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Recent philosophy and the fiction/non-fiction distinction

Perhaps oddly, for a discipline that thinks of itself as engaging in the disinterested pursuit of truth, philosophy is a fairly Balkanized subject. Even within the Anglophone world, one can distinguish different hostile camps. In particular, there is 'analytic philosophy' and 'continental philosophy' – neither name being particularly appropriate to what it describes. Each school is best understood through its tradition. Analytic philosophy finds its legacy in Locke and Hume of the Eighteenth Century, through the Logical Positivists in the early twentieth, to philosophers such as David Lewis and David Armstrong. Continental philosophy has streams that come from post-Kantian German philosophy, as well as modern French philosophy. Quite what the difference is between these two schools, and whether or not it matters much, are tendentious matters. Broadly, within the Anglophone world (and others, such as Scandinavia) analytic philosophy dominates philosophy departments, but philosophy that is done in other departments such as Art History and English, tends to be continental. Hence, it is no surprise to find that continental philosophy and literature move in step – the classification of works under labels such as Romanticism, Modernism, and Post-Modernism being common to them both (see, for example, (Kearney and Rasmussen, 2001)).

What is more surprising is that, for the past thirty years, there has been a flourishing interest within analytic philosophy in the philosophy of literature. The key moment was the publication, in 1990, of *Mimesis as Make-Believe* by the American philosopher, Kendall Walton (Walton, 1990). This 450-page book attempted to provide a comprehensive and unified account of the representational arts. Walton attempted to ground representation in 'make believe'. The insight is this. What is common across the arts is that something in the actual world is presented as something else in 'the artworld'. Sounds in the actual world are notes in the musical world; shaped lumps of stone in the actual world are kings and queens in the sculpture world; paint-smeared canvasses in the actual world are views of Delft in the picture world; sentences on a page in the actual world are assertions in the fictional

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world; and so on. What is the nature of this transformation? What is the relation, in each case, between the former and the latter?

For Walton, in each case the thing in the actual world mandates us to imagine, of it, that it is something else in the fictional world. That is, representation (or the artworld) is analogous to children's game of make-believe. In a game of mud-pies, there being a glob of mud mandates the participant to imagine, of that glob of mud, that it is a pie. That is just what it is to play mud pies. Similarly, faced with a shaped lump of stone, we are mandated to imagine, of that lump of stone, that it is Henry VIII (or whoever).

From this apparently simple idea Walton wove a dazzling account that purported to solve the principal problems surrounding representation that had been bothering philosophers. It was received with great acclaim and has dominated discussion of representation in analytic philosophy of art ever since. To come down to the topic of this paper, the second chapter of the book was called 'Fiction and Non-Fiction'. In titling his chapter this, Walton apparently endorsed the prevailing view, in what small literature there was, that this was the important distinction. John Searle had, in 1975, posed the problem thus: 'how can it be both the case that words and other elements in a fictional story have their ordinary meanings and yet the rules that attach to those words and other elements and determine their meanings are not complied with' (Searle, 1979: 58)? Gregory Currie, whose book came out in the same year as did Walton's, wrote: 'There can hardly be a more important question about a piece of writing or speech that this: Is it fiction or non-fiction?' (Currie, 1990: 1). Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen concur: 'The truth is that the classification of narrative into fiction and non-fiction is of the utmost significance; not only is it a precondition of making sense of a work, but it determines how we should respond in both thought and action' (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 30). Philosophers then set about to explore the nature of the distinction.

Walton had appeared to set up an interesting and workable contrast. On the one side, we had non-fiction. Readers of non-fiction acquire beliefs, and beliefs are the kinds of thing that lead to action.

For example, if I read about famine in the Horn of Africa, I form beliefs about famine in the Horn of Africa, and this can guide my actions – for example, my donating money to relieve famine in the Horn of Africa. On the other side we have fiction. Readers of fiction acquire make-beliefs (or 'imaginings'). Make-beliefs are not the kinds of thing that lead to action. If I read that there are four houses in Hogwarts that does not (unless I am deluded) incline me to prepare myself to enter one rather than another. To take a famous example, we do not believe what we see when watching a Dracula film, because, if we did, we would leave the cinema screaming.

In short, the distinction between non-fiction and fiction comes down to two elements. First, non-fictions cause beliefs, and fictions cause make-beliefs. Second, beliefs differ from make-beliefs in that the former cause action and the latter do not cause action. Making this distinction precise, and exploring apparent problems that arose from it, generated several monographs, several edited collections, and many hundreds of journal articles. Eventually, according to two of the contributors to the debate, philosophy arrived at 'a convergence, and a certain amount of agreement on the existence of such a convergence' that the right kind of analysis had been reached; it was just a matter of sorting out the details (Schroeder and Matheson, 2006: 21).

This consensus has recently fallen apart as the orthodox view has been attacked by Stacie Friend and myself (Friend, 2008, Author, 2014). Although Friend and I by no means agree on all the details, we both hold that Kendall Walton has been widely misunderstood (a view with which Walton concurs) as has the nature of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. Rather than traverse the whole debate, I shall focus on two particular arguments as they are each instructive in their own way. The first became known as the 'paradox of fiction'.[1] It stemmed from the apparent commitment we all have to three propositions, each individually plausible, but which form an inconsistent triad.

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[1] Other much discussed problems included: the 'problem of imaginative resistance'; 'the "sympathy with the devil" problem'; and the 'problem of the fictional narrator'. All disappear, or, at least, change their nature when, as I shall argue, the consensus view is refuted.

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1. We feel emotions towards fictional characters.

2. We cannot feel an emotion towards something, unless we believe that something exists.

3. We do not believe fictional characters exist.

In support of (1), we might cite cases such as our pitying Anna Karenina (this provided the title for one of the best-known papers on the topic [Radford, 1975]. In support of (2), we might cite cases such as the following: I do not pity victims of famine unless we actually believe there are victims of famine, and, in the absence of such a belief, such an emotion simply would not arise. (3), on any straightforward reading, is surely undeniable except to the seriously deluded. However, evidently, these cannot all be true at once.

There are two oddities about this (so-called) paradox. The first is that, in the many papers (and at least one book (Boruah, 1988)), (2) is not generally attributed to anyone. In one way this is surprising; if philosophers are setting up a proposition to investigate, they are usually meticulous in citing who has held this view and thus has been shown to be wrong. In another way it is not surprising, as the proposition is so obviously false it would be difficult to find anyone who actually *has* held it (indeed, I have never found a clear case of anyone who admits to it). Consider the case I gave in support of it. It is certainly true that *sometimes* our emotion will depend on our believing that something is happening to some actual person. Hence, if we lose that belief we lose that emotion. However, that does nothing to show that *at all times* emotions require existential beliefs. Consider a parallel. I can show that the fire in the barn was caused by lightening. It follows that if there had been no lightening, there would have been no fire. This does nothing to show that all fires are caused by lightening – indeed, we know that they are not. It is very easy to find cases of emotions that do not require existential beliefs. We fear the future, and we do not believe the future exists. We worry that about possible queues and we don't believe possible queues exist. We can upset ourselves thinking of our parents being dead, while fully believing that our parents are as hale and hearty as we are. And, of course, we feel emotions towards fictional characters and we do

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not believe they exist. It is simply not the case that, as a general truth, we have to believe something

exists in order feel some emotion for it. Without (2) there is no paradox and the problem disappears.

Although I think that is sufficient to consign the problem and all that has been written about it to the

dustbin of history, the second oddity is, for our purposes, the more instructive. That is, there *is* some

kind of oddity about some of the emotions we feel towards fictions. Kendall Walton has provided a

much-cited example:

> Charles is watching a horror movie about a terrible green slime. He cringes in his seat as the
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> slime oozes slowly but relentlessly over the earth, destroying everything it its path. Soon a
>
> greasy head emerges from the undulating mass, and two beady eyes fix on the camera. The
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> slime, picking up speed, oozes on a new course straight towards the viewers. Charles emits a
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> shriek and clutches desperately at his chair. Afterwards, still shaken, he confesses that he
>
> was 'terrified' of the slime. (Walton, 1990: 196)

The problem here is not that Charles is feeling an emotion towards some non-existent, but rather he

is feeling an emotion for himself: he is terrified of something that he knows cannot harm him. He

knows, as we all know, that a metaphysical gap exists between him and the slime – nothing can

jump out of a screen and molest us. This is a genuine problem – how can we be terrified that

something will harm us when we know that it is absolutely impossible that that thing can harm us?

Whatever the solution to that problem, the intriguing aspect from our point of view is that it is not a

problem about *fictions*. Walton's example uses a fiction, but he could equally well have talked about

a shark streaking towards the camera in a nature documentary, or a mad axeman running towards

the camera on the news. The problem is that people sometimes react to represented states of

affairs (the slime looming, the shark looming) as if those states of affairs were not represented, but

actually happening in their environment. They shriek, jump, duck or whatever. However, to repeat,

this is not a problem for fictions it is a problem for fictions and non-fictions. The only problematic

version of the (so-called) paradox of fiction, the most discussed problem in the philosophy of fiction,

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is not a problem about fiction but about representation more generally (a fact about which Walton, uniquely among writers in the area, was aware).

Why is this interesting? Recall the philosophers quoted above. They stressed that whether something was fiction or non-fiction was an important and fundamental fact about it. Then it turns out that the big problem in the philosophy of fiction, our psychological interaction with fictional elements, applies equally to non-fiction. This should at least raise the question as to whether the two categories, fiction and non-fiction, are as importantly distinct as everyone is making out.

And so to our second debate. Let us look at another distinction (or, rather, set of distinctions all bound up with each other) that philosophers have offered to demarcate fictions and non-fictions. I will approach this through the work of Peter Lamarque. Lamarque has argued for what he calls 'the opacity principle': 'In literary works, not only are characters and incidents presented to us but attention is conventionally drawn to the mode of presentation themselves' (Lamarque, 2014: 71). First, a note about what Lamarque means by 'literary works'. Generally, he means 'literary fiction'. He certainly does not hold that all fiction is literature – genre fiction, or fiction without literary merit is not. However, for Lamarque' purposes in this paper at least, he appears to hold that all literature is fiction. That is, as we shall see, when he comes to contrast literature with what he calls 'real-life narratives' it is clear that literature being fiction is part of the contrast.

We can understand what Lamarque means by 'opacity' by looking at an analogous case (I have heard Lamarque use this analogy on several occasions, although I have not found it in his writings): that of a stained-glass window. If you are looking through a transparent window, your attention is directed to the things beyond the window. If you are looking at a stained-glass window, your attention is directed to the window. Literary fiction is like the latter; we attend to the surface of the narrative, not to the world beyond the narrative. Although it is not explicit, it is tempting to see the contrast, the transparent window, as being analogous to non-fiction. That is, when reading non-fiction we do

not attend to the surface of the narrative, but to the things beyond it – what it is about, namely, the actual world. When reading fiction we attend to the surface of the narrative.

We do not need to speculate, however, as Lamarque has spelled out what he takes to be the difference between literary fiction and real-life narratives. The passage is worth quoting in full.

> The opacity principle, in which attention to literary works is conventionally directed to modes of presentation as much as to the material presented, again distances real-life narratives from literary ones. Simple narratives concerning real life will normally aim for high degrees of transparency of transmission, offering up facts, as it were, 'unvarnished', even if the storytellers are not entirely indifferent to narratives [sic] modes. With biographies and autobiographies, it will not be uncommon for readers to attend, and be invited to attend, to the narrative vehicle. This, though, is largely dictated by broader literary concerns with fine writing and stylistic effect. Like all fact-stating discourse, biographies aim to transmit information and are primarily constrained by 'getting it right'. What this means is that there are natural limits to the opacity desirable or possible in such discourses. Too much opacity – or strictly too much focus on opacity in reading – will frustrate pragmatic discursive purposes. Therein lies the crucial difference. In literary works, opacity is an asset – it is sought, and it enriches character identity – while in referential discourses opacity is a weakness, to be minimalised, and merely clouds personal characterisation. (Lamarque, 2014: 78)

What we are presented with is a contrast along these lines. The aim of non-fiction is to transmit information about what happened as accurately and efficiently as possible. To that extent, writing in such a way that readers' attention is drawn to the writing is self-defeating. By contrast, fiction does not have this aim – presumably, the aim of fiction is some measure of aesthetic satisfaction (or entertainment, broadly construed). For this reason, they are written precisely with the aim that readers' attention is drawn to the writing. Notice that this goes along with a claim about motivation:

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readers of non-fiction are motivated to acquire beliefs, readers of fiction are motivated by a desire to be entertained. Although I am not suggesting this is Lamarque's own view, it was once put to me by one of his graduate students that there was no difference between reading non-fiction and reading an 'unvarnished' list of facts.

My view is that this is almost wholly misguided. Of course, there is a contrast: writers of non-fiction are constrained by what actually happened. They are not allowed simply to make stuff up. However, that does not entail anything about how the narrative is written, where the reader's attention is directed, or what the reader's motivation was or picking up the book in the first place. I shall try to substantiate my view by making three points against Lamarque.

First, there is something amiss in Lamarque's argument. His claim is that, in non-fiction, drawing attention to the properties of the writing inhibits the efficient transmission of knowledge. However, it is difficult to see why this would be the case. Let us help ourselves to a good old fashioned form/content distinction. Formal properties of a narrative are the properties of the writing; the literary properties. Content properties of a narrative are what it is about. Lamarque claims that literary fiction and non-fiction exhibit the following difference: in literary fiction drawing the reader's attention to the form *does not* inhibit them grasping the content but in non-fiction drawing the reader's attention to the form *does* inhibit them grasping the content. The basis of the distinction is wholly unclear. If form is going to get in the way of content, then it is going to get in the way of content whether that content is fictional or non-fictional.

Secondly, I think Lamarque is simply wrong about the role much non-fiction plays in readers' lives. Consider what the noted biographer, Michael Holroyd, has to say on the issue:

> Biography is no longer simply an instrument of information retrieval, though historical and cultural information that is retrieved from these expeditions is a bonus. The biographers prime purpose is to recreate a world into which readers may enter, and where, interpreting

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messages from the past, they may experience feelings and thoughts that remain with them after the book is closed' (Holroyd, 2011: xxxiii).

Of course, there are many different kinds of non-fiction: from dictionaries, through encyclopaedias, 'how to' manuals and histories, to biographies and much more besides. Somewhere in this range will be non-fictional narratives (essentially the histories, biographies and autobiographies of the sort Lamarque mentions). It is very unlikely that there is any systematic, or real, difference between the motivations of the reader of fiction and non-fiction and especially so with reference to these historical and biographical biographical categories. The motivation will be that described by Holroyd – what psychologists call 'transportation': 'an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events' (Green and Brock, 2000: 701). It is extremely implausible to think that being 'lost in a book' extends to the boundaries of literary fiction and no further.

I shall begin my third point with a concession. Literary fiction, by definition, encourages close reading: readers should attend to character description, to details such as the use of particular words (as opposed to synonyms of that word), to narrative arc, to ongoing thematic interpretation, and so on. Once again, however, this does not mark any systematic distinction between literary fiction and non-fiction. Reading philosophers such as Lamarque, one would be forgiven for forgetting that some of the greatest prose stylists of the past wrote non-fiction. Bring to mind the list from which we can choose: Montaigne, Gibbon, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Churchill (at times, at least). Once one starts, it is difficult to stop. The thought that one should not read these writers with the same degree of attention to the same kinds of properties as one would read fiction seems far-fetched, to say the least.

The conclusion we can draw from the foregoing is that we should be suspicious of attempts to find thorough-going, armour-plated, distinctions between non-fiction and fiction. The best we can do, I think, is to point to two traditions of story-telling: one that is constrained by what actually happened, and the other that is unconstrained. This will never amount to a definition – there is

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plenty of non-fiction in which stuff is made up (the so-called 'new journalism', the ancient historians, biopics, the History Plays and so on) and it is simply false that 'anything goes' in fiction. Furthermore, we live in an age where writers delight in writing narratives that cross the divide – witness the recent interest in fictional biographies. What follows from all this – in particular, what follows for libraries? First, we need to recognise that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is a result of a hodge-podge of historical contingency and local circumstance; there is nothing necessary or immutable about it. Secondly, we should recognise the huge range of non-fictions. Many of them do not aim at 'high degrees of transparency of transmission' (to quote Lamarque). For these, the aim is to entertain (broadly construed) and hence many people will visit the non-fiction sections of bookshops and libraries for exactly the same reasons as they visit the fiction section.[2]

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[2] I am grateful to the editor for his comments on a draft of this paper.

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