

## **Fiction: True, Useful, and Justifiable?**

Someone only a few years ago said to me, “Fiction is *useless* – it is all a bunch of *lies!!!*” While she has since recanted, her verbal brickbat nevertheless echoes and taunts me whenever I encounter writer’s block. If fiction *is* useless and untrue, why should I insist on imperfectly perfecting *this* page, *this* sentence in front of me? Why not follow Annie Dillard’s advice and choose instead carpentry, or orthodontics, or race horse gambling – anything but writing! So this paper is as much a personal quest as it is an academic inquiry. I will here explore how (and if) fiction is ‘true’ in any sense, and if the uses of fiction can justify the cost of producing it. Finally, since I write as a committed Christian, I will explore how the Christian can justifiably – if at all – spend his time writing. Is it all vanity?

### ***Is Fiction True?***

Often people catch me spouting balderdash. In my defense I fondly remark that fiction writers are exempt from obeying all 10 Commandments, since it would be self-defeating for us to obey the 9<sup>th</sup>. A recent book popularized a similar slant on fiction; it is called *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit*. The title implies that fiction writing does not deal in truth, but fancy. The word *fiction* comes from a Latin base meaning: to shape, form, devise, feign. Even more condemning is the Latin root of *fictitious*, meaning ‘artificial, counterfeit’.<sup>1</sup> David Hume, for one, baldly asserted that fiction writers, poets in this case,

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<sup>1</sup> November 2001 *Douglas Harper*. <http://www.etymonline.com/f2etym.htm>

are ‘liars by profession, always endeavor(ing) to give an air of truth to their fictions.’<sup>2</sup> And according to Jeremy Begbie, the church also suspects that “the arts are essentially about the expression of emotion rather than the more serious business of truth-telling.”<sup>3</sup>

In response, some challenge the notion that the fiction writer *lies* in story making, for the writer does not intend to trick the reader into believing the reality of the events or characters in a story. Philip Sydney wrote, “Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false....But the poet (as I said before) never affirmeth.... And therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not.”<sup>4</sup> When I read a novel I do not mistake it for truth; I know it is artifice, that it has been ‘feigned’ or ‘devised’ by an author.

More to the root of it, others challenge our modern sense of *truth*. Since the Enlightenment, the argument goes, the world of the imagination has been denigrated because it is not scientifically intellectual. This hyper-rationalist thinking “writes off [works of the imagination] as satisfying a lower human passion, incomparably less significant than clinical empirical research.”<sup>5</sup> Science, however, is not as objective or reliable as we might suppose, since scientists must deal with their own language, and cultural assumptions.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Seerveld wonders why we behave as if scientific knowledge is qualitatively *better* than other types of knowledge – or as if it is the only source of *true* knowledge – when it is merely a particular kind of intense observation, when

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<sup>2</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Art and Action*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1996. Pg 122.

<sup>3</sup> Begbie, Jeremy. *Voicing Creation's Praise*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 1991. Pg 249.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Sydney as quoted in Wolterstorff, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Seerveld, Calvin. *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*. Toronto, Ontario: The Association for Reformed Scientific Studies. 1968. Pg 64. Both Seerveld and Wolterstorff write from a specifically Reformed Protestant perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Dillard, Annie. *Living by Fiction*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers. 1983. Og. 55.

“scientific knowledge is simply theoretical knowledge” and “not therefore infallible or...’better.’”<sup>7</sup> Finally, since all of our understanding – including scientific meaning – is piece-meal and incomplete, we should consider the knowledge literature offers, for “if we are to know electrons and chimpanzees less than perfectly, and call it good enough, we may as well understand phenomena like love and death, or art and freedom, imperfectly also.”<sup>8</sup> Frank Burch Brown even suggests that rational thought itself is impossible without an aesthetic dimension.<sup>9</sup>

Jeremy Begbie claims it is “misleading to claim that art affords no cognitive contact with reality.”<sup>10</sup> But what kind of knowledge can literature offer?<sup>11</sup> Fiction is not empirically or historically true, since it does not deal within the realms of actuality.<sup>12</sup> Instead, it deals with the realm of *possibility*. In most cases, fiction posits a *possible world*, a “smaller and more coherent world alongside the great world.”<sup>13</sup> According to Nicholas Wolterstorff, world-projection is the most primary and essential act an artist performs, and should not be mistaken with making false assertions about the actual world.<sup>14</sup> A writer offers us the way the world *might* be, “presenting to us a world for our

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<sup>7</sup> Seerveld, *Critique*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> Dillard 166-7.

<sup>9</sup> His argument is a bit complicated and involves image schema. See: Brown, Frank Burch. *Religious Aesthetics*. New Jersey, NY: Princeton Press. 1989. Pgs 94-96ff. Brown’s aim is not to study aesthetics and Christianity from a particular theological tradition, contra Wolterstorff and Seerveld. Instead, he hopes to further the general conversation about religion, aesthetics, culture, and humanities.

<sup>10</sup> Begbie, 217.

<sup>11</sup> The following arguments can be extended to artwork in general. I focus on literature for the sake of focus and personal relevance.

<sup>12</sup> “The world of the work is normally incompatible with the actual world: the world of the work and the actual world cannot *both* occur. But even when the world of the work is not incompatible with the actual world, that is, even when everything constituting the world of work actually occurs, still the world of the work is only a *segment* of the actual world, never the whole of it.” Wolterstorff, 123

<sup>13</sup> Dillard, 152. Also: “Quite often, in fact, the work of art seems to comprise or gather into itself a kind of world, both like and unlike our own.” Brown, 108.

<sup>14</sup> Wolterstorff, 128.

consideration.”<sup>15</sup> In doing so, “the fictioneer may make a claim, true or false as the case may be, about our actual world,” for by the mere act of selection – which every author must make – the writer takes a stance towards the world of the work.<sup>16</sup> Dillard adds, “We may inquire of the world within the work of art all that we inquire of the great world: what, pray, is going on here? In other words, we can examine an artistic world...to gain insight about the great world.”<sup>17</sup>

Those persuaded by a *possible world* conception do not wholly agree on the content or nature of knowledge in literature, though each suggest it is marked by a sort of ‘hiddenness.’ By Dillard’s thinking, a piece of literature is symbolic, and the symbols contained therein are “suggestive” and we cannot ever isolate or “exhaust” their meaning.<sup>18</sup> Seerveld suggests that literature is an act of *imaginative symbolizing*, where “writing serves directly as symbolical objectification of meanings perceived”<sup>19</sup> and communicates “allusively”.<sup>20</sup> For Begbie, art is capable of generating true knowledge of reality, but “beyond the confines of human self-consciousness,” and chiefly through

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<sup>15</sup> Wolterstorff, 146.

<sup>16</sup> Wolterstorff, 125. Also: “By doing one and another thing with his artifact of art, the artist projects a certain world. He takes up a stance toward those states of affairs constituting the world of the work...over and over what we discover is that it is a fictive stance. That is to say, over and over we discover that the artist invites us to *consider* the world of his work. To take up the fictive stance toward some state of affairs is not to *assert* that that state of affairs is true, is not to *ask* whether it is true, is not to *request* that it be made true, is not to *express the wish* that it be true. It is simply to invite us to consider that state of affairs.” Wolterstorff, 134.

<sup>17</sup> Dillard, 152. The full quote: “We may inquire of the world within the work of art all that we inquire of the great world: what, pray, is going on here? What sort of a world is this? Do social matters dominate it, or spiritual matters? Is man himself glorious or shameful? In other words, we can examine an artistic world not only formally, but also culturally, morally, and metaphysically, to gain insight about the great world – the great world that is the truest object of our most urgent inquiries and deepest hopes.”

<sup>18</sup> Dillard, 166-7

<sup>19</sup> Seerveld, *Critique*, 88. Also: “This attentive, apprehending aesthetic objectification of meaning...this imaginative operation displays a depth dimension of temporal human nature which is neither the *ethos* order to naïve experience nor the *epoche* ordering of sciences, but an important third, comparable phenomenon.” Seerveld, *Critique*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Begbie, 138.

metaphor.<sup>21</sup> Buechner sees fiction as pointing to “inward and invisible truth.”<sup>22</sup> Along these lines Langdon B. Gilkey proposes that art “opens up the truth hidden behind and within the ordinary.”<sup>23</sup> So, while not completely agreed on all the details, the general consensus is that fiction can capture meanings to things which otherwise would escape quantifiable scientific analysis; fiction possesses meanings imaginatively grasped by a writer, or *imaginative truth*.<sup>24</sup>

For some the definitions given above may seem ambiguous to the point of irrelevance. If the meanings and ‘genuine knowledge’ of literature are so slippery and obscure, how can we be sure they are there at all? Wolterstorff would respond that literature can contain evaluative truths, and often does. Others would answer that literature has the capacity to engage the *whole* human personality, not just the rational mind, though the experience of encountering an evocative piece of literature can *lead to* rational knowledge.<sup>25</sup> Seerveld offers two helpful examples. First he points to King Lear and Huck Finn; although you wouldn’t meet either of these characters on the street, they may indeed be more real than anyone else you might meet on the street.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, Seerveld tells a story about the painter Matisse:<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Begbie, 247. Also: “It may not deal in the currency of direct, literal statement, but, like a metaphor... it is able to depict reality beyond itself and beyond the self-awareness of the artist.” Begbie, 248.

<sup>22</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *The Clown in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 1992. Pg15. “Fiction can’t be true the way a photograph is true, but at its best it can feign truth the way a good portrait does, inward and invisible truth.”

<sup>23</sup> Gilkey, 190.

<sup>24</sup> Seerveld, *Critique*, 89-90. A disclaimer: I think it would be a misreading to suggest that *all* ‘meanings imaginatively grasped’ are imaginatively *true*. If I read him correctly, Seerveld would maintain that a meaning might also be imaginatively *false*.

<sup>25</sup> This is the argument of Frank Burch Brown.

<sup>26</sup> Seerveld, *Critique*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> Though this quote has to do with painting, it is appropriate for literature and other types of art.

Matisse said to the lady who looked at one of his curvaceous, twisted black swirls of an oil canvas and said, “I never saw a woman like that.” “Madame,” said Matisse, “it is not a woman, it is a painting!” But that painting is not unreal because it is not a woman nor false because it is ‘exaggerated’; Matisse in color discloses (and affirms) the voluptuous viciousness of a wanton that could be shown perhaps no other way.<sup>28</sup>

In this same way, fiction exaggerates reality and attempts to catch an undisclosed glimpse at its object. T.R. Wright says, “The whole point of reading literature...is that it says something about life which cannot be said in any other way.”<sup>29</sup> And this is precisely why Farley Mowat does not contradict himself when he writes, “it is my practice never to allow facts to interfere with the truth.”<sup>30</sup>

### ***Is Fiction Useful?***

Fiction’s utility is not necessarily tied to its truthfulness. For example, Freud saw art in general as the neurotic’s libido expressing itself, gaining the artist wealth, notoriety, and women. A.E. Housman declared that poetry’s use is to “transfuse emotion – not to transmit thought but to set up in the reader’s sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer.”<sup>31</sup> According to these notions, fiction is a *diversion* – a useful one – from the scientific, psychological, mathematic *reality* of the universe.<sup>32</sup> Here ‘fiction’ is a “dirty

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<sup>28</sup> Seerveld, *Critique* 72.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted in Begbie, 249.

<sup>30</sup> Mowat, Farley. *Never Cry Wolf*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd. 1963. Pg 139.

<sup>31</sup> Seerveld, *Critique* 63-4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

word used by the scientific mentality to ban novels from significant life to bed for reading oneself to sleep.”<sup>33</sup>

Many, as I have illustrated in the previous section, find fiction more valuable than mere distraction or escapism, thinking it deals in aesthetic or imaginative truth. For these thinkers, fiction is *illuminating*: “Art ‘is not merely a matter of subjective consciousness, but of ontological disclosure.’ In this disclosure, *we* are questioned – our self-understanding is revealed, illuminated and challenged.”<sup>34</sup> The main challenge presented to the reader is the ‘world of the work’, the author’s interpretation of the world.<sup>35</sup> World-projection *illuminates* because it draws our attention to certain aspects of the alternate world, thus leading us to reflect on the substance and events of the actual world. As Brown puts it, “Because the worlds of art represents things felt to matter (even while distanced from immediate concerns) and amounting to more than what is strictly logical, quantifiable, and measurable, the mind that thinks through the alternate worlds of works of art reconsiders even this present world in terms of qualities and values and purposes.”<sup>36</sup>

World-projection is particularly effective in challenging our self-understanding because its arguments are not played out *solely* on a rational platform; the fictional world, if produced with any skill, engages our *whole* personality, our mind, senses, and affect. Brown argues that although the aesthetic and artistic elements of literature can interact with cognitive processes – conceptual and propositional thought, the realm of the rational mind – it uniquely has us “think by means of aesthetically rich images, forms, and

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 89. Though he employs a heavy dose of hyperbole, his point stands.

<sup>34</sup> Begbie, 199. A caveat: “There is reason to doubt that...the visionary, revelatory capacity of art is equally applicable to all artworks...” Brown, 91.

<sup>35</sup> See Dillard, 151: “The writer is the world’s interpreter. The writer is certainly interested in the art of fiction, but perhaps less so than the critic is. The writer is interested in knowing the world in order to make real and honest sense of it. He worries the world and probes it; he collects the world and collates it.”

<sup>36</sup> Brown, 110.

representations.”<sup>37</sup> While recognizing the necessity of reason in literature,<sup>38</sup> Brown asserts that reason alone is inadequate in conceiving the world – particularly the philosophical and religious elements – without “drawing on a more replete and refined aesthetic rendering of the qualities of experience” found in art.<sup>39</sup>

Brown’s main argument is that humans are made up of three parts: mind, body, and ‘heart’, and that these interdependent parts constitute the ‘soul.’ Skillfully crafted art – literature in our case – engages all of these parts in various ways.<sup>40</sup> For example, as I have already noted, the *mind* encounters an alternate reality which can lead to insight about our own world. The *body* benefits by finding in literature “an extension and evocation of its own capacities, pleasures, and sensibilities,” which can stimulate our body’s “sensitivity and sense of vitality.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, a gifted writer appeals to our physical senses, thus drawing our *body* into a largely mental and imaginative experience.

Brown’s definition of ‘heart’ is two-fold, including both affect and will.<sup>42</sup> As for affect, C.S. Lewis notes, “...the poet’s route to our *emotions* lies through imagination,”<sup>43</sup> so part of Housman’s charge is spot-on: good fiction *is* emotionally evocative.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Brown doesn’t believe there can be any art (or religion, for that matter) without feeling,

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<sup>37</sup> Brown, 100.

<sup>38</sup> “Yet art cannot elaborate genuinely meaningful forms or imaginary worlds, let alone worlds and meaning that are felt to matter, without drawing on reason’s powers,” Brown, 99-100.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, 99-100. “Analogously, reason cannot adequately ponder or conceive the world that human beings express ‘wholly’, and that they most want to understand philosophically or religiously, without drawing on a more replete and refined aesthetic rendering of the qualities of experience than schemata transmit and than body and sense consistently present.”

<sup>40</sup> “Three clusters of artistic traits will be of particular interest here: (1) that art is made in such a way as to be appreciably aesthetic and often beautiful; (2) that it is made skillfully, knowledgeably, and creatively by human agents; and (3) that it is made in forms that can express, fictively represent, and imaginatively transform ‘worlds’ in a revelatory or prophetic way. With respect to each of these features of art, we will spell out how the relevant traits address and engage what we will figuratively speak of as *body*, *mind*, and ‘heart’ – understood here as distinguishable but inseparable ‘parts’ or functions of the self.” Brown, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, 103.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, 104.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, C.S. *Studies in Words*. Cambridge University Press. 1960. Pg 319, italics mine.

<sup>44</sup> He gets in wrong when he thinks it is *merely* emotional.



“for these depend on our having or wanting a world in which something matters; and, apart from feeling, there is no ‘mattering.’”<sup>45</sup> And literature is fundamentally about meaning and ‘mattering’, since if one didn’t care about *something*, there would be no point in picking up the pen to write,<sup>46</sup> and there certainly would be no incentive for a reader laboring through a work of fiction. It is the fiction writer’s role, as opposed to the scientist, to purposely use emotional language in their writings. C.S. Lewis writes:

By direct description, by metaphor, and simile, by secretly evoking powerful associations, by offering the right stimuli to our nerves (in the right degree and the right order), and by the very beat and vowel-melody and length and brevity of your sentences, you must bring it about that we, we readers, not you, exclaim ‘how mysterious!’ or ‘loathsome’ or whatever it is. Let me taste for myself, and you’ll have no need to *tell* me how I should react to the flavour.<sup>47</sup>

By arousing our *affect*, literature can also provoke our *will*. In doing so, the writer of fiction can assume the role of the prophet.<sup>48</sup> For one, like a prophetic utterance, literature can *illuminate* or give the reader a perspective on things they had not encountered yet, or had forgotten. John Macquarrie says art is “something like revelation. What is revealed has been there all the time, but it has gone unnoticed in our humdrum everyday experience. It needs the sensitivity of the artist to bring it to light, so that we notice things for the first time.”<sup>49</sup> The writer challenges the reader, showing them

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<sup>45</sup> Brown, 99.

<sup>46</sup> Even the writer who wishes to communicate the meaningless of life must produce a meaningful work if s/he wishes to be read. “...the writer makes real artistic meaning of meaninglessness the usual way, the old way, by creating a self-relevant artistic whole. He produces a work whose parts cohere. He imposes a strict order upon chaos. And this is what most contemporary modernist fiction does. Art may imitate anything but disorder.” Dillard, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Lewis, 317-8.

<sup>48</sup> Or it can further support the existing order of things. “Like so-called religious persons, artists *can* adapt their work so that it merely celebrates current forms of power, so that it merely sanctifies our technical advances, our affluence, our dominance....” Gilkey, Langdon B. “Can Art Fill the Vacuum?” in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. New York: Crossroad. 1985. Pg 192. However, “our high-art artist in the modern West characteristically sets himself over against his society.” Wolterstorff, 146.

<sup>49</sup> As quoted in Begbie, 209.

an alternate world, “so as thereby to awaken them from their somnolence, or release them from their self-indulgent ideologies, or energize them into action.”<sup>50</sup>

Because of this illumination, well-crafted literature brings us a sense of *immediacy*,<sup>51</sup> it has heightened our senses and our emotions, and the work demands a response. If the artist has succeeded in creating a genuine world for his work of fiction, by way of transforming ordinary reality, that world of his work then constitutes both a criticism of the established order and a sign of release from its dominance by its evocation of an alternative.<sup>52</sup> A reader may very well react by *rejecting* the author’s stance towards reality as seen in the world of the work, but this is nevertheless a response of the will.<sup>53</sup>

Literature, therefore, has the capacity to challenge and illuminate the reader through the projection of an alternate world.<sup>54</sup> Like other forms of art, it is especially effective because “The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not.”<sup>55</sup> Despite the claims of some empiricists, scientists, and other modernists, literature can be as cognitive as it can be emotional, and can have as much or more human *meaning* than scientific or mathematic knowledge. Evidently, literature meets a human need. It challenges, it illuminates, it interacts with the whole

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<sup>50</sup> Wolterstorff, 146.

<sup>51</sup> “Art’s particular relationship to cognition and emotion allows it to lay claim to immediacy.” O’Meara, Thomas Franklin. “The Aesthetic Dimension in Theology,” in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. New York: Crossroad. 1985. Pg 214.

<sup>52</sup> Wolterstorff, 152.

<sup>53</sup> This is not necessarily a conscious process, either in adopting elements of an author’s interpretation of the world, or in rejecting it.

<sup>54</sup> “This artist’s capacity to envision, and in vision to transfigure this world or some hypothetical counterpart, evidently responds uniquely to an abiding human need. That is the need to discover, imagine, and come to grips with a world that can be thought and felt to matter, both in its goodness and beauty and in its evil and horror.” Brown, 109.

<sup>55</sup> T.S. Elliot, as quoted in Brown, 101. Also: “...the whole man – you must not dichotomize him, cut him into two and say only part is working – the whole man is somehow, and naturally so, busy in the act of art.” Seerveld, 41.

human personality, and it deals with *truth*; this in turn allows us to ponder alternative ways of enacting our humanity. Thus, literature is *useful*.

### ***Is a Christian Justified in Spending Their Time Writing Fiction?***

A Christian doesn't need to look far to justify story telling. We are told to be like Christ, and Jesus did not speak to most people with logical, mathematic, or other empirical language. Moreover, the New Testament in general doesn't engage the reader via precise logic, but instead teaches "through imagination's forms: parables, stories, paradoxes, confrontations, dramas, hymns, gospels, and letters."<sup>56</sup> Gregory Wolfe sees precedent even in the Old Testament literature, linking the writer to the prophets of old, since they "employed many of the same tricks used by writers and artists: lofty rhetoric, apocalyptic imagery, biting satire, lyrical evocations of better times, and subversive irony."<sup>57</sup> Can a Christian therefore justifiably spend his time writing literature? Yes, because story telling deals with truth, with things that matter to people; because story telling engages the whole human personality, projecting a world for consideration; because story telling can have a prophetic and illuminating element to it; and because Jesus himself told stories.

Despite all these reasons, many people in our Churches – conservative Protestant churches more precisely – would object to their son or daughter or cousin choosing a life of fiction writing over, say, evangelism or the 'ministry' or missions. Part of the problem, according to Seerveld, is a certain Christian tendency that would rather withdraw from

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<sup>56</sup> Omeara, 211.

<sup>57</sup> Wolfe, Gregory. "Editorial Statement: Artist as Prophet" in *Image: Journal of the Arts and Religion*, issue 18, pages 3-4.

society than engage it.<sup>58</sup> This cultural rejection invariably derogates the artist, since art is in its nature a cultural artifact and an *interaction* with the world. As Wolfe sees it, “conservatives have just withdrawn from culture...[and] the most depressing trend of all is the extent to which Christians have belittled or ignored the imagination and succumbed to politicized and ideological thinking.”<sup>59</sup> In this scheme, literature is merely a means or a carrier of a *message*, and often times is poor writing or story telling. Another culprit in the denigration of the arts in general is the tacit assumption that certain vocations are inherently more ‘spiritual’ or more ‘Christian.’ Wendell Berry sums up and counters this idea: “The assumption that religious work is done only by preachers, missionaries, and church musicians seems to me a symptom of decay in Christianity...I see no reason not to think that I was doing a religious work when I wrote the story.”<sup>60</sup>

I’ve already suggested that world-projection is fundamental to literature, but I have not described what a “Christian” world-projection might look like, or how it might work. First of all, “Christian” world-projection does not concern itself solely with biblical characters and events.<sup>61</sup> In fact, much biblically-based fiction is rather shoddy or pedestrian, and would hardly be called literature outside of Christian circles. The true mark of “Christian” literature is simply this: its projected world takes on a Christian *slant*, just as non-Christian writing possesses a certain slant.<sup>62</sup> As Dillard described it earlier, a piece of literature is interpretive, and in this case “Christian” literature interprets the

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<sup>58</sup> Seerveld, Calvin. *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task*. Downsview, Ontario: Toronto Tuppence Press. 1980. Pg 182. There is also the shared cultural assumption that art in general has very little utility. See general arguments in the second section.

<sup>59</sup> Wolfe, Gregory. “Art, Faith, and the Stewardship of Culture” in *Image: Journal of the Arts and Religion*, issue 25, page 97ff.

<sup>60</sup> Barry, Wendell. “Wendell Berry: An Interview” in *Image: Journal of the Arts and Religion*, issue 26, pg 51.

<sup>61</sup> Begbie, 133.

<sup>62</sup> Buechner, 13.

world Christianly. Or to put it in Begbie's terms, "The crux of Christian [literature]...lies in a Christian *vision* of the world under the Lordship of God."<sup>63</sup>

Do not take Begbie to mean here that "Christian" literature, therefore, ought to be about happiness and joy and saccharine sweet intimacy with Jesus Christ. No, the pleasures of our relationship with God are only *part* of "the world under the Lordship of God." We must also consider the real brutality of sin and death – the Gospel is not an anaesthetic. Thomas Franklin O'Meara describes all human life, including Christ's, as having the quality of 'chiaroscuro', since the "beautiful is glimpsed with the sharp lines of finitude"<sup>64</sup>, and since "the underlying revelation of Jesus Christ is that God's plan for us, his 'glory' in us, includes contradiction, suffering, failing and death."<sup>65</sup> Thus, its truly "Christian" writer is as honest about the absence of God as the presence of God, because "needless to say you have had your dark times like everybody else."<sup>66</sup>

The author of a truly Christian book, as defined above, cares about these topics – pain and joy, suffering and promise, sin and hope – and wishes to communicate the importance of these things to the reader.<sup>67</sup> Like most art, a book is inherently conversational<sup>68</sup>, and here lies the value of quality Christian fiction. Most books don't bully you into believing on thing or another, and if they do we feel manipulated and often

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<sup>63</sup> Begbie, 55, italics mine.

<sup>64</sup> O'Meara, 213.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* Also, "Biblically true art will rather show the hurt and laughter, the thoroughgoing chiaroscuro to flowers and desires and prayers alike; it will let a childlike gladness of hope well up through the total groaning of creation for the Great Day still to come." Seerveld, *Critique*, 57.

<sup>66</sup> Buechner, 16. The full quote: "If you are going to be a religious novelist, you have got to be honest not just about the times that glimmer with God's presence but also about the ones that are dark with his absence because needless to say you have had your dark times like everybody else."

<sup>67</sup> See: "Picasso says that an artist paints not to ask a question but because he has found something and he wants to share – he cannot help it – what he has found." L'Engle, Madelleine. *Walking on Water*. Wheaton, Ill: Harold Shaw Publishers. 1980. Pg 237.

<sup>68</sup> "Art, we might say, is inherently dialogical." Begbie, 220. Also, "If artists invent themselves, it is in the service of others. The work of my life is given to others; in fact, the reader completes it." Norris, Kathleen. *The Cloister Walk*. New York: Riverhead Books. 1996. Pg 53.

disregard the book. In this way, fiction differs from theology, logic, and debate, all of which seek by force, precision, and coherence of their arguments to persuade the reader or listener. A book is rather an invitation to a conversation, a dialogue. As Begbie puts it, literature “is best construed as a vehicle of interaction...*through which* we converse with those communities with whom we share our lives.”<sup>69</sup>

But this is no ordinary conversation. Because fiction engages the whole person – body, mind, and heart – it can be a very persuasive form of discourse. Buechner uses the term ‘creative writing’ to imply that there is such a thing as its converse, ‘destructive’ writing.<sup>70</sup> By his line of thinking, authors can affect their readers in a peculiar way because of a lack of insulation: the words are *in* your head. Buechner uses an analogy to describe the intimacy of fiction’s discourse; he describes writing as ‘intravenous’, because

As you sit there only a few inches from the printed page, the words you read go directly into the bloodstream and go into it at full strength...the words you read become in the very act of reading them part of who you are, especially if they are the words of exceptionally promising writers. If there is poison in the words, you are poisoned; if there is nourishment, you are nourished; if there is beauty, you are made a little more beautiful.<sup>71</sup>

An effective author draws us into his or her fiction, thereby bypassing many of our defenses and persuading us – affecting us intravenously, to use Buechner’s metaphor – to accept their view of reality. For the Christian writer, this means presenting to their reader a Christian slant in the projected world, to whisper in their ear the truths of Scripture.

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<sup>69</sup> Begbie, 257.

<sup>70</sup> “There is writing that creates and writing that destroys.” Buechner, 44.

<sup>71</sup> Buechner, *Clown*, 76.

I do not advocate here outright manipulation in fiction, for most readers recoil when they feel manipulated. The Christian's projected world naturally follows from their core beliefs, since, "All of man, and notably his faithfulness to Whomever it be, goes into his art,"<sup>72</sup> and, "Whatever one lives close to crops up easily in his art."<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the writer ought to spend their time focused on the tools of their craft –in the realm of sentences, ideas, description, and dialogue, for example – in order to more aptly translate Christian truths to their readers. In this regard Seerveld charges to writer to focus "with unbending Rabbinic concentration upon the cast and purity and purpose of their art [and] *translate their own Christian vision* into language understandable by the rest of the world."<sup>74</sup>

Christians, therefore, ought feel justified in their pursuit of fiction writing. More than this, those who feel compelled to do so ought to feel *commended* to pursue fiction. In literature we find a peculiar form for disclosing Christian truth, and a useful form because it not only interacts with a person's reason but their 'heart' and body, their whole personality.

### ***Conclusion***

I have argued that in some sense literature deals with truth, despite being quintessentially fictive. Further, I have argued not only that fiction can be true, but also that it can be useful. A piece of writing can be illuminating or prophetic, and can hopefully challenge the basic assumptions we all, as readers, hold true. Literature is especially capable of challenging our preconceptions because we can encounter it with

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<sup>72</sup> Seerveld, *Critique*, 42.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

our whole human personality, not merely with our rational mind. Finally, I have argued that a Christian is not only justified in writing fiction, but those who are called to do so ought be commended to produce finely crafted, thoughtful “Christian” literature. In doing so, a Christian can enter into deep, possibly penetrating conversation with many who would otherwise be resistant to theological treatise and rational debate. The author acts as a translator of those things she or he holds dear, and acts as an interpreter of the world.

Effectively, I have argued myself into a corner. Prior to the writing of this paper I allowed the questions of fiction’s *truth*, *use*, and *justification* to excuse me, at times, from persistent writing. I can no longer use these concerns as a shield from laziness and procrastination. The questions have shifted and focused into a singular challenge: “Will *I* write fiction?” Or, to paraphrase Seerveld’s question, “Will *I* grow up artistically in my craft, or choose instead to be tongue-tied?”<sup>75</sup> But that is a topic for another paper, or even a thesis. Or, better yet, the first draft of a novel.

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<sup>75</sup> Seerveld, *Rainbows*, 181. The full quote: “And once you are children of God, the Lord says, grow up artistically or you’ll be tongue-tied and unable to glory in all that singing, painting, music mime and dance and story-telling going on in heaven and on the new earth!...[or] will my people welcome me with clumsy mumble when even the trees will be choreographing movements and the mountains jumping for joy? God’s New Testament people need Holy Spirited artists to prepare and lead them in this field of our existence as much as God’s Old Testament people did, even more so, because our times are as fierce and licentious and insidious as the days of Noah.”