Dear Alumni, Parents, and Friends,

I’m very much looking forward to meeting all of you this August and to exploring together with you some powerful literary visions of what it means to love, think, and dream from inside a very physical body. The novels I’ve chosen are taken from the syllabus of a senior seminar of mine on the same topic, and I think they will allow us to come at our subject from a number of diverse and provocative directions.

Although our course is formally entitled “Frankenstein’s Flesh: Three Literary Bodies,” each of the texts we’ll be reading are so rich that limiting our discussions of them to just the one theme they have in common would be frustrating and confining. Let me suggest a metaphor: we can think of *Frankenstein*, *The White Hotel*, and *Disgrace* as three islands that are all dominated by a similar peak: namely, an intense concern with the flesh and our embodied nature. As we visit each of these islands, we will definitely climb each of their respective peaks. But, if the country also offers some interesting caves, or forests, or waterfalls, or beaches, we’ll visit those too, without feeling guilty about it. After all, wherever we go in each literary island, the shadow of the peak will always be present, shading and coloring all the other destinations. Our ropes and pickaxes will certainly get a lot of use, but pack your sandals too, for our roaming will be as complete as our time allows.

Any literature class that concerns the body has a natural starting place, and happily for us, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is an inexhaustibly suggestive book. For now, I’ll only say that while the “realistic” plane of the world’s first science-fiction novel is engaging enough, things really get interesting when one begins to consider what the Creature might also symbolically represent. Once you start down that road, the intriguing possibilities just keep multiplying.

Turning to *The White Hotel*, let me anticipate one initial difficulty. After the Preface containing letters sent between several founding giants of Psychoanalysis, the next two chapters consist entirely of Lisa’s erotic fantasies, first in poetic form, and then
in prose. I imagine that what most of you will find challenging about these two journals is not the fact that they are sexually graphic, but that one has little idea what immediately to do with such confessions. Have faith, though—just hold them in mind and read on—The White Hotel is one of those novels in which things don’t cohere until the very end, but whose final revelation of universal coherence is more than worth the wait. Another feature of the book that involves delayed gratification is its magical-realist element: you won’t know until near the end just what part of the text has been “magical” all along. But I promise you this: when that magical aspect is finally revealed, it will be the opposite of some cheap “and-then-I-woke-up” gimmick—rather, the discovery will be simultaneously breath-taking and heart-breaking.

Disgrace, by contrast, is a deceptively straightforward novel, most of whose fireworks consist in the unexpected juxtaposition of seemingly simple words. One feature that all readers remark on, though, is that by its conclusion the text ends up being preoccupied with an issue that could not possibly have been predicted from its opening chapters—or even during its entire first half. One way into the novel’s depths might be to ponder why it goes to such an unexpected place, why it seems to give so little warning that it will do so, or whether in fact there is some natural but hidden inevitability between its initial and its final concerns.

That’s enough of a preview for now. I hope you find these three novels as gratifying as I do, and I’ll be eager to hear your thoughts when we sit down together in August. Have a great summer!

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