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What Dickens Says is True: Truth Communication Through Fiction

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

WHAT DICKENS SAYS IS TRUE: TRUTH COMMUNICATION THROUGH
FICTION

By

Meggan R. Payne

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

June 2010

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
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WHAT DICKENS SAYS IS TRUE: HOW TRUTH IS
COMMUNICATED THROUGH FICTION

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What Dickens Says Is True: Truth Communication
Through Fiction.

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This dissertation attempts to answer the question, "How is truth communicated through fiction?" It begins with an analysis of theories of fiction that have been given in analytic philosophy. Then, it frames the question in terms of a response to the "war" between philosophy and poetry, represented by Plato's Socrates, who sees a variety of problems with allowing that poetry can teach ethical behavior, and Sir Philip Sidney, who believes that poetry has a great ability to teach. At the heart of the disagreement between the two is a question about the relationship between truth and the kind of communication that takes place in poetry, which is everywhere assumed rather than stated and argued for. The dissertation then continues to work toward an answer to its main question. First it looks at the theories of several continental philosophers who had things to say that hint at the direction to go in answering the question. The last two chapters are an attempt to give and support an answer to the question; input is drawn from sources as various as Leonard Nimoy, Dorothy Sayer's "Gaudy Night," Linda Young's "Remember WENN" website, and academic literary theory; and the question is given a direct answer in the last chapter. There are three things that all fiction does that makes it communicate truth in a specific manner: all fiction attempts to engage, purports to describe the normal, and actually makes normative implications. It is because of this that fiction is the dangerous but potentially beneficial thing that Plato and Sidney respectively see it as.

to Mister Wulff

from someone who is very proud to be your student.

Even now, you insist on making me work harder than I think I can. Your pushing me is what made me a philosopher – and, far from just watching you teach logic all those years, I was learning from you how to be the person I wanted to be as an adult. If not for you, I wouldn't be doing so many of the things that I value, and there are very few things that could make me happier than the knowledge that you are proud of me. I love you with all my heart, and I always will.

Come now, let us reason together...

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Chapter One: Introductory

Consider these three fictional episodes:

1. Ernest P. Worrel floats through the air, electrically charged, facing down a look-alike bad guy hanging from the ceiling by a floor buffer. As the last seconds of the countdown tick away, Ernest swoops down, yanks the bomb from its place near his lady friend, and flies through the ceiling. After an explosion high in the atmosphere, Ernest's body falls to the ground, landing precisely at the spot he had taken off from. He then sits up and makes the following proclamation: "I came. I saw. I got blowed up." Then he falls over again.¹

2. Obi Wan Kenobi and his ex-pupil, Anakin Skywalker, are engaged in a saber duel, standing on a robot that hovers over a river of lava. When the robot nears the bank, Obi Wan does a backflip and lands half way up a hill of hardened lava flow. Anakin follows, getting both his legs sliced off by Obi Wan in the process. As the maimed Anakin slips down the flow into the fire, Kenobi lectures him, claims that he loved Anakin, and then walks away, leaving Anakin to burn to death alone.²

3. On the day on which Charles Darnay is to be executed by the leaders of the French Revolution, Sidney Carton, who looks rather like Darnay and who is in love with Darnay's wife, sneaks into Darnay's cell and switches places with him. While Darnay is sent safely back to London in the company of his wife, Sydney Carton goes to the guillotine and is executed, with only the knowledge that he is making a happier life for Darnay's wife.³

¹ *Ernest Goes To Jail*, Touchstone Pictures, 1990.

² *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith*, Twentieth Century Fox, 2005.

³ *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. First published 1859.

These three episodes are superficially similar; each is the climax of its respective story. In each story, a hero faces his nemesis in a life-or-death situation, and each hero's actions go a long way towards defining him in the future. But, even accounting for the differences in genre, these are very different scenarios. If one were to attempt to analyze the major differences in quality among these three episodes, one might be tempted to say that the first is bad literature, the second is middling (or at least debatably bad and debatably good), and that the third is good literature. That analysis is not quite right, though, mainly, I would suggest, because it doesn't take the differences in genre into account. The first episode is from a motion picture called *Ernest Goes To Jail*, one of a series of stories about a character that is more cartoon than real person, even though the stories are live action. Considered as an Ernest movie, *Ernest Goes To Jail* is actually quite good. The second episode, on the other hand, is from both a genre and series much more widely admired than is the first, but is generally considered a rather poor example of that genre and series.⁴

On the other hand, one could compare these episodes by the kind of story that they were intended to be. In that case, then, one might say that science fiction is, on the whole, a better kind of thing than live action cartoons.

This would be moving too quickly, though. If the principle behind the claim "science fiction, on the whole, is better than live action cartoons" is adopted, we really haven't got anywhere much, because there's still a lot to say: better for what? Better for whom? Better in what way(s)? How are 'ways of being better' differentiated so they can be counted? Are there better and worse (or, perhaps, more and less important) ways of

⁴ Of course, some admirers of science fiction in general and Star Wars in particular love it. For the sake of argument, I'm going with my own opinion and those of the people I know.

being better? Is a good live action cartoon better than a bad science fiction story? How bad does a science fiction story have to be in order to be worse than a good live action cartoon?

I suspect that answers to these kinds of questions will necessarily be arbitrary, or at least, more arbitrary than would be ideal. But still, our tendency is to say that *A Tale of Two Cities* is a better work of literature than either *Ernest Goes To Jail* or *Star Wars III*. (Of course, one might say that neither *Ernest* nor *Star Wars* is literature at all; but if one were to say that, he would be using the word ‘literature’ in its ameliorative sense, which is the same thing as saying that *Tale* is better than the other works). Though this seems right, there has to be a way of saying it more precisely.

There are a number of things that could be said as a means to making the term ‘better’ more precise. Here is a short list, off the top of my head, of some things that *Tale* is and *Ernest* is not, that might be part of what one would mean in saying that *Tale* is better: meaningful (deeply meaningful), truth-like or truth-capable, serious, realistic, surprising, thoughtful. Most of these things cannot be anywhere near the whole story; there are too many counterexamples of things that are not, for example, serious or thoughtful, but which we still want to say are examples of good literature. I will return to most of these concepts in later chapters.

The most promising words here are ‘meaningful’ and ‘truth-like.’ The problem with ‘meaningful’ is that it is itself imprecise – different things can be meaningful to different people at different times, in different ways and for different reasons. Truth-likeness or truth-capability, on the other hand, suggests something quite precise: a work of literature that is true, contains truths, suggests truths, or at least purports to suggest

truths, and that also does a good job of communicating, is doing something that various readers can look at and say, objectively and in agreement with other readers, “this is doing something good.” Looking back at the three scenarios described above, this makes sense. The point of *Ernest* is not to communicate anything deep to anybody; it is a story of good triumphing over evil, but both the good and the evil are so silly that the silliness dwarfs any truth that might be hiding in it. This is why, I suggest, people will tend to say that *Ernest* is bad literature, even if they like it. *Tale*, however, is about people who very well could have been real, doing things that real people might actually have done, and so has a lot of potential to say or suggest true things. And *Star Wars* is middling. Except for some characters’ superhuman acrobatic talents, the humanoid characters are more-or-less realistic, and so the story has a potential for truth-communication roughly similar to *Tale*’s. Unlike *Tale*, however, its potential is (arguably) not realized. While all science fiction is unrealistic to some degree or other, *Star Wars III* goes too far over the top for a lot of people’s taste in a variety of ways; most noticeably, in the part described above, to find that Kenobi, the character that has been most clearly a “good guy” all along, is capable of walking away from someone who is burning to death, upsets the whole distinction between good and bad on which rest of the story is predicated.⁵

Granted, there are going to be works that do better and worse jobs of communicating truths, and there are going to be, in turn, things that different works of literature do that help or hinder it in so communicating. Analyzing what these things are and seeing what specific effects they have on the communication of truth would be

⁵ Again, this is debatable. The “truth” that the story may be trying to communicate might be that there is no difference between good and evil. As I say in the body of the text, though, this decidedly works against the rest of the story; the climax of the series, in the end of *Star Wars XI*, is the salvation of Darth Vader – which, incidentally, reunites him with Kenobi.

interesting; if this analysis leads to a way of understanding how literature gets truth across without these truths actually being stated in the text, that would *really* be interesting! What makes it particularly interesting is that a great deal of literature is also fiction, which means that it is false, or perhaps, more precisely, it is, to use John Searle's term, not serious – it is not intended that the statements in a fiction be taken as true.

At this point, the whole discussion sounds like it is headed for trouble. On the one hand, I'm suggesting that *A Tale of Two Cities* is better than *Ernest Goes To Jail* as a work of literature because the reader can glean truth from it. On the other hand, because *Tale* is a work of fiction, we must assume that Dickens could not have intended that we take any statement in it to be meant seriously as the truth.

What This Project Is

The goal of this dissertation is to develop a theory about how truth can be, even intentionally, communicated through a novel or a motion picture or any other form of fiction, even though the author cannot depend on the reader taking anything depicted in the work of fiction as literally true. I will do this in a series of steps. First, I will compare fiction (as a means of communicating truth) to philosophical writing (as a means of communicating truth). This will allow me to get at what is necessary for the communication of truth, as opposed to what is merely incidental, and will also support my argument that truth can indeed be communicated through fiction. Second, I will investigate several different works of fiction with an eye to establishing some techniques by which fiction communicates truth; I will be creating a list, not exhaustive but certainly

extensive, of techniques that are conducive to such communication, and will show why they are so conducive.

Third, I will take a look at similar theories offered by other philosophers. The theories closest to the one I develop here are primarily from the continental tradition, and so will look superficially very different from my analysis even though they are complementary. The closest anyone in the analytic tradition has come to working out a theory of how truth is communicated through fiction is to address the question *whether* truth can be so communicated. So while most of these theories are consistent with my conclusions, I am going to have to go a great deal beyond them to get to where I'm going.

One Thing This Project Is Not

In Chapter Six, I am going to say something surprising about fictional characters, in the context of an investigation into the things about fiction that help it communicate truths. Beyond this, I will not be concerned about the ontology of fictional characters. While I find the issue interesting, I do not think it needs to be quite as difficult as recent philosophy of literature has made it out to be. Most of the unnecessary complication comes from the tendency of philosophers to write about fictional characters as if they were an odd sort of people, as John Searle^{12a} does, for example:

... by pretending to refer to... a person, Miss Murdoch creates a fictional character. Notice that she does not really refer to a fictional character because there was no antecedently existing character; rather, by pretending to refer to a person she creates a fictional person...⁶

^{12a} In *Speech Acts* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), Searle specifically says that fictional characters do exist in fiction – and that they do then exist as fictional characters. However, he does still fall into speaking of characters as an odd sort of person.

⁶ from “The Logical Status of Fiction”

...Taken as a piece of serious discourse, the [fictional] passage is certainly not true because none of these people... ever existed....^{13a}

If a fictional character were an odd sort of person, it would raise many needless questions about how such characters came to be and how they continue to exist, where they are, etc. All these issues can be avoided if we do not insist that they are a kind of person; if fictional characters are a metaphysically different sort of thing entirely from people, then they need not have the same kind of existential requirements as people – such as being continuous, for example. A theory that goes in the right direction, I suggest, is Bertrand Russell's:

...it is of the very essence of fiction that only the thoughts, feelings, etc., in Shakespeare and his readers are real, and that there is not, in addition to them, an objective Hamlet. When you have taken account of all the feelings roused by Napoleon in writers and readers of history, you have not touched the actual man, but in the case of Hamlet you have come to the end of him...⁷

There are details that still need to be worked out, but this is outside the scope of this project.

^{13a} *ibid*

⁷ from "Descriptions," reprinted in *The Philosophy of Language* by A.P. Martinich, Oxford University Press, 2001.

Chapter Two: Groundwork and Vocabulary

I have already made a couple of contentious suggestions, either explicitly or implicitly, for which I haven't offered any argument. First, by using "literature" and "fiction" interchangeably, I've suggested that literature and fiction are roughly the same thing. Though as yet I've said nothing to counter this implication, I don't think it is right, and will offer an argument momentarily. I have also made the following assumptions:

- fiction is false
- truth can be communicated through fiction.

These, I think, are correct, and I will have arguments to offer to that effect.

Literature or Fiction?

The first problem is the easiest: of course fiction and literature are not the same thing. For one thing, as has been noted many times by many scholars, while a lot of literature happens to be fictional (for example, *A Tale of Two Cities*; *Brave New World*), there is also much that is not fictional (for example, Descartes' *Discourse on Method*; *The Federalist Papers*) and also fiction that is not literature, other than in the sense of being printed material (for example, FoxTrot comics; the novelization of *Spaceballs*). For another, even if "literature" and "fiction" were exactly co-extensional, they would still not mean the same thing. John Searle gives a clear example of why not:

...Thus, for example, "the Bible as literature" indicates a theologically neutral attitude, but "the Bible as fiction" is tendentious.⁸

⁸ From "The Logical Status of Fiction," p. 320.

Interestingly, the relationship of literature to truth and of fiction to truth is precisely what causes the difference here. The phrase “The Bible as literature” suggests that the Bible be evaluated as any piece of literature might be: what were the authors’ intentions in writing it? Is it beautiful? Does it have anything significant to say? What are the main themes? How has it influenced history? etc. There is nothing inconsistent in calling the Bible ‘literature,’ and then saying that some of the books contain history, some law, some poetry, some prophecy, and some exposition. Of course, the orthodox Jew, who believes that the Old Testament is true, or the Christian and the Messianic Jew, who believe that the whole thing is true, usually don’t ask the “literature” sorts of question about the Bible. Instead, they are more likely to wonder “What is God trying to tell me?” or “How does the truth of this part fit with the truth of this other part?” The important thing here, though, is that even though the Jew or the Christian usually doesn’t read the Bible as literature, it is possible for either to do so without being inconsistent. But it is impossible for the Christian or Jew, qua member of his faith, to read the Bible as fiction. On the supposition that the Bible is fiction, consistency requires, for example, that one not be a Christian, since a necessary part of being a Christian is believing that Jesus was who he said he was, as the Bible records.

Something’s being literature, then, is not the same thing as its being fiction. Moreover, the difference between them is closely related to the concept of truth: if something is fiction, then, at very least, it was made up, and one cannot then hold the author responsible for the truth of what he creates;⁹ if we call a work ‘literature,’ we

⁹ John Searle would say this as follows: Fiction is not serious. Eventually I am going to make a stronger claim about fiction and truth, but for now I’ll stick with the claim that we cannot hold the author to the truth of what he writes.

make no claims either positive or negative about whether the author can be held responsible for the truth of what he writes. If Descartes didn't try, in the *Discourse*, to write his best attempt at an accurate description of the world, then he deserves some censure; if Richardson didn't believe that the events recorded in *Pamela* were true, however, he deserves no blame for writing what he wrote anyway. But both *Pamela* and Descartes' *Discourse* are works of literature.

Because whether something is literature or not has nothing directly to do with whether or not it is true, I am going to set the concept of literature aside and concentrate instead on the concept of fiction.

How We Should Think About Fiction

In philosophy of literature, there have been several different kinds of ideas of ways of understanding fiction. I am going to look at five of them. The question to answer is, "What makes fiction fiction?" It is important to resolve this question because it is easy to get caught up in attempting to develop a theory for a concept that is too broadly conceived or that is ambiguous. Under the influence of literary postmodernism, for example, one might suggest that the world is essentially a construct of the mind, and so, being only a creation of the mind, is fiction.¹⁰ In this case, one's theory of fiction would have to be able to cover all of sense experience.

¹⁰ For example, as suggested long before by, Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If'*, translated by C. K. Ogden (2nd edition, London, 1935), 96-7, as noted by Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, p. 15.

1. Woods: Logic of Fiction

One way of analyzing fiction is to attempt to work out a logic of fiction, constructing (or discovering) rules for how to interpret sentences in a fiction as fictional sentences (as opposed to ordinary non-fictional sentences that are interpreted with ordinary rules). There have been a variety of such analyses in the history of the problem, probably the most important of which is given by John Woods in *The Logic of Fiction*. Most of this work focuses on sentences about fictional characters: whether to count sentences such as “Sherlock Holmes lived in Baker Street” as being true, false, or neither; whether to count its implications as true, false, or neither; how to understand fiction in terms of possibility and necessity, or of a third truth value, etc. The assumption behind the book is that there is a semantic difference between sentences in fiction and ordinary sentences – the primary difference being, supposedly, that ordinary sentences refer and fictional ones don’t. Whether or not one is willing to grant the assumption, (which I am not, unless it is carefully qualified), it is not clear that there will be a noteworthy syntactic difference because of the supposed semantic difference. In fact, I think there is a good argument to the contrary.

Consider the following sentence: “Sydney Carton died in France.” There is nothing about this sentence that makes it unmistakably a sentence of or about fiction. The only thing that gives the fictionality of the sentence away is the use of the name “Sydney Carton”; if we didn’t happen to know that Carton is a fictional character, there would be no way to tell whether this sentence belongs in a history book or in a report about the novels of Dickens. But knowing what “Sydney Carton” refers to is not a matter of logic (i.e. there is no way to determine, simply by looking at the structure of the sentence, that

it is fictional or about fiction). If the fictionality of a sentence was a matter of its logical structure, one would have to be able to determine its fictionality by looking at the sentence stripped of all its context. (Otherwise, the knowledge of whether it was fictional or not would be coming from the context, and not from the sentence itself). And if this knowledge about the sentence does come from the context, and not the sentence itself, then the sentence's fictionality itself also comes from the context, and not the sentence's structure. (What a sentence's structure is, and the logical implications of that structure, are not open to epistemic doubt). Fictional sentences and non-fictional ones are logically identical; therefore, the project of working out a logic of fiction, specifically, is doomed from the outset, as whatever logic sentences of fiction are based on is exactly the same logic that underlies ordinary language.¹¹

Here I need to say something more about fictional characters. John Woods is another philosopher who writes as if fictional characters are an odd sort of person – he even uses the term “fictional person” from time to time throughout *The Logic of Fiction*.¹² Then, according to Woods, because Sherlock Holmes¹³ is clearly not a real person (you couldn't have run into him on the street, even if you had happened to be in London in the 1890s) the name “Sherlock Holmes” does not refer to anything, even though, extraordinarily, you can say true or false things about him. (According to Woods,

¹¹ This argument is not original with me, though it appears here in my own words. To my knowledge, the first person to use it was John Searle, in “The Logical Status of Fiction.”

¹² Woods writes on page 28, “For, to be a little previous, Holmes is a man (or was), and he did live in London, and does not exist and never did.”

¹³ Woods uses Sherlock Holmes almost exclusively as an example of a “fictional person.” I think that poor Sherlock has been overused and should be allowed to rest in peace; I'd prefer to write about Sydney Carton, Eliza from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Commander Data, and Willy Armitage. But since I'm writing about Woods here, I'll stick to the detective for now.

merely imaginary¹⁴ characters, such as the present king of France, the round square, etc., cannot have true or false things said about them).

I think that this is one of the typical non-issues that arises from the misunderstanding of fictional characters. I insist that if one can say true and false things about an individual, that individual exists, somehow. I also insist that if an individual exists, it need not be a person, not even a fictional one. Rather than make distinctions between kinds of non-existent individuals, I think it is much better to say that Sherlock Holmes does exist (even in the real world), but as a *fictional character* (which is often like a man in some ways, but never in others). If Sherlock is a fictional character, then we needn't wonder why we can never meet him on the street; in our world, he exists only in the minds of those who have imagined him while reading Doyle's texts. But the name "Sherlock" does refer – it refers to the thing the reader imagines when he reads the book.¹⁵ And, though it refers to a different sort of thing than similar names do in ordinary, non-fictional contexts, the logic of the reference is the same.

The fictionality of a fictional sentence cannot be a matter of the structure or logic of the sentences. It must be a matter of the context in which the sentence is found. There have been several different kinds of theory about how to distinguish fiction from non-fiction based on how the fictions in question ought to be interpreted. I shall discuss four, without either meaning that or attempting to establish that these are the *only* kinds of

¹⁴ as opposed to fictional ones

¹⁵ There are a number of problems commonly associated with existence of fictional characters, such as how a fictional character can exist through time, and of what counts as the same fictional character. I am not going to go into these problems here, though I think I could give good and fairly simple answers. This will have to wait until a later time.

theories that are possible or that have potential. I mention these four because I think they get some important things right.

All of these are what could be classified as “pretence” theories.¹⁶ Each incorporates the idea that pretending is an important tool in the analysis of fiction; they differ on who is doing the important pretending, and how, and why.

2. Walton: Fiction as Make-Believe

Kendall Walton offers a definition of fiction intended to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction (not between fiction and reality or between fiction and truth).

Walton writes:

Works of fiction are simply representations... whose function is to serve as props in games of make-believe.¹⁷

A prop in a game of make-believe, according to Walton, is some object, either an artifact or something naturally occurring, given a specific role in the game by the people playing it. This specific role props have is to “generate fictional truths” selected by the people playing the game. So, for example, children playing Robin Hood in their backyard might pick up sticks and use them as swords. The sticks, in that case, are not *just* sticks, though they *are* still sticks; in the story that the children as they play, it is true that the sticks are swords. My old, dog-eared, 95-cent copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* is a prop in a game of make-believe in much the same way. As a stick makes it true in the children’s pretense that Little John has a sword, the novel makes it true of the fiction *Tale* that there was such

¹⁶ Lamarque and Olsen, for example, use this terminology.

¹⁷ from *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 72.

a person as Sydney Carton, who lived in England during the French Revolution and died at the guillotine.

Like many people, I think Walton's theory of mimesis was a major step forward in theory of fiction. Certainly it is much more explanatory than a theory that attempts to devise a logic of fiction, to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction at the grammatical level. But Walton's theory still leaves a lot to be desired. Most importantly, I don't think that this definition actually does distinguish between fiction and non-fiction. Imagination has a fundamental role in many human activities, and other works besides fictional ones may assume that the reader will imagine what is written in the text. Consider the following passage from *The Mill on the Floss*:¹⁸

...But when [Maggie] was fetched away in the gig by Luke, and the study was once more quite lonely for Tom, he missed her grievously. He had really been brighter, and got through his lessons better, since she had been there; and she had asked Mr. Stelling so many questions about the Roman Empire, and whether there really ever was a man who said, in Latin, "I would not buy it for a farthing or a rotten nut," or whether that had only been turned into Latin, that Tom had actually come to a dim understanding of the fact that there had once been people upon the earth who were so fortunate as to know Latin without learning it through the medium of the Eton Grammar. This luminous idea was a great addition to his historical acquirements during this half-year...

In the novel, Maggie is very bright, especially as compared to her brother Tom. Part of what makes her so bright is her ability to understand history and even Latin grammar – a distinctly non-narrative subject – with the help of her vibrant imagination. Tom, on the other hand, has a difficult time with his studies, because (without Maggie there) he can't imagine anything more to his studies than that they are printed in a book, and that he has to learn and recite what is printed. That there were real, feeling, acting

¹⁸ by George Eliot, first published in 1860. The selection quoted is from book second, chapter one (page 160).

people, whose perspectives he might imagine, who spoke the languages and experienced the events he read about, would never have occurred to Tom, it seems, if Maggie hadn't assumed it and acted as if it were so. It is this ability to imagine how it must have been to speak Latin and experience the fall of the Roman Empire, and so on, that allows Tom to become better at learning than he had been, if only for a little while.

This idea isn't new. It is a common saying that before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in his shoes. This is based on the same principle – really to understand something, one has to be able to imagine it very precisely; actually having experienced the thing is one of the best ways to reach this level of imagination. (This is, I think, one of the reasons many people like to travel; they want to replace what they imagine about a place and its culture with what is true of it, or at least want to verify that what they imagine is accurate.) But if one's imagination is vivid enough, and if one has the right facts, simply imagining something from what one reads or is told is a good enough way of understanding something. This is what Maggie does but Tom really can't – she can take things from history and even grammar and imagine them from what might have been the perspective of a participant.

Imagination is a valuable tool for learning. So it is conceivable that the author of a non-fiction work might be asking his reader to imagine along with his work, so that, even though he intends that his readers believe what he writes, he also wants them to use their imaginations to create what he describes in their minds, which would leave the reader with beliefs that are vivid and memorable, as well as accurate. This might especially be the case for writers of history, which is often given in narrative form. If this were to

happen, non-fiction (“serious” writing, in Searle’s terminology) would be used just as Walton thinks novels are used: as a prop in a game of make-believe.

This doesn’t sound right because history is *not* make-believe. But, as Walton uses the terms, historical narrative used imaginatively makes the narrative into a prop. A prop in a game of make-believe is an object that generates fictional truth, by Walton’s definition,¹⁹ and a fictional truth, by Walton’s definition, exists when there is a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something.²⁰ If the author of a history text intends that what he writes should be imagined, then, by Walton’s definition, he is writing fiction, regardless of the fact that what he writes is also true.

In a sense, this is right; if we want to talk about what we imagine when we read any kind of book (or, more generally, when we experience any kind of language), this would be a likely analysis. But if we’re trying to develop a theory of fiction as opposed to non-fiction, Walton hasn’t actually got us anywhere useful – we still cannot distinguish between *A Tale of Two Cities* and any arbitrarily selected history textbook. (As my history-student sister says, “You have to imagine it – you, um, weren’t there”). The problem that Walton has, I think, is that he’s made imagination relate only to fiction; but the idea suggested in the passage from *The Mill on the Floss* quoted above suggests that imagination is an important factor in *any* kind of study.

Walton claims that “We cannot conclude that [any non-fiction text] prescribes imagining,”²¹ suggesting that imagination has nothing really to do with whatever participation a reader has in reading a non-fiction text. If this were correct, then whatever

¹⁹ *Mimesis* p. 37

²⁰ *ibid* p. 39

²¹ *ibid* p. 71

prescribes imagining very well could be fiction. But I don't think this is true.

Unfortunately, Walton has nothing specific to say about the definition of imagination. He says that imagination is not merely the entertaining of an idea, or having it in mind.²²

Imagining is not the same as entertaining, according to Walton, I suspect because he thinks imagining is something more than mere passive reflection, as “entertaining” seems to suggest. This may very well be true, but it does not follow that we can't have anything more in the way of a definition of imagining. Perhaps imagining might be “picturing something in your mind” or “trying an idea on.” In any case, whatever we do with novels inside our heads seems very like what we do when we read history and biographies and study religion, philosophy, and perhaps even some aspects of mathematics and natural sciences.

The difference between fiction and non-fiction that Walton notes is that non-fictions by themselves do not warrant the assertion of the claims they make in the world(s) they are about, while fictions do warrant such assertions. For example, my 8th grade American history book claims of the actual world that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. *A Tale of Two Cities* claims of the world of *A Tale of Two Cities* that Sydney Carton died at the guillotine. Walton's point is that I cannot be warranted in claiming that The Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776 simply because my history textbook says it was – the state of the world is not defined by what the textbook says. In the case of *A Tale of Two Cities*, however, the relevant world *is* defined by what the book says, and so I can form beliefs about that world just by what the book says. As Walton writes, non-fictions do not “...serve as props in games of make-

²² *ibid* p. 20

believe. They are used to claim truth for certain propositions rather than to make propositions fictional.”²³ The problem with this claim is that, as Walton defines “fictional,” claiming truth for propositions and making propositions fictional are not mutually exclusive activities. Making propositions fictional, according to Walton, is simply to suggest that they be imagined, and that they are imagined is not the same thing as that they are not believed or that they are false.

So Walton’s account of fictionality isn’t good enough. People imagine out what a piece of language says, when they come into contact with it, whether it is fictional or not. Just that there is a suggestion, implicit or explicit, that an idea be imagined, makes no difference to whether or not the idea is fictional. So, that something functions as a prop in a game of make-believe, or even that it is intended to so function, cannot be what makes that work fiction instead of non-fiction.

3. Lamarque and Olsen: Fictionality From Context

Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen make an advance beyond Walton in their analysis of fictionality. In their *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (1994), they write that what makes fictional language fictional is “that its content be fictional as well as its mode of presentation.”²⁴ Like Walton, they think that a correct analysis of fiction will have something to do with how people use the fiction. Walton writes about games of make-believe; Lamarque and Olsen write about social practices instead (they think that playing a game requires the intention to play a game). “Mode of presentation” in their definition

²³ *ibid* p. 70

²⁴ p.51

of fictionality is meant to tie fiction to the social practice of creating and perpetuating stories. They characterize the fictive mode of utterance this way:

...there are three main features of fictive utterances:

1. A Gricean intention that an audience make-believe...that it is being told... about particular people, objects, incidents, or events, regardless of whether there are (or are believed to be) such [things];
2. The reliance, at least in part, of the successful fulfillment of the intention in (1) on mutual knowledge of the practice of story-telling;
3. A disengagement from certain standard speech act commitments, blocking inferences from a fictive utterance back to the speaker or writer, in particular inferences about beliefs.²⁵

For the content to be fictional, what is required is that it “originates in fictive utterance.”²⁶

This is a step beyond Walton, because Lamarque and Olsen don't make fictionality depend on an imprecise and incorrect account of imagination. Instead, they make the origin of fiction fundamental. If a story is fictional, according to this theory, it will have been created with the intent that an audience pretend it is true, whether or not it *is* true (so far, Lamarque and Olsen agree with Walton), *and* where there is no commitment on the part of the author to the truth of any claim in the story, or any claim that can be inferred from the story. This latter part differentiates them from Walton; their theory allows them a way to explain why a history textbook, for example, is not fiction, even though it may meet the first requirement of fiction, that it asks readers to imagine the story as it is told.

It is right to make a further requirement for fiction beyond just that something be imagined. Even when people tell true stories, the teller typically intends that the stories be imagined. In fact, even if the teller had no intentions about the way a story should be

²⁵ pp. 45-46

²⁶ p. 51

treated, it would still be appropriate to treat non-fictions as imaginatively as one treats fictions. Consider the following mini-stories:

1. Even though I was the maid of honor at my best friend's wedding, and the maid of honor is usually involved in planning the details, at least to the extent that she knows what they are, I did the whole thing "by the seat of my pants," so to speak. I missed the rehearsal because my flight was too late, and because everyone was speaking Spanish, I only managed to go through the right motions because the groom's sister was standing at my side whispering hurried translations in my ear. Mexican wedding traditions are different from American ones, so I did a lot of things I had never imagined doing at my friend's wedding: holding a wooden box and several large books throughout the ceremony, leading a train of dancing women underneath my friend's veil, and carrying the groom's stinky shoe around for everyone to drop money into. Additionally, the best man missed the ceremony, so I had to do his job, too – that's how I became best man to a near-stranger from Mexico!

2. On the day before I hit my head, I decided to go to the library instead of meeting my best friend downtown. I had just been to the hospital to visit a different friend who wasn't doing too well, and I didn't feel like having a good time. But at the library, I dozed off while watching a fly, and I completely missed my curfew! I hurried home the minute I realized what time it was, but traffic is always bad in Seattle at that time of day, and I was almost two hours late. Needless, to say, my brother was home when I arrived, and my parents grounded me for two weeks. I sneaked out to meet my friend the next day anyway, and I

was so angry at Mom and Dad that I deliberately left off my seatbelt – that’s one of the rules they always harp on. So when my friend hit the other car, my head smashed into the windshield pretty good. You can still feel the dent in my skull.

The doctors said I was lucky to be alive.

Each of these stories asks for and merits the same imaginative participation from the audience. One of them is fictional; the other is true in every detail. I haven’t given any textual clues to help the reader determine which is which, such as prefixing the stories with “once upon a time” and “here follows my most vivid memory involving my best friend,” etc, or putting parts in them that the audience knows couldn’t be true, such as “my friend went to the moon for her honeymoon” or “I died and then came back to life.” The important thing to note is that I as the author expect the audience to treat these stories in exactly the same way. The only difference in treatment should be that, after all the truths are known about what has happened and what has not, one should be believed and the other shouldn’t. Until I say which is which, though, they ought to be treated no differently.

Lamarque and Olsen say that, in a fiction, both the content of the fiction and the mode in which it is communicated must be fictional. This means, roughly, that to be proper fiction, a story must both actually be made up, and be presented as having been made up. This sounds right on the first reading, but I don’t think it actually is; I think there at least two kinds of stories which tax Lamarque and Olsen’s analysis beyond its limit. First, suppose that a story has made-up content but is presented as true. That often makes it a lie, rather than a fiction – but not always. David Lewis gives the example of

J.R.R Tolkien's presentation of the *Lord of the Rings*,²⁷ as a manuscript which Tolkien discovered rather than one he wrote himself. In the novel, characters discuss writing parts of the books themselves, and Tolkien includes an appendix in which he describes translating the manuscripts and makes "conjectures" about who wrote the text, and when, just as if he actually had discovered it. Despite this pretense, it is more accurate to say that Tolkien is making believe than that he is lying. On the other hand, suppose that a story has content that is not made up, but is presented as made up. For example, suppose that content for stories came from real police reports, but that they were presented in a format that suggests fictionality, on a prime-time network TV show starring familiar actors. Should these types of story count as fiction?

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is clearly, indubitably, a work of fiction, despite Tolkien's playful pretense about having found it – everyone knows this is only pretense. *Dragnet*, the story I have in mind as an example of the second kind of case, is not clearly either fiction or non-fiction. It is a TV show as described above; the main characters are fictional, and most of the lines are made up, but the fictionality of the show ends there. Real police logs were used in the creation of the plots, and each episode ends with the (truthful) statement, "The story you've just seen is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent." The narrator goes on to give a record of the relevant trial and conviction.

I don't think it would be wise to adopt a theory that would force a definite all-or-nothing position on the fictionality of *Dragnet* and other such stories. *Dragnet* is a genuine tweener – it is fictional in some ways and non-fictional in others. But, according

²⁷ "Truth in Fiction" (American Philosophical Quarterly 15 (1978): 37-46), footnote 7. Reprinted in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1983.

to Lamarque and Olsen, *Dragnet* would fail to count as fiction because its content does not *originate* in a fictive utterance, despite the definite fictionality of its mode of presentation. (The narrator can say “The story you’ve just seen is true” until he’s blue in the face, but that by itself won’t make the mode non-fictional; the audience cannot simply take his word for it, but they have to know something about the real world, independent of what the narrator says, in order to form justified beliefs about the status of the story).

What is needed is a theory of fictionality that will allow a synchistic analysis, in which some candidate works may be counted as more fictional than others if they meet some criteria that the others do not. On such an analysis, candidate stories would fit somewhere on a scale between total fictionality and complete factuality, and a variety of elements would influence how a story fits on the scale. Lamarque and Olsen suggest two elements that contribute to fictionality: mode and content. So, using their criteria, one story might count as more fictional than the other if it is one has obviously fictional content and the other has content that might have been made up, but that also might actually be true. So it seems that a scale of fictionality might be a useful way of identifying fiction, as long as the right elements are identified with which to evaluate stories. At least, there is no good reason to insist that we cannot talk about fictionality in terms of “less fictional” and “more fictional,” rather than in terms of “fictional” and “not fictional.”

Lamarque and Olsen²⁸ try very hard to avoid circumstances in which a fiction is not first invented, but is somehow a result of real experience, but yet still seems to be fictional. (Examples from Currie’s work are someone who plagiarizes a non-fiction,

²⁸ Gregory Currie originally thought of the problem cases, and attempted to defend a similar conception of fictionality.

thinking it is a fiction; someone who writes a true story intending it to be taken as fiction, and someone who writes a story thinking he's creating a fiction, when really he's describing repressed memories).²⁹ If Lamarque and Olsen allowed themselves the possibility of classifying works as more or less fictional, rather than either fictional or not, they wouldn't have to say about works that seem to be fictional in only some ways that they are not fictional at all. They could then handle these problem cases easily and intuitively.

The phenomenon of fictionalization suggests that a scale of fictionality is more realistic than an all-or-nothing conception. Fictionalization occurs when an initially non-fictional story is turned into a fictional one. Suppose, for example, that it is true that my best friend was married in Mexico and that my flight made me miss the rehearsal, but false that the wedding was traditionally Mexican and that it was performed in Spanish, and also that the groom had a sister. In that case, story 1 above is a fictionalization of a true story, and to call it a fictionalization is more accurate than to call it a fiction, because some elements of the way it really happened remain.

To explain fictionalization, we have two choices. First, we could allow that fictionality is a gradational property, and that, as I tell the story and add made-up details in the process, it becomes more and more a fiction (unless, of course, I'm telling the story in a context where telling exactly what happened counts; in such a case, I'm creating a larger lie as I proceed). On this account, as I add more made-up details, I nudge the story across the scale from the not-at-all-fictional towards the completely fictional. Second, we could say that fictionality is an all-or-nothing property, as opposed to being gradational.

²⁹ Gregory Currie, from "What is Fiction" p. 388, reprinted in Lamarque and Olsen, p. 50.

On this account, then, I start with a true story, but the minute I add a detail that doesn't come from the actual experience, Poof! I turn it into a fiction. The first explanation of fictionalization seems more apt to me.

Lamarque and Olsen get around Currie's problem situations by doing one of two things. In the cases where the storyteller knows that his story originates in experience (rather than in his imagination), they deny that the story is fiction even though it is told as fiction; in the cases where the author is mistaken about the source of the story, they claim that the story told as fiction is not the same story as the source story, but that, as David Lewis writes,³⁰ different tellings of the story amount to different stories. This allows them to claim unproblematically that one is fiction and the other isn't.

I'm suspicious of the "different tellings, different stories" principle. Of course, it is probably true that some retellings should count as different stories; otherwise, for example, the book and movie versions of stories would have to count as the same story, even when they are radically different from each other. At least one of the movies made of *Black Beauty* (prior to the 1994),³¹ for example, has so little to do with the story in the book that one wonders why it has the same title – it follows the life of a black horse and is set in the same time period, but the things that happen to the black horse are almost completely different from those that happen to Black Beauty in the book.

Some versions of the story seem to be the same story, though. The text of my *Black Beauty* picture book is from the original version written by Anna Sewell, though it has been edited for length and supplemented with pen drawings by Susan Jeffers. I can see why one might want to count this as a different story from the original, because it's

³⁰ see footnote 19.

³¹ especially the 1971 Paramount release directed by James Hill

missing parts – the chapter about Lady Ann, for example. I have another copy that is unabridged, and also illustrated with pencil drawings by Wesley Dennis. Suppose, though, that Jeffers had illustrated an unabridged edition of the story. It would look quite different from Dennis's; and because illustrations tend to influence the way people imagine stories, readers of Jeffers' edition would likely get a rather different perspective on what happens in the story. But the story itself is the same, I want to say. On the “different tellings, different stories” view, though, they would have to be different.

I think that the problem here is a desire to be so decisive about whether two stories are or are not the same story. It would be fairly easy to posit a scale on which different tellings of a story are more or less like each other, where the reasons for making differentiations are obvious. So, for example, the Dennis- and the hypothetical Jeffers-illustrated unabridged editions of *Black Beauty* would count as so close that they're hardly different; the editions lacking the chapter about Lady Ann are very near to unabridged editions, but are easily distinguishable from them because they lack some characters. *A Tale of Two Cities* is so different from *Black Beauty* that it doesn't fit anywhere on the scale of *Black Beautyhood*.

So if sameness of fiction is seen as synecchistic, as I think it should be, the “different tellings, different stories” principle won't work – and the reason for that principle in the first place was that Lamarque and Olsen had no way of distinguishing between fictions and non-fictions. But if fictionality is *also* viewed synecchistically, we have an accurate way to distinguish between fictions and non-fictions, and so the principle is unneeded, anyway.

As with fictionalization and the synechistic view of fictionality, there are several phenomena from fiction that suggest that flexibility about the individuation of stories would be really valuable. First, we speak of fiction as if we can tell stories more than once and can make mistakes in doing so. For example, one might say “Tell the story again” or “I told that story incorrectly.” These phrases make no sense at all if every telling of a story amounts to a different story. If these phrases make sense, they imply that there is a unifying conception of a story, different from any individual telling of the story, to which all tellings of the story can be compared.

Second, we can add to stories by serialization or with spin-offs. An obvious example of this is the set of *Star Trek* stories. *Star Trek* consists of an original series, which is itself a set of 80 separate stories that build on each other, as well as four other series that have the original series as part of their timelines, as well as each other, as far as is possible. In a sense, these are all the same story, especially because they share a timeline and a fictional world in every detail. In another sense, though, they aren’t the same story; for example, once the people working on the original series stopped working on subsequent ones, changes in the philosophical underpinnings and general attitude of the shows began to creep in, so that the last in the set of spin-offs is very different from the first.

Without a synechistic account of story individuation, it’s hard to see how we can make sense of the idea that all the individual stories in a serialized corpus could be all one story – clearly, the “different tellings, different stories” principle will not allow anything of the sort. A theory must be able to handle the fact that stories grow and change while remaining, in a sense, the same. (This is clearest for serialized stories like *Star*

Trek, but it must be the case even for stories that don't have such separate parts). Of course, my point that a theory of individuation has to be synechistic does not amount to a full-fledged theory of individuation and identity; it is merely a nudge in the right direction.

So, Lamarque and Olsen's treatment of fiction is a good addition to Walton's because it not only allows for the role of imagination, but it also treats as important the origin of the story in question. But the theory still leaves something to be desired, because it does not allow for a synechistic analysis of fictionality or of story individuation.

4. Lewis: Fictional Worlds As Possible Worlds

One popular way of talking about fiction is to give a "possible worlds" analysis, so that different fictions are associated with different possible worlds, and what is true of the possible world in question is true of the fiction. The reason this sounds right is that fictions do take place in a physical location that is, by assumption, on a planet (or world), all of which are more or less like our world. It seems that one could describe the world of, say, Sydney Carton, by saying that it is exactly like our world, except that it takes place during the French Revolution, and a particular group of people exist in that world that didn't in ours, and so on. This is almost exactly the same procedure used to introduce the concept of possible worlds to logic students – by stipulating small changes in the actual world. Also, people often talk about the worlds in which fictions take place. For example, one might talk about the England of Jane Austen's novels, or Dickensian England, or

even whole fictional worlds like Middle Earth or Narnia. Because of this, a possible worlds analysis of fiction sounds promising.

But fictional worlds are not the same thing as possible worlds. First, and perhaps simplest, possible worlds are maximal (in every possible world, for any proposition p , either p or not p is true); fictional worlds are not. Fictional worlds, then, cannot be possible worlds. (Of course, there still could be possible worlds in which everything that is explicitly true in a fiction is also true, so that a fictional world could be part of a possible world).

David Lewis, probably the most influential proponent of possible worlds analysis of fiction, uses possible worlds analysis to define what is true in a fiction, which he wants to do because he wants to understand some claims about fiction or fictional characters as prefixed with the phrase “In fiction ϕ , ...” (This is the logic-ese equivalent of “In such-and-such fiction, ...”) In “Truth in Fiction,” he suggests that this will allow for a simpler handling of fiction than will a “Meinongian” account (an account that treats fictional characters as actually existing in some sense). While my own account is what Lewis would call Meinongian, and while I have things to say in defense of such an account, this is not the place for such a defense. Here I need to point out a problem with possible worlds analysis caused by the non-maximality of fictional worlds.

In the actual world, there are truths about a plethora of very mundane things that would never be mentioned by an author telling a story. Some examples: how many hairs does my horse Molly have on her? How many seconds have I spent tying my shoes over my lifetime? How many avocados were consumed in Cuba in 2007? etc. Now, Jo March, the main character in *Little Women*, has hair. This is specifically mentioned in the novel

because a minor plot point revolves around the way she decides to wear it. But there is no exact number of hairs on her head specified, and, hence, there's no truth about exactly how many hairs Jo has on her head, as there would be if she were a real person. In a single possible world, there can only be one number of hairs on someone's head at a given time. The way to handle this, of course, is to specify a set of possible worlds, each of which contains a Jo with a different specific number of hairs on her head. On this theory, then, Jo is not one individual, but a conglomerate of thousands of different possible individuals (perhaps millions or billions, given that there is also no fact of the matter about how many threads there are in each of her dresses, how many flakes of snow she shoveled on the day she met Laurie, etc).

This looks as if it will solve the problem – and it certainly seems to account for the phenomenon of differing interpretations. But it doesn't work. First, it assumes trans-world identity (which David Lewis admits). I'm not going to address the question of trans-world identity here, though, because even if it turns out not to be a problem, there's a second, deeper problem: just what is Jo March, on this theory? We said earlier that, for the fictional-world Jo March, there is no fact of the matter about how many hairs are on her head, but it seems that there is such a fact for the possible-worlds Jo March. It's a big, fat, disjunctive fact, but it's still a fact, and not an infinitely disjunctive one. Since the same proposition cannot both be true and not true of the same individual, the possible-worlds Jo March cannot be the same thing as the fictional-world Jo March. And so fictional worlds must be different than possible worlds, because they contain different individuals.

Once one starts talking about fictional worlds, possible worlds are the first thing that come to a modal logician's mind. I suggest that the problem here is that the phrase "world of the fiction" is ambiguous. On the one hand, it may mean the world described explicitly in the fiction; on the other hand, it may mean the (possible) worlds in which the fiction is true. These are, as I have shown, not the same things, no matter how much alike they sound. Whatever problems Meinongian accounts of fiction face must be faced; a shift to possible worlds analysis in order to avoid Meinongian problems will not succeed.

5. Searle: Suspension of Commitment

John Searle is less interested in defining fiction than he is in explaining why it is that the speaker or teller of fictions cannot be held to the same commitments as the speaker of non-fictions. He thinks that the interesting thing about fiction is that the writer of fiction, unlike the writer of what he calls "serious assertions," cannot be held accountable if he does not believe that what he writes is true, or simply has no evidence about it one way or the other, etc. (Of course, Lamarque and Olsen's requirement that the mode and content both be made up is very much in tune with this. If mode and content are both clearly made up – the author is both making something up and being obvious about the fact that he is making it up – the author should not be held accountable for the truth of what he says).

Writers and speakers of "serious" discourse do what they do, according to Searle, by performing a particular kind of illocutionary act: an assertion. Writers and speakers of fictions, on the other hand, are doing what Searle calls "pretending to make assertions." While there is an utterance occurring, there is no assertion being made, because making

an assertion is what does the work of committing the writer or speaker to the truth of what he asserts. So, while the utterance sounds like an assertion and behaves logically like an assertion, utterances of fiction are only pretend assertions – the speaker or writer is not serious.

The main problem I find with this theory is that, as with Lamarque and Olsen's theory, it makes *utterances* primary in the analysis of both assertions and narratives, rather than making a kind of *imagination* (or lack thereof) primary, as Walton does. Whatever it is that makes the difference between fiction and non-fiction must be already well at work by the time the author tells a story; she has already done the creative work of deciding what is true in the story – the telling of the story is, ontologically speaking, a report about what has already been created, rather than the act of creation itself. Even if she changes her mind while in the middle of telling the story, or if she makes up the story as she tells it, changes or additions are made when she chooses to make them, not when the relevant words occur in the telling. Another way to put this is like this: the only performative force that the words of a story's first telling have is to turn what is imaginary into what is fictional; the telling of the story represents what fundamentally is imaginary – i.e. the story.

In an assertion, it is the actual act of speaking the words that commits me to their truth. Within the practice of story-telling, I create truth-in-the-story when I decide which way things are going to be, not when I relate the story through some medium (though the telling of the story is what *commits* me to truth-in-the-story). Beneath the surface level, which is the act of recounting purported facts, there really is no parallel between telling serious stories and telling fictional ones. In the case of fictional stories, words describe

what is created by imagination; in the case of serious stories, words present what the author believes about the world. Searle rightly claims that there is no apparent grammatical difference between the two; but simply that the author pretends to do in the first kind of case what she really does in the second cannot be the whole answer to questions about what causes the difference in what we hold authors to. Were we to attempt to get to the bottom of this problem, the next question would be: how are we able to tell difference between the two kinds of case so easily and so consistently, and what does that imply for our theory of fiction?

First part first: There are a lot of methods people use to distinguish fictions and non-fictions. Searle reaches this conclusion:

...the pretended performances of illocutionary acts which constitute the writing of a work of fiction consist in actually performing utterance acts with the intention of invoking the horizontal conventions that suspend the normal illocutionary commitments of the utterance.³²

Correctly, he concludes that conventions regarding the treatment of fiction are necessary to explain how speakers avoid committing themselves to truth of fictional stories. But conventions don't quite work as Searle thinks they do. On Searle's theory, it is the context of a "serious" utterance that commits the speaker to the utterances' truth, not the actual words of the utterance. This is why speakers are committed by *utterances* of sentences and not just the sentences themselves. I think this builds context in illicitly, because the role of context in commitment to truth claims is operative without being recognized as doing what it does.

I agree that it is context that makes much of the difference between fiction and non-fiction, but I think that Searle is wrong about the role of context in determining

³² from "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" p. 327.

speaker commitment, and about the conventions regarding the understanding of context and commitment. The conventions are not attached to the pretense, as Searle seems to assume, especially not at the level of individual sentences within a fiction. If they were so attached, it would be really difficult to distinguish between a serious report full of lies, and a fiction. Every separate statement counts as a separate utterance act, and so, on Searle's view, a separate invocation of conventions. But this cannot be what's going on.

Imagine two sentences:

1. Willy carried the heavy suitcase in from the car.
2. Willy carried the heavy suitcase in from the car.

Imagine also that sentence 1 is an accurate description of the activities of my friend sometimes known as "Willy," and that the second sentence is from a script for an episode of *Mission: Impossible*.³³ Qua sentences, these sentences are indistinguishable (though they refer to different Willys, different suitcases, and different cars, and therefore have different meanings). According to Searle, as I utter the first sentence I commit myself to the truth of the claim, but as I utter the second sentence (supposing that I'm the one writing the episode) I invoke conventions which suspend my commitment to the truth of the sentence. But the sentences are indistinguishable. So it has to be something other than the sentence that causes the suspension of my commitment.

The way people would tell the difference between these two sentences, in terms of the speaker's commitment to their truth, would be, probably, to look at the context in which they might occur. This is the kind of guesswork competent English speakers are good at. Armed with the knowledge that the Willy of the first sentence is my (real) friend,

³³ The television show, of course. As far as I know, this line does not occur in an actual episode, but it very well could, since Willy often does this kind of thing.

competent English speakers will surmise that the sentence occurs in some context requiring accuracy; perhaps someone is wondering if Willy is strong enough to help move the piano, or needs to know what he was doing at a certain time, or wants to determine that he's not rude enough to make his mother carry it, etc. In any of these cases, I as the speaker (usually) intend that the inquirer take my word about Willy's behavior as true.

Should a competent English speaker discover that the Willy of the second sentence is Willy Armitage, the secret agent employed by the IMF,³⁴ she will (usually) quickly conclude that the sentence is nothing more than part of a story. She knows that the IMF and its agents cannot exist, and she (rightly) assumes that I, the story-teller, know that too. She also assumes that I know that she knows that neither the IMF nor its agents exist. There can be no point, other than to help with pretending or imagining, to my saying that Willy carried the suitcase – he cannot help her move her piano; it's very odd to say that he has been anywhere at any given time (outside the context of the story); and whether or not he is rude to his mother can only matter in the context of a story. Knowing all this, the competent speaker deduces that she is merely to imagine, and not to believe, what I tell her – it is the best way to make sense of the sentence.³⁵ It is this knowledge, which she infers from the context, that suspends the commitment to truth that I would ordinarily incur.

I've chosen my example with care. That *Mission: Impossible* is completely fictional is not at all subtle, and therefore it is easy for my hypothetical competent English speaker above to make the appropriate inferences about it. There are cases of

³⁴ The "Impossible Missions Force."

³⁵ Of course, it is not the *only* way to make sense of it. This is what leaves room for error in interpretation.

fictions of which the decision is harder to make – but the principles still hold. One that might be confusing, for example, is Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*. Unlike *Mission: Impossible*, *The Way of All Flesh* is written realistically about easily possible events, in the voice of a narrator who works himself into the story so smoothly that it seems quite natural that he is telling the story. The tone of the story makes it sound like a long letter written to someone wishing to know about Ernest, the main character. There is some question about how much of it is made up and how much is auto-biographical; almost certainly, the story is fictionalized, rather than being completely fictional. (It may be more correct to say that it is a fiction with truths worked in rather than a true story that has been fictionalized). The judgment made by the competent English speaker will be made with more care in this case than in the one above, but there are still enough contextual clues that will point her to a decision to pretend and not to believe – one of the main ones being that the story appears in a book with introductions that suggest fictionality, written by an author with a name that does not appear in the text.

Now for the second part of the question: what does this all mean for a theory of fiction?

For the reasons explained above, I don't think it will do to draw a distinction between pretending to make assertions and actually making them. I think it is better to say that in fictions, there are assertions; when I, the author, write, "Willy carried the heavy suitcase in from the car" as part of a fiction, I have actually asserted the proposition expressed by that sentence. However, this assertion has taken place in the context of a story that any competent speaker of English can tell is fictional, and because

the assertion has taken place in such a context, I am not held to the truth of the proposition asserted.

This is actually a good thing, I think. Searle would not like what I've just said, because, according to him, an assertion is by definition the kind of speech act that commits the speaker to the truth of the relevant claim, and to having evidence for it, etc., so that if a commitment is not made, there is no assertion. Not only is this not a problem for me, though, but it allows an explanation of one aspect of how fictions work internally, while also allowing the suspension of commitments externally.

Searle's theory of assertions, understood without a concept of "pretending to make assertions," will allow a nice way of explaining how inconsistencies within stories occur. Serials, especially, are a breeding ground for minor inconsistencies, since when they run long, it's difficult to hold all the details in one's head at once. For example, in *M*A*S*H*, Hawkeye was at different times an only child and not an only child.³⁶ Now, if it is possible for storytellers to create inconsistent stories, there first must be a way for storytellers to establish truths-in-stories; if one is to contradict oneself, one must first establish a proposition to be contradicted. Somehow, then, storytellers have to be able to establish that some propositions are true in a story, and once the storyteller has done that, I think it's fair to say that we can hold him to that truth within the context of a story. So, if Hawkeye says in the second season that his sister sent him a sweater, and then says in the sixth season that he is and always has been an only child, we might, then, as we do sometimes, say that the people making the show made a mistake. This is, of course, a different, less serious kind of mistake than if say, in the real world, an intelligence agency

³⁶ In the episode "Mail Call" from season 2, Hawkeye has a sister; in episode "Mail Call 3" from season 6, he claims never to have had any siblings.

were to report inaccurately that an enemy nation had weapons of biological warfare; the chastisement deserved in the two cases is not even comparable. But the creators of *M*A*S*H* have committed the show to a certain set of propositions when they have Hawkeye say, “My sister knitted me this sweater.”³⁷ So, because there is a commitment, there has to be an assertion. The assertion is embedded in the context of a fiction, which suspends the creators’ commitment as far as the real world is concerned. It does commit them to truth-in-*M*A*S*H*, because in the context of *M*A*S*H*, Hawkeye was serious and undeceived when he made the claim in question.

Taking the strong points and the weak points of all these philosophers’ theories into account, an accurate picture of fiction begins to emerge. First, the central concept in a theory must be the concept of a story, in the sense of the word that is neutral with respect to fictionality. (A narrative description of my activities in July 1995 is every bit as much a story as is *A Tale of Two Cities*). To tell a story, one must have the idea of a series of events in one’s head, and must attempt to describe them somehow. Whether these images are made up by the storyteller or come from experience or from another storyteller makes no difference at this level.

Fiction is a specific kind of story, the kind in which we don’t count the author as having committed himself to the truth of what he says, usually because we think he made the story up, without intending to deceive us. There can, of course, be all kinds of reasons why we don’t count an author as having committed himself to the truth of what he says. We may, for example, know enough about the world to know that the story couldn’t have happened as told, or that the author could not have been in any position to know about the

³⁷ Again, I don’t know that this line exactly occurs in the story. Whatever line does occur has the same set of implications and story-commitments, though.

purported events. (In these cases we would charitably interpret him as creating a fiction, unless the context of the story precludes that interpretation). We may have as good as watched the author while he was creating the story, in which case we would know where he got the story's content. We may know the real facts of the matter, and see that the author has got some of them right, but has changed others.³⁸ (In cases like this, we're likely to count the story as fictionalized rather than as strictly fictional. We will also need to know in these cases what the author intended, and must carefully consider the context in which he presents the story. To present *Forrest Gump* as a movie is perfectly fine, and even entertaining; to present the same story in a history book would be incorrect and blameworthy).

The Falsity of Fiction

The only thing that is completely clear at this point is that it is really complicated to spell out exactly what it is about context that makes the difference between fictionality and non-fictionality. If we agree that Lamarque and Olsen are right, roughly, that being made up in both mode and content makes a story fictional, we are left with a complicated tangle of distinctions to make, especially between stories that are more and less fictional, and between genuine fictions and lies passed off as fictions.

All fiction, to the extent that it is fiction, is made up, of course. If we leave our analysis of fiction at that, though, we won't be able to say much about how and why we

³⁸ To distinguish between an author fictionalizing and making a mistake, we first have to look at whether the author intends the audience to believe what he writes. If he does, then he *can't* legitimately fictionalize, and so we'll count him as making a mistake. If he doesn't intend to be believed, then whether his is fictionalizing or making a mistake will depend on what the author believes to be true – if he knows what is true and wrote something else, he's fictionalizing. In these cases, though, it doesn't matter which is which, because the fiction does not count as justification for any proposition about the real world.

treat different stories differently based on their contents and contexts. An example of one type of problem story is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which, though it is fictional, on the whole, recounts events that actually occurred in the real world to some person or other. Early in chapter 45, Harriet Beecher Stowe writes,

The separated incidents that compose the narrative are, to a very great extent, authentic, occurring, many of them, either under her own observation or that of her personal friends. She or her friends have observed characters the counterpart of almost all that are here introduced; and many of the sayings are word for word as heard herself, or reported to her.

By Lamarque and Olsen's view, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, like *Dragnet*, counts as non-fictional, because the events described do not originate in the author's imagination.

Earlier, I gave reasons for avoiding this particular analysis. Besides those, however, there is a further reason: if we were to leave our analysis at the point of deciding whether or not a story is made up, we would be incapable of saying anything further about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the like. And there are interesting and helpful things still to be said.

In writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe took events and personalities she had encountered herself, either directly or indirectly,³⁹ and worked them into the novel by changing some of the details (such as those about where and when and event occurred, who it happened to, who observed it, and what all the parties involved said and thought about it, for example). So the events didn't occur originally in the author's imagination. But this doesn't mean either that the novel is not a fiction or that Stowe's work in writing it was not a creative (as opposed to merely a descriptive) act. All authors (or, at least, I suppose, almost all authors) of fiction get their ideas at least partly from real life. Charles

³⁹ According to the passage just quoted, she used events related to her by friends as well as events she witnessed herself.

Dickens had to know a lot about the French Revolution before he could write *A Tale of Two Cities*, for example. L.M. Montgomery, the author of the *Anne of Green Gables* series, got the idea by reading a newspaper article about a couple who attempted to adopt a boy but ended up with a girl instead.⁴⁰ While this is not the only possible sort of starting point from which to develop a story, it is by no means an eccentricity of a handful of authors, either. Any handbook on story-writing will include an instruction to start by writing about what you know.

However, authors who start from experience, but who intend to write a fiction, often do not stick to experience – if they did, we might wonder (appropriately) whether or not it was a fiction they were creating. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is, on the whole, fictional, as are *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Anne of Green Gables*. We might wonder what makes them fiction, given the origin of the ideas behind them.

I think the important idea here is that authors of fiction can choose to stick to the real details or not – they have a choice about what goes into their stories. Wherever an author gets his ideas from, whether it be from his imagination, from his experience, or second-hand from someone else's imagination or experience, he is under no obligation to include anything in the story, as it appears in the end, other than what he chooses to include. (This, of course, shouldn't shock anyone). If part of what the author decides at some point to put in the story turns out not to fit in well with the author's plans for the story, he is perfectly at liberty to change it. He is not bound to use every detail from a real event for example (though for legal reasons, he may be required *not* to use every detail

⁴⁰ She says so in her autobiography, *The Alpine Path: The Story of My Career*, originally published in *Everywoman's World*, 1917.

from a real event), and he is at liberty to change whatever he chooses, as well as to add content liberally.

This much, I think, is unproblematic, and I would be really surprised were anyone seriously to disagree upon this point. (One issue that may come up here is whether or not an author's changing some detail of a story makes the thing into a different story, but this is just a new version of the ancient 'ship of Theseus' problem about criteria of identity, and has no direct bearing upon the point at hand). This means, though, that a fictional story created by an author is a different thing from an accurate record of events, even if the story is intended to approximate such a record or if the story borrows content from the actual events. A record of events is bound to a specific range of content; a fictional story is not. So, even if a fiction and a report are very similar – as in, say, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the events described to Stowe by her friends – they are, in fact, quite different, especially in terms of their origin. And because the two sorts of narrative are different, it is possible for one to be true while the other is false.

Of course the author of any work whatsoever, including biographies, histories, philosophy papers, instruction manuals, and financial reports, has some choice about what to include and what to leave out. Some details have to be left out of any true story – if every minute detail about even a short and unimportant event was recorded, the description would turn out to make the event seem much longer than it really was, because it takes longer to describe something in words than it does to experience it. Authors of biographies, for example, are just as able as authors of fiction to decide not to build an event into the story they tell. There is, however, a difference in the positions of the two kinds of authors. A biographer is, by definition, an author who tells the (true)

story of someone's life. Because of this definition, there is a set of considerations that appropriately apply to biography in general that the author of a biography must keep in mind while making choices about what to include, on pain of writing a bad biography, or even, I suppose, of failing to write a biography at all. First, one is constrained by what is true of the person. Other considerations might include the following: What was important or interesting about the person? What was the person aware of? What was he unaware of? What did he think about himself? What have other biographers said about him, and had they done their research? These considerations need not completely constrain the biographer, but she does need to take them into account somewhat. The author of fiction qua author of fiction has no such constraints, though he may create constraints for himself by intending to create a certain *kind* of fiction.)

So, to return to the main argument, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is fiction, clearly and knowably so, I would say. We know it is fiction because we know (to a high degree of probability, at least) how the story was created and how it connects to the real world – while the story relates kinds of events that could have very well happened, and that probably did happen to certain people, the people that had these experience in real life were not the people in the novel, and so, as recorded, the events in the novel are not the real events that occurred in the real world. So fictions are not true, even when they are based on real events.

Strictly speaking, in fact, fictions are false – that is, every claim in a fictional work is false rather than merely not true. This sounds shocking and extraordinary, but, really it is not.

In ordinary, non-philosophical contexts, the words “true” and “false” get thrown around a lot, without much care. We might wish that ordinary usage were more precise – we might want to differentiate between partial truths and “the whole” truth, or between propositional truth (“it is true that p”) and truth as a metaphor for accuracy or reliability (“aim true,” “true friend”). We might want to distinguish between truth that claims to be objective or universal, and relativistic truth, as in the ever-irritating cheap reply to moral arguments, “that may be true for you.” But one thing speakers rarely get confused about, which it is important to my argument, is about which world claims are being made.

Statements in fiction are, of course, true in the world in which the relevant fiction is set. Besides the author’s imagination, in fact, there is nothing besides the statements in a fiction that can possibly make propositions true of a fictional world – and every statement in a fiction contributes to the sum total of truths about the relevant fictional world. But when people wonder whether statements in fiction can be true, this truth-in-the-relevant-fictional-world sort of truth is generally not what they are asking about (unless, like David Lewis, they are wondering whether statements in fiction properly imply the truth of related propositions, but this is a different issue altogether). Instead, they are usually wondering whether or not statements in fiction can be true of the real world. My claim is that statements in fiction simply do not work that way – they are incapable of being true of the real world, because they are not about the real world.

For statements about fictional characters – descriptions and reports of what they say, do, think, feel, etc. – this doesn’t really seem all that surprising, since fictional characters are not real people (or androids, or rabbits, or unicorns, etc). Of course the statement “Uncle Tom was sold down the river” can’t be true of the real world; in the real

world, Uncle Tom is a fictional character, not a person, and as such, cannot be sold into slavery. (If they could be, authors could create characters simply for the purpose of hiring them out and collecting their wages. This could make the number of jobs taken by illegal immigrants seem insignificant by comparison).

There is a more problematic-seeming sort of statement in fiction, however. Consider the following sentence: “Basalt is a brown rock of igneous origin.” This sentence occurs in Chapter 11 of Jules Verne’s *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*. It is undoubtedly true of the world in which *Journey* is set that basalt is such a rock. It is also true of the real world that basalt is such a rock; had the sentence occurred in the *World Book Encyclopedia*, for example, it would have been unproblematically true.

It is false, though, when taken to be about the real world. In the section preceding this, when I used the example of the real Willy and the fictional one, I noted that the sentences aren’t exactly the same because the name “Willy” refers to different individuals in each, so that they are in effect two different names, even though they are spelled and pronounced alike. Something similar occurs in the case of the *Journey* sentence about basalt and the hypothetical, superficially identical sentence, in the *World Book Encyclopedia*: the sentences look alike, are pronounced the same way, and have the same grammatical structure, but the noun “basalt” refers to different kinds of things in each case. The sentence from *Journey* refers to fictional basalt imagined and described by Verne as a part of his book; the sentence that (hypothetically) appears in a real encyclopedia is about the real world and hence about real basalt, which does not depend on anyone’s imagination for its existence or properties. Though Verne probably used real basalt as a guide for what he wrote in *Journey*, he certainly needn’t have; he could have

said this instead: “Basalt means any pregnant sheep that is having a bad hair day” – and it would have been true in that world.

In our world, the stuff we call basalt is a sort of rock. In our world, the stuff Verne wrote about in *Journey* using the word “basalt” is not a rock; I’d call it an idea of a rock. If we interpret the sentence “Basalt is a brown rock of igneous origin” as being about the real world, keeping in mind that we are talking about Verne’s basalt, which is the idea of a rock, not a real rock, the sentence is false; Verne’s basalt is not a brown rock of igneous origin, but it is the idea of a brown rock of igneous origin. Ideas cannot be brown, rocky, or igneous (except metaphorically, perhaps), and so the sentence is false, strictly speaking, when taken to be about the real world.

I said, just above, that Verne *probably* was thinking about real basalt when he wrote the sentence in question. Not only does Verne’s description of basalt happen to match basalt in the real world exactly, but it would be reasonable to suppose that Verne intended the descriptions to match. He probably suspected that most readers would know something about rocks in the real world, and that if he made his fictional basalt as much as possible like real basalt, each reader was likely just to go ahead and imagine real basalt, in as much detail as she knew. This would have been a way of making sure that, to the extent that basalt is part of the novel, the readers would imagine the story the same way Verne was imagining it. It makes a lot of sense for an author to use this ploy to build in some degree of common ground for interpretation; but it does not mean that real rock, somehow, mysteriously, becomes part of a fiction or a fictional world. The author (probably) starts from, or is informed by, his experience of real rock, and I as the reader end up thinking about, or being informed by, my experience of real rock; but in order to

get from one to the other, the author creates fictional rock, and it is fictional rock that I read about.⁴¹

If this is true, it would explain how we can learn facts about the world from fiction, even though without additional research we cannot actually know that any fact assumed by the text is true. For example, I happen to know that the name of the Vice President under James Buchanan was Breckenridge. I learned this by watching a fictional character say so in a particularly memorable scene of a television show called *Remember WENN*, in a context where there was no reason to suppose that the character (or the writer) was making things up. I know, to a high degree of probability, that Breckenridge was Buchanan's Vice President because I've looked it up in a variety of sources, and that's what they all say. Rupert Holmes (the writer of *Remember WENN*) was perfectly at liberty to have the character say that Jones was Buchanan's Vice President, and he could even have made that true in the story. He also could have made Breckenridge Buchanan's Vice President in the story even if Buchanan had really had a different Vice President. So I can't know that Breckenridge was Buchanan's Vice President just because one of Holmes' characters says so; there's a disconnect between the real world and any fictional one that leaves the author free to make up whatever he wants. However, because having the details of the fictional world match the details of the real one makes it easier for me to imagine the fictional one, I can infer that, when a character says something about his or her fictional world that sounds as if it might be true if said of the real world, the corresponding idea about the real world is likely to be true.

⁴¹ If it's too weird to think about fictional rocks, substitute Dickens for Verne and London (of *A Tale of Two Cities*) for basalt. Then we get Dickens writing about a fictional London (one that he can manipulate at will), all the while knowing and intending that his audience would be imagining the real London.

This also explains why fictions cannot constitute proof of a proposition.⁴² It's tempting to say that fictions could count as proof that something is possible, or that a proposition is possibly true (especially if one is still thinking of fictional worlds as possible worlds). Specifically, for example, one might suggest that an implicit claim in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is that people, black, white, or mulatto, behave as they do because of the way they are socially conditioned rather than because of inborn tendencies. Because the novel turns out to make sense, and because it turns out in the novel that the mulatto boy ends up acting like a white boy because he is raised like one, one might think that the novel constitutes evidence that the claim is true, or at least possibly true. But the novel does not constitute any such evidence – most likely, Mark Twain just made it all up, and was writing not about people but about fictional characters, all of whose attributes he controlled. But because people are what we think about when we read the book, it seems like evidence about the way people behave.

What “Truth” Is This?

I said above that I intend to write about how truth can be communicated through fiction. At this point, I've said what I mean when I use the word “fiction.” There are four other component terms to discuss: “how,” “truth,” “can be,” and “communicated through.” I'll deal with “how” in Chapter Five and Seven, and “communicated through” in Chapter Six, after I give historical context in Chapters Three and Four; this leaves “truth” and “can be” to be tackled here.

⁴² Of course, fictions can constitute proof of, or evidence for, propositions about fiction. For example, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* constitutes evidence for the claim “Mark Twain wrote books” and also for the claim “Pudd'nhead Wilson is a fictional lawyer.”

A full-blown analysis of the concept of truth, while germane to this project, is far beyond its scope. While I am not going to be able to say precisely what I mean when I use the word “truth,” I should give a rough picture of what I think a satisfactory theory of truth should look like.

Truth, by its nature, must be objective, even though it may be about individuals at particular times and places. For example, if it is true that John is annoyed by badly-played violin music, this must be objectively true, because what you or I believe about John being annoyed is not relevant to whether he is annoyed or not – he will be annoyed or not without regard to whether or not you or I think he is. There are three issues to separate here. First, you or I might be part of the cause of John being annoyed, so we may not be entirely irrelevant to whether or not he is annoyed. At my current skill level, if John is annoyed by bad violin music and if I play the violin in his presence, he is very likely to be annoyed. This doesn’t mean it’s up to me to decide for myself whether John is annoyed – I can decide whether to try to annoy John, or I can decide whether to believe that John is annoyed, but I cannot decide whether he *is* annoyed. If John is annoyed, really, then “John is annoyed” is true of the world, for everyone.

Of course, it might be difficult to tell whether John is annoyed or not at any given point in time. He might be the kind of person who hides his feelings, or lies about them. So people might disagree about John’s state of annoyance; but even so, John either is or is not annoyed about a badly-played violin at any particular time. If we disagree, one of us at most⁴³ is right. So the first thing to distinguish from the question of whether truth is

⁴³ We might both be wrong if, for example, we are mistaken about the source of the annoyance. If Mary thinks John is annoyed by the violin, and James says that John is not annoyed at all, they might both be wrong if John has been so annoyed by the barking dog next door that he has not yet noticed the violin.

objective or not is the question of how we determine what the truth is; the epistemology might be difficult, but it will not affect the objectivity.

Thirdly, truths such as those about how John feels are subjective in the sense that they are about a particular individual. We might even go so far as to say that such truths are determined by a particular individual – that is, John. But this doesn't mean that such truths are subjective all the way down. They are truths about John, perhaps even determined by John, but if John is part of the world I live in, then they are also truths about the world I live in, truths that I cannot change simply by disagreeing with them.

To give a rough statement about what the most accurate theory of truth will look like, I offer Aristotle's suggestion: to make a true statement is "to say of what is not that it is not, or of what is that it is..."⁴⁴ This is not as developed and precise as one could wish, but it eliminates much of what ought to be eliminated of subjectivism. While there is interesting work to be done in the development of an accurate general theory of truth, Aristotle's theory will suffice for my purpose here, with the understanding that everything I say here will most likely remain unchanged should a good development of Aristotle's statement be offered. (I do not mean to suggest that such a theory has not yet been offered. I simply don't need a theory developed beyond Aristotle's statement in order to get on with my own project, and so I leave it an open question what such a development ought to look like).

However, it is important for my purposes that truth is objective. If truth is subjective, that works against the idea behind communication in general. One goal of communication is to share ideas. Fiction, as a form of communication, shares this goal. If

⁴⁴ in *Metaphysics*, Book IV, 7, 1011 b25.

truth is subjective, though, there would be no way to tell, for example, that anyone shares common meanings for words and common assumptions about the world, because at any time, any person might simply decide that they will adopt different rules for language, and so one could never *rely* on conventions of language in order to get an idea across. Mere agreement, by speech or body language, or by any form of communication, might simply be accidental mis-agreement where the parties talk past each other. Under these circumstances, communication would be dicey at best, and it would be questionable to suppose that an author might intend to communicate any real-world truth, especially by means of telling a fictional story. But I don't think it *is* questionable to make such a supposition, at least of some authors of fiction.

The kind of truth that I think is communicated through fiction is certainly real-world truth – this should be clear from the last several sections. It is also not some special, mystical, fancy TRUTH⁴⁵ that can only be reached by a method of inquiry unique to fiction. The idea that fiction constitutes a method of inquiry at all is debatable – one might think, and I would probably agree, that the primary purpose of fiction is not to

⁴⁵ What “special, mystical, or fancy TRUTH” might be, I have no idea. People sometimes talk about “capital T Truth” as if it’s supposed to be more true than ordinary (contingent?) truths about the world, and it is this idea of truth that I’m trying to talk about. I’m not sure what it might mean for one truth to be more true than another. I think this talk of “capital T Truth” is a way for people to express strong belief, or to suggest that it would have taken a lot of doing for the truths in question to be not true. I suppose religious truth – truths about how and why the world came to exist, about what, if anything, happens to people when they die, and about who God is, if he exists, is one of the kinds of truth often meant by “capital T Truth.” One might think of these as TRUTH truths because they affect every part of life, they have the capacity to engender strong belief (or disbelief), and they are very difficult to convince other people about. But, qua truth, I don’t see any reason to think that religious truth is different from truths animal, vegetable, or mineral. For instance (taking a particular claim of religious truth), in John 14:6, where Jesus says of himself that he is “the way, the truth, and the life...” he is not claiming to be more true than other true things. The only sense in which it would make sense for him to claim that would be in the sense that he created everything, and so if it wasn’t for him, there would be none of the ordinary truths with which we are familiar. But it would be clearer to talk about him being prior to these things, rather than more true than them. He’s making a more moderate claim, that there is some truth about which ways you can get to God, and that, truth is, he’s it. He’s not claiming that he *is* every truth (as in 7+5 = Jesus) or that no truth is knowable without him.

inform, but to entertain, and that, however it is that communication of truths about the real world occurs, it is by ways similar to, if not identical with, ways that ordinary truths are communicated in ordinary non-fictional truth-communicating methods.

What I mean by “ordinary truths” is something along these lines: it will go badly for me if I can’t tell the difference between a door and a wall. If I cannot distinguish them, I am likely to hurt myself every time I try to enter or leave a room. One truth that I might find it convenient to learn is that doors have hinges and handles, and walls don’t. Similarly, suppose that it is true, as *Black Beauty* suggests, that animals have a fairly sophisticated ability to feel and even think. In that case, knowing that they do is going to help me avoid behaving inappropriately towards animals. The relevant facts in each case are about my world and have practical application in my everyday life.

I don’t mean to be writing primarily about the sort of truth that could easily be acquired by reading an encyclopedia or watching the Discovery Channel, though. As the example of my learning about Breckenridge showed, it *is* possible to learn such facts through fiction. But this is not the most interesting kind of truth-communication in fiction. I hope I have already given a clear analysis of how this learning works and what its limits are. The sort of truths that I’m after are more along the lines of psychological or moral truths, or perhaps philosophical truths in general. Importantly, these kinds of truths are generally difficult to condense into a fact sheet, compared to, say, statistics about population growth in Missouri. Also, moral and philosophical truth tends to be debatable, even to the extent that some people argue there is no such truth. So one wouldn’t (or at least shouldn’t) just believe a fact sheet about philosophical truth, though it is permissible to believe one about population growth, given some knowledge of its sources. The point,

then, is that communication of the kinds of truths that particularly interest me has to be a bit more sophisticated than communication of what I'm calling "ordinary truths."

One final word about my use of the word "truth:" I do not mean to suggest that any particular fictional story has a particular philosophical or moral message that is actually true. All I mean to say is that fictional stories have a capacity for communicating truth implicitly, and I intend to offer an analysis of that capacity. Therefore, though I will talk much of truths communicated by fictions, I will not in general be very concerned about whether these "truths" are in fact true or not, and although I call them "truths," I do not mean to be claiming that they are true. As I pointed out in the Breckenridge example, for all the reader knows just by reading the fiction, any proposition assumed by, asserted by, argued for, or implied by a fictional work may be true, but also may be false. To be precise, I should call these propositions "truth-candidates" or "purported truths." However, for the sake of simplicity, I will adopt the convention of using "truth" or "truths" in place of the more accurate but longer "truth-candidate" or any of its synonyms, unless I say otherwise.

Fiction as a Vehicle for Communication

The one remaining assumption from Chapter One that I have yet to give an argument for is that truths can, indeed, be communicated through fiction, even when they are not explicitly stated. Candidly, I find it so obvious that fiction does work this way in some cases that I find it exceedingly difficult to offer an argument in support of the idea. What I'm going to do instead is to show that the idea has some explanatory value, and then consider and attempt to deflate reasons why someone might argue that it is mistaken.

The pragmatist George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) is perhaps best known for his theory of consciousness. According to this theory, the idea of the self is created as a result of social interaction, through one's memory. When one remembers interactions, one plays the role of other people for oneself. As one plays the roles of other people, one gets the idea that one's own self is a separate object, because in real life the people one is acting the part of reacted to the original self as to an object separate from them. So, X, in X's mind (or, perhaps, memory) pretends to be Y. Y, in the original encounter, reacted to X as if X was a separate object from Y; while pretending to be Y, X sees himself as an object, through Y's eyes, so to speak, and so comes to the idea of himself as an object. He is now conscious of himself as a self. This self-consciousness grows up together with the capacity for conscious thought, which Mead thinks takes the form of dialogue with oneself in its early stages, and only develops into abstract thought with time.⁴⁶

While noting the implications of this theory, Mead comments briefly that "(i)t is fair to say that the modern western world has lately done much of its thinking in the form of the novel, while earlier the drama was a more effective but equally social mechanism of self-consciousness."⁴⁷ Society is not a single consciousness, so the parallel he suggests here cannot be perfect, but there is such a thing as consciousness of society as an object. I suppose the parallel would work so: there has to be some sort of unity between people for a society to exist, and Mead would say, I think, that until people think together about things, there is no society. (Different members of a society needn't agree, just as a person can be 'of two minds' on a subject, but they do have to have the same topics or issues on

⁴⁶ "The Social Self," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 10, no. 14 (1913): 374-80; reprinted in Susan Haack, *Pragmatism Old and New*, Prometheus Books, Amherst: 2006, pp. 477-85.

⁴⁷ From, especially, pp. 481-2 in Haack's anthology.

their minds). When a society is small, group meetings probably suffice for achieving this unity, but if there are more than a couple of thousand people, it gets difficult to share ideas at such a venue. Printing and publishing is a way of disseminating ideas to millions of people at roughly the same time, so that at least a large percentage of a population can have the same ideas before their minds at once. Add to this the idea that novels can be and often are about ideas relevant to society, so that they can make their readers step back from society and view it as an object, and it begins to appear why Mead thinks novels were his society's best vehicle for self-consciousness.

There are a lot of interesting things to be said about Mead's theory of consciousness, including this tantalizing tidbit about novels that he leaves maddeningly undeveloped. Especially interesting would be a comparison between his time and ours, with regard to how the world does its collective thinking. Sadly, these things are outside the scope of this project. What I must emphasize is the admittedly banal point that if the novel can be the medium through which a society thinks, then novels have to be able to communicate ideas, and since it is possible for such ideas to be true, then it must be admitted that novels that communicate ideas have to be able to communicate truths.

I find it difficult to believe that anyone will seriously disagree with the idea that fictions can, somehow, get across ideas that admit of truth or falsity. Such a disagreement would contradict many people's experience of fiction; even though much of this experience is philosophically uninformed, probably, it would be much better than otherwise to avoid contradicting it or attempting to explain it away. Because people's experience of fiction as having something to say about the real world is so ubiquitous, it will be extremely difficult to give a good argument why that experience is confused.

Some philosophers do attempt to argue that fiction does not and cannot communicate truth. I would like to think that when they make such claims, they are not really saying that no reader ever actually gets true ideas about the world from reading fiction, regardless of what that reader thinks he is getting. Of course, some of them do mean this, but these will tend to be those who think that fictions do not have a meaning the way I think fictions do. These philosophers might take a postmodern view that there is no such thing as truth, *per se*, or that fictions have no meaning until they are interpreted by a reader. I have nothing to say to the first sort of theorist. I think his position is incoherent, and if he is consistent he will have no reason to engage in philosophical discourse anyway. I also have a fundamental disagreement with the second sort of theorist. I think fiction is a form of communication. This conception of fiction implies that fictions contain some content to be communicated. It may be incorrect to talk about *the* meaning of a work of fiction, but if fiction is communication then there must be *some* meaning to it initially (at the stage where the author is working it out). If the second sort of theorist wants to insist that fiction is not communication, then I have nothing to say to him either.

I see a tendency in the literature on this topic for philosophers to go beyond the claim “fiction, somehow, communicates truth” to more interesting and also more tendentious claims, such as, for example, “there are some truths that can only be communicated through fiction.” (Martha Nussbaum suggests something like this idea in, for example, her paper “ ‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination”).⁴⁸ Or, perhaps, one might claim instead that any truths

⁴⁸ reprinted in *Love's Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1990.

communicated by the text are part of an essential meaning of the fiction, so that if a reader happens to miss the truth, she has failed to understand the fiction completely or correctly. Lamarque and Olsen call this the “propositional theory of literary truth,” and make this the main target of their “no-truth” thesis in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*.

If I were to commit myself to either of these claims, I would quickly get off-track. I think it is probably true that there are *some* truths *best* communicated through fiction – that is, I would guess that there is at least one truth and at least two individuals x and y such that, all told, at some time t , fiction is the best means possible for x to communicate that truth to y . (I recommend the first part of II Samuel 12 as a potential example).⁴⁹ But I don’t think this is worth arguing about. What vehicle is best for communication will vary greatly, not just by what is being communicated, but by who is communicating, to whom, when, where, etc. I think it is probably false that some truths can only be communicated through fiction. In any case the argument for this claim would be very difficult; Nussbaum failed to make it adequately. In the midst of her attempt to show that only artistic language could communicate the image in James’ *The Golden Bowl*, I found myself understanding the novel much better by Nussbaum’s non-artistic exposition of it than by the passages she quotes from the novel itself. (To be fair to Nussbaum, though, I think she is really trying to argue that the artistic language of the novel and the technical language of philosophy work best together to bring both illumination and understanding).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ In this passage, the prophet Nathan tells King David a story about a sheep in order to show the king his fault in the matter of Uriah and Bathsheba. See appendix.

⁵⁰ See, for example, “Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory,” also in *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 190 especially.

I also do not want to commit to the “propositional theory of literary truth,” though I do need to be very clear about why I don’t. Lamarque and Olsen describe the theory like this:

...the literary work contains or implies general thematic statements about the world which the reader as part of an appreciation of the work has to assess as true or false.

I’ve already made it clear that I think fictions can imply truth-eligible statements about the world, though I’d be a lot more careful with the word ‘contain’ than Lamarque and Olsen are. The first thing to note is that Lamarque and Olsen are writing here about literary works and literary evaluation, not about fiction and the ordinary, non-academic experience of it. Not being a literary analyst, I’m not entirely sure what aspects of literary analysis are indispensable and which are not. Lamarque and Olsen’s argument, that literary analysts do not, in fact, argue about whether statements implied in literary works are true, seems convincing enough to me, and seems consistent enough with my limited knowledge of literary analysis. But I’m not sure why one ought to be interested in what analysts have to do (or not). What I am immediately interested in is this: if I want to try to figure out whether what a fiction has to say about my world is true or not, am I doing something that has any possibility, in principle, of succeeding?

I suggest that, in principle, of course one can find true implications in fiction. (And I suspect that Lamarque and Olsen agree with me. On page 394, they write, “There is no problem with the modest part of the thesis [about the connection between moral philosophy and literature] that says that ‘Some literary works make a contribution to moral reasoning.’”) It is another question whether one has failed to fully appreciate the fiction if one has missed something the author is trying to imply.

This brings me to my second problem with the propositional theory of literary truth as Lamarque and Olsen state it. In saying the reader must assess a statement as true or false, it sounds as if they think that the proponent of this theory is suggesting that in order to assess a work, the reader must decide whether or not he believes that an implied statement is true. This is a very stiff way of thinking about fiction; I take fiction as more of a ‘trying on’ of ideas, to see what comes of them, rather than sitting in judgment on implied propositions as the story unfolds. In any case, this aspect of the propositional theory of truth does not get at what I see as the important issues in this debate. I’m certainly not committed to a view about readers having to make judgments about truths of implied propositions, and I don’t think even Nussbaum is. Nussbaum thinks that fiction provides an angle or angles on problems, or a point of view or views, that will enrich the readers’ experience, and so give them more tools to help them cope with the world. Especially in “Finely Aware and Richly Responsible,” the goal is seeing an image, not assenting to some proposition.⁵¹ So I think that the criticisms raised here by Lamarque

⁵¹ “Seeing an image” is Nussbaum’s language – see, for example, “Finely Aware and Richly Responsible: Literature and the Moral Imagination.” Since Nussbaum writes using examples from novels, primarily, this locution is a little odd, as the image the reader is supposed to “see” is a mental image, or even an abstract idea, and not an image at all. (When the novel uses words literally to describe the action taking place, mental images ought to result; when characters or events function as symbols – as in *The Golden Bowl*, in which, according to Nussbaum, the main character is supposed to suggest or represent a certain moral outlook on life – the audience is supposed to understand an abstract idea about that outlook on the basis of having read about the character). In visual forms of storytelling, such as theater, film, or television, the audience does come to see an image, literally. But there is still often another, and more important, level to the “seeing an image” that the audience is supposed to do. The “point” to the story, or the main idea in it, perhaps, is commonly not something that can be seen with the eyes, but must be understood with the mind. By necessity, this involves an appeal to the reader’s experience – the reader has to find something in a text that is somehow relevant to his experience if he is going to understand an idea and find it meaningful. But the reading of fiction also counts as new experience for the reader – the experience of reading the fiction, of course, but also the experience of the fiction itself, which does not have anything to do with the copy of the text his eyes are passing over, but only with the idea of the fictional world and the events occurring in it that are passing through his mind. He experiences the events in the novel vicariously, and they become part of his experiences as such. So fiction both relies upon past experience of the reader, and creates new experiences for him. This experience, and not an assent to some propositional claim, is what I think Nussbaum has in mind as the goal of fiction.

and Olsen, in response to someone like me who wants to think about the truths implied by fictions, rather miss the point.

As for what I think *are* the important issues in the debate over whether fiction can communicate truths or not, I think those of primary concern ought to be those about *how* such truths might be communicated. I now turn to an analysis of these issues, via a survey of two major players in the “war between philosophy and poetry,” which turns on a question of whether fiction can even possibly admit of truth-claims, comparably to how philosophy does.

Chapter Three: The History of a War – Plato

One of the strongest arguments against fiction as a means of conveying truth is derived from Plato, most clearly in Book X of *The Republic* – that is, if Plato’s Socrates⁵² can be understood as offering a critique of all the imitative arts. Plato writes:

...we can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men.⁵³

The reason he gives for this is that if poetry is allowed, people will be ruled by their feelings rather than by reason. My focus here will be on the arguments that philosophers have constructed from Socratic statements in Plato’s text. What I intend to do in Chapter Three is to present and evaluate these arguments for this exciting but counterintuitive conclusion, attempting to explain why he reaches that conclusion and to what extent, if any, it ought to be accepted. If he is correct, that poetry is an unadulterated bad influence on a polis, to be shunned despite its popularity, that will leave me with a few questions to answer, even after I’ve tackled my main problem. I’ll have to be able to explain the difference between fictional truth-communication and other kinds, to make it clear why the fictional is so much worse for people than the others. I’ll also have to show how it is possible for the harmful aspects of fiction to coexist with its truth-communicative nature.

⁵² It is a subject of interest to scholars that Plato chose always to write in the voice of Socrates rather than in his own. His choice to use Socrates raises questions about whether or not he actually believed the conclusions that Socrates reaches in the dialogues, and why he chose to keep himself so removed from the ideas. Though these are interesting questions, my interest lies with the arguments actually given in the texts of Plato’s works, regardless of Plato’s actual commitment to them, because they form the basis of the claim that Plato is attacking literature.

⁵³ at 607 a

Plato's "Poetry" and Literature

That Plato's objections to poetry can be taken as objections to fiction as a whole is far from clear. Most of what we would call fiction did not yet exist at Plato's time. Theater was popular in Greek culture around Plato's time, but novels and, obviously, motion pictures and television and radio programs did not yet exist. So, given that Plato's criticisms are directed specifically at poetry, one might wonder how something as multifaceted as fiction can be adequately represented by one specific (and relatively limited) genre. Poetry, for us, is only a small part – truly a part but only a part – of what we call fiction. It seems odd to suggest that the whole of fiction could be judged by a small portion of it.

Poetry as Plato knew it was somewhat different than what it is today, though, and I think the difference justifies the extrapolation of Plato's criticisms to contemporary fiction. Contemporarily, poetry is sometimes performed – that is, it is sometimes read out loud to people listening – but is more often read off the page privately. Presentation is important; often, part of writing a poem well is making a choice about layout that will have some influence over what the reader takes away from the poem. This is different from what Plato would have had in mind, in some ways. In Plato's time, poetry was still recited by rhapsodes such as Ion (with whom Socrates converses in *Ion*), and theatrical comedy and tragedy flourished as art forms. Clearly, from Socrates' criticisms of poetry in *The Republic* Book X, Plato thinks of poetry as something that is primarily performed.⁵⁴ There is evidence of this from *Ion* as well:

⁵⁴ At 604 e, he speaks of imitators (poets) having a “nondescript mob assembled in a theater” to recite poetry to.

...Suppose [the poet is] reciting epic poetry well, and thrill[s] the spectators most deeply... There he is, at a sacrifice or festival, got up in holiday attire, adorned with golden chaplets, and he weeps, though he has lost nothing of his finery. Or he recoils with fear, standing in the presence of more than twenty thousand friendly people, though nobody is stripping him or doing him damage.

In this passage, it is clear that the recitation of poetry in Greek theater is not at all like the recitation of poetry contemporary Westerners are familiar with. At the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama, for example, a poet, Elizabeth Alexander, recited one of her poems⁵⁵ – she was wearing a suit, standing tall and still, and speaking slowly and with little rhythm, so the microphone would pick up everything she said. Contrast this with Socrates’ description of Ion’ performance of Homeric epic poetry. Ion gets so emotionally and imaginatively wrapped up in what he is saying that he hardly knows that he is a rhapsode, rather than one of Homer’s characters! And the audience seems to follow him in imagining the story so vividly:

Ion: Yes, indeed, I know it very well. As I look down at [the audience] from the stage above, I see them, every time, weeping, casting terrible glances, stricken with amazement at the deeds recounted...⁵⁶

In fact, what Ion describes here sounds much more akin to contemporary television programs and motion pictures⁵⁷ than it is to what we would call poetry. Actually, it approximates radio drama better than it does contemporary poetry – Orson Wells’ 1938 broadcast of an adapted version of *The War of the Worlds* famously convinced thousands

⁵⁵ “Praise Song for the Day,” published January 2009 (Graywolf Press).

⁵⁶ *Ion*, 535e.

⁵⁷ Of course, not everything in a motion picture or radio play is necessarily fictional. It is certainly possible to make a movie about something that actually happened. I don’t mean to suggest that these forms of communication are solely fictional; I only intend to mention some main forms that are used fictionally and that are something like what Plato knew as poetry.

of listeners that the earth was under attack from Martians, causing widespread panic.⁵⁸ As Socrates and Ion describe it, the poetry with which they were familiar has much in common with fiction as we know it, in all its various forms.

One thing that Plato's poetry and our fiction have in common is that both are subject to judgments about their artistic properties. Any poem, and indeed, any fiction, either succeeds or fails, to some degree or other, in being beautiful. This has the effect of making the question we might ask about a fiction, "Is it good?" an ambiguous one. The question might be meant in the aesthetic sense, in which case the answer would cover things like structure, word use, rhythm, etc. If the question is meant ethically, though, the answer might address whether the work has a clear (and perhaps true!) moral, or whether it glorifies bad behavior. Plato concentrates on the moral question as he offers his criticism of poetry, which is important; were he to criticize fiction as it is now, he would probably concentrate on moral criticism of this, too.

Another thing that Plato's poetry has in common with our fiction is that both generally make some sort of appeal to the emotions. It is often said that fiction allows a vicarious experience of the world beyond one's own experience. This is not the same as just reading out of an encyclopedia facts about things one has not experienced; the vicarious experience given in fiction often involves what it feels like to be in a certain place, experiencing certain events and interacting with certain people. (This is a different point from the previous one. If beauty has a "Form," then, in Plato's language, the rational part of the soul must be the part that strives to gain knowledge of it, or perhaps

⁵⁸ This is not a perfect likeness to Ion's recitations, because the audience of the radio program somehow missed it that they were supposed to be *imagining* the story rather than believing it. It is not clear from *Ion* whether his audiences were just really good at imagining, or whether Ion made his audiences actually *believe* him.

an interaction with it. So, if Plato thinks there is a Form of beauty, he is committed to holding that what makes poetry good may be understood without engaging the emotions).

Most importantly, both Plato's poetry and our fiction tell stories that are either mythic, patently made-up, or fact that has been embroidered upon. This is vitally important where Socrates' arguments are concerned. If stories are made up, and if the performers or creators of the work are forthright about the stories being made up, then those performers or creators are not understood as either believing the story or trying to make anyone else believe it. It is, so to speak, writing (or performing) without commitment. If a play performed on stage in Athens is set in Sparta, no one then claims that the stage really is, somehow, Sparta; and no one believes either that the stage is Sparta or that anyone is claiming it is. Poetry, as Plato knew it, as well as fiction as we know it, is mimetic, or representational⁵⁹, and everyone understands this.

One important difference between our fiction and Plato's poetry, though, is the use to which each is or was put within the respective cultures. In Plato's culture, poetry was a prime source of education. H.D.F. Kitto writes:

The *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* have been called the Bible of the Greeks. For centuries these two poems were the basis of Greek education, both of formal school education and of the cultural life of the ordinary citizen. Recitals from Homer accompanied by exposition were given by professionals who went from city to city... a citation from Homer was the natural way of settling a question of morals or behavior. Homer could be quoted in diplomatic exchanges... to support a territorial claim. A kind of Fundamentalism grew up: Homer enshrined all wisdom and knowledge.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Much art represents something from reality artistically; that is, many works of art incorporate forms or attributes, etc., that are easily recognizable as something from the real world. This is what it means for art to be mimetic or representational. Poetry as Plato knew it was mimetic because the action on the stage represented action in the real world; fiction, for us, is mimetic because the action in the story represents action in the real world. See my analysis of Walton in Chapter Two.

⁶⁰ *The Greeks*, Penguin Books, Ltd, 1951, p. 44.

This worries Plato a lot, and probably drives much of Socrates' criticism of poetry.⁶¹ Certainly poetry being used as educational material disregards the fact that it is fictional or fictionalized – despite the fact that poetry is mimetic, it still managed to convey to the Greek important purported truths on which he consciously based his actions.

Though the belief that people can learn things from fiction is still common, learning through fiction in our educational system is not nearly as central as it was in the educational system in Ancient Greece. In general, adults don't consciously try to learn from fiction. Fiction, for us, is mostly a means of amusement or entertainment; though Greeks almost certainly derived a lot of entertainment from this poetry, that was not the only primary use for it, as it is for us. "Educational" fiction is for preschoolers; older people learn mostly from non-fictional textbooks and other non-fictional media, and use fictional as a means of entertainment. "Educational" fiction, especially when directed at adults, is not usually as fun as fiction invented primarily for entertainment.⁶²

⁶¹ According to Joanne Waugh, that poetry was the foundation of the Greek educational system is exactly the reason that Plato attacks poetry with so much energy:

"If poetry functioned as the primary vehicle of Greek education until classical times, then in constructing the educational program for his ideal state Socrates would necessarily examine the claim that poetry was a source of truth and that Homer and the poets were knowledgeable about technical matters, culture, religion, and conduct. If the conditions for successful oral composition and performance were adverse conditions for the development of philosophical inquiry, then Socrates would indeed be forced to choose between philosophy and poetry as a vehicle of education." (p. 10, "Art and Morality: The End of an Ancient Rivalry?" *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 1986).

Directly following this passage, Waugh goes on to claim that conditions for successful oral composition and performance are indeed adverse conditions for the development of philosophical inquiry.

⁶² An example of educational fiction for adults is the *Destinos* series for learning Spanish. (WBGH Boston, 1992). This story follows Raquel, an investigator, as she tracks down the members of an old man's family. Certainly this is more entertaining than some other ways of learning Spanish, but compared to watching a prime-time fictional tv show or blockbuster movie – there's no comparison. *Destinos* must interrupt the story often to repeat words and phrases to the viewer. This is not conducive to great storytelling.

Consciously, at least. Socrates' arguments, which will follow in short order, suggest that all fiction has effects on its audiences. That in our culture we don't look for education in fiction or base our educational system on it does not imply that these effects do not exist.

On the whole, then, the sorts of fictions I am interested in have much in common with the poetry Socrates criticizes; and because it is for having these properties that Socrates criticizes it, his arguments can be interpreted as arguments against novels, novellas, and short stories of all genres, motion pictures, fictive television and radio programs, theater, the opera, the ballet, and all other kinds of "shows," including the performances of street mimes and re-enactments of important battles. At very least, we can conclude that if Plato and his audiences had been disposed to imagine these various forms that fiction can take, Socrates would have excluded all of them from the ideal state, along with poetry and theater.

I need to say, before I get going, that I do not think Plato would find objectionable every instance of every kind of fiction listed here – it is a stretch, for example, to conclude that Plato would have wholly disapproved of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood of Make-Believe.⁶³ I think that some of the texts belonging to the categories I listed just above would have been acceptable to him. I want to save this discussion, though, for after the discussion of his criticisms. In any case, if his arguments are not bad, then every text must be measured against his criticisms.

⁶³ For whatever it's worth, I think Plato would have found Mr. Rogers fairly benign because of the clear distinction made between the real and the fictional, and because of the justifications he offers for engaging in fictional play.

Socrates' views on the imitative arts rely heavily on what contemporary readers would describe as metaphysics and epistemology. I turn first to a brief summary of these.

Plato's Metaphysics and Epistemology

Plato's Socrates suggests that there are two sorts of things, universal ideas and sensible particulars. Particulars are the ordinary objects that one finds in one's experience, like pens, carpets, and oceans, as well as actions involving descriptions of a more abstract sort, such as just acts and deductive arguments. These things are all impermanent; pens break, carpets shed, oceans dry up, and acts and arguments occur once in time and can be forgotten or made of no effect. Universals, or what Socrates calls the Forms, are abstract ideas of things, such as what it is to be a pen, a carpet, or an ocean, as well as justice and deduction; a Form stands for the properties that all instances of a type of thing have in common.⁶⁴ These Forms are unique and enduring; there is only one Form for each type of thing, and these Forms are incorruptible (it doesn't make sense to say that what it is to be a pen has run dry or is broken, for example, nor that justice itself has been compromised, so that nothing will ever be just again).

According to Socrates, there are three parts to the human soul – the rational, the honor-loving, and the appetitive.⁶⁵ One of these must be stronger than the other two in any given person, and the kind of person one is depends upon what part of the soul is

⁶⁴ Socrates often asks his interlocutors to teach him about the Form of something. For example, in *Euthyphro* he says,

...bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. I believe you held that there is one idea form by which all unholy things are unholy, and all holy things are holy... (6d)

⁶⁵ Plato presents this idea in *The Republic*, Book III, 414d – 417. He is inventing (or adapting, rather) the "Noble Lie," with which he justifies the social order he recommends for the ideal state, the rational few being those that should lead.

strongest. Because, according to Socrates, the rational part of the soul is the part that pursues knowledge, he thinks that it is the best part. Since only one part of the soul can be dominant, any strengthening of the other parts of the soul is bad, insofar as that makes that part of the soul dominant.⁶⁶ The best people are the ones in whom the rational part is in control. These people are rarer than either of the two other kinds of people; most people are guided by their appetitive soul, and Plato's exclusion of poetry from the ideal state is based on the idea that this majority of people must be *taught* to do what is right. Doing good actions will not come to them without education.

According to Socrates, knowledge is exact and unchanging. This does not imply, though, that nothing anyone ever thinks they know is incorrect, but just that it isn't *knowledge*. Knowledge as Socrates describes it is knowledge of the Forms, so that if someone actually knows something, as opposed to simply thinking that he knows it, it will always be true. There is never any possibility that the world of Being could change, making what one knows suddenly false. People will still say they know propositions when they do not, but when they are mistaken in this manner, it will never have been true that they had knowledge at all. They merely had opinion, which they incorrectly took to be knowledge. Opinion, which is not based on incorruptible Forms, but only on sensible particulars or stories involving them, is changeable, and *ipso facto* not certain.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ In Book X, at 605b, Plato writes,

[The poet's] appeal is to the inferior part of the soul and not to the best part... he stimulates and fosters this element in the soul, and by strengthening it tends to destroy the rational part, just as when in a state one puts bad men in power and turns the city over to them and ruins the better sort...

⁶⁷ In response to Glaucon's suggestion that Socrates give an opinion (as opposed to saying what he *knows* (since Socrates claims to *know* nothing), Socrates talks about knowledge in the latter part of Book VI in *The Republic*. During that discussion, Socrates says:

When [the soul] is firmly fixed on the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent it apprehends and knows them and appears to possess reason, but when it inclines to that

It is important to note that, assuming that Plato is correct about the nature of knowledge, the way to get knowledge is not to go out and look at the world – it is to try to get in touch with the Forms (however that is supposed to be done). Thus, even if Homer studied the actions of real soldiers in order to compose poems about them, he did not use a method that even had a chance of giving him real knowledge of honor or justice.

Plato's Philosophy of Fiction: Arguments Against Poetry

In Book X of *The Republic* Socrates offers three arguments against poetry, concluding that there should be none of it in the ideal state. The first appeals to the ways in which the things represented in the imitative arts exist. Socrates points out the difference between the ideal bed, or Form of bedness, that a god makes, and a physical bed that the carpenter makes. The Form captures what it is to be a bed – everything essential to bedness and nothing non-essential to it. Still, a particular bed made by a carpenter is correctly called a bed as well. A painter's painting of a bed is not correctly called a bed, however; it is a mere representation of a bed, not in the sense that the particular carpenter-made bed is a representation of the Form of bedness, but in the sense that it is only an appearance, or imitation, of a bed, and not really a bed of any kind at all. One could not use a painting of a bed as something to lie on,⁶⁸ for example, so it does not share (at least) one of the essential properties of beds.

region which is mingled with darkness, the world of becoming and passing away, it opines only and its edge is blunted, and it shifts its opinions hither and thither, and again seems as if it lacked reason. (508 d)

⁶⁸ It is possible, I suppose, to physically lie on a painting, given that it is of sufficient size, but the part of the painting that looks like a bed is not what one would functionally lie on.

Poetry also merely imitates copies of Forms, Socrates says (597e). The songs of epic poets, such as Homer, feature characters that imitate the actions of real men. There are Forms of actions, such as just actions, kind actions, noble actions, etc.; these are analogous to the Form of bedness in Socrates' example. There are also particular just acts, kind acts, noble acts, etc. done by real people. And then, like the painter's painting of a bed, the poets' characters' actions are only imitations of particular actions which have certain properties, but are not themselves such actions and do not have those properties themselves. So, Socrates concludes, poetry, if imitative, only seems to present actions that really occur; it is "third from the truth," or, that is, from the Forms.

Socrates' second criticism of poetry is that the poets qua poets have no knowledge of what they sing about. He offers two reasons for this. First, a common idea about the poets was that they had knowledge about everything (at least, I suppose, everything they wrote poems about). But Socrates says, first, that if a person really did have knowledge on some topic, such as the law or military leadership, for example, he would not waste his time singing about it, nor would his friends allow him to (599b; 600c-d). This conclusion relies on the idea that people will pursue what they take as being the best course of action, as well as on the conclusion Plato reached above, that imitation and hence poetry is inferior to the Forms, and even to particulars – if the poets really had knowledge, one would think they would understand this difference. So, knowing that mere singing about law or military leadership is inferior to the actual practice of these things, and wanting to spend their time on the best things possible, they could not choose to create poems instead of practicing what they know. That they do compose poems is evidence, then, that they do not have knowledge.

Socrates implicates particular poets; he asks Glaucon whether a city or people had ever benefited from Homer's knowledge of law or generalship, and Glaucon responds in the negative. Homer has never actually won any battles for any city, nor has he actually written any law, or implemented it. If Homer had had knowledge of these things, Glaucon agrees, he would have used that knowledge to the advantage of society, rather than becoming a poet.

The second reason to conclude that poets have no knowledge of what they talk about is that, according to Socrates, imitators in general do not understand what they imitate, but they understand only the appearance of the things. Socrates' example is a horse's bridle and the makers, users, and imitators thereof. A horseman understands a bridle – he has knowledge of it, in Socrates' sense of the word. He does not only know what it should look like. He also knows the difference between a badly constructed one and a well-made one, a broken one and a serviceable one, and can say what each of the parts is for and how it would go riding the horse without it. (For example, he knows that the difference between using a plain snaffle and a double-jointed twisted bit on a horse that leans on the reins and likes to go too fast can be the difference between life and death). The horseman can tell the difference between kinds of bridles, can decide when to use what kind, and can think of how to adapt bridles to meet the requirements of new situations.

The person who makes bridles but does not use them himself does not have all this knowledge, but he does know what bridles should look like and how to make them. He does not know this through the experience of using them, though; he knows it because the horseman, who deeply understands bridles, knows what is required and explains it to

the bridle-maker. This Socrates calls opinion – the bridle-maker has right opinion about how bridles should be, gleaned from the horseman who has knowledge of bridlehood, so to speak. But the painter who paints a bridle has neither knowledge nor right opinion either of bridlehood or of the construction of particular bridles. All painters can do is copy the appearance of bridles.

The same is true of the poet, Socrates argues. Homer need not – and does not – *know* warfare in the way that a horseman knows bridles. He merely makes his characters copy the actions of real soldiers. Homer’s soldiers seem to do the right sorts of things on the battlefield, but that is only because Homer has copied from real soldiers who do the right things on the battlefield, not from an understanding of warfare on Homer’s part.

Socrates’ argument for his third criticism of poetry, that it “nurtures and waters [the irrational desires] and establishes them as rulers in us when they ought to wither and be ruled” (606d) comes in two parts. In the first part, he tries to show that it is better to be rational than emotional in dealing with grief. His argument is that acting on emotion precludes rational deliberation, which would tell one which way best to go about dealing with a situation. This leads to yet another reason to think that poets have no real wisdom: rational, clearly thinking people are, Socrates says, difficult to imitate, and are not very interesting when they are imitated; their behavior is calm and rational – and because of this rationality, the characters will be hard for the audience to understand and appreciate because the audience is so unlike them. Any popular poetry, therefore, cannot have wise characters; if poetry appeals to the masses, the characters must be like the masses – not wise.

The second part of the third argument is the most serious charge of all. Socrates argues that watching the performance of poetry written by these unwise poets can corrupt a virtuous person. In real life, Socrates says, a virtuous person would not allow himself to express grief loudly in public, but this is precisely what characters do in these poems. In approving of such a poem, in which this expression takes place, one approves of the expression, and because one approves of the expression, one is more likely to act similarly when circumstances arise in real life.

Criticisms of Plato's Philosophy of Fiction

Where I disagree with Socrates, it generally will be over matters of fact. I think his conclusions follow from his arguments, but that he doesn't have all the facts right. In fact, as I will point out later, in the situations where fictions and their authors match Socrates' descriptions, then there really are problems with the fictions. (I am not going to follow Socrates in his argument for censorship, even in the ideal state. The question of censorship is beyond the scope of my project.)

Criticism of argument 1: The most important point to make here is that Socrates' argument depends on his talk about the Forms. This issue is definitely outside the scope of this project, and hence I shall set it aside. Were there Forms, fiction's being third from the Forms would be a black mark against it. If the Form issue has been set aside, though, this black mark must also be set aside.

Criticism of argument 2: If an author does not know what he is writing about, then one should not take his poetry as an accurate representation of the real world (though I suppose one might get it right by accident). However, Socrates' conclusion that no author

“knows about that which he writes” is much too hasty. The argument depends on the premise that if one really knows a subject, one will not merely write fiction about it. I think this is false, and in two ways.

First, there are reasons to write fiction about subjects that one knows. I shall take horsemanship as an example. Here is a list of potential reasons one might have for writing fiction about horsemanship instead of practicing it:

1. Education: There is a novel for children, written in the 1965 by Margaret Cabell Self, entitled *Susan and Jane Learn to Ride*. Except for the beginning and ending chapters, the entire novel follows two girls through their riding lessons, showing what and how they learn and what mistakes they make. Reading this as a child, I found it much more engaging and memorable than the non-fiction books written by the same author covering the same material⁶⁹ precisely *because* it was fiction, and there were characters to relate to, and Susan did get her own pony in the end. Clearly there is a reason here for someone who knows a subject well to write fiction – in order to instruct. Sometimes, telling a story incorporating facts explicitly is a better way to communicate the facts than just giving them.

2. Financial reasons: Alas, horseback riding is an expensive sport. (It is not for nothing, for example, that flat racing is called the ‘Sport of Kings’). Pencils, paper, and libraries for reference, by comparison, are relatively inexpensive. Thus, while I may be kept from practicing horsemanship by the accident of my being too poor to afford it, which may have nothing whatsoever to do with my knowledge or lack thereof, I still may be able to participate in and enjoy some aspects of it by writing about it.

⁶⁹ For example, Self, *The Complete Book of Horses and Ponies*, 1963, McGraw Hill, New York.

3. Glut on the market: There are only so many positions available in the horsemanship-related industry. There are many people who desire to do the work. Out of the thousands of people who know how to ride hunters and jumpers, for example, who are good at it and enjoy it, only four people get to ride in the Olympics, and only about 100 qualify for the Maclay Finals in Madison Square Garden. Because it is so competitive, people who are knowledgeable and capable get left out. Writing about it, instead of doing it, then, might be a way for a person to be involved with it even though they are not actively participating.

4. Physical limitations: Horsemanship is an active sport, requiring participants to be in good physical condition. Not everyone can manage this all of the time, and injuries can sideline even skilled and knowledgeable participants. Dick Francis, for example, was an extremely successful professional jockey in the 1940's and 1950's, until 1957 when he suffered a career-ending injury. He had already written a (non-fiction) book, and so, instead of giving up horsemanship entirely, he began writing mysteries set in the horse-racing world,⁷⁰ which allowed him to participate, however minimally, in a sport he enjoyed.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of reasons why one might write about a field despite having real knowledge of it. It *is* intended to show that it is possible to (rationally) choose to write about something rather than practicing it, even if one has Platonic knowledge of it.

Second, it is possible that one might choose to write fiction about a subject in order to force oneself to learn something about it. (Good fiction is usually tied somehow

⁷⁰ This is according to www.dickfrancis.com, retrieved 8.14.08

to the real world, in order to help the reader imagine the fictional world, as I argued in Chapter Two). While writing about what one doesn't know in order to learn about it doesn't strike me as the ideal way to proceed, I suppose that it is possible for potential authors to educate themselves very well about a subject on which they wish to write in order to do so.⁷¹ (I would guess that it is more common for an author to need to educate themselves about subjects that are peripheral to the main point or context of a work of fiction).

Up until this point I have covered over an ambiguity in the way the word "knowledge" can be used, which it is now necessary to point out. "Knowledge" can mean either "knowledge of" ("kennen" in German, which has two different words for the two senses of the English word) and "knowledge that" ("wissen" in German). Plato does not make a distinction between these two senses; however, much of what he writes sounds as if he is thinking of "knowledge of." To have real knowledge of something requires being *acquainted with the Form* of it. Plato writes, for example, at 601d: "It's wholly necessary... that a user of each thing has most experience of it and that he tell a maker which of his products performs well or badly in actual use." Knowledge seems to require experience of a Form, interaction with it, not having facts about the Form. The maker of bridles has facts about bridles: they go together thus-and-so, they are made out of leather; they are used for controlling horses. But unless he is a horseman as well, and has used a bridle and experienced how it works, he does not fully know it by Plato's lights.

⁷¹ Marguerite Henry proceeded this way during her writing of *The Album of Horses*, for example. While writing quick essays about different kinds of horses, she stumbled upon stories of real horses, and found them so interesting that she interrupted her writing of *Album* to tell these other stories.

If this is the case then Plato has a reply to many of my criticisms. Merely reading about something cannot get the reader knowledge of anything (except reading); for someone whose education in horsemanship consists entirely of reading about it, the most one can have is true opinion. If one is kept from participating in the real thing by one's resources, physical limitations, or environment, then to the extent that one is excluded, one has no real knowledge. And for the teacher who has knowledge and desires to communicate it, I think Plato would say, it is better for the teacher, a better use of her time, to give instruction in the actual practice of horsemanship which will eventually result in knowledge than to spend time on what will, in the end, only result in right opinion.

Accepting Socrates' definitions of the terms for the purposes of argument, I still disagree that right opinion is valueless or of as little value compared with knowledge as Socrates implies that it is. If one is interested in something and "knowledge" is unavailable to one because of one's circumstances, and one has a choice between right opinion and ignorance, then right opinion is what one should choose. It is better to gain and pass on right opinion through the reading and writing of books (even fictive books) than to remain in ignorance.⁷²

Criticism of argument 3, part 1: Socrates' claim that it is a weakness for a man to act on his emotions, especially in public but also in private, is a contentious one to say the least. He claims that the poets portray characters behaving in ways that members of the

⁷² As long as the writer in such circumstances understands and admits that what she has is opinion rather than knowledge. In *Meno* (98c), Socrates suggests that right opinion is sometimes valuable: "...true opinion when it governs any course of action produces as good a result as knowledge."

audience could never appropriately allow themselves to behave in public, and yet they approve of the characters acting in these ways.

Plato is onto something here, to some extent; when emotion becomes excessive, characters look false and become embarrassing and disgusting. I once saw a generally overacted community theater production of “A Christmas Carol.” One scene in particular, where Bob Cratchit discourses upon Tiny Tim’s death to his family, was performed as if Cratchit was not even trying to check his feelings – and it was awful; the speech was given in sobs, interspersed with wails and fits of tears; and it was very clear that it was an actor saying the lines – even more so than when Kermit the Frog said them.⁷³

But Socrates is not talking just about bad acting, or even about acting at all, really. According to him, acting solely on one’s emotions prevents one from acting rationally, and it is always better to act rationally; so one should, ideally, never act solely on one’s emotions. This sounds so wrong that I am reluctant to interpret him this way, but he is often interpreted this way; Socrates says:

... if a decent man happens to lose his son... he’ll bear it more easily than the other sorts of people... Will he not grieve at all, or, if that’s impossible, will he be somehow measured in his response... when he’s alone I suppose he’ll venture to say and do lots of things that he’d be ashamed to be heard saying or seen doing.⁷⁴

The first phrase implies a scale of decency, on which the more decent one is, the less emotionally one will react. The second implies that, though not grieving at all is impossible, it is unfortunate that this is so; it would be much better if it were possible not to grieve at all. The third implies that any emotional behavior is shameful.

⁷³ “The Muppet Christmas Carol,” Jim Henson Productions, 1992.

⁷⁴ 603e – 604a.

I think this is an incorrect view of human psychology. People, by virtue of being people, have emotions; while there are always exceptions, in general, certain circumstances cause specific sorts of emotional reactions. For example, if someone is told he is stupid, he generally feels sad or angry or somehow bad; if he is told he is fun to be around, he generally feels good. If he does not know what is going to happen, and it might be harmful, he generally feels afraid. These kinds of feelings are not had by choice; they just happen. It is possible not to act on them, and it seems that this is what Socrates would have us do. But putting away such emotions is not healthy, as it can often lead to having (again, not intentionally) more violent emotions which one is less able to control. If this is the correct picture of relevant human psychology, then Socrates' way is not the best way to deal with emotions; rather, one ought to learn how to acknowledge one's feelings and deal with them so they do not cause worse problems later. Of course, this need not be done in public, but it does need to be done.

It can also be in one's best (rational) interest to allow oneself to act somewhat emotionally. During the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore spoke and acted like a robot, with a politician's smile plastered on his face. After he lost, since he had nothing more to lose, he dropped the fake smile and the canned speeches and started, as people said, to act like a human being – one can only speculate about whether or not he would have won if he had begun to do so earlier. People tend not to trust other people who act like robots – for good reason. One cannot, in general, help having emotions, and someone who does not show emotion in appropriate circumstances is either unfeeling, or is hiding something; and in either case it is natural to suspect that such a person ought not to be trusted. So it is better than not, both for an agent and for the persons he interacts with,

that he show appropriate⁷⁵ emotion, as opposed to stifling it all as Socrates recommends.⁷⁶

Criticism of argument 3, part 2: Granted, though, some texts are overly emotional, and in the wrong way. Socrates' last point, that such poetry corrupts even virtuous souls that experience it, is a serious charge, and one that, at least in a modified form, is correct. Socrates' (incorrect) ideas about which kinds of people could possibly be willing to write, and about which emotions are better only felt and not expressed, would imply that all fiction with emotional appeal is harmful – because, Socrates thinks, if one gets into the habit of approving of emotional behavior on the part of fictional characters, then he is more likely than not to begin to mimic the behavior and approve of it in himself as well. Socrates is wrong, as explained just above, that all emotional behavior is a weakness, but

⁷⁵ There is inappropriate emotion, too, which ought not to be shown. I do not have the resources or the space to analyze this notion adequately; all I can do is give an approximation. What emotions are “appropriate” in a situation are probably partly determined objectively by what people are and how they work, and partly determined by some sort of standard relative to one's society. For example, it is inappropriate to be amused by the sight of suffering, or to be angered to the point of violence by acts of kindness; some might argue that it is inappropriate to get aesthetic pleasure from something ugly.

⁷⁶ Something that Plato may have overlooked in this part of the argument is the possibility that the emotions require education as much as the rational part of the soul does. There are some reasons to believe that this is in fact the case, as earlier in Book III of the *Republic*, Socrates allows the use of a select kind of poem as a means of educating the future guardians of the ideal state in what is beautiful and what is not. There are standards for selecting these poems, though: “...we must look for those craftsmen who by the happy gift of nature are capable of following the trail of true beauty and grace, that our young men...may receive benefit from all things about them, whence the influence that emanates from works of beauty may... from earliest childhood insensibly guide them to likeness, to friendship, to harmony with beautiful reason...” (*Republic* 401 c,d) Aristotle, however, is much more confident than Plato is that poetry as a whole is good for the education of the emotions. In “Aristotle's poetics,” chapter 4 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 1*, Stephen Halliwell writes, “In comprehending the implicitly universal terms of a mimetic structure of events in poetry, we are drawn into a strong affective response towards the moral features of the action portrayed, as the definitions of pity and fear in *Poetics* 13 make clear for tragedy. It is plausible to suppose that, for Aristotle, the emotional energies released in such a response are not simply drained or ‘purged’ away, but tend to improve our capacity to feel these emotions ‘in the right way and towards the right objects’.” (p. 164). Plato's response to Aristotle here will be that poetry can only *improve* our capacity if the poem gets it right; the poem has to mimic truly good behavior in order to actually improve its audience, and he finds, as has been shown, that there is very good reason to suppose that most poems don't actually mimic truly good behavior. But I think he makes an error of degree here. Certainly there is cause for concern about what poetry people experience, but that does not legitimate the across-the-board prohibition of poetry in general. I will return to this later.

some emotional behavior *is* a weakness; and if persons allow themselves to approve of it in others, then they do become more likely to act that way themselves. At the risk of sounding like a cynical, old-fashioned fuss-budget much before my time, I suggest that a contributing factor in why my students speak disrespectfully to me in a way that would never have been tolerated at an educational institution even twenty years ago, is that they see people speaking that way to each other in movies and on television⁷⁷ without suffering consequences (of losing respect, looking like a fool, etc) as a result of it. Watching this stuff and approving of it allows one to slide into thinking that the behavior is acceptable. So, I agree with Socrates this far: to the extent that a text represents inappropriate expression of emotion, it tends towards harm even for virtuous people.

There is one caveat that even Socrates mentions. One of the essential elements of a good story is conflict; and a common way to bring about conflict is to introduce a villain, who will at least in part not be virtuous. As long as the vicious are shown to be vicious, and the good are shown to be good, Socrates does not object. So a story can include corrupt, emotional characters, as long as the upshot of the story is that these characters are to be held in derision rather than imitated, because they come to some sort of bad end.

There is another related caveat that should be noted, though Socrates does not discuss it. (Though I will not pin any weight on this claim, I suspect that Plato would have accepted it if he had thought of it.) Some characters change, sometimes in ways that are essential to the plot of a story – Ebenezer Scrooge, David Copperfield, Ernest Pontifex, and Maggie Tulliver, to name a few. In the cases where the change is for the

⁷⁷ *Shrek* and *ER* are two shows that come immediately to mind – there are hundreds more. One movie that does a good job with respect to this problem is *Spiderman*.

better,⁷⁸ a character's being irrational or only minimally rational at the beginning of the text is not a bad thing even from the perspective that Socrates takes, that all texts that one has access to will train the soul to some extent for good or for evil. A character who is minimally rational at the beginning of a story and who becomes more genuinely intellectually adult as the story progresses, such as Ernest Pontifex, the main character in *The Way of All Flesh*, can be an excellent example to model oneself after. Ernest is not just an example of someone who is intellectually honest, as he is in the end of the novel, when he has accepted that he does not believe what he does not believe. He is also a good example of how to *become* honest. Most of the story tells of the process he goes through to discover that he has not been so and shows him making changes that end up making him so; the text follows him as he tries and tries to act consistently with what he thinks he believes, but finds through a series of experiences with various people that he does not really believe what he has been told. In other words, not just virtue can be beneficially modeled in a text; so also can the process of becoming virtuous.

I would argue, by the by, that Socrates' claim that literature can have such an effect on the development of virtue is tantamount to a concession in my contest with him over right opinion and knowledge. Even if a person is learning vicious behavior from literature, he is still learning. We say now that one gets knowledge from learning, but Plato need not be bound by our current linguistic conventions. Still, it seems that he would have to acknowledge that once behavior is learned, one is capable of practicing it, or at least more capable than one was before the learning. Socrates might say that this

⁷⁸ I say change for the better; Plato may not agree with all of these example, especially Scrooge, who changed not from being less to more rational, but less to more in tune with the spirit of Christmas, a more or less emotional development.

person has learned only to imitate vicious behavior, not knowing it truly for what it is, but I do not think this move will help him avoid my argument. At some point vicious behavior may well be just copied from television or from the stage, but if it continues it will become a habit – the person will no longer be copying the behavior, but will be producing it by choice, or because it has become the natural thing to do, etc. Learning something by copying is only a step in the process of learning; later steps involve the actual understanding of how to perform the behavior and of what results to expect from it. Because imitation leads to knowing, in Socrates' sense, imitation has to be more significant for the achievement of knowledge than his treatment of it allows.

The upshot of all this is that, up to a point, Socrates is right that literature can be harmful. But literature can also be conducive to becoming virtuous, as the necessary qualifications, here summarized, show:

- People who have knowledge, even in Socrates' sense, of a subject can and do write fiction about it.
- Right opinion, as an alternative to pure ignorance, can be a positive thing.
- Not all cases of emotional behavior in literature, but only of “inappropriate” emotional behavior, are damaging to development of virtue.

There is a very good reason to suspect that even Plato himself thinks more highly of poetry than one would think, given Socrates' arguments in Book X. Plato's own writing, *The Republic*, and all his other dialogues, are not lectures or essays or anything like that; they are at least slightly fictionalized narratives – they are works of literature. (I hesitate to call them poetry in Plato's sense of the word, because they lack the necessary structure and meter, but they are certainly literary). This raises several significant issues for Plato. Almost certainly, Plato is attempting to communicate what he thinks is true, or

the closest he can come to that, in his philosophical dialogues. If we take what he says about poetry seriously, though, we might wonder how he can both hold that poetry is devoid of good effect and still expect to communicate truth as he does through his dialogues. We might be tempted to reach one of several conclusions regarding this apparent tension, none of which are particularly happy ones:

- 1) Plato doesn't think he is communicating truth-claims in the dialogues.
- 2) Plato is actually fine with poetry; he doesn't really mean everything he says about it in Book X.
- 3) Plato doesn't realize the tension between what he writes and how he writes.
- 4) Plato simply doesn't like most poetry, and is philosophizing his distaste for it.

I don't want to accept any of these, nor do I think it is necessary to. I think, though, that the apparent tension suggests that Plato liked "poetry" a lot and knew what uses it could be put to and how to use it for those things. I think Socrates' argument in Book X is *only* about the ideal state, while his style of writing is meant to communicate with people in a set of circumstances that is less than ideal.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato has much to say that resolves this tension, for the most part. The first half is about love, which is, while interesting, not quite the point here. But Socrates' dialogue with Phaedrus happens because Phaedrus is, at the beginning, quite taken with a speech made by Lysias on love. After discussing the topic of the speech, the two turn to discussing speech-making and writing generally – Socrates suggests that speech-makers are capable of making very good speeches for a position, and yet able to make very good speeches in support of the opposite of that conclusion as well. (He demonstrates this, in fact, by doing so himself). So speech-makers do not necessarily believe what they say, he concludes. In fact, he doesn't think that *anyone* can say

anything that is absolutely true in writing. (I take it that Plato includes himself in Socrates' claim).

Socrates says:

The painters' products stand before us as if they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition... drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not the wrong.⁷⁹

No writing contains perfect truth (or Formal knowledge, he might say) because communication is always context-dependent; it depends on who is doing the communicating, to whom, about what, whether or not the communication is successful. To get a point across to a variety of people, one must use a variety of means – one can't communicate to everyone using the same words. (*Phaedrus* is obviously the work of someone who had spent some serious time as a teacher!). And some people are not prepared to hear some things. Moreover, the words can't explain themselves. In order to communicate fully an idea one is trying to express, one has to be able to talk to the intended learner; that learner must be able to ask questions so that what he doesn't understand can be made clear to him.

I think this might be why Plato chose to write *dialogues* – dialogues are precisely someone saying what he believes, another listening, asking questions when he doesn't understand, and raising objections, etc. The dialogue – not the written one, but actual interpersonal exchange – is where learning and communication happen.

⁷⁹ *Phaedrus*, 275e.

Still, though, Plato's dialogues are *written* dialogues, not actual exchanges. (They may be semi-accurate records of actual exchanges, but that could do the reader no good, since he had no chance to participate in the actual exchange, and ask his own questions). The problem Plato sees with writing is a problem with all writing – once the author is not present to elucidate and defend the writing, the full extent of what he meant is no longer available. People ought never to suppose, Socrates suggests, that any writing contains important permanent truth. (*Phaedrus* 277d) The best thing writing can do is serve as a reminder of what is true for those people who already know the truths that the writing attempts to get down (276 d). Plato writes,

...lucidity and completeness and serious importance belong only to those lessons on justice and honor and goodness that are expounded and set forth for the sake of instruction, and are veritably written in the soul of the listener...

Given all this, Plato would have been justified in writing dialogues by his own theoretical framework if they were for use as help with teaching – discussion prompts, or lesson plans, etc. If he was writing them so he could hand them to students instead of talking to them, therefore assuming that the writings contained truth as they were, he would be in error, by his own theory. Plato writes:

...if any [of the writers] has done his work with a knowledge of the truth, can defend his statements when challenged, and can demonstrate the inferiority of his writings out of his own mouth, he ought not to be designated by a name drawn from those writings [i.e. he shouldn't be called a speech-writer or poet, etc], but by one that indicates his serious pursuit... A name that would fit him better, and have more seemliness, would be 'lover of wisdom' ... On the other hand, one who has nothing to show of more value than the literary works on whose phrases he spends hours... will rightly, I suggest, be called a poet or speechwriter or law writer...⁸⁰

⁸⁰ *Phaedrus* 278 c-e.

Here, Plato has justified his own writing of dialogues, while continuing his attack on poetry and the poets. One can write to create something useful for education (or to amuse oneself), as long as one is capable of defending and expounding what is written. The “poets” Plato has in mind, he implies, cannot so defend their writing, nor can the rhapsodes that recite it.⁸¹

Keeping all this in mind, I now move to discussing whether or not Plato would, and whether or not he should, disapprove of the different kinds of fiction we have available to us today. Because of Socrates’ suggestion that no one with knowledge of a subject will write fiction about it, it will be difficult to say of any fiction that he would have approved of it unreservedly. There are, though, certainly some fictions that he would have liked better than others.

Plato and Contemporary Fiction

Fictions that Plato would not approve of are abundant – one only needs to look as far as the local daily television listings. He would disapprove of any soap opera; from what I know of them, plotlines tend to involve unrealistic and catastrophic events, and the characters are not good role models, to say the least. Whether fortunately or not, I am not able to say anything more about them, but they would be as a genre unacceptable by Plato’s theory. There are other genres, though; “reality” shows such as *Survivor* and *American Idol*, situational dramas such as *24* and *CSI*, and sitcoms such as *Friends*, would all have important things wrong with them.

⁸¹ Ion certainly couldn’t, as I will note in Chapter Four.

Though not really fictional,⁸² reality shows would be problematic, according to Plato. Besides showing people acting on their emotions in ways not fit to be imitated, they portray people doing essentially stupid things, such as eating worms, standing in a roomful of poisonous snakes, trying intentionally to live in risky or unhealthy situations. There are also explicit cases of faulty reasoning, which Plato would find harmful because he would think they encourage faulty thinking in people who watch. For example, a reality show called *Mythbusters*, that purports to either confirm or disconfirm supposed urban legends, once went about attempting to set up an experiment to determine whether two semis crashing into each other from opposite sides of a passenger vehicle could weld all three vehicles together. The people on the show failed to get the precise collision required theoretically, and yet claimed that this had “disconfirmed” the theory that a semi crash can weld three vehicles together. This, of course, is not the case, because it is only after producing a specific condition that one can tell what it is possible to produce from that condition.

Expressly fictional television shows tend lately, at least, to be like *Survivor* in that they show even the protagonists behaving immorally in ways that I think I need not go into. But there is an entirely different element to shows such as *ER* and *CSI* that would concern Plato. These shows are set in professional settings where, in real life, there are specific ways that things must be done, which the show may or may not copy correctly.

⁸² While not expressly fictional, “reality” shows are subject to extensive creative editing and manipulation. On a show like *Survivor*, cameras are rolling practically all of the time, but each week is compressed into 40 minutes of air-time; editing, almost by necessity, will give an extremely fragmented picture of what actually happened. And a show’s makers will sometimes manipulate the people as well. For example, they will sometimes lie to the person they are interviewing about what another participant said or did in order to provoke a reaction in front of the camera. On *Survivor*, the council scene at the end of the program that seems to take about 5 minutes is actually a grueling multi-hour session in which the host grills the participants in order, again, to provoke them into saying or doing interesting things.

The doctors on *ER*, for example, are often shown performing operations, doing lab tests, putting in IV's, etc, and they make it look real, as if they know what they are doing; after watching them one is tempted to say that one has seen how things are done in real life – or even that things *are* done in real life (once on *ER*, one of the doctors performed the successful transplant of a complete brain). These shows sometimes have advisors who work in the field, but the producers and writers clearly do not always follow their advice. To the extent that a show purporting to be realistic does this kind of thing, Plato's Socrates would find it unacceptable, because by claiming to be realistic or authentic it puts itself into a position of authority (as Homer makes himself an authority on warfare) and then violates that position of authority by inventing convenient lies. (Socrates, of course, would find the claim to be authentic problematic in itself).

Humor is more of a matter of taste than truth, and so I cannot be certain about whether Plato would find much of the humor on television distasteful. His idea about humor was that, as one should not approve of behavior in others that one would be ashamed of in oneself, so one ought not to laugh at jokes told by others that one would be ashamed to tell oneself – one ought not to laugh at a buffoon. Taking a sitcom like *Friends* as an example, I can only say that I think Plato would disapprove; such comedy appears to me to be buffoonery, and I think that Plato would have more rather than less rigorous standards for good humor than I do, not because he seems serious, but because he seems to care about virtue and knowledge. Many comic situations on television have nothing virtuous or knowledgeable about them, and so I think Plato would find these

distasteful. Douglas Adams has expressed this well, in a short essay entitled “Turncoat.”⁸³

The thing about [Monty] Python that hit me like a thunderbolt... was that comedy was a medium in which extremely intelligent people could express things that simply couldn't be expressed any other way... For me [beginning to fall out of love with comedy] was hearing a stand-up comedian make the following observation: ‘These scientists, eh? They're so stupid! You know those black-box flight recorders they put on aeroplanes? And you know they're meant to be indestructible? It's always the thing that doesn't get smashed? –So why don't they make the planes out of the same stuff?– ‘... Was I just being pedantic to feel that the joke didn't really work because flight recorders are made out of titanium and that if you made planes out of titanium rather than aluminum, they'd be far too heavy to get off the ground in the first place? ... There was no way of deconstructing the joke... that didn't rely on the teller and the audience complacently conspiring together to jeer at someone – who knew more than they did.

I think Plato would agree that stupid people making fun of smart people, or just stupid people being stupid, are not all that funny.

But certainly there are some works of fiction that Plato might approve of. Fictions Plato might have liked are those that emphasize the rational over the emotional, and those in which the characters set good examples of virtuous⁸⁴ behavior for audiences to imitate. As I said above, Socrates does not think these must be limited to those in which people behave virtuously; if villains behave viciously and they are shown by the story to be vicious (and to end badly, most often) and if the story does not, so to speak, “get on the side” of the villains, then it will still be fine by Plato's standards.

⁸³ Reprinted in *The Salmon of Doubt*, Del Rey Books, New York: 2005, pp. 122-3.

⁸⁴ I am using the words “virtuous” and “vicious” to mean what they meant for Plato. Socrates never actually defined virtue, as it is one of the things he always was saying he didn't know the definition of. He begins to gesture at a definition in the *Meno*, saying that it is a sort of wisdom, that makes people good. (88d and 87e), and vice would be the opposite of virtue. I think that this is enough of an approximation to make Plato (and myself) clear in the following passages.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an example of a text that makes the villain, the devil, seem quite charismatic and sympathetic. The character seems sympathetic because the poem spends enough time with him that the reader sees what he is thinking; and Milton did a good enough job of making him a credible, person-like character that the reader starts to wonder whether there is not some good in him after all. This showing of the vicious character as virtuous is harmful, Socrates might say.

A fiction that does a good job in this regard would be George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. The heroine of the novel is clearly Maggie, but, true to life, who the villain is is not quite so clear. Stephen, who forsakes his girlfriend Lucy and attempts to get Maggie to run away with him, clearly behaved viciously. But Mr. Tulliver and Tom, Maggie's father and brother, whom she loves dearly, are just as much at fault as Stephen is for tempting Maggie into behaving badly. Neither of them appreciates her himself, and they both keep her from Philip, the man who loves her and whom she would love if her family hadn't made an enemy of him. Eliot portrays both Mr. Tulliver and Tom unsympathetically, as Mr. Tulliver dies as a result of a pathetic rage, and Tom, while financially successful, lives stunted in mind – had he lived past the end of the book, he most probably would never have developed morally as far as Maggie had by the middle of the book.

*David Copperfield*⁸⁵ is middling with respect to this issue. David's friend Steerforth, who befriends and protects David while they are at school, but later tempts Little Em'ly (David's first love) to run away with him, is roundly and adequately despised by everyone but David himself, who insists on seeing Steerforth in as good a

⁸⁵ by Charles Dickens, first published 1850.

light as possible. Even the reader gets the idea that Steerforth is scum who happens to have a soft spot for David, rather than a good person who has weaknesses. David knows Steerforth was a bad person; he remembers his friend kindly mostly because Steerforth had been kind to him in the past. David's fondness for Steerforth is the last little bit of his naiveté showing through.

A text that emphasizes the value of rationality over emotional behavior is the appropriately titled *Sense and Sensibility*.⁸⁶ Elinor, the older of the sisters who are the two main characters, falls in love right in the beginning of the novel, but for most of it has to contend with various obstacles that look as if they will prevent her from marrying Edward. She manages to do this while remaining rational, helpful to her mother and sisters, and even courteous to those who tease and torment her. Marianne, the younger sister, also falls in love early on, but throws herself into the hopeful attachment heart and soul (and mouth). She is forward and rash, is disappointed, gets sick, almost dies, and ends up marrying a different man. At the end of the story, she sees the error of her licentious ways, admits to Elinor that she ought to have been more like her older sister, and decides in the future to submit her emotions to the dictates of reason, as Elinor has done all along. Although the novel portrays both reasonable and emotion-driven behavior, the upshot is that it is better to temper one's emotions with clear thinking than to let emotion run unchecked. Socrates would agree with this general sentiment that reason ought to rule.

⁸⁶ by Jane Austen, first published 1811.

III. Plato and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Uncle Tom's Cabin is an interesting blend of exactly the things that Socrates does and does not like in literature. It follows an American slave, Uncle Tom, as he is sold “down the river” off the plantation where he has lived most of his life, and where he has a family. He is owned by a variety of different people: Haley, a trader who buys him from his original owner Mr. Shelby; Augustine St. Clare, Little Eva's father; and Legree, the man who ends up beating Tom to death. A subplot follows Eliza, the slave girl whose small son Harry is sold off Shelby's plantation along with Tom, as she escapes to freedom in the north along with Harry. In each of these parts of the story, Stowe consistently shows good characters in a good light, and shows bad characters to be bad, which one would expect Socrates to find pleasing.

As a preface, I should note that Socrates' usual charge that the author does not know what she writes about cannot apply here; as I said in Chapter Two, Stowe created the novel on the basis of personal observation. And she is very explicit about her intention in writing the book: “And now, men and women of America, is [slavery] a thing to be trifled with, apologized for, and passed over in silence? (p. 471)” Clearly not, is the implication; she thinks that people think about slavery in the wrong way, and intends to give them what Socrates would call “right opinion” about the matter. So suspicions about her knowledge of the situation and intent for the book are not well founded.

The rest of this discussion makes the assumption that Stowe was right about what ought to be believed and done about slavery. Whether or not Plato actually would have agreed with her is not the most important point, but if he did not, he would dislike her novel because of the content of its message, not necessarily because of her method of

communicating the message, and it is the method I am interested in. So I will assume he accepts the content, for the purpose of argument.⁸⁷

Stowe does an excellent job of saying of the virtuous characters that they are virtuous and of the vicious ones that they are vicious, and is not at all subtle most of the time. Two of the most virtuous characters are Tom and Little Eva; they nearly always behave as well as they know how. Little Eva, though an invalid, is always thinking of the condition of slaves and trying to improve things for them. She goes to the extent of taking the young slave Topsy under her wing, despite Topsy's reputation for being unteachable and malicious, even while she herself is dying of consumption. Tom is invariably patient, humble, and obedient, despite being forced away from his family, beaten, and lied about. But both of these characters are, through no fault of their own, kept from being fully virtuous in Plato's presumed sense of the word: Tom by the social condition he finds himself in, of being a slave, and Eva by her physical illness. If Tom were not a slave, not only would he be free to develop more virtues, but the virtues he has would be more meaningful – he could use them to make a broader impact on the world rather than just using them to help himself get along. And if Eva were freed from her illness, she would be able to do more towards righting the wrongs about which she feels so strongly.

George Shelby, the son of Tom's original owner, is another virtuous character – even when he is ostensibly acting wrongly, one gets the sense that the author is winking at him on the sly. He is a minor character, having only three important scenes: one early on, in which he bids Tom farewell (pp. 114-7), one near the end in which he finds Tom

⁸⁷ Of course, Plato lived in a slave culture and didn't seem to have a problem with it. That kind of slavery was not like American slavery, though. The racial nature of American slavery distinguishes it from the slavery familiar to Ancient Greece, especially. So it is possible that Plato might have been convinced by Stowe's arguments.

down south, and promises to do what he can to stop slavery (pp. 444-8), and one in which he sets all his slaves free and then immediately hires them back, with a salary (pp. 465-7). The third establishes him as generous and conscience-driven. The first scene, when he talks initially as if he would like to steal Tom back and beat up Haley, but is subdued by Tom's pleading for peace and accepts Tom's advice about how to behave, shows that he is brave, intelligent, teachable, and kind. (In the middle scene he slugs Legree in the face – but Legree certainly more than had it coming). Most importantly, George can follow through on his promises despite them costing him money; in the very end, he frees all his slaves in partial fulfillment of his vow to do 'whatever one man can' to end slavery.

As there are almost fully virtuous characters, there are also almost fully vicious characters – Haley and Legree, and a cast of other nameless slave traders. These characters are not spared in the least – not only do they buy and sell other people, but they are untrusting (Haley will not trust Tom without the shackles, even though Tom is so valuable precisely because he is so trustworthy), coarse (Haley swears in front of Mrs. Shelby – something that, at that time, a gentleman would never do), and irrational (Legree has the valuable Tom whipped to death for refusing to whip other "property" to death).

But the more interesting vicious characters are the ones who mean well, but end up behaving wrongly anyway. Unlike Haley and Legree, Mr. Shelby, Tom's original owner, Augustine St. Clare, and Miss Ophelia, St. Clare's unmarried cousin, do have consciences. But, unlike George Shelby or Little Eva, their consciences do not go far enough to make them actually *do* what they ought, rather than simply talk about it and want really badly to do the right thing. Mr. Shelby would like, all other things being

equal, for his slaves to be comfortable and well-taken-care-of; but sees no point in sacrificing some of his own comforts to keep them out of harm's way entirely by setting them free, and thinks it better to sell two down the river than to have to break up the establishment. He is a vicious character, from Stowe's point of view, because he sees his slaves essentially as cattle he takes pride in taking good care of.

St. Clare's and Miss Ophelia's vices are different; they do see the slaves as people. But St. Clare cannot force himself to free his slaves, as he knows he ought, because he needs them economically, and cannot make himself give his economic welfare up for them. He knows this of himself, and speaks cynically of it:

"I say it's perfectly abominable for you to defend such a system!" said Miss Ophelia, with increasing warmth.
 "I defend it, my dear lady? Who ever said I did defend it?" said St. Clare.
 "Of course, you defend it,— you all do, — all you Southerners. What do you have slaves for, if you don't?"
 "Are you such a sweet innocent as to suppose nobody in this world ever does what they don't think is right? Don't you, or didn't you ever, do anything that you did not think quite right?"
 "If I do, I repent of it, I hope," said Miss Ophelia, rattling her needles with energy.
 "So do I," said St. Clare, peeling his orange; "I'm repenting of it all the time."
 "What do you keep on doing it for?"
 "Didn't you ever keep on doing wrong, after you'd repented, my good cousin?"
 "Well, only when I've been very much tempted," said Miss Ophelia.
 "Well, I'm very much tempted," said St. Clare; "that's just my difficulty."
 "But I always resolve I won't, and I try to break off."
 "Well, I have been resolving I won't, off and on, these ten years," said St. Clare; "but I haven't, somehow, got clear. Have you got clear of all your sins, cousin?"⁸⁸

In a way, he is better than Mr. Shelby, because he does see that his slaves are people, which at least affects the way he treats his slaves – he treats them more respectably than

⁸⁸ *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 240. This conversation continues, in which St. Clare expresses a vehement dislike of slavery, and describes to Miss Ophelia how he came to own slaves at first, and why he still has them.

he would valuable cattle, at least. But in a way, he is worse than Mr. Shelby; he sees the truth (which Shelby doesn't) and knows what he ought to do, but cannot do it. This is a character weakness.

Miss Ophelia thinks that slavery is wrong and would not be caught dead owning a slave herself; she often takes her weak-willed brother to task because he does own slaves. But there is a step that she cannot take. She cannot see that she still thinks that black people are less important than white people like herself, and so she cannot bring herself to treat black people the same way she would treat white people:

“I've always had a prejudice against Negroes,” said Miss Ophelia, “and it's a fact, I never could bear to have that child touch me; but I didn't think she knew it.”

“Trust any child to find that out,” said St. Clare; “there's no keeping it from them. But I believe that all the trying in the world to benefit a child, and all the substantial favors you can do them, will never excite one emotion of gratitude, while that feeling of repugnance remains in the heart;— it's a queer kind of fact,— but so it is.”

“I don't know how I can help it,” said Miss Ophelia; “they *are* disagreeable to me,— this child in particular,— how can I help feeling so?”⁸⁹

This is not a weakness of St. Clare's; he relates honestly, maturely, and kindly to Tom.

Through her treatment of each of the characters, Stowe communicates her point, which she restates in the last chapter in case anyone missed it: Slaves are people too; slavery is intolerable. Socrates would have no problem with her methodology up to this point; Stowe has made instructive use of literature to communicate a (purportedly) true idea that will make its audience better people if it is true and they believe it; if slaves are people, then one needs to recognize the fact and do something about it. Stowe has both told us the truth and given some not-at-all-disguised hints about what we should do – free

⁸⁹ *ibid*, p. 305.

our slaves, if we own any, and make room for escaped slaves in our communities and lives, if we do not.

But Socrates would find problems with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Miss Ophelia's problem, implies Stowe, is the problem shared by the majority of people in the north: they want the slaves to be freed, but they do not want to have anything to do with them. For Miss Ophelia, learning to treat black people like people consists of one thing, at least initially: she has to learn to love Topsy:

Miss Ophelia raised her gently, but firmly, and took her from the room; but, as she did so, some tears fell from her eyes.
 "Topsy, you poor child," she said, as she led her into the room, "don't give up! I can love you, though I am not like that dear little child [Eva, who has died at this point]. I hope I've learnt something of the love of Christ from her. I can love you; I do, and I'll try to help you grow up a good Christian girl."
 Miss Ophelia's voice was more than her words, and more than that were the honest tears that fell down her face. From that hour, she acquired an influence over the mind of the destitute child that she never lost.⁹⁰

According to Socrates, coming to understand truth about the world is a good thing. But what Miss Ophelia must learn, according to Stowe, is how to *feel* for slaves – how to accept them as people and love them as she would love any member of her own class. This is beginning to sound rather emotional; Miss Ophelia cries and has a passionate, emotionally-laden outburst, all very appropriately, Stowe suggests. And this is not the only such passage – Stowe even allows herself very emotionally charged outbursts. When Eliza takes her baby and runs away with him, for example, Stowe writes,

If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, to-morrow morning,- if you had seen the man, and had heard that the papers were signed and delivered, and you had only from twelve o'clock till morning to make good your escape,- how fast

⁹⁰ p. 321.

could *you* walk? How many miles could you make in those few brief hours, with the darling at your bosom,- the little sleepy head on your shoulder,- the small, soft arms trustingly holding on to your neck?⁹¹

This is a direct appeal to the emotions. The whole of Eliza's escape is, in fact – it was precisely the point that Eliza did not sit and deliberate before she left, nor before she crossed the river. She acted immediately, out of desperation and love for her child. Because what she did is the same thing that most mothers would try, or at least what they would wish they had the courage to try, it is this that makes the point: Eliza is human too. And of Topsy: it is love, not whipping or candy or any of the other things her owners try, that makes her want to obey, just as it would be for any other child.

The conclusion Stowe is getting at has not changed; it remains 'slaves are human too.' But Stowe is using an appeal to emotion, because it is emotions, or at least the ability to be deeply hurt emotionally, that people thought that slaves lacked, and the author is here attempting to draw a connection between the character and the reader. She is saying, "This is how the slave is. And you, reader, are like this too, are you not?" Further, she thinks that there were two kinds of changes that Americans needed to make regarding slaves: one was a change of mind about a matter of fact, but the other was a change in how people feel about slaves. Slaves should be set free, Stowe thinks, because of the matter of fact about what they are, but freed slaves should also be *accepted*, because of how they *feel*. In fact, if people came to feel a lot more for slaves, Stowe suggests, they would not be making a mistake. She expresses the idea that people were, in general, much too cool and rationalizing about the issue.

⁹¹ pp. 61-62

So, I think Plato's Socrates, and perhaps Plato as well, would find himself pulled two ways over *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. On the one hand, Stowe uses characters – virtues and vices – well by Socrates' lights, to make a point that she wants readers to accept rationally, and she makes the point in a way of which Socrates would approve, by making good characters look good, and making bad ones look bad. On the other hand, Stowe seems to be suggesting, contra Socrates, that lack of emotion can be a vice, and that having the right emotions can be a virtue. Socrates would probably have to say of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that some aspects are valuable while some are corrupting, and I suspect, given the serious attitude that he takes towards corrupting influences, that he would think the negative influences outweigh the positive ones.

Conclusion

Socrates' attack on poetry does not quite work, because it fails to account for the place that the emotions have in human psychology. However, his (true, I think) points, about education and the effect one one's character of what one watches and reads, ought to be heeded, despite the over-stated criticism of the emotions and the portrayal of characters expressing them.

Against anyone who thinks he is or wants to become a poet, novelist, dramatist, or movie-maker, Socrates has brought a serious charge of wrong-doing that seems hardly fair, especially when directed at storytelling in general, and all practitioners thereof, without discretion. With Socrates' expulsion of poetry from the ideal state comes the

feeling that philosophy and poetry are fundamentally at odds, and because philosophy attempts to achieve knowledge of truth, poetry must then have something else as its goal.

There is much in this to object to.

Chapter Four: The History of a War Continued – Sidney

Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* also goes by the title *The Defense of Poesy*. According to Maslen's introduction to the work,⁹² these two titles were given by Sidney's two publishers and were not chosen by Sidney himself. Thought it may be true that the best defense is a good offense, I think the first⁹³ title is a better choice. Sidney does not simply defend poetry from Plato's attack, but instead makes an apology for poetry rather in the spirit of Socrates' apology for himself to the men of Athens – Sidney argues that, far from being worthy of condemnation as a corrupter of people, poetry is a better means for education than either philosophy or history.

It is evident in *An Apology for Poetry* that all the forms of fiction we have today are continuous with what Sidney called "poetry." Most of his argument concerns, not poetry as such, but only fictional poetry. Early in the *Apology* (86/21 and continuing) he differentiates between three kinds of poetry: poetry "that did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God" (86/22), poetry "that deal[t] with matters philosophical" (86/35), and, finally, poetry "that borrow[ed] nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range[d], only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be." (87/9-11). The first two kinds of poetry require no defense, he writes, because they are bound, as far as content is concerned, to what is, or, as we might say, to what is true of the real world, and so they must be judged by whether or not they represent the real world accurately. I suppose, to Sidney's mind, this implies that there will be no room for worries about whether such poetry is a waste of time, or misleading,

⁹² *An Apology for Poetry*, Third edition, edited by Geoffrey Shepherd, revised and expanded by R.W. Maslen. The relevant footnote is footnote 1, page 1.

⁹³ The first listed here, not the first chronologically. According to Maslen's footnotes, both editions were published in the same year, 1595.

or corrupting, the assumption being that if something is true, it will not waste time, mislead, or corrupt.

Additionally, Sidney gives the background for the word “poet,” which, as he claims, means roughly the same as the English word “maker.” In Platonic metaphysics, a maker is an individual of dubious character, metaphysically speaking. Forms, which (being incorruptible and indestructible) are the most real and best things, are not made; they simply are. Things that are made are of less value than things that simply are; and therefore someone who makes things is doing something less permanent than someone who gains knowledge of the Forms. According to Sidney, though, a maker is something quite honorable. God is a maker, and when people make things, they are copying God’s behavior,⁹⁴ especially when they make things just by thinking about them. (As Sidney seems to be a Christian with fairly standard beliefs, he would have believed that God created the universe by thinking or speaking it into existence).

The kind of poetry that Sidney intends to be writing about, then, is fictional poetry, and the most important feature of this poetry is that it *is* fictional – he writes at 101/25 that “it is not rhyming and versing that maketh poesy. One may be a poet without versing, and a versifier without poetry.” It is because the relevant kind of poetry is fictional that it requires a defense such as Sidney’s. I conclude, therefore, that, like Plato, Sidney would have recognized poetry in the various forms of fictional storytelling that are available to us today.

⁹⁴ This would have been a good thing, to Sidney’s mind, because he most likely believed, as it says in Genesis 1:27, that man was created in God’s image.

Poetry, Philosophy, and History

Sidney is not content merely to find a place for poetry where Plato would allow none. Instead, he finds that poetry is superior to both philosophy and history for moral education.

In Sidney's words, the goal of both philosophy and history is to "take naughtiness away and plant goodness even in the secretest cabinet of our souls." (90/5-6) This is an active definition of moral education, especially compared with what many current ethics textbooks have to say about ethics and moral education. Most textbooks, in my experience at least, describe ethics and the education in ethics they intend for their students rather propositionally, as if getting a moral education consisted of being able to recite a list of approved and disapproved actions. For example, ethics is defined in the following ways:

- "the systematic endeavor to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories" (Louis Pojman, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 3rd edition, p. 469)
- "...a form of inquiry that attempts to answer the question, 'Which general moral norms for the guidance and evaluation of conduct should we accept and why?'" (Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 5th edition, p. 2)
- "...asks how people should behave or what people should believe." (Manuel Velazquez, *Philosophy*, p. 515)
- "...asks basic questions about the good life, about what is better and worse, about whether there is any objective right or wrong, and how we know it if there is." (Barbara MacKinnon, *Ethics – Theory and Contemporary Issues*, 5th Edition, p. 2)
- "...includes the study of the values and guidelines by which we live and the justification for these values and guidelines." (Judith Boss, *Ethics For Life*, p. 6)

The list could go on. Probably, each of these statements of the goals of ethics has its own strengths and weaknesses; I am not claiming that any of them is particularly bad or particularly good. What I should like to point out is that each stops short of purporting actually to teach the student to be moral. Ethics, it seems, is in the business of defining what sorts of actions are good and which aren't. Actually *becoming a good person* by engaging in right actions at appropriate times for good reasons is up to the individual; philosophy doesn't seem to be able to help with that. (As one ethics textbook says – in the conclusion, not in the introduction! – “It all comes down to one thing. As Jean-Luc Picard might say, only we can ‘Make it so’.”)⁹⁵

Put another way: philosophy is like the U.S. Forest Service. Anyone who has spent much time in national parks has probably seen a Smokey Bear poster with the phrase “Only you can prevent forest fires.” These posters are part of a national forest fire prevention campaign that has been around since 1944. In various media, Smokey Bear shows people what damage fires can do, what conditions cause fires, how to make and tend fires so the risks are minimized, and what careless activities to avoid (such as dropping cigarette butts on dry leaves or grass). But all this information will not by itself keep people from starting forest fires. They actually have to want to prevent forest fires, and have to figure out how to apply Smokey Bear's principles on their camping trips. In the same way, philosophy can give people the principles they need to apply in order to become good people, but it cannot tell anyone exactly how to make that application. For the actual application, people are on their own.

⁹⁵ Judith Bard, *The Ethics of Star Trek*, Harper Collins, New York: 2000.

Philosophy's strength is its ability to impart general moral principles; but even there, according to Sidney, it has a problem. Philosophy is hard to read, even when well written. Following an argument on paper requires concentration that only comes with practice, as anyone trained in philosophy knows, and so to get through an argument one has to be the sort of person who has patience and endurance. Philosophy cannot educate everybody, then; some people won't be able to sit still for it long enough to figure it out. Everyone needs moral education, though. Philosophy, therefore, cannot be the ideal medium for moral education.

History has the opposite problem, according to Sidney. When one studies history, he learns a lot of facts about particulars – names, dates, and events. The historian can recite examples, Sidney writes, and bids the student “follow the footing of them that have gone before...” (89/23-4) But, qua historian, he cannot tell you why you ought to follow great men's examples. All he can do is to point out what great men have done.

This leads to another problem that Sidney notes a few pages on. History records what actually happens. (At least, that is what it purports to do. Some people suggest that history records what the people in power want everyone to think has happened;⁹⁶ but if this is all history is, then it would make Sidney's case for poetry over history even stronger.) Historians are not at liberty to create whatever end state of affairs they wish; if they manipulate the story, qua historians they deserve censure. And, as Kant noted while developing his moral argument for the existence of God,⁹⁷ bad things happen to good people in real life. In the paragraph beginning at 94/3, Sidney gives a number of instances

⁹⁶ as in the famous observation “History is written by the victors,” often attributed to Winston Churchill.

⁹⁷ in *Critique of Practical Reason*, section 125: “...Hence, there is not the slightest ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and proportionate happiness of a being who belongs to the world as one of its parts...”

in history where good people suffered ultimate ruin, and bad people earned money, power, and lasting renown. To be brief, real life isn't always fair; looking at history, someone wishing to learn how he ought to behave may very well come away with the idea that he ought to be as bad as he can get away with being – certainly not what we wish a student in need of moral education to learn.

There is another problem that Sidney doesn't mention explicitly, but which I shall bring up because it is in the spirit of his criticism of history. The historian, according to Sidney, tells the student to "follow in the footsteps" of other people – I suppose that he means that historians tell students about what people have done before so that students can copy those actions. But how, Sidney might ask, does the student know *which* actions to copy? All he knows is something about what prior actions have in the past brought about which end results. This tells the student nothing about which end results he ought to desire. The passage of time tends to bury information about people's characters and true motives, so the only information available to the student of history is how things turned out – rarely do we know about historical figures how their actions influenced their characters or their happiness (or vice versa). This historical approach to moral education teaches students that the consequences of their actions are the best or only standard by which to evaluate action, which has two problems: 1) it is based on the assumption that like behavior will lead to like end results, which may or may not be true in any particular case, and 2) even if like behavior did lead necessarily to like end results, it assumes that

every relevant feature of the end results can be known, figured in, and desired. Neither of these assumptions is defensible.⁹⁸

Roughly, then, according to Sidney, historians teach the student to copy the actions of great historical figures, but the historian's resources for determining who is great, and therefore ought to be copied, are severely limited – to what history records. Great men are those men that turned out to be great.

According to Sidney, philosophy can give general moral rules, but does not give examples of how to implement those rules in everyday life. History, on the other hand, gives plenty of examples of behavior to be copied, but it cannot give an explanation of why that behavior ought to be copied – it cannot impart general moral principles.

Fictional poetry, however, can do both; an author can step outside of the narrative to introduce a general principle, or use a character to voice the principle, and can then illustrate the principle with the narrative.

In fact, poetry's fictionality and poetic nature are calculated precisely to avoid the problems run into by history and philosophy. History shows us that bad things sometimes happen to good people, which is confusing if one wants to learn about morality. Fictional poetry, not being bound to record life exactly as it really happens, can show good people favorably and bad people unfavorably, which may not be realistic, but can be very much clearer than a history book about how one ought to behave. Philosophy tends to be dry, and of necessity requires concentration and a certain amount of endurance, which is likely to turn off the students who need most to learn its lessons. Fictional poetry, though,

⁹⁸ This scheme for moral education also fails for all the reasons that consequentialism fails in general (i.e. every criticism of utilitarianism and consequentialism in general will be operative here). I do not mention this in the body of the chapter because utilitarianism was not developed as a theory until more than 200 years after Sidney was writing, so he could not have had it in mind when writing his *Apology*.

being poetic and entertaining, can get the attention of those who will not learn from philosophy because they haven't the patience to sit through it.

While Sidney's comments about the philosopher sound fairly accurate, if slightly exaggerated, his criticism of the historian may sound unfounded and unfair to the contemporary reader. The idea that history only amounts to a series of "examples" with no general principles tying these examples together sounds foreign. History as we know it not only records events that took place in the past, but analyzes circumstances surrounding these events and attempts to offer an explanation for them. This sort of analysis isn't much like what Sidney seems to wish for – he seems to want history to teach lessons in how one ought to behave, as in *Aesop's Fables*, except that the stories should be accurate records of events. Contemporary historical scholarship is, however, much more than the citing of example after example. In fact, the contemporary historian will find it strange that historians are expected to give moral education at all; they tend to think of themselves as explaining what has happened in the past rather than what ought to happen in the future.⁹⁹ Sidney's description and criticism of history has to be read with the understanding that it doesn't really apply to contemporary academic history, though it does apply to history as a discipline as it was when Sidney was writing. Because history has changed as a discipline since Sidney's time, in a way that philosophy really hasn't, we no longer think it counts as a means for moral education.

This does not mean, of course, that one cannot learn lessons about what one ought to do, or not do, from studying history. It can be extremely instructive to study the choices made by past people and governments – to see, for example, that a failure to

⁹⁹ according to Dr. Steven Kale, Professor of History at Washington State University, in a letter to the author.

listen to people deemed unimportant at some time, such as British colonists of New England in the late 1700s, or Ho Chi Minh in the aftermath of World War II, can come back to haunt one. If one can learn from mistakes made by people in the past, that prevents his having to learn lessons for himself. It rather seems that contemporary academic history may be better for this purpose than the academic history of Sidney's time, and not only because there is now another 500 years' worth of it to study. Examples are helpful for moral education, but an analysis of the causes behind events, and effects that follow from them, increases the potential for a student's gaining understanding from the past, because such analysis places events in context. It is context that the general principles of philosophy lack, and so, if Sidney could have known how contemporary academic history would be practiced, he might have found it a tougher rival of fiction, as far as its value for moral education is concerned.

Arguments Against Poetry, and Sidney's Replies

Sidney considers four arguments against poetry, which are specifically directed at moral considerations. They are:

- 1) that reading poetry is a waste of time.
- 2) that poets lie.
- 3) that poetry teaches bad behavior and ruins readers' characters.
- 4) that Plato eliminated poetry from the ideal state.

(I am going to save my analysis of Sidney's counter-argument to the fourth for the next section, because I think Sidney mishandles it in an interesting way).

The first argument Sidney dismisses with appropriate dispatch. Since at this point in the essay he has just finished arguing that poetry is the best means of moral education, he does not need to argue that it is not a waste of time. Even if he has not shown to everyone's satisfaction that poetry is actually best for moral education, he has a further argument, which is roughly this: even if something is not the best thing, it can still be a good thing. As he writes, "it should follow (methinks) very unwillingly, that good is not good because better is better."¹⁰⁰ In other words, just that one activity isn't as useful as another does not imply that it has no value at all. Sidney means this to be taken in the context of "good for moral education," but I think the point is accurate in a much broader context. If a practice has possible positive value, then for those individuals who appreciate that positive value the practice is not a waste of time. This does not mean that there is no better practice to engage in – a practice from which greater value can be derived – but simply that practitioners are not doing something useless.

Sidney also deals quickly with the charge that poets lie. He writes, "[n]ow for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth."¹⁰¹ Poets do not claim to be describing the world, but only to be engaging in flights of fancy. Poets do not ask their readers to believe or disbelieve, and never cite any authority, but merely seek to describe how things should be or should not be. The domain of poetry is the ideal or the imaginary; the poet never commits himself to any fact, because that is not what poetry is for. And everyone understands this, including small children, Sidney writes. He suggests that this

¹⁰⁰ 102/39-40.

¹⁰¹ 103/8-9

imaginative role of poetry is so obvious that people who cannot understand it are to be counted among the beasts.¹⁰²

There is, however, some tension between Sidney's claim that poetry makes no genuine affirmations and his contention that poetry is good for moral education. For a practice like poetry to be good for education, one would think that it must allow for claims to be made, or at least must allow assumptions about what is true to be suggested. If a practice were incapable of doing either, it is difficult to see how education could result from it, since education consists of learning what is true of the world and how one ought to react to the world given what is true. If a practice does not even allow the making of truth claims, it is hard to see how students can attain truth by that practice.

Resolution here will be difficult, but I think it could be found in something along these lines: Sidney ought to be understood as assuming a theory of fiction much like the one I've sketched in Chapter Two; importantly, he understands that no part of a fiction is about the real world, which is why he claims that no fiction affirms anything (about the real world). I think he would add, though, that fiction is generalizable – perhaps even universalizable; exactly how that is he doesn't say, of course, but that needn't be worked out, necessarily, at least for his purposes in the *Apology*. It would be because of its universalizability that fiction could have lessons for the reader despite its lack of affirmations.

Sidney handles the argument that poetry ruins the characters of its readers at greater length¹⁰³ than he handles the two previous arguments, because his response is not

¹⁰² At 103/21-5, Sidney writes, "...none so simple would say that Aesop lied in the tales of his beasts; for who thinks Aesop writ it for actually true were well worthy to have his name chronicled among the beasts he writeth of. What child is there that, coming to a play, and seeing *Thebes* written in great letters upon an old door, doth believe that it is Thebes?"

merely a denial of the claim. Harm can come from poetry; he admits this. He denies, though, that poetry is the cause. It is not poetry that causes defects in people, but people that cause defects in poetry. People create poetry, and there is no shortage of good, uplifting, beneficial things to put into poetry. But people can and sometimes do create poetry that is bad or harmful. He speaks of this as an *abuse* of poetry, not just a bad use of it. The fact that poetry is sometimes abused, however, does not imply that poetry is bad; indeed, the opposite is true: that poetry is one of the most harmful things when abused suggests that it is a very good thing when it is not abused. Possible harm caused when something is abused is proportional to its possible good caused when used appropriately, according to Sidney, and so the great harm that can result from the misuse of poetry is evidence of how good a thing poetry is to begin with.

There is an additional part to this argument – poetry, it is alleged, turns its audience from the sort of people who go out and do things to the sort of people who sit around and let things happen to them. I suppose the general idea behind the argument is this: fiction is a form of vicarious experience. When one is reading, for example, one doesn't have actively to engage problems that present themselves as one has to do in real life; if the reader only keeps reading, eventually things will work out one way or the other. (I don't think this part is much in question; novels are written in their entirety before readers get to them, usually, so that the reader does not usually have any possible influence on the outcomes of events).¹⁰⁴ It might be argued that it is easier for the reader

¹⁰³ from 103/45 to 106/14.

¹⁰⁴ There are exceptions, of course. The most common kind might be a publisher or friend who reads an unfinished manuscript and gives suggestions. Even with a "Chose Your Own Adventure" kind of book, where the reader makes choices for the character, the choices given are still determined by the author, as are the specific outcomes to each of the individual choices.

just to let the story unfold, rather than engaging the characters' problems actively, trying to predict what will happen next or figure out what the reader thinks the characters ought to do. A further step in the argument might be that, since it is easier to just let stories unfold, this is what most readers actually do most of the time. From this point, one might argue that, because "practice makes permanent," if readers get into the habit of letting fictions unfold on their own, they will gradually become the kind of people who tend to just allow real life to unfold on its own as well, and who therefore will tend away from taking an active role in their own lives.

Sidney objects to this argument without reservation. It is simply untrue, as Sidney claims the argument alleges, that poetry teaches people to value imagination over action. He cites historical examples of people known for their great exploits who knew and valued poetry. He also points out that this is not an argument just against poetry, but against all forms of "book-learning" or "bookishness," as Sidney calls it. All "book-learning" has in common that it requires the student to sit down and think rather than to get up and do things. Certainly the argument that all use of books ought to be avoided because books make people passive is tendentious to say the least; the implication is that there is no good reason given for singling out poetry among all the fields of learning.

Though this last point is very shrewd, I think Sidney could have made an even better reply to the argument in question. The argument tries to create a dichotomy: on the one hand, there is action; on the other, there is imagination – the two are different, separate things. I don't think that this is a particularly accurate way of looking at the problem. Imagination is an activity; it requires energy and has to be cultivated, especially, in my experience, at least, after one gets to be ten or twelve years old. As with any other

activity, some people find it easier to use their imagination than others do, and some people enjoy using it more than others. So to say that, because someone is, say, reading a poem or watching a play, instead of doing a more physical activity like carrying out a military campaign or helping the cow give birth, that he is not doing anything active, is a mistake.

Granted, not everyone imagines what they read or see on the stage or screen very actively. (One might suggest that the relatively recent advent of television has lent even more weight to Sidney's opponents on this point). People vary in how much they imagine and what kinds of things they imagine. For example, one person might imagine in color and another person might not, or one might have a predominantly visual imagination and another might imagine things primarily in words. Some people may not imagine much of anything from just reading words. Those people may not be very active when reading a book but very active when watching a play. But it won't work to assume that someone is not active at all just because he is reading something.

Another reply Sidney might have made is to object to the assumption that poetry only teaches one to value imagination. It is true that poetry *develops* the imagination, but that is entirely different from teaching someone to *value* it. For example, consider *Hamlet*. If I have difficulty imagining things based on printed words, I'm going to have a difficult time getting much of anything from reading the play – the language is so foreign that I'm going to have to take a lot of trouble understanding the words, never mind imagining what they're describing. But my English teacher forces me to figure out the play, so, after much trouble, I finally manage to grasp the language at the level where I understand what's going on – if I imagine things visually, this probably means I can

picture Hamlet walking around and doing and saying what the play describes as I read. At this point, my imagination has had a workout – I am now better at imagining things based on printed words than I used to be.

But have I learned to *value* imagination more? Perhaps, but not necessarily. This completely depends on my reaction to the content of the play and to my experience of having to struggle through it. If I find Hamlet interesting, if I'm sympathetic to his plight, if I catch on to the ideas he's expressing and enjoy or get some value out of thinking about them, I may be able to step back from the experience and realize the role my imagination played in it (or the role that Hamlet's imagination played in the plot) and come to value imagination more for having played that role. But this is different from reading the play, and even from imagining it as I read it. So the role that poetry plays in developing or using the imagination is different from the role it plays in teaching the reader to value imagination.

The third assumption Sidney might have challenged is the assumption that the imagination ought not to be valued. One problem with this assumption is that the imagination has enormous practical value. Of course, there is not much practical value to one's spending one's time daydreaming about unicorns and talking animals. But there is a lot of value, for example, to being able to imagine easily what your children will be likely to do in the event of a fire, or to being able to imagine how a machine would work if certain parts were modified in various ways. The ability to imagine these things well can mean the difference between life and death, or between wealth and poverty.

There are reasons to value imagination other than this kind of immediately practical value, certainly – imagining things can be fun, for example – but that there are these practical benefits to having a good imagination would be enough to make the point.

On the whole, Sidney does an adequate job of replying to these three arguments. But I think there is another issue that he ought to have addressed, also regarding the value of poetry for moral education. One of the problems he found with history in this respect is that the “moral of the story” is often far from clear. I think the same point can be raised against poetry, though the reason why the moral might be unclear is different, at least much of the time. (Of course, there are fictions where good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people, but these are not the sort of fictions that Sidney would most likely be wont to defend).

The morals intended in stories such as *Aesop's Fables*, for example, are not difficult to find: they are often printed right in the text. In many cases, though, the moral may be difficult to find, or it may be unclear whether the author intended a particular moral to be drawn from a story or not. One might wonder, for example, what is the moral message of *Hamlet*? *Hamlet* contains some moral claims that are very similar to the morals in *Aesop's Fables*. “Neither a borrower nor a lender be” and “to thine own self be true”¹⁰⁵ are examples of these. I don't think that these are the kinds of things we should be looking for from *Hamlet*. First, the play is not about borrowing and lending, nor is it really about being true to oneself. It is about loyalty, and about finding the courageous mean between foolhardiness and cowardice (though I don't know that such Aristotelian language is appropriate for describing *Hamlet*). Second, these lines are spoken by

¹⁰⁵ both from *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 3; Polonius is bidding farewell to Laertes.

Polonius, who is otherwise not to be copied or held in esteem; he plots with and spies for Claudius, and is killed accidentally by Hamlet.

Other possibilities for moral lessons in *Hamlet* might be principles like “one ought not murder” or “one ought to act, when one can, to set wrongs right.” The second is more likely than the first, which is rather banal. Of course, Hamlet dies in the end, while acting to set things right, so this seems to be an example of a bad thing happening to a good character. But given the ideas that Hamlet expressed in the “to be or not to be” speech, it is not clear that Hamlet would regard his own death as a bad thing.

It is possible to use *Hamlet* as an example of either one of these principles, I suppose. But it would be misleading to suggest that the play contains either moral as a component of the story in the same way Aristotle’s lectures contain the doctrine of the mean, for example. Unless moral principles are expressly written down, it can be difficult to know what moral principles one ought to arrive at after reading a work of fiction, precisely because they are not explicitly written down, but are instead left to be grasped by the reader by implication or suggestion. Implication and suggestion leave a lot of room for error. The chance for error in the derivation of general principles from poetry would tend to count against Sidney’s claim that poetry is better for moral education than philosophy or history.

For example, an author often gives important things to characters to say. However, that a character says something does not necessarily mean that the author intends to suggest that the idea is true; even characters through which the author often speaks are not always used for that. Sometimes they can be used to make what the author would regard as interesting mistakes. And even when the author speaks as a narrator,

directly addressing the reader, one can still not be sure the author means what she is saying – authors sometimes speak ironically or even say the opposite of what they mean.

An example of a character being used to make interesting mistakes is Ernest Pontifex from *The Way of All Flesh*. Ernest starts out as credulous and naïve, and, through the course of the novel, has experiences that point out to him what was wrong with the way he had been thinking about things. Especially early in the novel, then, Ernest cannot be regarded as speaking for the author. An example of an author who often takes an ironic tone is Jane Austen; the first line of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, reads, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man of good fortune must be in want of a wife.” The point of her saying this is not to suggest that this is a truth, but to suggest that, even though it is probably false, people of a certain kind act as if it were a truth (and also, to poke fun at those people).

I think there is a reply to this argument. Sidney might challenge the idea that poetry is supposed to “contain” general principles in the same sense that philosophy does. Rather, he argues, poetry is amenable to moral education because it tends to make ideas more memorable than dry history or philosophy – it may be up to the reader, or the reader’s guide or instructor, which specific lessons to draw from any specific poem (within the bounds of reason, of course). So *Hamlet* may be correctly used as a memorable illustration of either “do not murder” or of “act, when one can, to set wrongs right.” (Note that it does not count as a particularly memorable illustration of “neither a borrower nor a lender be.”) On this view, there is no “correct” moral lesson to draw from a poem; that is simply not the point. The point would be that poetry is useful for making moral principles in general memorable.

But I don't think Sidney would make this reply. He writes as if specific poems contain specific moral lessons. He writes:

Now doth the peerless poet perform both [precept and example]: for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it in some one by whom he presupposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example.¹⁰⁶

This sounds very much as if the poet is intentional about which notions he decides to illustrate and which images he chooses to illustrate them with. What Sidney says does not allow a relativism about which principle is illustrated when. The examples he uses to show how poetry has been used for moral education are also telling on this point. The parables of Jesus (91/35),¹⁰⁷ the fable of Menenius Agrippa (96/12),¹⁰⁸ and the story told by Nathan to King David (96/29) are his main examples of the use of poetry for moral education, and they are all cases where the storyteller wanted to communicate a specific message to an audience they thought would be otherwise unreceptive.

Sidney's use of the parables of Jesus is interesting, because after telling the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, the disciples ask him why he speaks in parables, and his response suggests that poetry doesn't always work quite as well for moral education as Sidney thinks it does:

¹⁰⁶ At 90/22

¹⁰⁷ When speaking to uneducated people, Jesus tended to use stories to represent aspects of heaven or of God to his listeners. Some of the better known ones are, for example, the parable of the lost sheep (the point: God cares about each individual), the prodigal son (God forgives sinners), and the good Samaritan (the point: one ought to treat everyone one meets with love).

¹⁰⁸ Menenius Agrippa was the plebian consul for the Roman senate, appointed in 503 BC. Titus Livy, the Roman historian, records that Agrippa went out to a mob of angry plebians, telling the Aesop's fable of a body's rejection of its stomach and subsequent starvation. Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus* includes a retelling of this incident, in Act I, Scene 1.

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah,¹⁰⁹ which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart and should be converted, and I should heal them.

Jesus is not saying that he is trying to keep things from people. It is true, though, that not everyone could understand what he was saying; he says it is these people's own hearts and minds that are keeping them from getting it – the people who won't get it are those who stubbornly refuse to be sensitive to the point he is trying to communicate. Some refuse even to consider what ideas a play is trying to get across, not by rejecting them without adequate consideration, but by making sure the ideas never “get in” at all. They might focus on the rhythm in the music and ignore the words, or focus on staging and not think about what the characters are thinking. Poetry is susceptible to this kind of misuse, because what is entertaining can also be distracting, and I think this idea is very much like what Jesus is trying to get at here.

So, to sum up, Sidney gives adequate defenses against three arguments that conclude that poetry is not good for moral education. There is another argument that demands an answer, if we are to accept Sidney's claim that poetry is better than anything else for moral education. This is the argument that it can be difficult to work out specific claims from poetry, which can be the fault either of the poetry or of the reader. Sidney is silent on this issue, probably either because he was not aware of it or because he did not think it demanded a response. In any case, all we can conclude is that, while poetry can

¹⁰⁹ in Isaiah 6:9. The text reads, “And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not.”

be shown to be in some ways more useful for moral education than either philosophy or history, it also has some inherent problems that complicate moral education.

A Platonic Response to Sidney

The fourth problem with poetry Sidney considers is that Plato eliminated it from the ideal state. The implication here is that if Plato eliminated it, it must be bad.

As a response, Sidney denies that Plato would disagree with him about the value of poetry for moral education. Plato eliminates poetry because it had been misused, not because it has no value. Sidney writes,

Plato therefore... meant not in general of poets... but only meant to drive out those wrong opinions of the Deity... perchance (as he thought) nourished by the then esteemed poets. (107/21-27)

As evidence for this claim, he cites Plato's attitude towards poetry represented in the *Ion*, which is a dialogue Socrates has with a rhapsode. Sidney describes Plato as giving "high and rightly divine commendation to Poetry" and as saying that poetry is the "very inspiring of a divine force, far above man's wit." (107/29 and 37) To Sidney's mind, again, these are words of high praise, as he is coming from a Christian worldview in which God is both beautiful and infallible. Sidney assumes that Plato has a similar worldview and therefore means to be commending poetry when calling it divine and above men's wit. It isn't clear that this is the case, though.

There is, of course, much debate about what Plato thought about the divine: whether he believed in one God or many, whether he actually believed in any form of deity at all or merely paid lip service to religious belief, whether or not he believed that whatever deity exists is infallible. I am not able to resolve any of these questions here. It

seems, in *Ion*, that Plato does think there is some kind of deity, because Socrates claims that poetry comes not from the imaginations of people, but from the gods speaking through poets. Socrates says,

...a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him... when they utter many things and fine about the deeds of men, just as you do about Homer, but is by lot divine – therefore each is able to do well only that to which the Muse has impelled him... (*Ion*, 534 b – c)

Poets only speak what they are inspired to speak by the gods, according to Socrates, and so what they say is not a result of their understanding or knowledge.

Sidney interprets this as Plato saying that, in fact, poetry is a good thing. But that view is difficult to reconcile with Plato's arguments in *The Republic*; there, Plato wrote that no poet knows what he writes about, and that poetry corrupts its audience.

I suggest that Plato has not changed his mind about poetry between the *Ion* and *The Republic*,¹¹⁰ except that he has perhaps reasoned out his position more in *The Republic*. In the *Ion*, he claims that poets do not know what they write about, just as he does later in *The Republic*. In *Ion*, he seems to care about this less than he does in *The Republic*; in the *Ion*, poetic inspiration comes from the gods, but in *The Republic* Plato seems to think that poetry is created by the poet; he writes at Book X, 599d that Homer is “merely that creator of phantoms whom we defined as the imitator...”

Whether or not Plato believes in some kind of deity, if poetry does not result from knowledge, then it has a problem. Knowledge edifies the best part of man, and what is not knowledge edifies a worse part of man – whether that non-knowledge originates with

¹¹⁰ Because it is short and relatively simple, the *Ion* is supposed to be one of the earlier dialogs, while *The Republic* is considered part of the “middle stage” of Plato's writing. This is according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato>, retrieved 9/12/08.

a god or with a man can make no difference, given Socrates' metaphysical suggestions. Poetry is not knowledge, even if it comes from divine inspiration, since it originates not in the minds of men when they are at their rational best, but from something external to the man altogether, when he is at his least rational,¹¹¹ poetry is not a good thing.

Of course, if gods can be rational, then it is possible that they could inspire irrational men with words that will edify the rational nature of men. But it seems unlikely that Plato might believe this. In convincing Ion that his words are divine and not a result of knowledge, he describes the poet:

There he is, at a sacrifice or festival, got up in holiday attire, adorned with golden chaplets, and he weeps, though he has lost nothing of his finery. Or he recoils with fear, standing in the presence of more than twenty thousand friendly people, though nobody is stripping him or doing him damage. Shall we say that the man is in his senses?" (*Ion*, 535d)

Ion agrees with him completely, and continues to describe the audience:

As I look down at them from the stage above, I see them, every time, weeping, casting terrible glances, stricken with amazement at the deeds recounted." (*Ion*, 535e)

Neither the poet nor his audience is moved to rational behavior by poetry. This is why, in *The Republic*, Plato does not allow poetry in the ideal state.

Though Plato sounds like a crosspatch who refuses to understand imagination and play, I think it is better to interpret him in the *Ion* as being facetious, and thinking roughly the same as he does in *The Republic*, rather than as thinking that poetry itself is wonderful and yet disallowing all known instances of it in the ideal state. Whether or not Plato *is* just being a grump, and whether or not he has a point about poetry in general, are separate issues. What is important to note, in both *Ion* and *The Republic*, is that Plato

¹¹¹ *Ion* 534a.

does (consistently) have an issue with poetry in general, and not just with specific instances of it.

As I said in Chapter Three, though, I think the issue Plato takes with poetry amounts to a concession about the educational use to which poetry can be put. Sidney's argument at 104/35 and continuing, that for poetry, as well as for everything else of any value, the harm that something can do when used for evil is directly proportional to the amount of good it can do when used for good, is hard to deny. It is because people learn from poetry that people can learn bad behavior from poetry.

Even if Plato could be brought to see this, though, I think it is also clear that he would continue to keep poetry out of the ideal state, and not because of the way it is used by particular poets, as Sidney claims. Sidney suggests that it is out of respect for poetry and out of disdain for the religion of his day that Plato prohibited poetry:

So doth Plato [set a watchword] upon the abuse, not upon Poetry. Plato found fault that the poets of his time filled the world with wrong opinions of the gods, making light tales of that unspotted essence, and therefore would not have the youth depraved with such opinions. Herein may much be said; let this suffice: the poets did not induce such opinions, but did imitate those opinion already induced." (107/7-13)

The implication is that Plato would not have found a problem with poetry had the poets of his day been better people, and written poetry that was edifying. I think that Sidney is partly right; if there were poets who were outstanding people, morally speaking, and who wrote poetry that made all its audiences better people, then perhaps Plato would allow such poetry written by such poets access to the ideal state.

But I think that, on the whole, Sidney has gravely misinterpreted Plato, or rather, that he has been so anxious to show poetry in a good light that he has failed to grasp the

main force of Plato's argument. Recall Plato's three main points from *The Republic* Book X:

- 1) Poetry is at best opinion; it cannot be knowledge.
- 2) Poets cannot *know* about what they write about.
- 3) Poetry teaches bad behavior.

None of the corresponding arguments appeal only to particular poems; Plato makes some point about poetry in general for each one. In arguing for the first point, Plato said that all poetry is an imitation (and as far as that goes, I'd suggest that he's right). In the course of his argument for the second point, he claims that if people truly know some art (such as warfare or bridle-making), they will actually practice the art, rather than write about it, because practicing an art has more value than writing about it. Regarding the third point, Plato argued that because all poetry must appeal to the masses in order to be popular, and because the masses are non-philosophical, pleasure-loving people, all poetry will edify the pleasure-loving to the exclusion of the rational – in other words, all poetry will be bad. So, while Plato might allow good poetry into the ideal state, I think that he would say that it is impossible that there could actually be any good poetry.

The point might be put this way: regarding poetry, there will always be some concern about who the poet is, and whether he is the kind of person one ought to go to for an education. Plato thinks that because of the nature of poetry and the nature of people, poets will never be the sort of people who can be trusted as educators; poets cannot know what they talk about, but are at best vehicles of a Muse. One can never get knowledge (as opposed to opinion) from poetry. Therefore, though poetry may very well have a tendency to be memorable and have great educational force, whatever opinions people

may gain from poetry are always suspect. Therefore, poetry cannot be successfully used for education; and because it can corrupt its hearers, Plato eliminates it from the ideal state. And despite Sidney's aggressive defense on poetry's behalf, nothing he says responds to this central objection of Plato's. To mount a successful defense, he either would have had to deny some of Plato's claims (for example, that poets cannot know what they write about), or would have had to make some argument for the conclusion that there is some other way to guarantee that what a poem says is true (or at least can be true). But Sidney's actual argument, which is the claim that Plato really agrees with him after all, just doesn't work; it rests on an implausible interpretation of Plato.

"Poetry" and Philosophy: Contrast and Convergence

According to Socrates, the point of doing philosophy is to get at truth¹¹² - truth about the world, truth about people, truth about what is and what is not – this can be seen in everything he writes, from the law of non-contradiction evident in Socrates' criticisms of other people's rhetoric¹¹³ to the theory of the Forms and the Allegory of the Cave.¹¹⁴ I don't think even Sidney would say that the central point of writing or reading poetry is to get at the truth – although of course he thinks, unlike Plato, that it *can* get at the truth.

¹¹² Of course, not everyone agrees that the point of doing philosophy is to get at the truth. If this is what they think, they probably don't agree with me about what truth is (which I've already discussed in Chapter Two) or they don't think people can get at that kind of truth. Richard Rorty is one of these people; he would say that philosophy is nothing but a kind of literature. I think this is grossly false; I think, and will proceed to argue, that philosophy and literature are very different.

¹¹³ Often, Socrates will criticize his opponent by saying "You said so-and-so before, but now you're saying such-and-such, which contradicts it" (roughly). This happens repeatedly in the *Euthyphro*; it even occurs in the *Ion*, at 539e-540a. Socrates says, "Surely, Ion, you don't mean all! Are you really so forgetful?...[B]y your own account the art of rhapsody will not know everything, nor the rhapsode either."

¹¹⁴ The point of the Allegory is that philosophers have seen what is real – which is represented in the allegory by the sun – while most people understand only what is temporary and unsubstantial.

Probably, the main reason for having fiction¹¹⁵ is something like entertainment, though education and, therefore, truth-attainment, maybe a (common) byproduct of it.

It does seem, at first glance, that philosophy and fiction are at odds in some ways. In philosophy one ought, in general, to say as completely and precisely as the question allows what the truth is about whatever problem one is attempting to solve, because the point is precisely that – solving the problem or finding the truth or reaching certainty about what is the truth is much of the point of doing philosophy. Of course, if one can manage to write good prose and be entertaining while one is pursuing truth, it won't hurt, but it can't be the main goal, because then it would be permissible to sacrifice truth (or the pursuit of it) for entertainment value. In fact, this is exactly the case with fiction; entertainment is the primary goal – though it might be argued that the best fiction both entertains and educates – and so it is quite permissible for an author to make things up in order to create a compelling story.

And even when fiction does have truths to communicate, the best way of doing so is generally not to state them as baldly and precisely as possible as one does in a philosophical essay – what works as clarity in philosophy tends to come across as didacticism in fiction. Rather, truths in fiction are best suggested or implied, by building them into the thoughts of the characters, the overall structure of the story, or what-have-you, like a present hidden under a Christmas tree, waiting for the reader to discover. It may be true that the best works of fiction do have some truth to communicate, but I think this truth-communication is more accurately called edification than instruction. The latter

¹¹⁵ Again, I am going to use “fiction” and “poetry” interchangeably, especially in this section – it is pretty clear that Sidney especially would view fiction as an extension of what he called poetry, as I explained in the beginning of the chapter.

suggests a specific lesson intended and received; the former suggests that reader has freedom to find in a story whatever lesson will help him.

So philosophy and fiction are, in method, very different. What makes the two especially different, regarding the issue of truth-communication, is that clarity is an aid to communication, and since packing a truth into a fiction requires some degree of obliqueness, fiction can make it difficult to grasp what truths are there. Plato would suggest that fiction is not a useful means for grasping truths; Sidney would say, though, that fiction is not only useful for this, but is better than philosophy. These are opposite and extreme views, and I think that neither is wholly correct, though both Plato and Sidney have some important and correct ideas about fiction.

The Philosophical Novel

The question I am immediately interested in is this: We have two extreme opposite views before us about the relationship between philosophy and fiction, and have noted an inherent difference between philosophy and fiction in how each communicates truth. Is there any middle ground here? If middle ground could be reached, perhaps the historical war between philosophy and poetry could be called off, and a peace treaty signed.

The most likely candidate for middle ground between philosophy and fiction with regard to truth communication is, I think, the philosophical novel. A philosophical novel, as a work of philosophy, attempts to get at some truth about a philosophical question, and yet, as a novel, employs narrative structure, characters, etc. Even though the philosophical novel represents common ground between the two practices, as I think the

name implies, it is primarily a kind of novel, and not a kind of philosophy. Philosophical novels or plays or movies always occur as such, first of all, and not in the form of philosophical essays, though philosophical novels may be composed partly of philosophical essays.

There are at least two kinds of philosophical novels. (There may be more than two kinds, but for now I am interested in two. There is middle ground between the two, and it may be possible for both kinds of philosophical fiction to appear in a given novel – I’m ruling none of these possibilities out). The main difference between the kinds results from different motivations for the philosophical content in the story. Sometimes a philosophical novel is written in order to serve as a means of teaching philosophy in an interesting way. In these novels, the point is the philosophical content, and the fictional, narrative aspects of it make the philosophical content palatable, or memorable – in general, fiction might be used to make philosophy more appealing. (Recall Sidney’s criticism of philosophy as a means to moral education – reading philosophy is difficult and requires patience. Putting philosophical content into the form of a novel or play could perhaps make it easier to grasp).¹¹⁶ A good example of this kind of philosophical novel is Jostein Gaardner’s *Sophie’s World*,¹¹⁷ which is, as its subtitle claims, “a novel about the history of philosophy.” In this novel, there are both first- and second- order fictional characters; most of the novel is a second-order fictional story written by a first-order fictional character to introduce and explain philosophy to his daughter using a historical approach, and as such, it works very well for introducing and explaining philosophy to

¹¹⁶ Of course, it also might make grasping philosophical content harder, by obscuring the point – a trait of fiction that Sidney does not recognize.

¹¹⁷ originally *Sofies verden*, 1991, H. Aschehoug & Co, Oslo. Translated 1994 by Paulette Møller.

undergraduates. The point of giving a history of philosophy in this form is to give the historical content in a fresh and entertaining way; the story is told for the sake of philosophical content and not the other way around.

At the other extreme would be philosophical content included for the sake of the fiction, to make the fiction more interesting or more intellectual or more challenging. An example of this kind of fiction that comes to mind is Jasper Fforde's "Thursday Next" series.¹¹⁸ This series is about a woman who enters novels and does things in them to prevent bad guys from ruining literature. Because they are about what it is to be fictional, much of the humor comes from the relationship created between the real world (in the fiction) and the fictional worlds that exist through the books that the people in the real world have (in the fiction). Just the fact that fictional worlds exist in books is a philosophically relevant speculation, and Fforde explores many related ideas, especially in ontology of fictional characters, fictional events and fictional words. (For example, Marianne Dashwood, a character from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, flies a prop plane for fun when she is not actually being read about by someone;¹¹⁹ and when a cowboy is shot and killed, his body disintegrates into the letters that make up his description in the text of the novel).¹²⁰ This, of course, is not serious philosophy; Fforde is not attempting to answer philosophical questions. He's not even trying to help people identify philosophical questions. He's just trying to be funny in a clever way, and it works quite well.

¹¹⁸ *The Eyre Affair* (2001), *Lost In A Good Book* (2002), *The Well of Lost Plots* (2003), and *Something Rotten* (2004) published by Hodder and Stoughton, London.

¹¹⁹ *Lost In A Good Book*, pp. 282-4

¹²⁰ *Something Rotten*, pp.10-12

There is middle ground between the two extremes, of course, where a work of fiction with philosophical content is neither clearly written for the sake of the entertainment aspect nor clearly written for the philosophically enlightening aspect. A good example would be any of Jean-Paul Sartre's plays, such as "No Exit" or "The Flies." Sartre develops the same existentialist themes in these plays as he does in *Being and Nothingness*: freedom and responsibility, facticity and contingency, bad faith, etc. In the case of Sartre's plays, it doesn't really make sense to suppose that he's writing primarily *either* to communicate his philosophical ideas *or* create good literature; he's doing both at the same time. If the characters didn't give philosophical explanations, many of their most important actions wouldn't make sense, and if they didn't complete their actions, the ideas communicated in their philosophical speeches would lose some clarity and become less meaningful.

In "Dirty Hands," one of Sartre's plays, for example, the dénouement of the play comes when the main character, Hugo, decides to give himself up to the henchmen of the Communist Party, who are going to kill him. While this choice is interesting, it is not exactly rational, apart from Sartrean philosophy. Olga, one of the other main characters, has just offered to help cover up his involvement in a mission he completed for the party years ago, a mission that turned out not to be valuable to the party. Olga can't understand why he would give himself up when he needn't; he explains:

Here's an embarrassing crime: nobody wants to claim it. I don't know why I committed it and you don't know what to do with it... I don't know why I killed Hoederer, but I know why it was right to kill him: because his policy was wrong, because he lied to the rank and file and jeopardized the life of the party. If I had had the courage to shoot when I was alone with him in his office, he would be dead for these reasons and I could think of myself without shame. But I am ashamed because I killed him – afterwards. And now you want me to dishonor myself even more and to

agree that I killed him for nothing... If I renounced my deed he would become a nameless corpse, a throw-off of the party... A man like Hoederer doesn't die by accident. He dies for his ideas, for his political program; he's responsible for his death. If I openly claim my crime and declare myself Raskolnikov and am willing to pay the necessary price, then he will have the death he deserves..."¹²¹

Hugo is a noble character, because he rejects the position of bad faith that Olga would force him into by making him live a lie. Bad faith, or lying to oneself, roughly, is a form of self-negation, according to Sartre, which weak-minded people engage in so they can live more easily or more conveniently. Hugo could accept the lie and live in bad faith, but if he did, he would become something that would not be himself, and, what is clearer, the victim would also be made into something other than what he was. Hugo decides to affirm his action and so remain himself.¹²² The fact that a character makes this decision for such a reason makes Sartre's philosophical position easier to grasp than it is in plain-prose philosophy, especially for the non-philosopher who is unused to digging through wordy and sometimes unclear philosophical essays. And the fact that Hugo is willing to die for the idea expressed in this passage makes the story interesting. In this case, the two elements complement each other and merge seamlessly. Still, though, this is not a case of fiction and philosophy becoming one, but only a case of one text accomplishing both fictional and philosophical goals.

¹²¹ from Act VII of "Dirty Hands," reprinted in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, Vintage International, New York: 1989, pp. 239-241.

¹²² Sartre develops his theory of bad faith in, among other places, in section one of Part III of *Consciousness and Being*, reprinted in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Robert Denoon Cumming, editor, published by Vintage Books, New York, 1972.

Technical Devices

One might think that because philosophy and fiction use similar technical devices to communicate, there is reason to believe that the two disciplines have more in common than I have suggested above that they do. Of course, fiction and philosophy employ many similar devices; for example, both fiction and philosophy are primarily linguistic in nature, as opposed to being primarily physical activities like baseball and stamp collecting. But that they are linguistic in nature is not an interesting similarity, for my purposes at least; I am interested in how people can grasp truth through philosophy and also through fiction. One important thing that fiction as a practice has in common with philosophy – perhaps with all fields of serious inquiry – is that it employs the imagination in expressing and interpreting ideas. Any truth communication, in either practice, must go through the imagination on both the sending and receiving ends of the communication. Because of this, I have tried to identify technical devices used by writers of both philosophy and fiction that involve the imagination deeply. I think the most meaningful comparisons can be made of argument, thought experiment, and analogy.¹²³

1) Argument

The relevant sort of argument I'm interested in is, of course, the kind of argument that philosophers, especially logicians, specialize in, as opposed to bar-room brawls and shouting matches. Practically every introductory logic book has a definition of "argument" worded its own way. There are reasons to prefer one definition over another, but I'm not going to go into any of those here. A good working definition, for my

¹²³ I do not intend to suggest that argumentation, thought experiment, and analogy are the only devices by which philosophy (or fiction, for that matter) proceeds. See three paragraphs below.

purposes, is: a series of claims,¹²⁴ at least one of which functions as a conclusion to be believed, and some of which function as reasons to believe the conclusion.

Philosophy relies on argument a great deal. If the goal of philosophy is to get at certain kinds of truths, and everyone has a (slightly, at least) different idea about what the truth is, which is definitely the case in philosophy, and if deciding what counts as evidence and which direction evidence points is not a clear-cut matter, which is also true of philosophy, then it becomes clear why argument is so important – we don't have anything else by which to reach the agreement we need to reach in order even to have a conversation, much less to make progress as a discipline. In contrast to philosophy, consider the least theoretical of the sciences. I suggest wildlife biology as an example. While a wildlife biologist will theorize in order to develop hypotheses, like any scientist, much of his work will consist of actually observing animal behavior and making accurate records of it. A wildlife biologist, qua wildlife biologist, will not wonder, for example, whether there is such a thing as wildlife, or whether wildlife biology as a practice is a useful activity. They do not have to argue that specimens of wildlife actually behave in certain ways; if the biologist sees wildlife behavior and records it, it is part of the practice that other wildlife biologists just believe that his report is true, at least for the most part. Wildlife biologists have wildlife as a part of the external world, to look at and agree about. Philosophers have very little in the way of an analogue to the wildlife biologist's wildlife, and so they have to start out by convincing other philosophers of even their most basic assumptions.

¹²⁴ I use the word "claim" intending to be neutral between sentential and propositional logic. Really, if I had said "chunk of language," that would best approximate what I mean, though it is slangy.

I do not mean to suggest, of course, that philosophy is the only discipline that relies heavily on argument. Mathematics, for example, also relies heavily on argument. Nor do I mean to suggest that philosophy relies *only* on argument, or that argument is the most important tool used in philosophy. Simply articulating a philosophical idea (which is often not simple at all) can amount to major philosophical progress. So can surveying positive or negative evidence for it, disambiguating it, following it to other ideas it suggests, finding out what other thinkers have said about it and why.

But argument is a large part of philosophy. Insofar as philosophy relies on argument, it is always a positive thing for the premises and conclusion to be stated as clearly as possible. After all, convincing other people of some truth is the goal of argument, and one cannot be convinced of an idea, in the appropriate,¹²⁵ fullest sense of the word “convinced,” if one does not understand it. It is also always a positive thing, in philosophy that does depend on argument, either that the structure of the argument conform to a valid form of reasoning, or that the evidence presented makes the conclusion likely to be true. If philosophical truth is arrived at by poor reasoning, then the philosopher is set up to make a series of mistakes; he might have happened upon the right answer in one case, but if he uses the same erroneous reasoning another time, he may get something wrong because of the bad reasoning; a second mistake that turns out badly may put the first answer in doubt; he may fail to convince others of his conclusion

¹²⁵ One can think that something *sounds* convincing even if he does not grasp it; and one can also think that he is convinced of something which he misunderstands. In the first case, he is not actually convinced; he merely thinks he is likely to be convinced were he to learn more, while knowing that he doesn't know enough yet. In the second case, he is actually convinced of some thing, but not the thing he thinks he is convinced of. He is convinced rather of what he has *taken to be* the facts about the issue.

because of the reasoning; he may even convince others that the right answer is wrong because of the poor reasoning.

Argument is not even remotely as important in fiction, and even when it does occur, it occurs for somewhat different reasons and operates under quite different standards. It can take several different forms. Of course, sometimes characters need to convince each other of something or other; my guess would be that this is the most common kind of occurrence of argument in fiction. Often, this happens to move the plot along. Consider, for example, the following passage:

“Pigs mean less than nothing to me [said the lamb].”
 “What do you mean, *less* than nothing?” replied Wilbur. “I don’t think there is any such thing as *less* than nothing. Nothing is absolutely the limit of nothingness. It’s the lowest you can go. It’s the end of the line. How can something be less than nothing? If there were something that was less than nothing, then nothing would not be nothing, it would be something – even though it’s just a very little bit of something. But if nothing is *nothing*, then nothing has nothing that is less than *it* is.”
 “Oh, be quiet,” said the lamb. “Go play by yourself!”¹²⁶

In this passage from *Charlotte’s Web*, Wilbur the pig offers an argument about nothingness to his barnyard neighbor. The passage occurs early in the novel, and serves the function of establishing Wilbur’s character; he is intelligent (especially for such a young pig), talkative and thoughtful, but he has difficulty interacting with other barnyard animals, which leads him to develop a friendship with Charlotte, the spider who saves him from being made into bacon. Beyond this mention, nothingness does not figure into the plot, but Wilbur’s mention of it here helps set up what will happen in the rest of the book.

¹²⁶ from *Charlotte’s Web* by E.B. White, Harper Trophy, NY: 1952, p. 28. Italics in original.

This kind of use of argument is fairly common. Sometimes it is even less connected to the plot than Wilbur's argument is. In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, for example, characters will sometimes go on for pages trying to support a conclusion that has almost nothing to do with the plot; as in chapter seven, book one, part 1, when a character's only appearance in the novel consists of a two page monologue about the nonexistence of God. On the other hand, argument can take a central role in the plot, as in Clare Booth Luce's *The Women*, in which the main character, Mary Haines, hears an argument from somebody or other right before making nearly every decision that she makes throughout the course of the play.

Not all argument in fiction takes place in characters' conversations, or even in their thoughts; sometimes the author (or the narrator) will direct an argument to the reader. The example of this that comes first to mind is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; at several points throughout the novel, especially during Eliza's escape and in the last chapter, the author addresses several arguments directly to the reader, all more-or-less to the effect that slaves are people and ought to be treated like people.

Though these arguments I've mentioned here are all arguments in the sense of the term relevant to logic, they must be evaluated by other standards than only logical ones, because they occur in works of fiction. I said just above that, in philosophy, clarity and good structure are always good qualities in arguments. In fiction, though, it isn't always better to have premises and conclusions that are clearly stated and identified, and it is quite possible to get what you need out of an argument with bad structure, when an argument with good structure may simply cause added confusion. Consider "The Measure of a Man," episode 35 of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In this story, the

android officer Data undergoes a trial to determine whether or not he is a person (in the philosophical sense of the word, as opposed to the biological sense), because of a technical point of Federation law, and a Starfleet officer who wishes to take Data apart. Captain Picard must argue that Data is a person.

Arguing about personhood is difficult. In the context of a debate about abortion, it is difficult to make a decision about the personhood of a fetus because no one knows what it is like to be one, though everyone has been one in the past; and there is no way in principle to find out what fetuses experience.

What makes the problem difficult is that fetuses will, if left to develop naturally, become just like us, and when they do, it will be possible to find out approximately what it is like to be that person that they have become. Animal rights discussions are even more challenging because, while we see some behavior in animals that suggests certain feelings and attitudes, we never can communicate with these animals even to begin to approximate an idea of what it is like to be one. Androids, we think, are not alive in a comparable sense to that in which humans and animals are alive. As computers, they can be programmed to respond in various ways to input; we cannot know of an android's behavior that it is anything more than a programmed response. When Data says "I do not wish to undergo the procedure" (of being taken apart), it is impossible to tell whether this is actually a response of an individual to a situation and a statement of real desire, or whether it is only a series of preprogrammed physical manipulations of a computer's sound-making apparatus. Sorting out what is actually happening in such a case, and what is relevant, in order to make a philosophically correct ruling on the question, would be an

extremely difficult and complicated task – not one to be completed in a forty minute episode.

In philosophy, this problem calls for a careful treatment. A careful philosophical treatment, however, would take a long time, and for the average viewer of *Star Trek*, would likely be exceedingly confusing and boring. What the average viewer of *Star Trek* wants to see in such a situation is for Captain Picard to show up the officer who wants to take Data apart, and for Data to be allowed to live as he sees fit. And this is precisely what happens. As there is no time for good, clearly stated arguments here, bad, hastily put arguments have to suffice – and they do. Captain Picard forces his opponent into a badly conceived definition of sentience, shows that Data *seems* to meet two of the three criteria, and then abandons further discussion of Data's attributes for a series of stinging remarks about slavery and its incompatibility with the goals of Starfleet. This is, among other fallacies, a red herring argument, but it works for the episode – the judge's decision to grant Data personhood legally seems like a rational, and perhaps the best possible, response to the arguments she hears. If the captain had tried to present arguments that stand up philosophically, he most likely would have succeeded only in boring and confusing the audience, and perhaps the judge. The reasoning is sloppy, but in this context this seems to be okay; the audience is already convinced that Data deserves to be treated like a person, and needs only to see that Picard actually does succeed in showing up the opposition.

2) Thought Experiment

A thought experiment is a made-up situation designed to emphasize some aspect of a problem or to suggest a method of solving a problem. Because they are designed to

be about philosophical problems, they can be extremely abstract or unrealistic. (The point of doing a thought-experiment in philosophy is usually to abstract away from real-world scenarios to situations where it is clear what part of the situation is playing what role, and to see what holds true in the idealized situation). Philosophy doesn't hold a corner on thought experiment any more than it does on argument, but using thought experiments is a common way of proceeding philosophically; and common thought experiments in philosophy tend to be pretty unrealistic. A short list of the first few that come to mind: J.J. Thomson's unconscious violinist in ethics,¹²⁷ Descartes' evil genius,¹²⁸ Hilary Putnam's twin earth,¹²⁹ and Alvin Goldman's barn façade,¹³⁰ all in epistemology. Each of these thought experiments was created to make a specific point (and does so with varying degrees of success).

For example, the "unconscious violinist" thought experiment is meant to show that a woman ought not to be required to carry an unwanted fetus to term. The scenario goes as follows:

...let me ask you to imagine this. You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you – we never would have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist is now plugged into you. To unplug you would be

¹²⁷ first published in "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn 1971) pp. 47-66.

¹²⁸ from *The Meditations*, Meditation One.

¹²⁹ first published in "Meaning and Reference," 1973.

¹³⁰ first published in "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," 1976.

to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can be safely unplugged from you." Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation?"¹³¹

This example is, of course, well outside the boundaries of reality. The real Society of Music Lovers is the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde of Vienna, founded in 1812. It does not make a habit of perpetrating violent crimes in order to save the lives of famous musicians. Most people have perfectly ordinary blood, one of six common types, so the chances that one person would be the only possible source in a situation like this are miniscule. Besides that, hospitals rarely do such things without signed consent forms, and the Society would have a very difficult time, both legally and practically, accessing and reading all medical records to find a match for the violinist. So, as with most thought experiments in philosophy, this would never happen in real life.

Despite the craziness of the thought experiment, it manages to do exactly what Thomson needed it to do – to motivate the idea that someone's right to life does not necessarily outweigh another person's right to bodily autonomy. The violinist is a human – and even a person, in the moral sense – and yet, the fact that you were attached without your consent and have to put up with such an inconvenience to keep him alive suggests that you are not morally required to stay attached to him if you do not wish to. Thomson explicitly draws the analogy between the unconscious violinist and an unborn fetus. It is,

¹³¹ After this point, the thought experiment begins to derail, in my opinion. Thomson wonders what difference it would make if you had to stay connected for nine years, or the rest of your life – she says that this would be unacceptable for anyone. At this point, though, the thought experiment is hardly relevant to pregnancy any more. I think it also suggests a flaw in the argument she's trying to make. If it took one's whole life, or even nine years, pregnancy would be a more serious intrusion on the rights of the mother. But suppose the time was modified in the other direction – suppose it took nine days or nine minutes. I think one would be hard-pressed to argue that continuing a pregnancy for nine days would be moral heroism, and I think that an argument that the mother's right to autonomy for nine days outweighs someone else's right to life would be very difficult to make convincingly. So I suggest that the time period is not really the point at all. The issue must be the right to bodily autonomy, separate from any length of time, verses the right to life.

of course, a matter of debate whether or not she succeeds in adequately supporting the conclusion she tries to support, that pregnancies are analogous to the case of the unconscious violinist in relevant ways; but she does at least succeed in providing some reason to believe that the right to bodily autonomy can be serious enough in some cases to outweigh the right to life.

In fact, the unrealistic nature of the thought experiment is part of what makes it work philosophically. Since she is not bound by reality, Thomson is free to create the thought experiment with precisely the details that she needs.

In a sense, all fiction that has a point to communicate can be seen as thought experiment, because the stories in such cases are designed to lead a reader to a certain conclusion or to illustrate the point with the example(s) of what happens in the story. *Black Beauty* is a good example of a novel that seems very much like a thought experiment. The point that Sewall was trying to get an audience to accept is something along the lines of “animals ought to be treated in a way that takes their feelings into account.” To get this point across, she tells a story in which animals talk to each other (and to the reader) about their wishes and about the way they are treated by people – we hear, for example, that Black Beauty appreciates being brushed carefully around the eyes, that wearing bearing reins hurts his back, especially when he pulls a load up a hill, and that he feels very uneasy whenever he learns he is going to be sold. Needless to say, these examples help readers imagine what it would be like to be a horse, but that is not what makes this story like a thought experiment.

Thought experiments are about getting people to accept some idea, by giving them a scenario specifically designed to show how that idea might work in a specific

situation. *Black Beauty*'s premise is that a horse is telling his life story. Of course, horses don't tell their life stories, even to each other; we think this because we have no reason to suspect that horses are capable of understanding time, narration, or the concept of self, at least in a sense that is complex enough. *Black Beauty*, then, might count as a thought experiment that begins: "Suppose horses could tell their life stories – what might they say?" As the novel suggests that horses would have some fairly negative things to say about the way they are treated, the thought experiment might conclude with a claim like "you ought to treat your horses with concern for their feelings." As readers, we have been given a general point to accept, and we have been given a rational story about how animals might feel – rational because, if we were in *Black Beauty*'s shoes, we would probably feel much the same way as he does about how we were treated.

But actually there are a lot of differences between thought experiments in philosophy and the fictions that seem the most like thought experiments. One of the main differences is that they require different degrees of detail. *Black Beauty* works as a story because it really does seem that the narrator *is* a horse – the concerns mentioned are uniquely horsey ones, such as whether the ground is firm, or whether the straw in the stall is changed, or whether too much grain will be loaded on the wagon. In one chapter, *Black Beauty* describes what it is like to be driven by various kinds of drivers. This level of detail is essential to the story, because without it, the readers wouldn't feel as if they were hearing a horse's thoughts (rather than thoughts about horses). In Thomson's violinist scenario, though, this level of detail would be counterproductive. The only thing we really need to understand in Thomson's thought experiment is what the victim of the attack would feel like, and what he would have to sacrifice in order to save the violinist's

life. Any further details, such as those about how the violinist became ill, how the search of the records was made, or how the kidnapping was planned, would merely make it more difficult to get the point that Thomson was trying to make. Thought experiments do not require believable or interesting characters or plots, which are things that fictions always benefit from.

3) Analogy

Analogy is a kind of reasoning which suggests that things may have certain properties based on other properties that they share with other things. J.J. Thomson's unconscious violinist scenario is an analogy as well as a thought experiment (although not all thought experiments are analogies). The violinist in that scenario is the analogue of a fetus, and the victim of the kidnapping is the analog of a pregnant woman.

Thomson's goal in designing the thought experiment was to make as clear as possible that the victim of the kidnapping is not at all obliged (morally speaking, of course) to help with the treatment of the violinist. If Thomson succeeds in that, then by analogy, she has also supported the claim that women are not morally obliged to carry fetuses to term, either.

Thomson's violinist thought experiment is an example of one of two distinct uses of analogy in philosophy. This sort of analogy is what I would call "communicative" analogy – analogy that has communication, or perhaps convincing, as its goal. This kind of analogy emphasizes claims, or makes them more memorable or easier to understand, or gives some reason to believe a claim. Thomson's analogy was meant, for example, to highlight the sometimes horrible or embarrassing inconvenience an unwanted pregnancy

can be, while divorcing the situation from sentimentality that can keep people from thinking clearly.

Another example of this kind of analogy is C.S. Peirce's cable analogy; Peirce objects to the simple, one-directional character of Cartesian argumentation:

The multiform argumentation of the middle ages is replaced by a single thread of inference...¹³²

and offers an analogy to clarify his objection:

Philosophy ought to... trust rather to the multitude and variety of its arguments than to the conclusiveness of any one. Its reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected.¹³³

The analogy between argument and cable, shown in contrast to the analogy between argument and chain, which represents the Cartesian theory of the structure of knowledge, helps the reader pick up on what exactly in Descartes' theory Peirce is criticizing. Peirce thinks that Cartesian philosophy is much too dependent on every single argument. Instead, Peirce believes, knowledge must rely on numerous different pieces of evidence and numerous arguments. That way, if one turns out to be false, we needn't be caught in the throes of radical skepticism. And it turns out that, in ordinary careful thinking, we don't descend into radical skepticism every time a belief turns out to be false, so the cable analogy offers a more realistic understanding of the structure of knowledge than the chain analogy, as well as a more useful one.

There is another use of analogy in philosophy, though, besides the one which aids communication and argumentation. Analogy can also be useful for philosophical

¹³² from "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2 (1868), pp. 140-57. Reprinted in *Pragmatism Old and New* by Susan Haack, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY: 2006.

¹³³ *ibid.*

discovery, taking the philosopher past the point for which the analogy was created, and guiding him on to new insights. Susan Haack's crossword puzzle analogy¹³⁴ is an example. It began as a picture of how experience and beliefs might interact. The puzzle's clues are the analogues of experience, in this analogy, and the answers one thinks should be filled in are the analogues of beliefs. Clues and answers interact a lot in crossword puzzles; clues (like experience) determine one's answers (beliefs), but because there is often more than one possible answer (belief) that could result from the clues (experience), the other answers (beliefs) that one already has help him determine out of all possible answers (beliefs) which one he ought to accept. So this analogy had something going from the outset; it accurately represented what effects prior beliefs have on the belief forming process much of the time. But the analogy also suggested a way of responding to a possible objection. Of course, it is not guaranteed that any analogy will be useful for gaining further insights into the relevant problem; the analogy must happen to be set up in the right way – and “right” here, unfortunately, can mean little besides “one that works,” which is not at all helpful. But it is clear that analogies can and do serve as spurs to the philosophical imagination.

It is arguable that, save for cases where the point is explicitly stated, fiction makes whatever point it has to make by analogy. (Since fictions are not about the real world, but they have points to communicate that are about the real world, the fictional people and situations are analogues of real world people and situations). For example, suppose that the point of the television show *M*A*S*H* is that American involvement in the Vietnam

¹³⁴ The crossword puzzle analogy can be found at work in *Evidence and Inquiry*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford: 1993, especially pp. 81-89.

War was a very bad idea.¹³⁵ To miss this, one would have to very unfamiliar with history, or incompetent in English, or both. But Vietnam is rarely explicitly mentioned; in fact, it is only mentioned once, in the last season. The program explicitly states or assumes many things about the Korean War:

- a) Many ordinary Americans were hurt or killed;
- b) even the soldiers who didn't get killed had many difficulties because of their service;
- c) innocent civilians lost their possessions, families and/or lives;
- d) the Army's planning and execution skills left a lot to be desired;
- e) people who thought the war was a good idea were, in general, unfeeling, idiotic, boorish, and/or hypocritical.

Even though *M*A*S*H* was explicitly about the Korean War, it could still say things about the Vietnam War by relying on the fact that the Vietnam War was already in the viewers' minds, and by using the commonalities between the two wars to advantage: both were fought solely in Asia with a philosophy of limited warfare, which arguably was responsible for the high death toll. The connection is left for the viewers to make, but it is not difficult.

Although *M*A*S*H* employs analogy (and even a sort of argument, if the intent of the program was to convince people of its point) it will not suffice just to say that truths are conveyed through literature by analogy, full stop. One reason is that analogies

¹³⁵ I've put this in much more minimal language than I could have. Probably, this description of the point of *M*A*S*H* is not far off. However, Alan Alda, the actor who played Hawkeye in the show, has a different idea:

“We began the show during the Vietnam War, and some people felt it was really about *that* war. I know Vietnam was certainly on Larry [Gelbart]'s mind when he wrote the pilot, but I thought of the show as about *all* war, and especially about Korea.” (from *Never Have Your Dog Stuffed* by Alan Alda, Random House Books, New York: 2005, p. 157).

This is very close to the suggestion that *M*A*S*H* is about the Vietnam War, and actually entails it.

such as the one mentioned just above are left as implications and not directly stated. For any purported claim that is left as an implication instead of being explicitly stated, it is always left to the audience to interpret the fiction and derive the intended claim.

Technically, then, the claim is not a part of the fiction. This raises the question of how these claims are derived, since they're not actually in the fictions to start. So, if truths are communicated by analogy in literature, it remains to be said exactly how that works. The important point for now is that, however analogy works in literature, it works differently from how it works in philosophy, because philosophical analogy is, in general, specifically drawn, and not left to interpretation.

Last Words (About Philosophy and Fiction)

The upshot of all this is that, though philosophy and fiction can work together, in, for example, the philosophical novel, fiction and philosophy are different practices with different methods and different goals. In some philosophical novels, the goals (telling a good story and communicating philosophical content) line up neatly so that one can hardly tell the difference between the good philosophical parts and the good literary parts – the same words do both jobs. The point is that, even then, the two *jobs* are distinct.

I don't think there is a simple answer to whether Plato or Sidney is right about poetry. I think that they both get some things right, and they both make some mistakes, as I've explained in Chapter Three and the first parts of this chapter. What I do think, though, is that there is a role for both philosophy and literature in liberal education, and so the question of which is better for education is badly conceived, or at least badly expressed, by both Plato and Sidney. Probably, the answer to the question "which is

better?” is something to the effect that (good) philosophy is better for teaching people how to think, and (good) literature is better for teaching people how to act. This answer, of course, requires a lot of fleshing out to be sufficient – but answering this particular question any further is beyond my scope here. However, I think that the conclusion I reach in this project allows an easier resolution of the war between philosophy and poetry than would be possible otherwise.

Chapter Five: Freedom and Understanding Through Fiction

Despite the people who argue that fiction cannot really communicate truth, the idea that fiction *does* communicate truth is far more generally accepted, among both philosophers and non-philosophers. But most philosophers who accept the idea don't actually defend it. Almost always, for analytic philosophers, any treatment of truth in fiction is intimately related to a question about the definition or demarcation of fiction. These philosophers tend to stop at the question "Can truth be communicated through fiction?" which I have dealt with above, in Chapter Two. Continental philosophers, though, do sometimes take up the topic of fiction with the intent of understanding *how* it works as it does.

In this chapter, I will be looking at aesthetic theories of four continental philosophers: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 -1831), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Though each of these philosophers has something different to say about aesthetics,¹³⁶ they converge in an interesting way: they all are interested in the fact that art can communicate truths about reality, specifically about what it is to be free and to understand that freedom. It is their theories about this relationship between art and the understanding of freedom that I intend to investigate in this chapter.

Most of these philosophers write, not about fiction, but about art in general. (Sartre, the exception, writes about the difference between poetry on one hand, and all other writing on the other). I am going to count what they all say about art as applying to fiction. Fiction is an art form, with which all of these philosophers could have been

¹³⁶ Sometimes because they disagree with each other, but sometimes only because they emphasize different aspects of art or reality or both.

familiar.¹³⁷ Since these philosophers were, I take it, doing their best to give general theories of art, rather than theories about art in specific media, I think it is a safe assumption that these theories were meant to apply to fiction as well as to all other forms of art. I will sometimes write as if the theories are specifically about fiction, because that is the form of art I am interested in; but when I do, I should not be taken as implying that I think these theories are supposed to apply *only* to fiction.

I must point out from the outset that though continental aestheticians tend to think about problems that relate more directly to the question I'm seeking to answer than the problems analytic aestheticians think about do, continental aestheticians tend also to gesture at or assume an answer to my question rather than to address it directly. So, while their theories are more or less likely to be relevant, the question "How is truth communicated through fiction?" will still not have a direct answer at the end of this chapter.

Hegelian Aesthetics, To Start

I think Hegel has two important ideas concerning philosophy of art that will be helpful in moving my project along. These ideas are:

1. that symbols are used to communicate truth in art
2. that art appeals to peoples' feelings

¹³⁷ Though Hegel probably was not. *Pamela* was published in England only 30 years before Hegel was born; also, given that Hegel was writing an Encyclopaedia, attempting to cover everything relevant to his thought comprehensively, and given that he makes no mention of fiction in the various forms of art that he covers, he probably either was not aware of fiction, or thought of it as a variation of poetry, about which he has much to say. For reasons that I will explain momentarily, though, I am going to count his theory of art as applying to fiction.

Hegel develops these ideas in the context of a system meant to show the progression of mankind through history. Freedom is one of the most important concepts in this system, since it is the ultimate result of progress. Mind (or Spirit)¹³⁸ grows more free as it achieves more knowledge; according to Hegel, this occurs through the dialectic process of thesis, antitheses, and synthesis.¹³⁹

If mind is knowledge, then the individual mind is what the individual knows and can understand, and general mind is the knowledge that is available to individual minds at a given point in time. As minds together amass more knowledge and gain the ability to grasp that knowledge from more and more advantageous perspectives, general mind approaches the Absolute. A good way to gauge the advance of general mind towards the Absolute is to look at what people – individual minds, so to speak – are being taught now as opposed to what people at the same stage of education have been taught in the past:

... as far as information is concerned, what in former ages occupied the mature spirits of men has been reduced to information, exercises, and even games suitable for boyhood; and in the boy's pedagogical progress we recognize the history of the education of the world as if it had been traced in a silhouette.¹⁴⁰

Art, including poetry, which Hegel thinks is the highest form of art, is one of the final stages of development of general mind towards the Absolute. Hegel finds it certain that knowledge can be communicated through art; he writes:

¹³⁸ This is roughly equivalent to the whole store of human knowledge at any given point in time. However, Hegel's Mind is a very difficult concept to pin down precisely, and is not a topic to be covered adequately here. The sketch I give of the concept here is intended only to give the reader enough of an idea of Hegel's project to allow me to make the points about his philosophy of art that I've laid out above.

¹³⁹ Hegel describes the dialectic process in the *Phenomenology of Spirit: Consciousness* (Inwood p. 165) and in the introduction to *The Philosophy of History* (Inwood p. 359).

¹⁴⁰ preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, section 8 (Inwood p. 128).

...it is necessary to maintain that art has the vocation of revealing *the truth* in the form of sensuous artistic shape, of representing the reconciled anti-thesis just described, and, therefore, has its purpose in itself, in this representation and revelation.¹⁴¹

Anything that facilitates the development of Mind requires the capability to express knowledge, because the growth of Mind only happens when it achieves knowledge.

Hegel is also concerned with the kinds of truths that can be communicated through art – this is what gives art its place among the last stages of mind approaching the Absolute.

He writes,

Fine art... achieves its highest task when it has taken its place in the same sphere with religion and philosophy, and has become simply a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance the Divine Nature, the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind... This is an attribute which art shares with religion and philosophy, only in this peculiar mode, that it represents even the highest ideas *in sensuous form*, thereby bringing them nearer to the character of natural phenomena, to the senses and to feeling.¹⁴²

Art takes important ideas and represents them with “sensuous forms.” That these forms are sensuous means, in Hegel’s terminology, that they appeal to people’s feelings:

The work of art then, of course, presents itself to sensuous apprehension. It is addressed to sensuous feeling, outer or inner, to sensuous perception and imagination... the work of art is not only for the *sensuous* apprehension object, but its position is of such a kind that as sensuous it is at the same time essentially addressed to the *mind*, that the mind is meant to be affected by it, and to find some sort of satisfaction in it.¹⁴³

This appealing of sensuous forms to the mind happens symbolically, it seems; sensuous forms take on more meaning than they have as *merely* sensuous forms:

...in the sensuous aspect of a work of art, the mind seeks neither the concrete framework of matter, that empirically through completeness and development of the organism which desire demands, nor the universal and

¹⁴¹ introduction to *Philosophy of Art*, Inwood p. 403.

¹⁴² from the preface to *Philosophy of Art* (Inwood p. 371); italics in original.

¹⁴³ *ibid* p. 387

merely ideal thought. What it requires is sensuous presence, which, while not ceasing to be sensuous, is to be liberated from the apparatus of its merely material nature. And thus the sensuous in works of art is exalted to the rank of a mere *semblance* in comparison with the immediate existence of things in nature, and the work of art occupies the mean between what is immediately sensuous and ideal thought.¹⁴⁴

Unfortunately, this is as clear as Hegel gets about the relationship between sensuous forms and abstract idea. So he definitely thinks that art functions as representational symbol, but does not say very clearly *how* this works. He says later¹⁴⁵ that the forms are presented “with the purpose of affording in that shape satisfaction to higher spiritual¹⁴⁶ interests,” but does not say how that satisfaction takes place.

But he does say which spiritual interests are served:

...[Art’s] aim is therefore placed in arousing and animating the slumbering emotions, inclinations, and passions; in filling the *heart*, in forcing the human being, whether cultured or uncultured, to feel the whole range of what man’s soul in its inmost and secret corners has power to experience and to create, and all that is able to move and to stir the human breast in its depths and in its manifold aspects and possibilities; to present as a delight to emotion and to perception all that the mind possesses of real and lofty in its thought and in the Idea – all the splendour of the noble, the eternal, and the true; and no less to make intelligible misfortune and misery, wickedness and crime; to make men realize the inmost nature of all that is shocking and horrible as also of all pleasure and delight; and, finally, to set imagination roving in idle toyings of fancy and luxuriating in the seductive spells of sense-stimulating visions.¹⁴⁷

and here he says directly that art is symbolic:

In this process [of doing the things just listed] it is quite indifferent whether [the person’s] attention is claimed by immediate external reality,

¹⁴⁴ *ibid* p. 389

¹⁴⁵ *ibid* p. 390

¹⁴⁶ This word was not intended by Hegel to have theistic connotation; it should only be taken to mean ‘having to do with the spirit (mind)’. Even in the context of his work *The Positivity of the Christian Religion*, Hegel uses the word “spirit” thus: “...robbed of freedom, their spirit, their eternal and absolute element, was forced to take flight...” (Inwood p. 82).

¹⁴⁷ from the introduction to *Philosophy of Art* (Inwood pp. 395-6); italics in original.

or whether this effect is produced by another means – that is, by images, symbols, and ideas, containing or representing *the content* of reality.¹⁴⁸

So art presents ideas to people. Here we begin to see how art is tied to the overall growth of Absolute Mind. In experiencing works of art, a person sees his own feelings as those of another, which is one step on the way to developing free self-consciousness (understanding that one is self-determined and is different from other free self-determining agents).

Poetry¹⁴⁹ is the highest form of art because the most complex kind of symbol it can employ is so much more complex than those that, say, painting or sculpture can employ. As such, it can communicate ideas that are more freeing, and it can communicate them more freely. An idea in a painting has to be represented by physical appearance only, because that is all a painting is – albeit, sometimes, an extremely complex physical appearance. Poetry, on the other hand, can portray thoughts directly, rather than relating ideas through physical media:

[Art's] characteristic peculiarity lies in the power with which it subjects to the mind and to its ideas the sensuous element from which music and painting in their degree began to liberate art. For sound, the only external matter which poetry retains, is in it no longer the feeling of the sonorous itself, but is a *sign*, which by itself is void of import. And it is a sign of the idea which has become concrete in itself, and not merely of indefinite feeling and of its *nuances* and grades... In poetry, the mind determines this content for its own sake, and apart from all else, into the shape of ideas, and though it employs sound to express them, yet treats it solely as a symbol without value or import... as this element is common to all types of art, it follows that poetry runs through them all and develops itself independently in each. Poetry is the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature, and which is not tied to find its realization in external sensuous matter... it abandons the medium of a harmonious

¹⁴⁸ *ibid* p. 396

¹⁴⁹ Hegel, like Sidney, wrote about poetry instead of about literature or fiction. Fiction was so new when Hegel was alive that he may not have counted it as separate from poetry. As I did for Sidney, then, I am going to count his idea about poetry as being about fiction.

embodiment of mind in sensuous form, and passes from the poetry of imagination into the prose of thought.¹⁵⁰

Art is, however, only the first of the three final stages of the development of general mind. The great thing about art for the development of mind, according to Hegel, is the way it allows individual minds that interact with a work of art to feel the truth of what it attempts to communicate:

Art liberates the real import of appearances from the semblance and deception of this bad and fleeting world, and imparts to phenomenal semblances a higher reality... the artistic semblance has the advantage than in itself it points beyond itself, and refers us away from itself to something spiritual which it is meant to bring before the mind's eye.¹⁵¹

Religion is a move beyond art because it can handle more and deeper forms of truth;

philosophy is the final stage in the development of Mind. Hegel thinks that philosophy is:

...a cognition of the necessity in the content of the absolute conception, as also of the necessity in the two forms – on one hand, immediate intuition and its poetry, and the objective and external revelation presupposed by the conception, - on the other hand, first the subjective retreat inwards, then the subjective movement of faith and its identification with the presupposed object. This cognition is thus the *recognition* of this content and its form; it is the liberation from the one-sidedness of the forms, elevation of them into the absolute form, which determines itself to content, remains identical with it, and is thus the cognition of that essential and actual necessity. This movement, which philosophy is, finds itself already accomplished, when at the close it grasps its own concept – i.e. just *looks back* on its knowledge.¹⁵²

This is probably not the first description of the role of philosophy that would pop out of the mouth of an analytic philosopher. There's a lot to pull apart and probably to take issue with there. But it does fit in well with what Hegel is trying to do. Art offers, in a

¹⁵⁰ from the introduction to *Philosophy of Art*, Inwood pp. 418-9.

¹⁵¹ *ibid*, pp. 372-3.

¹⁵² from *Encyclopaedia: Absolute Mind*, paragraph 573.

sense, a thesis – a complex thesis, already the result of a dialectical process, but yet still a thesis. Art takes a kind of truth and shows what it means, really – what it actually feels like for that truth to be true. Religion is, in a sense, the antithesis to art’s thesis; it claims that those truths of art are not the highest truths, so to speak. Philosophy, then, is the synthesis; it takes the higher truths of religion and does with them what art does with its lower truths – it shows what it feels like for those truths to be true.

Again, the thoughts of Hegel’s that are most relevant to the question I’m seeking to address are:

1. that symbols are used to communicate truth in art
2. that art appeals to peoples’ feelings

I think these two ideas are right; my main criticism of Hegel’s philosophy of art is that he doesn’t say very carefully how these ideas actually play out. However, Sartre and Gadamer, who were contemporaries of each other, both had things to say that get a little bit closer to saying precisely how art communicates truth implicitly.

Sartre: Freedom in Fiction

Jean-Paul Sartre is one philosopher who writes specifically about fiction instead of about art in general or about poetry only. As a 20th century philosopher, he was well aware of the difference between poetry and prose fiction. His essay “What Is Writing?” (1947) draws a distinction between the two genres, which results in significantly different treatment of the two where to truth-communication is concerned.

Roughly the first half of “What Is Writing?” is about poetry.¹⁵³ Sartre says that words, for a poet, are like paint to a painter or sounds to a musician; as Sartre writes, poets “consider... words as things and not as signs.”¹⁵⁴ A smear of yellow paint in the painting of a sky, he writes in the beginning of the essay, does not signify anguish – it *is* anguish, and it is a part of the sky, at the same time:

Tintoretto did not choose that yellow rift in the sky above Golgotha to *signify* anguish or to *provoke* it. It is anguish and yellow sky at the same time. Not sky of anguish or anguished sky; it is an anguish become thing, an anguish which has turned into yellow rift of sky...it is no longer *readable*. It is like an immense and vain effort, forever arrested half-way between sky and earth, to express what their nature keeps them from expressing...¹⁵⁵

The patch of sky does not represent the feeling, though the feeling is there. Likewise, the poet does not use words to represent the world; the words are the part of the world that the poet is interested in, and when he creates a poem, he creates something that is about the words that he has taken up.¹⁵⁶ Because of this, Sartre thinks that it is silly to understand the poet as making claims about the world that he can be said to have committed himself to – much as it would be silly to hold the painter accountable for a claim about what color the sky was at the crucifixion. To so understand the poet or the painter is simply to miss the point of their respective arts.

Prose writing is entirely different. Prose writing is not about the words, but instead uses words to communicate ideas. Sartre writes,

I would readily define the prose-writer as a man who *makes use* of words...

¹⁵³ Note that Sartre is using the word “poetry” in a different sense than Hegel is. Hegel uses the word “poetry” the way we might use the word “literature,” but Sartre means poetry as *contrasted* with, say, novels, essays, etc.

¹⁵⁴ from *What Is Writing?* reprinted in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, edited by Clive Cazeaux, Routledge, London. 2000, p. 104. Originally published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1947.

¹⁵⁵ Cazeaux p. 103; italics in original.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid* p. 104-5.

The writer is a *speaker*; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates. If he does so without any effect, he does not therefore become a poet; he is a writer who is talking and saying nothing.¹⁵⁷

Because the point of communication is to share an idea with another, it makes sense to count the author of prose as committing himself to the claims he sets down on paper. In fact, Sartre thinks, as the above quotation illustrates, if a prose author is not committed to what he is saying, and is not trying to convince a reader or cajole her into believing what he writes, then he is, in fact, saying nothing. His writing is empty. Sartre argues further:

...this undertaking [writing of prose] cannot have pure contemplation as its end. For intuition is silence, and the end of language is to communicate.¹⁵⁸

Sartre calls the action of the prose writer “action by disclosure.”¹⁵⁹ This is the most interesting part of his literary theory, in my opinion, but fully to grasp the import of the label, an understanding of his existentialist theory is required. I turn now to a brief presentation of this.

Being and Nothingness is about “human reality;”¹⁶⁰ it explores what it feels like, and what it is, to be human – to experience the world and oneself as a human. One way of experiencing the world is to keep oneself apart from it in one’s mind, and to look at the world as an object without seeing oneself as an object in the world:

When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in looking at a portrait, no I is present. There is consciousness of the streetcar-having-to-be-caught, etc., and non-positional consciousness of that consciousness. On these occasions I am immersed in the world of objects; they constitute the unity of my consciousnesses; they present

¹⁵⁷ *ibid* p. 107

¹⁵⁸ *ibid* p. 108

¹⁵⁹ *ibid* p. 109

¹⁶⁰ Sartre writes this in *Being and Nothingness*, reprinted in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, edited by Robert Denoon Cumming, Vintage Books, 1972, p. 188. Originally published 1943.

themselves with values, with qualities that attract or repel – but I have disappeared, I am nothing. There is no place for Me at this level of consciousness. This is not accidental, it is not due to a temporary lapse of attention, but to the structure of consciousness itself.

According to Sartre, people are fundamentally, necessarily, free.¹⁶¹ They are so free that absolutely nothing can (rightly) compel a person to do anything at all. (This freedom comes with a feeling of extreme “anguish,” according to Sartre, which some people avoid by pretending they can be compelled, by morality, or tradition, or whatever. Pretending to be so compelled is one way of acting in bad faith). Typically, when acting in the moment, we don’t recognize this freedom, but simply act on it, and this actor-looking-at-objects way of viewing the world is much in keeping with this freedom – in Sartre’s language, humans transcend the world, because the world is governed by cause and effect (Sartre calls this “facticity,” which means roughly that objects are constrained to certain ways of being because of their physical attributes), but people are free.

As embodied beings, however, we are also a part of the world, and so are subject to our own facticity (as physical objects). Sometimes one is forced to see oneself as such an object, which compromises one’s feeling of freedom:

I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture... I neither judge it nor blame it. I simply live it... But now suddenly I raise my head. Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I feel ashamed... By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other. Yet this object which has appeared to the Other is not an empty image in the mind of another. Such an image, in fact, would be imputable wholly to the Other... I could feel irritation, or anger before it as before a bad portrait of myself which gives to my expression an ugliness or baseness which I do not have, but I could not be touched to

¹⁶¹ Cumming p. 267: “...human-reality can choose itself as it intends but is not able not to choose itself. It cannot even refuse to be; suicide, in fact is a choice and affirmation – of being. By this being which is *given* to it, human-reality participates in the universal contingency of being...”

the quick. Shame is by nature *recognition*. I recognize that I *am* the same as the Other sees me.¹⁶²

What is important about “The Look,” which is what Sartre describes in the passage quoted above, is the very last part I quoted: “I am as the Other sees me.” It is seeing oneself through the eyes of the other that allows one to see how one actually is.¹⁶³

Now we must return to *What is Writing?* The role of the prose writer, who can be described as “acting by disclosure,” Sartre thinks, is to be the Other, telling readers *that* they see and *what* they see, so that readers may understand themselves:

If you [the author] name the behavior of an individual, you reveal it to him; he sees himself. And since you are at the same time naming it to all others, he knows that he is *seen* at the moment he *sees* himself., After that, how can you expect him to act in the same way? Either he will persist in his behavior out of obstinacy and with full knowledge of what he is doing, or he will give it up. Thus, by speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it.¹⁶⁴

According to Sartre, it is fundamentally important that literature communicates from author to reader what is true about the reader; that is the whole goal of the practice. The reason that this is so important is also tied directly to Sartre’s existential philosophy of human experience – and of bad-faith and good-faith reactions to the Look, in particular. To have good faith is, briefly, to accept responsibility for one’s free actions and the results of those actions, insofar as they were intended or known, and to deny responsibility for what one did not choose. Bad faith is the opposite: to deny responsibility for what was one’s choice and to accept it for what was not.¹⁶⁵ A

¹⁶² *ibid* pp. 188-189; italics in original.

¹⁶³ Recall, from Chapter Two, George Herbert Mead’s theory of consciousness. It is in seeing himself through the eyes of another person that a person becomes conscious of himself as a self. Mead and Sartre have much in common here.

¹⁶⁴ *What is Writing?* p. 108. Italics in original.

¹⁶⁵ Sartre writes, “Good faith wishes to flee the “not-believing-what-one-believes” by finding refuge in being. Bad faith flees being by taking refuge in “not-believing-what-one-believes.” (Cumming p. 165). The

prerequisite for the taking or denying of responsibility, however, is an accurate understanding of oneself. Providing that understanding for the reader is the goal of literature.

So, Sartre would support the claim that truth can be communicated by fiction, and would have a certain, very specific kind of truth in mind. Nothing in *What is Writing?* hints at how this communication is supposed to take place, though, beyond that the reader sees himself in what the author writes. This is more or less what I will call “relevance” in Chapter Six, and I think, predictably, that it is important. Also predictably, I don’t think it is a satisfying answer, even though, as an answer, it goes as far in the right direction as anyone’s does.

One way of ensuring that the reader does manage to see himself in the novel he reads has to do with the passage of time in a novel and how that affects the reader’s experience. In an essay reviewing the novel *La Fin de a Nuit* by François Mauriac,¹⁶⁶ Sartre has some insightful things to say about time. (He also has much to say about character freedom, but that I will introduce that in Chapter Six, where it is especially relevant to my own analysis of truth-communication in fiction). Sartre writes:

A novel is a series of readings, of little parasitic lives, none of them longer than a dance. It swells and feeds on the reader’s time. But in order for the duration of my impatience and ignorance to be caught and then moulded and finally presented to me as the flesh of these characters of invention, the novelist must know how to draw it into the trap, how to hollow out in his book, by means of the signs at his disposal, a time resembling my own, one in which the future does not exist.¹⁶⁷

basic element here is honesty with oneself; good faith is honesty with oneself, and bad faith is self-deception.

¹⁶⁶ “François Mauriac and Freedom,” reprinted in *Literary Essays*, translated by Annette Michelson, published by Philosophical Library, New York: 1957, pp. 7-23. *La Fin de la Nuit* was published in 1935 by Editions Grasset and Fasquelle, Paris.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid* p. 7

The idea that should be noted here is the importance of time – a novel should take the reader out of his own time - more accurately, perhaps, it ought to catch the reader's time up into the events in the novel. Keeping the attention of the reader is a necessity for a novel. (One of the most common excuses for not finishing a novel once one has begun it is "Oh, I just couldn't get into it," which means that nothing in it drew the reader in enough to make him care what happens, enough to warrant his spending the required time and effort to finish it). This is one of Sartre's main complaints about the novel he reviews in this essay:

...the book has disappointed me. Not for a moment was I taken in, never did I forget *my* time; I went on existing, I felt myself living. Occasionally I yawned. Now and then I said to myself, "Well done." I thought more often of M. Mauricac than of Therese Desqueyroux [the main character]... Why was I unable to forget him or myself?¹⁶⁸

He answers the question further on; the author takes a standpoint of omniscience relative to the fictional world he has created. (This is more than just the omniscient voice, where the author writes in the third person and has access to any character's thoughts at any time; in this novel, according to Sartre, the author makes omniscient comments throughout the text that don't come from any character's thoughts, that show that it is already decided what is going to happen – almost as if the characters have nothing to say about their futures). Sartre writes,

...the introduction of absolute truth... constitutes [an] error of technique... the absolute is non-temporal. If you pitch the narrative in the absolute, the string of duration snaps, and the novel disappears before your eyes. All that remains is dull truth...¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ *ibid* p. 8-9; italics in original.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid* p. 15

Because, in this case, there is nothing to hold the reader out of his own time, he cannot really experience the novel; he keeps getting kicked out of it by the intrusion of the author's omniscient voice. On top of this, Sartre is complaining, much of the novel itself does not exist in the time of the novel. Because of the deterministic flavor of final knowledge given by the author's omniscient voice, the sense of adventure is missing – the novel is dull, because no one in the novel can do anything to avoid one particular ending.

Gadamer: A Different Kind of Truth

Hans-Georg Gadamer was a student of Martin Heidegger's. Hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, was one of his main philosophical interests. In *Truth and Method*,¹⁷⁰ Gadamer argues that the human sciences, especially history and the arts, as well as philosophy, are outside the sciences, especially in terms of how truth is experienced. What he means is that one cannot expect to use the scientific method successfully to reach truths in philosophy, art, or history. Instead of being justified, as are truths in the natural sciences, truths of art, for example, are "understood." As a philosopher, Gadamer is bothered by the lack of justification and rigor that such understanding requires, and takes it as his goal in *Truth and Method* to find out whether understanding in this sense can be justified.¹⁷¹ I am not going to follow Gadamer all the way through this argument. The things he says that are relevant to my project can be found in the first part, entitled, "The question of truth as it emerges in the experience of art."

¹⁷⁰ Crossroads Publishing Company, New York: 1975.

¹⁷¹ Gadamer, introduction, p. xiii

Gadamer's starting point is that human sciences (what we would call the arts, humanities, and social sciences) are methodologically different from the natural sciences, which raises the question whether the knowledge that a student of history or art reaches is real knowledge at all, or whether it is something like knowledge in some ways but not in others. In fact, according to Gadamer, *knowledge* isn't really the point in the human sciences. The point of studying the human sciences is rather to *understand* an individual¹⁷² – to learn its history, and to grasp how it is what it is:

...the real problem that the human sciences present to thought is that one has not properly grasped the nature of the human sciences if one measures them by the yardstick of an increasing knowledge of regularity. The experience of the socio-historical world cannot be raised to a science by the inductive procedure of the natural sciences. Whatever 'science' may mean here and even if all historical knowledge includes the application of general experience to the particular object of investigation, historical research does not endeavor to grasp the concrete phenomenon as an instance of a general rule. The individual case does not serve only to corroborate a regularity from which predictions can in turn be made. Its ideal is rather to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness. However much general experience is involved, the aim is not to confirm and expand these general experiences in order to attain knowledge of a law, e.g. how men, peoples, and states evolve, but to understand how this man, this people or this state is what it has become – more generally, how it has happened that this is so.¹⁷³

According to Gadamer, the point of particular instances in science is to generalize from them to laws which will apply in all circumstances. Human beings (or individual nations, etc) are much more complicated than chemicals; and so, if there are laws governing them, these laws will be very difficult to figure out. And often the attempt is not even made. Much of the emphasis in the human sciences is the instance or the individual rather than the general.

¹⁷² person or society or whatever

¹⁷³ Gadamer p. 6.

Gadamer writes about two concepts that he thinks are operative in the development of human sciences. The first of these is *Bildung*, in the sense of “culture” (the word also can mean education, improvement, or growth). Gadamer writes that the word *Bildung* “...is intimately associated with the idea of culture and designates primarily the properly human way of developing one’s natural talents and capacities.”¹⁷⁴ This idea is very Hegelian in nature, and Gadamer draws out the association. Hegel writes about the mind beginning with experience as thesis; running into contradictory evidence, which is antithesis; and reaching synthesis by finally apprehending knowledge that will explain all the evidence as one. And, Hegel makes it fairly clear, this is a process that not only individual human minds go through, but general Mind as well, which is roughly the same thing as all the repository of knowledge available within human culture at any time.

But there is one point at which Gadamer rejects the Hegelian system. Hegel thinks that synthesis follows antithesis as a matter of course, or that the move from antithesis to synthesis is necessary, at least when it comes to general Mind in culture. (It may indeed be extremely difficult for an individual mind to persist in a state of antithesis and contradiction, but Gadamer makes no claim about this. He is not attempting to do psychology). In culture, though, he holds that synthesis may not necessarily ever be reached; unlike Hegel, Gadamer does not believe in the inevitable progress of culture. Intellectual harmony,¹⁷⁵ rather than absolute knowledge, can be the goal, and while

¹⁷⁴ *ibid* p. 11.

¹⁷⁵ Gadamer’s concept of harmony is described on p. 15: “Every single individual that raises himself out of his natural being to the spiritual finds in the language, customs and institutions of his people a pre-given body of material which, as in learning to speak, he has to make his own.”

reaching the absolute is one way of achieving harmony, it is not the only possible way.

Gadamer writes,

... ‘perfection of form’ is not so much the last state of a development as the mature state that has left all development behind and makes possible the harmonious movement of all the limbs. It is precisely in this sense that the human sciences presuppose that the scientific consciousness is already formed and for that very reason possesses the right, unlearnable and inimitable tact that bears the judgment and mode of knowledge of the human sciences.”¹⁷⁶

In other words, the goal is not to know everything, as Hegel thinks it is. Gadamer writes that *Bildung* is not just the goal, but is “the element in which the historical sciences move.”¹⁷⁷ Unfortunately, at and around this passage he is not very clear about what he means by ‘understanding,’ so it is difficult to interpret the passage with much precision. I think that what he means, though, is that the human sciences require the student to be trained in how to think correctly – scientifically – so that knowledge can be used in order to understand, with both facts and intuition, the many subjects of the human sciences. There is no inevitable result of this training; all it does is make the student more likely than otherwise to succeed in understanding the various aspects of human experience.

Gadamer takes up a second concept to help explain what the human sciences are about. This second concept is that of *sensus communis*, which means, as he interprets the phrase,¹⁷⁸ “sense of community,” as well as “common sense.” Working with the ideas of Giovanni Battista Vico (1668 – 1744), an Italian rhetorician, Gadamer uses *sensus*

¹⁷⁶ Gadamer p. 15.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid* p. 15.

¹⁷⁸ On p. 21 of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer writes, “The main thing for our purposes is that *sensus communis* here obviously does not mean only that general faculty in all men, but the sense that founds community.” Gadamer may be mistaken in claiming that the connection is obvious; the connection is that it is the community of learning that makes common knowledge possible, roughly.

communis to try to characterize the knowledge available in the human sciences; and it is here that his Heideggerian tendency surfaces.

Heideggerian Truth

Martin Heidegger, from whom Gadamer inherited his theory of truth, had a working concept of truth that is fairly distinct from anything one will encounter in the analytic tradition of philosophy. In “On The Essence of Truth,”¹⁷⁹ he denies that truth is most basically a property of propositions, based on an argument about accordance and correspondence,¹⁸⁰ instead giving a phenomenological definition of truth. Heidegger claims, “The essence of truth is freedom.”¹⁸¹ He sounds as if he means here what an analytic philosopher would mean if she said that freedom is a necessary condition for truth; he writes a little further on, “... ‘essence’ is understood as the ground of the inner possibility of what is ... known.”¹⁸²

As it stands, this sounds wrong as a definition (although it sounds like an accurate partial description of the *conditions for* freedom). Truth is a value (an attribute that propositions can have), while freedom, though it may *have* value, is not itself a value; it would be more accurate to call freedom a state in which individuals can exist. This is precisely what Heidegger is getting at – though he doesn’t offer an argument for it, he thinks that truth is a state of being rather than a value that propositions can have.

¹⁷⁹ reprinted in *Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell, Harper & Row, New York: 1977, pp. 117 – 147.

¹⁸⁰ which I believe fails because of Heidegger’s inability to account for multiple meanings of the words in question, and his failure to understand meaning itself carefully enough.

¹⁸¹ Krell, p. 125 (section 3).

¹⁸² Krell p. 125

Heidegger makes a lot of use of the word translated “accord,” which, in the infinitive, is *stimmen* (which can also mean “to agree”) – too much use, I think. On one hand, he writes about a proposition being in accord with the state of the world, and hence being true.¹⁸³ But this is not even possible without a precondition that allows it:

But if the correctness (truth) of statements becomes possible only through this openness of comportment [through being, that is], then what first makes correctness possible must with more original right be taken as the essence of truth.¹⁸⁴

So, he is saying, statements can only be true because of what is. (That is what “being” and “openness of comportment” mean, as Heidegger uses them).¹⁸⁵ This much certainly is true, even according to Aristotle’s definition of truth as presented in Chapter Two. From this, though, he reasons that the essence of truth is something more fundamental than the relationship between statements and the world, and this simply isn’t right. A triangle is a figure with exactly three sides. So the triangleness of triangles depends on there being sidedness – there has to be such a thing as a side for there to be a triangle. But that doesn’t mean that sidedness is essentially the same thing as triangleness. Sidedness is a precondition for triangleness; in fact, it is a necessary precondition for triangleness. But sidedness is not the essential nature of triangleness; it is only essential *for* triangleness. This is the mistake I think Heidegger makes. Freedom may very well be essential *for* truth, but it isn’t therefore the essential nature *of* truth.

After claiming that freedom is the essence of truth, Heidegger says with more precision what he means. The kind of freedom he is particularly interested in is the

¹⁸³ Krell p. 119: “...we say of whatever is ‘as it should be’: ‘it is in accord’...A statement is true if what it means and *syas* is in accordance with the matter about which the statement is made.”

¹⁸⁴ *ibid* pp. 124-5.

¹⁸⁵ for example, *ibid* p. 124: “What is thus opened up, solely in this strict sense [of comportment] was experienced early in Western thinking as ‘what is present’ and for a long time has been named ‘being.’ ”

freedom of a thing to be what it is – not forced to try to be something else. To interact with a free thing is to ‘let it be;’¹⁸⁶ this shouldn’t mean that one ignores it, but that, in the midst of active engagement with it, one never tries to change or reinterpret it, instead interacting with it as the thing that it is.¹⁸⁷ Here is where freedom and truth are attached to each other: when I interact with something, allowing it to be free and therefore to appear how it is, the true nature of the thing is revealed. Truth, then, is unconcealedness,¹⁸⁸ or the thing appearing how it is. It would perhaps have been more accurate for Heidegger to have claimed that freedom is a necessary condition for truth, rather than saying it is the essence of truth. But when the claim is stated in terms of necessary conditions, it becomes clear that Heidegger hasn’t told us what the essential nature of truth is after all. It is helpful, in defining a thing, to know what its necessary conditions are; but that isn’t sufficient. We need to know more.

Return to Gadamer

Heidegger’s conception of truth as unconcealedness is also the conception of truth that Gadamer is working with. In the midst of explaining the idea of *sensus communis* as it affects knowledge in the human sciences, Gadamer writes:

On this general sense of the true and the right, which is not a knowledge based on argumentation, but enables one to discover what is obvious

¹⁸⁶ Krell p. 127: “Freedom now reveals itself as letting things be.”

¹⁸⁷ *ibid* p. 127: “To let be – that is, to let beings be as the beings which they are – means to engage oneself with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand, bringing that openness, as it were, along with itself.”

¹⁸⁸ Heidegger is aware that this word is another possible translation of the Greek word for truth; he writes: “If we translate *alētheia* as ‘unconcealment’ rather than ‘truth,’ this translation is not merely more literal; it contains the directive to rethink the ordinary concept of truth in the sense of the correctness of statements and the think it back to that still uncomprehended disclosedness and disclosure of beings.” (Krell pp. 127-8).

(verisimile), Vico bases the significance and the independent rights of rhetoric.

(Rhetoric is, by no accident, the human science of which Vico was a practitioner).

Knowledge in the human sciences is different from knowledge in natural science because it is Heideggerian; rather than having a truth-value that can be shown with argument, these truths of the human sciences are learned by being unconcealed. Human science uncovers them, and there they are; we may be able to argue about how to use them, but that they are what they are cannot be disputed.

I don't think that the Heidegger/Gadamer conception of truth can be quite accurate. At very least, there are questions to be answered: is what is "unconcealed" true before it is revealed to a knowing agent? If so, is truth merely a matter of potential? Can a knowing agent be mistaken about what is revealed, or confused? Can what is genuinely revealed to x be different from what is genuinely revealed to y? It is not clear to me what the answers to these questions might be. But I must set these questions aside.

Gadamer continues to differentiate these two kinds of truth by applying the Aristotelian distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, or between "knowledge that" and "knowledge how." Ethical knowledge makes a good example of both; Gadamer writes,

Although the practice of this virtue means that one distinguishes what should be done from what should not, it is not simply practical shrewdness and general cleverness. The distinction between what should and should not be done includes the distinction between the proper and the improper and thus presumes a moral attitude...¹⁸⁹

Moral knowledge, he is saying, has two elements. One of those elements must of course be factual knowledge. In order to avoid causing pain, for example, I have to be able to

¹⁸⁹ *ibid* p. 22.

recognize when others are in pain, and I have to be able to predict which of my actions will cause pain. This is just as scientific a process as learning to recognize boiling water, and figuring out what I have to do to bring about conditions where water boils. But there is a second element as well – I have to be able to empathize with people who might feel pain, and to take a moral attitude towards the situation, or I will not succeed in my attempt to avoid causing pain. There is a scientifically discoverable aspect to good moral behavior, but there is an empathetic aspect to it as well.¹⁹⁰

Having said as clearly as he could what he means when he claims that the human sciences admit of a different kind of truth than natural sciences, Gadamer turns specifically to the arts. With much care, he explains why Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is

¹⁹⁰ One thought that might occur here is whether (or perhaps to what extent) this conception of truth has anything in common with one or more conceptions of truth of any of the pragmatists. According to Heidegger and Gadamer, truth is unconcealedness; according to William James, truth is what we call "whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief," as he writes in "What Pragmatism Means" (reprinted in *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings* by J.S. Thayer, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis: 1982. Originally published in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Longmans, Green, and Co., New York: 1907, pp. 43-81). James is admittedly unclear about what exactly he means by this. Sometimes he interprets this definition to mean something absolute; for example, when he writes in "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" of truth being "expedience in the long run" (ibid. p. 238. Originally published in *Pragmatism*, Longmans, Green, and Co., New York: 1907, pp. 197-236), he suggests that truth can be different than it seems to be at some time or other, because "what meets expediently all the experiences in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily." In other words, people are fallible, and truth is not defined in terms of what people think it is. But truth is also connected to the concrete; he writes that the "only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted" (p. 225). So the concrete world is the test of truth. Now, if Heidegger is right that truth is unconcealedness, or what is revealed in the world, then the world must be the only test for truth; so in this way, James is in concert with Heidegger. Where they differ is over the bearers of truth. For Heidegger, the bearers of truth are phenomenological appearances; for James, they are beliefs, which may be about phenomenological appearances, but usually are propositional in nature.

C.S. Peirce's definition of pragmatic truth, especially in comparison to Heideggerian truth, has much in common with James'. Peirce writes, "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is real... reality is independent, not necessarily of thought in general, but only of what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it..." ("How To Make Our Ideas Clear," ibid p. 97; originally published in *Popular Science Monthly*, 12, 1878, pp. 286-302) (This is stated here in the indicative; in later writing he puts it in the subjunctive, which avoids a problem: if truth is actually agreed upon, then actual finite people must be doing the agreeing, and this is not what Peirce is writing about). Peirce's formulation of pragmatic truth has elements of the abstract and the concrete, and is in that way consistent with Heideggerian truth; it also shares with James' formulation a propositional element, contrary to Heidegger: the bearer of truth is opinion, not appearance. Where Heidegger would use the term "unconcealedness," Peirce would use "real."

wrongheaded as an aesthetic system. Kant does not recognize a second kind of truth, and is therefore forced into using tools to analyze art which, Gadamer claims, are unfit for the purpose. Gadamer writes,

Kant always starts, as we have seen, from natural beauty. But inasmuch as Kant limited his concept of knowledge wholly to the possibility of 'pure natural science,' ...and thus gave to the nominalist concept of reality an unquestioned validity, the ontological difficulty in which nineteenth-century aesthetics found itself goes back ultimately to Kant himself. Under the domination of nominalist prejudice, aesthetic being can be only inadequately and imperfectly understood... [phenomenological criticism] has shown the error in all attempts to conceive the mode of the experience of reality and the modification of it. All such ideas as imitation, appearance, irreality, illusion, magic, dream, assume a relationship to something from which the aesthetic is different. But the phenomenological relationship but sees, rather actual truth in what is experiences.¹⁹¹

Kant's mistake, according to Gadamer, is that he can only evaluate the artistic in terms of the real. If the artistic is an imitation of or an abstraction from or stands in any other relation to the real, then the real is primary and the artistic is only a way of getting at the real; and hence the artistic must always be judged by the real. And Gadamer thinks this is wrong; if works of art are considered only in these terms, much of what can be gleaned from art is lost. This is the strength of the Heideggerian conception of truth and art: because unconcealedness is truth, and the art work itself is unconcealed by being an artwork, the artwork *is* truth. It is not, according to Gadamer, the same kind of truth as scientific truth, but then again, it was never intended to be. Someone who evaluates works of art solely in terms of how realistic they are is missing the point.¹⁹²

However, Gadamer does not think that art has absolutely nothing to do with real life. In fact, he claims that art has the power to suggest "a fullness of meaning":

¹⁹¹ *Truth and Method*, pp. 74-75.

¹⁹² I would infer from Gadamer's position on Kant that he doesn't have much use for realism in art.

...the very way in which [any experience of any kind] is 'preserved' through its being worked into the whole of life-consciousness, goes far beyond any 'significance' it might be thought to have. Because it is itself within the whole of life, in it too the whole of life is present... As the work of art as such is a world for itself, what is experienced aesthetically is, as an experience, removed from all connections with actuality... it suddenly takes the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, by the power of the work of art, and yet relates him back to the whole of his existence.¹⁹³

It is difficult to decipher what exactly Gadamer means here, but I think it is something along the following lines. People know their own experiences (usually – except for the very young and those with certain diseases). By virtue of knowing those experiences, and because a framework is required to make sense of further experiences, they take past experiences with them and use them to interpret new experiences. According to Heideggerian and Gadamerian theory, art is not about the real world; each work of art is its own world. Yet it cannot help showing the person his own life, though there is nothing of that life in the work of art; it shows him a separate world, but he will still find things in it that are enough like the actual world, as he has experienced it, to allow him to draw whatever connections he is disposed to draw between it and his own experience.

An important part of this drawing of connections is that it has nothing to do with the laws proposed in science, or with induction or argument, but is more a matter of intuition – of “seeing” what might possibly be seen in the work of art.

Of course, the mere fact that this process involves an aesthetic object does not mean that the only kind of knowledge used in the process is this non-propositional, non-scientific knowledge. In fact, Gadamer recognizes that knowledge of the ordinary,

¹⁹³ *Truth and Method*, p. 63.

propositional, scientific kind is required, too; he just thinks that there is also the second kind of knowledge:

... 'aesthetic' vision is certainly characterized by its not hurrying to relate what one sees to a universal, the known significance, the intended purpose etc, but by dwelling on it as something aesthetic. But that still does not stop us from seeing relationships, e.g. recognizing that this white phenomenon which we admire aesthetically is in fact a man. Thus our perception is never a simple reflection of what is presented to the senses.¹⁹⁴

When looking at, say, a marble statue of some man, one does not merely experience the statue in the non-propositional aesthetic way. An understanding of the statue that did not include the ordinary propositional idea "this statue has the shape of a man" would be a misunderstanding, or at least an incomplete understanding, of the statue. So real world knowledge can be relevant to the experience of works of art, and is sometimes necessary.

Gadamer continues, by way of explanation:

In the case of significant representation, in works of plastic art, providing that they are not non-representational and abstract, the fact of their significance obviously directs the way that what is seen is understood. Only if we recognize what is represented are we able to 'read' a picture, in fact that is what makes it, fundamentally, a picture. Seeing means differentiation... The same is true of the literary work. Only when we understand a text – that is, at least be in command of its language – can it be for us a work of literary art. Even if we hear absolute music we must 'understand' it. And only when we understand it, when it is 'clear' to us, does it exist for us as an artistic creation.¹⁹⁵

So, according to Gadamer, just that there is aesthetic truth that must be both apprehended and evaluated differently from how ordinary truth of science and the physical world is evaluated, does not necessarily imply that ordinary truth has nothing to do with aesthetic truth or the apprehension of it. On the contrary, Gadamer has just stated

¹⁹⁴ ibid p. 81

¹⁹⁵ ibid p. 82.

in the passage quoted above that aesthetic experience and the grasping of aesthetic truth both rely on ordinary kinds of truth and our capacity to grasp them. Works of art must be understood at the ordinary level first; and then, given that that level of understanding has been achieved, one goes on to experience the object at the aesthetic level, using what one has gathered at the ordinary level to inform the aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience must be of something; ordinary experience reveals what the something is.

Gadamer wraps up this section as neatly as he can on pages 86 and 87, writing:

...Aesthetic experience also is a mode of self-understanding. But all self-understanding takes place in relation to something else that is understood... Inasmuch as we encounter the work of art in the world and a world in the individual work of art, this does not remain a strange universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in it, and that means we preserve the discontinuity of the experience in the continuity of our existence. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt an attitude to the beautiful and to art that does not lay claim to immediacy, but corresponds to the historic reality of man. The appeal to immediacy, to the genius of the moment, to the significance of the 'experience,' cannot withstand the claim of human existence to continuity and unity of self-understanding. The experience of art must not be side-tracked into the uncommittedness of the aesthetic awareness. This negative insight, expressed positively, means that art is knowledge and the experience of the work is a sharing of this knowledge.

All this may be a little unclear. Here is what I believe is a more-or-less accurate restatement of the argument Gadamer is trying to give: Anyone who experiences a work of art will know that it is not specifically about her. Even so, the viewer recognizes aspects of the work of art that gives her clues about how to understand herself; and since these are things that she can recognize precisely because she is a person of a certain degree of maturity of mind, she should be able to figure out that any person with a similar maturity of mind should be able to recognize the same things in the work that she does.

So she understands from this that the artwork has a general message rather than one about her specifically, or one that interests only her.¹⁹⁶

Much of what Gadamer writes in *Truth and Method* is given by way of an explanation rather than an argument. Talking about truth, existence, and experience is very difficult, and there are places where Gadamer's meaning is unclear. I've tried to clarify these when possible. Some of what he says is problematic, I think, and I now turn to these areas.

The closest Gadamer comes to answering the question I am attempting to answer, "how is truth communicated through fiction?" is on page 63. He writes:

In the experience of art there is present a fullness of meaning which belongs not only to this particular content or object but rather stands for the meaningful whole of life. An aesthetic experience always contains the experience of an infinite whole. Precisely because it does not combine with others to make one open experiential flow, but immediately represents the whole, its significance is infinite...

Though much of the language here is imprecise, I think Gadamer gets an important thing right: it is because art is meaningful – potentially to everyone – that it can communicate by implication messages that are not actually part of the work of art. People simply *do* find truths in art – they have a habit of taking their life with them as a framework for interpreting new experiences, including aesthetic ones. Art represents or "stands for" all of life, and so communication happens because anything in the actual work of art may suggest something to the viewer about his or her own life.

¹⁹⁶ Sometimes a person will find things in a work of art that brings something uniquely of her own experience to mind – as in a detail in a novel reminding someone of a private joke they have with someone else – but the person should understand that this shouldn't be taken as a part of the general meaning of the work of art.

I think this is a very important point, and I will make something of it in Chapter Seven. However, what I find unsatisfactory about Gadamer's theory is that it does not explain at all how an artist can presume to have communicated any at-all-specific message through a work of art. If I as the viewer am looking at a work of art with my own life experiences in mind, then I am going to see every piece of art radically differently from how some other people see it. The actual content of the artwork will limit my interpretation somewhat, but not completely. One might think that this is a strength of Gadamer's theory, because people's interpretations *do* vary wildly. But with what he has said, Gadamer cannot distinguish between better and worse interpretations (though, to be fair, that was not really his goal). The problem is that, while describing the aesthetic experience and the specifically aesthetic knowledge that it brings, he does not make a distinction between truths found in a work by readers and truths intentionally worked into the work by the author; he talks *only* about the reader's end. Gadamer's theory cannot handle truths intentionally implied by the author; his apparatus makes no distinction between such truths, and truths that slip into a work by an accident of the way the work was created. Because intentionally implied truths are what I think are especially interesting, and are what I most want to understand, Gadamer's theory just doesn't get far enough to begin to answer the most interesting questions.

I am also suspicious of Gadamer's claim that art communicates a "different" kind of truth.¹⁹⁷ I understand the distinction between "knowledge how" and "knowledge that"; if this was the extent of what he thought the difference to be, I would have little to criticize. I would want to claim, *contra* Gadamer, that art can communicate "knowledge

¹⁹⁷ as distinguished from truths of natural science

that” as well as “knowledge how,” but I would agree with him that the “knowledge how” communication is by far the most interesting and the most vital – stories at their best communicate knowledge about how to live well. But I see no reason to think that “knowledge how” is a different kind of knowledge from “knowledge that” – though it is presented differently, and is therefore apprehended differently, I would argue that it makes use of the same knowledge-gaining apparatus (eyes – brain, etc) and is subject to the same standards of evaluation.

I think, in fact, that even Gadamer must admit that this knowledge is subject to the same standards as ordinary, scientific knowledge. He writes about how aesthetic truth is evaluated:

In the experience of art we see a genuine experience induced by the work, which does not leave him who has it unchanged, and we enquire into the mode of being of that which is experienced in this way. So we hope to understand better what kind of truth it is that encounters us there.¹⁹⁸

The experience of art changes people. In order to understand what the experience was, we look at what that change is, and then we try to figure out what kind of thing would be capable of making that change. So, we look at the effect and attempt from that to draw an inference about the cause. There is nothing extraordinary about this form of evaluation; it is commonplace in the sciences.

¹⁹⁸ Gadamer p. 89

Nietzsche: A Different Conception of Reality

One last philosopher who would have something interesting to say relating to my project is Friedrich Nietzsche. He definitely believes that fiction – tragedy,¹⁹⁹ in particular – can and does communicate truth.²⁰⁰ But he would object to the question I'm investigating here, primarily because it makes assumptions that he wouldn't accept. First off, I started with the attitude that it is surprising that truth could be communicated through fiction at all. That it is surprising or even a question is something Nietzsche would find problematic. Secondly, the conception of truth I'm working with is heavily Platonic, when contrasted with the conception of truth that Nietzsche prefers, even though I don't believe in the Forms and have begged off having anything to do with them above (in Chapter Three).

These objections of Nietzsche's result from his metaphysical leanings, adopted (or adapted, perhaps) from Schopenhauer. According to M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, the tenets he adopts from Schopenhauer's metaphysical system are:

...the illusoriness of empirical reality, with all its individual phenomena; and the recognition, behind our illusory world of an ultimate reality that brings no joy, no god, no providence, no ordained meaning, no rational basis to life or to death. Only a blind will-to-exist fills the universe, and the only salvation from it lies in the surrender of the individual will...²⁰¹

Essentially, the universe is chaotic and devoid of meaning. Tragedy, Nietzsche believes, has the effect of making the audience stare this bleak universe in the face.

¹⁹⁹ Tragedy, for Nietzsche, is something like what it is according to Aristotle. As a scholar of Ancient Greece, Nietzsche was very familiar with Aristotle's work.

²⁰⁰ See, for example, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1981), pp. 288-9.

²⁰¹ *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, p. 19.

Much of Nietzsche's theory of tragedy derives directly from this Schopenhauerian pessimism.²⁰² He identifies spirits (or attitudes, which is not a better word for them, but should make it clear that these are not ghosts or other kinds of individuals, except metaphorically) and gives them the names of two Greek deities, Apollo and Dionysis; these spirits work through art in order to give people a view of reality. The most accurate view of reality is Dionysiac; this is a spirit of horror in response to the vast chaos of the world, in which the individual is lost. The only even hypothetically purely Dionysiac art is music – music need not be expressed in words, which makes it more expressive of non-individuated being and uncontrollable, soul-shaking feeling. Nietzsche describes the Dionysiac thus:

...the tremendous awe which seizes man when he suddenly begins to doubt the cognitive modes of experience, in other words, when in a given instance the law of causation seems to suspend itself. If we add to this awe the glorious transport which arises in man, even from the very depths of nature, at the shattering of the *principium individuationis*, then we are in a position to apprehend the essence of Dionysiac rapture, whose closest analogy is furnished by physical intoxication. Dionysiac stirrings arise either through the influence of those narcotic potions of which all primitive races speak in their hymns, or through the powerful approach of spring, which penetrates with joy the whole frame of nature. So stirred, the individual forgets himself completely...²⁰³

The problem with Dionysiac art is that it is horrible to experience – it deprives one of one's sense of identity, which gives freedom from responsibility²⁰⁴ but also makes

²⁰² Even early in his career, when he had newly discovered Schopenhauer, Nietzsche didn't follow Schopenhauer exactly; much of *The Birth of Tragedy* is written contra Schopenhauer. (See *Nietzsche on Tragedy* for discussion of this). However, the basic ideas behind Schopenhauer's metaphysics are at work in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

²⁰³ *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 22. Italics in original.

²⁰⁴ *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, p. 182. This overwhelming feeling is sometimes called nausea. This should not be associated with nausea in Sartre's system, though, because in fact it has almost the opposite cause. In Sartre's system, nausea is the result of feeling one's freedom completely, because one realizes that he is completely responsible for himself, and that no one can tell him what he ought to do. But the nausea that

the individual lose himself in the overwhelming emotion it expresses. And so, there is the Apolline spirit in art. This is the spirit that introduces order – pattern, resolution, etc. As Nietzsche writes,

...one might say of Apollo what Schopenhauer says, in the first part of *The World as Will and Idea*, of man caught in the veil of Maya: “Even as on an immense, raging sea, assailed by huge wave crests, a man sits in a little rowboat trusting his frail craft, so, amidst the furious torments of this world, the individual sits tranquilly, supported by the *principium individuationis* and relying on it.” One might say that the unshakable confidence in that principle has received its most magnificent expression in Apollo, and that Apollo himself may be regarded as the marvelous divine image of the *principium individuationis*, whose looks and gestures radiate the full delight, wisdom, and beauty of “illusion.”²⁰⁵

According to Nietzsche, as dreams are, at the time of dreaming, sensible and understandable,²⁰⁶ but often bear only the loosest connection to reality, so the Apolline imposition of form upon chaotic reality helps us understand what seems to be real, but what is actually quite different from reality. As humans, we need that dream-like form imposed upon chaotic reality, because we couldn’t live with the whole unadulterated truth.

Without Apolline order in art, Dionysiac chaos is painful. But without the Dionysiac spirit – that is, if art was solely Apolline, or all structure – art is dead. There is no truth in solely Apolline art; without the Dionysiac reality, art has nothing real to communicate.

Nietzsche thinks that each spirit spurs the other on to higher development:

comes from experiencing reality through Dionysiac art, according to Nietzsche’s conception, results from losing one’s senses of individuality, which coincides with a *loss* of freedom and responsibility.

²⁰⁵ *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 22.

²⁰⁶ Often, at least; though, on waking, the dreamer often realizes very soon that what seemed reasonable in the dream actually is not.

The two creative tendencies developed alongside one another, usually in fierce opposition, each by its taunts forcing the other to more energetic production...²⁰⁷

Apolline art, unadulterated by the Dionysiac, is naïve:

Whenever we encounter 'naïvete' in art, we are face to face with the ripest fruit of Apollonian culture – which must always triumph over titans, kill monsters, and must overcome the somber contemplation of actuality, the intense susceptibility to suffering, by means of illusions strenuously and zestfully entertained...²⁰⁸

This is naïve because, in reality, the titans and monsters usually win, things are somber, and people do suffer intensely. To pretend otherwise is to create an illusion – perhaps a happy illusion, and perhaps a necessary one, but still only an illusion. Apolline art requires the wild, rule-defying Dionysiac art because reality itself is wild and rule-defying:

The effects of the Dionysiac spirit struck the Apollonian Greeks as titanic and barbaric; yet they could not disguise from themselves the fact that they were essentially akin to those deposed Titans and heroes... The individual, with his limits and moderations, forgot himself in the Dionysiac vortex and became oblivious to the laws of Apollo...²⁰⁹

It is built into the conception of the world that Nietzsche is operating with that Dionysiac art is the best way of understanding reality. (He might make the case that it is the only way even to hope to understand it accurately). If the world is truly as fundamentally chaotic as Nietzsche, following Schopenhauer, thinks it is, then the world, of necessity, will defy philosophical explanation and systematic understanding. I'm not convinced that the world is fundamentally chaotic, though; Nietzsche assumes that it is but does not offer an argument for that conclusion. (To be fair, though, that would have

²⁰⁷ *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 19

²⁰⁸ *ibid* p. 31

²⁰⁹ *ibid* p. 34-5

worked against the rest of his project, and trying to convince people about the fundamental nature of the world was not what he was trying to do). The important thing to note here, whether or not Nietzsche is right about chaos in the world, is that, *were* he right, Dionysiac tragedy perhaps *would* be the best way to communicate²¹⁰ truth. Such communication is non-linguistic and even non-propositional, which is interesting; art, in that case, would then mirror the nature of the world.

The other part of Nietzsche's (probable) reaction to my project is the one having to do with the Platonic conception of truth represented by Socrates. Again, this Platonic/Socratic conception doesn't have much to do specifically with the Forms; though Nietzsche wouldn't like the Forms, his problem with Socrates is much more general. Nietzsche writes,

[Socrates] is the great exemplar of that *theoretical man* whose significance and aims we must now attempt to understand. Like the artist, theoretical man takes infinite pleasure in all that exists... But while the artist, having unveiled the truth garment by garment, remains with his gaze fixed on what is still hidden, theoretical man takes delight in the cast garments and finds his highest satisfaction in the unveiling process itself, which proves to him his own power... we find a type of deep-seated illusion that thought, guided by the thread of causation, might plumb the farthest abysses of being and even *correct* it.²¹¹

Nietzsche's problem with philosophy in the Socratic tradition seems to be, I think, a general problem with the idea that the philosophical process could ever result in truth. Both empiricism and rationalism are under attack here – rationalism because thought alone cannot, so to speak, “plumb the abysses of being;” thought is structured and reality, Nietzsche thinks, is chaotic, so trying to *understand* reality is a doomed endeavor. I think Nietzsche would say that reality can only be felt. And empiricism is problematic because

²¹⁰ I don't know that he would choose this word for it, though.

²¹¹ *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 92-3. Italics in original.

it assumes that the world of sense experience is the deepest form of reality. This is the fixing of focus upon the “cast garments” of truth instead of looking forward into the unrevealed.

Socratic art is art that attempts to eliminate the Dionysiac spirit from tragedy.²¹²

(This manifests itself as the making of heroes out of common man, and reducing conflicts from epic proportions to the mundane).²¹³ And this is why Socratic art (of which Euripides’ tragedies are representative, to Nietzsche) are problematic:

Euripides is the actor of the beating heart, with hair standing on end. He lays his dramatic plan as Socratic thinker and carries it out as passionate actor. So it happens that the Euripidean drama is at the same time cool and fiery, able alike to freeze and consume us. It cannot possibly achieve the Apollonian effects of the epic, while on the other hand it has severed all connection with the Dionysiac mode; so that in order to have any impact at all it must seek out novel stimulants which are to be found neither in the Apollonian nor in the Dionysiac realm. Those stimulants are, on the one hand, cold paradoxical ideas put in the place of Apollonian contemplation, and on the other fiery emotions put in the place of Dionysiac transports. These last are splendidly realistic counterfeits, but neither ideas nor affects are infused with the spirit of true art.²¹⁴

In the end, I don’t think Socrates and Nietzsche have an important disagreement over the nature of art, as compared to the disagreement that Plato and Sidney have. (I think Nietzsche must side with Sidney in that debate; except for that he wouldn’t see how there could possibly be any question that Sidney is right, and he might take issue with Sidney’s rationalistic argumentation). The main disagreement between Nietzsche and

²¹² *ibid* p. 76. According to Silk and Stern, one might characterize Socratic art as Apolline art without the Dionysiac: “The conclusion to which [*The Birth of Tragedy*] leads itself is that the Socratic is a plainer offshoot of the Apolline and results from a total rejection of the Dionysiac. This is the lesson of Euripides, who aspired to reconstruct tragedy as an Apolline art... and of Plato... and apparently of Rome... Socratic rationalism is to be taken as the product of the divorce of the Apolline from the Dionysiac (and in that sense a denial of nature and art alike)... (p. 286, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*)

²¹³ *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 70-72.

²¹⁴ *ibid* p. 78-9.

Socrates is not about art, but is a question of what is real, and how we know it – they disagree primarily about metaphysics and epistemology. Nietzsche does, however find a deeply poetic way of emphasizing the (I would say possible)²¹⁵ role that art can have in describing and communicating the true and the real, and his work is valuable to this process for that reason.

Having shown how some important continental philosophers think about the relationship between art and reality (especially with regard to human freedom and the understanding of it), I turn now to giving the best answer I can to the question of how truth is communicated through fiction. I will do this in two steps: in Chapter Six I will analyze the relationship between meaning in language on one hand and truth and reality on the other; in Chapter Seven I will tie the positive aspects of these four continentals, ideas from Sidney and Plato, and my own work in Chapters Two and Six together to come up with as precise an answer to my question as I can manage.

²¹⁵ and I think Nietzsche would say necessary

Chapter Six: Meaning and Communication

In Chapter Two I promised to have more to say about what I mean when I say that truth can be *communicated through* fiction. There is some reason to think that the basic model of communication, which involves a message, a sender, and a receiver, cannot be completely accurate in the case of communication through fiction – at very least, it seems, the model misses some of the important nuances of communication through fiction. It is my goal in this chapter to offer as clear an analysis as I can of communication via fiction.

Implication Is The Fun Stuff

An analysis of explicit truth-communication in fiction is, I have argued, pretty simple, once the correct scope of fiction is identified. In Chapter Two I argued that fiction is only about the fictional world it creates, though authors may (and usually do) create fictional worlds that are very much like the real world, in order to aid the reader in his imagination of the story. What the author writes can often be assumed to be true of the real world even though the author usually makes no claim to that effect. The explicit statement of a truth in fiction cannot count as adequate evidence for a claim, but it does imply truth in many cases.

When truths are left unstated, though, analysis is much more difficult. First there is an issue about whether or not the implied truth claim is, properly speaking, part of the text at all. Then, one might wonder, even if we could properly relate the text and implication, how can the author count on the message getting through as he intended it – if it gets through at all? What rules are there for working out implied meaning, in other

words, and if there are such rules, why doesn't anyone know what they are? One also might wonder about the proper roles of author intention and reader interpretation, and whether or not it makes sense to talk about "the meaning" or "meanings" of a text.

Meaning and the Triad

It should be clear that there is a triad of entities involved in the creation of the meaning of a fictional text (on the assumption, for the moment, that there can be such a thing). By "meaning of the text" in this context, I mean something like "the sum total of all possible or likely meanings of a text." I will have more to say about this locution soon. There is, perhaps centrally, the text itself. The text by necessity contains a finite set of words, which will have, usually, a limited number of possible meanings given their arrangement. Next, there is the author of the text, who usually but not necessarily has an idea in mind that guides his selection of the words that go into the text – if he didn't have one specific idea in mind, he is probably at least working towards a particular range of meanings. The last member of the triad is the reader. While reading the text, the reader uses the text, as well as his own experience of the world, to guide himself in constructing his idea of the fiction. Of the three parts of the triad, the reader has the least to do with determining the meaning of the text, because he has no control over what actual words are contained in the text, or the order in which they occur. It is still appropriate to consider him a part of the triad, though, because the author's intention can never have exact, direct influence on what meanings the text can be appropriately construed to have.

J.R.R. Tolkien is one author who claims explicitly that he does *not* have specific meanings in mind for his texts, but that he likes instead to leave some determination of meaning to the reader. He writes:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader; and the other in the purposed domination of the author.”²¹⁶

Tolkien’s use of “applicability” suggests that, while he doesn’t think the author should force one specific meaning on the reader, he does think the author has some range of meanings in mind, and that the audience should be free to select meanings out of that range that they find particularly appropriate. Application does require one to start with something, after all. The reader, on Tolkien’s view, shouldn’t be bullied; but he can’t conjure up the whole of the work’s meaning, either.

The word “meaning” in the phrase “meaning of a text” has at least two different possible senses, and in order to save myself a lot of work, and also to prevent confusion, the word must be disambiguated. The two different meanings I have in mind correspond to the two different “worlds” relevant to any work of fiction. At what I would argue is the most basic level of meaning, the actual words that comprise the fictional text create truth-in-fiction, but also communicate the content of the story, in much the same way that the words of a true story communicate the content of that story. At this level, then, meaning is communicated no differently than it is in non-fictional uses; words have conventional meanings, but can be used in ways outside their ordinary conventional uses in order to suggest ideas without stating them, to attempt humor, to communicate a unique

²¹⁶ introduction to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Ballantine Books, 1965, p. x.

perspective, etc. When all we as readers are doing is attempting to understand what is happening in the story, the words refer similarly or have similar senses or uses as they do in ordinary, non-fictional contexts. When Dickens writes in *The Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times, it was the worse of times...” readers do not have to learn some new way to understand the words or the sentence; the sentence tells the reader what is happening in the fiction the same way that it would tell readers what was happening in the real world if it had been written in a history book or a newspaper. Because establishing the “meaning of a text” in this sense is the same philosophical project as establishing the meaning of “meaning” in general, I am going to set this aside. It is an interesting project, but it is beside the main point of this work.

There is another sense of the phrase “meaning of a text,” however. It is one thing to understand what is supposed to be happening in a fictional narrative at face value; it is entirely another thing to try to extract truths about the real world from a fictional narrative, or, in other words, to apply that narrative to the real world or one’s own life. Though the meanings of the actual words in the text have some influence on this second sort of meaning, they do not wholly determine it. Application to a world besides the one which the words actually describe will always involve some sort of evaluation of the original content as understood, because the story must be applied outside its original context, and so it must be adapted into general terms based on some understanding of it. Evaluation will differ in different cases – it might be made in terms of good and bad, pessimistic and optimistic, uplifting and depressing, satisfying and not, universal and not, etc. It is only after one makes this sort of evaluation of the content that one can attempt to apply it outside the context in which it appears. The “meaning of the text” in the second

sense is a direct result of this kind of evaluation and application. In this second sense, the “meaning of the text” will always be a meaning *for some individual*.

It might be helpful, for understanding the two senses of meaning I’m trying to establish, to draw an analogy. Suppose that you turn on the television and see the local channel’s news anchor reporting the terrorist attack in Mumbai. The reporter uses a specific set of words, including, for example, “terrorist” and “Mumbai,” and from these words, taken in the specific order used, the viewer comes to grasp the meaning of the report, in the first sense. The main operative force in the establishment of this first-sense meaning is the words used. If you are in a normal epistemic state, you the viewer will come away from that news report with a new set of beliefs about Mumbai. But most viewers will come away with more than just new beliefs – there will usually be some reaction. This reaction will vary from person to person, in intensity and in content, but will generally be negative, because most people agree that terrorist attacks are bad things. That there was a terrorist attack in Mumbai suggests other things: maybe there will be another attack somewhere else, or another attack there later. Perhaps valuable cultural or historical artifacts were damaged or destroyed. If I experienced a different terrorist attack in a particularly memorable way, I might find myself thinking about that. If I have a friend in the city, I will probably wonder if she is in danger. If I have been planning a trip to Mumbai, I worry that I may have to change my plans. All these are possible results of a terrorist attack in Mumbai, and depending on my circumstances, and what is important to me, I will be more or less likely to have a reaction somewhere in a possible range of such reactions to the news of the attack. These reactions are what the news of the terrorist attack in Mumbai *means* (in the second sense) to me.

The difference between the two senses of “meaning” I’m talking about is not the difference between natural and non-natural meaning.²¹⁷ Like all language, the actual words of the anchor’s report, as well as the words that comprise any fiction, have, in Grice’s terms, non-natural meaning. In my example (of the newscast), the second-sense meaning grasped by the viewer happens to be Gricean natural meaning, but it need not have been. For example, the anchor’s statements may have logically entailed another unstated statement, which the viewer could have picked up on. In any case, the important difference between these two senses of “meaning” is not about whether the meaning is naturally occurring or not, nor is it about whether or not intentions can be inferred, or whether meaning is entailed, etc. The important difference is whether or not meanings are actually part of the text of the (fiction, script, etc).

Because, of course, by virtue of being implied rather than explicitly stated, these second-sense meanings are not part of the text. Now, Grice claims that even in cases where we’re dealing with the literal content of a sentence (for example), the meaning is not completely determined without some knowledge of the context in which the sentence occurs.²¹⁸ I think this is probably true, but it is not the same issue. Of course we need context to determine what a sentence means, but sometimes we can come to grasp propositions that are not part of the sentences in a text *at all*, but that are merely implied by the (partially-grasped-without-context) sentences that are actually written in a text. So, the picture I would like to get across here is that there are two steps to determining the

²¹⁷ As used by Paul Grice in “Meaning,” *Philosophical Review* 66: 377-388, reprinted in A.P. Martinich, *The Philosophy of Language*, 4th edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2001, pp. 92-97.

²¹⁸ In for example, “Logic and Conversation,” *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3, Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan, eds. (New York Academic Press, 1975) pp. 41-58. Reprinted in A.P. Martinich, *The Philosophy of Language*, 4th edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2001; pp. 165-175. Note especially the section entitled “Implicature.”

meaning of a fiction, and philosophy of language meaning issues are only relevant to one of them – the first step, where the reader of the fiction is trying to understand the literal meaning of the word in the text in order to understand what is supposed to be going on in the fiction. The second level, where the reader tries to figure out what “to do” with the story – how to apply it in the real world, for example – requires a different kind of understanding that has almost nothing to do with the “meaning” issues in philosophy of language.

What is merely implied by a text is not literally a part of it.²¹⁹ This doesn't mean, though, that what is implied by a text is necessarily foreign to the work, something that ought not to be considered when appreciating or evaluating the work as a whole. It can be a genuine part of a reasonable interpretation of a text to consider what implications the text makes.

One might wonder how implication can be relied on at all to communicate anything. I think this is a real problem for the author of fiction who wishes to communicate by implication – one never can be sure that one is getting anything across. Implications have to be noticed in order to work, and dense, quick, or careless readers are likely not to notice them at least some of the time. There are ways to make implications noticeable, though. If the author knows, because of recent events, that his readers are more or less likely to be thinking of certain things, or if he knows of a connection likely to be already in place in his readers' minds between what he might write and what he

²¹⁹ I take this to be an analytic truth.

wants to get across, then he can just write what he writes and count on those things to bring the (correct)²²⁰ other things to his readers' minds.

There's a nice picture of how this might work in a recent children's novel called *Princess Academy*.²²¹ Miri, a girl of about 10, has been sent away to school because she is physically incapable of working at her village's occupation, which is quarrying a certain kind of rock. Miri has always felt outside the center of her village's community, because, not having worked in the quarry, she doesn't know the special language the workers use – quarry-speech. But while away at school, she begins to figure out the language on her own:

Build on common ground. The question of quarry-speech [a way the characters talk to each other; they must be touching a certain kind of rock for it to work] was constantly murmuring in the back of Miri's mind... *They didn't speak the same language,* she thought, pondering the story Esa had read, *so they found other ways to communicate by sharing what they had in common.*

When Gerti had heard Miri's quarry-speech, she had remembered her own time in the closet. The thing they had in common – they had both experienced the closet and the scuttling noises of the rat.

Miri's thoughts began to buzz like flies over a meal. That last day before coming to the academy, Miri had heard Doter tell another quarry worker to lighten the blow. How had she known what Doter said? Thinking back to that moment, she realized she had imagined the time Marda had taught her how to pound a wheel of cheese and corrected her when she hit it too hard. The quarry-speech had prompted a real memory in her own mind, and she had interpreted the memory into what it might mean in that moment – *Lighten the blow.*

Quarry-speech used memories to carry messages.

In the context of the story, this “quarry-speech” is mystical – mineral-based telepathy, which is not just mystical, but a little messed-up as well; why would you need rock for

²²⁰ By “correct,” I mean the things that the author wants the readers to think of. This should not be interpreted as a claim on my part that author intention is the most important, primary, or only determinant of meaning.

²²¹ by Shannon Hale, Bloomsbury Children's Books, New York: 2005. The section quoted is from page 111.

telepathy? – but the idea is still interesting in the context of communication through fiction by implication. The author relies on shared experiences of the world, and uses certain ideas to get readers to react in desired ways.

Evocation and Communication

Up until now I've been using the word "communicate," which is a general word, intended to be neutral between the explicit and the implicit sharing of ideas. It is now time to find a better, more precise word. I think the best word for communication by implication might be the word "evoke" (though I don't think it is completely free of possible pitfalls of misunderstanding, as I will explain momentarily). John Hospers uses this word to describe what the poet does:

...if the poet selects his words properly, and is sufficiently a master of the verbal medium, he may be able to communicate his insight to the reader not by describing but by *evoking* in the reader, by means of just these combinations of words, the same kind of vision (picture, emotion, etc) which was vouchsafed to him, the poet. That is, the words act as an *objective correlative* of the poetic vision, the latter cannot be transferred bodily from one mind to another, but the communication *may* be effected by means of this objective correlative, the words evoking in the reader the same syndrome of pictures and emotions as the poet intended...²²²

Further, he compares "expression" and "evocation":

...All evocation... is not expression. When we say "x expresses y to me," we do not mean simply, "x evokes y in me." Most cases of evocation are not cases of expression at all; many times an object may evoke an intense effect in use even though we would never say that the object *expressed* it (the sight of a snake may evoke terror without expressing terror)...²²³

²²² from *Meaning and Truth in the Arts*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 1946, p. 181. Emphasis in original.

²²³ *ibid* p. 67. Emphasis in original.

The word “express” seems to suggest that there is a meaning properly understood to be communicated by a text, whereas “evoke” refers to those things that the text actually raises in the reader’s mind, whether this is a result of the genuine content of the text, or a result of some experience or idea brought to the text by the reader or even a *misunderstanding* of the text by the reader. There are two reasons I think “evoke” is the best word to describe communication by implication in fiction, and, specifically, why it is a better word than “express,” or even the more neutral “convey.” First, “express” and “convey” are both success words; both expression and conveyance happen when an intended message has been got across. Now, I think that it is important that it be allowed for intended messages to be got across, but I don’t want to rule out from the get-go that authors may leave things open to interpretation, intending that some idea or set of ideas in a certain range be communicated, but not that any particular specific one is communicated. “Evoke,” though, suggests that what gets communicated is what in the intended range of meanings strikes the reader as interesting or notice-worthy.

But more importantly, the word “evoke” more accurately describes the process of communication by implication than the word “express.” The ideas explicitly communicated by the text in the words tend to suggest other things to the readers’ minds, often predictably and intentionally, but not necessarily so. It is still an interesting question, of course, what general principles can be established describing this process, and my intention is to explore that question further. The point for now is that the content of fictions brings other things to people’s minds, which they (at least sometimes) then see as being related to the content of the novel. The extra comes from people’s minds, not wholly from the fictions, and that is why “evoke” is a better word for what happens.

Pitfalls in Evocation

There is a problem with allowing that a fiction's implied or "evoked" meanings come to a great extent from the minds of the readers, but it is a problem that people who think and talk about fiction experience in the real world, and therefore a problem that we should expect. If part of a fiction's meaning is supplied by the reader – from the reader's experience at the whim of the reader (or, more specifically, at the whim of the reader's memory), then it is possible that wild interpretations of a text might come to be seen as part of the meaning of a text, by certain readers, at least. For example, a few years back when the "Lord of the Rings" movie trilogy²²⁴ was released, I remember hearing a lot of discussion about whether or not the novels are inherently an allegory of the Christian faith, and I remember seeing people on both sides of the issue get quite upset over that discussion. Knowing what I now know about Tolkien, and having read most of his major fictional works, I think this is just as wild an interpretation as the one that interprets it as allegory of World War II, or as gay literature.²²⁵

These aren't completely wild interpretations; there are things in the novels that, given certain audiences, lend themselves to the evocation of the respective kinds of ideas. *The Lord of the Rings* is about the salvation of the whole world by a king whose coming

²²⁴ *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* (2003), New Line Cinema. All directed by Peter Jackson.

²²⁵ All of these interpretations have, in the past, been made by various people. For the Christian interpretation, for example: *Walking With Frodo* by Sarah Arthur (Tyndale House Publishers, 2003); *The Gospel According to Tolkien* by Ralph Wood (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). Tolkien responds to proponents of the war interpretation in the foreword to the 1965 paperback edition published by Ballantine Books, so the view must have existed, or he wouldn't have bothered to respond. An internet search on keywords "lord rings Tolkien allegory war" reveals that people still consider that this today – though there is a tendency to view the obvious conjecture that Tolkien's experience of the war *influenced* his writing of the novel as evidence that the novels are *allegory*. This, of course, is a mistake; allegory is specific kind of figurative language, but an author's experience *always* informs what he writes, whether it is allegorical or not. Sean Astin refers to discussions with proponents of the gay literature interpretation in *There And Back Again*, his autobiographical telling of the making of the film (St. Martin's Press, 2004, pp. 245-9).

was foretold in prophecy – salvation from an evil entity that corrupts everything it touches, and that deceives men into doing its bidding. Put this way, the story seems a mirror of the Biblical story of salvation for mankind through Jesus, and so, if the Biblical story is something one thinks about a lot, and especially if one believes the Biblical story, *The Lord of the Rings* is more-or-less likely to bring the Biblical story to mind, despite the numerous disanalogies and Tolkien's claim to dislike all allegory categorically.

To the average reader in the mid-1950's, when *The Lord of the Rings* was first published, the joining together of the various races inhabiting Middle Earth to defeat an evil poised to conquer the whole world might easily have brought World War II to mind, as World War II influenced practically every nation, and Hitler was pretty clearly an evil person. Tolkien argues that the story would have had to be different to work as an allegory for World War II, though:

If [the real war] had inspired or directed the development of the legend, then certainly the Ring would have been seized and used against [the bad guy]; he would not have been annihilated but enslaved; and [his fortress] would not have been destroyed but occupied. [The other bad guy], failing to get possession of the Ring, would in the confusion and treacheries of the time have found... the missing links in his own researches into Ring-lore, and before long he would have made a Great Ring of his own with which to challenge the self-styled Ruler of Middle-earth. In that conflict both sides would have held hobbits in hatred and contempt: they would not long have survived even as slaves...²²⁶

The good guys in Tolkien's story were better at resisting the urge to seize power than any good guys in real life ever have been; the story is not a good allegory for the real war because real good guys would never limit themselves to completely destroying the bad guys.

²²⁶ Tolkien, p. 2

Likewise, if one were gay or if one had that lifestyle on one's mind a lot, there are things in the novel that might bring that to mind. Hobbits are different from humans, and have a different culture. They hold hands, kiss each other, and call each other "dear" with much more freedom than people do, especially Westerners. However, much about hobbit culture suggests that the intention was for hobbits to be innocent – almost childlike, in fact; hobbits mature later than humans do, are resistant to the greed that makes humans covet the Ring, and never, ever kill each other. It is therefore by far a better (more unifying) interpretation to interpret hand-holding, etc. as a result of their childlike innocence, rather than as a suggestion of homosexual tendency.

So, none of these "wild" interpretations is completely ungrounded – it is understandable, in each case, why the novels might evoke these ideas in someone, especially people with certain specific experiences. They are wild interpretations, though, more or less, because there are other interpretations which are both more reasonable, given the text and the author, and usually much more consistently adopted in a wide readership.

The important thing, though, is that novels do work by evoking ideas (images, propositions, etc) in the minds of readers – both a set of ideas about what is happening in the world of the novel, which is directly related to the words printed in the text; and a set of ideas about what the novel might "mean" (for the reader, or in the context of the real world, or some such), which is guided in part by the words in the text, but also by the reader's knowledge about the author and the context in which the book was written, as well as by the readers' experience of the world. Because novels do work this way, we should expect to find some meanings derived from texts by readers to vary, more or less.

We should also expect that some meanings readers work out from texts *will* be wildly different from other readers' interpretations, as there will be miscommunications between author and readers, readers who think some things have different import than authors intend, and readers who insist on reading a text (or all texts) in a certain way regardless of any evidence about how it ought to be read. People are different, so they will read the same things different ways, and notice different details – and sometimes they are focused so intently on what they want to find that they find it wherever there is the slightest reason to think it could be there.

Ideally, there would be a theory that establishes some guidelines for determining which interpretation in a set of interpretations is the best one – or, at least, which interpretations are the better ones and which are not as good. If there is no way to tell this, then the whole project of attempting to derive implicit truths from fiction will be no more legitimate than reading tea leaves or “finding” pictures in clouds. Fortunately, I think such a theory can be constructed.

In “Truth in Fiction,”²²⁷ David Lewis uses possible worlds analysis to create a theory of what is true in a fiction. His goal, of course, is not to talk about truths explicit in stories, but rather those that are implicit. Though I continue to resist the implication that fictional worlds are possible worlds, what he says is, I think, instructive in helping us understand what interpretations are best. (Interpretations could be viewed as claims about what is true in a story, even though those claims are not explicitly stated). Lewis develops an analysis of truth in fiction in three stages:

²²⁷ *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978): 37-46.

1: A sentence of the form “In fiction f , ϕ ” is true iff ϕ is true at every world where f is told as known fact rather than fiction.²²⁸

This means that only things that explicitly occur in a story are true of it. Lewis rightly points out that this is not right; it does not allow for implication.²²⁹ He suggests it as a theoretical advance over the analysis that the worlds to be considered are simply the worlds where the plot is enacted. This latter analysis has the problem that it could turn out by chance that the real world is one of those worlds, which would let in too many propositions as true of the text. (For example, could it be true in the series *Star Trek* that in the late 20th century there was a popular television series *Star Trek*?)

2: A sentence of the form “In fiction f , ϕ ” is non-vacuously true iff some world where f is told as known fact and ϕ is true differs less from our actual world, on balance, than does any world where f is told as known fact and ϕ is not true.²³⁰

According to this analysis, the more realistic an interpretation is, the more likely it is to be true. It will help to have a specific example rather than sentences with logic words and Greek variables. Consider the following interpretation of Hamlet: on the day Hamlet died, he had Wheaties for breakfast. I suspect that there will be general agreement that this is a bad interpretation; if we were to suppose that Hamlet did eat Wheaties, we would have to presuppose a lot of changes to the world – especially that people in pre-modern Denmark might have eaten Wheaties. Because the presumption that Hamlet did eat Wheaties involves imagining gross differences between the fictional world and the real one, and the presumption that Hamlet did not eat Wheaties does not require such

²²⁸ “Truth in Fiction,” p. 268. In “Truth in Fiction,” these analyses are numbered 0, 1, and 2, in order. My 1 :: Lewis’s 0, etc.

²²⁹ Remember, fictions are not maximal. Whatever propositions are not relevant to the story are not either affirmed or denied.

²³⁰ “Truth in Fiction,” p. 270.

differences, the interpretation supposing that Hamlet did not eat Wheaties is true; that is to say, it is true, in *Hamlet*, that Hamlet did not eat Wheaties for breakfast.

The problem with Analysis 2 is that it assigns far too great a weight to the real world. Conan Doyle famously allowed a plot point in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* to turn on an attribute of Russell's vipers that Russell's vipers don't actually have. If committed to analysis 2, we would have to believe that there is something problematic about Holmes' reasoning in the case, or with the facts of the case. The simple, and, I think, most obvious, reply here is that authors control *all truths* in their stories. If serious and undeceived people in the story say that Russell's vipers can climb ropes, then, by gum, Russell's vipers *can* climb ropes (in that story). If Conan Doyle had made the plot depend on people being able to fly, then *that* would have been true in the story. Flying people in realistic fiction would bother most readers more than vipers that can climb ropes, because most people aren't aware of the distinction between vipers and constrictors, while most are aware that people cannot fly. But analysis 2 doesn't allow this reply. This brings us to the most accurate analysis of the lot:

3: A sentence of the form "In the fiction f , ϕ " is non-vacuously true iff, whenever w is one of collective belief worlds of the community of origin of f , then some world where f is told as known fact and ϕ is true differs less from the world w , on balance, than does any world where f is told as know fact and ϕ is not true.²³¹

Translated from logicese into English, this means that the only propositions about the real world that matter in determining what is true in the story are those that people from the story's originating culture generally believe. This, of course, makes sense; in chapter two, I wrote that authors presume that readers will fill holes in the description with what they

²³¹ *ibid* p. 273

know from the real world; therefore, it is permissible to infer that these details from the real world were intended as part of what is true of the story, even though these details are not explicitly mentioned. It is this idea that I find important from Lewis' work – that common knowledge between the author and his readers does much of the work of implicit communication in fiction.

Return to the Triad

Lewis' analysis focuses primarily on facts about the fictional worlds (and the real one), not on meaningful truths of human nature. (He does discuss character psychology, briefly, but that is as close as he gets to the kind of truths I mean to be talking about). Even in the case of truth-claims that are deeply meaningful (though not explicitly stated) it should be becoming clear how the triad responsible for implicit meaning communication works. The author creates a text which has two levels of meaning – explicitly, a perfectly ordinary meaning, that establishes and communicates truth-in-the-story, and implicitly, a meaning which is meant to evoke in the reader a certain set or range of images, feelings, ideas, etc. Through shared culture and experiences, the author selects text that he thinks will best work to bring about the evocation he desires – if he intends to evoke a set or range of ideas, which he need not. The reader reads and grasps the text on a perfectly ordinary level, and uses his experience of the world to inform that reading, knowing that this is what the author (probably) intended for him to do. If there is a difference in culture between the author and reader, either temporally, geographically, ideologically, or some combination of the three, then the author and the reader should take that difference into account, the author when selecting text and the reader when

allowing his experience to color the text. (If the difference is temporal, this care is solely the reader's responsibility, because the author came first and cannot be held responsible for knowing what has happened in the interim).²³²

There is a lot of detail that could be worked out here. Much of this working out already takes place in literary theory, however, and I don't think that the specifics of the details will have much bearing on my project, so I will have no more to say about it now. The important thing to note is that this is not the hopeless task that some make it out to be.²³³ Figuring out what an author intends to imply, or what a reader will bring to a novel, is a matter of imagining a person's intentional states. Some people are better at doing this than others are; no one is perfect at it; and it cannot be done with logic-like precision. But this kind of imagination is not foreign to normal human experience, nor is it impossible to approximate an imagining of another person's intentional states. One attributes intentions and meanings to other people in ordinary conversation as a matter of course; it is unfathomable to me that just because communication involves fictional storytelling, interpretation of meaning must become logically precise, or be given up entirely, as some philosophers suggest.

What I have said, though, does suggest an answer to the questions of how many meanings it is appropriate to consider that a text has, and of whose interpretation should be primary, the author's or the reader's. The most important member of the triad is the text itself, because the text constitutes and determines what is true in the story (or, stated less rigorously, what happens in the story). Even what is implicit in the story is

²³² A similar analysis could be given for any form of fiction; for clarity and ease of communication, I've put this analysis in terms of written fiction.

²³³ For example: John Hospers, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts*, p. 161; Peter LaMarque and Stein Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, pp. 326-7.

determined in part by what is explicit in the text. Implications should not contradict the text, for example (unless the text is itself contradictory). So all interpretations have to be, at very least, consistent in letter with the text, and it is better than not that interpretations fit in with the spirit of the text as well.²³⁴

Based on the analysis of communication through fiction that I've developed, there have to be exactly as many meanings of a text as there are people who interact with it. These meanings may be very much like each other, but they also may *not* be very much like each other at all. The only thing that guarantees any uniformity at all is the text itself. Everyone uses his own experiences to color the text – his experiences help him imagine incidents, places, and characters, as well as guiding him to fill in what is not explicitly stated. (The author does much the same thing when he writes – thus the commonplace instruction in writers' manuals for the author to write about what he knows). Because everyone's experience is different, each reader will have a slightly different interpretation of the text. But though people's experiences are different, they also have things broadly in common with many other people, especially people from their own time and culture; so while interpretations will vary in details, it will be possible to reach general agreement about how to interpret a text, especially within a culture. So, while each reader will in fact have a different interpretation of a text, her interpretation is likely to be more or less like other interpretations found among other readers in her culture.

Suppose, though, that two readers did interpret a text wildly differently from each other. There are several sources to go to in order to establish which is "right," or, in language I prefer, which is better. The first, of course, is the text itself. If one

²³⁴ Whether it is hopeful or pessimistic, fantastical or starkly realistic, playful or serious, etc.

interpretation requires stretching of the text, or doing convoluted gymnastics with the ordinary apparent meaning of the content of the text, and the other does not, then the second interpretation is better, all other things being equal. Likewise, if one interpretation fits in seamlessly with given truths about the fictional world or the overall spirit of the text, and the competing interpretation requires additional information or a change in spirit, then the first is better. (See the earlier discussion of the interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* as gay literature).

Secondarily (and also, I realize, more controversially),²³⁵ one can appeal to what is known about the intentions of the author. If nothing is known specifically about the author's intentions, readers can still gain probabilistic knowledge of what the author intended by learning about the author's culture and ideology, and in some cases his character as well. An interpretation inconsistent with these things is worse, all other things being equal, than one that is not.

The author is, however, just another person. One might wonder why his intentions for his story matter more than someone else's interpretation, especially in cases where the reader has gone to a lot of trouble to think about, develop and argue for his interpretation, and when the author didn't bother even to put anything specifically contradicting the undesired interpretation in the text.

²³⁵ There is much controversy, both in philosophy of art and in literary theory, over whether the author's intentions count for interpretation. I think that the arguments favor those who think that author intentions do count for something. E.D. Hirsch Jr. gives strong replies to anti-author arguments in "In Defense of the Author," reprinted in *The Philosophy of Art*, Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, eds; McGraw-Hill, New York: 1995. Since the appearance of Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" in 1946, the issue that most concerns philosophers of art seems to be *whether* or not the author's intentions are key to understanding a work of literature (and if so, which ones). To me, these are not the interesting questions; instead, I am interested in *why* author intention might be important for determining meaning. If we can figure out why author's intentions might be important for interpretation, it will hopefully become clear whether those intentions actually can play the role they need to, or not.

Before I defend this author preference, I need to be clear about what I am not claiming. I am not claiming that an interpretation that defies the author's intentions is always "wrong" or badly conceived. As authors are human, they are certainly capable of failing or circumventing their own intentions. It is quite possible that an author, setting out to communicate or illustrate a certain point, through an injudicious choice of character, plot, location, dialogue, or description, etc. could end up, for example, making fun of the point he intended to illustrate, or communicating the opposite point. Or he might set out merely to tell a story, and end up creating a text that makes an unintended point rather well. (*Paradise Lost* is perhaps an example).²³⁶ I am not arguing that an author's intention is the last word on the meaning of a text.

It is, however, usually a very good indicator of a text's meaning, and the author's intentions are *always* more important to consider than any one reader's interpretation. Many people disagree with this, I think because one's first inclination is to say that the author's intentions matter because the author presumably knows his own work inside and out, and can therefore say with ease what is inconsistent with it, what fits in well, and what is actually, in his own mind, part of what he intended to imply. I don't think anything in the way of author expertise will serve to justify author preference, though, because, however expert the author is regarding his story, he can always forget things, and other people can learn things, so that it is quite possible for someone other than the author to become an expert about a story, and even about the author's method of creation of the story. While such expertise on the part of someone other than the author makes him a person we should listen to in developing an interpretation of the story, it does not

²³⁶ Famously, Milton made the character Satan sympathetic, making revolt against God seem gutsy but ill-fortuned, which was, according to Milton, definitely *not* his intention.

give that other person the same preference of interpretation that the author has. So it has to be something other than the author's expertise about the story that makes it so we ought to give special weight to his intentions when developing interpretations.

Back in chapter two, I argued that all fiction is false. As a part of that argument, I made much of the author's ability to decide what goes into a fiction and what doesn't. This discretion is also, I think, what makes an author's intentions so important to the interpretation of a text. When an author decides that something will be true in his story, that decision makes the thing true in the story, just by virtue of him having decided that it will be true, even if it is never stated explicitly. The author, unlike any reader, no matter how well informed that reader may be, has the power to make things be (or not be) in his stories. Even if he hasn't thought much about what is implicitly true in his story, he is still the only one who can actually make anything true.²³⁷

Consider fanfictions. Fanfictions (also called "fanfics") are stories about characters and situations written by fans of the relevant stories rather than by the authors or any other person officially associated with the stories. As one might guess, most are not thoughtfully interpreted and are badly written, but even the ones written well by fans who have obviously thought very carefully about the characters, the setting, the tone of the original work, the overall arch of the plot, etc. do not "count" as a real part of the story any more than the fanfics that are sloppily-constructed fantasies of the writer with the faces of popular characters pasted on stick-figures populating the story. What writers of good fanfic lack is not knowledge of the characters, setting, and plot – indeed, in some

²³⁷ This is by virtue of owning the story. If an author sells the story (say to a publisher or a producer) then that publisher or producer becomes the one who has say over what is true in it. This complicates matters a bit, but it also is added evidence that it is not the author's knowledge of the story that gives him special interpretive status.

cases they may know more about these things than the author does himself.²³⁸ All they lack is authorship – the status of being the person who decides what goes into the story, both explicitly and implicitly.

Granted, again, not every choice of the author about what to put in the story is by definition a good choice, and not every implication that the author attempts to make necessarily succeeds. He can make choices that work against what he intends to communicate, and he is at liberty to write without intending to communicate any implication at all. But, on the whole, an author's intentions count towards the meaning of a story to a degree that makes his intentions useful for resolving conflict between competing interpretations.

A third source one can go to in resolving such conflict is to the readership in general. Interpretations of groups of readers are likely to converge towards one (or perhaps two or three) interpretations(s); people who disagree wildly about how to interpret a text can study the opinions of other readers to find out which view is the received view (of course, there may be more than one). Given that the people whose interpretations contribute to the received view are people who can think carefully and well, a view that at least does not contradict such a received view is better than one that does contradict it.²³⁹

²³⁸ For example, it is legendary among fans of the short-lived cable television series *Remember WENN* that the author, Rupert Holmes, would check the website of a fan, Linda Young, in order to remind himself of which company sponsored which serial in the show. (It was set in a radio station). Young also wrote fanfiction, which can be found, along with the information about sponsors used by Holmes, at www.rememberwenn.org.

²³⁹ One that contradicts only peripheral tenets will be stronger than one that contradicts central ones, etc.

Helps to Communication Through Fiction

I've said several times that communication through fiction can fail, because the author can fail to evoke in his readers what he intends to evoke, and he can accidentally evoke reactions which he did not intend to evoke. (Though meaning is definitely not solely dependent on author intention, communication requires these intentions; a "sender," someone with a message to get across, is part of any basic model of communication). This might sometimes be due to careless reading, but it is at least possible that failure to communicate is partly the author's fault. What I intend to do in this section is to identify some properties of fiction that are conducive to the communication of truths – to identify the aspects of fiction that make it such a powerful means of getting people to understand ideas, and of evoking specific reactions in their minds.

At this point I've separated evocation from communication – evocation, as I'm using the word, is the text's prompting thoughts and other reactions as a response to its contents, which can be a result of the author's intent to provoke those thoughts, but which can also be accidental. Communication is the getting across of an idea from the author to the reader through the text; evocation can be one means of communication, but there are other means as well (such as, for example, direct address).²⁴⁰ The word "communication" bears even further scrutiny, though. We might differentiate, I suggest, between whether a text "expresses" truth (roughly, whether or not a text states and/or suggests any true ideas) and whether a texts "communicates" those truths (roughly, whether and to what extent the text actually succeeds, on the whole, in getting those true ideas across). There

²⁴⁰ Though it is in the area of evocation that one really might wonder how communication is possible.

are several values, then, that claims expressed in fiction (implicitly or explicitly) can have that make them more likely than otherwise to be recognized as truths.

Significance of Meaning

“Significance” is, of course, a gloriously vague term. Whether or not an idea counts as significant will vary with context; an idea may be significant to one audience and not to another, it may be significant at one time and not at another. Ideas can also be significant relative to a story, relative to an individual, relative to people in general, relative to ideas in other stories, etc. Significance is, of course, closely related to meaning (again, in the sense that is separate from the sense operative in philosophy of language); another way to say that an idea is significant is to say that it is deeply meaningful. This is not a whole lot less vague than “significance.”

If a claim is to count as a truth implicitly expressed by a text, it will not be an obvious truth that everyone already accepts. Truths that everyone already knows can be assumed by a text, and these truths can even function as the basis of important plot points, but it would be a mistake to say that every truth assumed by the text is part of the implicit message that the text seeks to communicate. For example, every novel I have ever read describes a setting where gravity is in effect, though by far most do not actually mention gravity, and none, in my experience, have attempted to define gravity or describe it mathematically (though, of course, it is certainly possible for a work of fiction to make such an attempt). Though these novels would be extremely odd without the effects of gravity at work, they tend not to make claims, explicit or otherwise, that gravity functions in a certain way, or that the way gravity works is good, bad, interesting, funny, etc. The

effects of gravity are so indubitably part of the way people experience the world that the topic does not lend itself to thoughtful exploration.

Sometimes the truth that a work of fiction attempts to communicate is not given in the form of a claim. A story may simply encourage thought about an issue. Stories like this might be interpreted as making a claim of the form, “Issue x may not be quite as clear-cut as it seems.” An example of this kind of story is *The Matrix*, an action movie in which, though people think they are living what we would call ordinary lives, they are in fact floating in human-sized capsules of liquid, plugged into a super-computer that feeds them their ordinary-life perceptions. One interpretation of this film is that it seeks to motivate thought about perception: How *are* we so sure about what we think we know? What would it matter if we really were all brains in vats? These are significant questions, even though they may not seem significant to people not philosophically initiated. Part of the film’s usefulness is to make the questions significant by asking them and showing that there is no easy or immediately satisfactory answer.

So, part of an idea’s significance is a function of how much in question the idea is; if it has a readily available, easily reached answer, it is less likely than otherwise to be significant. If, on the other hand, people disagree about the idea a lot, or if people tend to get confused about it, it is more likely than not to be significant. But that isn’t all there is to significance. Significant ideas also have import; they are ideas that matter.

Relevance to an Audience

Whether or not an idea “matters” is as vague as the concept of significance. I think it will be helpful to think of ideas mattering in terms of relevance – if an idea

matters (to some hypothetical person in some hypothetical context), then it is relevant to that person, or in that context, or both. An idea can matter because someone cares about it, or it can matter because someone ought to care about it; but sometimes people can care about things that they shouldn't or needn't care about, so the set of ideas that people do care about is potentially very different from the ideas that people should care about.

Relevance is not as much a matter of opinion, though; people can believe that an idea is relevant to something else and be mistaken, and be convinced that the idea is not relevant in a way they thought it was (if they're not hard-headed about accepting arguments).

In the course of an argument about how philosophical literature ought to be read,²⁴¹ Arthur Danto claims that, in a sense, literature is about the reader. He recognizes that the sense in which a piece of literature is about the reader is metaphorical rather than literal, but he means to make a claim much stronger than the claim that literature is about things that matter to each reader. He writes,

Each work is about the "I" that reads the text, identifying himself not with the implied reader for whom the implied narrator writes but with the actual subject of the text in such a way that each work becomes a metaphor for each reader: perhaps the same metaphor for each.²⁴²

This is one of the clearest parts of an argument that is far from ideally clear. What Danto seems to be suggesting is that the reader imagines that he is himself one or more of the named characters in a book, imagining the story through his own eyes from the perspectives of that character or those characters, and so, in a sense, is part of every story

²⁴¹ In "Philosophy as/and/of Literature," reprinted in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, Anthony J. Cascardi, ed, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 1987.

²⁴² *ibid* p. 18

he reads. I think this theory is pretty clearly wrong as a general theory of literature,²⁴³ because it is overstated. It sounds as if Danto thinks that characters are mere placeholders for the reader, a point at which the reader can imagine himself into the setting of a novel in order to interact with its circumstances. However, Danto has a point that I think is worth exploring. When a text illustrates, suggests, or even states something that is true of me, or that might be true of me were I in the novel's particular setting (even though it doesn't actually say anything about me), it is relevant to me and makes it easier for me to pretend along with the text, because it's easy to understand where that novel's characters are coming from, and there's a possibility that the text will suggest an idea that will help me deal with my own problems. So, while a fictional text is not literally about the reader (as even Danto admits), and while readers should not necessarily imagine that characters are the readers in any sense, it can still happen that a novel and/or its characters are analogous to the reader and/or the situations he finds himself in, and that, because the novel is in some way analogous to the reader, it can help the reader learn about himself.

I think an example is in order. One of the most and longest well-known fictions in the English language is *Hamlet*; specifically, the passage that begins, "To be or not to be: that is the question." This is, first of all, undoubtedly fiction; readers are directed (specifically, because it is a play) to imagine a prince of Denmark with a certain set of attributes speaking these words in the context of the plot of the play. Hamlet, in the story, has many fundamentally human things in common with every potential reader of *Hamlet*:

²⁴³ I think it is possible for a reader to interact with a novel this way, but I doubt that it is particularly common. In my opinion, it seems fairly immature habitually to read oneself into a text. In an essay entitled "Francois Mauriac and Freedom" (reprinted in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literary Essays*, Philosophical Library, New York: 1957), Sartre argues that if a novel allows a reader to think of himself, it makes the novel a bad one, to the extent that the reader is impelled to think of himself while he reads it.

he is mortal; he has a sense both of his mortality and of the idea that, to some extent, what he does matters; and it seems to him that he can effectively choose his own actions. The questions that he asks, and the reasons he brings to bear upon them, are the kinds of questions and reasons that anyone both mortal and reflective might come up with; they are about mortality and thoughtfulness. Because Hamlet, in the story, shares mortality and thoughtfulness with all of his readers,²⁴⁴ and because mortality is something that (should be) important to all thoughtful mortal individuals, Hamlet's musings on the topic are relevant to all readers of *Hamlet*, actual or potential.

This relevance on a personal level doesn't exhaust what I mean by relevance as valuable for the expression and communication of truth-claims, however. Relevance cannot be just "relevance" alone; it must be relevance *to* an individual, or *to* an idea; but that relevance must be relevance to someone or to something does not necessarily imply that the person for whom an idea is relevant must be the subject of that idea. (This is why Danto's theory of "universality" of literature is overstated – it requires that the person to whom an idea is relevant be what makes the idea relevant). There are other possibilities. If, for example, a text is about characters that are like people I know (instead of about characters that are like me), it can suggest ways of understanding and communicating with those other people and handling problems that are created when I have to interact with them. Also, it is possible for me to understand why some people might find certain fictions very relevant to themselves, even though I do not find those fictions relevant to myself – so, even though a fiction is not particularly relevant to me, I can still understand its value in terms of relevance.

²⁴⁴ to different degrees, of course

An example is called for here as well. Imagine a culture with a system of slavery approximating that of ancient Greece, and isolated enough that none of its members have come into contact with someone of a different ethnicity. Slavery, for someone in this system, happens to you when you're taken prisoner in a war or when you can't pay your debts, so it never comes about as an automatic result of who you are; it is punitive, in a broad sense of the word. Slavery as it happened in America would be quite foreign to a person that was familiar with this system, especially since it would be difficult for this person to understand why ethnicity should mean the difference between slavery and full citizenship. For this person, a novel like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will be extremely foreign, as Harriet Beecher Stowe's main intent is to show that slaves are people, which is an idea that this hypothetical reader already accepts. Despite this deep cultural disconnect, however, we can still expect that this hypothetical reader could understand how *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could be relevant to certain people. The novel will not mean nearly as much to this reader as it might even to a modern American, but if this hypothetical reader has a good imagination, he should be able to see the novel's point and understand why, in certain contexts, it might be important.

When I was young I was very familiar with the *Little House* series of books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, about the author's experiences growing up in the late 1800s as a pioneer in the western frontier (in areas ranging from Wisconsin to South Dakota to Missouri). I identified very closely with Laura when I was young, as I was also a second daughter bossed by the oldest. She and I were also the only brunettes among the children in our families. Generally speaking, a character's hair color is only important to the extent that having some specific hair color or other helps the reader imagine what the

character looks like, so the tendency would be to say that having characters with certain hair colors does not affect its relevance to its audience at all. In the case of me and the *Little House* books, this *did* affect its relevance to me, though. Laura felt that her brown hair made her less pretty than Mary, her blonde older sister; and I felt as a kid that my brown hair made me different from my sister too. Hair color then became a point on which I could empathize with Laura, and the way she dealt with her feelings had some influence over the way I dealt with mine.

This example should make it clear to what extent having characters that are like a story's readers make it relevant to the readers. *Hamlet* is relevant to everyone, no matter what age one is or what culture one happens to be from, because he shares attributes in common with everyone who could possibly read the play. The commonality between the character and the situation he's in, on one hand, and the reader and the situation she's in, on the other, is what causes the fiction to be relevant to the reader. Laura's hair color would not have any affect on the relevance of the story to most readers, because most readers would not identify with that particular fact about that character – but the moment a reader does identify with that attribute of Laura and the emotions raised by the issue, that fact about her does increase the story's relevance to the reader.

Generalizing, now, we can say that the following things have a direct influence over a fiction's relevance to a particular member of its audience:

- how close the characters and situations in the text are to being like those of the reader, people the reader knows, and people the reader can imagine, in that order.
- how much impact those similarities of character and situation have on the plot.
- how important those similarities are to the reader.

Significance and relevance both, though relative to the varying audiences a fiction may reach, have to do primarily with the expression of truth, as I've defined the word; they're not really about whether anyone actually understands the ideas in a text, but rather, whether the text has anything much in the way of ideas to offer. Of course, having ideas to offer is itself conducive to communicating ideas, and in that sense, significance and relevance are conducive to communication as well as to expression. The primary reason that a story without significant ideas to communicate doesn't communicate is not that something is wrong with how things were said, as much as with the lack of any important idea that is there to be said badly or well. The following four helps, unlike significance and relevance, are more about communication than expression, though. These four helps work on the assumption that there is an idea to be communicated, and they make the communication easier or more clear (all other things being equal).

Degree of Dogmatism

Dogmatism in argument is, for good reason, often associated with unreasonableness. People who are dogmatic stick to their beliefs no matter what evidence they run into (often avoiding evidence that contradicts their beliefs), and they tend not to be able to explain their reasons for holding their beliefs. This kind of person often doesn't find reasons convincing, but rather is convinced of beliefs because he wants to be – he wants certain beliefs to be true. A variation on this might be when a person hears a reason for a conclusion, is convinced of that conclusion, and after that point is no longer willing to reevaluate the conclusion when additional evidence turns up (or, simply avoids

additional contradictory evidence). Note that dogmatism does not necessarily imply that dogmatically held beliefs are incorrect, just that they are insufficiently supported.

Dogmatism in fiction takes the form of propaganda. War literature (films and novels) come to mind as a prime source of this – war literature from a variety of different wars, and on both sides of each war, and about war in general, often support one opinion about war without considering other contrasting or contradictory opinions (other than to make fun of them). One of the main attributes that makes a work of fiction sound dogmatic is a certain kind of thoughtless-ness: a refusal to consider (try on, play with, etc) a number of alternative answers to the questions being asked. One way for a fiction to refuse to consider answers is to simply ignore them, as was the case in, for example, many films that came out in the late 30s and early 40s in America, showing the Allies or some facet of the Allied cause in entirely sympathetic light, as good, heroic, noble, honest, honorable, etc, and completely leaving out anything negative for which the Allies or some facet of the cause might have been responsible.

Another way for a work of fiction to refuse to consider possible answers to a question is to allow some characters to communicate alternative opinions, but then to show the characters in a bad light by making them unsympathetic or evil, or by making fun of them. For example, I said earlier²⁴⁵ that M*A*S*H portrays all characters that think the war is a good idea as idiotic, boorish, and/or emotionally cold people. Furthermore, as far as I am aware, there is never a point where one of the “good” characters stops to think of any reasons why the war might be a good idea. So the show

²⁴⁵ In the end of Chapter Four

really only expresses one point of view on the question of whether or not the war is a good idea, and is, therefore, dogmatic.

This can be a problem, if the intent is to communicate truths. M*A*S*H suggests that everyone who thinks the war is a good idea is either morally reprehensible in some way, or has not thought the question through properly. This suggests this argument structure:

Frank thinks the war is a good idea.
Frank is in every way reprehensible.
 The war is not a good idea.

This is not only a fallacious argument; it takes the emphasis away from any good reasons characters might have for not approving of the war, which is the view that the makers of the show wanted to communicate. It doesn't allow that there might be compelling reasons to think that the war is a good idea or, of course, respond to those potential objections. Just that Frank doesn't have any good reasons to support the war doesn't mean there aren't any. It is easy to grasp how horrible Frank can be, and it is easy to connect Frank to pro-war ideology, because he spouts it, all the while behaving reprehensibly – pro-war sentiment comes to connote weak character and immoral behavior because all three come visibly from the same source. Characters that the show is more in favor of, though, give reasons about why the war is bad. Because Frank's antics are more colorful than the other characters' reasons, they distract attention away from the reasons, which threatens to make the overall point of the show unclear.

This is unfortunate, especially because Frank's antics do not contradict the intent of the anti-war reasoning of the rest of the characters; in fact, they support it. The message is that intelligent people do not support the war, only idiots do. The fact that

Frank's idiotic behavior supports the intended message of the show as much as the reasoned positions of the thoughtful characters is part of what makes M*A*S*H so heavy-handedly dogmatic. As the only character who fully supports the war is a stupid boor, any possibly good reasons for the war will not be aired, because he is intellectually incapable of making those points, and no other character is willing.

Dogmatism in tone can be major hindrance to communication. It can turn people who disagree with the author's intended claims²⁴⁶ against those claims. If people disagree with an idea because they have a reason to (which is, admittedly, not all of the time), then an argument that entirely discounts those reasons will not have anything to say to those individuals. Even for people who have not made up their minds about the relevant issue, if it seems as if the text is ignoring or simply making fun of the opposing position, it suggests that the author (perhaps the narrator or the characters) in his unreasonableness can't understand how anyone could find that opposing position compelling or reasonable. And that an author is unreasonable or not very thoughtful is a major turnoff where the communication of truth is concerned.

Sometimes texts just assume that something is so, failing to consider that alternative opinions are even possible (except for, perhaps, in the minds of thoroughly evil people), and the assumption that things are so permeates the whole text so that the assumption begins to look as obvious as gravity. (The problem with this is when the assumption is a moral claim, which can make it look as obviously true of the real world as it seems to be of the relevant fictional one). I have in mind, as an example of this, the

²⁴⁶ supposing that there are any, of course – which will generally be pretty obvious in the case of dogmatic texts

recent movie *Iron Man*,²⁴⁷ in which the main character, Tony Stark, builds himself an “iron” suit that allows him to fly around the world destroying all the weapons that he invented and his company built. Being in an ambush in Afghanistan is what changes Stark from a weapons manufacturer to a proponent of disarmament; I suppose that, before the ambush, he had simply never thought about what his weapons did to people, and after he knew, he decided that those things should never happen again. Though this makes a great superhero movie, it is dogmatic about armament, in such a way that, if real people followed Stark’s example (of thoughtlessness, not necessarily of disarmament), their decisions, based entirely on their personal experiences, would quickly get the world in a worse mess than it already is.

I think that a text can try and fail to be dogmatic. For example, *A Few Good Men* attempts to show that is never okay to break rules in order to bring about some “higher” good. The story follows Tom Cruise’s character, a Navy lawyer, as he tries to defend two Marines accused of the murder of a third Marine. The Marine who died was the unit’s weakest member, and he was beaten in order to get him to change his attitude. Unfortunately, he had a rare illness that made the beating lethal. The two Marines who did the beating claim that they were exacting punishment as ordered by their commander, and that the punishment killed the other Marine accidentally; the commanders claim that, as per instructions of Marine brass, no such orders were ever given, and that the two Marines must have murdered the other Marine intentionally. It comes out in the end that the commanders were lying through their teeth. The commanders are arrested, and the

²⁴⁷ Paramount, 2008, directed by Jon Favreau, starring Robert Downey Jr. Apart from the dogmatism about the making, selling, and buying of weapons, I liked this movie a lot; dogmatism about an issue does not necessarily ruin a text, though dogmatism may make it not as good as it could have been.

two Marines who carried out their orders are exonerated but discharged. The two realize, in the end, that they should have refused to execute the order of their commanders because it was immoral for them to punish their fellow soldier so harshly – and, according to the movie, this should have been obvious to them from the beginning. The only people who end up still thinking the actions were okay are the commanders, all of whom are unsympathetic characters who end up in prison.

But is this so obvious? I think not. The movie allows the bad guys to talk just enough to express their points of view (though it tries to draw attention away from their arguments by showing how awful the bad guys are, and how badly they end up). The truth is, the two Marines really were stuck in a position from which they couldn't have done anything good. A Marine must follow orders. The existence of the Marine Corps as an organization is predicated on a hierarchical command structure, such that, if it becomes permissible for soldiers to say “no” to their superiors, the organization and the jobs it does are both put in serious jeopardy. The Marines do protect America's interests in vital ways, and because of the nature of the task, have to do things that a lot of civilians would be unwilling to do (such as killing people from enemy nations). So, it is not at all clear that the soldiers ought to have refused to follow orders,²⁴⁸ especially since they were not trying to kill the other Marine, and they didn't know that what they were doing would kill him. The movie tries to draw attention away from this by having the soldiers admit their error, but, in the end, I don't think it succeeds. The movie tries to stick dogmatically to the conclusion that the soldiers made the wrong choice, but a suggestion of the opposite message manages to get through anyway.

²⁴⁸ What is clear is that the order should never have been given in the first place. That, however, was not under the two Marines' control; given that the order had been issued, they had to make a choice.

In the examples I've used above, dogmatism (to the extent it exists) in a text is bad, because it makes the implicit truths hard to grasp, distracts away from the truth, or confuses it. The main hallmark of dogmatism in a text, again, is a refusal to countenance alternate views or opposing arguments, either by distracting attention away from them or by ignoring them altogether. Some texts, though, end up being very one-sided on the questions they address, and still manage to avoid being dogmatic because they present reasons for the conclusions they offer and sometimes also consider (and deflate) opposing points of view. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* comes to mind; Stowe is so firmly on one side of the question of what treatment of black people is appropriate that she often steps outside of the narrative in order to address the question directly. She also does what M*A*S*H does: she makes characters that support wrong answers to the question appear weak and small, coarse and cruel, or foolish. But she avoids dogmatism by attacking opposing views instead of ignoring them. The author's views are extremely one-sided, and that makes the text didactic, but it never becomes dogmatic.

There can be value in being didactic. Though it can detract from the beauty of a work, because it makes the "point" the primary goal for which beauty can be sacrificed if need be, it also cuts through implication and imagery to make the point more-or-less directly. This cuts out much potential that readers will misunderstand and misconstrue a text. By thoughtfully addressing opposing arguments, a text makes its author's views clear, even if those views are not explicitly stated.

Character freedom

Besides dogmatism in tone, another distracting manifestation of thoughtlessness on the author's part, this time related specifically to characters, is illicit or unneeded manipulation of a character's thoughts and actions by the author in his creation of the text. Because there is such a close relationship between fictional worlds and the real one (namely, that it is assumed that, where possible, readers will be thinking of the real world when reading about the fictional one), it is best if the characters are as much like real people as possible.²⁴⁹

To most non-philosophically educated people, as well as to many people who are philosophically educated, it seems that they have free will. People may or may not actually have free will; I have opinions about that, but this is not the place to get into that discussion, as whether or not they actually have free will is entirely beside the point. What is important is that it seems to most people that they actually do make choices freely, whether they really do or not. This impression that we do make choices, and all the implications that follow from that, if it were true, is one of the things that most centrally makes being human interesting. This is one of the most important ways in

²⁴⁹ Of course, not all stories are about people: *Black Beauty*, *Watership Down*, the *Redwall* series, *Peter Pan*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Charlotte's Web*, etc, are all primarily about non-human characters, all of which have important non-human traits – Black Beauty has no tendency to defend his “rights,” nor does he even have any real concept of them; Hazel and Fiver and the mice that live in Redwall, the rats of Nimh, and other little critter characters, have to constantly defend themselves from almost everything; Peter Pan doesn't age; hobbits have no natural inclination to be sneaky or mean; and Charlotte has a life-span of only a couple of years. Still, these characters were created to help tell stories intended to be specifically compelling to humans. The characters, then, have to be human-like in certain ways, or their stories would have nothing to say to humans. Oftentimes, it is the specifically non-human aspect of the characters that, when combined with their human characteristics, makes their stories so compelling. *The Lord of the Rings* is a good example of this. Hobbits, like people, are materialistic and relatively hedonistic – they collect things, and like nothing better than good food and “pipeweed” to smoke. However, they are unlike humans in an important way – they would never, for example, murder someone in order to rob him, as humans will. This is important to the story because the One Ring, which the bad guy uses to destroy his enemies by controlling their minds, works by tempting people's greed. It is only because hobbits are not greedy as people are that they can withstand temptation long enough to actually destroy it.

which characters should be like people, because of how central free will is to making humans interesting.

For a character to seem as if he has free will means that whatever he does flows from who he is – his actions and thoughts should reflect or at least be consistent with his personality traits and his experiences, and it should seem to him, as to the readers, that he is making his own choices. The problem with characters not seeming free is that it causes the same problems in interaction (between both the characters and other characters on one hand, and the character and the reader on the other) as it would were the character part of the real world. If one were to interact in the real world with someone who was not free to act as he desired, then one would have to wonder – is the person saying what he thinks is true, or is he saying what someone else is forcing him to say because that other person wants me to think it is true? Since I have no immediate interaction with this third person lurking behind the scenes, I can't judge anything at all about his thoughts, feelings, motives, or actions, so I can't know whether or not I'm being intentionally misled. While I might not know that during face-to-face conversations with free moral agents, either, there may at least be some clues that I might pick up on in such cases. But when someone is being controlled, all that I can really tell is whether or not the person is being controlled – this gives me no clues about how I ought to evaluate the interaction.

This applies to interactions with characters in fiction as well. If I can tell that the characters are not acting freely, I begin to suspect that the author doesn't really care as much about his characters reflecting real, life-like attributes and about his story being relevant to real life as he does about the character completing a certain set of actions or saying a certain set of words. The characters become merely means through which the

author achieves his end of telling a story, or communicating a point, or whatever it is that the author is trying to do. Since the characters are in this case only means to the end, the author shows that he doesn't care much about them, which in turn suggests that I, the reader, ought not to care much about them either. But caring about the characters is one of the primary ways that I come to grasp whatever it is that the author may be trying to get me to see through the text, because caring about the characters makes me want to understand them and "spend time with" them. So, when the author forces a character to do something outside his character, he risks turning the reader off completely to whatever he wants to communicate through the text.

My suggestion here, that characters seeming free is conducive to truth communication in fiction, and the reasons that support that suggestion, are entirely in line with what Aristotle says about character and plot in the *Poetics*. At 1450 a, he writes,

Again, Tragedy is the imitation of action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these – thought and character – are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends. Hence, the Plot is the imitation of the action: - for by plot I here mean the arrangements of the incidents. By Character I mean that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents.

and, at 1454 a XV:

In respect of Character there are four things to be aimed at... The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent. As an example of motiveless degradation of character, we have Menelaus in the *Orestes*... of inconsistency, the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, - for Iphigenia the suppliant in no way resembles her later self.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ reprinted in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* by S.H. Butcher, Dover Publications, Inc, New York: 1951.

What Aristotle has said here is that any plot depends on the characters, because their choices are what moves the plot along. In the second passage here, he says that characters must always be what they are, and must not suddenly change at some point; a character may keep changing his mind about things, or may make decisions differently than he has in the past, but if he does, he must always keep changing his mind; such a character should not, with no cause, suddenly become a steady-minded, decisive type. But he still hasn't explained why. He continues:²⁵¹

... a person of a given character should speak or act in a given way, by the rule either of necessity or of probability; just as this event should follow that by necessary or probable sequence. It is therefore evident that the unraveling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, must not be brought about by the *Deus ex Machina*...

Here we see that Aristotle thinks characters must be lifelike in the same way plots must be – actions must be natural (i.e. probable or necessary) results of characters' beliefs and desires, and not based on the beliefs and desires of something or someone outside of the story. Since the whole of the *Poetics* is predicated on the assumption that the fundamental role of poetry is to imitate (real life) through language, and in real life it seems that people are the originators of their actions, it must also seem so of characters in fiction.

What I have said is also consistent with Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of fiction. According to him, if a character is not free, he doesn't "live," which in turn makes the reader think of the reader himself, the author – but not the plot and the characters. He writes:

If I suspect that the hero's future actions are determined in advance by heredity, social influence or some other mechanism, my own time ebbs back into me; there remains only myself, reading and persisting,

²⁵¹ *ibid*, 1454 b.

confronted by a static book. Do you want your characters to live? See to it that they are free.²⁵²

The idea that it is possible for characters to behave freely suggests that there is a surprising relationship possible between authors and characters – namely, that authors can misunderstand and misuse, and perhaps even bully, their own characters. At first blush, this may sound mistaken; I think the reason it sounds wrong is that everyone knows that authors create characters, and in creating those characters are the primary (and sometimes sole) determinant of everything that is true of the character, including the character's personality traits. Because of their role in creating the characters, it seems, then, that how the characters end up acting is left entirely to the discretion of the author.

One of the things that make this problem so difficult to discuss is that I can only tackle it with knowledge of my own experience. I've interacted with characters as an author, as an actor, and as an audience member or reader, which gives me a variety of experiences, which all suggest to me that characters do, in fact, have beliefs and desires apart from what authors and actors think and "make up" about them. However, this is still only the experience of one person – and a person with premeditated philosophical leanings, at that. So I will instead present the views of two other people who have said things in print that relate to this issue: Dorothy Sayers and Leonard Nimoy.

Leonard Nimoy is easily most famous as the actor who played Spock on *Star Trek* (The Original Series). Actors have a great deal of influence over how their characters develop, often as much as or more than the various writers and directors on a project have, so if there is anyone who could talk about what they did to make a character, it is

²⁵² From "Francois Mauriac and Freedom," reprinted in *Literary Essays*, published by Philosophical Library, New York: 1957, p. 7.

the actor. While actors can generally describe the process by which a character is created, many talk more about “getting to know” the characters they portray, rather than making decisions about him. Nimoy is a particularly good example of this, because he seems to have put a lot of thought into a variety of aspects of his relationship with Spock (without having been corrupted by a study of philosophy of language!). Here is what he writes about the “birth” of Spock:

... I realize now that there *was* a defining moment, a flash of revelation where I suddenly realized “*Aha! So this is who the Vulcan is...*” And it came during the shooting of the third *Star Trek* episode ever filmed, “The Corbomite Manuever.” ...We were all supposed to be concerned about this strange new threat, and my line consisted of that single fateful word, “Fascinating...”

I just didn’t have a handle on how to say it... it didn’t seem appropriate to shout such a word out. Everyone was reacting in character – humanly, of course – but I couldn’t figure out how the Vulcan would respond or how the word should come out.

Until, that is, Joe Sargent wisely said, “Look, don’t act uptight about what you see on the screen. Instead, when you deliver your line, be cool and curious, a scientist.”

The moment he said it, something inside me clicked; he had just illuminated what it was that made this character unique and different from all the others on the bridge. I composed myself, drew a breath, and calmly said, “Fascinating...” ...I began to seriously understand where Spock was coming from. The Vulcan was truly among us.”²⁵³

It seems pretty clear that, to Nimoy, at least, there is a right way and a wrong way (perhaps many of them!) to play Spock – that Spock is something more than the thoughts and actions Nimoy used to portray the character. In this short passage, even, he uses telling phrases multiple times: “so this is who the Vulcan is;” “didn’t have a handle on how to say it;” “couldn’t figure out how the Vulcan would respond;” “began to seriously understand where Spock was coming from.” Just these few phrases make it clear that, though Nimoy understands that he as much as anyone else determines what comes across

²⁵³ from *I Am Spock* by Leonard Nimoy, Century, London: 1995, pp. 38 and 45.

as Spock's identity, it is also true that Spock has a separate identity from Nimoy and the other creators of *Star Trek* that must be approximated as closely as possible within the confines of the story being told.

One might be suspicious of Leonard Nimoy as an example; after all, he is, originally at least, just an actor; the character he portrayed was dreamed up by someone else. Surely the originator of the idea of character, at least, must be such a determinant of a character that he could never get the character wrong, even though an actor might?

I don't think even the author is immune to making mistakes with characters. Again, my own experience backs me up on this; I've worked with characters that went right along with what I had in mind for them, and characters that "dug their heels in" at every turn. But, again, I'd like to get away from my own experience. Dorothy Sayers, the British author, must have had similar experiences. Her character Harriet Vane, an author who solves mysteries with Lord Peter Wimsey, discusses with Wimsey the problems she's running into in writing a mystery involving a character named Wilfrid:

"If you ask me," said Wimsey, "it's Wilfrid. I know he marries the girl – but must he be such a mutt? Why does he go and pocket the evidence and tell all those unnecessary lies?"

"Because he thinks the girl's done it."

"Yes – but why should he? He's dotingly in love with her – he thinks she's absolutely the cat's pyjamas – and yet, merely because he finds her handkerchief in the bedroom he is instantly convinced, on evidence that wouldn't hang a dog, that she is not only Winchester's mistress but has also murdered him in a peculiarly diabolical way... From a purely constructional point of view, I don't feel that Wilfrid's behavior is sufficiently accounted for."

"Well," said Harriet, recovering her poise, "academically speaking, I admit that Wilfrid is the world's worst goop. But if he doesn't conceal the handkerchief, where's my plot?"

"Couldn't you make Wilfrid one of those morbidly conscientious people, who have been brought up to think that anything pleasant must be wrong – so that, if he *wants* to believe the girl an angel of light she is, for that very reason, all the more likely to be guilty. Give him a puritanical father and a

hell-fire religion... He'd still be a goop, and a pathological goop, but he would be a bit more consistent.”

“Yes – he'd be interesting. But if I give Wilfrid all those violent and lifelike feelings, he'll throw the whole book out of kilter.”²⁵⁴

Two things are clear to Harriet and Wimsey in this dialogue. The first is that Harriet is completely in control of what will happen in the story that she's writing, down to the tiniest details about how her characters think and feel – if she decided to change things, she could change them, and then they would be changed. The second thing that both Harriet and Wimsey seem to assume is that it is possible for Harriet to do a poor (thoughtless, badly constructed) job of writing the characters. Of course, if it is possible for Harriet to do a poor job writing Wilfrid, then it must be the case that Harriet is the person ultimately responsible for who Wilfrid becomes, and that there is some standard outside of Harriet for what makes Wilfrid a good character. (Wimsey seems to suggest that being consistent and interesting are two such values. Harriet suggests that a character's fitting into the story as a whole is also valuable – as well as something that can work against being interesting and consistent).

It seems, though, that these two things are incompatible. If an author is completely in charge of what a character in a story does, then it seems that no matter what the author decides to create would be the right²⁵⁵ thing to create, because all the author is doing is creating what she wants to create. This seems to leave no room for the author to make mistakes in creating what she creates, except, perhaps, that she may be able to end up creating a story different from the one she set out to create. On the other

²⁵⁴ from *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy Sayers, Harper & Row, New York: 1936 (Perennial Library edition, 1986, pp. 301-2.

²⁵⁵ or, perhaps, *a* right thing

hand, if it is possible to get a character wrong, then it seems that there is a constraint on the creativity of the author after all.

I think what is going on here is that the constraints of the author and the attendant freedom of the character operate on one level, while the freedom of the author to create what she will operates on an entirely different level. Authors are free, at the beginning of the story-creating process, but once they begin, they are bound to the stories and the characters they began with,²⁵⁶ so authors need to pay attention to the attributes of the characters they create, if they want to tell a good story.

For example, I once wrote a story about a character I'll call PT. A scene came up where I was trying to get him to think and do certain things, and, though he did them, every sentence was a struggle; it was as if PT had no internal drive of his own, but was merely making wooden motions that I forced him to make. Eventually I realized that something that had happened earlier in the story really should have been affecting his behavior, and once I allowed it to, he started to do things without seeming to require my forcing him to do them. So, though it was entirely my choice to put that earlier event in the story, once I did, if I hadn't allowed that event to affect PT's behavior, I would have been making a mistake.

So, the principle that I draw from Aristotle, Sartre, Nimoy, Sayers, and PT is this: while an author can't make mistakes in setting up the story, she can both create the wrong characters for the story (characters that make the telling of the story more difficult than

²⁵⁶ Of course, it is possible for a storyteller to purposely work against general principles of good storytelling, in order to make a point (or a pointless splash, maybe). If character consistency – and hence, character freedom – is “worked against” in this way, it will tend to have the effect of making the story either hard to follow or difficult to believe, or both – Wimsey implies this of Harriet's story in the passage quoted above.

otherwise) and can make mistakes about how the characters develop, given how they were when she started the story (by misunderstanding them or just not paying attention to them). At the level of planning the story, the author is in complete control. But once characters begin to grow and take on personality, it must be believable that they are making the choices and feeling the feelings they do. If this isn't believable, the illusion of the fictional world created by the story will be ruined, which will make it harder than otherwise for the author to communicate through the story whatever she may have desired to communicate.

Distance

Earlier, both in this chapter and much earlier in Chapter Two, I took a lot of trouble to explain the relationship between fictional worlds (which, I reiterate, are not possible worlds in the sense operative in modal logic), and the real world. One of the most important aspects of this relationship is the role the real world plays in helping the readers or the audience to imagine the fictional world the author creates with the fiction;²⁵⁷ one of the other most important aspects of the relationship is one of the assumptions I've made throughout this work, defending it only briefly in the end of Chapter Two: that fictions can, indeed, express and communicate truths about the real world. This suggests an interesting cycle: the actual text of a fiction brings to mind facts, principles, experiences, etc. about the real world which help the reader imagine the fictional world, which in turn can suggest previously unnoticed ideas about the real world (which may or may not be true, interesting, exciting, life-changing, etc.). In (most of)

²⁵⁷ see "Fiction is False" in Chapter Two

these cases, it's good for the fictional world and the real world to have a lot in common, to ease the process of these ideas and implications bouncing off each other. In fact, in some cases – *Dragnet*, for example – the fiction has so much in common with the real world that discerning the line between fiction and reality can be really tricky.

In some cases, though, it is better for the fiction to be quite unlike the real world – if, for example, the point that one wants to communicate is an idea that one suspects will be unpopular or next-to-impossible for one's audience to understand given its cultural background. In these cases, getting the audience away from their perceptions of the real world is perhaps a good thing to try; distance from the real world could allow the story to communicate an idea which may otherwise hit too close to home and so turn them off, or spark criticism that will distract people from the idea one wants to communicate.

Science fiction as a genre comes to mind – *Star Trek*, in particular. *Star Trek* is about Klingons, Romulans, and a host of other kinds of fictional aliens. But more fundamentally, *Star Trek* is about racism, sexism, greed, and many other problems faced by people in the real world. That it is set in a place we can't go among individuals who don't exist allows it to handle these real problems with a freedom it wouldn't have if it was dealing with real people groups in real places. Klingons and Romulans don't exist, so one can say whatever he wants about them, without taking a risk that what he says might incite anger and violence, from Klingons or against them. Communists and Muslims, however, do exist – which means that whatever one says about them will have effects in the real world beyond simply making people think. Though the point of talking about Klingons might be to say something about communists, for example, the distance

between the two kinds of things allows space for thought to take place before one's immediate, culturally prompted reaction to the familiar occurs.

Originality

It is true of the psychology of humans that we tend to notice new things, unfamiliar things, and changes more easily than things that we are used to. It is easier to take familiar things for granted than things that we have never seen before. Likewise, an idea that a person has never considered before is more likely to attract that person's attention than an idea with which the person is familiar.

One of the most important elements in a basic model of communication (i.e. sender/receiver/message) is the reception of the message by the receiver. Communication is only successful if the receiver actually receives the message, which in turn requires that the receiver be able to use the words (more broadly, symbols) of the message to reconstruct the idea that the sender (probably) intended to send. At the strictly literal level of meaning, this will be more or less straight forward, as long as the sender and receiver speak the same language. If the message is communicated by implication, though, the receiver, besides just understanding the words, will have to notice that there is a message to be noticed implicit in the first-order message.

This is how implicit communication through fiction works: the reader has to understand the text as written, and then must notice that there is an implicit message in

the text to be found. Anything that helps the reader notice the implicit message, then, will help the communication work better than otherwise, all other things being equal.²⁵⁸

General Considerations About Helps to Communication and Expression

When I began writing about things that are conducive to the expression and communication of truth through fiction, I called them values, meaning to suggest that, all other things being equal, it is valuable for the communication and expression of truths that these things are at work in a text. But not all of them are required in every instance. I would be pretty surprised if I was shown a text that did all of the things I've mentioned here and yet didn't either communicate or express some truth and do it well; but I could also imagine a text doing only a few of these things and still managing to both express and communicate a truth. Hence, I should not be understood as claiming that any or all of these things are necessary for truth-communication or expression. I only think that, all other things being equal, these things make communication and/or expression happen with more ease.

I should also not be understood as suggesting that these are the only attributes a fiction can have that are valuable for the expression and communication of truth. I do think that the values I've listed are some of the most important and/or interesting ones, but certainly it is possible that there are others.

²⁵⁸ Readers noticing intended implicit messages is important because subliminal messaging, or the subconscious reception of messages does not affect anything in one's actions, thoughts, or feelings other than momentary, automatic inclinations. According to psychologist David Myers, author of the book *Psychology*, an "invisible image or word can 'prime' your response to a later question," but the possible effects of subliminal messaging are limited to that. He writes of a series of sixteen double-blind experiments performed over ten years on the effects of subliminal self-help tapes: "Not one had any therapeutic effect (Greenwald, 1992)." (Worth Publishers, New York: 2008, pp. 232 and 234).

One thing that might strike one about some of the values I've mentioned is that it's not clear they work to the same degree for different people. Even the same text may seem very different to different people, or at different times. For example, I claimed above that it is a value for a fictional text to be relevant to the reader, and I defined relevance, for a fiction, as when the text is about situations or characters that are like the reader or his situation, other people the reader knows and their situation, or people that the reader can imagine or their situations, in ways that play an important role in the fiction. This implies, then, that whether or not (and to what degree) a text is relevant is going to be relative to every individual reader, because people are different and have different experiences.²⁵⁹ For example, I personally get very little out of *Law & Order*, probably because I spend little time thinking about law and no time at all with people who practice it. Though there are interesting philosophical problems in the theory and application of law, these are not the problems that attract my attention, for whatever reason. So the show isn't very relevant to me. But I know people who are attracted by philosophical problems related to law, and I know that at least some of these people find the show relevant. Neither of us is being irrational or making a mistake about the program; it's simply that the program is relevant to each of us in different degrees.

Most of the values I mentioned are potentially relative to some degree or other. I don't think this is a problem; in fact, I rather think it should be expected, because people have real disagreements about what stories are the best ones, and why, and any adequate theory of fiction must allow for that variance in opinion. But, even though these values are relative to individuals, I don't think that facts about which fictions have which values

²⁵⁹ There will also be a great deal of agreement between readers, though, because there are some things that all people have in common.

to which readers are epistemologically subjective; I think that judgments about these values relative to individuals will be largely objectively determinable, because people can come to know, to a high degree of probability, how other people think and what experiences they've had, and how people think and how they've experienced the world determine to a great extent how they experience fictions, and to what degree those fictions succeed in communicating to them. In other words, whether a text has any of these values for a particular reader will not be due just to a whim of the individual concerned, but will be more or less predictable, given an understanding of the individual in question.

I have now finished explaining what I take to be the meaning of the question, "How is truth communicated through fiction?" It remains to me to answer the question. In Chapter Seven, working off the continental theories I analyzed in Chapter Five, and what I've done here and in Chapter Two, I will offer my answer to the question.

Chapter Seven: The Process of Evocation

From time to time throughout Chapter Five, a direct answer about how truths are evoked through fiction has seemed maddeningly close, without actually being forthcoming. For example, Hegel claims that art functions by representing even complex or abstract ideas using symbols of varying degrees of complexity, and writes that art appeals to people's feelings, both of which claims are true, I think, but need a lot more explanation, if we are to understand *how* fiction conveys truth.

Sartre's important point is that characters in novels have to seem free – free of the author more than free of the control of other characters. And, he thinks, making the novel into what he calls a “dull truth” drives the reader away from active participation in it. Having predetermined events in a novel, told by someone omniscient, makes a fiction bad (as a fiction, not necessarily morally bad), presumably because it makes the fiction feel different from real life. According to Sartre, remember, the important role that fiction plays is that it shows the reader his own life, so that he can accept it or change it. In Sartre's philosophy of fiction, then, there is a lot more explanation of *how* fiction works to convey truth, but the story still has not been told in full.

Gadamer, attempting to explain the difference between aesthetic and ordinary knowledge, does not want to divorce art completely from the rest of people's lives. The connection between art and life is found in the response of the individual to the work – the reader finds things about his own life in the novel (for example) that are ostensibly about an entirely different world. This gets really close to beginning to describe exactly how fiction conveys truth, but stops just short.

I think these three sets of ideas are pointing towards three elements that all fiction has in common, which allow two related, but different, assumptions to be made about any work of fiction at all. All along, I've wanted to be able to answer the following question: How can an author expect an audience to figure out what truths he means to evoke in their minds? This is directly relevant to the question of how truth is communicated through fiction, because that communication cannot be a matter of accident – the idea that truths *are* communicated through fiction is too ubiquitous and difficult to refute. So there has to be something about the way in which truths are conveyed through fiction that makes it *very* likely that the audience will pick up on what the author is trying to communicate. Finding what makes that likely, or understanding why it is likely, will, I think, lead to an answer to my main question. So, these two assumptions must, somehow, be legitimated:

1. The author must be able to assume that it is possible for his readers, on the whole, to successfully figure out what he intends to evoke in their minds (assuming also his competence in the language and a message to be communicated).

2. The readers must be able to assume that, for every idea they find in a fiction, more or less, the author could have intended to communicate it (assuming also their understanding of the author's cultural and historical background).

The first assumption is required because, as Sartre says, writing (non-poetic writing, in his sense, at least, which would include fiction) is communication. There must be something about fiction itself that guarantees the author at least a chance of successful communication, or fiction would not be the meaningful art form we know that it is. If there was no chance for communication, working through ideas for oneself would be the

only reason for writing – and even that requires that the author be able to communicate with himself. The second assumption is required because there has to be something that gives fiction potential, at least, for shared meaning. If I tend to find ideas in fiction that weren't put there on purpose, then I'm really just pulling them out of my own head because I want to find them. This diminishes one of fiction's best attributes – the sense that one gets, when reading a novel or watching a movie, that one is sharing an experience and ideas with someone else, perhaps with many others. The experience of fiction should not be solipsistic.²⁶⁰

I think that Hegel, Sartre, and Gadamer have said things that point towards three properties that all fiction, by virtue of being fiction, aspires to, regardless of the desires, intentions, and abilities of its authors. In other words, I think that any fiction attempts to do three things, just by virtue of being fiction, regardless of how well it does at following through on these attempts. What these things are has been hinted at by Hegel, Sartre, and Gadamer; and understanding what they are and whether or not any one fiction succeeds in its attempt to do them is important to understanding how fiction implicitly communicates truth.

First Things First

Fictions communicate truths by illustrating them. Characters, places, events, and objects are sometimes made to function as symbols or tokens, representing the type of thing that they are, or representing abstract ideas. So fiction, being an art, is representational (as Hegel suggests, as described in Chapter Five). When abstract ideas

²⁶⁰ Here, of course, I'm skating over a bunch of questions about author's intent, reader interpretations, etc. I said what I have to say about those things in Chapter 5, and so am not going to recapitulate here.

are represented, fiction is fairly likely to employ symbols. For example, the killing of the wild pig in *The Lord of the Flies* represents a loss of innocence; this is the first experience the characters have of killing anything, and the pig's remains come to signify the dark side of human nature that allows people to come to be able to kill each other, and behave immorally in other ways.

But representation in fiction is regularly tied to character, and so can be pretty different from symbolic representation; it would be weird to say, for example, that Ernest Pontifex from *The Way of All Flesh* is a symbol for all mankind as it progresses through the Age of Reason (or whatever). Instead, I think it is much more accurate to say that Ernest is an specific instantiation of the general kind *man*, sharing properties with all individual men, but also having some characteristics that make him a unique individual; and that his actions throughout the novel tell us how it might go for any man caught up in his circumstances. (This is, of course, given that allowances must be made for a character's unique properties as well – for example, a person who tends to be accurately introspective would make several important choices differently from how Ernest did).

In either case, whether representation occurs through symbol or through instantiation, as the fiction progresses, events happen to the representational figures, and those figures respond to those events; and through the upshot of the story (how the story turns out for each character) and the slant that the author takes in relating the story, the reader sees what the author would have him believe about the ideas or types that the representational figures represent.

Sometimes, it doesn't even matter what the author intends; readers grasp a new idea, or freshly understand an old idea, and the new thought is made so clear through the

text that it becomes merely distracting to think about whether or not the author realized what his story was saying when he wrote it – the idea is so obtrusive that it must be judged independently of its context or history. But, often, ideas that are supported by or in a novel are taken to originate, or at least to be supported by, the author.

The idea that fictions communicate truth by illustrating them is an old idea – Sidney says as much in the *Defense*, for example.²⁶¹ The interesting question here is not *whether* it is true or not that fictions illustrate truths,²⁶² but rather, *how* they do it. There must be several layers of representation going on; at one level, words, which are symbols themselves, are used to create fictional characters, objects and events. At another level, these particular characters, objects, and events can represent general types, or they can represent abstract concepts. But fiction is not the only medium which employs representation. As Hegel claims in the quotation above, art (and hence fiction) shares its representational capacity with religion and philosophy. Analogies and thought experiments, as described in Chapter Four, are representational. Philosophy and fiction both use these tools, but this cannot be taken to mean that philosophy and fiction work the same way; both Plato and Sidney think that there are important differences between philosophy and fiction (and I follow them in thinking so). There must be something that is specifically fictional that makes the difference in how symbolism is used – because philosophy and fiction communicate truths differently.

The three things attempted by all fiction (no matter how well they are realized in any fiction, and regardless of the author’s intentions) are, taken together, what makes the

²⁶¹ At 90/25 he writes: “[the poet] yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description...”

²⁶² Again, fictions may actually illustrate falsehoods; recall, as I stated in the end of Chapter Two, that I am using “truth” to stand for “purported truth” or “truth claim.”

difference between implicit communication of truth through fiction and communication of truth non-fictionally, such as through philosophical writing. These three things are:

1. All fiction purports to be engaging.
2. All fiction purports to describe what is normal.
3. All fiction purports to describe how the world ought to be.

I turn now to these.

Claim 1: All fiction purports to be engaging.

This may sound banal. *Of course* the point of fiction is that it ought to be enjoyed. There has to be some reason for one to give fiction his attention – and fiction cannot claim one’s attention on the basis of a claim to truth, as can philosophy, religion, science, history, etc. Fiction is made up; and, for reasons I gave in Chapter Two, it cannot be true (although it can contain truths). The best strategy it has for selling itself, besides the claim to truth, which it cannot make, is its claim to be engaging. That fiction is engaging is, superficially, what justifies its existence, and what justifies the time and attention it draws from its audience.

But fiction’s being engaging does not just “sell” fiction, it does part of the work of truth-evocation. It is very difficult to learn something without actually being exposed to it consciously.²⁶³ A fiction’s being engaging keeps the attention of the reader on the work. If it is well crafted, a work of fiction keeps the attention on the place where the truth claims are at work or implied, so that the reader can figure out the truth claims that the author wishes him to, or that his own mind draws him to, without specifically noticing that there is a truth claim to be apprehended.

²⁶³ Research has been done into the effects of subliminal messaging, but the success rate of communication through these means leaves much to be desired. See footnote 155 in Chapter Five.

Sartre suggests something along these lines in the passage quoted in Chapter Six.²⁶⁴ A story is something that the reader should experience as if he was one of the characters (or more than one of them); ideally, the reader will pretend to be the characters. Sartre says elsewhere²⁶⁵ that what he didn't like about *La Fin de la Nuit* was that it didn't draw him into the novel's time; while reading the novel, he was very aware of his own life and how he was reading the novel, thinking about the story and the author writing it, rather than just following the story. Sartre suggests that when reading a novel, one should be drawn into the novel's time and place – not in the sense that he projects himself onto the character, making the character take on traits of his own, but in the sense that he should pretend to be the character(s) for a time, taking on *their* identities and perspectives. It is when this happens to the reader that he begins to notice the truth of truth claims; because he is still himself, even having been drawn into being the character(s), he will notice aspects of the story that bear on his own (real) life.

Claim 2: All fiction purports to describe what is normal.

“What?” someone might ask. “Science fiction? Fantasy? Children's fiction in which animals talk?”

I do not mean to claim that all fictions make an attempt to describe the real world accurately in every detail. Some of my very favorite fictions, in fact, abound with real-world impossibilities, and this is part of why I like them. I don't think that's a problem with them; describing the real world accurately in every detail is simply not what those stories are trying to do. If they are trying to do anything in the way of world description,

²⁶⁴ See footnote 192 in Chapter Six.

²⁶⁵ See footnote 193 in Chapter Six.

it is more along the lines of description of a hypothetical world that is interestingly different from the real world.

It is absolutely incontrovertible that fictions actually describe, accurately, what is normal in the world of the fiction. I don't think there is any way to get around this; fictions create fictional²⁶⁶ worlds as they describe them, and so it is impossible for the description of a fictional world, within the relevant fiction, to be false.

The claim I mean to make is somewhere between these two – it is a stronger claim than the claim that fictions describe their fictional worlds accurately, but it is weaker than the claim that fictions describe the real world accurately. I've put the claim in terms of normality instead of actuality for a reason. Fictions, by fiat, describe what is actual in the world of the fiction; but since any fictional world is different from the real world, the impact of the actual fictional world on people from the real world is limited, unless there is some way to make the fictional world relevant to the fiction's audience. There are two levels to this, linked together.²⁶⁷ The first level is what I've described so far: given whatever happens to a character, the story follows what is, in that world, a normal reaction to those events. The events that happen to a character may be pretty weird, compared to the real world, or even compared to what would usually happen in the

²⁶⁶ The *imaginary* world that corresponds to the fiction being told may very well be created prior to the creation of the fiction; the imaginary world is created by the imagining of it at the time it is first imagined. The *fictional* world, though, is created when the imaginary world is shared. So while the imaginary world exists independent of the telling of the story it is about, the *fictional* world isn't. This creates a question about whether the fictional world is the same as the corresponding imaginary world. I would say that it isn't always, but that often the fictional world causally depends on the imaginary one. But I don't think my argument here hangs on this.

²⁶⁷ I am going to have to move very slowly through this. I ask the reader to bear with me.

fictional one, but even when these out-of-the-ordinary events take place, stories describe the reaction to those events that a normal participant in those events would have.²⁶⁸

For example, *The Lord of the Rings* describes a world populated by trolls, elves, dwarfs, and dragons – so it describes a world that is fairly abnormal compared to ours. In that story, dwarves and elves don't get on, generally speaking, and so when the main dwarf and the main elf meet, there is tension between them in keeping with that generality. Their growing friendship is, in that world, pretty weird, because dwarves and elves just don't get along, but the story describes what is normal anyway because the main elf and the main dwarf are very good characters, capable of overcoming ill-conceived prejudice. (It would be normal for good people who are capable of overcoming ill-conceived prejudice to make friends with someone with whom they spent a year chasing down bad guys).

One might still wonder why this is so important. We find out in a fiction what it is normal for people in that fiction to do given a certain set of circumstances, but this still doesn't seem of much use or import; the world of the fiction is by definition a world different from the real one, with no guarantee that it is like the real world in any way at all. It seems of little value to know what is normal in any fictional world.

It will come out momentarily that there is more to this purported description of the normal than simple description – it has a second level. But even at the first level, description is not so simple. The description of the normal does not describe the actual world, but it doesn't just describe the fictional world either. Recall Gadamer's claim that

²⁶⁸ Sometimes characters are more ideal than normal, doing things that ordinary people wouldn't do, and becoming heroes because of their exemplary actions. This seems that it might be a counterexample to my point here, but I don't think it is. Even in these cases, stories should attempt to show what is normal for these characters to do, given their somewhat extraordinary experiences.

the work of fiction “takes the person...out of the context of his life... and yet relates him back to the whole of his existence.” The work of fiction, being art, according to Gadamer, has a universal aspect.²⁶⁹ People’s reactions to works of art vary, but all people are the same in that they can experience works of art and have some reaction or other to them, even if that reaction is to be bored or unsatisfied by them. So, though a work of fiction describes a fictional world, it describes a fictional world to which anyone at all can have some reaction.

This brings us to the second level of the fictional description. In Chapter Six I made a list of some of the reasons that fiction appeals to people – for example, relevance, character freedom, and distance – and I claimed that any person’s reaction to any fiction is likely to be different in some degree from any other person’s, because people have different personalities and experiences. Recall also Sartre’s claim that helping the reader to get into the novel’s time – the time experienced by the character – is what all good fictions do. “Getting into the time” of the story is the phrase Sartre uses to describe the reader’s interaction with the story

I think it is safe to connect these two ideas directly: getting the reader into the time of the fiction as experienced by the characters is what the qualities I listed in Chapter Six do. The more relevant things in the story are to me, the easier it is for me to get into the time of the story. When reading a novel, the reader imagines his own character and situation away as much as is possible, instead using the text of the novel and everything it implies to him to take on, sympathetically, the situation and personality

²⁶⁹ Of course, not everything that is fictional actually does this... but good fiction does. If I am right that fiction does indeed make a claim that what goes on in the story describes the normal, then part of what makes a fiction a good one is that it succeeds in describing the normal.

of the characters(s). He needn't actually feel as if he *becomes* the character; but he must attempt to understand the character in much the same way he must listen sympathetically to a good friend telling a true story. The reader must eliminate, set aside, or otherwise get beyond his own personality and situation, and focus on those of the characters.²⁷⁰ How easy it is to do this depends on a lot of things, some the responsibility of the reader and some that of the author. The main idea is this: the imagining of the character in his place and time, to the exclusion of the reader's own place and time, so far as it is possible, is the means through which the reader's reactions to the text become possible.

Here is where the inherent purported description of what is normal becomes interesting. Any person is capable of having some reaction to any fiction, which means that any person can "get into the time" of any fiction, at least a very little way. (No fiction is entirely foreign, in principle, to any person). Of course, not all fictions are *good* at drawing readers in, but to the extent that they are good fictions, they facilitate the process. Good fictions allow readers to understand the perspectives and experiences of the characters, so that readers can come to glimpse, at least, what is normal for those characters. So any person can in principle come to know what it is like to be any character, and can come to know what is normal for the character. Every fiction, by virtue of being fictional, shows what is normal for its characters; and because any person can in principle come to understand this, every fiction shows what could be normal for any person. And, in *showing* what *could be* normal, the fiction *suggests* that these elements *are* normal, because those elements are what the audience is asked to pretend. (It is as if

²⁷⁰ No reader will be able to completely set aside their own circumstances, and so every fiction they interact with will be colored slightly by their own experiences, but the effect of this coloring will be minimized as much as possible, ideally.

the fiction says, “This could be normal. What if it actually is?”) So fictions do not just make the “first-level” claim that the events and actions described are normal in the fiction, but they also make a second-level claim about what could be normal in the real world, and from that a *suggestion* about what *is* normal.

The norms I’m speaking of are not matters-of-fact about, say, gravity, or the way houses are built.²⁷¹ Pretty clearly, it would be missing the point to take a story like *Star Trek*, recognize that, in the world of the fiction, there are Klingons, note that there are no Klingons in the real world, and to claim on that basis that *Star Trek* tells lies or that the stories have no value. Questions about matters of fact (e.g. Are there Klingons? What is basalt? What role did Breckenridge play in American politics? What is the sum of the square root of 2 and the cube root of 9? What effect can frontal lobe damage have on human behavior?) do not admit very usefully of fictional treatment – each has a (fairly easily determinably) right answer, and playing pretend about them is not a very good way to reach those right answers. These are questions that can be clearly resolved by investigating the world. Playing pretend about them might be fun, but since the right answers are available, it won’t be very useful. And when a story presupposes a wrong answer to these kinds of questions, the best response is to play along with the false claim, even though it is false, to see what role it is playing in the fiction – the false idea might be symbolic for something else, or the author might be experimenting with a counterfactual, etc. One needn’t assume that false ideas are meant to be taken as true of the real world.

²⁷¹ Of course, there are fictions where gravity or the way houses are built are radically different from the way things are in the reader’s ordinary life. Science fiction and fantasies almost always incorporate these kinds of differences, for example. In these cases, though, it behooves the author to come out and describe directly the way he intends these things to be, so the readers don’t get hung up anywhere in the story because of them. Often, the important points of the story depend on the differences in fact that the author has created between the relevant fictional world and the real one, though, and so authors are usually pretty good about being clear about these things.

There is another kind of question, though: questions without easily reachable right answers (e.g. Are there minds? What is God? If Breckenridge had been more liberal, would the US have still experienced a civil war? Should schools make more effort to encourage girls to study math? Which human behaviors are right and which are wrong?). The reasons we don't have easily knowable right answers to these questions are different for different questions; we may just not have found a satisfactory answer yet, or the problem might be a counterfactual problem for which a test cannot be formulated, or the question might be so complex that it is not even fully understood, or the answer may rely on a value judgment that people disagree about – a claim about what is right, appropriate, funny, interesting, clever, or beautiful, etc. While “playing pretend” can help someone reach an answer to these kinds of questions, because it may stimulate creativity needed to solve the problems, successfully created stories do not justify the answers to questions about the way the world is, any more than an untested hypothesis spun by an armchair scientist would.

But answers to all these kinds of questions admit of a useful treatment by fiction anyway. While fictional stories don't provide *justification* for possible truths, they do provide *narratives describing possible consequences* of the truth of these claims – especially claims about how moral agents ought to behave. A fiction takes a hypothetical set of circumstances and shows, given behaviors of characters in response to those circumstances, what may result. And, through the inherent suggestion that these behavioral responses are normal, a related suggestion is made about how behaviors affect and are affected by circumstances in the real world.

Claim 3: All fiction purports to describe how the world ought to be.

In every fiction, there are characters the reader is supposed to care about, and characters he isn't supposed to bother about much. A classic example of the latter is any of the characters from *Star Trek* that suffer from the "red-shirt" phenomenon. Guy Fleegman, a character from *Galaxy Quest*, who plays such a character on a TV show, describes his role thus:

I'm just Crewman #6. I'm expendable. I'm the guy in the episode who dies to prove the situation is serious.²⁷²

Crewman #6, like redshirts from *Star Trek*, dies before he gets a chance to say almost anything – there is no time given him to develop any personality or history. He exists to die. Readers (or viewers) aren't supposed to care much about such characters, since they're given no reason that will make them care. Except in the case of bad guys, the more one gets to see a character in action, and the more one gets to know about his or her background, the more one is supposed to be sympathetic to him or her. One is supposed to be sympathetic to him more as one gets to know him more because knowing more about a character helps one understand what it is like to be that character, which in turn makes it easier to pretend to be him. As he shows his personality more, there is more of him to like, appreciate, admire, commiserate with, etc.

This can sometimes work for villains, too, a notable case being Satan in *Paradise Lost*; but it usually doesn't. Most of the audience's acquaintance with the villain consists of his perpetrating his evil deeds, and otherwise behaving in ways that are not attractive or sympathy-inspiring. The reason Satan from *Paradise Lost* is an exception to the rule is

²⁷² Sam Rockwell as Guy Fleegman, from *Galaxy Quest*, directed by Mark Johnson, released by Dreamworks Pictures, 1999.

precisely because the way he is presented *does* engender some degree of sympathy – Milton makes Satan’s attempt to dethrone God seem brave and, while wrong-headed, also understandable.

Though this principle about inspiring sympathy applies to most characters, and to all characters that aren’t wholly bad, the most important application of the principle is to the protagonist(s).²⁷³ Because the protagonist is generally either the person through whose viewpoint readers experience the fiction, or is the focus of most of the action, he is the most important person for the reader to understand, even if it is not important, in the fiction, that other characters understand him. If the reader misunderstands the protagonist, he runs the risk of missing the entire point of the story.

So far I’ve suggested that all fictions, by virtue of being fictions, regardless of the author’s intentions, implicitly do two things: they try to be engaging, and they purport to describe what is normal. (This is also regardless of how well any individual fiction succeeds in actually being engaging and in appealing to readers enough to be meaningful to them). I think that there is a third thing that fiction does, just by virtue of being fiction: all fiction implicitly purports to describe, either positively or negatively, how the world ought to be, in part. In other words, all fictions have normative force.

Fictions get their normative force from the kind of imagination required of the reader if he is to participate fully in the fiction. To get the most out of a novel, one must “lose oneself” in the time of the novel, as Sartre says, and this requires the reader to

²⁷³ The definition of ‘protagonist’ has changed since its first use in ancient Greece, when it referred to the main member of the chorus. Contemporarily, it refers to the main character in any literary work. Of course, not all works of fiction have a clearly defined protagonist. Any fiction that follows a group rather than focusing on one character or being told from one character’s perspective will be a bit unclear on this point. However, as long as there is at least one character (and perhaps several) that the author takes a great deal of care in developing, and to whose thoughts the readers have access, what I have to say here will apply.

pretend what it would be like to be each of the characters.²⁷⁴ Ideally, this means that the reader should attempt to see the characters' perspectives of the world, and to follow their reasoning and understand their feelings as much as is possible. The reader need not accept the characters' perspectives as actually true, or even as necessarily true in the fiction, but should at least try to understand these perspectives and pretend along with them, either until the end of the novel, or until it becomes impossible because the characters have grown too unrealistic. This is especially important in the case of the protagonist(s), for reasons given above.

This is where the normative claim slips in. As the reader tries on, so to speak, the perspectives of the protagonist, and perhaps other characters, he eventually comes to understand the character: how the character feels, thinks, talks, acts, reasons, and rationalizes what he's done, becoming familiar enough with the character to be able to predict what kinds of things he will do, or at least enough to notice when he behaves *out* of character. In the case of the protagonist, the reader is also prompted to be concerned that the events in the story turn out well for him.²⁷⁵ Because of this, there is an impetus for the reader to take the protagonist's part in any conflict in which the character is involved. Taking sides this way requires a value judgment: the characters ought to do such-and-such; it was right for the character to do so-and-so. Since fictions have more-or-less universal appeal, and so do characters, judgments such as "The character was right to

²⁷⁴ This is not the same as pretending what it would be like for *oneself* to be the characters in the fiction; this would require a lot of figuring out how one's attributes and personality would fit in with the novel (e.g. "If I was Sydney Carton, I would have let Charles Darnay die.") The whole point of getting into the time of the novel is to leave oneself out of it as much as is possible (of course, it is probably not possible to leave oneself out of it completely). So the pretending that one ought to do, instead of pretending what it would be like for *oneself* to be the character, one ought to pretend what it would be like for anyone to be the character.

²⁷⁵ Usually; not always, though.

do so-and-so” take on the status of universal moral claims – they admit of application to any individual in identical circumstances.

Of course, just that the reader should be inclined to take the protagonist’s part does not imply that the protagonist never does anything wrong. Often, there are cases where the protagonist (or another good guy) does something that he ought not to have done, and sometimes it is even immediately apparent that he ought not to have done it. I don’t think it makes sense to say that there is an implicit claim that whatever the protagonist does is always right. But there *is* an implicit claim that whatever the protagonist does is understandable, and so is an appropriate reaction to the situation the protagonist finds himself in. This does not even amount to a claim that whatever the protagonist does is morally permissible – sometimes protagonists make mistakes or have lapses in judgment; indeed, they often grow through mistakes, just as real people do.²⁷⁶ The important thing for the protagonist is that, even when doing bad or stupid things, his reasons for doing them should be understandable, so that the action, even while bad, is also understandable.

There is a further normative claim made by all fiction. As I said just above, protagonists sometimes do bad things. Sometimes the wrong actions committed by the protagonist result in problems for him later on; and, though the character may or may not recognize it, the audience sees that the harm has come about because of the wrong action. Sometimes, though, that wrong action may have absolutely no negative consequences at all. I think, in these cases, where the action in question has no bad consequences, the fiction makes an implicit claim that the action is morally permissible. And this is entirely

²⁷⁶ Ernest in *The Way of All Flesh* is such an example, as is Martin Arrowsmith Sinclair Lewis’ *Arrowsmith*.

separate from whether or not the author intends such a claim.²⁷⁷ Actions that don't cause bad consequences are likewise recommended by the story as morally permissible at least, whatever the author's intentions.

I think an example is called for here. In the first *Spiderman* movie,²⁷⁸ a man pays Peter Parker much less than he owes him. When Peter complains, the man replies, "I miss the part where that's my problem." Moments later, a thief steals all the other man's money, and Peter intentionally lets the thief go. (With his Spiderman abilities, he could have stopped him easily, without endangering himself at all). When the man who has been robbed criticizes Peter for letting the thief go, Peter replies with the same words the man had just used to him. It turns out, though, that right after Peter lets the thief go, the thief shoots and kills Peter's Uncle Ben, while in the process of stealing his car.

This particular example stands out to me because I watched it for the first time in an auditorium full of undergraduates who cheered when Peter made the reply, despite the obvious badness of the action.²⁷⁹ The death of Uncle Ben and these circumstances surrounding it turn out to have a huge influence over the rest of the plot, since Peter always feels guilty about the incident afterwards. So this is a case where Peter's wrong action causes problems later on. Suppose, though, that nothing bad had come of Peter's

²⁷⁷ The author can intend to say what the fiction actually claims; he need not intend to, however. People's moral beliefs differ, so there will be cases where any fiction will make an implicit claim with which some reader disagrees. In these cases, there is potential for confusion about the claim the story is making. In the example about *Spiderman* below, I note that the preponderance of the undergraduates I watched the movie with believed that Peter's behavior was permissible and perhaps even praiseworthy. At the point where Peter realizes the enormity of the wrongness of his action, the response I heard from the others in the audience was primarily surprise, coupled with confusion. They thought that the movie was supporting their belief that it is okay to intentionally allow harm to someone who has harmed you, and when the opposite claim was implied, they were no longer sure what the movie was suggesting.

²⁷⁸ 2002 by Columbia Pictures. Directed by Sam Raimi, starring Tobey Maguire.

²⁷⁹ It was fairly clear that the action was never intended to be taken as a good one, if from nothing else, then from the ominous music accompanying the action.

letting the thief go – that it was simply something that happened on the way home, and it was never mentioned again in the stories. In that case, there would have been an implicit claim that it was morally permissible for Peter to let the thief go. The easiest response would have been, “Oh, that Peter, he showed that guy.”

So my theory is that all fictions make two normative claims: everything the protagonist does is understandable, and everything the protagonist does that has no negative consequences is morally permissible.²⁸⁰

It is this ability of fiction, to make normative claims through the consequences of actions or the lack thereof, that allows the author to evoke implicit claims through fiction. I’ve said several times earlier that all three of the things done by fiction that I’ve been arguing for here work independently of the intentions of the author (though how well the implicit claims come through probably has something to do with how skilled the author is

²⁸⁰ This latest point seems to give undue preference to utilitarianism among moral theories, because it makes the consequences of actions the only means of evaluating moral claims in fiction. If that was the case I think it would be a problem for the theory, and I would think so even if I thought utilitarianism was true; moral claims ought to be open to analysis by any moral theory. Fortunately, though, I have a reply here. Consequences of actions, or, in other words, the continuation of the plot of the story, is the only way the story exists; there is nothing else to analyze, and so consequences must be analyzed if anything is to be. But consequences can be understood in a variety of ways. The utilitarian might understand consequences in terms of pain caused and happiness created. The deontologist might understand consequences in terms of duties avoided or fulfilled, and the virtue ethicist in terms of whether or not each action tends towards the betterment of the character of the characters involved. (Note that, on any of these analyses, Peter’s actions in *Spiderman* come out wrong). So just that consequences are analyzed does not require that utilitarianism is the moral theory of choice.

An example of a story that makes this clear is Woody Allen’s 1989 film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, starring Allan, Martin Landau, and Alan Alda. In this film, Landau’s character, a rich businessman well-known for being a philanthropist and an all-around good guy, has his lover murdered to prevent her from telling his wife and the press about their affair. Strictly in terms of event consequences, Landau’s character suffers no ill consequences – no one finds out, his marriage flourishes, and business gets better. He suffers a pang of remorse every now and then, but on the whole, he doesn’t think of the murder. However, from the standpoint of virtue ethics, much harm has been done. Landau’s character has developed a serious character flaw – the next time a situation arises in which he feels similarly trapped, he is likely to try to do something just as irrational, selfish, and violent as the first murder, or more so. The movie explicitly claims, in-text as well as in official taglines and summaries, that morality may not be real. The motivation for this is that Landau’s character, as well as Alan Alda’s, gets away with bad actions, with no event consequences. I think that a more appropriate claim to draw from the movie is that utilitarianism (or any other of the family of consequence theories) does not capture the essence of morality.

in creating fiction). While I think that these things are done whether the author intends to put them there or not, it certainly is possible for the author to take advantage of them, making them work to evoke some particular truth claim. Whether the author tells the story in order to make the truth claim, or makes the truth claim in order to tell the story, is impossible to tell just from reading the story (although how central the truth claim is to the story will have some effect on which way things appear to be). The important point, in any case, is that, because fiction does these three things, the author has reason to hope that his audience will catch the truth claims that he builds into his story intentionally; and the readers have reason to go looking for truths buried in the story, and can have interesting and fruitful discussions with other readers about those truths, and whether or not they were intentionally implied.

A Study In Failure

Of course, not all fictions do a good job of following through on actually doing these three things that I've claimed all fictions attempt. A look at some fictions that fail in one or more of these three areas to a greater or lesser degree will not only show that these fictions do actually do these things, regardless of their failure to follow through on them, but will also make it clearer how the things are done and of what importance is the fact that they are done.

Failure 1: Failure to Engage

The problem with this kind of analysis is that what is engaging for one person might not be engaging for another. One of my favorite TV shows is *Mission: Impossible* (the first one!) – I could watch it for hours at a time and feel creatively stimulated by it. I

know people, though, that could use it as a reliable sleep aid. Of course, the example I am going to use in what follows is not going to work for everyone. I do think, though, that the kinds of problems that I see in the particular text I mention will be similar, more or less, to the things that make other texts boring for other people. So I think that agreement about what happens when texts are boring can be reached even though agreement about which texts are boring will probably never be even approached – nor should it be expected.

The last book that I remember being bored by was the first book of the *Artemis Fowl* series.²⁸¹ As I remember, some of the elements that made it boring were clichéd characters (a moderately rebellious but highly intelligent adolescent, technologically skilled; law enforcement personnel incapable of doing their jobs correctly; a pale-skinned evil genius; etc.) and a semi-scientific analysis of magic, which I find ridiculous, as it forces something that is by definition outside of the natural order into a naturalistic analysis. Also, I was able to guess what would happen well before it did.

The problem with these things is that, because I had to force myself to keep reading the story, I had to keep myself focused on the text at the literal level. If I hadn't stayed focused at the level of what action was being described, my attention would have turned to how many pages I had left to go or whether or not I ought to give up and start another novel. But because my attention was so firmly fixed to what was going on, I paid little to no attention to what was implicit in the story. I couldn't say, for example, whether or not the novel suggested that it was okay that the protagonist didn't quite follow the rules. I do remember that she did break the rules, and that the bad guy was

²⁸¹ Eoin Colfer, Hyperion Books, New York: 2001.

foiled in his plans, but I don't remember in what light the protagonist's decisions were cast.

I think, then, that the main problem with texts that fail in being engaging, whether that is a result of a flaw in the text, in the reader, or in the interaction between the two, is that the reader misses implicit descriptive behavioral claims and normative claims. It is the fact that fiction is engaging, and does keep the reader drawn into the story (as in the phrase "lost in a good book") that allows readers to notice and play pretend about implicit messages. A failure to engage often causes failure to communicate.

Failure 2: False Suggestions of Behavioral Normality

Upstairs, Downstairs is a British television drama set in the years just preceding World War I, and is primarily a social commentary about class distinctions. It follows the household of a member of parliament, both his family, who live upstairs, and his servants, who live downstairs.

The eighth episode in the series follows a romance between Emily, one of the newest of the maids (an uneducated Irish girl), and a boy who works next door as a footman. Everything goes just fine until it becomes clear to the footman that his mistress desires him as a sort of closet consort, and that she is willing to fire him if he insists on forming attachments to anyone else. Because another job will be virtually impossible to find without good references, the footman chooses to stay with the job, and behaves coldly to Emily. Emily proceeds to go through various fits of typical broken-hearted behavior, which interfere her job. Up to this point, this is a sad, stark story, probably psychologically accurate to some degree. But, on the morning of the picnic planned for the neighborhood's servants by the footman's mistress in order to assuage her guilt, the

servants of the household in which Emily works find her in her room hanging by the throat.

This is not just gross, to my mind (although it certainly is that). There is an implicit claim that, at some level, Emily's reaction to her situation was an understandable one. Of course, because Emily was in a very worked-up emotional state, she wasn't behaving in a particularly rational way, but it is precisely this that makes her behavior understandable – we don't count her as being required to be rational in that emotional state. So, from the perspective that discounts rationality as applicable, what she did was predictable, or understandable, or, in some sense, an appropriate reaction to her circumstances, and was, in that sense, normal.

Of course, suicide as a response to a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend is not a normal response, by any means. Certainly being emotionally worked up because of a breakup is normal, and until the suicide was discovered the show did an accurate job of describing what would have been, in the real world, pretty normal – Emily cried a lot and was unable to do very thorough work. At the point where the suicide was discovered, though, the show became very much unlike the real world. One's first thought might be to say that becoming unlike the real world is all that happened to the show, and that it made no further implications about normality as soon as it ceased to actually show what is normal. But this is not all that happened. To suppose that it is all that happened is to assume that there is a deeply one-directional relationship between fiction and reality, where reality influences fiction but where fiction has no effect on reality. (If, as soon as a fiction becomes unlike reality, we no longer take it to be relevant to reality, then we've assumed that the only important or interesting relationship between the two is the way

that reality influences fiction, which presupposes that fiction cannot have an important or interesting influence on reality).

The relationship is not one-directional, however. The experience of fiction having some effect on reality is not uncommon; examples might range from little kids who read stories about an animal and then decide on that basis that they want a certain kind of pet, to adults who find that a novel helps them understand a religion so well that it influences them to adopt it. One of the best understandings of this effect of fiction comes from a work of fiction, interestingly. In act III scene 2 of *Hamlet*, Hamlet says:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

Playing (meaning acting, in this context) has a function, according to Hamlet; it acts as a mirror of reality. This does not mean just that the play mimics reality, as a reflection in a mirror mimics the action of the thing reflected; but that reality, metaphorically speaking, can look at a play and understand itself, and then go on to either change or not change, having seen itself in the play.²⁸² (Hamlet is, after all, staging the play in order to “catch the conscience of the king.”)²⁸³ So fictions do not only either describe reality accurately or not; they also have influence over reality by affecting how people think about reality, and what they do.²⁸⁴

²⁸² This is very much like what I think Sartre was trying to say in *What is Writing?* See footnote 189.

²⁸³ Act II Scene 2.

²⁸⁴ George Eliot writes something to this effect in *Leaves from a Note-book*, in an essay entitled “Authorship”: or

“But man or woman who publishes writings inevitably assumes the office of teacher influencer of the public mind. Let him protest as he will that he only seeks to amuse, and has no pretension to do more than while away an hour of leisure or weariness... he

Returning now to Emily: at the moment her suicide was discovered, the show went from showing what is actually (fairly) normal to showing what is not normal at all. But the implicit claim to describe what is normal was never revoked. So the show did make the implicit claim that committing suicide is a normal reaction to the breakup of a romantic relationship.

The problem with fictions making this sort of claim should be obvious; the claim is false. And, moreover, it would likely be harmful if people thought it was true. Now, I don't think it is at all likely that anyone in the real world ever has or is ever going to commit suicide after the breakup of a romantic relationship because they saw it happen on this show. But I think this is a function of how common it is for fictions to depict this sort of behavior. If it ever became commonplace in fictions for suicides to happen in such circumstances, I suspect that that would causally influence some people to commit suicide in like circumstances. (I am not saying that they would be either a necessary or a sufficient causal influence; but such fictions, I suspect, would play a part. This raises all sorts of questions about the social effects of violent fiction, which I'll address later).

Failure 3: False Normative Suggestions

Before I get going with this example, for clarity's sake I need to qualify my argument again. People have different moral beliefs. For every text, some people will agree with the normative claims that it suggests, and some people won't. I've selected an example that is very clear to me, and which I hope will be clear to most, but I don't expect that everyone will agree with the example – to find such an example would be

can no more escape influencing the moral taste, and with it the action of the intelligence, than a setter of fashions in furniture and dress can fill the shops with his designs and leave the garniture of persons and houses unaffected by his industry..."

impossible. I think, though, just as in the case with the attempt to be engaging, that agreement about what happens when a text suggests a false moral claim can be reached, even though not everyone will be able to agree about which texts suggest which false moral claims.

One of my long-time favorite fictions is *Little Women*. I like it for a lot of reasons: it is about a tomboy who wants to be a writer, and who has a lot of sisters, as I do; it has a lot in it about writing and trying to be good, both things which I want to do; it's funny; and it's historically accurate. The book is laden with moral messages, both explicit and implicit, so much so that Louisa May Alcott, the author, referred to it as "moral pap for the young;"²⁸⁵ she didn't particularly like it. While I wouldn't recommend it as a particularly good example of how to communicate truths implicitly through fiction, because it is fairly didactic²⁸⁶ a lot of the time, it does have a pretty good overall implicit message, especially for young people, which is that one ought to find something to do with his or her life that is both fulfilling for him or her, and somehow beneficial to other people. None of the characters find real happiness until they find something to do that meets both of these criteria, which is what suggests that implicit message.

Along the way to making that claim, though, an idea is implicitly suggested which I think is harmful, almost poisonous, an implication it has in common with a lot of other fiction, especially but not only from its period and before, and especially from its type of fiction, which I would call, roughly, moralistic fiction for girls. It is common in this type of story for any good female of marriageable age to get married, or at least engaged, by the end of the story.

²⁸⁵ According to Nina Auerbach's afterward to the 1989 Bantam Books edition.

²⁸⁶ Recall my discussion of didacticism in Chapter Five.

The problem is not just that all the good women get married; sometimes, that can happen without suggesting the same implicit claim that *Little Women* does. In, for example, Jane Austen's novels, this is done because happy endings are called for, and Austen's novels are social commentary on the conventions surrounding marriage. Women in England in the 1700s were in a precarious financial situation simply by virtue of being women, and Austen's novels explore and comment upon this precarious position, often explicitly. Because the novels are about marriage, and because the situation was precarious, happy endings in the novels almost require that the heroine marry at the end.

That every good female gets married in the end of Austen's novels is not a problem in the same way that it is in *Little Women*. *Little Women*, first, is not about marriage specifically. (It would be more accurate to say that it is about becoming a good woman, morally and socially). Second, women in Civil War era America were not in as precarious a financial situation, relative to men, as were women in England in Austen's time and class. So, a happy ending would not require marriage, as it would in Austen's novels. *Little Women* suggests that, in order to be fulfilled and to live a happy, useful life, a woman must be married, no matter what her economic situation is. And it is not simply that fact that, in the novel, every woman does get married, that makes this suggestion; there are parts of the story that make that assumption so fundamental that one would have to be quite dull to miss it.

Early in the novel, Meg, the oldest sister, has overheard mean-spirited gossip about her mother making plans to marry her off to Laurie, the grandson of the

neighborhood millionaire, who plays with her younger sister Jo. Mrs. March has no such plans, it turns out; instead, she tells her daughters this:

I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved and respected; to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives... To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman... It is natural to think of it, Meg, right to hope and wait for it... poverty seldom daunts a sincere lover. Some of the best and most honored women I know were poor girls, but so love-worthy that they were not allowed to be old maids...²⁸⁷

Much later in the story, after Beth has died, with Meg married and Amy gone to Europe, Jo is lonely. The author addresses the reader directly, thus:

Don't laugh at the spinsters, dear girls, for often very tender, tragic romances are hidden away in the hearts that beat so quietly under the somber gowns, and many silent sacrifices of youth, health, ambition, love itself, make the faded faces beautiful... Even the sad, sour sisters should be kindly dealt with, because they have missed the sweetest part of life, if for no other reason; and, looking at them with compassion, not contempt, girls in their bloom should remember that they too may miss the blossom time; that rosy cheeks don't last forever, that silver threads will come in the bonnie brown hair, and that, by-and-by, kindness and respect will be as sweet as love and admiration now.²⁸⁸

And as icing on this particular theoretical cake, later on Jo writes in a poem:

Hints of a woman early old;
A woman in a lonely home,
Hearing, like a sad refrain –
'Be worthy love, and love will come...'

I should not be mistaken for saying that I don't think marriage is a good thing. Indeed, I almost agree with Mrs. March – the right marriage can be one of the greatest blessings in life. However, I also think, having some evidence in this direction, that a marriage to the wrong person can be one of the most horrible burdens in life – and

²⁸⁷ from chapter 9.

²⁸⁸ from chapter 43.

marriages got into because one of the parties is afraid of being always unmarried are fairly likely to be of the wrong kind, keeping both parties from making the most of themselves. *Little Women*, suggesting that women can't be completely happy and fulfilled if they're not married, suggests a horrible lie. (It doesn't *tell* a lie, because it is not about the real world, but it certainly suggests the lie, in spades!) It is not true, as *Little Women* suggests it is, that women ought to marry expressly to make their lives meaningful. And, again, people coming to think that it is true from reading *Little Women* and other such works of fiction can have really bad effects in the real world.

Danger Danger

The ability of fiction to fail more or less gloriously to follow through on these last two types of descriptions of what is normal and what ought to be should make one thing very clear: fiction is dangerous! Actions of characters or opinions taken for granted can legitimately be taken as implicit claims made by the text about the real world, if conditions are right.²⁸⁹ Sometimes implicit claims might be very clearly intentional on the part of the author, thanks to the thoroughness of the text in showing a certain character or action in a positive or negative light, or to outside information about the author's thoughts about the text, etc. But sometimes, implicit claims may not be at all intentional.

There is seemingly constant debate over violence in movies and on television.

The first question in this debate is a causal one: whether or not viewing violent material

²⁸⁹ In an attempt to avoid the appearance of mere hand-waving, I need to say something about what I mean here. I spent most of Chapter Five analyzing the right conditions under which a fictional text can make claims about the real world; of course, my analysis was almost certainly not complete, but was intended to be extensive. My conclusions in that chapter are a great deal of what I mean by "the right conditions" here.

makes people act violently. Folded into this question is another one: who is responsible for behavior that is parroted from fiction?

My own earliest memory of this debate is over *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*²⁹⁰ (*TMNT*), the 1990 live-action movie. This is a fairly violent movie, especially given that it was marketed to older grade-school children, compared at least to other things being marketed to children in and around 1990. Suppose, now, that a four-year-old watches the 1990 *TMNT* film, in which the turtle Raphael throws a brick at an opponent's head. Later, in the context of a game of cops and robbers, the child sees a brick on the ground and, remembering the movie, is struck with the inspiration to throw the brick at his friend's head. The question is, I think, what caused the child's action, and if the movie is a cause, is the movie or its makers then at all morally responsible for the action?

To adequately answer these questions, some background from aesthetics is required. (One of the goals of aesthetics is to understand the relationship between art and morality). Monroe Beardsley introduces a useful distinction in his 1958 book *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*;²⁹¹ he distinguishes between inherent or immediate effects of a thing, and its side effects. The inherent effect of a work of art, Beardsley claims, is aesthetic experience, and perhaps entertainment (as a mild form of aesthetic experience). Moral claims evoked by a work of art, or moral effects made upon people by a work of art, would be side effects of such work. What aesthetic experience is, is not altogether clear, which is a problem in aesthetics (in fact, it is one of the main

²⁹⁰ *TMNT* was based on a cartoon about four turtles and a rat who became intelligent and strong when hit with radioactive material, and who therefore live in the Manhattan sewer system, coming out at night to fight gang-related crime.

²⁹¹ Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., New York, p. 558.

problems in aesthetics to distinguish art and the aesthetic experience from non-art and what is merely pleasurable sensation). Of course, to make such a distinction cannot be my project here. Beardsley gives a more-or-less workable approximation of aesthetic experience; at least, it will suffice to move my project along:

...psychological states and processes [that] are generally, or universally, found in responses to aesthetic objects...²⁹²

At very least, with this general idea of what counts as a definition of aesthetic experience in mind, it should be clear that whatever that is, ethical beliefs are not part of aesthetic experience proper, because they are not part of a response to a work of art, either universally or generally. For someone to acquire new ethical beliefs or perspectives as a result of experiencing a work of art is not uncommon, but failure to so acquire such beliefs or perspectives is not uncommon either.

To call ethical claims side effects of art may suggest that it is an accidental feature of art, or that it is not appropriate to have as a primary goal for a work of art that it evokes moral beliefs. I don't think this labeling need be taken in this way, though. Art qua art isn't *necessarily* for making ethical points or evoking ethical claims; much of it doesn't have an ethical effect. But that evoking ethical claims is not the *central* role of art does not mean that it is not a *proper* role of art.

Regarding the question of moral responsibility for the content of fictional works, such as the movie *TMNT* that I referred to above, the distinction between inherent effects and side effects will help thus: if there is any responsibility for the child's brick-throwing on the part of the moviemakers, it is definitely not one of their primary responsibilities

²⁹² *ibid* p. 61. This is not his final definition, but it does roughly characterize his longer description which can be found on pp. 527-530.

(qua moviemakers). Their first responsibility is to produce a product with aesthetic value, whatever that is. Ethical consideration must be secondary to aesthetic ones, if the production of a work of art is the goal of the craft.

Noel Carroll lists three kinds of common objections to the idea that art is useful for making ethical claims.²⁹³ The first is that art should be evaluated artistically and not ethically, as if the two were mutually exclusive. I see no reason to think that they *are* mutually exclusive, and so I don't think much of this objection. It is quite possible for something to be both beautiful and good. The second objection I also don't find very compelling. The idea behind it is that the kind of ethical "truths" that can be found in fictions are often fairly mundane or obvious propositions that everyone already knows anyway. (For example, the point behind *Black Beauty* might be said to be that one ought not to mistreat animals; which, though true, is not very exciting – everyone should already know that anyway, quite apart from reading the book). I don't think that this is a very good objection to raise either, because I see no reason to think that works of art must of necessity make *new* claims in order to be ethically interesting. There is educational value in giving a vivid, humorous, or otherwise memorable example of how a commonplace moral truth might work out.

The third kind of objection is, in my opinion, much more compelling. Carroll calls it the anticonsequentialist objection; the idea is that there is little to no evidence that art actually has any significant effect on people's ethical beliefs – at very least, it would be extremely problematic to make a study of what particular effects any work of art has. Since this is the case, the objection goes, it makes no sense to talk or make predictions

²⁹³ in "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research," in *Ethics*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (Jan 2000) pp. 350 – 387.

about what we can expect people's reactions to a work of art to be; it is difficult to say that a work of art has any properly defined ethical effect at all. Because of this, evaluating artwork ethically makes no sense.

This objection warrants a careful response. The idea behind it is right – people do have a range of reactions to art, because of their different personalities, experiences, and interests. Some works of art will seem one way to one person and may elicit an entirely different response from another. However, I think (along with Carroll, who gives a similar response to the objection) that the objection goes too far. While people do have different reactions to works of art, these reactions are not usually *unpredictably* different. Most reactions will fall somewhere in a range of reactions that the work makes likely. So while we may not be able to predict any one person's specific reaction to a work of art, we *can* predict likely reactions. For example, it could have been predicted that a book like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would cause a lot of people to get angry, because so many different kinds of characters behaved obviously wrongly that it was fairly likely most readers could identify with at least one of them. The idea of Eliza escaping over the icy river is more or less likely to engender feelings of sympathy and admiration – almost everyone understands why someone would want to rescue their child, and we would all like to think we could try such a thing if our own children were in similar danger. So, because we can predict a range of reactions to a work of art, we can predict a range of moral influences that a work of art might have.

So I think it *is* possible for a work of art to suggest moral claims, despite the anticonsequentialist's claim to the contrary. The worry in the context of the problem of moral responsibility for claims inherent in fiction is that in instances like the case of the

brick-throwing child, the creators of a work of art may be held responsible for all kinds of claims that, in all likelihood, they had no intention of making. This is especially worrisome in the narrative arts like novel-writing and movie-making, where suggestions no one wants to make, necessarily, must be introduced in order to create conflict. There must be some way to distinguish between claims that the work of art is making and claims that it isn't making.

This is where our ability to determine the meaning of a written work of art comes centrally into play. In Chapter Five I argued that meaning is determined from three sources: first, the text; second, the author; and last, readers. The text is by far the most important of the three parts, because it is the most readily accessible and is what the other elements share in common. As far as determining the meaning of the text goes, especially when one is trying to figure out what ethical claims the text might be implying, I argue that what I call the upshot is critically important: the things that good characters do without bringing bad consequences on themselves, in the end, and also the actions that bring positive consequences are the actions that the text recommends, as permissible or as praiseworthy as the case may be.

So, when Raphael the turtle throws a brick at his enemy's head, there is a claim implied that throwing bricks (in such circumstances) is morally permissible (assuming, of course, that there are no bad consequences of that action for Raphael in the story). Unless there was really good reason otherwise, though, it wouldn't be right to count *TMNT* as making the claim that throwing bricks is morally permissible. In fact, it would be a mistake to count the movie as making any claim at all about brick-throwing. If it makes any moral claims, it makes claims that are much more general, like, "one ought always to

try to stop bad people from fulfilling their evil objectives,” or “you should work together with others to accomplish goals,” etc. The reason that only fairly general moral claims count as being made by *TMNT* is that the movie is so far removed from the real world, in terms of what sorts of things can exist. *TMNT*'s world is populated by a variety of extraordinary creatures, including sentient ninja turtles. Our world would have to be quite different from the way it actually is in order for there to be real sentient ninja turtles, and it is difficult to say, in that world, whether or not throwing bricks would be justified, and in what circumstances. So, because a claim about brick-throwing isn't properly considered as one made by *TMNT*, I think that the movie's makers are not responsible for the action of the child imitating Raphael, even though they may be morally responsible for other implications of the movie.

The difficulty with the case of the child imitating Rafael is that the child does not necessarily have an accurate sense of the difference between reality and the worlds that fictions are set in. Very young children may not know that, in the real world, there cannot be sentient ninja turtles. In fact, these children might think that such movies are good-faith attempts to depict the real world. This doesn't mean that movie-makers are responsible for brick-throwing done by children copying the movie. If that were the case then there would be a lot of things that it would be wrong to say only on the grounds that small children shouldn't hear them. Instead, the responsibility for the brick-throwing event and others of the same sort belongs to the guardian of the child who allows the child access to fictions which he cannot understand. This way, moral responsibility of creators of fiction for implicit claims made by fictions is reserved for claims that actually

are implicitly made, instead of for any old claim which someone might *think* a fiction makes because of a misunderstanding or misconstrual of the text.

It is possible for a fiction to make an unintended implicit claim. This might happen when, for example, an author includes some content that has a connotation of which she isn't aware, but that her audience picks up on. This is easy to imagine happening in cases where the audience is from a different time or culture than the author is. If I, as a young American, for example, were to move to a different country and write fiction for the market there, it would not be very hard for me to use some locution which means one thing where I'm from and has a totally different meaning or connotation in the market I'm now writing in. My readers will know the different meaning, though, and they won't necessarily know that I don't – and they'll use that meaning when interpreting what I write. So the miscommunication, while not necessarily anyone's fault, would be a result of a genuine meaning or connotation of what I wrote. An author may also write ambiguously on purpose, in order to allow the audience broad latitude in finding meaning in the text (or possibly to obscure meaning as much as possible). In some cases like this, anything the reader comes up with as an interpretation of the text could be seen as a reasonable implication.

I think a good general rule for whether or not an author is responsible for the claims implied should be something along the lines of the standards for negligence in the law. A typical standard of negligence comes out of the Revised Code of Washington:

A person is criminally negligent or acts with criminal negligence when he fails to be aware of a substantial risk that a wrongful act may occur and his failure to be aware of such substantial risk constitutes a gross deviation

from the standard of care that a reasonable man would exercise in the same situation.²⁹⁴

The “reasonable man” standard in law does not appeal to any one particular reasonable man, but instead suggests an ideal reasonable man, of which there exists no actual instance. This hypothetical person is not supposed to be omniscient, nor even especially intelligent, but he can figure problems out, and he is not prejudiced for or against any of the litigants. So, we might say that an author is morally negligent when she fails to be aware that it is likely, on the whole, that an implication could be read into what she has written – likely because the reasonable reader (a hypothetical, non-existent individual from the time and culture in which the novel appears) would be aware of that implication. This is still very imprecise, but it gets at the gist of what standards one might apply. If a judgment can be made that the author should have known that she was implying what she implied, that will be enough, more or less, to establish her responsibility.

So there can be unintentional as well as intentional implications made by a fiction. Whether implications are intentional or not, they have a lot of force; the fictions people read or watch tend to influence how they perceive the world, and what they expect it to be like. Fiction has the power to define normality, both moral and non-moral aspects of it. For example, when I was young, reading *Anne of Green Gables*²⁹⁵ once a year, I came to believe that it was extremely common for people to make lifelong best friends when they are children, because that is what happens in the book for most of the important characters. Reading the same book repeatedly made me expect that it described what the world as it actually is, especially, in this case, because no one in the book ever thinks

²⁹⁴ 9A.08.010 (1)(d))(1998)

²⁹⁵ by Lucy Maud Montgomery, L.C. Page & Company, 1908.

specifically about whether or not there will be such friends in their lives. In other words, it is precisely because the idea is evoked implicitly, rather than written explicitly, that makes it so easy for the reader to believe that it is actually true of the world.

To avoid sounding excessive here, I need to point out that the persuasiveness of a novel like *Anne* has much to do with the audience it is directed at; children, being young, will accept generalizations about the world with greater abandon than adults will, because they aren't constrained by as many facts as adults are. Not knowing, for example, that friendships often end when people grow and change, it would be easy for someone to come to believe that most friendships last for a lifetime if that was what happened in all the novels he read. Adults generally have too much experience with real friendships to believe that, regardless of how many of the novels they read that suggest the idea. Most adults are thoughtful enough not to believe everything that a novel suggests at the expense of their real-world experience. However, where implications do not conflict with a reader's experience, they have tremendous power in defining what a reader expects of the world.

A Truce in the War Between Philosophy and Poetry

Plato recognized this persuasive attribute of fiction when he excluded poetry from the ideal state. Bad "poetry," and, in particular, "poetry" where characters behave badly and suffer no bad consequences for doing so, is dangerous; it has the power to make people believe that such bad behavior is normal, and acceptable, and will help them lead satisfactory lives. Poetry, and fiction in general, can both constrain and broaden how people think about the world and about what their own roles in it ought to be.

This is where the battle lines are drawn in the war between philosophy and poetry – Sidney’s best reply to Plato is directed at exactly this point. Sidney argues eloquently that any bad effects in its readers that result from a particular poem could never be the fault of poetry in general. Bad effects come from bad poetry, I think Sidney may grant; but that this is so does not mean that the general practice of poetry itself is bad. Quite the contrary, Sidney argues: anything that can be so misused to cause the ill effects that poetry can have must also have the capacity to great and positive things:

... Nay truly, though I yield that Poesy may not only be abused, but that being abused, by the reason of his sweet charming force, it can do more hurt than any other army of words, yet shall it be so far from concluding that the abuse should give reproach to the abused, that contrariwise it is a good reason, that whatsoever, being abused, doth most harm, being rightly used... doth most good... Truly a needle cannot do much hurt, and as truly... it cannot do much good. With a sword thou mayest kill thy father, and with a sword thou mayest defend thy prince and country. So that, as in their calling poets the fathers of lies they say nothing, so in this their argument of abuse they prove the commendation.²⁹⁶

That poetry can have really bad effects is not reason to eliminate it, Sidney thinks; it is, rather, proof that it can also do really good things.

Of course, Plato’s worries about poetry come in the context of an imaginary society where the few ruling intellectuals rule the state, making decisions for the people of lower intellectual classes about which things those lower people should have access to. In this context, there is a case for elimination of poetry altogether; if bad men, who know nothing of what is true, take up poetry, they can cause a lot of harm with it – they take their false ideas and make them part of the story so that, to the audience, these ideas appear to be not just true, but matter-of-course. Instead of allowing this, it might be practical to simply eliminate poetry – then it cannot be corrupted, and the people in

²⁹⁶ 104/20-34, 39-45.

charge won't have to bother to oversee its use. About our free state, where people are (nominally) able to choose themselves what "poetry" to enjoy, Plato would probably say something along the lines that most citizens have not been educated well enough to be able to make good choices in self-censorship, so someone from our society would be not a whole lot more likely to do better in the experience of "poetry" than someone from the lower classes in the society that he would have created.

This is worrisome, and probably true. People aren't told, as a part of their education, what counts as good or bad fiction, unless it is by someone with an agenda who makes decisions based on that agenda, and not on the merits of fiction qua fiction. (Very rarely will one hear someone say: "Here, read this book; it's great. I disagree with it, but it's really good." More often, one will hear, "Don't read that! It will poison your mind!" or some such). But the conclusion we reach about what to do with fiction need not be the extreme conclusion that Plato offers, that all poetry ought to be eliminated. There is room for a moderate conclusion. Perhaps citizens ought to be educated about fiction. If people could be taught, as part of a basic education, what fiction does, how it can influence the way readers think, what bad effects it can have, and how to notice and evaluate what is implied in a text rather than simply imbibing it, much of the possible danger from fiction could be averted. After being educated in this way, people could be allowed to make their own decisions about what is harmful and what isn't. But not allowing any fiction because it might be corrupted by a morally inferior artist is like killing your dog so it won't get sick – it is an effective solution, but only preemptively, and it may cause as much harm as good, because it is also certainly excessive.

So, in the end, fiction *is* dangerous – it can persuade people that bad things are normal and good. But, being dangerous, it is also potentially able to do great things as well – it can teach people how to behave appropriately, show them what behavior they ought to approve of and try to develop in themselves, and stimulate their ability to solve problems creatively. It is one and the same feature of fiction that makes it both dangerous and potentially beneficial – the claim all fiction makes to describe, playfully and implicitly, what is normal.

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