

**How and What Can We Learn From Fiction?**

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I. LITERATURE, FICTION AND TRUTH<sup>1</sup>

When someone looks out the window and tells me about the weather as they can perceive it, I tend to assume that what they say is true or at least in the ballpark of the truth. We rely every day on the accuracy and sincerity of one another's reports, at least as they pertain to observable or otherwise feasibly decidable states of affairs. One reason for this is that the sentences we utter in such cases we put forth *as true*<sup>2</sup>: such utterances come with the understanding that they aim to be accurate representations of the world. What's more, speakers tend to put forth as true only those propositions they can back up: I'll lose my reputation for reliability if too often I am challenged and can't substantiate my claims, or if my claims too often turn out to have been based on inadequate evidence. On the assumption that we care to protect our reputations, and have some success in doing so, this is good reason to think that, on the whole, we can take someone's word at face value as accurately representing the world.<sup>3</sup>

Matters seem different with literature, at least when the literature in question is a work of fiction. First of all, as Gaut 2007 observes, literature and fiction are not the same: Some literary works are not fictional, and some fictional works are not works of literature. Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* are widely considered works of literature but are not fiction; some fiction, for instance some erotic fantasy writing, is not literature. I will use the term 'literary fiction' to refer to those works of literature that are also fictional.

In literary fiction, the bulk of propositions expressed are not put forth as true, or at least as true beyond the world of the work of fiction. If someone challenges my claim about the impending storm with the question, "How do you know?", I might reply by throwing open the

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to the Editors for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> I use 'true' in the everyday usage of that term. On this usage, it's true that gasoline is flammable and that Richard Nixon died in 1991. Use of 'true' in this everyday sense commits me neither to the claim that there is a unique, God's-eye, view of the world, nor to the claim that all truths that there are must be accessible to us.

<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon of testimony has become a topic of considerable interest in recent epistemology. Essays by influential figures in that discussion are collected in Lackey and Sosa 2006.

curtains or at least switching on the Weather Band radio. By contrast, if someone were to challenge George Eliot's claim that Rosie Vincy craned her neck on a certain occasion, Ms. Eliot would, I take it, be nonplussed. Her reply might go like this: "I know what Rosie did because I simply decide what she did. She's my creation after all. Perhaps I *shouldn't* have had her do all the things she did in *Middlemarch*, but that's another question." That Rosie craned her neck on the occasion in question is true in the world of *Middlemarch*, but outside the world of the work, the question does not even seem to arise.

No doubt, many works of literature are, or contain sentences that are, largely true in a way not likely to raise any hard questions. For instance, many works are historical or journalistic while having been "fictionalized" in order to protect identities of the characters discussed. A reporter might for instance go undercover posing as an addict in an American city for an article about the methadone trade. She might then change the names of her informants to protect their identity. In that case, we take what she writes as a memoir rather than a novel or short story with the understanding that minor parts have, in effect, been redacted.

More germane for our purposes are cases in which an author will intersperse her novel with observations on city life, marriage, jealousy, political intrigue and the like that she puts forth as straightforward assertions. In some cases what then occurs in the novel is meant to support one or more of those claims. Jane Hamilton begins her novel, *A Map of the World*, with one of her characters saying:

I used to think if you fell from grace it was more likely than not the result of one stupendous error, or else an unfortunate accident. I hadn't learned that it can happen so gradually you don't lose your stomach or hurt yourself in the landing. You don't necessarily sense the motion. I've found it takes at least two and generally three things to alter the course of a life: You slip around the truth once, and then again, and one more time, and there you are, feeling, for a moment, that it was sudden, your arrival at the bottom of the

heap. (1994, p. 1)

Whether or not this view represents that of Ms. Hamilton, we might ask, Is it true? If we are not already sure that it is, does Hamilton's novel give us any reason to believe it to be? Alternatively, are we supposed to rely on the author's, or character's testimony in the way that I rely on a friend's meteorological pronouncements?

Another important way in which literature may be thought to impart knowledge is not by what the author puts forth directly, but conveys by more indirect means. Something might happen in a work of fiction that suggests an implicit claim about how things are. For instance, after Susie Salmon in A. Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* is raped and murdered, she finds herself in Heaven. However, Heaven as characterized by this novel is not perfect: its citizens have case workers, who help their "clients" with such issues as longing to be back with loved ones on Earth, regret for things not done, etc. If one believes in Heaven, is this a plausible picture of how things might work there? If so, we also need to keep in mind that some literary genres self-consciously depart from reality: people in Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* do things like subsist on dirt, see into the future, or are born with the tail of a pig. Here there is no implicit claim as to how things are. The genre of a work brings with it certain norms as to what is supposed to be real. I return this point in Section IV below.

We do sometimes turn to fictional literature with the feeling that we can learn something, and indeed something important about the world outside the work, including ourselves, by reading what's between the covers. Those who feel this way approach literature for reasons other than the desire to escape the pain or banality of daily life.<sup>4</sup> What sense can we make of the idea that one

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<sup>4</sup> Many also feel that literature can give us knowledge that either cannot, or can only with great difficulty, be acquired from non-literary works. What we might call the thesis of Literary Cognitive Uniqueness (Literary fiction can be a source of knowledge of a kind that cannot be had from other sources) is an important thesis outside the scope of the present essay. Also, this essay will not investigate the question whether the ability of a literary work to cultivate knowledge in its audiences is relevant to its appreciation as a literary work. Instead, see Lamarque (Chapter ??? of this volume) for an investigation of this issue.

can learn from a work of literary fiction?

## II. LITERARY COGNITIVISM

In an attempt to make sense of that idea, we may crystallize the thought of the foregoing paragraphs with a thesis I shall term

*Literary Cognitivism*: Literary fiction can be a source of knowledge in a way that depends crucially on its being fictional.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis builds in a crucial dependence on fictionality in order to accommodate our observation in Section I that many essentially journalistic works are fictional in name only. Our ability to learn from such works doesn't depend crucially on their being fictional. Further, a work of literary fiction's being a source of knowledge does not imply that it was intended to be, by the author, editor, or anyone else. The author may have had a didactic aim in writing the work that she did, or she may just have been in the grip of a narrative welling up inside her that she felt compelled to write down. In the latter case our ability to learn from her product is a happy, if unintended consequence of her writing what she has.

The knowledge invoked in the thesis of Literary Cognitivism may, strictly speaking, come in any of a variety of forms. Here are some of them: (i) Propositional knowledge—knowledge that such and such is the case; (ii) phenomenal knowledge—knowledge of what an experience is like, or how an emotion or mood feels; (iii) knowledge how to do something, where the doing in question may include not only bodily actions, but those involving use of the imagination. Good works of

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<sup>5</sup> As with 'truth', I use 'knowledge' in the most quotidian way possible. On this everyday usage, it is doubtful that knowledge requires certainty: I can know something without being certain that it is so. Similarly, it is doubtful that knowing something requires that you know you know it. Also, compare Literary Cognitivism with a similar thesis propounded by Kivy: "Some fictional works contain or imply general thematic statements about the world that the reader, as part of an appreciation of the work, has to assess as true or false." (1997, p. 122). Following Lamarque and Olsen, Kivy characterizes general thematic statements as those expressing generalizations. (These are distinguished from subject descriptions, which refer to particular situations, events, characters, and so on.)

literary fiction often contain a mixture of all three kinds of knowledge.

Literary cognitivism is stronger than the claim that literature can be a source of belief. The belief in question must be *supported* by the work itself in such a way as to produce, or at least enable, justification. Just as a bumper-sticker might express a slogan without providing any support for it, so too it is easy to think of literary works that express beliefs without justifying them. Such works would fall outside the purview of the doctrine of literary cognitivism. Similarly, the purview of literary cognitivism is not meant to include such cases as a work's simply reminding me of something I already knew. The name of a character in a short story might remind me of an old friend with whom I've lost touch and entirely forgotten. I might be grateful for having read the story because it prompts me to revisit a friendship, but it wouldn't be plausible to credit the work with having justified any of my beliefs. So too, literary cognitivism is also meant to exclude such cases as a work's espousing or endorsing what is in fact a reasonable view, but on bad grounds: A novel might offer a cautionary tale against the corrupting influence of money, but in so doing make implausible assumptions about human psychology. Even if I for some reason find independent justification for the view that the novel endorses, it would be a mistake to describe such a work as a source of knowledge.

In contrast to other authors, I also mean to exclude from Literary Cognitivism such cases as a work's formulating a thought that the reader substantiates elsewhere. Suppose a literary work expresses a thought about human character that it gives no, or bad, reasons for. I then find after perusal of recent issues of the journal *Psychological Science* that the view is indeed correct. I don't know whether in such a case the work is a source of knowledge. If it is, however, its ability to be such a source is relatively uninteresting: The interesting epistemic work is done by the research that went into the psychology article, not the novel, which of course might be excellent and informative for other reasons.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> My approach is thus different from that of Gaut, who writes, "...one can confirm the implicit psychological or moral tenets advanced even by fictional artworks in the light of one's earlier experience, and also by one's later experience, successfully applying them to the world. (2007, 142) Gaut gives this as a reason for supposing that literature can be a

All this is consistent with the fact that it can often be hard to discern what message, if any, a literary work might be trying to convey. We often have to peel away layers of irony, ambivalence and insinuation before finding reason to think of a work, or some part of it, as presenting a point of view. What is more, that point of view need not be something that the author herself espouses: She might for instance present a point of view that she only tentatively, or ambivalently endorses. The work might nevertheless express that point of view relatively clearly, and in that case we may still ask with what cogency it does this.<sup>7</sup>

Again, one can espouse literary cognitivism without being committed to the view that every person who exposes herself to a work having the capacity to engender knowledge will in fact acquire such knowledge. A person might read a work of literary fiction while missing its point entirely. That shows nothing at all about the ability of a such a work to produce knowledge. Great or even good literature doesn't force anyone to cotton on.

Common sense generally admits a distinction between having *some* justification for a belief, and having sufficient justification requisite for knowledge. Exploring in the woods I come across a mushroom that looks just like a portabella. In spite of being an amateur mushroom enthusiast, I have some justification for thinking it to be a portabella. However, there are plenty of other toxic fungi about that look similar, and I can't be sure that this isn't one of those imposters. Most of us would conclude that in spite of my having some justification for believing this one to be a portabella, I don't know it to be. That would be so even if it is in fact a portabella, and I believe it is. What is evidently missing is an adequate level of justification: only if I have a sufficiently high degree of justification do I know this to be a portabella.

A fictional work providing non-trivial, but perhaps not knowledge-enabling justification for a belief should nevertheless interest us. We might value it because of the justification that it

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source of knowledge, whereas I see the knowledge thus generated as adventitious at best.

<sup>7</sup> A fuller discussion of how it is possible and on what basis we might impute 'messages' to works of art may be found in Levinson 1995.

does provide, and it might spur us to investigate its suggestions further. The work's ability to do these things is an achievement in itself. Accordingly, I shall take Literary Cognitivism to include works that are a source of knowledge by virtue of providing *some* justification for a belief.

Having clarified Literary Cognitivism, we may formulate our problem. How can we learn from fiction in away that this thesis suggests? In Section I above, our imaginary conversation with George Eliot seemed to show that she can make up what she wants to in her novels. As a result, it is hard to see how we can learn from what goes on in them (other, perhaps, than about Eliot's psychological profile) just as it hard to see how someone can learn from my daydreams anything other than my own psychological profile. Unlike someone reporting on the weather or today's stock market fluctuations, Eliot is under no obligation to tell the truth, so why should we expect to get any from her novels?

### III. THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

It is sometimes suggested that we can learn from literature by virtue of its ability to get us to imagine things. David Lewis, for instance, holds that one can learn from a literary work that it is possible to be a dignified pauper.<sup>8</sup> Presumably that is because the work in question depicts an impoverished person with a dignified character. Others have suggested that I can learn about myself by imagining what I would do in certain situations. Perhaps, it might be suggested, I can learn about my own attitudes and propensities by imagining what I'd do if I were an impoverished, pregnant teenager locked into an abusive relationship with a boyfriend.

Such claims need to be approached with care. It is well known, first of all, that something's being conceivable does not show that it is genuinely possible. We can easily conceive of traveling backwards in time, and many works of science fiction ask us to imagine just this. That, however, would be a facile way of establishing the possibility of time travel. For all that

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis writes, "I find it very hard to tell whether there could possibly be such a thing as a dignified beggar. If there could be, a story could prove it. The author of a story in which it is true that there is a dignified beggar would both discover and demonstrate that there does exist such a possibility. An actor or painter might accomplish the same." (1983, p. 278.)

such novels reveal, time travel might harbor hidden contradictions showing it to be impossible after all. Similarly, we can conceive of a jilted lover feeling no regret, anger, or resentment toward the person who rejected her. That, however, would be in such violation of basic facts of human psychology that a narrative describing her as accepting her fate with no turmoil whatsoever do nothing to establish that such a reaction is possible.

We don't resolve this issue of what we can learn from something's being conceivable by suggesting that if we carefully examine the story and fail to detect a contradiction, then it must be possible. I can carefully examine and find no contradiction in a story in which gold has a different atomic number from the one it actually has. However, if widespread consensus among current philosophers is correct, that doesn't show that such a scenario is possible: Most philosophers would agree that it is "metaphysically impossible" for gold to have a different atomic number from the one it actually has. While more controversial, it has also been argued with some force that some emotions have an essential nature that cannot be discerned by mere reflection: Only empirical inquiry can determine the characteristic causes and effects of, say, anger (Griffiths 1997). So too for the other so-called basic emotions: fear, surprise, disgust, happiness, sadness.<sup>9</sup>

Should we conclude that conceivability never shows us anything about what is possible? That would be rash. Rather than thinking of cases in which an author asks us to imagine a situation, perhaps outlandish, and then puzzling over whether such a case is possible, we do well to consider scenarios that ask us to draw on what we already know of the world. Consider a famous example of Galileo's aimed to refute the ancient Aristotelian doctrine that the heavier a body the faster it falls. Suppose two objects are falling toward the ground. Imagine now that they happen by accident to hook onto each other, perhaps because of some slight wind and a chance combination of a hook on one and a thing to latch onto on the other. Then they will start falling together, and you can see intuitively that the new composite object will not fall any faster than did

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<sup>9</sup> Yablo 1993 provides a fuller discussion of the relation of conceivability and possibility.

either of its components before their union. This thought experiment makes clear that, contrary to the Aristotelian tradition, it is not the case that the heavier an object the faster it falls. Further, you don't need to drop cannonballs off towers to establish the thesis: Drawing upon one's knowledge of the everyday behavior of objects, one can see intuitively that Aristotle was mistaken.

This example sheds light on how knowledge can be generated through thought experiments, including those that authors of literary fiction ask us to engage in. First of all, the example relies upon our background knowledge: Although it can be contemplated in an armchair, when contemplating it there we draw upon our knowledge of the world gained either from experience or known innately.<sup>10</sup> It is not by conceptual analysis alone that we reach the anti-Aristotelian conclusion. Second, in spite of the example's drawing out implications of what we already know, it can well happen that we come upon surprising conclusions, even conclusions that contradict some of our other beliefs. As a result, we can learn something new from a thought experiment even if we do so just by discovering implications of already held beliefs.

Thought experiments do not always offer such a straightforward "Aha!" experience as that devised by Galileo. Some such experiments invite us to consider cases in which our concepts lack clear conditions of application. One character finds much to love in a woman who, unbeknownst to him, two decades earlier as a Nazi prison guard allowed 200 inmates to burn to their deaths. (Schlink, *The Reader*). In another case (*Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness*) we are asked to consider what long-term relationships would be like among people who regularly, and as a matter of course, change their genders.

Here we have cases that do more than ask us to consider the consequences of our implicit beliefs. They also require us to apply our concepts in ways that might not be easily inferred from their previous applications. One might have thought that a person's being lovable was not

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<sup>10</sup> My knowing something innately does not mean that I know it a priori. That innate knowledge might be inherited through my parents' genes, and acquired through the evolution of my species. Such knowledge would then be known by experience, but not by *my* experience.

compatible with her having been a mass-murderer; one might have thought that being chronically gendered was a condition of long-term intimacy, and so on. *The Reader*, and *The Left Hand of Darkness* challenge these presumptions, respectively, forcing us to reconsider our habits of mind and heart.

In such cases, it's plausible that the authors intend us to examine our views about, for instance, evil or gender, and if we see fit, revise them. However, while this process of revision is valuable, perhaps even indispensable, to becoming a reflective person, it would be optimistic at best to describe our resulting opinions as knowledge. These matters—evil, gender, and so on—are too often ones on which the most we can often hope for is *some* justification rather than a level of justification adequate for knowledge. Given our liberal reading of Literary Cognitivism, however, that will not prevent such cases from falling under its purview. So long as a literary work leads me to a somewhat justified opinion, that will still allow it to fall within the scope of that principle.

What about those thought experiments prompting me to ask what I would do under certain conditions (as opposed to asking what would happen in a more general way)? After reading a short story about such a case, I might think that if I were a teenage girl in an abusive relationship, I would—unlike the girl in the story—take immediate measures to protect myself and my unborn child from the perpetrator. Yet in so doing I might be overestimating myself. Perhaps in that situation I would believe that my relationship with my boyfriend could be improved with time, or perhaps I would feel that in spite of his problems he is one of the few people who truly know and appreciate me. Notoriously, women in abusive relationships go back to their abuser not long after leaving them. What makes me think I would do any different?

How, then, may the imagination be used reliably in such a way as to justify beliefs? Galileo's example shows that it sometimes can, yet we have also seen many pitfalls to its use. How can we tell the reliable uses of imagination from those that are not? One beginning is to notice that literary fiction often comes in the form of a genre, which carries its own norms. It is to these genres that I now turn.

#### IV. GENRES

The very act of imagining something to be so permits a departure from how things are. However, we participate in a great many types of imagining, all the way from daydreaming about a fishing expedition in a trackless wilderness to considering what would be the case were the oceans to rise in temperature by two degrees. While the fishing daydream permits flights of fancy—the size of the fish, the ferocity of the grizzly avoided, etc.—in a way that the oceanographic one does not, both are subject to norms: you're simply not daydreaming about fishing if your consciousness is replete with images of space travel or bread baking.

The same holds of genres of fiction. Many such genres mandate certain standards of veracity. A detective novel requires rough accuracy about the ways of criminals and detectives. A political thriller needs to attain ballpark plausibility about governments and politicians, and so forth. It is, however, in the nature of certain genres to be deliberately liberal about certain issues. Magical realism (exemplified in the works of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Gunter Grass, Mikhail Bulgakov, Toni Morrison, and Salman Rushdie) permits violations of laws of human physiology. Science fiction permits violation of current technological limitations. However, that does not mean that such literature is sheer fantasy. Even in these genres the author must adhere to a plausible human psychology. That means that if a character in such a work is feeling jealous, she will behave in ways that jealous people tend to, and if another character is overbearing he will behave in a way that overbearing people tend to. So far as I know there is no genre in which jealous people act generously and in which overbearing people are solicitous. When a genre permits departures from how things are, it does so in fairly circumscribed ways. More generally, I suggest that it is part of the definition of a given genre to imply norms as to which departures from reality are permissible and which are not. (This does not mean that these norms are always assiduously followed: You can easily imagine a detective novel that naively treats cops as impervious to the temptations of bribery, for instance. Here we would have a detective novel that is, to this extent at least, mediocre, since it does not conform to the standards of the genre.)

Experienced readers are sensitive to clues, often subtle, as to the genre of the work at hand. Discerning the genre then enables them to form expectations as to the standards of veracity to which the work should conform. In one genre we read, without blinking an eye, of characters conversing with ghosts; in another those same events would provoke disdain. In one genre the use of a magic spell seems a *deus ex machina*, in another it just comes with the territory. Insofar as we are habituated to characteristic departures from reality that accompany various genres, those genres differ from *counterfactual reasoning* as we find it in everyday life and scientific inquiry. This is, roughly, reasoning that tries to answer questions of the form, 'If A were to be the case, would B be the case also?' For instance, if I were to strike this dry, well-made match, would it light? Or, if the seas were to rise in temperature by a few degrees, would hurricanes become more common? It is generally accepted that in answering question like these, *conservatism* reigns: In the match case, I am to make the minimal changes to the current situation required to accommodate the lighting of the match. That is why if there is currently oxygen in the room, we keep that fact fixed while supposing the match to be struck.

By contrast with everyday counterfactual reasoning, literary genres are often permitted to transgress conservatism. The noir tendency of detective novels protects the author from questions of the form: Are people really that corrupt/deceptive/carnivorous, etc.? The magical tendency of magical realism protects the author from questions of the form: Can a person really subsist on dirt or be born with the tail of a pig? Historical fiction and New Journalism are, similarly, permitted to fill in the gaps in our historical knowledge. We are not allowed to ask how Truman Capote knows the last words of the murdered family members as described in *In Cold Blood*.

That is not to say that all fictional literature will violate conservatism. Counterfactual history may not do so. A novel that imagines a nuclear confrontation resulting from the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 would keep as much fixed as is compatible with the assumption that one or both of Kennedy and Khrushchev push the button. Notice that it may be difficult to tell whether such a work should count as fictional literature rather than historical scholarship, albeit of a

somewhat speculative sort. That is suggestive, for I want to argue that the difference between counterfactual reasoning and fictional literature is one of degree rather than of kind.

Return to the example of the political thriller. Imagine one in which a terrorist has planted explosives all around London set to go off simultaneously in the middle of a business day. The Mayor is made aware of this fact, and her advisors also inform her that there is no way to defuse them before evacuating the city. Any attempt to evacuate the city sooner will cause panic and at least as much carnage as the explosives would. Also, the mayor's advisors inform her that the terrorist is known to the authorities, and has a daughter who can be apprehended. If apprehended, the daughter, who is entirely innocent of any wrongdoing, can perhaps be used as a bargaining tool: We know that if we make the terrorist aware that she is being tortured, he will very likely crack and tell us how to defuse the explosives.

The novel asks us to consider our own moral convictions, and forces us to see that whether we take a consequentialist or deontological approach to ethics, that approach will have disturbing consequences. The novel may also help us to come to grips with what we believe about the nature of morality in a way that we had not been aware of before: Up until that novel you may have thought that nothing could possibly justify torturing an innocent child. Now perhaps you think otherwise. The political thriller, note, asked the same question as did the counterfactual history: What if a situation such as the former describes were to occur in a major city? That question, if it activates any genre at all, does not licence any departures from reality other than the following: The characters, political institutions, technological limitations, and the like need to be relevantly similar to those that we find in major, contemporary first world cities. The author will likely add romantic or other kinds of intrigue in order to increase the appeal of the story, but from our point of view that is an essentially decorative, albeit unobjectionable, maneuver.

#### V. LEARNING BY SUPPOSING

Many defenders of the idea that knowledge can be gleaned from works of literary fiction think of

the process along the following lines. The work in question either implicitly or explicitly suggests a proposition—about freedom of will, the nature of fate, romance, death, what have you. The reader is then invited to reflect on that proposition and then draw her own conclusions, whether they be in agreement or disagreement with any suggestions by the author. Thus for instance Berys Gaut writes,

...reasoning plays little explicit role in most artworks—exceptions being those works of literature that are also works of philosophy, such as Plato’s dialogues, or in those works of literature, such as Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, that have philosophical aspirations. In the case of most works, audiences ‘draw their own conclusions,’ as we say, and the reasoning going on lies in the audience’s response to the work... (Gaut, 2007, p. 142.)

Similarly, Kivy imagines what he terms a ‘laboratory of fictional truth’. On this proposal, the author floats a proposition by means of some aspect of her literary work, and then each reader is invited to contemplate it:

Intelligent readers of the canon often have proposed to them live hypotheses of a religious, metaphysical or moral content that they continue to think about and try, thereby, to evaluate during and after the reading process. (1997, p. 127)

The set of contemplating readers for a work constitutes, for Kivy, a “laboratory” for that work in which, presumably, the hypotheses in question will be decided (Ibid, p. 126).

Gaut’s and Kivy’s suggestions are reasonable descriptions of some cases, but I will argue that they fail to appreciate the full knowledge-enabling capacity of fictional literature. As the plot of a good work of literary fiction develops, we often find ourselves pulled along, having the sense

that this is a natural, if not entirely inevitable way for things to go. Returning to Hamilton's *A Map of the World*, the young mother is distracted with a map she made as a child while her and a neighbor's children play outside; during that time the neighbor's child drowns in a nearby pond. Crushing guilt, ostracism, marital stress, all ensue. This is not to say that when you pause over a relic of your childhood, tragedy must result. However, our background knowledge enables us to see that this *could very well happen*: Many parents can vividly recall occasions when tragedy brushed very near to their own children or those for whom they were caring. We may accordingly think of Hamilton's novel as a plausible account of what would have ensued had the event been more than a brush.

Let us unpack the mechanism at play here a bit further. One widely used technique in reasoning involves suppositions for the sake of argument. It is often of interest to interlocutors as well as to agents reasoning on their own to settle a question, and to do so we often seek an answer to that question that will be acceptable to all parties to the discussion. Sometimes the wanted answer is conditional in form; in other instances a good route to establishing that answer is an indirect one showing an alternative to be unacceptable. To either such end one may invoke a practice permitting a proposition P to be put forth as a supposition rather than as an assertion. Doing so entitles the reasoner to draw inferences from P, together with other propositions already established or accepted, in order to infer a proposition Q still under the scope of the supposition P. Having reached Q, the reasoner is entitled to put forth "If P, then Q" no longer under the scope of P, and if no other suppositions are in force she is entitled to put forth that conditional as an assertion rather than as a supposition. Ideally, with the aid of other propositions established or accepted the assertion justified by this procedure will settle the question at issue.

An analogous style of reasoning works for so-called *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation, in which one assumes a proposition for the sake of argument in order to debunk it. One such might be the proposition that the heavier the body, the faster it falls. After we assume this, our reasoning under the scope of this supposition shows that it would contradict other things we know

from our everyday experience with objects in free fall. That, in turn, justifies us in rejecting the original supposition outright: No longer supposing anything, we can see that it isn't true that the heavier the body, the faster it falls.

Suppositions can also nest within one another. Within the scope of a supposition of a proposition P, one can add a new supposition, Q. What is established under Q's scope can then, once the supposition Q is discharged, be added to the things that have been established under the scope of P. This process has no finite upper bound, so that within the scope of Q one can also suppose a third proposition, R, and so on. Such *recherché* cases are not likely to be analogous to much in literature, but when a Q is supposed within the scope of a larger supposition, P, we may well see analogies with cases of "plays within plays". Observe also that one making a supposition of P must do so in such a way as to be entitled to reason under its scope without being answerable to objections to P's truth, and in such a way as to be entitled to infer a proposition no longer under the scope of P that either has P as its antecedent, or is P's negation. Further, these norms distinguish supposition from other acts significant for inquiry such as assertion, conjecture, presumption and presupposition. To take just one difference, a speaker performing any of these acts is, unlike the supposer, answerable to objections to the truth of the content forwarded. By contrast, if I ask you to suppose P for the sake of argument, and you reply by pointing out that P is not true, I'll feel you've missed my point.

How does this relate to literary fiction? An author of a literary fiction who implicitly or explicitly imagines that something is so is, I am now suggesting, often supposing those things to determine what consequences will plausibly follow. 'Determine' may be misleading here, since the author might already have a clear idea of what will ensue from her supposition. Further, as we have mentioned, the author may just be in the grip of a narrative rather than being guided by any didactic aim. Even so, return to the story of the terrorist. We may think of this novel as asking, What if this were to happen? In the process it employs counterfactual reasoning under the scope of this supposition, often, perhaps not coincidentally, described as the "premise" of the story. The

behavior of the main actors in the drama must then be plausible given what we know about human psychology; the technological facts about explosives, crowd control, and so forth, must be accurate, and so on. So far we don't have a crucial departure from cases such as that of the warming oceans.

Some fictional literature can plausibly be construed as taking the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Some dystopian literature is a clear instance of this kind. Huxley's *Brave New World* asks what would be the case were a society to exist based on principles associated with hedonic utilitarianism. We may think of Huxley as asking, What if a society were set up along these lines? We are then led through a working out of the implications of that supposition by being shown the various things that would ensue: The State would support an orgiastic religion, drug-induced anaesthetization of its citizens, suppress all independent inquiry, and so forth. The reader is then justifiably expected to recoil with horror at such a world. As a result, the structure of the "argument" implicit in Huxley is:

1. Suppose a society were organized along the lines dictated by hedonic utilitarianism.
2. In such a world, people would lack freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and the ability to cultivate the capacities for critical reflection on their surroundings.
3. Therefore, in such a world, life would be intolerable to all but those who have lost the capacity for the activities mentioned in premise 2.
4. Therefore, such a world would be unacceptable.
5. Therefore, hedonic utilitarianism is an incorrect theory of how to achieve happiness.

Line 5, our conclusion, is no longer under the scope of supposition 1. It stands as justified by premises 1-4. So far the "logic" of the novel is strikingly similar to that of the Galileo thought experiment.

Background knowledge is nearly always in play in suppositional reasoning. In the

meteorological reasoning concerning the heating of the oceans, I will only be able to follow the scientist's line of thought if I have some familiarity with how oceans work, the water cycle, major currents, and so forth. This does not imply that the scientist is just telling me what I already know. I can realize something new by drawing out consequences from information I already possess, say for instance about how bodies fall through space. So too, the meteorologist might produce surprising results by asking me to combine disparate pieces of information already available to me and/or draw out some unexpected consequences of that information. The same goes for the example of the political thriller: Here I will be able to assess the veracity of the plot's unfolding only if I have relevant background knowledge. So here again we do not find a crucial disanalogy between counterfactual reasoning and fictional literature.

The aforementioned novel about the Cuban Missile Crisis might go the same way. So long as the author remains within the bounds of political, technological and psychological plausibility, her novel may well justify the some such conclusion as: If Khrushchev had not backed down, much of Russia and Central Europe would have been devastated by nuclear fallout. We have said that genres imply various kinds of violation of conservatism. Does this imply that literary genres, other perhaps than counterfactual history, cannot generate justification? I suggest it does not. Consider so-called hard science fiction (examples of which J. Blish's *Surface Tension* (1952) and F. Pohl's *Day Million* (1971)). This is a sub-genre of science fiction in which adherence to the laws of physics is required: No superluminal travel, teleportation, etc. Here too, however, it is accepted that facts about human psychology are to be kept fixed. In these novels, people who get angry, scared, surprised, and so forth behave pretty much as you would expect them to do. As a result, in a hard sci-fi novel you might, for instance, imagine a world in which we have begun to mine the Moon for minerals. What social formations would result from this? If the novel justifies its conclusions, it can produce knowledge of a conditional statement that is no longer under the scope of any

assumptions.<sup>11</sup>

So far we have found significant similarities between non-fiction when it engages in counterfactual reasoning, and much fictional literature, particularly when it has a didactic capacity; indeed, the two cases are not different in kind. The point also applies to genres that permit a dramatic departure from veracity. In fantasy literature such as the *Harry Potter* series or the *Inheritance* trilogy, violations of physics and biology are abundant. One can nevertheless learn new truths without taking the author's word for anything.

A natural concern here is this: It might be suggested that while counterfactual reasoning in science tends to proceed in such a way that each step must follow from the previous; by contrast, a plot, even in a quite realistic genre, rarely proceeds by means of necessity. 'Could very well happen' is far weaker than 'must happen'. However, much scientific reasoning proceeds by plausible steps rather than by necessity. Returning to the case of meteorological prediction as it pertains to the heating of the oceans, no scientist could expect to make more than plausible claims about what would ensue. The reason is that there are simply too many factors interacting in stunningly complex ways. The same may be said of human affairs. Whether or not Universal Determinism is true, we are far from a rigorous science of human behavior. Instead, we may make use not just of everyday knowledge about matters of the heart and mind, but also the findings of psychology and neuroscience as we construct a plot.

## VI. De Se Suppositions

Loosely following a tripartition offered in Lewis 1979, let us call supposing what would happen were a proposition true, *de dicto supposition*. Then, supposing, of a certain object, that it were to be different from how it in fact is, we may call *de re supposition*. Then a special case of this will be *de se supposition*, in which I suppose, concerning myself, that I am in some way different

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<sup>11</sup> A fuller treatment of sub-genres within science fiction may be found in Clute and Nichols 1995.

from the way I in fact am. Considering how I would feel if I won a lucrative lottery, lost a child, or learned that I was suffering from a terminal illness, are all cases of *de se* supposition.<sup>12</sup>

*De se* suppositions are treacherous. I might have a view about how I would fare under conditions of extreme deprivation, danger, or some other forms of duress, and that view might be activated by my engagement with a fictional work. So too, I might think I know what I'd do if I were a pregnant teenage girl with an abusive boyfriend. The trouble with these views is that they fly in the face of a large body of current research concerning our limited self-knowledge. Under the rubric of affective forecasting, research suggests that we vastly over-estimate, for instance, how happy we'd be if we won a large sum of money, or acquired a luxury item such as a fancy home or sports car. We also tend to over-estimate how devastated we'd be by tragedy such as the loss of a loved one. Forecasts about our future are not the same as *de se* suppositions, which need make no commitment about what will actually befall us. However, the relevance of forecasting to supposition should be clear: My views about how I'd feel if A *were* to happen to me are typically drawn from the same source as those about how I *will* feel if A happens to me.<sup>13</sup>

Given these pitfalls, we should consider whether fictional literature can really provide substantial justification for a view I acquire by means of *de se* supposition. It is here that the author's role as more than a storyteller is crucial. I mentioned in Section I above that we often take someone's word for what they say on the default assumption that they know whereof they speak. Most of us can be relied upon to speak accurately about the nearby weather. Some of us can be relied upon to speak accurately about tomorrow's weather, and so forth. It is no accident, I suggest, that aspiring writers are often counseled to know their subject matter well, be it bullfighting, seafaring, hairdressing, or space exploration. A writer who draws on her expertise can be a source of testimonial knowledge not only in a factual way—an author with nautical experience

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<sup>12</sup> *De se* imaginings (of which *de se* suppositions are a special case) are discussed at further length in Walton 1990, and in Currie 1995.

<sup>13</sup> A survey of the relevant literature may be found in Wilson 2002.

can be depended upon to speak reliably on maritime matters—but also in a more personal way. She can do the latter by showing how a certain experience, feeling, or emotion feels, drawing, typically but not exclusively, on firsthand knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

Alice Sebold was beaten and raped while walking across campus as a college student. She draws on that experience in her account of Susie Salmon, the fictional teenager who is raped and murdered in *The Lovely Bones*. Her ability to do this adds to the power of the story, precisely by showing some dimension or dimensions of how that must have felt to the victim. By showing us how that experience felt, Sebold provides us with the tools for a *disciplined* use of our imagination: She guides us toward a proper understanding of what, or some portion of what, Susie Salmon must have felt while being raped and before her murder.

Some authors attempt to enable de se imaginings for what might seem impenetrable cases. In *The Curious Case of the Dog in the Nighttime*, the author Mark Haddon tells a story from the point of view of an autistic boy, Christopher Boone. In some cases, you can imagine Christopher doing something but may find it hard to imagine yourself in his shoes: For instance, when upset he will calm himself with a repetitive activity, whereas I have no idea what it would be like to scrape a coin against a radiator for over three hours in order to calm myself down. In such a case we may engage in a de dicto, and perhaps also a de re supposition, but not a de se supposition. In other cases we do get some glimpse of what it would be like to walk in the boy's shoes. Like me, you probably can discern another's emotion by the look on their face, without however having consciously to reflect what their facial expression means. Most of us determine affect through facial expression rapidly and unconsciously. Not Christopher Boone. However, his teacher Siobhan has helped him over the years to connect faces with emotions:

I got Siobhan to draw lots of these faces and then write down next to them exactly what

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<sup>14</sup> I develop an account of the various means by which one can show what's within—be it an emotional, cognitive or affective states, in Green 2007.

they meant. I kept the piece of paper in my pocket and took it out when I didn't understand what someone was saying. But it was very difficult to decide which of the diagrams was most like the face they were making because people's faces move very quickly. (Haddon 2003, p. 3.)

It is no accident, I suggest, that the dust jacket of Haddon's book mentions that he worked with autistic individuals before trying his hand as an author. This makes it plausible that he speaks with some authority about what autists experience. It is that authority, and Haddon's talent in giving it voice, that enables us not only to engage in *de se* supposition, but to do so in a sufficiently disciplined way as reasonably to expect to learn something from the exercise.

*De se* suppositions, then, can as easily be the source of illusion as knowledge. However, one important role for authors as the source of testimony is in guiding such suppositions in the right way. Most of us need knowledgeable guidance in trying to understand the world from an autistic boy's point of view, just as, thankfully, most of us need guidance in trying to understand what it is to be raped. Talented, informed authors can do just this.

The authors of works that guide disciplined *de se* imagining go beyond reportage-with-the-names-changed such as we considered in our Section I example of a journalist doing a story about the methadone trade. On one hand authors of fiction are not beholden to factual detail in the way that a journalist is. On the other hand, the author of fiction does well to show how the situations of the characters she discusses feel "from the inside".

Literary fiction, then, is more closely associated with and bound by the real than might at first glance appear. Our imaginary discussion with George Eliot suggested that adherence to the truth is no standard for the writer. However, this is only superficially the case. At a deeper level, we have seen that, intentionally or inadvertently, many authors use their fiction to show how things are, and our characterization of many works as having a suppositional structure helps to explain how this is so. First, an author can show how things are by drawing out conclusions from

things we already know with the aid of suppositional reasoning, typically de dicto suppositions. Second, an author can show how an experience, emotion or mood feels by inviting the reader into a de se imagining. In this case, however, it is crucial that the author knows her subject matter, either by personal experience or careful study. The qualified author can then provide her reader knowledge of what an experience is like by serving, in effect, as a source of testimony.

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