

The Call of Stories



TEACHING AND THE
MORAL IMAGINATION

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B O S T O N

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Introduction



THIS BOOK BEGAN in hearing my mother and father read to each other from novels by George Eliot and Dickens and Hardy and Tolstoy during my elementary school years. My brother Bill (now a professor of English) and I had our own agenda—a host of radio programs to which we were devoted. While we responded with noisy laughs to “Easy Aces” or “Amos ’n Andy,” our parents were trying to understand how England changed in the Age of Reform (*Middlemarch*) or how Russia survived Napoleon’s ambitious, greedy plunge eastward (*War and Peace*). I remember one evening, when my father was saying good night to me, we had, as was our custom, what he called a “brief evening chat.” Putting on a serious face and feeling a bit nervous at the prospect of challenging what by then I knew to be a much-cherished activity, I managed to voice my query: “Why do Mom and you read out loud to each other?” He wasn’t surprised by the question, but he wanted to know how much thought I’d given to the subject. He asked me whether I’d discussed his reading habits, and my mother’s, with anyone else. I told him that Bill and I had indeed learned that none of our neighborhood friends had parents who were so inclined. I also told him that I had tried reading a book, *Robin Hood*, with a good friend who lived next door, Benedict, and we had concluded that the exercise

was slow, cumbersome, boring. Dad, sensing more at stake, wondered whether I'd be happier if he and Mom read upstairs rather than in our living room.

I recall the brief, unsuccessful fight I waged to keep a straight face. He never pushed the matter beyond that point; my smile provided him his answer: their reading had effectively denied us the use of the big parlor radio. We had to sit in the kitchen, on straight wooden chairs, listening to the small Zenith on the side table where the toaster also nested. How much more we got out of "The Shadow" on Sunday afternoons, or the programs mentioned above on weekday early evenings, after supper, when we could sprawl on the big stuffed sitting chairs, with the footstools nearby, and hear what that enormous Philco set had to offer!

I can still remember my father's words as he tried to tell me, with patient conviction, that novels contain "reservoirs of wisdom," out of which he and our mother were drinking. A visual image suddenly crossed my mind—books floating like flotsam and jetsam on Houghton's Pond, near Milton, Massachusetts, where we lived. I never told my father what had appeared to me, but he knew its essence by my glazed eyes. He made his pitch anyway: "Your mother and I feel rescued by these books. We read them gratefully. You'll also be grateful one day to the authors." *Grateful!* I was most certainly grateful, seconds later, when I felt my father's facial stubble on my cheek. No more moral explication—only that last, Yorkshire-accented "Good night, Bobby," and my ever-optimistic rejoinder: "See you in the morning."

On the way to school the next morning, my brother and I talked about "them," about their habit of reading to each other. We were no psychologists, but we were searching for an explanation that would account for motives. We found one easily: they were prejudiced against the radio (all they ever wanted to hear on it was the news), and they were trying to incline us similarly. In effect, those novels were the instruments of a parental ruse. My brother, a bit rasher than I, wanted a confrontation. I urged restraint—lest we lose what we had, that small radio's daily magic.

Not that I was averse to taking the measure of the enemy. While my brother rehearsed speeches to our parents, I surveyed their bookshelves, picked up some of their favorite novels or collections of short stories, flipped the pages with a mixture of irritation and impatience, read a few chapter titles, and brooded briefly over the propagandistic uses of these "reservoirs." I recall, once, wondering whether they would even notice if "someone" removed some of the books and hid them, or, better, threw them out.

In high school, in the classroom, I started getting reacquainted with some of those books. Yes, I thought to myself, I've not only heard of Dickens and Hawthorne, I've heard their words read *aloud*. I've heard them discussed as if they mattered more than what Fred Allen or Fibber McGee and Molly had to say. By then the English teachers were saying more or less what my parents had said, though not always, I began to notice, with the same conviction. In fact, some of those teachers seemed almost as bored with the books they assigned us as I had been. A friend of mine whose job it was to clean our English teacher's room on a particular morning (he'd been making too much noise in a study period) reported seeing a well-worn study guide of *A Tale of Two Cities*; in it were a summary of the plot and a list of all the characters. We'd been cautioned about "trots" in Latin, but no one had said anything about summaries of the novels we were reading in English. I went to the library that weekend and secured an outline of that Dickens novel, only to make the mistake of leaving it on my desk at home. My mother stumbled on it while dusting, and soon enough I was arraigned: why take such a shortcut? Dickens was meant to edify and entertain, not to become someone's "fast study," as she put it. Had our teacher suggested such a resource? No, but he'd used it himself. Well, too bad for him! That evening at dinner my parents told us about *A Tale of Two Cities*, about their appreciation of the book, their delight in it. They gave us a flesh-and-blood account of the English and French history upon which the novel drew, and we were impressed. That plot summary seemed skeletal in comparison.

By the time I went to college I shared the literary enthusiasms

of my parents. They—she from Iowa, he from England—had met in Boston through a lucky accident. She loved Willa Cather, Mark Twain, Booth Tarkington, Sinclair Lewis, and, later, Wright Morris—writers who evoked the prairie states, favorably or critically or in both ways. He was a great admirer of the Victorian trio, Dickens, Eliot, Hardy—and he himself (we were often reminded) was born a week or so before long-lived Queen Victoria had died. Together my parents had read American writers such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner while my brother and I were young children, and together they had also read Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. Though my father did not dislike the Russians, he never took to them with the passion my mother felt. She read and reread Tolstoy all through her life—*Anna Karenina* three times, short stories such as “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” and “Master and Man” repeatedly, and *War and Peace* twice.

When I was a high schooler of sixteen and inclined to be moody and troublesome at home, my mother bought me a copy of *War and Peace* and asked me earnestly, pleadingly, to spend the summer reading it. I refused immediately, of course, asking why in the world she was pressing on me such a big book, written almost a century earlier. She answered that I might obtain a modest amount of sorely needed “understanding” (a word she favored) with Tolstoy’s help. Moreover, since the Second World War had just ended and I’d been much interested in its various battles, she reminded me several times that Tolstoy knew history exceedingly well and evoked in his great novel the personal side of war—the way it gets worked into the lives of individual men and women. I took to reading the novel, but on the sly. I kept working at it for many months, even during the school year, when lots of homework had to be done. By then, needless to say, my parents were only too aware that I was ignoring math and history and Latin (and even English) for my rendezvous with the Rostovs and the Bolkonskys in a Russia being battered by Bonaparte. My mother’s interest in Tolstoy’s “understanding” gave way to a stubborn inability to

find any understanding for me and my choices, which she deemed “out of kilter” (a serious accusation). I was “using Tolstoy in a foolish way,” or so she said.

I managed to finish Tolstoy’s novel by the time I finished high school, and in college I promptly enrolled in a course titled “Tolstoy and Dostoevsky”—on the naive notion that if I’d read the longest of all novels, I’d have an easy time of it in at least one freshman course. Soon I was struggling with a novel a week, many of them a mere few hundred pages shorter than *War and Peace*. I was also taking another heavy reading course—an introduction to English literature—and I began to feel myself drowning in print. For a while those “wonderful stories,” as my mother sentimentally referred to them, became a torment; I yearned for a math course, or a composition class, in which I could write, rather than read and read and read in order to be able to spot passages correctly or identify in multiple-choice tests the obscure characters who come and go in long nineteenth-century novels. (My parents were shocked when they saw those identification questions on the examination in my “Tolstoy and Dostoevsky” course—an effort on the teacher’s part to make sure we read the books well enough to remember the names of the characters. “Tolstoy would be horrified,” my mother exclaimed. I wondered how she knew.)

By my junior year in college I had fallen under the spell of Perry Miller, who taught American literature from the angle of the Puritan tradition. He was interested in the attraction that tradition held for many writers, and in general he responded to the moral as well as to the aesthetic side of literature. But his tastes were broad and sometimes surprising. He got me interested in the poetry and prose of William Carlos Williams—hardly a Puritan divine—and eventually persuaded me to write my undergraduate thesis on the first two books of *Paterson*, published in the late 1940s. He also persuaded me (working against shyness and fearful pride) to send that thesis to Dr. Williams, who promptly wrote back with a friendly critique and an invitation to drop by if I was ever “in the neighborhood.”

As a consequence of doing so, I found myself in a bind: I'd expected to get a job teaching high school English or else to do graduate studies in literature or a religious studies program (another consequence of tutorials with Perry Miller), but now I had the idea of being a doctor like this astonishing and inspiring Doc Williams, as all his patients called him. He'd taken me on his rounds, taken me to Paterson's tenements. In a way, I became one more of his admiring patients; in time I enrolled in premedical courses, went to medical school, embarked on a pediatrics residency, and eventually took training in psychiatry, child psychiatry, and psychoanalysis.

For the last decade I have taught courses for college students and those in graduate school as well. I started doing so in a modest way. I'd come back east from a two-year stint in New Mexico, where I'd gotten to know Indian and Spanish-speaking children. I was writing up the results of that study when a friend who was a Harvard administrator suggested I teach a seminar for freshmen at his college. He had in mind a course devoted to social science inquiry of the kind I had been doing in the American South and West, but I hastened to tell him I would much rather have the students read James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and George Orwell's documentary writing—*Down and Out in London and Paris*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, *Homage to Catalonia*—than any series of sociological texts. He liked the idea, and I started a seminar in the “literary documentary tradition,” looking at the way novelists and poets write about certain social and political issues. That seminar has been running ever since.

In 1978 I began teaching a course—it is still a mainstay of my autumn schedule—titled “A Literature of Social Reflection.” For this lecture course (with sections for discussion) we read fiction in hopes of doing moral and social inquiry. Among the works we think about are Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Tillie Olsen's stories, collected as *Tell Me a Riddle*, William Carlos Williams' *White Mule*, Flannery O'Connor's stories, Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, Georges Bernanos' *The Diary of a Country Priest*, Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine*, and some of my parents' favor-

ites—*Middlemarch*, *Great Expectations*, *Jude the Obscure*. As in my freshman seminar, we call upon Agee, the poet and novelist, and Orwell, the novelist.

I have taught Harvard medical students in a seminar called “Literature and Medicine,” where we read O'Connor, Percy, and the “doctor stories” in which William Carlos Williams gave an account of his experience as a physician working among the poor in northern New Jersey. We have also called upon Anton Chekhov, another writing physician, and Leo Tolstoy (“The Death of Ivan Ilyich”). I have found myself constantly learning new ways of interpreting those fictions—taught by my undergraduates and medical students. Differences in interpretation become apparent when I teach *The Moviegoer* or an O'Connor story such as “The Lame Shall Enter First” to college youth as against physicians-in-training. Some students who have taken both my undergraduate and my medical school courses have commented upon how a few years of life and a different intellectual agenda affected their response to a particular story. By the early 1980s I was beginning, at last, to see why my parents kept rereading certain favored books in the course of their lives.

As I have continued to do psychiatric work with children, I have gradually realized that my teaching has helped that work along—by reminding me how complex, ironic, ambiguous, and fateful this life can be, and that the conceptual categories I learned in psychiatry, in psychoanalysis, in social science seminars, are not the only means by which one might view the world. As I interviewed teachers during springs and summers, here and in Europe, Africa, and Latin America, I increased my autumn teaching load. I taught a course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in which students read how teachers and their work are regarded and evoked by fiction writers—Dickens in *Hard Times*, Flannery O'Connor in “The Artificial Nigger.” While studying the manner in which children's political attitudes are shaped, I gave a seminar at the Institute of Politics at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, centered on Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, a novel that aims to comprehend what

draws people into political life. Listening to aspiring teachers or governmental administrators talk about their working lives in response to the reading of one or another novel was not unlike listening to young people describe their moral and political experiences.

Later I decided to extend my teaching further, to see if novels and stories might be of use to others in other parts of Harvard University. I began a course at Harvard Law School called "Dickens and the Law"—a seminar devoted to discussion and analysis of novels such as *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Little Dorrit*, in which lawyers and legal questions are constantly presented to the reader. At Harvard Business School (and in an evening course for working people at the Harvard Extension School) we read fiction such as Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and *The Last Tycoon*; Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*; John Cheever's stories; Dr. Williams' so-called Stecher trilogy; Dr. Percy's *The Moviegoer* and his essay "The Man on the Train"; Tolstoy's story "Master and Man." With Harvard Divinity School students I did readings from Percy and O'Connor, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Silone, Bernanos, François Mauriac—novelists who interweave spiritual matters with their storytelling. Finally, one spring, I read Henrik Ibsen's play *The Master Builder* with two Harvard Graduate School of Design students, future architects who had taken my undergraduate course.

The chapters that follow are the result of a kind of fieldwork—a teacher's conversations with his students over many years in many classrooms. The conversations have been about certain books, which I use and use and use in various courses. Put differently, the conversations have amounted to a collective exploration of the personal responses of various American students to a particular literary tradition. Many of those conversations have been tape-recorded, and here I share moments in them. They have been edited, shaped, for this book. I have attempted in these pages the same kind of documentary study or psychiatric anthropology I have presented elsewhere (in the *Children of Crisis* series, for instance), though now it is of a hometown or localist

kind. Instead of venturing across regions or oceans or railroad tracks to talk with one or another "them," different by virtue of racial, cultural, or social condition, I have tried to probe my own teaching world, an intellectual and moral territory familiar to many of us twentieth-century Americans who have gone to college and perhaps graduate school.

I draw upon a number of wonderful novelists and poets in this book, but now I simply want to acknowledge an enormous debt to the students, who have taught me so much. My book's title is autobiographical: one keeps learning by teaching fiction or poetry because every reader's response to a writer's call can have its own startling, suggestive power, as my parents tried to convey. To my office hours in Adams House, at Harvard College, students brought their papers, their proposed projects, and themselves with all their diversity, perplexity, apprehensiveness, or self-confidence. Two of those students became good friends of mine and helped me a great deal—Wayne Arnold and Jay Woodruff. So, in recent years, has Phil Pulaski. I want also to mention some other very satisfying teaching I've been privileged to do: as a visiting professor of public policy at Duke University, where on numerous occasions I discussed novels with both undergraduates and medical students; as a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and as a visiting professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where with Sandra Bertman I taught a "medical humanities" course much like the one I teach at Harvard Medical School.

My wife has been a schoolteacher for over a quarter of a century. She has taught in private schools in Massachusetts and Georgia, and in public schools in both of those states and in Louisiana and New Mexico, where we have lived while doing our work together. Her subjects have been English and history, and her high school children have come from a wide range of social, racial, and economic backgrounds. Since our marriage she has more than reinforced my attachment to novels, stories, poems, and plays. I have often acknowledged her decisive influence on me. I cannot imagine myself, without her, doing the

work I have done. Peter Davison, who has edited my writing ever since it began, is a fine poet, a good friend, a person of great breadth and depth, and, to me, a wonderfully energetic and knowing teacher. Like my wife, he has taught me by example. I thank him, as well as my wife, even as I salute the lives of my mother and father, both of whom, in their eighties, died near the end of 1985 after sixty years of a most gracious and loving marriage. God bless their memory.