.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, Kearney’s goal comes down to this very power of stories to call each other into question, although expressed in different terms: He wants individuals and communities to experience the power of empathy through mythic-mimetic catharsis. It seems that he hopes his second two senses of story—self-inventive stories and stories as creative solutions—will overcome, or possibly transform, the inherited stories that he sees as problematic purveyors of violence. In the end, he makes an explicit connection

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<sup>42</sup> In a sense, then, I am proposing the reverse of Kearney’s suggested methodology: In *The Wake of Imagination*, Kearney calls for imagination to undertake “a hermeneutic reading of its own genealogy: one which critically reassesses its own traditions, retells its own stories. . . . [S]uch a hermeneutic reading would brush this tradition against the grain, allowing repressed voices to speak out, neglected texts to get a hearing” (390). In other words, he believes that retelling a dominant narrative will allow minority voices to speak, while I suggest that a dominant narrative will not be available for retelling until other voices are heard. This is part of why I believe a thoroughgoing commitment to plurality is so important: Unless there is already space in the conversation for multiple voices, I think it unlikely that those assuming a dominant narrative will have the opportunity to become aware of the contingent nature of that narrative.

between narrative imagination and ethical sensitivity.<sup>43</sup> If we have “narrative sympathy,” or the ability to see from another’s point of view, he proclaims, “we cannot kill.”<sup>44</sup>

Empathy, for Kearney, remains the crux of story’s ethical impact.

### *Form and content: Narrative means and ends*

Kearney’s position, then, is not a simple contrast to Arendt’s or Nussbaum’s. Let us look more closely at how the themes in these three thinkers’ work relate. Several primary themes arise from Arendt’s view of story. One of the most famous is connected to her statement in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* that to “think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting.”<sup>45</sup> As we saw briefly above, Disch develops this thought in connection with other of Arendt’s published and unpublished writings to demonstrate how storytelling for Arendt is a form of critical thinking. Disch states that for Arendt, stories activate the imagination and foster publicity “in Arendt’s distinctive sense of a decision that is tested against a plurality of divergent perspectives that it purports neither to transcend nor to reconcile.”<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the “visitor” is not requested to assimilate different perspectives, but to converse with them.<sup>47</sup>

Stories bring light to versions of the world that transform the way people see,<sup>48</sup> which makes novelists potentially skilled analysts of political phenomena.<sup>49</sup> Stories, especially stories from the margins, are particularist and challenge claims to universality,

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<sup>43</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 139.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>45</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 43.

<sup>46</sup> Disch, *Limits of Philosophy*, 209.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

says Disch.<sup>50</sup> They are “more adequate than arguments to depict the ambiguity of a social reality that is never linear but many-sided and multidimensional.”<sup>51</sup> Enlarged thought depends not on generality, but on specificity and multiplicity of detail.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, but with a focus specifically on the question of how human beings should best live their lives, Nussbaum looks to novels for guidance and aid. Key points about the novel for Nussbaum, as she declares in *Love's Knowledge*, are that they focus on our common humanity and are structurally connected to the Aristotelian ethical view that she defends.<sup>53</sup> Specifically, novels tend to demonstrate the noncommensurability of valuable things (i.e., the pervasiveness of conflicting attachments and obligations), the priority of perceptions (i.e., the priority of the particular), the ethical value of emotions, and the ethical relevance of uncontrolled happenings.<sup>54</sup> Also significant is the way that novels tend to be open-ended, not presenting an ethical view that is already “cooked.”<sup>55</sup> And especially important for Nussbaum's perspective is the intimate connection between literary form and ethical content.<sup>56</sup>

Although Kearney quotes some of Arendt's remarks on story with approbation, he seems to miss the significance of her emphasis on the impossibility of fully telling our own stories. This emphasis can be seen most clearly in her distinction between the “who” and the “what” of a person. The *who* is, so to speak, the mysterious inner kernel of a person's identity, while the *what* is the more visible “outer shell” of someone's persona.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>53</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 45–46.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 36–44.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 46.

*What* a person is refers to characteristics he or she shares with others, such as ethnic background, economic status, athletic ability, or temperament, for example. *Who* a person is refers to the unique and distinct kernel of identity that makes each person different from every other. Arendt suggests that the *who* remains always hidden from a person's self, and is only revealed through speech and action with other people; she compares this *who* to the Greek *daemon* who looks over each man's shoulder from behind and is visible only to those he meets.<sup>57</sup> For Arendt, story—like almost every other aspect of human existence—is primarily a matter of plurality.

Kearney's emphasis on narrative identity bypasses the insight that Arendt has so lucidly articulated about the way in which *who* we are, rather than being a story we tell to others who ask us, is something we can only know through other people, if at all. In other words, for Arendt we are so inextricably in ourselves that we can't really see ourselves. That is something only others can do.<sup>58</sup> Thus it makes sense in terms of consciousness for her to focus on the outside (even to get in touch with what is within), whereas Kearney seems to start with consciousness of the inside, and to be unable to get beyond that, perhaps simply because he's starting in the wrong place. And while Arendt insists that even if you can walk in another person's shoes, they won't fit you (she says in her discussion of enlarged mentality that it "does not consist in an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others"<sup>59</sup>), Kearney wants to get inside the other's head, shoes, and skin.<sup>60</sup> Although he is a

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<sup>57</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 179–80.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Arendt, *Lectures*, 43.

<sup>60</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 137.

professed admirer of both Arendt and Ricoeur, he cannot seem to find a way past “oneself as oneself” and “another as oneself” to “oneself as another.”

A further significant difference between Kearney’s approach and the approaches of both Arendt and Nussbaum arises in the matter of particularity. Kearney, in his laudable call for empathy and listening to the specificity of testimony in the face of anonymous evil, concludes with his statement of the problem: How can we move from these “micro-narratives” to “quasi-universal narratives”? Although careful to avoid seeking an “absolute scientific consensus,” Kearney’s desire to move away from the particulars to some sort of generality stands in direct contrast to both Arendt’s and Nussbaum’s perspectives on this subject. He tends toward drawing things together rather than probing differences.

For Arendt, as we saw briefly through the eyes of Disch, we do not need to try to move from the multiply specific to the general—although there is certainly a relationship between the two—but to take into account as many perspectives as possible, recognizing the always many-sided and multidimensional nature of societal reality. Arendt may be looking for reconciliation, but not consensus, even if it is a quasi-universal, non-absolute consensus. As philosopher Veronica Vasterling puts it, “A good discussion is less about agreement or disagreement than about enlarging one’s perspective. And we are able to enlarge our perspective when we understand the point the other is making, whether or not we agree. Thus, whether conflictual or consensual, leading to agreement or disagreement, the plurality of interpretational perspectives remains.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Veronica Vasterling, “The Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach to Plurality: Arendt, Habermas, and Gadamer,” in *Phenomenological Perspectives on Plurality*, ed. Gert-Jan van der Heiden (Boston: Brill, 2015), 170.

Nussbaum is if anything even more clear on this point. Generality for Nussbaum is almost always a diminishing of the particular, a sort of “best we can do for now” that should always give way to the specific and concrete. This is because in actuality there will always be new and unanticipated features to a situation, the relevant features will always be context-embedded, and the particular persons and relationships involved will always have a special ethical relevance that cannot be determined by what is generalizable about the situation.<sup>62</sup> The quasi-universal, then, is for Nussbaum simply not a useful goal to move toward.

Perhaps the most significant difference, though, is that of Kearney’s view of form and content in comparison to Nussbaum’s and Arendt’s. Kearney ends his discussion with a description of the “evaluative charge” of narrative; narrative, he says, “dramatizes the moral relationship between certain actions and their consequences.” Narratives show approval or disapproval relative to some measure of goodness or justice, and it is up to us to choose from the options so proposed.<sup>63</sup> This, I think, is a classic version of the view that sees stories as vehicles for a message. It seems that for Kearney, stories offer morals, and we as the audience can pick and choose to find the morals we take as most appealing or convincing. In contrast, the view I see demonstrated in Arendt and Nussbaum sees stories as not expressing an explicit moral but still guiding us into living moral lives.

We can witness Kearney’s insistence on the separation of a story and its moral even more clearly in his recent interview with *The Other Journal*. In a discussion about evil, ethics, and imagination, Kearney repeatedly makes the claim that stories, as well as other human artifacts, are only ethically significant when we apply them to life. He says,

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<sup>62</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 38–39.

<sup>63</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 155.

for example, “if art is misused, as it can be—and this is equally true of virtual technology—and if that misuse actually has a murderous impact on people’s lives, one has to question the ways in which we adjudicate the passage from art to life, not necessarily the original work of art. Imagination, or art that’s produced from the imagination, is neither good nor bad, but interpretation makes it so; and for a book like *Ulysses*, the interpreter is the reader, who after reading the book applies it to his or her life.”<sup>64</sup>

Because form and content—the story’s form and the use or effect of the story—appear to be separable for Kearney, an author can embed a moral into the story that is not imbibed with the story, so to speak. The story itself is distinct from the purpose we have for it. For Nussbaum, on the other hand, the very form is part of the meaning, and so the good that comes from reading the story comes in the reading itself, not simply outside or after it. Ursula K. Le Guin, herself the author of some very good novels, puts it like this: When we’re done reading, “we may find—if it’s a good novel—that we’re a bit different from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little, as if by having met a new face, crossed a street we never crossed before. But it’s very hard to *say* just what we learned, how we were changed.”<sup>65</sup>

In the end, the “enlarged mentality,” or as Arendt also puts it, “going visiting” that storytelling makes available is similar to Kearney’s goal of using narrative to increase empathy and ethical imagination. Kearney’s fundamental understanding of story

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Kearney and Ron Kuipers, “Evil, Ethics, and the Imagination: An Interview with Richard Kearney, Part I,” *The Other Journal* 20 (March 2012): in second response, fifth paragraph, <http://tinyurl.com/77zfhuK>.

<sup>65</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “Introduction,” in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), x.



as a way to bring meaning to disparate events and define one's own and one's communal identity, however, is on a different trajectory from his target. A tool that is meant primarily to bind the disparate events of our lives into a consistent whole is unlikely to be a good way, much less the best way, to break open old habits and ways of being to usher in newness. Looking to story's potential for marginal criticism, which takes its strength from its very diversity, provides stronger resources for moving against societal injustice than looking to story as a tool for bringing order to fragmented experience. In this way, story becomes not merely a device for getting across a message of tolerance, but by its very form calls people to walk in each other's shoes.

Kearney is in quest for enlarged mentality à la Arendt, but Arendt would consider nonsensical his psychological understanding of the way this should work. He wants story to provide moral guidance just as Nussbaum does, but he separates the moral from the story in a way that Nussbaum considers ineffective and inaccurate. He wants to pay attention to specific testimonies as both Arendt and Nussbaum do, but believes these cannot be widely shared without generalization, a move both Arendt and Nussbaum renounce. The difficulty is not that Kearney's project is different from Arendt's and Nussbaum's. Rather, the problem is that his goals are very similar to theirs but the way he tries to get to them is not, and I am doubtful of the ability of his process to actually lead to his goals. Although I too share many of Kearney's concerns and goals, I believe the comparison between his approach and those of Arendt and Nussbaum demonstrates the critical importance for philosophical fiction of the relationship between form and content, as well as the key role of particularity. Likewise, this discussion has pointed to the danger of seeking for even quasi-universal consensus rather than inclusive conversation in

response to questions about ethical interaction with fiction and the ethical insight that fiction has to offer.

### *Plurality and/or particularity?*

In arguing that Kearney's approach undermines his goals, I have set him in contrast to Nussbaum and Arendt as if they were in complete agreement with each other. I summarized above how their approaches to story are both attuned to some of the same important themes, but in another respect they have decidedly different emphases. When we consider Nussbaum's focus on particularity and Arendt's concern for plurality, it may seem that there is actually a significant abyss in their common ground. In order to make clear how their approaches relate to each other, I summarize the importance of plurality for Arendt's thought and the importance of particularity for Nussbaum. I then compare Arendt and Nussbaum, showing that they are both addressing a potential tension between particularity and plurality. I go on to discuss how particularity and plurality come together differently for the two thinkers largely due to their differing approaches to compassion, love, and morality, and in the end, how Arendt's and Nussbaum's approaches and views on the role of stories might complement each other.

Plurality is a guiding theme for Arendt's thought; she sees it as one of the conditions of human life. She enumerates the conditions of human existence as "life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth."<sup>66</sup> Arendt tends to speak of the human condition rather than human nature, suggesting that the question of human nature is an unanswerable one both psychologically and philosophically, since it

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<sup>66</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 11.

would require us to speak about *who* we are as if it were a *what*.<sup>67</sup> Even the conditions of human existence cannot “‘explain’ what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely.”<sup>68</sup> This sums up some of the basic themes at the background of Arendt’s work: the plural and limited nature of the human realm, which yet remains unbounded because of the constant insertion of the new into the framework of human institutions.<sup>69</sup>

Plurality is also constitutive for the human mind for Arendt, and particularly for the faculty of judgment. Judgment is a term that in this context is closely linked to the moral and ethical attunement that I am suggesting storytelling can help develop. According to Arendt, human beings are interdependent in their needs and cares, but also in their minds.<sup>70</sup> Judgment, remarks Arendt, always reflects upon others and takes their possible judgments into account.<sup>71</sup> Arendt’s understanding of judgment is closely linked to her view of impartiality, which, she says, “is obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account; impartiality is not the result of some higher standpoint that would then actually settle the dispute by being altogether above the *melée*.”<sup>72</sup> Impartiality, or enlarged thought, provides the best basis for principled judgment. The relation of plurality to thought in general is somewhat more complex. In various writings Arendt refers to the necessity of withdrawal and solitude for thought, and yet the withdrawal is not exactly complete, for we can never really withdraw from the web of human affairs. If

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 190–91.

<sup>70</sup> Arendt, *Lectures*, 10.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 42.

anything, even in solitude thought demonstrates a form of plurality, for Arendt often describes it as an inner dialogue with oneself.

For Nussbaum, particularity is the guiding theme. This means that she resists summing up the full human life, wanting to be flexible and inclusive, and to let people think through and decide for themselves what is most important and deepest in their lives. The closest she comes to summing up is her description of the Aristotelian ethical position, which she finds the most convincing and generally applicable view of what is important in human life. The basic emphases in the Aristotelian view according to Nussbaum are, again: the noncommensurability of valuable things, meaning that there is no single metric, nor even a small number of metrics, by which the claims of different good things can be meaningfully compared; the priority of perception and the particular, meaning that moralities based on general rules are ethically crude; the ethical value of emotions, meaning that emotions are frequently more reliable and less deceptively seductive than intellectual calculations; and the ethical relevance of uncontrolled happenings, meaning that a correct understanding of the ways in which human aspirations to live well can be checked by uncontrolled events is not a deception but an important part of ethical understanding, contra Plato.<sup>73</sup> Like Arendt, Nussbaum has a sense of both limitedness and limitlessness in human existence, but for Nussbaum the limitlessness has more to do with the human quest for excellence, rather than the fact of natality: “human striving for excellence involves pushing, in many ways, against the limits that constrain human life.”<sup>74</sup> But the strongest themes we see in Nussbaum’s

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<sup>73</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 36–43.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

writing again and again are the priority of the particular and the importance of emotions for thought and judgment.

The priority of the particular for judgment comes up in Arendt's take on the matter as well. Following Kant, she describes judgment as "the faculty of thinking the particular," but since thinking for Arendt does involve generalization, judgment is "the faculty of mysteriously combining the particular and the general."<sup>75</sup> The best solution for this for Arendt is through the exemplar. In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* she first describes this as thinking of the best possible example of something to which we compare particular examples, which sounds rather different from Nussbaum's insistence on remaining with particulars. But then Arendt goes on to say, "This exemplar is and remains a particular that in its very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined. Courage is *like* Achilles. Etc."<sup>76</sup> This description sounds much more like what Nussbaum is talking about, especially when we notice that Arendt sums up by pointing to a story.

In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum sums up her emphasis on compassionate attention to the particular in a phrase from Henry James: "finely aware and richly responsible." Drawing from James's novels, it is Nussbaum's contention that cutting oneself off from emotion and from particular people and situations leads to the possibility of terrible acts. Says Nussbaum, "Vividness leads to tenderness, imagination to compassion."<sup>77</sup> Compassion is for Nussbaum of political importance. The person who goes by the general is the one we should worry about, while the person who truly (and

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<sup>75</sup> Arendt, *Lectures*, 76.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>77</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 209.

thus compassionately) perceives the particular “will be most deeply and firmly bound to human values in choosing political action.”<sup>78</sup>

Nussbaum discusses compassion’s role in public life at length in her book *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions*. Situating her discussion on the basis of her understanding of compassion’s cognitive structure, as well as on the history of the philosophical debate about whether compassion and reason are compatible, she asks, “Given that there is reason to think that compassion gives public morality essential elements of ethical vision without which any public culture is dangerously rootless and hollow, how can we make this compassion do the best work it can in connection with liberal and democratic institutions?”<sup>79</sup> Seeking to answer her own question, her ideal is for laws, institutions, and basic political principles to be designed on the basis of compassionate imagination.

Again, at first glance this perspective appears in direct opposition to that of Arendt, who thinks compassion is apolitical. Arendt discusses compassion in *On Revolution*, where she describes its strength as hinged on the strength of passion, which “can comprehend only the particular, but has no notion of the general and no capacity for generalization.”<sup>80</sup> Compassion is not felt in response to a class or group of people, but to the suffering of one person. Like Nussbaum, Arendt sees compassion as directed toward the particular. Unlike Nussbaum, however, this characteristic makes compassion for Arendt a non-political experience. Arendt says that compassion abolishes the space of the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>79</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 403.

<sup>80</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 75.

political, and its tendency to be able to only stammer and gesture makes it inappropriate to the political speech of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise.<sup>81</sup>

Arendt goes on to develop a distinction between compassion and pity. Pity is a perversion of compassion, a sentimentalized compassion, a “talkative compassion.” The alternative to pity, says Arendt, is solidarity.<sup>82</sup> Here we can see that Arendt’s dramatic language of compassion as “irrelevant” to political affairs is only the beginning of the matter. The fruits of particular compassion, either pity or solidarity, are both able to reach the many. Pity can do this because it keeps a sentimental distance from suffering, but pity—which has, says Arendt, more capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself—looks with an unequal eye on fortune and misfortune, and indeed glorifies the misfortune upon which it is based. Solidarity, on the other hand, while aroused by suffering, is not guided by it and can look evenly at the strong and rich as well as the weak and poor. We are reminded here of Arendt’s view of impartiality, which seeks to take all relevant viewpoints into account. Compassion is the passion that gives rise to either pity—a sentiment; or solidarity—a principle.<sup>83</sup>

Interestingly, Nussbaum chooses to avoid using the word “pity” because of some of the very connotations that Arendt discusses. She briefly mentions these “nuances of condescension and superiority to the sufferer” as a recent development; while admitting that there may be more than a terminological difference going on, she chooses to focus on “compassion,” which she considers to be synonymous with pity “in its older use” as

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 76–77.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 79.

“associated with the undeserved character of misfortune, and thence with potential issues of justice.”<sup>84</sup>

Despite the difference in the language and structure of their arguments, then, Arendt and Nussbaum may be closer than it first appears. Indeed, the main issue that Arendt has with the movement from compassion to pity is pity’s unboundedness; it becomes disconnected from the particular persons that gave rise to it in the first place.<sup>85</sup> And it is especially notable that Arendt develops her discussion on the subject via philosophical commentary on novels by Melville and Dostoyevsky. It is intriguing to see how Arendt seems to have turned instinctively to fiction for the sort of insight for which Nussbaum was later to make a theoretical case.

Despite Arendt’s repudiation of pity, however, it remains the case that in order for a political space to open we must move from the intense involvement of compassion to the thinking generality of solidarity. Somehow we must find a balance between the goodness of compassion and the necessity of political interaction. So seemingly we still find a contrast between Arendt and Nussbaum here. When we take a closer look at Nussbaum, however, we find that she has a similar tension in her own thought. Along with compassion, the other emotion Nussbaum focuses on is love. Arendt makes the connection between compassion and love, pointing out that they both abolish the in-between of plural human interaction.<sup>86</sup> Nussbaum describes this same tension in terms of the intensity of romantic and/or erotic love, and the plural outlook of morality.<sup>87</sup> Actually,

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<sup>84</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 301.

<sup>85</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 80.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>87</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 338.



as Nussbaum herself is aware, she is somewhat conflicted on the matter, and has defended different positions at different points in her writing.

Nussbaum has in fact described three distinct responses to the question of how love and morality relate. In the first, she defends the Aristotelian ethical position as inclusive enough to include every aspect of the good life, including love. She emphasizes the question of how to balance all the elements of a good life. Even though some potential effects of love, such as jealousy and the desire for revenge, might be immoral in a narrower sense, as long as we retain a larger perspective on what we lose through love's partiality, we remain within the Aristotelian ethical position. In the second of Nussbaum's positions, she sees the relationship between love and morality as a deep and pervasive tension. The exclusivity of romantic love is a problem for the Aristotelian ethical position, which emphasizes "wide and inclusive attention and the public giving of reasons."<sup>88</sup> Thus love, while an important part of the full human life, would have to be considered morally subversive.<sup>89</sup> The third view that Nussbaum has defended has its roots in her reading of *David Copperfield*. In this view love and morality support and inform each other, and each is less than complete without the other.<sup>90</sup> Nussbaum expands this third position in *Upheavals of Thought*, in which she sets what she describes as the "ascent tradition" (discussed via Plato, Augustine, Dante, Brönte, Mahler, and Whitman—although these last two she sees as making praiseworthy efforts towards appreciation of bodily reality) against the "transfiguration of everyday life" (exemplified by Joyce's *Ulysses*). The burden of her argument is "that the root of hatred is not erotic

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 53.

need, as much of the ascent tradition repeatedly argues. It is, rather, the refusal to accept erotic neediness and unpredictability as a fact of human life. Saying yes to sexuality is saying yes to all in life that defies control—to passivity and surprise, to being one part of a very chancy world.”<sup>91</sup> Nussbaum suggests that this makes novel-reading if anything more important. She gives the novel the task of “constituting its readers as moral subjects, according to this new and broader conception of morality. Only now, instead of surrendering romantic fantasy before the judgment of judicious perception, instead of dispelling the shadowy world by calling in the daylight of judicious spectatorship, the reader is encouraged to bring that fantasy and mysterious excitement into the world of reality, and to use the energy of fantasy toward a just and generous vision.”<sup>92</sup>

Having read Nussbaum’s essays defending each of these three positions, I find the second most convincingly argued. The first, suggesting that some immorality may have a place in overall virtue, is singularly implausible, especially in terms of Nussbaum’s emphasis on particularity. To drown particular wrongdoing in the soup of the full human life belies her belief in the unabating primacy of the particular. The third view is rooted in a reading of *David Copperfield* which is distorted by Nussbaum’s refusal of any form of Christian transcendence. This leads her to represent Agnes, David’s “good angel,” as an ambivalent death-dealer who symbolizes “cessation of generous outward movement.”<sup>93</sup> Because Steerforth, David’s “bad angel,” is in so many ways contrasted to Agnes, he becomes representative of the mobile and volatile morality of Nussbaum’s new view.<sup>94</sup> I find this reading seriously problematic on various levels, not least of which is the

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<sup>91</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 709.

<sup>92</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 363.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

identification of wealthy, entitled Steerforth as a symbol of goodness. In any case, neither of these views in the end seems to me to vanquish the tension in Nussbaum's perspective between love's exclusivity and the inclusivity of morality as expressed in the second view; both are merely finding a productive tension there instead of a subversive one.

This tension echoes the balance in Arendt's thought between the exclusive particularity of compassion and the public nature of political interaction. For Nussbaum, I suggest that this tension is based on an inaccurate view of romantic love. The blindness and exclusivity she sees in love is based on a model which positions the lovers as facing each other and ignoring everything around them. I would suggest that a better and more accurate model would position the lovers next to each other, facing the world around them—or better, walking through it—hand-in-hand. From this perspective, love actually brings about the possibility of broadening the lovers' perspectives and giving them more resources to respond ethically to the world around them. Likewise, Arendt finds a way to navigate beyond the tension between attention to particular loved ones and public morality through the movement from compassion to solidarity. In this way particularity and plurality come together productively.

If we look again at how Nussbaum and Arendt see the world, we may see an indication of how Arendt is able to make this move to solidarity, while Nussbaum tends to remain in tension. As I noted above, Nussbaum sees human striving for excellence as involving the need to push against the limits of human life. The possibility of a better (or at least different) future is tied to an assault on constraints. For Arendt, in contrast, new possibilities are inherent in the human condition, since, though limited, we are conditioned by the fact of natality. Newness, though ever unpredictable, always breaks

into the human framework. We can relate this also to love between particular people, which if directed exclusively inward toward each other as Nussbaum too often assumes, takes for granted that nothing will change in the relationship or the parties involved. Yet surely love involves and brings about newness.

We can see, in fact, by the movements in Nussbaum's view of the relationship between love and morality that she also is not at a standstill, and is involved in and committed to change—and perhaps also newness. Indeed, Nussbaum has continued to address the connection between the particular and general in an attempt to find a way to speak convincingly of inclusive altruism. I suspect that her emphasis on erotic love, however, has held her back from a thoroughgoing recognition of plurality. Nussbaum continues to view love primarily in erotic terms. Although in her most recent book, *Political Emotions*, she discusses various models for patriotism as a form of love, ranging from love of a sports team to love of family members, she most strongly associates patriotism with erotic love as being the most particularistic (apparently leaving behind sports teams for the moment): “In all its forms, however, patriotic love is particularistic. It is modeled on family or personal love of some type, and, in keeping with that origin or analogy, it focuses on specifics ....” She goes on in the next paragraph to casually reassert her understanding of love focused on specifics as erotic with the phrase “The very particularity and eroticism of patriotic love ....”<sup>95</sup> Yet it is clear that she wants to include more varieties of love in her understanding. In the final chapter of *Political Emotions*, she affirms that political love should be polymorphous, although with common features: “a concern for the beloved as an end rather than a mere instrument; respect for

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<sup>95</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2013), 208–9.

the human dignity of the beloved; a willingness to limit one's own greedy desires in favor of the beloved."<sup>96</sup>

Despite this movement toward understanding particularity within the context of plurality, however, the tension between love's exclusivity and the inclusivity of morality has remained part of Nussbaum's framework. Summing up in the final chapter of *Political Emotions*, she says, "we have grappled with the problem that any appeal to love in the context of politics makes vivid: how to balance love's inherent particularism and partiality with the need to create and sustain policies that are fair to all."<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, she sees art as a kind of "bridge" to help us navigate between particularity and altruism, although she is less focused on novels in *Political Emotions*.<sup>98</sup> As her thought continues to develop, it may be that her attention to the particulars of love may move her further in the direction of an understanding of love which opens the way to plurality. For Arendt, at least, an acceptance of plurality includes an appreciation of uniqueness, newness, unexpectedness, and even incommensurability. Plurality, and with it, natality, provides a necessary framework for Nussbaum's Aristotelian ethical conception. In the end, perhaps plurality is a better framework for appreciating the contribution of the particular than a straightforward focus on the particular.

I suggest that philosophical fiction—fiction that invites philosophical response or is experienced philosophically—is an archetype of the complementarity between plurality and particularity. Stories, especially thoughtful, thought-provoking stories, provide a

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 382.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 385–86.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 387.

plurality of particular voices, made available to a plurality of particular interpretations.<sup>99</sup> In ongoing conversation with stories, each other, and ourselves we may dare to hope that our philosophies, too, will be opened anew to answering the question “How should we live?” in ways that are attuned to the plurality of particulars that makes up our lives.<sup>100</sup> It is through the ethical insight and enlarged mentality gained through interaction with particular stories, then, that both lived and academic philosophy can seek to better answer fundamental ethical questions in a way that avoids reducing the plurality of human life to pseudo-individual or pseudo-universal claims.<sup>101</sup>

As I have shown in this chapter, the impulse to seek ethical or interpretive consensus, on the other hand, encourages a view of philosophical fiction that separates form and content, extracting a generalized “essence of story” out of the stories’ particular contexts. Correlatively, if one does not separate form and content, one has to learn in and from the particulars in their varied contexts, encouraging interaction with a true plurality

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<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, although Ricoeur shows himself to be puzzled by Arendt’s concept of natality, he recognizes the significant connection between plurality and storytelling, as well as the way in which plurality offers a context for particularity: “It is only jointly that the disclosure of the who and the web of human relationships engenders a process from which the unique life story of any newcomer may emerge” (Paul Ricoeur, “Action, Story and History: On Re-reading *The Human Condition*, *Salmagundi* 60 [Spring-Summer 1983], 67).

<sup>100</sup> For further discussion of the intrinsic plurality of human life and its implications for fiction and philosophy (and vice versa), see Chapter 5.

<sup>101</sup> Ricoeur describes the imaginative possibilities inherent in the interpretation of a text as “a distancing of the real from itself.” He describes these possibilities (in somewhat more expansive terms than I am willing to do) as follows: “Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be. Everyday reality is thereby metamorphosed by what could be called the imaginative variations that literature carries out on the real” (Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press], 86). I am focusing specifically on the ethical possibilities in this sort of imaginative variation.

of perspectives. If we accept the inseparability of form and content in well-written philosophical fiction, what we learn from a story can never be held apart from a story; fiction cannot be truly philosophical without remaining fiction.

Le Guin, in an essay on the contemporary relevance of fantasy and young adult literature, sums up this inseparability out of her own experience as a writer:

Story tells human truth, serving human community and spiritual longing. And the stories that call most on the imagination work on a deep level of the mind, beneath reason (therefore incomprehensible to rationalists), using symbol as poetry does to express what can't be said directly, using imagery to express what can't be perceived directly—using indirection to indicate the truthward direction.

And here myth and imaginative fiction run a risk; all fiction does, but it's particularly destructive to fantasy: the risk of being rationalised—interpreted, reduced to allegory, read as a message.

Such reduction is a nefarious act.<sup>102</sup>

And yet the impulse to extract and generalize the moral of the story comes from a laudable and necessary desire to find sharable criteria in order to find our way to a mutual sense of normativity. Somehow, if an author like Le Guin is indeed right, such works of the imagination must disclose an awareness of right action that goes beyond the notion of pseudo-universal criteria—but without going beyond what is sharable. But how exactly that is possible is material for another chapter.

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<sup>102</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Young Adult in the YA," in *Cheek by Jowl: Talks and Essays on How and Why Fantasy Matters* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2009), 119.

#### 4. Hermeneutical Situation

I made the case in the previous chapter that (some) fiction can be understood as a kind of philosophy, informing people's lived philosophies and appropriately contributing to academic philosophy as well. Martha C. Nussbaum has explicitly articulated an important role for philosophical fiction, and the modern realistic novel in particular, for ethical development. Hannah Arendt has written a little and implied much about the role of telling stories (not necessarily only fictional) in enlarging our perspectives to allow for more just and impartial interaction with those around us, perhaps particularly in terms of activity that could be broadly called political. These expectations—the ethical insight and enlarged mentality that can be gained through interaction with stories—are two contributions of storytelling to lived philosophy upon which I focused in the previous chapter.

Both of these contributions, however, focus on the “impact” of storytelling on the individual, which may seem to imply a directly causal connection between storytelling and lived philosophy. In contrast, Lambert Zuidervart argues in *Artistic Truth* that art, including literature, is thoroughly hermeneutical. This means that a causal model is not capable of successfully framing the relationship between fiction and lived philosophy. When we ask how reading books can contribute to our responses to the question “How should we live?” we often tend to use language that seems to imply direct cause and effect. We say things like, “Reading *Many Dimensions* by Charles Williams totally changed the way I pray.” Or, “I read Lucy Cullyford Babbitt's *The Oval Amulet* as a teenager, and from then on was convinced that men and women should have equal social and political power.” While it is true in one sense that a book can act as a cause leading to



an ethical effect in the reader, we can see that a simple causal model is not sufficient when we stop to realize that although these books may have informed *my* life in these ways, they cannot be expected to always do the same for others. Every reader's life context and interpretive framework is different, and how we understand the interaction between fiction and lived philosophy, in particular, must take into account the fact that each reader will therefore read and respond to a book differently.

A causal model assumes a relatively unilateral, unidirectional, one-dimensional—even static—relationship between book and reader. In contrast, a hermeneutical model emphasizes interaction, reciprocal response, and mutual enrichment. An artwork, such as a novel, is not simply an object that affects a subject unilaterally, like an ice cube on your skin makes you shiver.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is a voice that speaks and needs to be heard and interpreted. Art presents itself in a dynamic, multi-layered way, both suggesting and requiring interpretation.

With this in mind, I examine in this chapter ways in which philosophical fiction as an art form contributes to people's lived philosophies—always by way of interpretation—and how it is unique from other art forms. By addressing these issues in terms of Zuidervaat's high-level analysis of the arts' webs of connection, I hope to broaden our sense of story's contribution, situate it among the many influences at work in society, and emphasize the importance of a model that can successfully interpret the relationship between story and philosophy. I begin with a discussion of Zuidervaat's conception of imaginative disclosure, showing how this idea provides an important setting for art's contribution to lived philosophy. I examine Zuidervaat's ideas in some

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to John Van Dyk for this metaphor.

detail, since they provide a key theoretical framework for the normative interaction between philosophical fiction as an art form and lived philosophy at the communal, cultural level.

I then address Nussbaum's perspective on ethical normativity, placing it in the context of Zuidervaart's hermeneutical model. Nussbaum's perspective places a normative call on academic philosophy as well as addressing fiction's import for lived philosophy at both individual and societal levels. Her emphasis on a revisable, immanent normativity places limits on general moral rules, showing that general rules are less able to respond to truly universal norms, however we articulate these, than a responsiveness to particulars is. By bringing her thoughts on normativity into conversation with Arendt and Zuidervaart on ethical responsibility in art and in society, I seek to further elucidate the need for a hermeneutical model for the way we interact with the fact of plurality, including the plurality available in fiction.

Finally, I move to a consideration of specific ways in which art, and especially philosophical fiction, interacts with lived philosophy in the movement toward the ethical and political contribution Nussbaum, Arendt, and Zuidervaart have emphasized. I also look at what in their ideas is common to both philosophical fiction and other art forms and take note of what makes fiction, and particularly young adult literature, unique among art forms in its potential to inform lived philosophy. This sets the stage for the following chapter's discussion of a noncausal model that makes for good reading—both in terms of what makes books good and in terms of the good they offer us.

### *Imaginative disclosure*

Lambert Zuidervaart brings together imaginative insight in art and life-giving disclosure as a “process of truth” to form the concept of “imaginative disclosure,” demonstrating that both the imaginative and disclosive aspects are necessary in order to avoid either making art seem irrelevant or frivolous, or expecting it to have a direct effect on people that ignores its imaginative character.<sup>2</sup> Before we get into the details of Zuidervaart’s conception, let us briefly consider the term “imaginative disclosure” itself. Disclosure has to do with a revealing of something, so art that is imaginatively disclosive will in some way have something to share. But this disclosure is not aggressive or mechanical; it is imaginative. There is a sense of creativity and innovation, but in a way that is both organic and somehow reaching through and beyond everyday existence.

Zuidervaart differentiates imaginative disclosure into three concepts: “mediated expression,” which has to do with the context in which art is produced; “interpretable presentation,” which has to do with the context in which art is used; and “configured import,” which has to do with the internal demands of the art itself.<sup>3</sup> Mediated expression and interpretable presentation help us gain cultural orientation; configured import helps to open us to possibilities beyond our current personal and social existences.<sup>4</sup> All three of these terms point to the thoroughly hermeneutical nature of art and our interaction with art—it is mediated, interpretable, and configured. According to Zuidervaart, art that is imaginatively disclosive in each of these ways will demonstrate authenticity, significance, and integrity. Art will be true with respect to the artist’s intentions

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<sup>2</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart, *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 126.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 133.

(“authenticity”), true with respect to the audience’s interpretive needs (“significance”), and true with respect to the artwork’s internal demands (“integrity”).<sup>5</sup>

In regard to authenticity, Zuidervaat points out, we expect art to arise from the artist’s own experience or vision, no matter how obscure this might be and whether or not we agree on what is worth disclosing.<sup>6</sup> In regard to significance, we expect art to be worthwhile for one reason or another; Zuidervaat points out that “art serves to bring to our attention interpretive needs that might otherwise remain hidden.”<sup>7</sup> If it were not significant, art could not interact effectively with lived philosophy as it so often does. Lived philosophy orients what we want and what we expect; art that is significant can give us what we want in ways we don’t expect, leading us to reinterpret our desires and expectations. A person’s lived philosophy is not a single, coherent whole; some aspect of an artwork may draw a person in, while other aspects may initially feel foreign or puzzling. Often a person reads a novel or looks at a work of visual art and is unexpectedly moved, saying, “I would not have thought I would like that, but it really opened my eyes to ....” Notably, in his discussion of significance Zuidervaat indicates the way in which reflexivity is built into art interpretation, so that we simultaneously interpret art and our need for what art may offer. This encourages political, moral, and religious interpretations—at least, ones that are open to art challenging their self-interpretations. On the other hand, straightforward readings of some kind of “message” tend to backfire, says Zuidervaat.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 128–29.

The matter of integrity is a little more complicated, having to do with the way that artworks, as a peculiarly “doubled” kind of aesthetic sign, present themselves in presenting something else, and present something else in presenting themselves. For an artwork’s import to be true, says Zuidervaart, “the artwork must live up to its own internal demands, one of which usually is that it live up to more than its own internal demands.”<sup>9</sup> This tripartite conception of imaginative disclosure as demonstrating authenticity, significance, and integrity is closely linked to artists’ social responsibility, Zuidervaart points out in *Art in Public*, the companion volume to *Artistic Truth*.<sup>10</sup> Describing social responsibility in contemporary societies as entailing emphases on community, collaboration, and commitment, he calls artists to “take on the tasks of educator, community builder, and social healer” through “a vision of what needs to be learned, where a community is fragile, and how suffering and oppression must be countered.”<sup>11</sup> With this vision in mind, complementary relationships between both artists’ and audiences’ authenticity and social responsibility provide the “normative contours” for art in public.<sup>12</sup> Many institutions and communities will need to contribute, says Zuidervaart, in order to move toward a society in which artists can freely, responsibly, and authentically practice imaginative disclosure and social responsibility.<sup>13</sup>

Zuidervaart therefore also calls for a culture of dialogue between art and societal institutions, in which institutions help to create space for art to contribute to larger societal ethics. Ethical art and ethical societies are part of a mutual conversation, and both

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>10</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart, *Art in Public: Politics, Economics, and a Democratic Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 259.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 266.

sides of this conversation are vital: “Properly ethical conduct within the arts requires a space for critical and creative dialogue: such dialogue lies at the center of art-ethical conduct. Moreover, to contribute to ethical interactions in other domains, whether in pursuit of political justice or economic stewardship or social solidarity, the arts need to be a vital societal site for imaginative disclosure.”<sup>14</sup>

Zuidervaat’s depiction of imagination, which forms part of the basis for his discussion of imaginative disclosure, also demands that the integral connection between art and the rest of life be taken seriously and that art be recognized as the occasion and result of interpretation. Zuidervaat understands imagination to refer to an intersubjective process that has three dimensions: exploration, creative interpretation, and presentation. Exploration indicates open-ended inquiry; creative interpretation opens up the possibility of multiple layers of meaning beyond conventional understandings; and presentation provides for the sharing of complex nuances of meaning.<sup>15</sup>

Each of these surpasses the standard Western dialectics of play/work, entertainment/instruction, and expression/communication, respectively. In each case, Zuidervaat’s formulation of the three central aesthetic processes cannot be captured by these standard dialectics that go both too far and not far enough. In the play/work dialectic, exploration is at risk of either leaving everything outside of art untouched or fancying that the rest of life can do without art.<sup>16</sup> This calls for a critique of the conventional distinction between entertainment and instruction, which needs the

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<sup>14</sup> Lambert Zuidervaat, “Creating a Disturbance: Art, Social Ethics, and Relational Autonomy,” *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 90 (2015): 12.

<sup>15</sup> Zuidervaat, *Artistic Truth*, 57–61.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

expansion and interruption brought about by creative interpretation.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, presentation makes available nuances of meaning “in ways that either exceed or precede both idiosyncratic expressions of intent and conventional communications of content.”<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the divisions of the standard dialectics, Zuidervaat seeks to show that exploration, creative interpretation, and presentation are essential to human flourishing and cannot be merely limited to art.

In response to the dimensions of artistic truth that we have just taken note of, Zuidervaat develops the notion of cultural orientation; that is, “how individuals, communities, and organizations find their direction both within and by way of culture.”<sup>19</sup> He works out this concept via three sorts of “worlds” through which we seek cultural orientation. The personal world, that of unique individuals, relates to our expectation of authenticity, which assumes sufficient similarity between the artist’s world and our own that we can learn from his or her experience and vision even while always needing in the end to find our own way. The intersubjective or social world of interpersonal relations relates to our expectation of significance, which assumes the ability of art to illuminate and even transform our shared interpretive needs. The postsubjective world, “of what neither is nor is not the case,” relates to our expectation of integrity, in which we open ourselves to a world that is more than that of the artist or interpreter. Here again the “doubling” of import in artworks (in which they present something else in presenting themselves, and present themselves in presenting something else) makes them a special

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 132.

case of art phenomena in terms of their truth potential, since an artwork that shows integrity always addresses and potentially impacts our personal and social worlds.<sup>20</sup>

These “worlds” are not simply abstract constructions, but a description of ways we interact with our contexts and ourselves. In *Art in Public*, Zuidervaat discusses in more detail the significance of imaginative disclosure for the way art relates to other parts of life. He says, “Because the arts are societal sites for imaginative disclosure, reducing them to economic, political, psychological, or other factors cannot explain their existence and functions. Yet imaginative disclosure does not isolate the arts. Instead, it supports individual and communal attempts to find cultural orientation and reorientation, opening windows to personal and social worlds and either affirming or disturbing the worlds we already inhabit.”<sup>21</sup>

Zuidervaat’s insistence on art as a human, social institution, rather than simply a collection of things and experiences, gives an important setting for my question about ways philosophical fiction—in common with other art forms—can contribute to lived philosophy. In order for people to interact meaningfully with art, they need to be involved in the places in society—shows, classes, clubs, etc.—where art has a voice and people have the space to reflect on it. Art in contemporary societies has the capacity to “generate, sustain, and renew dialogue that is both critical and creative in character,” says Zuidervaat, but this freedom relies on legal, constitutional, and structural conditions.<sup>22</sup> Art does not “happen” in a vacuum. In North American culture, how art interlinks with social institutions, and especially how it relates to the dominant economic and political

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 133–34.

<sup>21</sup> Zuidervaat, *Art in Public*, 227.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 229.



systems, makes all the difference for whether it can actually inform people's lives.<sup>23</sup> And art's ability to inform lived philosophy hinges as well on its ability to contribute to our lives through interpretation, as an artist interprets society's needs and his or her creative insights, and an audience interprets its own needs and the artwork in question.<sup>24</sup>

### *Philosophical commentary and normativity*

Martha C. Nussbaum's recognition of the ethical importance of societal institutions' interconnections is, I suspect, a large part of the reason she wants to emphasize art's (in particular, novels') place in academic philosophy. One aspect of these interconnections is the hermeneutical texture of art and how art informs our lives, although she does not appear to explicitly recognize art's hermeneutical texture.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 233. As Zuidervaat puts it elsewhere, "Given the economic and political pressures on not-for-profit organizations and on the public sphere, however, arts organizations cannot maintain art's societal autonomy all on their own. They need to form partnerships with other organizations that have similar social-economic and communicative profiles, not only in the arts but also in education, research, health care, social advocacy, and other areas. Such partnerships do not preclude strategic alliances with commercial businesses or selective participation in the delivery of government programs. Nevertheless, arts organizations need to be clear about the limits to such alliances and participation, in order to avoid a dependency that opens even wider the floodgates of hypercommercialization and performance fetishism. Partnerships in civil society and the public sphere are a priority if arts organizations are to make art-appropriate contributions and receive art-appropriate support of an economic or political sort." (Zuidervaat, "Creating a Disturbance," 10–11.)

<sup>24</sup> Zuidervaat's discussion of the links between art and social institutions prompts me to consider the relationship of these social institutions to philosophical fiction in particular, although a thorough discussion of these factors is too much for this context. If we are to read books for increased ethical insight and enlarged mentality, where will we read them? With whom will we talk about them? Where will we get them, and how will we find them? We can see from these questions that philosophical fiction also does not operate in a vacuum. Literature classes at various levels, libraries, publishing houses, marketing agencies, and book clubs are just a few of the organizations that will potentially be involved in the normative reach of philosophical fiction and the philosophical commentary that so often serves to make fiction's normative import explicit.

Nussbaum's emphasis on the place of the novel in academic philosophy goes beyond simply making sure that good books are available and that people have a place to read and discuss them; the fact that fiction can affect us at a deep philosophical level means that books are significant for how we fundamentally and normatively approach the structures we form and are formed by. In this section, I show how Zuidervaat's model for engaging art and Nussbaum's model for ethical life have a strong hermeneutic resonance with each other. I situate Nussbaum's approach in light of Zuidervaat's hermeneutical model of art, then address her perspective on normativity in more detail in the following section.

Much of the significance of philosophical commentary on novels for Nussbaum lies in comparison to the way other intellectual disciplines (notably economics) shape the public and private life of our culture, including our public policy decisions, our understanding of basic rights and freedoms, and our experience of gender. Silence in these matters amounts to capitulation to impoverished understandings of these and other important aspects of our lives, Nussbaum declares. The alternative, richer concepts of rationality and human personhood that we know and love from novels are overlooked and even unknown among many people, she says. It is clear that this is at the heart of Nussbaum's motivation for her project: "The hungry will be fed (or not fed) according to some idea of the person; patients will be treated; laws and policies will be made—all according to some conception or conceptions of human personhood and human

rationality. If we do not take a hand in these choices, they will be made by default without us.”<sup>25</sup>

Like me, Nussbaum has a sense of people being locked into a way of life and set of possibilities to which academic philosophy must respond if it is to be normatively responsible. We have seen Nussbaum’s take on philosophy’s normative task in her call for philosophical commentary to take its place among other intellectual disciplines in affecting culture to allow people alternative conceptions beyond the impoverished ones now in place. However, Nussbaum’s normative perspective rejects conventional philosophical system-building. She calls academic philosophy to flexibility—flexibility in which temporary, tentative position-holding remains feasible. In a sense, she develops a program of trying to make all positions available for consideration.

What Nussbaum refers to as “sense of life” is for her the background for all further reflection. She privileges responsiveness to life and life experience; nothing in our responses to life experience is unrevisable, even if everything can’t be revised all at once. She renounces the aspiration to any kind of transcendence, except perhaps a kind of “immanent transcendence,” as Charles Taylor points out in his discussion of Nussbaum’s aversion to “transcending humanity” in his wonderful book *A Secular Age*. Taylor draws

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<sup>25</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 192. Nussbaum emphasizes that the ideals she holds up for life together (discussed in my project primarily in terms of individual interaction with literature) are based on the reality of what human existence is like: “Real people are bodily and needy; they have a variety of human frailties and excellences; they are, quite simply, human beings, neither machines nor angels. Who can say what constitution a nation of angels would make? Who can say what constitution would be best suited to a nation of elephants or tigers or whales? The nation we imagine is a nation of, and for, human beings (albeit in complex interrelationships with other species), and its constitution is a good one only to the extent that it incorporates an understanding of human life as it really is. ... The ideal, then, is real” (Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2013], 384).

attention to the fact that Nussbaum wishes to renounce the desire for religious (especially Christian) transcendence while maintaining an “*internal* and human” aspiration to transcend “ordinary humanity.”<sup>26</sup> For Nussbaum, we are “here,” and this is where we are supposed to be; in fact, there is nowhere else beyond or outside where we are. Academic philosophy’s task therefore involves making the “here” more thoroughly available, and a better place to be.

It seems, then, that for Nussbaum academic philosophy (at least moral philosophy) should position itself primarily in the service of lived philosophy. Her defense of novels as belonging to the canon of moral philosophy reflects Zuidervaart’s description of art that is significant: bringing to light a society’s hidden interpretive needs. Society’s need for the rich concepts of personhood that Nussbaum values in novels calls for a response to the limited philosophical frameworks offered by dominant economic and political systems. My feeling is that Nussbaum is attempting to address the hermeneutical nature of ethical interaction with art, but has not been able to find her way to an articulated noncausal model for the relationship. This lack of articulation may be why her emphasis on the integrality of form and content, an insight that points clearly to the constitution of art as thoroughly situated in interpretation, has so often been missed by her readers. Robert Piercey, for example, claims that Nussbaum speaks “as though there is a direct causal link between reading literature and becoming a better person,” and that she “speaks as though texts neatly transmit their lessons to readers, without being

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 627.

mediated by interpretation.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Simon Stow reads Nussbaum as seeming “to suggest that there is but one valid interpretation of the text, and one lesson or set of lessons to derived [*sic*] from each novel.”<sup>28</sup> While in Piercey’s case these statements may be due to willful misreading (he admits in a footnote that Nussbaum presents a more nuanced approach in other works), the fact that more than one of her readers has misread or read over her fundamental insight about the inseparability of form and content (i.e., novel and “message”) demonstrates that something in her framework is not communicating appropriately. This miscommunication demonstrates the importance of an articulated, thoroughly hermeneutical model for the way art contributes to lived philosophy, sidestepping unanswerable questions about direct causal links between art and life.

Nussbaum’s emphasis on responsiveness to real life situations and the priority of the particular means that any general moral conclusions we come to must always be revisable in response to new particular contexts. At the same time, she does not hesitate to suggest that the guidelines of her Aristotelian ethical position are generally applicable, even if they are always available for revision. She values novels for their particularity and responsiveness; her commitment to continuous revisability seems to be an articulation of her largely inarticulate sense of the thoroughly hermeneutical nature of novels. How fiction contributes to people’s lives is always by way of interpretation. If we take seriously the inseparability of form and content, as Nussbaum does, and if we further

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Piercey, “Paul Ricoeur on the Ethical Significance of Reading,” *Philosophy Today* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 281, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/754137205?accountid=14771>.

<sup>28</sup> Simon Stow, “Reading Our Way to Democracy? Literature and Public Ethics,” *Philosophy and Literature* 30, no. 2 (October 2006): 414, <http://simplelink.library.utoronto.ca/url.cfm/287332>.

recognize that this complicates the ethical contribution of fiction to lived philosophy—disallowing a directly causal connection—we can see that we are left with a normative question of how to deal, for example, with encounters with fiction that we would consider ethically damaging.

*Revisable, immanent normativity*

Nussbaum clearly rejects the kind of transcendent normativity that has often traditionally been associated with morality, while at the same time avoiding the incoherence of complete relativism. For those of us who are more attuned to transcendence, immanent or otherwise, than Nussbaum is, the all-inclusive discussion she has in mind may still be a satisfactory method of finding our way to shared norms that either exist (although Nussbaum would reject this articulation) or come into some kind of existence as we express them.

The question that must be answered, then, is this: If we are unable to label certain books as bad and not worth reading by a set of pre-approved criteria, and if we must pay careful hermeneutic attention to form and content before making a judgment, what are we to do with those conversation partners who we see as potentially ethically damaging? These are the companions that we might wish to weed out with an external, non-revisable—that is, (pseudo-)universal—standard, and so it is these books that put Nussbaum's approach to the test. To put it simply, does Nussbaum's implied hermeneutic approach only work for good books? Obviously, if we are influenced noncausally by what we read, the dangers are heightened: We may not notice the ways in which we are

being influenced or the quality of the rapport we are sharing. And yet, if we are truly to engage books in a spirit of plurality, that possibility cannot be simplistically avoided.

To put the question positively: Does Nussbaum's emphasis on all-inclusive discussion give us access to the sort of normativity that, when we engage with a book in which the presence of injustice, oppression, and the like is approved, still aids the reader in moving toward a sense of shared good? By drawing Arendt and Zuidervaat back into the discussion, I clarify and situate Nussbaum's approach to normativity, indicating the strengths of her position as well as some ways it could be further strengthened.

This revisable, immanent understanding of normativity can perhaps best be described as not a generally applicable rule, but a call to which everyone must respond, although Nussbaum and I may still disagree about where (or whom) the call comes from. Nussbaum's greatest shortcoming in this discussion may in fact be that she insists so strongly on the here and now that she may be tempted to shortchange the kind of openness she desires when it appears to be directed toward anything "outside" of human existence. Yet so many of us do experience life as being open to something we describe as "beyond" ourselves that the experience of transcendence must surely be a part of the normative conversation by Nussbaum's own inclusive agenda.

Although she does have a program, so to speak, it is important to remember that Nussbaum always remains suspicious of generalization, seeing it as a diminution of particularity, something we can make use of if there is not enough time to take into account all the details. Generalization, for Nussbaum, "fossilizes or preserves the work of perception in a form in which it could be tapped on another occasion as a guide, or a substitute should there be no time for full perception. ... [T]he intellectual conclusion

may well even be a regression or falling off from the fullest knowing or acknowledging of the situation, defensible in the way I have indicated, but also dangerous, since fossilized partial knowing can too easily become a form of denial unless it is continually awakened into perception.”<sup>29</sup> Her cautious approach to generalization could be seen as an outright rejection of normativity, if we understood normativity to be a general rule applicable to all (or at least many) particular situations. However, in Nussbaum’s perspective, the claim seems to be that normativity can comprise both the “general rule” and an openness to the inevitable deviation that is necessary to engage individual situations. The “general rule,” then, should not be a set of propositions applicable to a range of situations, but an impetus or beginning place for the examination of a situation that (incorporating also what cannot be codified or articulated and what we cannot even be properly conscious of) will end in a right response. The key for this understanding of normativity is attentive, responsive, particular knowing of which a general rule will always be an unsuccessful summary.

Although convincingly argued, Nussbaum’s defense of the revisable, immanent normativity to be found in conversation with fiction does not necessarily satisfy some of her colleagues. A common response to Nussbaum’s claims is to say that the kind of flexible normativity that she prioritizes can be accepted as a complement to general rules of ethics, but does not offer an acceptable primary model.<sup>30</sup> Hilary Putnam has voiced these concerns in a relatively balanced and articulate manner. As Putnam points out, for some, literature is simply a different undertaking from philosophy, and these thinkers will

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<sup>29</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 92.

<sup>30</sup> Hilary Putnam, “Taking Rules Seriously: A Response to Martha Nussbaum,” in “Literature and/as Moral Philosophy,” special issue, *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 195, <http://www.jstor.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/stable/469002>.



want to maintain the distinction. While accepting the fact that some fiction does offer important responses to the question “How should one live?” they do not therefore agree that this fiction should be considered philosophy. Commentary on fiction may make the cut, but not fiction itself, Putnam argues, since it does not deal with “foundations” or “methodologies,” no matter how much ethical insight it displays.<sup>31</sup>

It is indeed valuable to recognize that different thinkers will want to draw boundaries at different points in the conversation about how literature, philosophy, and ethics relate. In fact, these differences demonstrate the very plurality that I am attempting to call attention to; my concern is that the willingness to converse with competing views is not all on one side. Following Nussbaum, I defend the inclusion of some forms of fiction as contributing to the philosophical conversation about how we should live because, as I show, they do indeed have something important to contribute. Rather than simply insisting that they are not really philosophy because they do not address moral foundations and methodologies in a certain traditionally direct style, Putnam would need to show that this distinction actually makes the contributions of fiction to the moral conversation not appropriately philosophical. If novels offer important alternative moral perspectives, not including them in the conversation is a serious philosophical loss. As Nussbaum puts it in her response to Putnam, she promotes the study of novels along with the study of traditional works of moral philosophy “in order to be sure that we are fair to all the alternative conceptions of goodness.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>32</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Reply to Richard Wollheim, Patrick Gardiner, and Hilary Putnam,” in “Literature and/as Moral Philosophy,” special issue, *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 204, <http://www.jstor.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/stable/469003>.

Like Nussbaum, Arendt is suspicious of a normativity that depends on general rules. However, Arendt addresses the inapplicability of general rules to new situations—or at least the obviousness of the need to think flexibly—as a historical development following the breakdown of societal morality in the face of totalitarianism in various places in the world over the last century (notably Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia). From this perspective, she identifies a difficulty that Nussbaum sometimes seems to gloss over (perhaps because she has not articulated a thoroughly noncausal model for ethical development): the problem of actually getting people to think flexibly. As Arendt says, “Unfortunately, it seems to be much easier to condition human behavior and to make people conduct themselves in the most unexpected and outrageous manner, than it is to persuade anybody to learn from experience, as the saying goes; that is, to start thinking and judging instead of applying categories and formulas which are deeply ingrained in our mind, but whose basis of experience has long been forgotten and whose plausibility resides in their intellectual consistency rather than in their adequacy to actual events.”<sup>33</sup> Arendt also sees the danger for those who want to apply general rules in that these rules have been demonstrated to be changeable “overnight,” leaving people with the habit of holding fast to standards that may no longer be ethically defensible. In cases like these, it is the skeptics of generality, the ones who are practiced at thinking through particular cases, who will be able to respond in an ethically reliable way, she maintains.<sup>34</sup> These are the people who will be able to address new situations with flexibility and the recognition that no general rule will apply fully to the particularity of the new situation.

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<sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 37.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

According to Nussbaum, novels are an ideal source for flexible, varied, particular knowledge. But can we expect this knowledge to be ethically beneficial? Nussbaum speaks in many places about the power of the novel to take hold of us and change us, but of course there is no guarantee that this change will automatically be for the better. Being ethically impacted does not necessarily entail being ethically improved.<sup>35</sup> There are many stories of people reading a novel like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, for example, and being inspired to commit horrific acts similar to those recounted in the book. However, Nussbaum's commitment to the Aristotelian dialectical method and the place of the novel in philosophy complicates this potential "direct" impact, since she asks us to also hold novels up for comparison and evaluation among other contributors to the conversation. That we experience and respond to art via interpretation also has normative significance, then. As we look, per Nussbaum's suggestions, for coherence with our web of judgment, feeling, perception, and principle, we do so with an eye to the communal conversation called for by the Aristotelian dialectical method. Individual interpretation is a part of a larger conversation. Once again every individual's interpretation and experience, rather than being generalizable, is a participant in a plurality of particulars. We don't just read novels on our own terms; Nussbaum always insists that our own terms be continually brought under scrutiny and be kept open to communal revision.

As Nussbaum works through what it means to say that nothing is unrevisable, how we say it remains of the utmost importance. For her, the indispensability of the novel for the question of moral philosophy means that in the end, philosophical commentary may have to be silent, for "one must not rule out the possibility that the literary text may

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<sup>35</sup> I address this issue more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

contain some elements that lead the reader outside of the dialectical question altogether; that, indeed, might be one of its most significant contributions.”<sup>36</sup> The implication is that philosophical commentary cannot go beyond the dialectic, but fiction can. And yet the importance of philosophical commentary is that it can help move the reader to the point of being able to hear what is beyond the commentary, to be open to the imaginative disclosure available in the medium of philosophical fiction. When I am reading Nussbaum’s commentary on Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*, I may not only become attuned to nuances in the text that I missed in an earlier reading, but I may also become attuned to a more nuanced reading of the book in other ways, such as a greater attention to underlying themes or to a certain use of language. And that practice may orient and open up the way I read other novels in the future as well.

Zuidervaat’s refusal to limit activities such as art and philosophy to strictly demarcated zones that do not influence each other echoes something of the same felt need to which Nussbaum and Arendt are responding. In fact, we could apply Zuidervaat’s tripartite conception of imagination as exploration, creative interpretation, and presentation to the making of Nussbaum-style philosophical commentary as well. Responsible philosophical commentary will engage in open-ended inquiry, not simply seeking to find a moral or categorize a genre, but exploring a story on its own terms. It will seek to creatively interpret what a story presents, opening up and sharing new possibilities and layers of meaning beyond a superficial or conventional understanding. It may be that Nussbaum’s call for this kind of commentary on literature to take its place in academic philosophy is a call for the aesthetic dimension to be more fully realized in

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<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 49.

academic philosophy as well.<sup>37</sup> In that case, she joins Zuidervaat in his contention that imagination is vital to human flourishing in all areas of life, not just art.

And perhaps Zuidervaat's view of imagination applies not only to how art is made, but to how we interact with it. If this is so, the institutions that interlink with the arts are again vital as the framework for our response to the arts. Many of our institutions tend to encourage us to engage art in terms of dualisms; for example, schools treat literature as primarily—if not solely—for instruction, while mainstream movie theatres exist to entertain rather than instruct (and to make money, of course). Other institutions seem more able to work from the positive content of the dialectics: Libraries and alternative movie theaters, for example, offer the opportunity to cut through the dialectics, encouraging exploration, creative interpretation, and presentation.

Again, Zuidervaat does not present norms as “what” (e.g., “this is right judgment” or “this is the good”) but norms of “how” (e.g., ways of interacting and connecting properly). Nussbaum's insistence on everything being revisable could be seen as precisely the articulation of such a norm; in Zuidervaat's vocabulary, perhaps this would have to do with sensitivity to the connection between authenticity and

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<sup>37</sup> It is interesting to note that both Nussbaum, who rejects transcendent normativity, and Calvin Seerveld, who holds transcendent normativity dear, can affirm a similar call. Seerveld says, “Literature, like graphic art, poetry, and music, appeals, in my judgment, to an order in God's world, a creational ordinance for suggestion-rich allusivity (as there is an order for promise keeping, for generous thrift, for assertoric correctness)—one that can be approximately discovered, is historically formulated and re-formulated, and will be followed in human acts, poorly or well, that will mark such cultured deeds and products typically as artworks .... It would be a mistake to try to take this rich metaphor-sparking kind of literary/artistic truth telling and force its multi-splendored, winsome, if not sometimes whimsical, glory flat to a bare residue of non-imaginative deposits.” (Calvin Seerveld, “A Concept of Artistic Truth Prompted by Biblical Wisdom Literature,” in *Truth Matters: Knowledge, Politics, Ethics, Religion*, ed. Lambert Zuidervaat, Allyson Carr, Matthew Klaassen, and Ronnie Shuker [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013], 301).

significance, for example. If norms are understood to be related to “how” rather than “what,” it becomes clear that they are not necessarily static. As a context changes and a person in that context changes, what it means to be authentic, for example, may change, too. In this way, Zuidervaat deepens Nussbaum’s emphasis on revisability by giving it another dimension; a norm that is provisional and situated is even further away from the idea of a static rule that attempts to approximate the norm that is always in motion, so to speak. While principles such as justice or solidarity may always be relevant societal norms, how they look in different contexts will differ as well.

As we have seen, Zuidervaat’s depiction of imagination demonstrates that the result of artistic interaction can be a movement toward aesthetic normativity across the board, not restricted to the realm of art. He argues that culture orientation—finding our way in and as a society—needs aesthetic as well as moral and epistemic processes in order to address the difficulty of its “multidimensional, complex, and unending task.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in both Nussbaum and Arendt we see a movement toward some kind of larger normativity as a result of interaction with art. Nussbaum’s desire for a normative conversation that is responsive to our “sense of life” and inclusive of fictional voices echoes Zuidervaat’s understanding of aesthetic validity, or “imaginative cogency,” which he insists is relevant to wider questions of validity.<sup>39</sup> Like Nussbaum, he describes aesthetic standards as not universally binding, extending this description to other standards as well: “Each one can be contested, moved, or replaced. Yet the very process of contesting a standard requires that people appeal to some notion of validity.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Zuidervaat, *Artistic Truth*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

Imagination, with its open-ended inquiry and attentiveness to complex, multiple, yet sharable layers of meaning is precisely what we need as we face the complexities of our lives that too often leave us paralyzed. The rich potential available in imagination is the reason that Nussbaum and Arendt—and I, too—turn to art for normative orientation and the reason that we believe art is relevant to all of life.

### *Noncausal interactions*

The role of art in general as a potential agent for increased ethical insight and enlarged mentality is obvious to those who have experienced it. But in what ways does this happen, specifically? Can we answer this question without resorting to a causal model for the interaction between fiction and ethical development? And is there anything unique about philosophical fiction as an agent for ethical change? Questions about how and why books affect us have been the subject of much research, yet the topic does not lend itself to clear answers of a certain kind. For example, the relationship of book and reader has been analyzed from social, psychological, and behavioral angles. In Jèmeljan Hakemulder's wide-ranging study of the subject, he sums up the results by telling us what most of us already know: that there is evidence that literature affects us, but little clarity on what it is about it that makes this happen.<sup>41</sup>

Still, however, Hakemulder argues for a definite connection between reading and ethical adequacy. He sees ethical adequacy as being made up of insight into human character (ability to imagine other people's emotions, thoughts, and goals) and moral self-

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<sup>41</sup> Jèmeljan Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000), 147.

knowledge (knowing where one stands on moral matters).<sup>42</sup> This means that reading is ethically significant when it expands readers' capacities for empathy and self-knowledge. Starting from a social research perspective, his conclusions echo those of Nussbaum on the subject:

If reading narratives affects self-knowledge, this has direct implications for social perception. Research suggests that well-developed domains of our self-concept equip us with the ability to recognize similar characteristics in other persons. Furthermore, reading a lot of diverse stories presumably increases our range of abstract memory structures ('scenarios'). These represent plausible combinations of situations, goals, emotions, and their probable causal relationships. The more scenarios we have at our disposal, the more successful we will be at interpreting other people's behavior. Finally, repetitively taking the roles of character can be expected to result in a habitual empathic attitude toward fellow humans.<sup>43</sup>

Recent research affirms the importance of the way we "take on the roles" of characters we read about in the effect literature has on us.<sup>44</sup>

It is nice that research affirms what so many of us already know, but much of the discussion about the specific mechanism of how literature affects the reader is beside the point. Arguing about the details of why and how we can be changed by what we read often still assumes a causal model, leaving us with a mechanistic perspective on literature despite the best intentions of the researchers, and making literature again appear to be primarily a tool for ethical formation. The cause-and-effect model simply cannot do justice to a thoroughly hermeneutical sphere.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>44</sup> Geoff F. Kaufman and Lisa K. Libby, "Changing Beliefs and Behavior Through Experience-Taking," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103, no. 1 (July 2012): 1–19.



In contrast, a hermeneutical approach can help us think deeply about how the books we interact with inform us on a philosophical—not just psychological or behavioral—level, although of course psychological and behavioral considerations will be part of our interpretive interaction with books as well. The development throughout our lives of our lived philosophies is something that needs to be seen from a whole-life perspective. This is part of why the questions and issues that Zuidervaart raises about the integrality of different aspects of life provide an important framework for my discussion of these same questions about the specifics of art's potential for making an ethical contribution. With these thoughts in mind, let us take a look at the specific ways in which art can contribute to our lived philosophies: by offering cultural critique, sparking reflection, giving enjoyment, saying what cannot be said less metaphorically, negotiating between the concealed and the revealed, encouraging the compassionate attention that promotes ethical insight and enlarged mentality, having relevance to the audience, and finally, inviting the audience to co-create with the artist. Let us look briefly at examples of each of these in turn, with special consideration for the case of philosophical fiction—especially young adult literature—and what sets it apart from other art forms.

One of the most obvious contributions of art to lived philosophy, especially in light of Zuidervaart's conception of cultural orientation, is the possibility for it to offer cultural critique. Art often calls into question everyday habits and systems by either direct presentation and critique or through thought experiments about our communal trajectories or possible alternatives. This is true of most if not all art forms, and it is certainly very often true of philosophical fiction. The writings of George Orwell, most famously *Animal Farm* and *1984*, are prime examples of this kind of cultural critique.

Similarly, philosophical fiction, among other art forms, sparks reflection. This is related to the general capacity we see in art to reorient and sensitize those who interact with it. Reading E.M. Forster's *Maurice* prompts the reader to ponder the legal, emotional, and relational implications of homosexuality past and present. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* gives rise to questions about satire and persuasion, race and friendship, sanity and goodness. Even reading books by Agatha Christie will likely occasion reflection on issues of class and societal changes brought about by the World Wars. The way in which fiction sparks reflection, although not necessarily always leading to an improvement in either ethical insight or enlarged mentality in the way that Nussbaum's compassionate attention or Arendt's "going visiting" do, is part of the process that makes them possible.

Take one of the books that I will address more thoroughly in Chapter 6: Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *Tehanu*, with its depiction of a thoughtful, middle-aged woman who has given up great power to live an "ordinary" life, and the scarred and abused child she adopts who has great power yet to be discovered. Reading this book sensitized me to—among other things—ways in which power and powerlessness combine, and thereby helped change the way I experience the power of those around me. Or take Pompeo Girolamo Batoni's 1776 painting *Peace and War*, which I once saw exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago. I found this painting strangely impressive, although it is anything but unusual in style or subject. "War" and "Peace" look into each other's eyes in something of a lovers' embrace, War protectively raising his shield over Peace, while she gently restrains his sword hand as she holds up an olive branch between them. This painting permanently affected my understanding of the relationship between war and

peace, leading me to wonder whether war and peace are mutually necessary, mutually exclusive, or have some other relationship to each other. My responses to these works of art were not simply a straightforward assimilation of what was presented, but gave rise to the sort of unavoidable internal reflection that reorients and sensitizes one in new ways to the ethical implications of aspects of life. We could think of examples from every genre of art that have some sort of similar re-orienting effect.

Another way in which philosophical fiction among other art forms can contribute to lived philosophy is its capacity to give enjoyment and delight. More than just making people happy, this helps get past people's defenses and opens them up to further understanding. Just as we tend to listen more sympathetically to a perspective expressed by a friend we enjoy being with than to the pronouncements of an abrasive acquaintance, we are more likely to give art that we enjoy a chance to speak to us than art that does not draw us in and gain our considerate attention. Although true of many art forms, this aspect is one that is particularly true of philosophical fiction. (After all, it has to sell—perhaps a more undisputable connection with the masses than many other art forms have these days!)

I have heard it rumored that when Richard Kearney wrote his book *On Stories: Thinking in Action*, he hoped that it would be widely accessible to the general lay reader, and in fact formatted it with the footnotes in the back in order to keep the academic aspect from “getting in the way” of such a reading. And though it may indeed have been more widely read than much of published academic philosophy, it cannot even begin to compare in popularity to a novel addressing philosophical themes (even one that is questionably well written), such as Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*. This comparison

demonstrates what might be considered an advantage that philosophical fiction has over “normal” philosophical writing: It tends to have a greater immediate relevance for people’s lived philosophies simply because it reaches a wider audience.

Nussbaum, Arendt, and other thinkers who value stories for their ethical relevance point to a deeper reason that philosophical fiction has a philosophical role to play: Fiction is able to say what sometimes cannot be said in less metaphorical language. Again, this aspect is closely related to the importance of form-content indivisibility. As Le Guin puts it, “with genuine works of literature ... it is a grave error to teach or review them as mere vehicles for ideas, not seeing them as works of art. Art frees us; and the art of words can take us beyond anything we can say in words.”<sup>45</sup>

Art also negotiates between what is concealed and what is revealed. The way in which philosophical fiction does this with words makes it stand out particularly among narrative forms of art. Reading any Jane Austen book is a paradigm exercise of this negotiation, demonstrating that what is said may be saying something other than what is being said. In this way, we learn to better negotiate the concealment and revelation we stumble across in life outside the book.

This advantage is closely connected to a further aspect of philosophical fiction. Reading philosophical fiction encourages the attitude of compassionate attention that Nussbaum espouses for development of ethical insight, and the need to put ourselves in the shoes of the characters we read about that we gather from Arendt. The idea is, of course, that this type of engagement with fiction tends to stimulate these attitudes to spill over into our “real” lives. The promotion of ethical insight and enlarged mentality are

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<sup>45</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “A Message about Messages,” in *Cheek by Jowl: Talks and Essays on How and Why Fantasy Matters* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2009), 128–29.

perhaps less obvious in other art forms, although we certainly see something similar in areas such as theater and the visual arts, and especially other narrative forms such as biography, memoir, essay, and many forms of poetry. But if we back off for more of a bird's-eye view we can see more clearly some similarities between the ways that fiction and other art forms can contribute to our lived philosophies. Both the ethical insight and the enlarged mentality we can gain from philosophical fiction are ways of expanding our horizons of understanding. When we interact with art we gain new experience and find ourselves able to align ourselves in new ways.<sup>46</sup> Surely these responses are common to art forms of quality in all their variety.

Still, however, there is something unique about philosophical fiction in the way it informs lived philosophy. Nussbaum briefly addresses the question of what she sees as special about novels in the introduction to *Love's Knowledge*, and at more length in *Poetic Justice*. She mentions reasons such as the way in which the structure of the

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<sup>46</sup> One could say that in a sense, the ability to align ourselves in new ways that arises from our interaction with art is a mirror of art's ability to re-align itself to each new reader's unique context. As Ricoeur has said, "An essential characteristic of a literary work, and of a work of art in general, is that it transcends its own psychosociological conditions of production and thereby opens itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in different sociocultural conditions. In short, the text must be able, from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view, to 'decontextualize' itself in such a way that it can be 'recontextualized' in a new situation—as accomplished, precisely, by the act of reading" (Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutic Function of Distanciation," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press], 83). The ability to decontextualize itself in a way that it can be recontextualized—at the same time maintaining the significance of its original context—is, I think, what enables art to become "classic." As Gadamer has said, "[T]he classical preserves itself precisely *because* it is significant in itself and interprets itself; i.e., it speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past—documentary evidence that still needs to be interpreted—rather, it says something to the present as if it were said specifically to it. ... This is just what the word 'classical' means: that the duration of a work's power to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d, rev. ed., trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [New York: Continuum, 2004], 290).

interaction between reader and novel, as presenting persistent forms of human need and desire in different specific social situations, “invites the reader to see how the mutable features of society and circumstance bear on the realization of shared hopes and desires—and also, in fact, on their very structure.”<sup>47</sup> She also talks about the novel’s concreteness and its interest in the ordinary. And, of course, there is her contention that the novel is “a living form and in fact still the central morally serious yet popularly engaging fictional form of our culture.”<sup>48</sup> When it comes specifically to works of art, it remains the case that other than films and recorded music (relatively little of which can count as serious), novels have the widest reach in North American culture. This is part of why Nussbaum sees them as so important.

There is one final point about all philosophical fiction that I would like to mention. In any interaction with art, the audience is somehow a co-creator with the artist, but there is something unique about this co-creation in forms of art that make use exclusively of the written word. In reading, while the reader is transported outside him- or herself through the characters he or she reads about, the interaction and images evoked take place uniquely in the reader’s own head.<sup>49</sup> This is part of what sets literature apart from serious plays and films, which otherwise might arguably fulfill all the functions of a book. This, I think, is connected to one of the most important things that set philosophical fiction apart in its contribution to lived philosophy: In reading, we are actually *training*

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<sup>47</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> This experience may have a physical dimension as well. I am sure I am not the only person who has been called back to earth from a book thinking that I could not walk or speak, for example, when I had been reading about a person who could not walk or speak. This experience of “alternate reality” can feel very real.

for, not just learning about, the ethical insight and enlarged mentality which I, with Nussbaum and Arendt, believe inform our lives wholly. The unique way in which we experience written stories within ourselves calls for a correspondingly unique approach to understanding their contributions to philosophy. If reading a good book is a form of normative training, perhaps the practice of philosophical commentary on books is the warm-up exercise that allows us to position ourselves for the training. Philosophical fiction is one art form among many that inform our lived philosophies, and yet—like every other art form, I suspect—it does so uniquely.

Nussbaum has chosen realistic novels as the focus of her argument both because they are ideal for her purposes and because they are culturally relevant. I would suggest that these reasons are even more true of young adult literature. Young adult literature is one of those easily recognizable yet difficult-to-define categories. The field marks by which we can identify young adult literature will always leave out books here and there that should obviously be included, but young adult fiction tends to center on teenage protagonists and display strong plot and character development.

All of the reasons Nussbaum holds up for the value of novels apply to young adult literature, I suggest. Young adult literature addresses persistent human concerns in specific, concrete situations; it engages with serious moral issues; and it has a wide reach in North American culture. But young adult literature goes even further in that in most quality books in this genre, at least one of the major characters undergoes some kind of transformation or development of self-awareness. This characteristic, I suggest, is one of the main reasons “young adult” literature is so popular with adults as well as young adults. North American culture seems to assume that adults want to change almost every

aspect of themselves (as can be seen in the prevalence of self-help books—another genre with wide reach, if not moral seriousness). Most of the adults I know who are self-proclaimed readers continue to enjoy young adult literature, and I believe this is at least partly due to the development in self-awareness and ethical change that much young adult literature explores.

Zuidervaat approaches issues of art and normativity from both a theoretical and a sociocultural angle, always insisting that art informs life by way of interpretation and that it arises from interpretation. His concern for the integrality of art and life for the development of a truly imaginative, normative perspective provides a framework for a hermeneutical model for the normative interaction of fiction and philosophy. Nussbaum's express concern in turning to philosophical fiction is certainly a normative one. "How should one live?" is the question with which she frames her whole project. Although in one sense her understanding of this question as a matter of normativity might be somewhat nebulous (since any sense of normativity for her must be immanent and flexible), on the other hand her hope for fiction's influence on philosophy is an explicitly moral one. Arendt's more political focus provides a stance for resistance against assumptions about knowledge that privilege abstraction at the expense of particularity, thereby misplacing the position of impartiality and, by creating blind spots in the available information, forgoing the possibility of truly discerning better and worse. This approach, like Zuidervaat's, embodies a resistance to limiting oneself to the options one is given, enabling instead the possibility of envisioning newness.

Stories, and philosophical fiction in particular, uniquely offer us the possibility of envisioning something new, but this possibility is not entirely straightforward: As



Nussbaum shows, tapping into the full import of the novel's context-defying integrity may take the assistance of philosophical commentary, in one form or another, in order to be properly positioned. But once that is achieved, the integrity of the novel as a work of art that takes shape within the reader's mind enables the reader to not merely witness but to take part in its creation. Each person who interacts with a story becomes a particular possibility of newness. As Zuidervaat shows, this is not simply a matter of cause and effect, but a network of interpretation. As we converse about these interactions through philosophical commentary and in communal conversation, the contribution of fiction that we experience in our own lived philosophies has the potential to make a larger normative contribution as well.

Some questions remain, however. How can we provide for the possibility of normative interaction with philosophical fiction while still avoiding treating it simply as a tool for ethical improvement? What positive metaphor can we find for the way we relate to stories, and for the way they affect us? What makes for a good book, and what makes for good reading? We will navigate these questions in the following chapter.

## 5. Narrative Friendship

How to measure quality in literature is always a difficult question. Even when there is general agreement among its readers that a certain book is better or worse than others, there will always be those who disagree, and often for recognizably valid reasons. How can we construct or discover criteria for good books and good reading while still allowing for inevitable variation in taste and context? And how might reading books influence us? This second question is similarly difficult. Even if we agree that books contribute to and affect our lives in some way, this contribution remains far from simple and very hard to prove. One way into these matters is to find a metaphor that can open up for us a way of approaching the evaluation—and especially, the ethical criticism—of books, how we interact with them, and how they affect us, ethically or otherwise.

When I was a child, my mother often repeated to me the saying “Books are your friends; treat them as such.” For the most part, she said this to remind me not to throw books, sit on them, or leave them open face-down. As a reader herself, however, I suspect that part of the reason she was fond of the phrase was that it points to something true about how many readers experience books. A good book does indeed feel like a good friend.

The metaphor of books as potential friends is the wide-ranging, effective, and illuminating model Wayne C. Booth uses in his own fine book *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. This model allows him to find an approach to literary ethical criticism that avoids the problems of either pretending that books don’t affect people (clearly not true) or focusing on direct causal links (inaccurate and very difficult to prove even if it were accurate). Instead of asking whether a narrative will have a good or bad

effect on us after we read it, Booth begins by asking what kind of company it offers us during the time we spend with it. This is exactly the kind of noncausal metaphor that we are looking for. It addresses our real-life experience with books and how they affect us, while at the same time creating space to consider the ethical implications of that relationship.

Speaking to the great classics of literature, Booth says:

You lead me first to practice ways of living that are more profound, more sensitive, more intense, and in a curious way more fully generous than I am likely to meet anywhere else in the world. You correct my faults, rebuke my insensitivities. You mold me into patterns of longing and fulfillment that make my ordinary dreams seem petty and absurd. You finally show what life can be, not just to a coterie, a saved and saving remnant looking down on the fools, slobs, and knaves, but to *anyone* who is willing to work to earn the title of equal and true friend.<sup>1</sup>

We ended the previous chapter with a question about what makes for good books and good reading, and the chapter before that with a question about how to find criteria that are sharable while going beyond an insistence on pseudo-universality. In this chapter, I explore these questions with the assistance of Booth's conception of narrative friendship as described in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. With the metaphor of narrative friendship as a guide, I address Booth's criteria for judging the quality of books and how spending time with books may affect their readers. I then explore Booth's suggestions about the relationship between friendship and character.

Next, I question some of Booth's vocabulary choices and how they affect the narrative friendship metaphor as a whole. To clarify some of these issues, I bring Martha C. Nussbaum back into the conversation, addressing a number of criticisms she directs

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 223.

toward the ideas she finds in Booth's book. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts about the strength of Booth's model to confront issues of quality and ethical criticism, which is Booth's term for the same question we have been addressing in previous chapters: How should we live?

### *Narrative friendship*

Booth suggests that every story can be considered an offer of friendship, and in particular, a gift proffered by the "implied author" of a narrative. Booth distinguishes between the implied author, who represents the generally coherent perspective within a specific narrative; the actual, flesh-and-blood writer; and any explicit narrator(s) of a story.<sup>2</sup> Although he does not provide an explicit definition for the term, the "implied author" seems to be the way Booth gives a narrative its metaphorical personality and intention as a friend; it is, in a sense, the work of art treated as a person. The implied author is also therefore the representative and source of the world-and-life-view in which a narrative asks us to participate, a view which is generally more coherent and delineated than the flesh-and-blood writer's real-life view of things. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the book that introduced the term, Booth variously describes the implied author as the narrative's "official scribe" (following Jessamyn West), the author's "second self" (following Kathleen Tillotson, who was following Edward Dowden<sup>3</sup>), "different versions,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>3</sup> The fact that Tillotson was bringing attention to Dowden's concept is pointed out in Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy*, trans. Alastair Matthews (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 80.

different ideal combinations of norms,”<sup>4</sup> “the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole” (73), “the core of norms and choices” (74), “an ideal, literary, created version of the real [author],” and “the sum of [the author’s] own choices” (75).

That the implied author gives a work a sense of unified (metaphorical) intention distinct from that of the flesh-and-blood author is made humorously clear in Booth’s essay, “Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple.”<sup>5</sup> There, Booth talks about part of the process of making art as the gradual elimination of “rival selves” as subsequent drafts of a work become focused on a certain range of choices. He illustrates this point by quoting a brief conversation with Saul Bellow, in which he asks Bellow what he is actually doing as he spends hours each day revising a novel. “Oh, just cutting out those parts of myself that I don’t like,” responds Bellow. Booth points out that in this process of revision, Bellow “was changing the text’s intentions, which slowly became a different thing from the flesh-and-blood author’s original muddled intentions as he wrote many earlier drafts: a new, and presumably superior, self was created.”<sup>6</sup>

The idea of the implied author is an inventive way of getting around the sometimes shocking abyss that readers may experience when they meet the writer of a

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 71. Quotes and the parenthetical page numbers in the rest of this paragraph are from this text.

<sup>5</sup> Booth, “Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple,” in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2001), 16–29.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 22. Elsewhere, Booth says, “One major act in the creation of any great text is the writer’s successful effort to slough off mediocrity. Authors often report their surprise in discovering a new, superior self. Some writers in fact attempt to elevate their lives to live up to their invented second selves ..., but the gap inevitably remains large. No human being was ever as witty and mature and generous-spirited as the imagined geniuses who give us the works of Shakespeare or Jane Austen or Flaubert or Henry James.” (Wayne C. Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 275.)

well-loved book. How can there be such a gap, we wonder, between an inspired, inspiring literary work and a flesh-and-blood writer who may come across as trite and arrogant, or even as a cynical nihilist? The implied author seems to come into existence somewhere in between the actual author and the reader. It is the writer's invention and skill that bring a book into basic existence, but a book does not come alive until it is read—and when that happens, it often seems to take on a life of its own. It is this new creature, the voice that speaks to the reader through the words of the writer, that is described by Booth's term "implied author." It is, in a sense, the experiment that the flesh-and-blood writer is making with the particular words that make up a particular story. It is also, in a sense, the author imagined by the reader in the reading of a book. In fact, one of the quotations with which Booth heads Part II of *The Company We Keep* is a quote from Herman Melville to this very effect: "No man can read a fine author, and relish him to his very bones, while he reads, without subsequently fancying to himself some ideal image of the man and his mind. And if you rightly look for it, you will almost always find that the author himself has somewhere furnished you with his own picture."<sup>7</sup> And in fact, the implied author as the author imagined by the reader is further complicated by the common habit of referring to a work of art by the name of its artist. (This is true of many forms of art, not just literature; when you hear someone refer to "a Van Gogh," you know that an artwork by Van Gogh is what is usually being referred to.) When I talk about "Cynthia Voigt" or "Ursula Le Guin," discussing their offers of friendship with human friends, I am using the name of the writer to talk about my experience of an implied author. It is apparent that the implied author is very difficult to pin down. Not only does a flesh-and-blood

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<sup>7</sup> Herman Melville, quoted in Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 157. I'm sure this idea can be applied to female readers and writers as well.

writer potentially create a different implied author in every written work, but every reader may understand a work to have a different implied author as well.

However, that the implied author is difficult to pin down does not make it useless as a metaphor. I find that the idea of the implied author makes so much sense intuitively that I did not realize at first that Booth never either explicitly defines or specifically defends the concept. The closest he comes to a definition is a rephrasing of a term, such as “a given fiction—which is to say, a given implied author”<sup>8</sup> or “the core of norms and choices which I am calling the implied author”<sup>9</sup> or “the implied author, the creating person who is implied by the totality of a given work when it is offered to the world”<sup>10</sup> or “‘The writer’s responsibility to the work’ can thus be translated as ‘the writer’s responsibility to the implied author.’”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, in Booth’s fullest discussion of the concept, which comes as part of a discussion of whether authors can or should be neutral, he bemoans the “curious fact that we have no terms either for this created ‘second self’ or for our relationship with him. None of our terms for various aspects of the narrator is quite accurate.”<sup>12</sup>

Although Booth did not apparently realize it at the time, he had hit upon a term that is sufficiently accurate to have become the standard term for the concept in the discussion of literature. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* was recognized as a landmark text almost immediately upon its publication, garnering widespread approval.<sup>13</sup> The concept of implied author was soon recognized as not just part of a rhetorical approach to literature,

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<sup>8</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 74.

<sup>10</sup> Booth, *Critical Understanding*, 269.

<sup>11</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 128.

<sup>12</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Kindt and Müller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy*, 69.

but an important concept with implications for the wider discussion of textual interpretation and narrative theory.<sup>14</sup> It also very quickly became a subject of debate—a debate which has continued to the present day.<sup>15</sup>

Although a full discussion of the concept is outside the scope of my project, Booth's idea of the implied author offers a helpful path toward a conversation on how we relate to books philosophically.<sup>16</sup> In my view, the term seems to do the work he asks of it even without an explicit theoretical foundation.<sup>17</sup> For my own purposes, then, I find it

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 74. John Killham's essay "The 'Second Self' in Novel Criticism" (*The British Journal of Aesthetics* [1966] 6[3]: 272–90. doi:10.1093/bjaesthetics/6.3.272) began the discussion of the concept as applicable to debates beyond a rhetorical approach to literature.

<sup>15</sup> Interlocutors in the overarching debate can be widely grouped into three main categories: (1) those who emphasize that the implied author is a streamlined version of the real author; (2) those who emphasize that the implied author is constructed by the reader and/or identified with the text; (3) those who believe that the concept of implied author is incoherent (largely because in its original form it appears to encompass both positions 1 and 2) and/or unnecessary (largely because the work it does can be done by other terms). James Phelan is the best-known name in the first category; Brian Richardson, Seymour Chatman, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (who suggests "inferred author" as a preferable term) are representatives of the second category; Mieke Bal, Gérard Genette, and Ansgar Nünning are significant proponents of the third category.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed description of the history and reception of the "implied author" concept, see Kindt and Müller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy*.

<sup>17</sup> This lack of explicit definition is often a self-conscious approach on Booth's part. For example, in introducing his concept of methodological pluralism in his book *Critical Understanding*, Booth says, "My way among ways charting ways is—I think fortunately—not of the kind that can be cleanly defined at the beginning. It is more a way of living with variety than of subduing it. ... Here at the beginning I can only suggest how the pluralist attitude toward diverse acts of critical understanding differs from other attitudes, and I may make it seem like a mere expression of undefended and unarguable faith. I can only hope that by the end, though it will still not be 'proved' by the standards of some epistemologies, it will have been proved in that honorable and traditional sense: tested, explored, and found adequate to (and in the service of) our actual experience of literature and our ways of talking about it" (Booth, *Critical Understanding*, 3). As I hope is made clear throughout this dissertation, I follow Booth in the conviction that the approach of living with variety rather than subduing it is often more appropriate, accurate, and helpful than the fabricated clarity that sometimes comes with an attempt at strict definitions, especially when the topic at hand is as unruly as fiction.



sufficient to treat the implied author as a useful metaphor.<sup>18</sup> Simply put, when we think of the fact that a single author sometimes writes books representing quite different views of the world—and that this sense of perspective can be distinct from any one narrating character, as well—we can see that it is helpful to have some way to refer to this perspective apart from the actual author and the fictional(ized) characters. Whether “fictional or historical, elevated or vulgar, welcoming or hostile on the surface,” every implied author invites us to spend time in friendship, says Booth. “As soon as someone takes the trouble to get my attention, by publishing or by talking to me, the offer of some benefit or pleasure or companionship is undeniable.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Those who criticize the term tend to do so on technical grounds, based on their specific articulations of various assumed or defended norms for how we should speak about texts and authors. For example, one of the earliest commentators on the topic, Peter Swiggart, complains that Booth should not conceive of the implied author “in moral terms that are appropriate only to human individuals and not to their artistic creations” (Swiggart 1963, 143, quoted in Kindt and Müller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy*, 73). Similarly, Killham argues that it is inappropriate to use a single concept to discuss both an author’s action on a text and the composition of the work as a whole (Killham, “The ‘Second Self’ in Novel Criticism,” 288). Clearly, the determination of what is an appropriate or inappropriate way to speak about books in the field of literary criticism is part of a larger conversation that is outside of the scope of this project. However, Swiggart’s and Killham’s declarations are examples of the kind of statement that Booth frequently draws attention to, pointing out that these are normative claims which themselves need to be defended rather than assumed. For an excellent example of Booth’s approach to this kind of “hidden” normative framework, see his assessment of Richard Posner’s rejection of ethical criticism (Wayne C. Booth, “Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22, no. 2 [October 1998], 366–93). In this article, Booth points out with exceptional clarity the way in which Posner repeatedly violates his own rejection of ethical criticism by engaging in ethical criticism under various disguises. This is a point that Booth makes frequently throughout his writings.

<sup>19</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 174.

### *Criteria for quality*

It is immediately apparent from the friendship metaphor that we need to distinguish between different kinds of friendships. Booth looks to the ancient tradition of inquiry into friendship to discern three basic categories of friendship: friendship based on the giving and receiving of pleasure, friendship based on the giving and receiving of immediate gain, and full friendship, which is worthwhile simply because of the quality of life the friends experience while together.<sup>20</sup> Every implied author, claims Booth, offers one of these kinds of friendship to the reader. Of course, not every friendship is healthy, and not every offer of friendship has the same value. Booth reminds us that one important question is: Does a narrative work *invite* rich inquiry, or merely *tolerate* it?<sup>21</sup> When we make choices among offers of friendship, we are making ethical decisions that affect who we will be while with the friends we choose; we are formed by the company we keep. And trying to determine whether an offer is from a true friend or a fraud is no easier in literature than in life, says Booth.<sup>22</sup> When we pick up a book, we are making an acquaintance; whether or not we will allow this acquaintance to ripen into friendship depends on whether the implied author can convince us, so to speak, to spend the time doing so. If we find that the implied author's offer of friendship does not seem worth our time—whether because we find the potential friend boring, preachy, offensive, or simply incomprehensible—we will reject the offer.

What will keep us conversing with a narrative? Booth presents a set of seven “spectrums of quality” that will vary in every friendship, narrative or human. These spectrums are as follows: quantity of invitations offered; degree of responsibility or

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 178.

reciprocity asked of us; degree of intimacy; intensity of engagement; coherence of proffered world; distance between narrative world and ours (“otherness”); and kind or range of kinds of activities suggested, invited, or demanded.<sup>23</sup> Different readers will prefer different points on each spectrum, but all will shy away from all of the extremes of the spectrums, Booth contends. Even those who argue for one extreme or another will reach a limit of tolerance at some point along the continuum.<sup>24</sup>

If we consider examples toward either end of each scale, we can see more clearly what Booth is getting at. In terms of quantity, compare a single immense work like James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* to a short story by Flannery O’Connor, which, although it may offer many invitations, is still simply quantitatively smaller than a much larger work. In terms of reciprocity, compare James Joyce’s tone of learned genius to the comradely Ogden Nash. In terms of intimacy, compare the full disclosure of characters’ thoughts and feelings in Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* to the external view of characters presented in the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne. In terms of intensity, compare the simple recounting of Aesop’s fables to the gripping horror of Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*. In terms of coherence, compare Lewis Carroll’s delightful inconsistencies with Henry James’s quest for fictional harmony. In terms of otherness, compare the multiple strangenesses of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* with the significance of the everyday brought to the fore in the stories of Jean Little. And finally, in terms of range, compare the stylized simplicity of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling” with the complex scope of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. We can see that on any of these scales, going too far to an extreme will turn every reader off. If we consider

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 179–80.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 181.

the scale of distance between the narrative world and ours, for example, complete otherness would be unintelligible, whereas complete familiarity would be monotonous.

These seven scales offer a helpful basis for considering the relative quality of the books we read. This is not to say that there is a certain place on each scale, or even a particular balance among all the scales, that would be the ideal for all books, or even for all the readers of one book. We may be tempted to think that because we are talking about criteria and quality, there must be an ideal somewhere. Here we find ourselves once again faced with the specter of pseudo-universality—the desire to gather particulars into generalities that can be normatively universalized. Rather, Booth's spectrums offer us reference points when we compare literary works to each other and when we discuss them with each other. Considering a book I have read with these spectrums in mind, I can say something like "*The Greater Trumps* by Charles Williams maintains a powerful intensity and intimacy while remaining sometimes both a little too cosmic in range and a little too limited in the kinds of invitations it offers." Booth's vocabulary offers me a way to think about the book that helps me to identify its strengths and weaknesses as I experienced them, and discuss my interpretation in terms of sharable criteria. In this way, we can have discussions regarding quality without requiring universally applicable standards.

Along the same lines, another advantage—and one that Booth is certainly not unaware of—is that these seven scales allow for variety in taste and context. Not every good book needs to have the same balance of virtues, but a book that is in some way too far to the extremes on a variety of these scales is much less likely to be worth spending much time with. I suspect that not every quality has the same ethical relevance, either. In

contemporary, highly partisan North American culture, for example, a healthy dose of “otherness” is recognizably significant for a reader’s ethical development, at least when the implied author treats otherness in a generous way. Sheer quantity, on the other hand, may not be as ethically relevant to this culture at this time.

### *Becoming like our friends*

Booth addresses the question of what kind of company a narrative offers us while we are reading or listening to it through a consideration of how it affects “who we are.” When we spend time with a narrative or human companion, who we are is impacted in some way by who we are with, says Booth. The way that Booth describes this impact is that stories of any kind will only work as stories if the reader wants to spend time listening to them for some reason; in other words, they create “patterns of desire.” While reading, the reader becomes involved in desiring some kind of future fulfillment.<sup>25</sup> Again, if we had no desire to be fulfilled, whether simply for the conclusion of the story or even for some kind of aesthetic completion of form, we would simply stop reading or listening.

This patterning of desires is the basis and reason for ethical criticism. Specifically, ethical criticism for Booth has to do with appraising and judging, but also with character and habit. It addresses issues both normative and practical. When we enter into a narrative friendship, we are allowing our desires to be formed by the company we keep. Says Booth, “We may not want to call this patterning of desires (by no means confined to narrowly moral domains) a practical effect, but it does have one obvious and inescapable effect on the reader’s practice: it determines who he or she is to be for the duration of the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 201.

experience.”<sup>26</sup> Booth demonstrates the ethical importance of how spending time with a narrative affects who we are through an examination of how the first few pages of Peter Benchley’s thriller *Jaws* fits on his seven spectrums of quality. He concludes that especially on the scales of otherness and range, this book makes a bad friend: It narrows the world into a place of stereotyped villains and heroes where anything that is not understood is automatically to be shunned, and where physical survival and pleasure are the only important goals.<sup>27</sup> Booth takes it as self-evident—and I agree—that the ethical narrowness the book displays on these scales is not a good thing.

The example of *Jaws* demonstrates how when we read a story, it tries—metaphorically speaking—to mold us into the shapes the author has built into its structure. Entering a narrative world unavoidably gives us practice in being “that kind of desirer”—wanting, fearing, loving, or laughing according to the shape of the story—unless, Booth suggests, we practice some kind of ethical criticism in response.<sup>28</sup> This approach of considering what kind of character we are practicing when we immerse ourselves in a story allows for a nuanced assessment of the ethical quality of various narratives. Booth points out the subtlety available in ethical criticism that pays attention to the time we spend with a narrative as a friend: “Our interest here is in how we are shaped, far more than in what any seeming spokesman for the author may do or say at particular moments. Obviously when we think in this way, some of the most piously intended, openly moralistic works will reveal themselves as ethically shoddy, and some

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 204.

works with aggressive surface teachings of ‘the wrong kind’ might well prove, through the quality of the journey, ethically admirable.”<sup>29</sup>

### *Evaluating friendships*

Besides Booth’s seven spectrums of quality, how we experience a narrative ethically depends on a number of other factors that are visible within the metaphor of friendship. Booth contends that how we talk about what a work does for us depends on what it claims to do, how we experience what it does, what we know about what the original readers were expected to bring to it, and what we infer about its intention (whether it is meant to be serious or satirical, and so on). When our expectations change, our opinion of a work’s formal and ethical worth changes as well.<sup>30</sup> And, of course, different readers have different biases and skills, and so will experience the same work differently. Just as we don’t all choose the same human friends, we choose different narrative friends as well. At the same time, it is evident that some friends have more to offer than others.

Booth is very clear about the fact that he is calling for conversation, not consensus, in the appraisals we make of literary friends. This conversation will necessarily be multi-dimensional, since the choices we make about which literary friends we will spend time with are not simple. We balance gifts against deficiencies, which makes sense, since none of the qualities we look for in a narrative friend are desirable if

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 214.

they are limitless. Pushing any one quality too far at the expense of the others will destroy any friendship, says Booth.<sup>31</sup>

Booth emphasizes that differences in evaluation are vital to this project; without them, he admits that his metaphor would be useless or outright dangerous. Trying to determine a fixed point at which we can say that a certain narrative is so completely lacking on all of the spectrums of quality that it is not worth reading is the mistake of censors.<sup>32</sup> Who can say that something is irredeemable in every life context? A story that might be useless or damaging to one person might open up new worlds for another. Perhaps even *Jaws* might be the first step for a “reluctant reader” on a journey that could lead to the greatest classics. And in literature, as in life, we judge relative quality but don’t associate only with the best. As Booth says, “we can and do embrace many kinds and levels, with no assurance that we can finally discover that they are in harmony.”<sup>33</sup>

Booth’s desire for both criteria and conversation is very much in line with the perspective of principled plurality that I have been presenting throughout this dissertation. The impulse to ask the question “How should we live?” makes the search for criteria desirable, while the fact of human plurality calls for flexibility and a recognition of both the always-partial and the poly-storied nature of our ethical judgments.

### *The characters we are*

An integral part of Booth’s friendship metaphor is his emphasis on the reader’s character, and he claims that, until recently, it was assumed that it is possible to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 222.



distinguish good from bad character, and that the point of talking about character is to improve it.<sup>34</sup> As I have suggested, this is his way of expressing the same question I have taken up from Nussbaum as humanity's central ethical question: How should one live? Everyone who has read much "knows" that narratives influence behavior, Booth points out, and yet our culture—while flooded with projects for self-improvement—generally ignores the role of literary company in the formation of character.<sup>35</sup> Part of what Booth identifies as a widespread suspicion toward ethical criticism of stories is that since the Enlightenment, people have increasingly thought of character not as something built or formed through experience but as something individual and indivisible within, found by probing inward for the "the real me." Yet when we attempt to peel off the layers of "inauthentic" influences, such as church, family, politics, and so on, we find emptiness rather than bedrock.<sup>36</sup> Many thinkers have tried to point out that an isolated individual self does not and cannot exist, Booth recounts, but the idea of the self as a private individual has resisted attempts to dethrone it in North American culture.<sup>37</sup>

Despite this resistance, however, Booth casts his vote—and his powerfully persuasive rhetoric—on the side of the dissenters: "to attempt to go it alone is to destroy a 'self' that one never 'possessed' in the first place. To break off from my 'others' is to break off parts of my self."<sup>38</sup> Part of the reason for the persistence of individualism, explains Booth, is in reaction to excessive conformisms. We see this in modern literature as well as in the political sphere. Booth points out that our literary heroes are often those

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 227, 236.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 238–39.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 240.

who hold out against some dangerous group pressure. Ironically, these heroes of individualism would certainly be immune to the literary influences that have helped shape the way we think of the ideal individual as isolated and combatively resistant to conformity.<sup>39</sup>

Booth's conception of character, then, is of a complex, multi-layered phenomenon that involves the taking on and trying out of various roles and characteristics over time.<sup>40</sup> When we read, the patterning of our desires that we experience is a way of practicing character, and the more we practice, the more we will develop the characteristics and skills we find in the narrative. According to Booth, the more we become involved in a narrative, the more we become like our picture of the implied author, as we see, feel, love, or mock what he or she sees, feels, loves, or mocks.<sup>41</sup> That we become more discriminating as we mature does not mean that being mature means not "succumbing" at all. Our character, which Booth also describes "in the larger sense of the range of choices

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 240–41, 251.

<sup>40</sup> We can hear echoes here of Ricoeur's concept of "understanding oneself in front of the text": "It is not a question of imposing on the text our finite capacity for understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed." Likewise, although again in terms more expansive than I am willing to use, "just as the world of the text is real only insofar as it is imaginary, so too it must be said that the subjectivity of the reader comes to itself only insofar as it is placed in suspense, unrealized, potentialized. In other words, if fiction is a fundamental dimension of the reference of the text, it is no less a fundamental dimension of the subjectivity of the reader. As reader, I find myself only by losing myself. Reading introduces me into the imaginative variations of the ego." (Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press], 88.) Like Booth, however, I am interested in this interaction specifically in terms of ethical character rather than overall self-identity.

<sup>41</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 256.

and habits of choice available to us,” is, he claims, largely affected by what we feed our imaginations.<sup>42</sup>

Comparing Booth’s claims about character and the way it is influenced by the narratives we immerse ourselves in with my own claims about how the books we read contribute to our responses to the question of how we should live, one can see that we are using slightly different vocabularies to discuss similar themes. Booth’s anti-individualist emphasis allows us to avoid the individualist’s need for rules and formulas. We can try on any role for size, Booth contends, since we need not be anxious about preserving a unique core apart from the connections we are a part of.<sup>43</sup>

Booth identifies three possible ways for a reader to interact with a narrative: uncritical surrender, unchanged distance, or surrender plus ethical criticism, which can take the form of either supplementing a narrative with other narratives or discussing it with other people.<sup>44</sup> “Just as anyone who limits all friendship to one person risks becoming a partner in a *folie-à-deux*, a reader who becomes wholly absorbed with one author or one kind of narrative risks becoming grossly misshapen or, at best, frozen in one spot,” so Booth prescribes a varied narrative diet for all readers: “Powerful narratives provide our best criticism of other powerful narratives, our best antidote against any one thoughtlessly adopted role.”<sup>45</sup> We practice ethical criticism whenever we surrender to a narrative that does not simply reinforce our current fixed norms. This surrender is not a simple capitulation that sweeps away the reader’s own normative framework; however, Booth truly believes that when we let a story “in,” so to speak, we open ourselves to an

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 267–68.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 282.

alternate perspective that becomes part of our own internal ethical conversation.<sup>46</sup> This in itself is an act of ethical criticism, Booth insists. Like Nussbaum, though, Booth values an overt, non-narrative, critical appreciation of a narrative as an important form of ethical criticism, while recognizing that this form can never take the place of narratives themselves.<sup>47</sup>

One key insight to be gained from Booth's emphasis on multiple perspectives and character roles among people and within ourselves is that it is not only okay, but beneficial that readers will not always agree in their ethically critical discussions. As we listen to each other's responses to the stories we have spent time with, we will bring our own contexts and judgments to bear on the conversation. Perhaps praise is especially worth taking note of, since we can see from the friendship metaphor that enjoyment is tied to understanding. In a sense, what we like about a story could be considered normatively prior to what we dislike. After all, to really understand a book well enough to reject it, we must have spent time with it as a friend.

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<sup>46</sup> Booth's understanding of the way a text "enters into" the reader is reminiscent of Gadamer's description of a conversation with a text, in which "one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning. Nevertheless, in being changed back by understanding, the subject matter of which the text speaks itself finds expression. It is like a real conversation in that the common subject matter is what binds the two partners, the text and the interpreter, to each other. When a translator interprets a conversation, he can make mutual understanding possible only if he participates in the subject under discussion; so also in relation to a text it is indispensable that the interpreter participate in its meaning" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d, rev. ed., trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [New York: Continuum, 2004], 389). From this perspective as well, it makes sense to think of a story as somehow becoming part of the reader, since it is only through participating in the story through the act of reading (and therefore interpreting) that a story exists as other than print on a page.

<sup>47</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 285.

## *Worlds*

Toward the end of *The Company We Keep*, Booth expands his metaphor of friendship into a metaphor of worlds, since he feels that the vocabulary of friendship cannot quite sufficiently address the “metaphoric worlds” that some authors offer. These authors insist that the picture of the world they are presenting really is the way the world is, not just the way it seems. Choosing between imaginative worlds can sometimes be more like choosing between religions than choosing which friend to spend the day with, says Booth.<sup>48</sup> Booth appears to make this move partly because some of the examples he works with in this section are more insistent about the way the world is and how we must respond to it; responding to Norman Mailer by saying “Good to see you; I hope we can chat again soon” would indicate that we have totally missed what he is saying.

Actually, though, I think the friendship metaphor does not need to be expanded in this way. Perhaps Booth feels this move is necessary because of his authentic sense of how huge and mysterious our interaction with metaphor is. But human friends, too, live in different metaphoric worlds, and we can certainly spend time with different people without having to make a religious choice to fully imbibe their worldviews. And human friends, too, can be very insistent about the way the world is and how we must respond to it, but again that does not mean that we must fully enter into their perspectives in order to communicate with them. Booth’s emphasis on metaphor actually demonstrates this very point: “Even when an author explicitly claims to represent *the one true* world, everyone who is not totally converted to that one view can see that it is at best a metaphor, an abstraction torn from the heart of an ever-elusive and impenetrable mystery: the whole of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 335.

things.”<sup>49</sup> The vocabulary of worlds, in fact, makes it more difficult for Booth to communicate his own ideas to thinkers like Nussbaum, as we will see later.

Notably, Booth does not make use of the term “implied author” during his discussion of metaphorical worlds, and this makes his use of the term “author” somewhat nebulous, since the intentions of the actual writer would not necessarily be of foremost importance. In my reading of this section, I take Booth’s “author” to mean “implied author.” It may be that in these cases of an author insisting that a certain perspective represents the one true world, the writer is attempting to assimilate the implied author, so to speak, rather than letting the work speak for itself.

The overt discussion of metaphor is very important to Booth’s argument for polyphonic truth. He insists that in order to take seriously contradictory metaphors while avoiding absurd contradictions, we must recognize that metaphoric statements cannot be treated as direct propositions that conflict logically with each other.<sup>50</sup> Booth’s response to the question of how to deal with contradictory metaphors is to acknowledge that all statements of truth are partial, and to embrace the resulting plurality: “At any one moment we have a relatively small collection of worlds that we take together as a pretty good summary of the ‘real.’ But each new encounter with a powerful narrative throws a critical light on our previous collection. We can embrace its additions and negations vigorously, so long as we remember that like all the others, this is a metaphoric construction: a partial structure that stands in place of, or ‘is carried over from,’ whatever Reality may be.”<sup>51</sup> Like me, Booth claims, then, to treat narratives and philosophies as

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 345.

rivals not because they are all “fictions” but because they are all philosophical. And he insists that we recognize that we cannot harmonize all the different narratives we imbibe or even all that we appreciate. According to Booth, “Human life is inherently, inescapably multivalent, poly-storied, pluri-mythic.”<sup>52</sup> He points to the disasters that have resulted from insistently mono-mythic endeavors, arguing that skepticism too is a result of the attempt to find one correct myth or grand narrative. He therefore holds to the assumptions that every “going” myth has some truth to it or it would have been discarded, that no one myth can give any culture all it needs, and that although mono-myths may occasionally seem to serve better, at this point in history we are so entwined in rival myths that we need a scrupulously pluralistic ethical criticism to make sense of things.<sup>53</sup> As I see it, these assumptions show a recognition of the intrinsic plurality of human life, as well as the positive side of the complexity that arises from that plurality. They also point to our inability to articulate all that is of ethical significance; we cannot simply lay out different ethical perspectives and decide between them. Mono-myths are not the bridges between myths that they pretend to be. Stories, on the other hand, make very good bridges, or at least trampolines.

One of the reasons that Booth values the differences among grand narratives is that no one metaphoric construction can easily address some aspects of life that other grand narratives address effectively. Each rival metaphoric world perspective can profit from comparison to and criticism by others. Booth goes so far as to claim that every event is inescapably plural as it occurs, since each participant will experience it differently. The only way around this would be if everyone involved could reach a single

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 350.

rational judgment about it; however, Booth claims, the surest sign that people are *not* reasoning together is if they totally agree. Thus we must not just tolerate different viewpoints, but actively seek them out. If we do not find them, “we must suspect collusion or coercion.”<sup>54</sup>

A plurality of perspectives that are not easily reconciled is the very aspect that makes the work of many well-known authors so appealing. That many disparate elements can converse with each other in and through story both reveals and responds to the complexities of our own lives. As Michael Cadden writes in his book about author Ursula K. Le Guin, “Dialogue, while concerned with interdependence, does not insist upon a synthesized or reconciled position but revels in simultaneous, separate, and equally powerful positions in concert with each other.”<sup>55</sup>

### *Friend, lover, or companion?*

These thoughts should sound familiar to anyone who has been introduced to Hannah Arendt’s insistence on the intrinsically plural nature of human life. Nussbaum, however, is not satisfied with this kind of talk. In her lengthy review of *The Company We Keep*, published as an essay in *Love’s Knowledge*, she makes a number of interesting points. She summarizes and lauds Booth’s call for reflection on the literary friendships we take part in. Booth’s idea of “coduction”—a kind of communal, conversational process of judgment—also lines up well with Nussbaum’s call for a conversation to come to always-revisable judgments. But Nussbaum draws back from the possibility of outright

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 364–65.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Cadden, *Ursula K. Le Guin Beyond Genre: Fiction for Children and Adults* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.



contradiction—from the concert of irreconcilable positions referred to by Cadden.

Nussbaum is drawn to a certain kind of dialogue, and a certain kind of friend; despite her commitment to inclusive conversation, she is uncomfortable with the possibility of real internal contradiction at a fundamental level.

In fact, Nussbaum is not entirely satisfied with Booth's project on several counts. For one, she wishes that he would have said more about how novels are unique. Nussbaum says that novels "offer a distinctive patterning of desire and thought, in virtue of the ways in which they ask readers to care about particulars, and to feel for those particulars a distinctive combination of sympathy and excitement."<sup>56</sup> Of course, this is Nussbaum's pet project, but a significant point nonetheless. Booth has made a very general argument for the metaphor of narrative friendship. In retrospect, the only exception to the applicability of his argument I can think of that he mentions explicitly, if somewhat tongue-in-cheek, is a "required reading" list. He addresses numerous examples throughout the book, ranging from advertising ditties to various forms of poetry to massive novels to cheap escape literature. In a sense, then, the question of how each narrative form is unique is beyond the scope of his project. But the question remains as to whether certain forms—as opposed to simply better quality within any form—have more to offer, ethically speaking.

Nussbaum's next complaint is a bit more complex. She suggests first of all that Booth elides between the language of friendship and the language of seduction. She classes his use of terms such as "succumb" and "surrender" as erotic, and opposed to Booth's self-confessed adherence to the ideal of Aristotelian friendship, which, says

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<sup>56</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "Reading for Life," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 236.

Nussbaum, has the friends maintain independence and critical autonomy. This is the point at which Nussbaum would like to assert distinctions among genres. Philosophical texts, she asserts, unlike novels, generally “do not invite the reader to fall in love.”<sup>57</sup>

However, I think Booth’s metaphor holds up here. Although Booth does insist that if we are really to spend time in friendship with a narrative, we must in some sense come to it trustingly, there is no sense that we therefore lose our independence or critical autonomy. Indeed, if a text tries to go “too far,” we will almost inevitably either reject it or become inadvertently distanced from it even as we read. This is as true for philosophical texts (insofar as they can be called narrative) as it is for novels. And it appears that Nussbaum does recognize this to a certain extent. In the paragraph following her claim that philosophical texts ask readers to be wary and distrustful, she acknowledges that some do offer friendship. And just a few paragraphs later she goes even further, saying, “For philosophy, too, has its seductive power, its power to lure the reader away from the richly textured world of particulars to the lofty heights of abstraction.”<sup>58</sup>

It seems that Nussbaum’s recognition of the novel’s special power leads her to attempt distinctions that she doesn’t actually follow through. Perhaps she is simply trying to emphasize that some friendships are healthier than others. Booth’s friendship metaphor never denies that some friendships are better and offer more than others, however, and I don’t think it rules out the occasional seduction, either. I suspect that Nussbaum actually wants to compare alternatives within the Aristotelian perspective, while Booth wants to let alternatives, including the Aristotelian perspective, criticize each other.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 238.

Still, though, Nussbaum's question does point to something: Are all those we spend time with really our friends? Booth talks about different kinds and levels of friendship, but perhaps that is still sometimes too strong of a word. When we are following metaphors through, the choice of words we make is vital, since a different word choice can change the import of the entire metaphor. We can spend at least some time with, and therefore be impacted by, people or books who might be better described by a word other than "friend." Some books, like some people, are simply companions, I suggest. We spend time with them, and are at least somewhat patterned by their patterns of desire, but without the commitment that a friendship entails. With a difference in degree, I suspect, comes a difference in kind.

Does my choice of a different word for some cases affect the central import of Booth's model? I don't believe so. Our characters are still responsive to the company we keep, whether we keep company with friends or companions. Nussbaum's desire to extend the metaphor in the opposite direction, so to speak, demonstrates its strength. Her suggestion that some books seduce us, rather than offering friendship, leads her to suggest as well that we can treat books in a way we couldn't ethically treat human beings—by using them to mindlessly numb our worries.<sup>59</sup> She hopes, then, that though hiring a prostitute is ethically damaging, crashing on the couch with a Dick Francis novel is not doing anyone any harm.

Yet according to Booth's metaphor—and I think he is accurate about this—Nussbaum is still "harming" herself when she chooses to spend time with this companion. She is for that time fitting herself into a world of gratuitous violence and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 240.

“strong yet sensitive” *machismo*. (Yes, I occasionally read Dick Francis books too, but always with a sense that they are not doing me any good!) Even though Nussbaum’s worldview is very likely opposed to much of the implied author’s in any Dick Francis book, while she is reading it she does somehow submit to the fixed norms therein, becoming “that kind of desirer,” as Booth puts it, unless she is actively engaged in ethical criticism as she reads—which, if she is looking for mindless escape from the stresses of essay-writing, is probably not the case.

### *Belief and metaphor*

Nussbaum’s most serious concern comes, I believe, from a misreading on her part and an unnecessary metaphorical extension on Booth’s. She is concerned about Booth’s pluralism when it comes to what she considers to be contradictory “world-versions.” This is her interpretation of Booth’s discussion of metaphoric worlds that I briefly addressed earlier. She seems to have been alerted to this potential problem by her standard oversensitivity to religious overtones; the first specific “contradiction” she refers to comes from a footnote on page 173, where Booth appears to support both the Aristotelian rational idea of friendship and the Christian command to love our enemies, which Nussbaum cannot reconcile. However, this is simply one example of a basic misunderstanding on her part. She states that “Booth explicitly urges the reader to take in, and to believe, a collection of cosmic myths” that are incoherent and contradictory.<sup>60</sup>

However, when we look at the text she is referring to, we can see that Nussbaum has added a significant word, and therefore a significant concept, to what Booth is saying.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 243.

He does indeed say that “the total collection of cosmic myths that any one person can take in will always be to some degree incoherent and self-contradictory,” but nowhere does he say that we need to “believe” these myths. To “take in,” as I understand it, simply means to listen sympathetically to someone’s perspective, while to “believe” entails making that perspective one’s own. In the section referenced by Nussbaum, Booth is referring to the fact that, for example, Burke, Mailer, Tolstoy, Austen, Sophocles, Plato, Spinoza, Kant, and Saint Matthew all offer us a different perspective on what the world is really like.<sup>61</sup> But Nussbaum is reading “cosmic myths” in a religious sense, apparently forgetting that Booth is talking about the metaphorical world that an implied author presents. These “myths” do not need to be “believed.”

This misunderstanding is, I believe, evidence that Booth’s move from literary friendship to metaphorical world in his discussion of what an implied author offers the reader was a mistaken move. In an effort to make clear the sweeping presence of narrative metaphor, he has actually made it more difficult for readers like Nussbaum to follow his argument. Nussbaum notices the effort, but hasn’t been able to make sense of it. She says, “This more sweeping and problematic pluralism does not seem to be an easily eliminable feature in the book, since Booth makes such assertions often, as if they had some importance.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed these assertions do have importance—they are central to Booth’s entire project of pointing out that “[h]uman life is inherently, inescapably multivalent, poly-storied, plurimythic.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 348.

<sup>62</sup> Nussbaum, “Reading for Life,” 243.

<sup>63</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 348.

This is where the metaphor of literary friendship is so helpful. Surely it is not only possible, but healthy, to have a wide variety of friendships and to participate in discussions with friends who have many different perspectives. The fact that I have been close friends since my first year in college with a conservative, politically right-leaning woman who believes that women should be subordinate to men—all perspectives to which I am strongly opposed—makes it impossible for me to doubt this. This friend and I share an earthy interest in the practical side of things, as well as a strong commitment to the inseparability of lifestyle and religion, even though our understandings of that religion are widely different at certain points. However, what we share has been enough to keep us friends through her diagnosis of diabetes, the breaking up and new formation of committed relationships, moves to different parts of the continent, the birth of my children, and her inability to have biological children and subsequent choices to foster and adopt at-risk babies. I have maintained friendships with books, too, that display perspectives I consider seriously problematic. A paradigmatic example would be Richard Adams's *Watership Down*, a book that I have loved for many years. Its scope and power, and its deeply imagined rabbit culture, have allowed me to retain it as a friend despite its blatant, scientifically inaccurate male supremacism and militarism.<sup>64</sup> Because it is so well written, I still find it worth spending time with even as I criticize its very serious shortcomings. That we are made up of incoherent, overlapping selves is what carries Booth's entire argument; disconnects at certain points do not necessarily mean no connection is possible.

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<sup>64</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin has written a brief but telling commentary on *Watership Down* in *Cheek by Jowl: Talks and Essays on How and Why Fantasy Matters* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2009), 79–82.

The evidence of my own experience, then, demonstrates that as long as you and I have some point of significant connection, we can have a lasting, meaningful friendship even though we may passionately hold widely different viewpoints in other areas. And even if some of these friends do demand that we convert to their religion, or insist that they have the only true perspective, we can still see that it is possible to have other friends with other perspectives as well. But once we begin to talk about “cosmic myths,” it becomes more difficult to remember that conversation among different worldviews—the most important form of ethical criticism in Booth’s discussion—is even possible.

This demonstrates once again, I believe, that the metaphors of narrative friendship and companionship create an ideal space for ethical criticism and communal judgment. To put this to the test, I turn in the next chapter to an experiment of philosophical commentary on some of my own narrative friends, addressing as well the potentially companionable relationship between philosophy and fiction.

## 6. Philosophical Stories

Many of us can name specific stories, told by others or in book form, that profoundly influenced the way we see the world—and thus, our lived philosophies. I have argued that a significant aspect of philosophical fiction's—and, in particular, young adult fiction's—valuable contribution to both lived and academic philosophy is its imaginative power to enlarge perspectives, criticize from the margins, and galvanize readers to engage with injustice in the context of the widespread tendencies toward pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality that I described in Chapter 1.

After explicating the distinction between lived and academic philosophy and situating my project among other conversations (Chapter 2), I argued for the philosophical and ethical significance of philosophical interaction with story (Chapter 3). I drew together the themes of the integrality of form and content, the ability of storytelling to act as critical thinking in context, and the key role of particularity in the context of plurality to point to the need for a way to approach fiction in its intrinsic plurality without losing the possibility of shared criteria. To address this need, I highlighted the inability of a causal model to sufficiently describe our interaction with fiction and discussed the reality that art both suggests and requires interpretation, arguing that fiction's ethical contribution to philosophy needs to be understood as thoroughly hermeneutical (Chapter 4).

In quest of a noncausal metaphor for interaction with fiction, I settled on narrative companionship, a variation of Wayne C. Booth's metaphor of stories as friends (explored in Chapter 5), to show that it indeed makes sense that we feel varied influences when reading varied books, just as we do when we step out in companionship with varied



people. In this final chapter, I seek to demonstrate the fruitfulness of this metaphor. There are many ways of looking at stories other than treating them as companions, of course. As I indicated in Chapter 1, academic philosophy has tended to see stories as tools rather than companions. In this chapter, I consider these two basic approaches in terms of several stories that have informed my own lived philosophy. I seek to demonstrate through philosophical commentary that these stories have more to offer philosophically when they are approached as companions than when they are treated as tools.

I address three stories, each of which I have experienced as a worthy companion in its own way. I demonstrate my understanding of Nussbaumian philosophical commentary by practicing it on each of these stories, summing up each discussion with a review of where the story stands in terms of Booth's spectrums of quality: quantity of invitations offered, degree of responsibility or reciprocity asked of us, degree of intimacy, intensity of engagement, coherence of proffered world, distance between narrative world and ours ("otherness"), and kind or range of kinds of activities suggested, invited, or demanded. In seeking to demonstrate interactions with stories as companions, I do not approach the individual stories as if it were possible to determine a structure for the philosophical commentary before getting to know the story, as if a universalizable systematic analysis were my goal. Rather, I approach each story as a unique friend, seeking to make explicit some of what it has to offer to a philosophical engagement while respecting its unique integrality of form and content—what the story has to say and how it says it.

In making my own attempt at philosophical commentary, I address two young adult novels and a contrasting short story to illustrate the two ways story is often used as

a philosophical tool: story-as-hammer and story-as-example. As I suggested in Chapter 1, these are the most common roles we find for fiction in philosophy, and they do have their uses. I note the usefulness inherent in these approaches, but also the limitations that a different way of reading gets beyond. In this way, I hope to throw into relief the kind of philosophical commentary that Nussbaum suggests will make more explicit the contributions of these works. Nussbaum's call is a lofty one:

In order to be an ally of literature, and to direct the reader to that variety and complexity, rather than away from it, this Aristotelian style itself will have to differ greatly from much philosophical writing that we commonly encounter: for it will have to be non-reductive, and also self-conscious about its own lack of completeness, gesturing toward experience and toward the literary texts, as spheres in which a greater completeness should be sought. But it will need to differ from the novels as well, if it is going to show the distinctive features of the novels in a way that contrasts them with features of other conceptions. Both the literary works and the "philosophical criticism" that presents them are essential parts of the overall philosophical task.<sup>1</sup>

In line with my suggestion in the previous chapter that books are potential companions, I call this alliance story-as-companion.

By bringing into the discussion Booth's spectrums of quality, I hope to articulate the reader's engagement with the story in a way that clarifies the differences between approaching stories as examples, hammers, or companions. Applying Booth's categories is, in a sense, a practice of orienting oneself to the particular companion one wants to engage in conversation. It is helpful to have some sense of a companion's characteristics, knee-jerk reactions, taboo subjects, and so on, in order to have fruitful conversation. In this way, Booth's spectrums make conversation more possible, more fruitful, although they aren't themselves all that is necessary for conversation to happen, of course. With

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<sup>1</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 49.

each story, then, I ask: How do Booth's spectrums of quality help illumine the way in which treating stories as philosophical companions deals with the stories more fully than does treating them simply as tools?

All of the stories I have chosen to discuss as philosophical fiction are centered around female protagonists. Reading these stories has played a part in the development of my own approach to the world, deepening my understanding of how the apparently negative events that occur in our lives contribute to our sense of self and increasing my self-awareness in regard to gender relations. They also do a particularly good job of exploring themes of ethical insight and enlarged mentality, and working them out in concrete, if imaginary, situations. While not necessarily addressing the question "How should we live?" directly, the stories uniquely work to encourage a movement in the perspective of the reader which is likely to contribute to the reader's lived philosophy as well.

### *Example, hammer, and companion*

The first story I explore is Cynthia Voigt's *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*,<sup>2</sup> which addresses the ubiquitous issue of finding one's place in the world through the story of a teenage girl facing up to the challenge of responding to an unexpected, difficult situation—in particular, the loss of her leg in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. Through my discussion of this book, I seek to make manifest its philosophical character and demonstrate the limitations of treating it as a philosophical example. To emphasize the difference between the story-as-example and story-as-companion, I address C.L. Moore's

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<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Voigt, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986).

“No Woman Born,”<sup>3</sup> a science fictional short story that highlights issues of how the human mind and body interact through the story of a woman who receives a metal body when her human body dies. The other book-length work I have chosen is set in the fantastical world of Earthsea; Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Tehanu*<sup>4</sup> is simply one of the best published works of feminist philosophy that I have ever come across. Through my exploration of how this book can be seen as feminist philosophy, I more thoroughly examine the issue of a story-as-hammer.

As I indicated above, I identify two main approaches to philosophical fiction: story-as-tool and story-as-companion. The story-as-tool approach is further divided into two sub-categories: story-as-example and story-as-hammer. At the heart of the story-as-example is that the *reader* recognizes a philosophical idea in a story, and uses the story to *illustrate* this idea in his or her commentary. The story is not seen to contribute anything new except in that its form may make the idea more clear, potent, or memorable. The goal of using the story-as-example is to clarify something. At the heart of the story-as-hammer, on the other hand, is that an *author* has a philosophical idea and aims to *express* it through a story. The story is written for a predetermined end, to make a certain point. There is little question about what the message of the story is. The goal of using the story-as-hammer is to change someone.

The story-as-example is a tool in service of philosophy; it is generally first of all an approach from the reader’s side, though some stories invite being used as examples more than others. This, of course, may be due to the philosophical climate and current

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<sup>3</sup> C. L. Moore, “No Woman Born,” in *Feminist Philosophy And Science Fiction: Utopias And Dystopias*, ed. Judith A. Little (Potsdam, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 47–90.

<sup>4</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *Tehanu* (New York: Simon Pulse Paperbacks, 1990).

fads as much as to the stories themselves. Like the story-as-example, the story-as-hammer is a tool in the service of philosophy; it is generally first of all an approach from the side of the author, although stories can certainly be experienced, read, or used as hammers when they were not intended as such. For example, when the reader finds the reality being presented in a story altogether too alien, he or she may experience the story as a hammer even though it was not intentionally written as such—coming face to face with too alternate of a reality can easily lead to defensiveness.

A helpful way to see the distinction between the story-as-example and the story-as-hammer is by considering where the weight of intentionality lies, so to speak. In the story-as-example, it is the reader's intention to seize the story as an illustration of the reader's own philosophical idea, whereas in the story-as-hammer, it is the author's (or teacher's or philosopher's) intention to impact and change the reader with a philosophical idea. A spatial metaphor may be helpful here: In the story-as-example, the reader moves forward to act upon the text, while in the story-as-hammer, the reader is knocked backward by the force of the text. Again, this distinction is a matter of approach and experience, not a hard-and-fast characteristic of a certain story, although some stories clearly do invite one experience more than the other.

Let me clarify that the distinction between whose intention is dominant is not meant to indicate that the story-as-example is only a matter of reader approach, or that the story-as-hammer is only dependent on the author. An author may also write a story to work through a thought experiment; this could easily constitute approaching the story as an example. Likewise, a reader can approach a story as a hammer by either taking a defensive stance toward it from the start or by seeking to use it as a hammer toward other

readers. In both the story-as-example and the story-as-hammer, the “point” of the story is in a sense separable from the story itself; it is a tool to be used either to clarify or to change.

In contrast to the story-as-example and story-as-hammer, at the heart of story-as-companion is philosophy and story working together, rather than making use of each other. In companionship with a story, philosophical commentary can make more explicit the contributions a story has to make philosophically. This is again primarily an approach on the side of the reader, although again some stories invite this kind of companionship more than others; it seems likely that these stories were approached as companions by their authors as well, although this is by no means necessary.

The distinct relationships to a story that I have identified as story-as-example, story-as-hammer, and story-as-companion are of course not as distinct as my identification makes them sound. There are gradations and variations from each to the others, and many commentaries will contain elements of more than one. Also, as I mentioned above, stories can be approached in these ways by the author as well as by the reader, making them more or less available to various ways of reading. However, each of these categories does have a distinguishable kernel at its heart which, I think, makes the distinctions worthwhile and useful. Since my project focuses on philosophical commentary, I primarily address the way we approach stories as readers; making recommendations to authors is outside of my scope.

We can see from the way I have expressed the distinctions between story-as-example, story-as-hammer, and story-as-companion that the commentator, reader, and (implied) author all factor in to some extent. The intent of an author (or, perhaps more

relevant here, the metaphorical intent of an implied author), how we experience a story, and how we approach a story philosophically all interact with each other, in keeping with the thoroughly hermeneutical texture of philosophical fiction as an art form. Let's turn to my area of focus, young adult fiction, beginning with *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* by Cynthia Voigt. This book has been an estimable companion on my own philosophical journey and a book I have returned to many times over the years.

### *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*

Meet Izzy Lingard, a nice but normal upper-middle-class high school sophomore somewhere in the United States, sometime in the last few decades. Not someone you'd be especially interested in getting to know, but someone nice to have around when you do. Her family is nice and law-abiding—"we Lingards were nice people,"<sup>5</sup> she says early on in the book—intelligent but unimaginative. Izzy herself is somewhat eclipsed by very energetic older twin brothers and a moody and demanding younger sister, but she doesn't think in depth about her place in the family, or much of anything else, for that matter. B student, plenty of friends, Izzy in the middle slips along through her life, normal enough to fight with her parents and nice enough to not do it too often. Nice. Normal.

On the first page of Voigt's *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* we meet Izzy in a state of semi-consciousness as she is about to have her right leg amputated below the knee. The doctors call her by her full name, Isobel, which troubles her because nobody calls her that in her normal life. Through a brief but artistic series of flashbacks we follow Izzy through the lack of healing of her seriously damaged leg, and then further back to the cause of the

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<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Voigt, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*, 58. In the following discussion, all parenthetical page numbers refer to this book.

catastrophe: a normal date to an after-game party, until her drunk escort, Marco, insists on driving her home and instead drives her into a tree. From the amputation of her leg, we follow Izzy in her gradual transformation toward Isobel; she changes from a nice, normal nobody into a person who has developed depth and a sense of selfhood. Like many works of young adult fiction, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*'s strong focus on character makes highly available the reader's opportunity to step into someone's shoes as the character changes. The reader can, in Booth's terms, "try on" the character's enlarging perspective.<sup>6</sup> More than this, we see—and, in a sense, experience—how something beyond the scope of a person's possibilities can widen that person's sense of what is possible.

Because we meet Izzy at the moment of transition, so to speak, we have to take her word for it when she describes her past self. It is evident that her judgment is accurate, however, both from the way we see others respond to her and from the way she herself responds to what has happened. Her first question to herself when she wakes up in the hospital is, "What is a nice girl like me doing in a place like this?" Her identity up until this point has been pretty much summed up by niceness: "A nice girl—that's just exactly what I was. Am. Most of the people I know don't want to be just nice. They want to be interesting, or exciting, romantic, terrific—something special. I don't think I ever wanted to be more than nice. Nice suited me" (2). As she slips into depression following abandonment by the friends, Suzy, Lisa, and Lauren, that she had assumed would stay around her, she articulates her first understanding of the change she has undergone: "I was supposed to be nice, that's what I was, a nice girl." And then, "Not any more, that wasn't what I was. Now I was a cripple" (59). It is clear that Izzy's nice, normal life has

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 5 for a discussion of this idea.



not prepared her for what seems to her to be total catastrophe: with the loss of her leg she sees the loss of her status, her freedom, her friends. Loss and limitation are everywhere she looks. She has taken for granted a life of privilege up to this point, a life which made assumptions about bodily wholeness and generally privileged treatment that can no longer be made.

As the days in the hospital stretch on and her family and former friends appear to go on with their lives, Izzy's depression deepens. We see the change in how she is experiencing her surroundings highlighted in her description of the hospital food. When she first wakes up after the amputation and eats real food instead of being fed through an IV, she feels that she has forgotten how to eat and is amazed by how good food tastes: "I started with the eggs. Scrambled eggs are the only kind I really like, usually, but these eggs—with the rich yolk mixed in over the silky whites, with salt and pepper and just a touch of butter—I had never before realized how good eggs could taste. I'd never noticed how the different flavors of different foods filled up my mouth" (24).

Later, when she has realized that people—including her friends—will now see her as a cripple, her feelings toward food have changed dramatically. "The afternoon dragged by. I had a snack of peanut butter, crackers and an apple, but it wasn't crunchy peanut butter so I didn't eat it, and the apple wasn't at all crisp. Dinner came in, but I wasn't hungry. I ate the mashed potatoes, because the gravy was OK, but left the two thin slices of meat and the limp salad and the lumpy pudding and the peas. I never eat peas" (68). In both descriptions we see a glimpse of the former Izzy's classic likes and dislikes ("Scrambled eggs are the only kind I really like, usually; I never eat peas"), but this is merely the frame for an expression of intense emotion, and of a dramatic emotional shift.

Izzy's "niceness" is not enough to keep her from the depression that convinces her that looking at her makes her former friends feel sick (which is unfortunately not totally untrue, if not in exactly the sense she means), and that her family is happy to have her off in the hospital and doesn't even want her to come home (which is fortunately not at all true).

It is hard to say where Izzy's depression would have led her; perhaps she would eventually have come to a place of self-acceptance in any case. Enter a catalyst, however, in the form of Rosamunde Webber. Rosamunde is a girl that the former Izzy had always felt sorry for and looked down on because she is overweight, not well off, badly dressed, and socially inept. From Izzy's former privileged perspective, all these characteristics had seemed difficult burdens to bear, since looks, money, style, and niceness formed the boundaries of her world. But Rosamunde has humor and intelligence, as well as the ability—or social ineptitude—to be honest with Izzy, to push her toward regaining her independence, and most importantly, to see and enjoy Izzy for who she is and not just what she has become. Rosamunde—unlike Izzy's "friends"—visits Izzy faithfully for the rest of her hospital stay, loaning her items to brighten up her room and games to play, and bringing tasty homemade treats that reawaken Izzy's appetite, figuratively as well as literally. It is Rosamunde who first forces Izzy beyond a simple understanding of herself as crippled and therefore worthless. Since according to Izzy's former standards, she has nothing to offer Rosamunde, Rosamunde's attention points to the fact that there is much more to Izzy, at least potentially, than Izzy herself had ever realized.

The effect that Rosamunde has on Izzy is nearly instantaneous. During her first, brief visit, Rosamunde says a lot more about the accident and Izzy's new handicap than

anyone has yet said to her, and Izzy doesn't enjoy it. When Rosamunde leaves, Izzy sums up the visit for herself: "Weird, it was definitely weird, she was really weird. What was Rosamunde Webber doing coming to see me in the hospital anyway? I was almost amused by the visit, now that it was over" (84-85). But Izzy's mother walks in a few minutes later and tells her she just saw a girl in the front of the elevators sobbing as if "all the troubles in the world were on her shoulders," and in her description Izzy recognizes Rosamunde. When we see Izzy trying to make sense of this, she is already moving toward a new independence of thought: "It wasn't as if we were friends, Rosamunde and I, and she certainly hadn't looked upset when she left the room. I thought about asking my mother about it, but then I thought that I didn't want to hear what she thought until I knew what I thought. If I didn't know what I thought first, I'd probably just take her ideas for my own" (85-86).

Up to this point in the story Izzy's self-identity has been centered around understanding the change from "normal" to "crippled." With the entrance of Rosamunde into her life, however, the movement becomes more distinctly positive: We begin to see how the unexpected, in the form of Rosamunde as well as in the more drastic unexpectedness of the amputation, can actually work to deepen a person's selfhood. The possibilities that exist for Izzy are expanding as she begins, perhaps for the first time ever, to really think for herself and to specifically choose to think for herself.

A few minutes after leaving Izzy's room Rosamunde calls from the pay phone downstairs to apologize for upsetting Izzy and to tell her that she had planned to come cheer her up with jokes, like "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" Izzy is utterly surprised that Rosamunde thought of that too. But at the end of the

conversation, already beginning to push Izzy toward a new identity, Rosamunde says, “The trouble with you, Isobel Lingard, is that you’re so nice, I can’t even tell when you’re being nice and when you mean what you’re saying” (88). Rosamunde’s use of Izzy’s full name, as well as the complaint that she makes, point ahead to the changing identity that Izzy is already beginning to move toward.

In fact, Rosamunde has always seen more in Izzy than Izzy has seen in herself. On Rosamunde’s second visit, when she brings “some stuff” for Izzy in a borrowed carrier, we see the foundation of what will clearly build into a solid friendship. The importance of the scene in revealing the interrelation between Izzy and Rosamunde merits a lengthy quotation:

“Why don’t you stay anyway?” I said. Actually, I mumbled it, because I knew it was what I should say, and I sort of wanted her to stay, but I also wanted her to go.

“No, listen, it’s OK, I understand,” she said. “I mean, I know I always say these stupid things, but I’m pretty smart.” She sort of smiled and jammed her hands into the pockets of her windbreaker. “I can understand that you want me to go, and you’re too nice to say so, but it’s OK, really, it doesn’t bother me—”

“I wouldn’t mind,” I interrupted her, because she was rattling on like Suzy. “It can’t hurt, can it?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Yes, it could. That’s what worries me, about hurting your feelings, or something. Inadvertently.”

I didn’t know what to answer.

“And besides—” She hesitated.

“I’d like you to,” I said. “At least, I think I would, if you want the exact truth. If you want the exact truth, it gets pretty depressing, sometimes.”

“Really? Boy, I’m glad to hear that.” Rosamunde took off her jacket and draped it on the visitor’s chair. She folded up the carrier and rested it against the wall. “I don’t know why she’s so fussy about that, it couldn’t have cost her more than a dollar-fifty at a yard sale, the way it’s rusted up. Because I was afraid you were some sort of supergirl, you know? Or, maybe, you were being brave and everything, and you’d probably go crazy if you were making those impossible demands on yourself. Or, I guess you could be too stupid to figure out how bad it is.”

I just sat there in the hospital bed. You didn't *say* things like that. Rosamunde looked at my face and then put her hand up over her eyes. I guessed she knew all right that you didn't say things like that, only she never knew it until after she'd said them.

On the other hand, I guessed what she said was true.

"You know," I admitted, "I think it's a little bit of all three of those."

Rosamunde uncovered her eyes. "I knew I wasn't wrong. About you." Her voice rang, almost like music. "I wasn't sure, but I knew it" (103-4).

As Izzy makes the transition from hospital to home, her friendship with Rosamunde continues to develop. Two of Izzy's former friends, Suzy and Lisa, stop by briefly a couple of times, but their visits are awkward and full of things not said. Izzy begins to realize that Suzy's friendship is not worth trying to keep, and although Lisa would be willing to make an effort, she follows where Suzy leads. Izzy's mother is concerned that Izzy is seeing so much of Rosamunde and not her former friends, especially Lisa. She doesn't want Izzy to drop Lisa's friendship while in "this period of adjustment." Izzy thinks in response: "I wanted to tell her that I didn't think it was a period of adjustment, but a change. A big change. But I didn't want to upset her. It must have been hard enough on her, acting calm and collected and grown up because that was what I needed her to be. I knew sort of what she wanted for me, in my life, what she thought was important. I agreed with her, too; I wanted the same things for me. But I didn't think I could get them, not any more; certainly not in the old easy way. And I wondered, too, if there weren't other things I might want, not instead of, but along with what the old Izzy would have wanted" (211). This is perhaps the first indication that Izzy herself is becoming aware that the changes she is undergoing have a positive side as well as the more obvious negative side.

One of the most surprisingly powerful tactics Voigt uses to keep us in tune with the inner Izzy is introduced as soon as we know the basic events up to the amputation of her leg. After Izzy wakes up, clearheaded for the first time in quite a while, she describes how she feels: “Inside my head, I saw this little person, a miniature Izzy in a leotard, kind of smoky blue, to match my eyes. The little Izzy raised her hands over her head and did a back flip, landing with her arms stretched out and her back arched, like Mary Lou Retton. That was a joke because I couldn’t do a back flip to save my life, I couldn’t even do a good back dive off of a board—but it was just exactly how I felt” (22–23). This little Izzy in her head gradually becomes a fixture during the rest of the book, enabling us to see into Izzy’s deepest feelings at any moment. Surprisingly, this never becomes trite or tedious. Voigt has managed to tap into a way of experiencing the world that both rings true and allows the reader impossible access to a character’s sense of self without having her come across as self-absorbed or even unusually self-aware. The new self-awareness we see in Izzy comes rather through the way she thinks about herself and those around her, and through the choices she makes.

Izzy becomes aware of her new identity as “crippled” when her friends visit her for the first time and act awkward and uncomfortable. After they leave, “It was as if the little Izzy was running around and around in circles, some frantic wind-up Izzy, screeching *No, no, no*” (49). After Suzy and Lisa stop by again briefly more than a week later, “the miniature Izzy in my head just stood there, hanging onto a walker, all drooped over it. They’d been forced to come. They hadn’t even ever asked about what had happened to me. ‘How are you?’ they asked and I said, ‘Fine,’ and they took that for the truth. Gray water rose up over the miniature Izzy’s bent head” (72). The miniature Izzy is

not always simply an expression of how the full-size Izzy feels, however. Toward the beginning, the little Izzy can be downright uncooperative, doing back flips when the real Izzy is feeling far from happy, and particularly when she is finding things especially hard to accept. This happens, for example, after Izzy has looked at her amputated leg for the first time: “Inside my head that stupid little Izzy in her leotard still did back flips, but it was hard and heavy going for her and I felt like reaching my hand into my imagination and knocking her over” (96). This mechanism, then, is not intended merely to illustrate a point—to show Izzy’s feelings. Rather, it is in a sense uncooperative, revealing more and different things than we’d expect it to reveal. As art does, the story is asking of the reader not merely comprehension, but interpretation.

Not long after she has settled in at home, Izzy receives a visit from Tony and Deborah, two of the “big” students at the high school. Tony is the “king of the roost,” as Rosamunde calls him, the boy all the girls (except the ones like Rosamunde, who have further life ambitions) have a bit of a crush on. Tony had been at the party, and had offered to take Izzy home when he saw how drunk Marco was, but didn’t insist. Tony and Deborah come to ask Izzy to work on the school newspaper; being on the paper was “a select crowd of people, about the best people in the school ... the ones who were smart but not weird, the most interesting people” (189). Izzy says no, because she knows that they’re asking her out of guilt, and would never have considered her if the accident hadn’t happened.

“For God’s sake, Izzy,” Tony said. “Look, of course it’s because we feel guilty. I mean, who wouldn’t? I should have gone ahead and taken you home, I should have had the guts. And the brains too. And it’s because I feel sorry for you, too, if you must have the truth.”

I didn’t feel any need for the truth, frankly.

“And I thought this would be easy,” Tony said to Deborah. “Once I nerved myself to do it. We underestimated you, Izzy.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“But I really want you to try it, and I think you *ought* to, for your own sake.” He stood in front of me, waiting for my answer. “If it makes any difference, I’d feel a hell of a lot better about myself if you’d agree to try it” (190).

Deborah reminds Tony not to rush Izzy, and they leave her with time to decide. In fact, by this time Izzy’s concern is outdated, we might say. She is right about their motivations in asking her, but she is wrong—as Tony realizes when she initially refuses—in thinking that the fact that they would not have asked her before the accident means that she is not worth being asked now.

Eventually Izzy has to face up to going back to school. She has been putting it off partly because she is naturally afraid of the kind of attention and pity she’ll get, and partly because she isn’t sure how she will respond to Marco. He has never called to apologize or contacted her in any way. When Rosamunde brings up the topic of going back to school, reminding her that she can’t hide away forever, Izzy tells her how she feels: “‘I’ll tell you what really scares me,’ I admitted. The little Izzy inside my head had her hands over her face and her words were muffled. ‘I’m not too eager to see Marco Griggers’” (227). And when Rosamunde asks what Izzy would say to him, she says, “‘Nothing. I don’t ever want to see him again. I don’t want to have to see him,’ I said. I heard the anger in my voice. ‘So I don’t want to go back to school.’ After a long time, Rosamunde said, ‘That just lets him make a bigger mess of your life’” (228).

At the same time that Rosamunde convinces Izzy that it is time to go back to school, she convinces Izzy to join the paper. As usual, she has more confidence in Izzy’s abilities than Izzy herself does. Izzy finds that she enjoys working on the paper, and fits



in well enough without having a definite job. The newspaper gives her something to look forward to, and she likes seeing so much of Tony. “I liked seeing how he made decisions, and how he stood back to let the whole staff decide something. I liked knowing him better. He was always thoughtful about me. He always remembered to bring my crutches when it was time to go, doing it as naturally as he handed Deborah a blue pencil and told her to cut a piece by fifty words” (235–36). It is Rosamunde, though, who really helps Izzy through the adjustment to being back at school. She keeps an eye on Izzy, and she is there when the thing that Izzy has been dreading happens: Someone cuts too close behind her and knocks one of her crutches away, leaving Izzy to fall on her face. Rosamunde helps Izzy make a joke of it to the crowd that gathers, and then goes with Izzy to the bathroom to let her cry it out.

Izzy has started to realize, though, that some of the many differences in herself and her life are improvements. She sees and understands people, perhaps especially her family, in a new and deeper way. Even more importantly, she recognizes the difference in herself. Most of the differences are not improvements, however, and “Whenever I saw the little Izzy in my head, she was lying flat on her face with her crutches knocked away from under her and her jean leg pinned back with a stupid diaper pin—like a warning” (244). At the same time, though, we can see that Izzy is well on her way to becoming a person with depth and thoughtfulness that she had never dreamed of back when she was “normal.”

Her own adjustment is accompanied by the adjustment of those around her. Gradually, Izzy comes to realize that even though most people will see her first of all as a cripple, they won’t necessarily continue to see her that way. As exams come nearer, Izzy

helps out more and more with the school paper, doing whatever needs to be done. One afternoon when she stays late to help, she sees that Tony has put her name on the editorial staff list: Izzy Lingard. After looking at it for a minute, she crosses out Izzy and writes in Isobel. When Tony asks about it, she tells him that it is her name sometimes, and more and more as she gets older. Then Tony leaves to bring the paper to the printer, and Izzy gets ready to leave too: “That was when I noticed that Tony had forgotten my crutches, that they stood leaning against the far wall, down the whole length of the room. I was glad I was alone as I stood up on my one leg and started hopping over to where the crutches were. When I had them under my arms, I suddenly realized—Tony Marcel had forgotten my crutches. Inside my head, the little Izzy gathered herself up and did an impossible backflip, and then another and another. I knew how she felt” (258). As we can see, Tony forgetting Izzy’s crutches demonstrates that he no longer sees her as an instance of a general category, “crippled,” but as a unique individual.

Voigt brings Izzy’s development, not to a conclusion, but to the point where we can see that she is well on her way in a certain direction. The final scene of the book brings Izzy and Marco face to face for the first time since the accident. Izzy happens on Marco as he is flirting with a freshman girl, Georgie, who is flattered to be asked out by a senior. Izzy recognizes what is happening and is angry. Pretending to be friendly, she approaches the pair and reminds Georgie that she, Izzy, went out with Marco once and it was “quite an experience.” She smilingly warns Georgie: ““You have to look out for Marco,’ I told Georgie, as if I was making a joke. ‘You know his reputation.’ After a long minute, I added, ‘Marco’s such a flirt, everybody knows that’” (260).

As the bell rings and Marco and Georgie go their separate ways, furious and puzzled, respectively, Izzy realizes two things. She sees how lovely it is to be young and perfect, and that she can't help but be depressed sometimes; she can't expect herself not to wish for her own perfection back. And she also realizes that she saw Marco and Georgie and did something about it, which nobody had done for her.

“Oh, wow,” I thought. It was the richness of it, the richness in me; there was so much more than before. Better, too, I had to admit it, although if I could have gone back and changed things I wouldn't have hesitated for one minute to do that.

I didn't know what to think, but I wanted to stand there, for another minute or five, just being myself. Inside my head I saw the little Izzy. She was standing alone, without crutches. She wore her black velvet skirt and a silky white blouse. Her hair was feathered gold all around her head. Her arms were spread out slightly. She looked like she was about to dance, but really her arms were out for balance. I knew, because it was true even though it didn't show, that underneath the long skirt one of the legs was flesh and the other was a fake. The little Izzy balanced there briefly and then took a hesitant step forward—ready to fall, ready not to fall” (261–62).

Although Voigt has chosen a rather typical mainstream context for the story, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* is a distinctly counter-cultural book. North American culture in general prefers to believe that we direct our destinies, that success comes through fair play and hard work, and that people get what they deserve. The idea that limitations can actually expand our possibilities, that unexpected, and especially that unwelcome events can make us better people, strikes at the core of these assumptions. These ideas also strike to the heart of many who read this book and find that it rings more true to them than the culture they live in.

Stories about characters facing unwelcome events are not uncommon in popular culture (as seen in movies, for example), of course, but in most of these popular stories I see a more mainstream North American approach: Characters struggle through events

while maintaining their own identities; changes that they experience tend to be superficial improvements of relationship and circumstance. An example that highlights this distinction is the difference between the young adult novel *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and the movie made from the book. In both the book and the movie, there is a scene in which two of the main characters have a conversation the night before heading into an arena to fight to the death with two dozen other young people. In the book, the boy expresses a desire to show those in charge that he is more than just part of their game. The girl does not understand at all what he is saying at the time, but later comes to see what he meant and to feel the same way.<sup>7</sup> In the movie version of this scene, the boy has most of the same lines, but the girl immediately understands him and agrees.<sup>8</sup> This difference exemplifies the way that North American young adult fiction tends to deal with change and development of identity and self-understanding, while popular movies—even those based on young adult novels—tend to portray a fixed identity struggling through difficulty. The underlying assumption is that, although we can learn and improve on a certain level, our “true” identity is static. In contrast, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* recounts a less communicable and more fundamental development along with the easy-to-see changes that Izzy undergoes.

Much of the philosophical power of this book comes, I think, from the excellent integration between the form of the young adult novel and the content. Themes of unexpectedness and new possibilities on the horizon work well in fiction, and particularly well in young adult fiction. Young adults, the ostensible audience of this book, are the

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<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic, 2008), 141–42, 236.

<sup>8</sup> *The Hunger Games*, directed by Gary Ross (Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2012), DVD.

one group in our culture who are at least somewhat expected to be growing and changing in ways they did not foresee. The fact that young adult fiction continues to be enjoyed by many adults points to the reality of growth and change in unexpected directions throughout life, even though cultural expectations regard adults as fully self-directing.

At the core of my reading of *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* is the question of what it means to step out of a sense of inevitability. I don't mean this as a message to be mined from the content of the book, of course. Rather, my experience has been that in the interaction between the reader and the book, the story encourages the reader to step out of a passive internalization of any narrative that may have played a dominant role in his or her understanding of life. In my reading, the movement away from inevitability comes through most strongly in the development of Izzy's relationships, and especially her relationship to her family. As I emphasized earlier, Izzy's family can no longer expect her to do and want the same things as she did before the accident. Before, the general scope of her life was laid out in front of her as North American culture indeed expects of its members. At the end of the book, Izzy is stepping out into the unknown, ready to fall or not to fall. Having followed Izzy in her journey to this point, I and others I know who have read the book find ourselves reflecting on our own lived philosophies—pondering our own similar placement in relation to the unknown.

In my attempt at extended philosophical commentary—in which I have endeavored to remain aware of the concerns of both academic and lived philosophy—I have sought a balance between trying to let the book speak for itself and making explicit some of its contributions to the philosophical conversation through explanation and commentary. *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* invites companionable commentary and is well-written and

complex enough that it would be difficult to use as a philosophical example without finding that it keeps having more to say. Even the themes that I have attempted to make more explicit only reach part of this rich work. My interpretation should not be taken as an exhaustive description of the plurality of the book's themes and potential reader interpretations. But I hope that my particular interaction with the book gives a sense of the possibilities available within it.

To get a clearer sense of why *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* is more fruitfully approached as a philosophical companion than an example, a clearer understanding of the particular shape of this story's character is needed.<sup>9</sup> This is where Booth's spectrums of quality may be usefully applied. In terms of quantity, the book is relatively limited in setting and focus; the cast of characters is not large, the book is not lengthy, and most of the action takes place in a hospital room, a house, and a school hallway. In terms of responsibility, the implied author requests significant empathy, as well as effort to follow Izzy's growth in character, but the reader doesn't have to do extra work to follow the story; the book treats the reader as an equal. In terms of intimacy, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* is on the very intimate side of the spectrum, as we follow closely with Izzy and what she is thinking and feeling; the "little Izzy" in Izzy's head is the device which draws the reader into the heart of the story without introducing a sense of exploitation. In terms of intensity, this story is toward the intense side of the spectrum, as we are dealing with a teenager undergoing significant trauma. In terms of coherence, the story is also far to one side of the spectrum; it presents a very coherent, real world. In terms of otherness, the distance is between the reader and a high school girl in a certain family, which is a more significant distance than it appears,

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<sup>9</sup> This move is in keeping with Nussbaum's emphasis on the particular; it is the unique character of a specific situation or person that teaches us and to which we respond.

perhaps. Finally, in terms of range, the size of the topics addressed is larger than it may first appear, but it is still limited, as the story is quite focused.

What kind of conversation do these characteristics invite? With regard to Booth's metaphor of friendship, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* is an easy friend to meet. As my summary of where it fits on Booth's spectrums of quality shows, this story meets us as an equal. Likewise, most of us have experienced the basics of high school existence in the real world, so we do not have to travel that far in imagination to meet this potential friend. Yet we are stretched in the reading, as its intimacy, intensity, and focus draw us toward contemplation of larger philosophical themes. This is the kind of friend that empowers us by treating us as equals, but doesn't leave us where it found us. We find insight here, and yet the insight is somehow our own; it is not handed down to us from above. It is the balance of all these qualities that make this book uniquely powerful. And as is always the case with good books, you have to read it for yourself to appreciate its full worth.

I find it hard to imagine using this story as a story-as-example partly because in my own attempt at commentary I found myself repeatedly forced to include more of the book than I had intended to in my discussion. In order for my commentary to make sense, I had to keep returning to the book itself for what it has to say even while I sought to highlight its contribution in my own words. To take an extreme version of story-as-example in contrast: If we consider the possibility of using the book simply as a moral example, we can see how limited—even misleading—this would be. The story-as-example can see certain of the book's qualities, but misses the full range; the power of its intimacy and intensity, for example, could be seen to bring home the disastrous consequences of drunk driving, but this view elides both the book's reciprocity with the

reader and the subtle otherness that are some of its major strengths. This limitation of a story-as-example may be a major part of the reason many readers find the back-cover summaries and accolades on their favorite books so annoying. On the back of my copy of *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*, for example, there is a quote from *The Boston Globe* that treats the whole book as simply a moral example: “Give this book to every teenager you know who has a driver’s license. It’s a riveting story about driving drunk and the devastating consequences it can wreak.” The assumption is both that there is no distance between the book and the reader, and that the book is in the position of a teacher—not companion—to the reader. But if one wanted to use the book simply as a warning against drunk driving, the whole positive aspect of Izzy’s development would have to be purposefully muffled. Likewise, if one wanted to use it as an example of how suffering builds character—a legitimate theme—Izzy’s development would be sadly incomplete and unbalanced. Unlike some stories that can be quite easily and helpfully used to illustrate a point, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* insists on being a primary contributor to the conversation.

### *No Woman Born*

For a more explicit contrast between story-as-example and story-as-companion, let’s take a look at a very good short story, “No Woman Born” by C.L. Moore. I found the story as part of the anthology *Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction: Utopias and Dystopias*. This anthology is an excellent source for my purposes both because its philosophical introductory material approaches the included stories and excerpts as examples and because many of the stories themselves are distinctly of the hammer type.



The book is set up as a series of philosophical questions with one or more stories as responses. “No Woman Born” is given as a response to the question, “What does it mean to be human?” In particular, the introduction states, it “asks us to reconsider the necessity of biology to what it means to be human.”<sup>10</sup> In the context of this feminist anthology, of course, the focus of the question is closely related to gender. The story has three characters: Deirdre, a beautiful and beloved singer and dancer whose brain was preserved at the moment of her death while her body perished; Maltzer, the creator of a new metal body to house Deirdre’s mind; and John Harris, her former manager who more or less plays the role of audience for the interactions of the other two.

The story is basically that of the struggle between Deirdre and Maltzer both to define who she now is and to define who controls her. Maltzer has created a metal body for Deirdre out of a series of rings working through electromagnetic currents directly from her brain. She retains a basically human form. Deirdre feels very much herself and intends to go back to the stage, but Maltzer considers her much too fragile, and indeed, no longer truly human. Deirdre retains her mind and her mortality, but has a metal body. She and John both seem to think she is still herself. Maltzer is not convinced. Because she has lost three of the five human senses, and because she no longer has a “female” body, he cannot but consider her subhuman. As the introduction states, he cannot accept her as human “because the sexless body contains the brain of a woman and sexuality is what makes a female human.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Judith A. Little, “Introduction,” in *Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction: Utopias and Dystopias* (Potsdam, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 40.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Deirdre, however, realizes that if anything she is now superhuman. Since her body no longer has the limitations of a human body and can respond directly to her mind, her speed, strength, and flexibility are practically unlimited. She has other powers, such as unlimited vocal range and volume—to the point of being able to destroy buildings through sound alone—and perhaps more abilities yet to be discovered. Besides this, she can present herself with human gesture and presence to the point of compelling those around her to forget her nonhuman body.

In this story we see exemplified the inability of a man to understand a woman apart from her sexuality. Because Deirdre no longer has a female body, Maltzer cannot accept her as human. He says several times that she's a "freak" and an "abstraction."<sup>12</sup> Maltzer considers himself Frankenstein, and cannot hear her when she reminds him that he is not her creator, but merely her preserver. He also insists on her absolute fragility. If the subject of the experiment had been a man, would Maltzer have been less worried about the man's fragility? When she finally demonstrates that she is anything but fragile, he is still not convinced that she does not feel "inadequate."<sup>13</sup> She tries to tell him that she is not unhappy, merely lonely because there is no one else like her and she does not want her powers to draw her away from normal human beings. His last words, though, are still: "Then I am Frankenstein, after all."<sup>14</sup> He is so set in his belief that she is not human that he cannot even see loneliness as a normal human condition. She is still an abstraction to him, a freak.

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<sup>12</sup> Moore, "No Woman Born," 66, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 89.

Thus far the example. As we can see, the story does indeed provide an excellent example of the point which the introductory material claims for it. Actually, though, I think there is more to the story than that. In terms of what it means to be human, this story certainly does drive home the questions: What does it mean to be human—mind or body? What does it mean for a woman to be human? Is Deirdre still female? Apparently so, since her mind is that of a formerly female body. Or is she something else entirely, since she is now, according to her, “superhuman”?

But one of the most important remaining questions is how having a metal body will impact her humanity over time. Although the story does make a good example of the point made in the introduction, that it may be difficult for (some) men to see a female as human apart from her sexuality, I see the story as going further, asking the broader question of how important a human body is to our humanity in general. Deirdre sees herself as imprinting her personality on her metal body, changing it. Her former manager, John, wonders if—and the author seems to imply in the ending that—the reverse will also be true. Because mind and body are mutual to human life, having a metal body will in some sense imprint itself on Deirdre’s mind as well. Does this mean that Deirdre is indeed un-human, or will become more so? The central question of the story, then, might be not so much simply about gender as about material existence itself.

How does the shape of this story’s character influence our interaction with it? Turning again to Booth’s seven spectrums of quality, we can see that in terms of quantity, the story is short and has few characters, but offers the potential for huge conversation over the subjects addressed; this is not unusual for a short story. In terms of responsibility, “No Woman Born” invites significant reciprocal engagement as the reader

thinks through possibilities along with the author, yet the reader is left with the feeling that the author has not put all her cards on the table; the questions raised are not only unanswered, but may be unanswerable. In terms of intimacy, the story is certainly intimate in terms of dealing with the meaning of self, but since the self under discussion is strange, some distance remains; likewise, the reader follows John's thoughts and reactions in response to Deirdre, but the question of her humanity continues to introduce distance into their otherwise intimate relationship. In terms of intensity, "No Woman Born" is quite intense, as short stories often are, although the intensity is relatively cerebral; while it grips the emotions, this intensity always feels that it is in the service of making the reader think. In terms of coherence, it appears to have a coherent focus, but the science fiction aspect breaks this coherence open; what is normal and what is human appears obvious and yet is continually questioned. Finally, its otherness is significant, as the main character is science fictional and it is this otherness that is the focus of the story. In terms of range, it is limited as to topic, but the few topics involved are big ones.

What kind of conversation do these characteristics invite? The different aspects come together to describe a story that is focused and intense, but has a constant strangeness that invites the reader to continually ponder the underlying assumptions, motivations, and capabilities of the characters. Approaching the story as an example focused on gender emphasizes a certain aspect of the otherness that is threaded throughout, but does not take into account the subtle strangeness of Deirdre's power over human imagination and materiality that breaks open the coherence of the story.

We can see that the story-as-example has both benefits and limitations. Examples help to make a point more explicit and acceptable by engaging the readers' imaginations

and encouraging a certain perspective on an issue to be the main imaginative framework for discussion. Rather than simply saying “(some) men cannot see women as human apart from their sexuality,” pointing to a story like “No Woman Born” makes the idea more plausible by demonstrating it in a concrete form. This is an important role for story both philosophically and practically. Without examples and analogies, it is difficult for interlocutors to work through differences in language use and assumed metaphor.

Taking a story simply as the illustration of a point, however, can easily miss what else the story might have to say. If the reader approaches the story as only a particular instance of a general theme (such as gender inequality), then the interpretive possibilities it contains for the reader may be limited. If, however, the reader approaches it as an individual in its own right, the conditions of possibility are greatly increased. In the case of “No Woman Born” as part of a feminist anthology, the focus on gender does not encourage the full power of the story to come to the fore. The story is presented as a tool to make a philosophical point rather than a companion on a philosophical journey. Because the focus of the discussion is directed so specifically to one idea, anything else the story may have to say is by default pushed to the background. The focus on analysis of a story’s “message” can be a significant limitation to the way a story is written, the way we read it, and the way we talk about it. It also tends to blind the reader to what else the story might have to say. Yet a really good story like “No Woman Born” is not content to be thus constrained; it sticks with the reader and keeps the reader wondering about it.

## *Tehanu*

My final story of focus, *Tehanu* by Ursula K. Le Guin, demonstrates that not all really good books can be easily approached as simply an example, hammer, or companion. A brief look at reviews of the book on Amazon.com is enough to show that while many people experience it as a deeply meaningful story and true philosophical companion, others do experience it definitively as a hammer and treat it as such in their responses. Part of this is no doubt due to the distance between some of the readers' perspectives and the way of thinking presented in the book, but I think part of it is also due to Le Guin occasionally slipping up and striking an actual hammer stroke.

With Le Guin's *Tehanu*, we start not at the beginning but in the middle. *Tehanu*, although it can certainly stand on its own, is the fourth book in what has become a series of six. In order to clarify a few of the events from *Tehanu* that are linked to earlier events, I very briefly summarize the three preceding books in the series. The first book, *A Wizard of Earthsea*,<sup>15</sup> follows a young man named Ged in his journey as he learns to become a powerful wizard in the imaginary land of Earthsea, first as a student of the great mage Ogion and later at the wizard school at Roke; he then must come to terms with the results of his pride. The second book, *The Tombs of Atuan*,<sup>16</sup> is about a young girl named Tenar from Earthsea's "barbarian" civilization of Atuan. She is the high priestess of the powers of darkness, and when Ged arrives in search of part of a ring long prophesied to bring peace to Earthsea, Tenar and Ged help each other escape the darkness and bring the ring to the capitol of Earthsea. Ged, now the Archmage of Earthsea, is again one of the main

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<sup>15</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Berkeley: Parnassus Press, 1968).

<sup>16</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Tombs of Atuan* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

characters in the third novel, *The Farthest Shore*,<sup>17</sup> in which he is accompanied by a young man, Lebannen, who is to become the first king that Earthsea has had for many years. At the end of the book Ged loses his wizard's power in sealing up a tear in the fabric of the world between life and death.

*Tehanu*, the book I discuss here, takes up again the story of Tenar, the heroine of *The Tombs of Atuan*. At the end of that book, we left Tenar as a young girl from the foreign land of Atuan, newly arrived in the land of Earthsea with the promise of great power, wearing the ring of peace. At the beginning of *Tehanu*, we find her now to be a middle-aged woman, having given up a life of power to experience the life of a normal woman in a foreign culture.

The pace and plot of *Tehanu* are unusual; the story is mostly made up of arrivals and departures woven through the context of Tenar's thoughts, until a sudden shift of perspective and stunningly climactic ending. The story begins right after the death of Tenar's husband, a quiet farmer on an island called Gont. Soon after being widowed, Tenar adopts a tramps' child who was abused, raped, severely burned, and then abandoned. Tenar calls her Therru, a word in her native language which means the flaming of fire. After little Therru is healed of her physical hurts, barring the scars which deform half her face and one hand, Tenar receives a message from Ogion, the mage who had been her teacher before she gave up the study of power to become a farmer's wife. Tenar and Therru go to Ogion's home to be with him when he dies.

Tenar and Therru stay on at his house afterward, per his instruction to "wait." After Ogion's death, when some local wizards come to do him honor, Tenar meets

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<sup>17</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Farthest Shore* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).

Aspen, who is technically the villain of the book, although we don't actually see much of him and he is a very limited and one-dimensional character. A clearly all-around bad guy, Aspen is the personal wizard of a local lord, whom he is keeping alive by draining the life from the lord's grandson. Aspen adds to his general evilness an extremely offensive, over-the-top hatred and abhorrence of everything female. His general dislike for Tenar as a woman is increased by her importance in the history of Earthsea as the bringer of the ring of peace.

Not long after Ogion's death, Tenar is looking out over the sea when a dragon comes flying from the west with a man, Ged, on his back. The previous book, *The Farthest Shore*, ended with Ged the Archmage flying off on the back of the dragon, Kalessin; now we see that Kalessin brings him to Gont to rest and heal. Tenar takes care of Ged as he heals from his physical wounds, but can do nothing about his depression over the loss of his power. When the young king Lebannen sends men to look for Ged to come to his crowning, Ged feels he cannot face them, and Tenar sends him back to her late husband's farm to work there.

Aspen, the bad guy, then takes it into his head to curse Tenar, taking from her the power of sensible speech in the local language, although she is still able to think in her native tongue. By her own power, which is definite if nebulous, she recognizes what is going on and takes Therru back to her home farm to flee the curse. This is mostly successful, although from then on Tenar finds it difficult to think or remember anything about the time at Ogion's house.

Throughout the story we watch as the child Therru slowly gains courage and confidence, having setbacks a few times when they come across one of the men who had



abused her. At this point in the story the tramps, having killed Therru's biological mother, come back to the farm and try to get at Tenar and Therru in the farm house. Ged comes back from the healing solitude of goat-herding at just the right moment and helps Tenar run them off. The men are captured in the next few days and sent off to be judged and hung. This is freeing for little Therru in that she no longer has to fear these specific people. However, the question has long been growing in the book as to her true nature. Tenar, blinded by (and often blind to) her own power perhaps, does not see that Therru has power of her own which those who have eyes to see it are afraid of. Tenar sees her only as an abused child, and does not see that the strangeness people fear goes deeper than her scarred appearance.

Up to this point the book has been less plot driven than driven by several interwoven themes. At the forefront are questions of gender, and especially the question of men's and women's power. This is connected with the issue of the power structure of Earthsea itself, which has been traditionally dominated by male mages. Woven throughout these themes is the question of what dragons are, and how they differ in nature from humans. Both dragons and humans are intelligent and linguistic species, and there gradually develops in the story the apparent fact that once they were one species which at some point in the past chose to develop differently: the dragons chose freedom and flight, while the humans chose building and study. Throughout the book Tenar dreams of the dragon Kalessin and of the star which in her own language is called Tehanu.

Now at the end of the book the plot suddenly picks up in pace. Tenar's son comes home from the sea and decides to settle at the farm, which is his by law as the male

descendent. Tenar, although happy to see him again, is so distressed by his thoughtlessly typical sexism that she finds she cannot stay. As she and Ged consider moving back to Ogion's house, they receive a message from Moss, a witch who had been Ogion's neighbor, and that Tenar and Therru had become friends with. The message says that Moss is sick and wants to see them again. Tenar, Ged, and Therru set out, unaware that the message is actually a plot of Aspen's to entrap and destroy them.

Tenar and Ged fall under Aspen's spell as they come closer to their destination, and instead of taking the way to Moss's house, they turn toward the path that brings them to Aspen. As Aspen, having gained control over them, mocks and abuses them, it becomes apparent that he is a disciple of the villain in the previous book, who had attempted to make himself immortal by tearing open the barrier between death and life. This disclosure gives Aspen some motivation for his villainy besides obsessive misogyny.

At this point we leave Tenar and Ged and for the first time enter Therru's perspective. Her power is suddenly revealed in that she does not fall under Aspen's curse, but can see right through it, and indeed, right through him. Leaving Tenar and Ged as they insist on going the wrong way, she runs to the cliff and calls for Kalessin. Kalessin comes just when Aspen has brought Tenar and Ged to the cliff to send them over, casually burns Aspen and his cohorts to a crisp, and asks for Therru by her "true name," Tehanu. Tehanu speaks to Kalessin in "the language of the Making," the language which only mages learn among humans, but which is the native language of the dragons. Thus it is revealed that Tehanu is one of the few who are still born both human and dragon. Tehanu chooses to stay with Tenar and Ged for the time being, understanding that she has

something yet to do among humans before she goes to join the dragons in the west. The book then ends on a quiet note—as they decide to live in Ogion’s house and plan what to plant in the garden—but with the promise of great things yet to come.

What is it that makes this unusual story such a good work of feminist philosophy? As I mentioned earlier, the book is structured much more by theme than by plot. This form contrasts with *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*, which invites the reader to respond strongly to the chronological development of the main character. In *Tehanu*, the form of the book seems to me to call the reader to interact with it at a thematic level. In response to this call, I identify three main themes in the book that are field marks of effective feminist works. The first is the representation of a character as “other” in her (or his) context, allowing her (or him) to question barriers and borders that others assume. The second is the revelation of power where there had seemed to be none. The third, closely related to the second, is the realistic juxtaposition of typically sexist perspectives with women of great power, demonstrating both the inaccuracy and the tenacity of sexist points of view. I discuss each of these themes as they appear in the book.

A large part of the answer to the question of why *Tehanu* is a powerful work of feminist philosophy lies in Tenar’s character and her position as “other” in her context. In *The Tombs of Atuan* Tenar was a child priestess, the Eaten One, who served the powers of the nameless dark. Living only among women and eunuchs until Ged came looking for the ring of peace and they escaped together, Tenar had no way of imbibing and internalizing the gender stereotypes common to Earthsea. When she chooses to marry a Gontian farmer, she has no way of knowing what parts of the role she assumes are understood to be particularly female, and what is just part of being Gontian. Everything is

foreign to her. This context allows her the freedom to question the stereotypes and power structures that those around her take for granted. After her husband's and Ogion's deaths, Tenar's interaction with the obsessively sexist Aspen and the fact of Therru's abused past start her asking these questions more thoroughly.

This is made explicit quite early in the book, after Tenar and Therru have moved into Ogion's house and are making the acquaintance of Moss, the witch. Ged has been brought back by Kalessin, and is lying ill. Tenar and Moss sit together and split reeds for basket making, and their conversation turns to the difference between men and women and their relationships to power. Moss has told Tenar that Ged has no power anymore, but Tenar has trouble believing it. Moss describes men as like nuts, all full of themselves and nothing else inside their hard shells; a wizard, she says, is all power inside because his power is himself. But Tenar asks,

“And a woman, then?”

“Oh, well, dearie, a woman's a different thing entirely. Who knows where a woman begins and ends? Listen, mistress, I have roots, I have roots deeper than this island. Deeper than the sea, older than the raising of the lands. I go back into the dark.” Moss's eyes shone with a weird brightness in their red rims and her voice sang like an instrument. “I go back into the dark! Before the moon I was. No one knows, no one knows, no one can say what I am, what a woman is, a woman of power, a woman's power, deeper than the roots of trees, deeper than the roots of islands, older than the Making, older than the moon. Who dares ask questions of the dark? Who'll ask the dark its name?”

The old woman was rocking, chanting, lost in her incantation; but Tenar sat upright, and split a reed down the center with her thumbnail.

“I will,” she said.

She split another reed.

“I lived long enough in the dark,” she said.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike those around her who have grown up learning that men and women are deeply different, Tenar is both able and willing to question the differences that others assume. In

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<sup>18</sup> Le Guin, *Tehanu*, 63–64.

a later conversation with Moss, Tenar learns that wizards are celibate, perhaps in exchange for their power or perhaps in order to keep their power to themselves.

Pondering this, Tenar asks Moss,

“When you had a man, Moss, did you have to give up your power?”

“Not a bit of it,” the witch said, complacent.

“But you said you don’t get unless you give. Is it different, then, for men and for women?”

“What isn’t, dearie?”

“I don’t know,” Tenar said. “It seems to me we make up most of the differences, and then complain about ‘em. I don’t see why the Art Magic, why power, should be different for a man witch and a woman witch. Unless the power *itself* is different. Or the art.”

“A man gives out, dearie. A woman takes in.”

Tenar sat silent but unsatisfied.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to gender stereotyping, whether in Earthsea or on Earth, the strength of the assumptions made is necessarily based on an inability to see the reality of other options. If you know for a fact that different assumptions are made in a different context, it becomes much more difficult to maintain your belief that your stereotypes are based on innate, unchanging realities. Moss justifies the difference between men’s and women’s power by the statement that a man gives out and woman takes in. She does not see, however, that this justification is not self-evident, especially in the face of her earlier statement that “You don’t get without you give as much. That’s true for all, surely.”<sup>20</sup> Tenar, able to see the disjunction between these two ways of looking at humanity, is unsatisfied by a simple, unquestionable division between male and female.

The question of uncrossable borders is echoed in the problem of Therru/Tehanu’s nature. Rather than merely questioning or crossing the border, Tehanu actually

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 120.

encompasses both sides of the divide between dragon and human. The status and discovery of Tehanu and her power throughout is another of the themes that make the book such a good work of feminist philosophy. Since we see Tehanu first from Tenar's perspective, we are introduced to her as simply a helpless, abused child. As the story continues we see hints that she may see the world differently through the eye that has been burned away than through her human eye, and in the final revelation of her dragon being we see that the scars which left one hand like a claw and half of her face hard and scale-like are a partial revelation of her literal nature. In the shift of perspective that brings us into Tehanu's point of view after Tenar and Ged have been captured by Aspen, we see that Tehanu does indeed have two eyes:

She ran as fast as she could across the fields, past Aunty Moss's house, past Ogion's house and the goats' house, onto the path along the cliff and to the edge of the cliff, where she was not to go because she could see it only with one eye. She was careful. She looked carefully with that eye. She stood on the edge. The water was far below, and the sun was setting far away. She looked into the west with the other eye, and called with the other voice the name she had heard in her mother's dream.<sup>21</sup>

A change in perspective which allows us to see as powerful a character we had formerly seen as powerless is a not uncommon device in feminist fiction, and can be very compelling, as in Tehanu's case. The juxtaposition of perspectives is a form of another of the themes that make this book a work of feminist philosophy: the interaction of typically sexist characters with specially powerful women (who are not necessarily aware of their power).

This type of juxtaposition is revealing in several ways. One of the most simple and obvious is that when assumptions are made by sexist characters about powerful

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 272–73.

women, the assumptions are so obviously untrue as to be revealed as ridiculous. Perhaps even more compelling, though, is the realism of many of these encounters. The interactions of Tenar with many of the male characters in the story show the peculiar deafness that is the hallmark of sexism. Aspen's extreme misogyny is atypical. Most forms of sexism are exhibited by well-intentioned people who simply cannot see that there is a problem. Le Guin demonstrates this much more widespread kind of sexism through a prophecy that has been made by the Master Patternner, one of the Council of the Wise on the island of Roke, the most important and far-seeing wizards in Earthsea. When the Masters of Roke gather together to figure out what to do about the fact that Ged, who was the archmage, has lost his powers, what they are seeking is really a new archmage. However, there seems to be no answer to their questions. Instead, the Master Patternner gives them an answer to an unasked question, and the answer is simply: "A woman on Gont."

When Tenar hears this story from the young king Lebannen and Master Windkey, another of the Council of the Wise, it quickly becomes clear that the wizards can think of no question that would have this answer except the possibility that a woman on Gont might lead them to a man on Gont. Master Windkey says to Tenar, "So, you see, it seemed we should come to Gont. But for what? Seeking whom? 'A woman'—not much to go on! Evidently this woman is to guide us, show us the way, somehow, to our archmage. And at once, as you may think, my lady, you were spoken of—for what other woman on Gont had we ever heard of? It is no great island, but yours is a great fame."<sup>22</sup> But when Master Windkey asks her if she knows of any woman who might be a sister,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 177.

mother, or even teacher of a man of power, Tenar can think of nothing to say: “His deafness silenced her. She could not even tell him he was deaf.”<sup>23</sup>

Tenar does try to hint at the possibility of a great and fundamental change that is taking place in Earthsea, but to no avail.

The Windkey looked at her as if he saw a very distant storm cloud on the uttermost horizon. He even raised his right hand in the hint, the first sketch, of a windbinding spell, and then lowered it again. He smiled. “Don’t be afraid, my lady,” he said. “Roke, and the Art Magic, will endure. Our treasure is well guarded!”

“Tell Kalessin that,” she said, suddenly unable to endure the utter unconsciousness of his disrespect. It made him stare, of course. He heard the dragon’s name. But it did not make him hear her. How could he, who had never listened to a woman since his mother sang him his last cradle song, hear her?

“Indeed,” said Lebannen, “Kalessin came to Roke, which is said to be defended utterly from dragons; and not through any spell of my lord’s, for he had no magery then. . . . But I don’t think, Master Windkey, that Lady Tenar was afraid for herself.”

The mage made an earnest effort to amend his offense. “I’m sorry, my lady,” he said, “I spoke as to an ordinary woman.”

She almost laughed. She could have shaken him. She said only, indifferently, “My fears are ordinary fears.” It was no use; he could not hear her.

But the young king was silent, listening.<sup>24</sup>

After Master Windkey has left, Tenar makes one more effort to communicate with Lebannen: ““I wanted to say—but there was no use—but couldn’t it be that there’s a woman on Gont, I don’t know who, I have no idea, but it could be that there is, or will be, or may be a woman, and that they seek—that they need—her. Is it impossible?” He listened. He was not deaf. But he frowned, intent, as if trying to understand a foreign language. And he said only, under his breath, ‘It may be.’”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 179–80.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 181.



Le Guin is walking a difficult line here, trying to make explicit the deafness of sexism without overbalancing into mere shouting at deaf ears. This is especially difficult, of course, because the line may well be in different places for different members of her wide-ranging audience. When I look back at my initial reaction to many of the stories in the *Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction* collection, I find that the feminist hammer tends to be most felt when a story seems first of all to be concerned with making explicit the oppression of women, rather than being first of all concerned with telling a story. The story becomes an illustration. This is again a rather nebulous distinction, however, since every story could be seen on a continuum somewhere between the illustration of an idea, a thought experiment, and a “really good story.” *Tehanu*, I think, can be identified with each of these at some point, although I obviously identify it overwhelmingly as a really good story. The hammer stroke, then, comes when the reader gets too much of a feeling that the thought experiment is no longer experimental, or that the really good story is being shoved aside for the sake of making a point, either by the (implied) author or by someone who has requested or required that the book be read.<sup>26</sup>

What makes *Tehanu* so powerfully liberating for many readers, though, is again its challenge to inevitability. We can see this in each of the reasons I gave for identifying the book as a work of feminist philosophy. Tenar’s character as “other” in her context allows her to question the inevitability of cultural gender divisions. The status and

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<sup>26</sup> Virginia Woolf has brilliantly described the difficulty that stories which try to make a point give rise to for the reader: They have “a distressing effect, as if the spot at which the reader’s attention is directed were suddenly twofold instead of single.” (Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction,” in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000*, ed. Dorothy Hale [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006], 582.) Woolf is talking specifically about authors with a personal grievance to air, but in my opinion the description is more widely applicable—including to stories whose authors are airing a philosophical grievance in the form of a story-as-hammer.

discovery of Tehanu and her power question the inevitability both of an abused child's permanent status as victim and the helplessness of a small girl in general. Likewise, the juxtaposition of sexist characters with powerful women calls into question the assumed relative powerlessness of women as individuals.

Let's turn once more to Booth's spectrums of quality for another perspective on what gives this book its unique character. With *Tehanu*, we find that in terms of quantity, the book is on the longer side, but has relatively few characters and a very focused topic; in fact, the length of the book only increases the focus of the topic. In terms of reciprocity, the story is a bit aggressive, which invites the reader to respond strongly, leading to either defensiveness or inspiration; the (implied) author seeks to lead the reader on a journey, but assumes that the reader has the intelligence and capability to reach or perhaps even go beyond the author's intended destination. In terms of intimacy, it is very intimate, as it happens very much inside Tenar's, and then Tehanu's, head; nearly all of the story is told through Tenar's thoughts and feelings. In terms of intensity, it is extremely intense, with a number of very suspenseful moments, which crescendo as the book goes on; both the strength of the topic and the life-or-death (or at least safety-or-harm) nature of many of the events contribute to this intensity. In terms of coherence, with its "in the head" style, it would not be described as heavily coherent, as it follows thoughts and themes rather than a direct plot; however, Tenar's perspective does end up being a very coherent one. In terms of otherness, it is toward the extreme, both in being a fantasy and in dealing with otherness head on through the topics of both gender and the nature of humans and dragons. Finally, in terms of range it has a very focused topic and perspective, but the topic is again a big one; this focus is also broken open at the end of

the story with the shift to Tehanu's perspective and the beginning of an understanding of the larger changes to come.

What kind of conversation do these characteristics invite? As we can see, this book tends toward more of the unusual extremes on Booth's spectrums than *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* and "No Woman Born" do. Its aggressive tendency means that the reader may not take ownership of the ideas presented, and indeed may experience it as a hammer. The book is making a strong push with its otherness, intensity, focus, and sense of the author pulling or pushing the reader along, but this is softened by its lack of straightforward coherence and by its intimacy. *Tehanu* is not the kind of easygoing acquaintance that anyone can get along with, but is potentially a companion who can push us to go beyond our current assumptions and habits into something that we will end up feeling is much more worthwhile.

With this story, as with many friendships, what we get out of it is related to what we put in. If we approach it as mere entertainment—a cheap friend, so to speak—we may be disappointed or repulsed. But if we expect it to be the sort of friend with whom we can share some of our deepest thoughts—and not that only, but the sort of friend we expect to push us further in directions we need to go—then our interaction with the story is likely to be more positive, and potentially powerfully so. Of course, we don't know what sort of companion a story will be before we try it. Some stories introduce themselves more gently; *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*, for example, we might start to read for entertainment, then end up getting a lot more out of the relationship.

Even the previous three books in the Earthsea series, though, don't quite prepare the reader for the sort of companionship invited by *Tehanu*, as is obvious by some

people's comments on the book (along the lines of "I really liked the first three, but Le Guin's lost it here"). Or perhaps it does offer the same kind of companionship, but the issues confronted in this book are more difficult for many readers—its "otherness" is too far from their comfort zone. The way that *Tehanu* encompasses the border between story-as-hammer and story-as-companion demonstrates the complex, hermeneutical nature of our relationships with stories. The character of the story itself interacts with the experience and context of the reader in a thoroughly hermeneutic way; the selfsame story can be experienced very differently by different readers or by the same reader at different times, and yet it is the same characteristics that initiate these different experiences.

When we interact with a story as a companion, we can be deeply invested in it while preserving the possibility of disagreement. In contrast, when we interact with a story as an example, we prioritize (or the story invites) analysis; when we interact with a story as a hammer, we prioritize (or the story invites) a relatively uncritical but definitive presentation or acceptance. A story-as-example tends to pull the reader out of the story by interesting the reader more in the message than in the story. If it is done well, this means the reader will become interested in the message; if the story is done badly, the reader will find them both equally boring or not worth thinking about. A story-as-hammer, on the other hand, will produce an "ouch!" as the reader cringes out of the story. If it is a well-written hammer, the cringe can be instructive, breaking open inflexible ways of thinking; if it is badly done, it will likely simply be uncomfortable or even cause the reader to rebound defensively away from the intended impact.

How an author writes a story, how readers experience stories in their various life contexts, and how commentators approach stories with various philosophical

commitments all factor into the mix. Both story-as-hammer and story-as-example can do good work, but they remain tools, missing the deep life-changing possibilities that come from a story in which the story's form and content meld in unity and the story itself (not an extractable principle or a single behavior change) speaks to the reader.

Hammer, example, or companion: By contrasting these different ways that we interact with how stories present themselves, I have sought to show concretely that story has more to offer philosophically than simply as a tool. Every book we read is a potential companion in the conversation about how we should live our lives, and the more we read them, the more opportunity we have to engage ethically and imaginatively with our world.

## **Conclusion**

I began this dissertation with a question about the way books can bridge gaps between disparate people and perspectives. Building on a strong personal belief that reading good books can inform our lives in positive ways, I began to map out the terrain for this dissertation by identifying a prevalent issue in my culture to which I believe a certain kind of fiction offers a normative response. This issue is the inattention to and undervaluation of plurality, exemplified in two apparently contradictory trends: the tendency to take as normative what can be generalized, and the tendency to deny universally applicable normativity. I have suggested that both of these trends are rooted in a form of reductionism that neglects plurality while seeking after pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality.

This reductionism can be identified in a number of symptoms that are widespread in North American culture. One of the most common is the faith people put in scientific studies to guide their life choices, indicating a desire to take statistical averages as universal norms. This faith in statistics, I suggested, results in a sense of inevitability and a suspicion of outliers. I hold out hope that our culture's love of stories can enable us to imagine new possibilities and learn from those who are different from ourselves, combating the oppressive urge toward pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality.

In order to clarify the potentially beneficial contribution of books to our lives, I introduced a distinction between academic philosophy and lived philosophy, suggesting that stories have something to offer both categories. I argued that philosophy has traditionally approached story as a tool, either understanding story as a hammer to make a point or treating it as an example out of which to distill a point. In contrast to these

approaches, I suggested an alternative, treating story as a companion, in which story and philosophy partner with each other, recognizing the unique value of each. Story can address philosophical questions in a way academic philosophy cannot, while philosophical commentary on story assists to bring to light story's philosophical import. In this way, philosophy and story in companionship promote appropriate plurality rather than a misguided quest for pseudo-universality that leaves out fictional voices, and they advocate genuine interaction rather than the mere spouting of opinions under the guise of pseudo-individuality.

In Chapter 2, I clarified my distinction between lived philosophy and academic philosophy by way of Herman Dooyeweerd's concepts of theoretical thought and naïve experience, as well as Sander Griffioen's reflections on worldview. I then situated my project in the larger philosophical discussion through a brief introduction of various philosophers' approaches to the relationship between philosophy and fiction, which I categorized into three families based on their fields of interest, broadly construed: the cognitive/analytic, the historical/narrative, and the moral/political. I identified my own project's location on this map at the intersection of moral philosophy, literary criticism, and ethics, with a specifically cultural focus on the philosophical interaction of individuals with literary works. This placement also offered a rationale for my choice of main interlocutors.

In Chapter 3 I began to lay out a foundation for an understanding of story as a philosophical contributor in partnership with the kind of commentary that Martha C. Nussbaum espouses. Nussbaum has argued that a certain kind of novel belongs in the canon of philosophy that seeks to answer the question "How should one live?" A look at

the philosophical work that has been done on the question of how literature and ethics relate shows that Nussbaum is an original and key thinker in the field. Almost everyone who discusses the topic nowadays addresses her work. However, despite the broad reach that her work has enjoyed, several of the most important aspects of her approach are frequently missed or misunderstood. Most significantly, her emphasis on the inseparability of form and content in well-written literature has been sadly left behind by thinkers who read her as making just such a separation. I highlighted the importance of the integrality of form and content through a comparison of Nussbaum with Richard Kearney.

It is not uncommon for the next generation of philosophers to react against philosophers before them who have broken new ground. Although the original philosopher may at times be caricatured and dismissed, the backlash also tends to clear the ground by pointing out possible misunderstandings or limitations in his or her approach. This allows a second wave of philosophers to come along and point out missed details and connections, reinvigorating the power of the original philosopher's insights. When it comes to Nussbaum, I appear to be part of this second wave. My dissertation aims to make an important contribution to the conversation by insisting on and clarifying the significance of the connection between form and content as vital to our understanding of how fiction can inform our lived and academic philosophies.

I expanded the discussion of how story and philosophy relate through a discussion of Hannah Arendt's insights and approach on this subject. When it comes to Arendt, the first two generations have already done their work; she has been caricatured and dismissed, and now her insights are being expanded upon and appreciated. Philosophers



who take up themes from Arendt's thought with sympathy and insight have become numerous. I mentioned several of these philosophers, with special attention to Lisa Jane Disch, who demonstrates how Arendt approached storytelling as a form of thinking that is both critical and situated, although Arendt's perspective on the subject was never as articulated as Nussbaum's is. Arendt's emphasis on plurality, however, adds an important ballast to Nussbaum's emphasis on particularity, as I demonstrated through a discussion of their respective views of compassion, love, and solidarity.

Philosophical commentary that comes alongside fiction to make manifest its philosophical importance, the inseparability of form and content, and the importance of plurality: my discussion of all of these led me to questions of how to find sharable criteria for a mutual sense of storied normativity without insisting on the ability to extract and generalize morals from stories. I began to expand the discussion in these directions in Chapter 4 by situating fiction in a larger aesthetic, normative, and societal framework.

The key to this discussion was Lambert Zuidervaat's thoroughly hermeneutical conception of art and our interaction with art. His theory of imaginative disclosure and his insistence on the fact that art informs our lives via interpretation provide a framework for an understanding of art's contribution to lived philosophy that is real and discernable but does not follow the rules of cause and effect; art does not unilaterally cause changes in lived philosophy, but contributes through a sort of reciprocal interaction. I linked Zuidervaat's perspective with Nussbaum's theory of always-revisable normativity in order to address the need for a normative approach to fiction's relationship with lived philosophy, mitigating the problem of damaging encounters with art. To flesh out the

accuracy of the hermeneutical model, I assessed a number of specific ways that art informs people's lives, with special attention to philosophical fiction.

In Chapter 5, I presented the metaphor of friendship as an excellent noncausal model for the relationship between fiction and lived philosophy. While Nussbaum's original contribution to the discussion centered on her insistence that fiction should be a contributing member of academic philosophy, Wayne C. Booth is well recognized as the seminal contemporary theorist on the relationship between reading and ethical character development—that is, the relationship between story and lived philosophy. No other thinker appears to have reached his scope and insight in the field of literature and ethics. I demonstrated some of the strengths and limitations of Booth's metaphor and related criteria for evaluating narrative friends in comparison with Nussbaum's criticisms of Booth's approach. I suggested that Booth's model could be made even stronger by resisting the inclination to expand the metaphor of friendship into that of "worlds" and by recognizing that the term "companion" may at times be a more appropriate description of our relationship with narrative works than "friend."

Finally, in Chapter 6 I sought to demonstrate philosophical commentary by undertaking my own philosophical reading of two young adult novels and a short story. Through this exercise, I highlighted the unique value of treating story as a philosophical companion, contrasting this approach with the limitations of treating story as a tool. Throughout this project, I have moved from the connections between story and lived experience to an examination of the theoretical underpinnings of these connections (taking into account the larger normative and societal framework involved) to a consideration of the most helpful way to approach story and back again to the actual

experience of reading. I hope this approach has at the very least made it more possible for the reader to remain connected to story in its own right, so that the ideas and generalizations presented here come with a specific reference, and not as isolated members of a self-referential whole.

As I came in the last chapter to my own philosophical commentary, I found that each book needs to be approached uniquely. I discovered that I could not dialogue with *Izzy*, *Willy-Nilly* in the same way I could with *Tehanu*. *Izzy* resists dissection, somehow, while *Tehanu*'s message (inextricable though it is from the story itself) seemed to me all the clearer and stronger for being compared with some of the classic approaches in feminist philosophy. And perhaps this makes sense, since no two friendships are ever the same, as no two different narrative encounters travel over the same bridge. In this way, I have been reminded again that the very structure of story encourages the sort of plurality and imaginative empathy people like Booth and Nussbaum and Arendt—and Kearney, too—are striving toward.

In this journey, it has been my aim to continue pointing out the pitfalls of reductionism; tendencies toward pseudo-universality and pseudo-individuality lie all around us in our philosophical endeavors. As we have seen, an emphasis on particularity and revisability will continue to dissatisfy those, like Hilary Putnam, who believe that we can in fact internalize an understanding of general rules that satisfactorily takes into account exceptions. Again, he would say that fiction can be accepted as a complement to general rules of ethics, but does not offer an acceptable primary model.<sup>1</sup> Putnam has

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<sup>1</sup> Hilary Putnam, "Taking Rules Seriously: A Response to Martha Nussbaum," in "Literature and/as Moral Philosophy," special issue, *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 195, <http://www.jstor.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/stable/469002>.

expressed this as a concern that a devaluation of general rules will mean an empty morality where “anything goes.”<sup>2</sup> I return to this concern one more time to summarize the nature of the principled yet imaginative plurality that I find to be fiction’s unique contribution to the philosophical conversation.

Pointing out the dangers of a theory’s trajectory is always a worthwhile endeavor, although Putnam does at times seem to be overly concerned about possible trajectories of Nussbaum’s thought to the point of obscuring what she actually says. He is worried that an understanding of morality that highlights particularity, incommensurability, and the newness inherent in every situation means that general rules will no longer be taken seriously, leaving moral agents to pick and choose which moral they want to follow in any given context. This would indeed be an empty morality. In contrast, however, I suggest that an emphasis only on general moral rules, even with carefully hedged exceptions, does not take moral duty and obligation seriously enough. In a world in which contexts are always changing, general rules are an approximation for which one must always compensate in each particular situation. Putnam’s belief that morality must be based on general rules leaves him imagining that a perspective that emphasizes the primacy of particulars is simply a mixture of incompatible fragments in which any kind of ethical coherence is not possible. It is as if the only options available when one is thrown into deep water are to wear a life jacket or drown; however, I suggest that we can also learn to swim. My emphasis on principled plurality offers a sense of the whole that does not reduce the hermeneutical, contextual nature of ethical obligations to the pseudo-universality of abstract rules that must always be “applied” or to the pseudo-individuality

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 193.

of “anything goes.” Literature’s contribution is to offer alternative systems of morality (supplementing, not simply supplanting, the temporary, general ethical articulations we have developed) that have not traditionally been taken into account by moral philosophy, to its own loss.

As we seek to allow literature a place in the philosophical conversation, our conception of what story is and how we relate to it is very important. The discussion of Kearney in Chapter 3 highlighted my concerns about his understanding of story as primarily bringing coherence to a fragmentary existence and his separation of the work of art from its application. I recognize that these emphases express a response to the experience of the way we narrate our lives individually and communally, and the fact that there are more and less ethically appropriate ways to respond to works of art. However, I am concerned that Kearney’s focus on coherence makes it difficult for his readers to know what to do when they come up against irreconcilable inconsistencies as they seek to orient themselves ethically. One of story’s greatest strengths is its ability to help us negotiate precisely those irreconcilabilities that a direct focus on coherence would lead us to either ignore or jettison. The importance Kearney places on coherence is not in itself bad, but when this value becomes seen as story’s primary role, its other powers are weakened or even stifled. Kearney’s claim that stories can equally be applied well or badly also arises out of this uncongenial simplification. He seems to mistake the sense of the whole that a story can give as something that can be articulated, and therefore consciously manipulated. In contrast, I have argued that the ability that stories give us to dialogue with and even hold together incompatible views is not an act of understanding and then application, but arises from the complete fusion of form and content, such that

the “good” in story cannot be “taken out” without loss. The possibility of bridge-building is one of these inextricably storied benefits. What North American culture stands in need of, I have argued, is exactly the imaginative insight available in young adult fiction and the integrality of form and content in all well-written works.

Of course, the scope of my project is necessarily limited. My emphasis on conversation may not be appropriately applicable to every sphere. In politics, for example, some may argue that consensus, not just conversation, should be the rule, while others may object that decisions need to be made under time constraints that limit the possibility for even a relatively inclusive conversation. These are valid and defensible concerns. The problem of time constraints is, I believe, analogous to Nussbaum’s understanding of generalization—sometimes a limited conversation is the best we can do for the time being, but it should not therefore become the guiding principle. But should consensus be the guiding principle in some cases? Again, a thorough examination of the question is outside the scope of my project, but I will reiterate that although I do not deny the possibility that consensus may at times be the ideal, I retain a worry about the consensus being a false one, in which some of the relevant voices have been suppressed.

Another scope-related concern may be the stress I have given to certain principles and not to others. I have emphasized principles related to compassion—especially plurality and solidarity. This emphasis may be in danger of obscuring the importance of other principles, notably justice, although a concern for justice is very much in the background of my project. My hope, of course, is that all of the principles we value will act in concert, but I recognize that in certain contexts one may take priority over others; perhaps at times they will conflict. Again, however, I feel that in many cases North

American culture currently demonstrates a clear need for a greater emphasis on plurality and solidarity, and I have articulated my project accordingly.

At the same time, I remain committed to the perspective that Booth has described of reality as multivalent and poly-storied, meaning that multiple conflicting perspectives are to be not only expected, but welcomed into conversation. My concern remains that the conversation is indeed happening—that we do not simply fall into the reductionism of pseudo-universality, insisting that certain moral interpretations are applicable to every context, or into the reductionism of pseudo-individuality, assuming that all these perspectives are just opinions, and that it is not necessary to converse about them since there is no point in trying to reach any agreement about anything. Contra pseudo-universality, the question “How should we live?” will need to be answered differently in different contexts; contra pseudo-individuality, ethical criteria remain important. In my own context, I offer a response of principled, imaginative plurality that values young adult fiction as an important philosophical contributor to the ethical conversation.

This project has been motivated by my conviction that both philosophy and fiction can contribute to a movement toward the ethical development of justice and solidarity through imagination. I add my voice in support of a world in which boys and girls are treated as unique instances of newness, not simply specimens of a gender; alternative, marginal voices are heard and have power to direct themselves as part of a society that communally resists oppressive impulses; academic philosophy is normatively responsible and takes seriously nontraditional contributions; and young people (and adults) have the opportunity to read and discuss good books that will guide and open them in these directions.

In this way, I have sought to bring into relief the real life-changing power of story—not the sort of world-changing power one expects, perhaps, but an ability to hear voices never heard before, and to thus become attuned to new possibilities. My aim is for my readers to find here not simply an analysis of several philosophical themes, hopefully treated in a balanced, adequate manner. I hope they will also be motivated to turn back even to old, familiar stories, and read them as if for the first time; and in these stories to find strength, hope, and imagination to face the problems of the day.



## Samenvatting

Vanuit een sterke persoonlijke overtuiging dat het lezen van goede boeken kan bijdragen aan het positief vormgeven van ons leven, begin ik dit proefschrift met de bespreking van een in de Noord-Amerikaanse cultuur dominant aanwezige kwestie waarop naar mijn mening een bepaald soort fictie een normatief antwoord biedt. Die kwestie is het gebrek aan aandacht voor, en de onderwaardering van pluraliteit, waarvan een voorbeeld te vinden is in twee tegengestelde tendensen: de tendens om wat gegeneraliseerd kan worden als normatief te beschouwen, en de tendens om universeel toepasbare normativiteit te ontkennen. Ik suggereer dat deze beide trends, terwijl ze streven naar pseudo-universaliteit en pseudo-individualiteit, geworteld zijn in een vorm van reductionisme die pluraliteit verwaarloost.

Het reductionisme waarop ik reageer kan via een aantal wijd verbreide symptomen opgespoord worden. Een van de meest voorkomende is dat mensen geloven dat ze zich bij de keuzes die ze in hun leven maken laten leiden door wetenschappelijk onderzoek, een geloof dat wijst op een verlangen om statistische gemiddelden voor universele normen te houden. Als voorbeeld onderzoek ik genderstereotypen, want gender is bij uitstek een gebied waarop afwijking van het gemiddelde verdacht is. Wanneer mensen horen van “onderzoeken” die aantonen dat “de meeste mannen” bepaalde kenmerken vertonen en dat “de meeste vrouwen” bepaalde andere kenmerken vertonen, dan denken ze veelal dat dat betekent dat mannen en vrouwen die kenmerken behoren te vertonen. Het bijzondere (individu) wordt irrelevant, ontkend of als een bedreiging beschouwd, tenzij het gezien kan worden als deel van het algemene (stereotype) en als zodanig behandeld kan worden. Deze onderdrukking van

particulariteit is een indicatie van pseudo-universaliteit – het idee dat wat voor de meesten geldt voor iedereen moet gelden.

De invloed van stereotypen wordt eerder door het persoonlijk ervaren van werkelijke of fictionele alternatieven minder dan door abstracte kennis. We hebben elkaars verhalen nodig om ons in staat te stellen ons mogelijkheden voor te stellen die door ons geloof in statistieken verborgen blijven. Ik suggereer daarom dat de liefde van een cultuur voor verhalen ons in staat stelt nieuwe mogelijkheden te verbeelden en te leren van hen die anders zijn dan wijzelf.

Ik betoog dat filosofie het verhaal van oudsher als gereedschap heeft benaderd, door het hetzij als een hamer op te vatten om een punt te maken of door het te behandelen als een voorbeeld waaruit een boodschap gedestilleerd kan worden. Tegenover deze benaderingen stel ik als alternatief voor het verhaal te benaderen als een metgezel, waarbij verhaal en filosofie elkaars partner zijn die elkaars unieke waarde erkennen. Het verhaal kan filosofische vragen entameren op een wijze waarop academische filosofie dat niet kan, terwijl filosofisch commentaar op verhalen kan helpen de filosofische portee daarvan naar boven te halen. Op deze wijze, als metgezellen, kunnen verhaal en filosofie een bijdrage leveren aan gepaste pluraliteit, in plaats van aan een misleide zoektocht naar pseudo-universaliteit die voorbij gaat aan fictionele stemmen, en kunnen ze een pleidooi voeren voor echte interactie in plaats van alleen opinies te spuien onder het mom van pseudo-individualiteit.

Neigingen tot pseudo-universaliteit en pseudo-individualiteit zijn overal in onze filosofische bezigheden aanwezig. Ik geef aan dat aandacht alleen voor algemene regels, zorgvuldig omliggende uitzonderingen daarop inclusief, morele plicht en verplichting

onvoldoende serieus neemt. In een wereld waarin contexten voortdurend veranderen kunnen algemene regels alleen bij benadering richting geven en is in iedere bijzondere situatie bijstelling daarvan noodzakelijk. Het geloof dat moraal beschreven moet worden in termen van algemene regels leidt ertoe dat men zich een perspectief dat het primaat van het particuliere benadrukt slechts kan voorstellen als een mengsel van incompatibele fragmenten waartussen geen enkele vorm van ethische coherentie mogelijk is. Het is alsof verdrinken of een reddingsvest dragen de enige opties zijn die men heeft als men in diep water gegooid wordt; mijn suggestie zou echter zijn dat men ook kan leren zwemmen.

De bijdrage van fictie is het bieden van alternatieve systemen van moraal (die de tijdelijke, algemene ethische articulaties die we ontwikkeld hebben aanvullen en niet eenvoudigweg vervangen), systemen die, tot haar schade, niet al van oudsher door de morele filosofie in beschouwing genomen zijn. Ik beweer daarom dat, te midden van ander kunstvormen, kwalitatief goede fictie voor jongvolwassenen een bijdrage levert aan principiële pluraliteit die een idee geeft van het geheel zonder de hermeneutische, contextuele aard van ethische verplichtingen te reduceren tot de pseudo-universaliteit van abstracte regels die altijd “toegepast” moeten worden, of tot de pseudo-individualiteit van “anything goes.”

Ik richt me op fictie voor jongvolwassenen primair vanwege het brede bereik en vanwege de bijzondere relevantie daarvan voor ethische vorming. Tot nu toe hebben filosofen en literatuurcritici vrijwel geen gehoor gegeven aan oproepen tot serieus theoretisch engagement met fictie voor jongvolwassenen. Fictie voor “jongvolwassenen” houdt zich echter bezig met thema’s die veel verder reiken dan de adolescentie. Thema’s

als macht, persoonlijkheid en identiteit, relaties tussen het zelf en anderen, dood, gender, ethiek en ideologie staan in dit genre consequent voorop. Fictie voor jongvolwassenen neigt er vooral toe stereotiepe opvattingen over het menselijk bestaan ter discussie te stellen, een kwestie die eveneens een leidend thema is in dit proefschrift.

In hoofdstuk 2 licht ik de in potentie positieve bijdrage van boeken aan ons leven toe door een onderscheid te maken tussen academische en geleefde filosofie, waarbij ik stel dat verhalen aan beide categorieën iets te bieden hebben. Ik verhelder dit onderscheid met behulp van Herman Dooyeweerts concepten van theoretisch denken en naïeve ervaring, en Sander Griffioen's bespiegelingen over levensbeschouwing. Een korte inleiding in de visie van verschillende filosofen op de relatie tussen filosofie en fictie stelt mij in staat om mijn project binnen de bredere filosofische discussie te situeren. Die visies deel ik op basis van hun interessegebieden in in drie breed geconstrueerde families: de cognitief-analytische, de historisch-narratieve en de moreel-politieke. Mijzelf reken ik tot de laatste categorie. Mijn project plaats ik namelijk op het snijvlak van moraalfilosofie, literaire kritiek en ethiek, met een specifiek culturele focus op de filosofische interactie van individuen met literaire werken.

In hoofdstuk 3 leg ik een meer gedetailleerd fundament voor de opvatting van het verhaal als iets wat een filosofische bijdrage levert samen met het soort van commentaar dat Martha C. Nussbaum voorstaat. Nussbaum heeft beweerd dat een bepaald soort roman behoort tot de filosofische canon die antwoord probeert te geven op de vraag “Hoe moeten we leven?” Ondanks het brede bereik dat haar werk heeft gekregen, hebben denkers bij lezing van haar werk haar nadruk op de onscheidbaarheid van vorm en inhoud in goed geschreven literatuur gemist of verkeerd begrepen door dat werk juist op te vatten

als een pleidooi voor een scheiding daartussen. Ik haal het belang van de integraliteit van vorm en inhoud voor het voetlicht door Nussbaums begrip van verhaal te vergelijken met dat van Richard Kearney. Ik betoog dat het vermogen van verhalen om in gesprek te gaan met incompatibele visies, en die zelfs bij elkaar te houden, geen zaak is van eerst begrijpen en vervolgens toepassen, maar voortkomt uit de versmelting van vorm en inhoud, die zo totaal is dat “het goede” in het verhaal er niet “uitgelicht” kan worden zonder iets te verliezen. De mogelijkheid van bruggenbouwen is een van die voordelen die onlosmakelijk bij het verhaal horen. Wat de Noord-Amerikaanse cultuur nodig heeft, zo stel ik, is precies het fantasierijke inzicht dat aanwezig is in fictie voor jongvolwassenen en de integraliteit van vorm en inhoud in alle goed geschreven literaire werken.

Ik verbreed de discussie over hoe verhaal en filosofie zich tot elkaar verhouden door de inzichten van Hannah Arendt en haar benadering van dit onderwerp te bespreken. Lisa Jane Disch laat zien hoe Arendt het vertellen van verhalen benaderde als een vorm van denken die zowel kritisch als gesitueerd is. Arendts nadruk op pluraliteit geeft Nussbaums nadruk op particulariteit substantieel extra gewicht, zoals ik laat zien door een bespreking van hun respectievelijke visies op compassie, liefde en solidariteit.

Natuurlijk is de scope van mijn project beperkt. Ik leg de nadruk op het gesprek terwijl dat wellicht niet bij iedere sfeer past en daarin toepasbaar is. Ook benadruk ik principes die aan compassie gerelateerd zijn – vooral pluraliteit en solidariteit. Door die nadruk kan wellicht het gevaar ontstaan dat het belang van andere principes, met name rechtvaardigheid, onvoldoende belicht wordt, hoewel zorg voor rechtvaardigheid op de achtergrond van mijn project sterk aanwezig is. Ik hoop dat alle principes die we

waarderen samen zullen optrekken, hoewel ik besef dat in bepaalde contexten wellicht het ene principe prioriteit krijgt boven andere, dat ze bij tijden zelfs conflicteren. Ik heb echter sterk het gevoel dat vandaag de dag de Noord-Amerikaanse cultuur in veel gevallen een duidelijke behoefte laat zien aan een grotere nadruk op particulariteit en solidariteit, en heb de accenten in mijn project daarop afgestemd.

Ik blijf trouw aan de visie dat verschillende conflicterende perspectieven niet alleen te verwachten zijn, maar ook welkom zijn. Mijn zorg is dat we niet eenvoudigweg blijven volhouden dat bepaalde morele interpretaties toepasbaar zijn in iedere context of aannemen dat al die perspectieven maar opinies zijn, en dat het niet nodig is om daarover een gesprek te voeren omdat het geen zin heeft om waarover dan ook overeenstemming te bereiken. Contra de pseudo-universaliteit zal de vraag “Hoe moeten we leven?” in verschillende contexten verschillend beantwoord moeten worden; contra de pseudo-individualiteit zullen ethische criteria belangrijk blijven. In mijn eigen context bied ik als antwoord een principiële, verbeeldingsvolle pluraliteit aan, die de bijdrage van fictie voor jongvolwassenen aan het ethische gesprek als belangrijk waardeert.

Filosofisch commentaar dat fictie vergezelt om het filosofische belang daarvan manifest te maken, de onscheidbaarheid van vorm en inhoud, het belang van pluraliteit: mijn bespreking van dat alles brengt me bij vragen over hoe we criteria voor een wederzijds gevoel van narratieve normativiteit kunnen vinden, criteria die gedeeld kunnen worden, zonder dat we erop staan dat uit verhalen een algemeen geldige moraal te halen. In hoofdstuk 4 breid ik de discussie in deze richtingen uit door fictie te situeren binnen een breder esthetisch, normatief en maatschappelijk kader.

De sleutel tot dit deel van de discussie is Lambert Zuidervaarts door-en-door hermeneutische conceptie van kunst en onze interactie met kunst. Zijn theorie van verbeeldingsvolle ontsluiting en zijn beklemtonen van het feit dat kunst via interpretatie ons leven vorm geeft, verschaffen een kader voor een verstaan van de bijdrage van kunst aan geleefde filosofie, die werkelijk en waarneembaar is, maar die geen simpele regels van oorzaak en gevolg volgt. Ik verbind Zuidervaarts perspectief met Nussbaums theorie van de altijd reviseerbare normativiteit om in te spelen op de behoefte aan een normatieve benadering van de relatie tussen fictie en geleefde filosofie, waarbij het probleem van beschadigende ontmoetingen met kunst verzacht wordt. Met het oog op het concretiseren van de precisie van het hermeneutische model, beoordeel ik een aantal specifieke manieren waarop kunst het leven van mensen helpt vormgeven, met speciale aandacht voor literatuur

In hoofdstuk 5 presenteer ik Wayne C. Booth' vriendschapsmetafoor als een voortreffelijk niet-causaal model voor de relatie tussen fictie en geleefde filosofie. Terwijl in Nussbaums originele bijdrage aan de discussie haar standpunt centraal staat dat fictie actief moet bijdragen aan de academische filosofie, vindt Booth brede erkenning als invloedrijk theoretisch denker over de relatie tussen lezen en ethische karaktervorming – dat wil zeggen, de relatie tussen verhaal en geleefde filosofie. Ik laat enkele sterke en zwakke punten van Booth' metafoor en verwante criteria voor de beoordeling van narratieve vrienden zien, in het licht van Nussbaums kritiek op Booth' benadering. Ik suggereer dat Booth' model zelfs sterker gemaakt zou kunnen worden als we weerstand bieden aan de neiging de metafoor van vriendschap uit te breiden naar die van

“werelden” en als we erkennen dat de term “metgezel” soms een meer passende beschrijving is van onze relatie met narratieve werken dan “vriend.”

In hoofdstuk 6 poog ik tenslotte een illustratie te geven van filosofisch commentaar door mij te zetten aan een eigen filosofische lezing van twee romans voor jongvolwassenen en een kort verhaal. Met deze oefening breng ik de unieke waarde van de behandeling van het verhaal als filosofische metgezel voor het voetlicht, waarbij ik deze benadering afzet tegen de beperkingen van de benadering van verhaal als gereedschap. Bij dit uitproberen van filosofisch commentaar kom ik tot de conclusie dat ieder boek als uniek benaderd moet worden. Evenmin als twee vriendschappen ooit hetzelfde zijn, volgen narratieve ontmoetingen precies hetzelfde pad. Zo word ik er opnieuw aan herinnerd dat de structuur zelf van een verhaal stimuleert tot het soort pluraliteit en verbeeldingsvolle empathie waarnaar Booth en Nussbaum en Arendt – en ook Kearney – streven.

De motivatie achter dit project is mijn overtuiging dat zowel filosofie als fictie een bijdrage kunnen leveren aan een beweging in de richting van ethische ontwikkeling van rechtvaardigheid en solidariteit door middel van verbeelding. Ik sluit mij aan bij de steun voor een wereld waarin jongens en meisjes als unieke voorbeelden van nieuwheid behandeld worden, niet eenvoudigweg als exemplaren van een gender; een wereld waarin alternatieve, marginale stemmen worden gehoord en autonoom handelen als deel van een samenleving die gezamenlijk weerstand biedt aan onderdrukkende impulsen; waarin academische filosofie normatief verantwoordelijk is en niet-traditionele bijdragen serieus neemt; en waarin jongvolwassenen (en volwassenen) de gelegenheid hebben om goede



boeken te lezen en te bediscussiëren die hen ontvankelijk zullen maken voor en leiden in die richtingen.

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