

IMAGINATION

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I

From at least as early as Plato's censure of dramatic poetry for the transformations it causes in the character of its reciter, theoretical conceptions of the imagination have contributed to speculation over our encounters with works of art (Halliwell, 2002, p.74–75). However recent philosophy of mind and psychology have developed models of the imagination—as well as of kindred phenomena of pretense, make-believe, and simulation—that offer much greater explanatory power than provided by those earlier incarnations. These new approaches have come to be especially fruitful in elucidating the nature of our responses to literature.

Described very generally, the imagination is a capacity to mentally represent and respond to some states of affairs regardless of whether it is actual. This capacity is employed in a wide range of human activities that includes playing games, fantasizing, dreaming, hallucinating, manipulating symbols, planning for the future, performing thought experiments, inquiring into metaphysical possibility, wishing, remembering, adopting another person's point of view, and, of course, responding to literary fictions.

In focusing on our engagements with literature, we will treat topics such as: how imagining is the means by which we discover what facts hold within a story, including what characters believe and desire; how emotions, desires, and other evaluative attitudes are generated toward such contents; and how these attitudes compare to those we adopt toward analogous circumstances in real life. We will eschew discussing the creative imagination in connection with literature, that is, the capacity to generate or combine ideas in original ways—although no doubt literature may spring from and enhance this capacity (Gaut, 2003). Rather, our discussion will be confined to the broad range of activities corresponding to what has been called the *recreative imagination*, where the assumption is that one's imaginative representations are guided by and answerable to the prescriptions and elicitions of a text (Currie and Ravenscroft, 2003).

II

One of the foundations of literary experience is determining what the facts are in a story, i.e. what does it ask us to imagine taking place. Such facts include prosaic details about events, locations, and characters that anyone following the story must recognize, as well as facts that are occasionally missed in even relatively competent readings. Determining what is fictionally true in a story is logically prior to, and partly provides the grounds for, the sort of interpretive exercises that attribute a thematic, symbolic,

allegorical or other sort of meaning to a narrative. However, there may be in practice a back-and-forth adjustment between the two kinds of determinations. If we accept that Billy Budd's downfall is modeled on Christ's Passion, we have a *prima facie* reason to attribute facts to the story that are consistent with that interpretation even if they are otherwise indeterminate in the narrative. Part of what we do in comprehending what is true in a fiction is to *propositionally imagine* those contents. That is, we adopt a certain kind of mental attitude—that of imagination—toward a certain kind of content—the propositions that hold in the story. Such mental attitudes are not distinguished by their content, for that content can be the same, e.g. I can both imagine and desire that *p*. Rather they are distinguished by the respective patterns of interactions they have with other elements of mind and behavior. For our purposes here, we may observe that while beliefs “aim at truth,” imaginings aim at what is true in a fiction (Velleman, 2003).

But what makes something true in a fiction? Some approaches treat that truth very broadly, so as to incorporate whatever would be true if the fiction were told as known fact (Lewis, 1983). But that kind of construal, even with additional conditions and fine-tuning, tends to mischaracterize our identification of what happens in a story. For it wrongly directs us to identify as fictionally true many aspects of a fiction's representational content that don't count as part of the story. We would have to admit that in *Madame Bovary*, the narrator has a superhuman ability to reproduce the exact words uttered long ago by denizens of Rouen; in Shakespeare's dramas, even rough soldiers address each other eloquently and in meter; and in Dickens' novels, people such as Gradgrind had the misfortune to develop personalities suggested by the surnames they were born with. Thus other theories narrow the scope of what is true in a fiction, construing it as the product of an engagement wherein only certain dimensions of the fiction generate facts within it. One approach that has gained widespread acceptance characterizes this engagement as involving a structured pretense.

In Kendall Walton's influential theory of fictions (among which he includes pictorial representations, indicating a departure from our pre-theoretical concept), a text is a fiction in virtue of the role it plays as a prop in such a pretense—what Walton calls a game of make-believe. A simple game of that sort is exemplified by children pretending to duel with wooden sticks as if they were swords. Some of the rules that structure this game may be formally agreed upon, but others may have a naturalness in that context such that, without being explicitly stipulated, they govern what counts as properly playing the game. If a stick breaks, so has the sword it represents. Walton proposes that works of literature can have analogous roles as props in more tightly constrained forms of pretense, where, for example, in reading a fictional story we imagine that we are following a real person's narrative of actual events. Whereas the rules of a children's game are often ad hoc and readily revised, the rules that structure our engagements with literature tend to be relatively stable within and across different contexts of literary consumption. Among those rules, of course, are those specifying that certain features of a fictional representation—e.g. that the narrator appears to have an ability to read other characters' minds—are not counted as facts in the world of the story.

Some theories, including Walton's, see a pretense as being definitive of fiction. Thus, Gregory Currie identifies fictions through appeal to what he calls a *fictive utterance*: a proposition that an author intends audiences to imagine to be true, and to do so in awareness of the author's intention (Currie, 1990). Leaving aside further qualifications,

such theories are vulnerable to the charge that they succeed at best in identifying only necessary conditions for fictionality, as many non-fictional works also depend on our imagining their contents (Friend, 2008). However, these approaches significantly re-orient a traditional conception of fictionality; for they construe it as a function not of the falsity of a work, but of the place of the work in an activity of pretense or make-believe.

A significant feature of that activity is that many of the inferential operations we perform involving propositional imaginings have parallels in those we perform involving beliefs. (Nichols, 2004; Weinberg and Meskin, 2006).

For example, just as inductive and deductive reasoning among our beliefs can lead to new beliefs about the actual world, so such reasoning among our imaginings of what is true in fiction can lead to new imaginings of what is true in it. If I believe that I was bitten by a poisonous snake, and I believe that there is no antidote, then I'll conclude that I'm in serious trouble. If I imagine of a fictional character that she was bitten by a poisonous snake, and that there is no antidote, then I'll imagine that she's in serious trouble. We also tend to monitor the consistency among our imaginings in relation to a given fiction, just as we do with our beliefs, sometimes giving up what we thought was true in a story when more reliable information from the story contradicts it. This capacity to reason among the contents of a pretense just as we reason among the contents of our beliefs appears in children at least as young as two years old playing imaginary games, who can determine, e.g. that a pretend cup of tea, when overturned, "becomes" empty (Leslie, 1994; Harris 2000).

No doubt, many facts we imagine in reading a fiction come not from inferences but from the narrator's descriptions that we take to be true by stipulation. We read that "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" without doubting its accuracy. However when facing unreliable narrators, or characters with limited perspectives such as the dog in Woolf's *Flush*, we may discount the evidential value of what is stated, and find alternative avenues to working out what occurs. This mirrors how we handle an actual person's testimony as a source of belief.

However, even the most omniscient and transparent narrator's descriptions do not tell us all the facts that we are encouraged to imagine as holding in a story. We often infer unstated facts in a fiction from what is directly asserted, either by implicitly relying on background beliefs we have about the real world (say about human motivation) or by importing such beliefs into the narrative. If a character is in London one day and New York the next, we assume without needing to be told by the text that the character traveled by plane. Here, our beliefs allow us to infer new imaginings from the imaginings that we already have (Nichols and Stich, 2000; Gendler, 2003).

Beliefs that saliently contradict what we are prescribed to imagine are not typically admitted into our inferences among those imaginings. For that would result in our imagining contradictions to exist in even the most quotidian naturalistic stories. Furthermore, we may abstain from importing certain beliefs into a fictional story if it represents a world highly dissimilar to our own. We may hesitate in assuming, for example, that Penelope's commitment to Odysseus is fueled by our contemporary notion of romantic love.

Imaginings, of course, are typically *quarantined* from playing a role in inferences among our beliefs (Gendler, 2003). One may concurrently imagine that p and believe that *not* p , without feeling any rational pressure to hold one of these thoughts to the exclusion of the other. Relatedly, what we imagine to be true does not tend to motivate the behavior that it would if we believed it. One's discovery when reading a novel that a sympathetic character

is to be poisoned does not serve as an impetus to any relevant action. Within a behavioral pretense what one imagines (e.g. the monster hiding behind the tree) may motivate one to act. But in such cases one's imagining serves as a reason for the action as identified from within the pretense, not outside it.

Other asymmetries in patterns of imagining and believing are explained by the joint perspectives, *internal* and *external*, that we take on the contents of fictional representations but not on the real world (Lamarque, 1996; Currie, 2010a). We take the internal perspective when we refer to facts in the fiction that motivate us to imagine certain other propositions as true within the story; we adopt the external perspective when we refer to factors outside the fictional world that perform that imagination-generating function. The external stance on the work describes it in terms of its identity as an artifact, with reference to its characters, plot, style, medium, meter, tone and other aspects of the vehicle of representation. The internal stance, by contrast, identifies the contents of that representation as if they were real or were being recounted by a real narrator. From the internal stance, Othello's speech is rough ("rude am I in my speech"), but from the external it is refined, in the poetic diction Shakespeare employs.

Thus only some of the grounds of what is true in a fiction lie within the scope of the operator "it is make-believe that." Other sources lie outside. We can usually assume, for example, that in a gothic horror story a vampire cannot bear daylight. We do not import that fact into such a fiction because we believe that about actual vampires, but because we know it is a convention of the genre. By the same token, if we see that the dramatic principles attributed to Chekov are being followed in a narrative, then we can reasonably predict that when a gun hanging on the wall is mentioned in the first chapter, by the third it will go off. We may also be justified in imagining certain facts to be true in one work in virtue of how it alludes to or is modeled on another. Walcott's *Omeros* is thus read in awareness of its relation to the *Iliad* and we encounter Fielding's ribald *Shamela* knowing of its heroine's doppelgänger in Richardson's earnest *Pamela*.

In general, a fiction's overt descriptions of what is the case supply an opportunity to make an indefinite number of potential inferences about what else is true in the fiction. That only a much smaller subset of mostly shared inferences are in practice activated in our engagement with the text is explained by how its descriptions manage our attention and interests, making certain conjectures and conclusions *relevant* to us in the fictional context (Nichols, 2006; Currie, 2006). Indeed, authorial slight of hand may divert us from inferences that reveal inconsistencies in a story or that supply alternative explanations of events than what the text mandates we imagine. Of course, a text manages not only what facts we imagine but *the manner in which* we imagine those facts: the sensory, expressive, and affective experience evoked by a narrative is crucial to explaining the richness of our engagement with literature.

III

Consider the kinds of mental representations we form in reading this passage from James Joyce's "Clay," in which Maria, a woman living in narrow circumstances, plays a children's game in which an object selected by chance while blindfolded signifies one's fortune:

They led her up to the table amid laughing and joking and she put her hand out in the air as she was told to do. She moved her hand about here and there in the air and descended on one of the saucers. She felt a soft wet substance with her

fingers and was surprised that nobody spoke or took off her bandage. There was a pause for a few seconds; and then a great deal of scuffling and whispering.
(Joyce, 1914: 86)

Here, we are invited not only to entertain a proposition, *that* these events occur, but to undergo certain sensory and motor imaginings as well: we see Maria groping for an item, feel the clay within her hand, and hear the disconcerting hush (the clay may be a sign of death). Just as a fiction relies on our importing into its content some of our beliefs about the real world, so it may recruit our sensory and other kinds of non-propositional knowledge—knowledge of what things are like—in filling out the state of affairs it represents. What we add to a story's contents with sensory imagining may be less constrained and exhibit greater variety than what we are elicited to propositionally imagine, while still serving as a fitting representation of the fictional state of affairs. Indeed, we may have no motivation to contribute purely descriptive facts to a fiction when it leaves them indeterminate, but certain sensory imaginings, even when not invited by a text, are often unavoidable, such as what a protagonist looks like.

When integrated, propositional and experiential kinds of imaginings can provoke affective responses that we might not have toward the content of either attitude alone. We feel pity for Maria as Joyce's narrative adds detail upon detail: her cheery unsophistication, her co-workers' clichéd praise for her goodness, and condescending predictions that she'll marry. But the unease and embarrassment we feel for her at moments such as when she grasps the wet clay depend on a more visceral form of imagining than imagining the truth of those propositions alone. It isn't clear whether all kinds of emotions that we may feel for the contents of a fiction depend upon the presence of sensory or experiential imagining. However those kinds of emotions that are subject to that condition—such as disgust—tend to be subject to it as well when they are responses to beliefs.

Although being emotionally affected by a story is familiar, how to describe the nature of that experience is a matter of dispute (Radford, 1975). Some theorists situate our experience of such fiction-directed emotions *within* the pretense that fictions elicit from us. In other words, it is not that we feel sad for the fictional Maria in Joyce's story, rather it is part of our participation in a pretense involving the fiction's contents that we make-believe we feel sad. Such *irrealists* about fiction-directed emotions argue that while genuine emotions can be provoked by a work of fiction—as when reading a ghost story causes apprehension over the house's creaking floorboards—those generated in response to the contents of a work are not literally felt but only pretend, despite often being accompanied by the standard physiological and phenomenological dimensions of reality-directed emotions (Walton, 1997).

We should note that a related but independent view is that the *desires* we feel for the contents of fictions should on some occasions be construed as a constitutive part of a pretense, and thus not as genuine desires (Currie and Ravenscroft, 2003; Doggett and Egan, 2012). This proposal is motivated in part by difficulties in finding a consistent concept of desire that can enter into explanations of both (1) a person's real desires, and (2) his desire-like states that have as a satisfaction condition only an imagined state of affairs (Currie, 2010b; Kind, 2011; Gilmore, 2013). A conception of imaginative desires distinct from a real ones would help explain why our desire that Desdemona not be murdered does not have the same satisfaction conditions as a desire, e.g. for an eccentric performance or revision of *Othello* in which her life is spared.

A background commitment in the irrealist approach to emotions (and in some approaches to desires) is a broadly cognitive conception of an affective state according to which it has both a phenomenological dimension and is constituted by, or depends on, a belief about its object. To genuinely fear something requires that I judge it to pose a threat. Pitying someone depends on my believing that she suffers misfortune. The objects of fictions do not support the requisite beliefs that real emotions require, therefore, the irrealist holds, any putative emotions felt for fictions are either irrational (flouting the cognitive requirement) or, in their favored interpretation, not really genuine.

The contrary realist position is that the emotions we feel for the contents of fictions can be genuine as well as rational. Our emotions lie outside of the scope of the operator “it is fictional that,” but can be appropriately triggered by and directed at what is within.

Realists point out that there is something unsatisfying *ad hoc* about treating emotions that are fiction-directed as only pretend, when emotions directed at the contents of a wide range of other sorts of representations that are counterfactual or don’t represent one’s circumstances (e.g. memories) are uncontroversially counted as genuine (Moran, 1994). This point can be generalized to say that emotions may be supported or partly constituted by mental attitudes other than belief. Fantasies, desires, anticipations, perceptions, acknowledged hallucinations, and, most relevantly here, thoughts that need not be truth-apt such as imaginings, can serve as the representational vehicles of an emotion’s target (Roberts, 2003; Carroll, 1990). Indeed, our emotional responses to what we take to be fictional seem to instantiate a broadly exhibited disposition to respond behaviorally, cognitively, and affectively toward some kinds of stimuli in a way that is indifferent to their sources (Damasio, 1994; Gendler and Kovakovich, 2006). Furthermore, other accounts of the interests we have in such emotional responses to merely imagined contents show how they can be rational, or at least not irrational, as a class and thus less in need of the sort of re-characterization as only pretend that irrealists offer. (Gaut, 2007; Joyce, 2000). Among these interests is garnering the pleasure offered by fantasies and fictions; being able to anticipate how one will feel in future circumstances; and learning of and from another’s point of view through modeling her emotions. Let us now look at that phenomenon of empathetic identification as it features in our engagements with fictions.

IV

Sometimes in reading a fiction we experience affective states shared with particular characters. I don’t merely pity Marcel but feel his grief when he recognizes only in his photograph of his grandmother how seriously she had been ailing when it was taken. One kind of philosophical approach to the imagination suggests that this awareness and experience of such affective states need not stem from a process of inferential reasoning about a character’s beliefs and desires. Rather, I arrive at that understanding in a more direct fashion through imagining or *simulating* being in the character’s situation. I imagine having his beliefs and desires and I attribute to him the emotions or other states that this process generates in me. I can tell what Marcel feels from what I am caused to feel when I imagine having his beliefs and desires, his recognition of his earlier insensibility, his perception of his grandmother’s face, and so on.

The extent to which such simulation of characters’ mental states plays a role in our engagement with fictions depends in part on a larger debate in philosophy and psychology

over how best to explain our ability to know other minds. Broadly construed, simulation models posit imaginative identification as playing a significant role in some contexts of shared background experiences in generating our understanding of others (Goldman 2006; Currie 1995). The alternative theory-theory models place greater stress on our use of a tacit body of knowledge of how people think and feel (Carruthers and Smith 1996; Stone and Davies, 1996).

Critics of simulation as an explanation of our affective responses to fictions do not claim that it never occurs. Rather, they argue that its scope is limited. For we can plausibly account for much of what we know of a character's feelings from descriptive information a narrator provides about the mental state of the character and via inferences from what the character says and does. We may also come to have the same emotion as a character because we recognize the same grounds for the emotion that she does.

Furthermore, our emotional responses often do not match those of the character with whom we putatively empathize: she feels excitedly optimistic about her assignment with a stranger, but we feel wary of that encounter. In such a case the proponent of simulation may observe that our wariness is felt in virtue of our recognition of the character's optimism, and it is that latter feeling that is generated empathetically. However, other emotions we may feel for a fictional scenario are sufficiently *decentered* that they may not refer to any particular emotions of characters in the fiction. That the contents of a story are amusingly grim may be due to the mordant way it is framed or represented, not to the feelings of any individual represented therein. Appealing to a narrator as the target of our simulation in such cases does not help. For even when we adopt in imagination a narrator's beliefs and desires concerning some state of affairs, and thereby understand how he feels, we may feel a different way about those facts ourselves. A malicious narrator, such as Montresor in Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" or Bateman in Ellis' *American Psycho*, need not be unreliable for us to reject his perspective on what he describes while still responding in a way consistent with what the fiction prescribes. Determining what a fiction expresses about its contents entails attending to the particular ways in which that content is represented—e.g. parodically, coldly, reverentially, blandly, tolerantly, and so on. It need not involve simulating the attitude of some other real or fictional person, except perhaps in the sense that in imagining those contents as the fiction prescribes we may "try on" an evaluative perspective alien to our own.

V

That we don't respond merely to the contents of a fiction but to those contents in the particular manner in which they are represented, explains a curious feature of our engagement with literature. We sometimes treat a fictional state of affairs in ways contrary to how we would treat analogous circumstances in real life.

We may find a person of some kind contemptible in real life but find ourselves on his side when he is instantiated in a fiction. We may find some situation funny in a story while depressing in real life. Or we might desire an event to occur while absorbed in a narrative, but desire it not to occur in analogous circumstances in the actual world. Shaun Nichols calls these cases of *discrepant affect* (2006).

Limits to such divergences have been probed in recent discussions of what has come to be called *imaginative resistance* (Walton, 1994; Moran, 1994; Gendler, 2006). There, it

it has been observed that while we are usually able to imagine a wide range of counterfactual situations—the bizarre scenarios of science-fiction, fantasy, alternative history, and myth—certain scenarios pose a comparative difficulty: paradigmatically those in which we are to imagine that what we find immoral is morally good. Although it is easy to accept that it is true in a given fiction that slavery is morally permissible, it is difficult to imagine, as mandated by the fiction, that slavery is morally permissible. Other morally-irrelevant kinds of prescriptions to imagine also cause such problems, and it isn't clear if all kinds of cases can be explained in the same way. But, in the cases we consider here, we have no difficulty in imagining some state of affairs even though it calls for us to respond in a way contrary to how we would if we encountered it in real life.

One explanation of why such discrepant affects exist is that fictional descriptions always frame their contents in ways that evoke particular responses (Schier, 1983).

For example, facts in a scenario that are criterial for one kind of emotion can be highlighted, while those criterial for contrary emotions can be diminished (Carroll, 1997). We may thus find the torments of the hero amusing in a picaresque novel but be revolted learning of them occurring to a real person, where different dimensions of the circumstances would be salient. The names given to characters (e.g. Willy Loman, the hapless salesman and Allworthy, the too-upstanding guardian of Tom Jones) often invite associations not explicitly invoked in the narrative. And, the register used in describing some state of affairs can convey a mood independent of any particular facts that are mentioned. Thus, the terms used in *Emma* of Mrs. Elton on her way to pick strawberries dressed in “all her apparatus of happiness” invite us to gently mock her too deliberate and mechanical cheer.

However, framing devices do not identify how imagining such facts differs from believing such facts. For the emotions we feel for some state of affairs in real life may similarly be explained by the point of view we are caused—say, by good rhetoric—to adopt. Of course, vis-à-vis any veridical representation, we can always meaningfully ask if there is an alternative way of looking at things that would justify feeling a different way. The contents of a fiction, by contrast, are constituted by how they are represented; there are no alternative facts not already incorporated in that representation.

A different explanation of discrepant affects is that they sometimes stem from our countenancing contrary kinds of reasons or causes for our responses according to whether they are generated by imaginings or by beliefs.

For example, the moral disgust we feel for Fagin in *Oliver Twist* stems in part from his sinister behavior. But that feeling is also supported by the text's references to his filthiness (his “greasy” clothes) and slimy bearing (“creeping . . . like some loathsome reptile”). These descriptions work by exploiting a well-studied tendency to conflate feelings of mere physical disgust with justified moral opprobrium (Schnall, 2008). In responding as we are elicited to by those descriptions, we appear to accept that such physical disgust is a reliable indication of moral attributes. Of course, a similar feeling of disgust prompted solely by someone's filth in the real world would not offer a reason for judging him immoral. Similarly, we may respond with satisfaction as the narrator of a fiction pursues some sinister aim because the experience of mentally representing his voice conduces us to a feeling of intimacy. Thus, in imagining that we are reading the memoir of Humbert Humbert—a “shining example of moral leprosy” according to the novel's frame-narrator—we come to see Lolita's mother as just that troublesome obstruction portrayed by her ill-intentioned lodger. Indeed, we may accede to a narrative's

exploitation a wide variety of our biases and tendencies, such as our seeing beauty as an indicator of moral goodness, without endorsing the effects of those irrational or arational causes on our attitudes when they concern real-world states of affairs.

One characterization of those kinds of responses is that they demonstrate how some fictions exploit our susceptibility to being irrational in our modes of appraisal: such works cause us to respond in ways that we would not endorse if we rationally reflected on the reasons we have such feelings.

An alternative characterization, however, is that in such cases we do not fail to respect norms that we recognize as governing all our emotions and desires. Rather, when we engage in certain activities of pretense or imagining we abide by norms that are indexed to the functions of those activities. If, for example, we aim to imagine whether *X* or *Y* would be a better place to spend a vacation, we want the feelings that we form in imagining being in *X* to be roughly indicative of how we would feel if we were in fact in *X*. There, our emotions about what we imagine are held to the same norms of representational accuracy as emotions about what we believe. However other activities such as our engagements with fictions, may be driven less by securing epistemic and evaluative accuracy and more by attaining the pleasures of absorption and vicarious experience. In such cases, an emotion that is justified in response to the contents of the fiction might not be justified in response to analogous circumstances occurring in real life. For the function that is served by the elicitation of a given emotion may make a difference in the reasons or causes we accept as justifications for it.

If different sets of norms govern our affective engagements with fictions and our affective responses to what we believe to be the case, this offers some motivation for skepticism about two familiar conceptions of the relationship between literature and moral character. One of these is the familiar idea that fiction-guided imagination can aid us in honing our moral sensibilities through exposing us to richly-imagined moral dilemmas and alternative outlooks on life. (Nussbaum, 1992). The problem is that if the available justifications and criticisms of our emotional responses to two events of the same kind can appropriately diverge in virtue of one belonging to the content of an imagining and the other to the content of a belief, then there may not be any straightforward transfer of those capacities of appraisal from one domain to the other. The other is that our moral character is partly revealed in our responses to the scenarios that we imagine in reading fictions. It might be assumed that if one is not unwittingly manipulated by a work of art to feel emotions that run contrary to one's values, one's reflective and considered emotional reaction to the content of a fiction can disclose one's evaluative dispositions—that is, what one cares about. But if one can internalize different criteria for appropriately responding to, respectively, fictions and reality, one can exhibit one sort of a response to a state of affairs within a fiction without that predicting how one would respond—and what sort of response one would sanction—if that state of affairs actually obtained.

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JONATHAN GILMORE

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