

INKLINGS OF THINGS UNSEEN

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Inklings of Things Unseen

Philosophical Essays on Literature

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Prologue

Beauty will save the world.

—Dostoevsky

The great philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, reserves the term ‘genius’ for artists who create masterpieces—works of art that determine the standard of an art form, or a genre within an art form. His use of the term is exact: he follows the etymology of the word by noting that a genius is one who gives birth to something new, a work of art that is created not just through the application of techniques peculiar to that art, but through the free play of the artist’s imagination as he or she draws inspiration from Nature. As Kant puts it, genius is the capacity by which “nature gives the rule to art.” A genius is not simply an imitator or a describer, following the usual techniques of a given art form. Rather, a genius is an artist whose imaginative descriptions, images, and compositions elicit ideas and conjure emotions which are both personal and universal. In other words, a genius is not simply someone with a brilliant intellect. A genius possesses a unique gift—we might call it a “guiding spirit,” or a “muse”—that compels him or her to create works that deepen our understanding of ourselves, the world, and others; that mold, purify, and refine our passions and attitudes; that repair and strengthen the bond between heart and mind, body and soul, physic and metaphysic.

It was not until I was a graduate student that I read Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, and by then I had also run into Plato, who, it turns out, expresses (in the *Republic*) the same idea of ‘genius’ through one of his own characters—Socrates. But Socrates does not use the term “genius.” Instead, he calls such a person a “true philosopher.” Like Kant, Socrates distinguishes a genius—a “true philosopher”—from someone who

simply applies the techniques of an art form to create their works. Socrates calls these sorts of so-called artists “imitative artists.” They are not compelled to create by a love for beauty, nor are they devoted to an ideal of goodness. Rather, they are motivated by fame, or fortune, or power—or all three. They follow the popular fancies of the moment, not the perennial concerns of anyone with an interior life.

The first genius I knew was my maternal grandfather. Though he lacked a formal education beyond high school and was a landscaper by trade (the most artistic one I have ever known), he was also a masterful storyteller. Whenever he had one or more of his grandchildren around, he would tell us stories—with that glint in his eye and an unquenchable excitement in his voice. His stories were seldom true, but they always held the truth. Like all geniuses, he was compelled to tell stories, you couldn’t stop him from doing so. But it was never for his own glory or praise. His musings were simultaneously entertaining, moving, and profound.

When I became a reader and learned to use my eyes as ears, I encountered a great many more geniuses: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers, George MacDonald, Antoine St. Exupery, Robert Frost, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle. As I grew to be an even better reader, I found more: Joseph Conrad, Fyodor Dostoevsky, William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Oscar Wilde, Albert Camus, Jane Austen, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Wendell Berry, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, G. K. Chesterton, Seamus Heaney, Cormac McCarthy. And as I progressed into philosophy, I found even more literary geniuses: Augustine, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Simone Weil, and Plato himself. I have had at least one personal friend who was a genius—the poet Donovan Welch. I have had some students who are geniuses too. And, of course, there are many more I have not mentioned. One thing I know for sure: I am not one of them.

This book is my way of honoring some of these geniuses. It is not a book of modern criticism—that is, I am not interested in finding faults in any of their masterpieces. One of the most distressing revelations of

my graduate education was discovering that the predominant *modus operandi* among “researchers” in the humanities (specifically in Philosophy and Literature) was to find fault in the works of past authors—most of whom were dead and so could not defend themselves—in order to (at least partially) dismiss them. This process was euphemistically called “critical analysis.” Carrying out this programmatic process required some ideological basis—some interpretive “theory”—from which to criticize the work in question (e.g., Marxist theory, Freudian theory, Feminist theory, Power Dynamics theory, Structuralism, Deconstructivism, or, most recently, Critical Race theory), along with an assumption that no author is capable of freeing him- or herself from the biases inherent in the social structures in which they live. The effect of this approach to the works of these geniuses was to keep those works at arm’s length from those who read them.

This is the last thing I wish to do. On the contrary, my primary purpose in the essays that follow is to send you, dear reader, back to those masterpieces—or to send you to them for the first time if you have never read them before. I wrote these essays because I wanted to explore and solidify the importance and significance of these works—of the ideas portrayed in them. The essays are divided into two parts. Part One contains essays on the ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores’ of literature—the purposes and effects of literature, and the ways that literature achieves those purposes and effects. In this section I also critique the predominant approach to literature in modern times. Part Two contains essays on particular works of literature—masterpieces which have affected me personally in important ways. In this section there are essays on works by Plato, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad, G.K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

I wish to give fair warning to my readers: as will become obvious as you read these essays, I often try to see the connections between the stories that these authors tell and the story of Jesus, the Christ (as well as some of the stories that Jesus himself told). Like Lewis and Tolkien,

I believe this story to be “the true myth”—a story that has the power and affect of myth, but which is also a true account. Most of what I write does not require the reader to share such commitment, but it is fair to let my readers know before they read further.

Professors at Universities are expected to do research and to publish. In fact, they are often allowed time devoted to doing so, as I was in order to finish this project. For that allowance, I am grateful to the administrators at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. I had originally envisioned a book on the consonance of thought and approach between C. S. Lewis and Ludwig Wittgenstein, but I found that others consistently were making their presence felt: Plato, Solzhenitsyn, Kierkegaard, Tolkien. So I gave up on that plan and decided to try a more comprehensive book on Philosophy and Literature. The most sensible thing to do was to try to tie together many of the essays I have written over the past 25 years. I must admit that I still have doubts about the wisdom of publishing these essays. In the preface to his book of philosophical essays, O. K. Bouwsma recounts how he decided the matter. “I flipped a coin and, as I expected, it landed on its edge. So I knocked it down.” The same thing happened to me.