

THE REALITY OF FICTION

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LA RÉALITÉ DE LA FICTION

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Today’s Forum on “Literature and Education” provides us with an opportunity to discuss something that has been puzzling the human race for a very long time, provoking wonder, sometimes even fear. How can something known to be make-believe seem real: a tale, a novel, a *piece de theatre*? How can there be truth or reality in the make-believe of fiction? And why, indeed, do we say of great fiction that it is even more real than life itself?

Perhaps we should begin our quest with a quick look at what “Reality” has, over the ages, been taken to mean. We quickly discover, of course, that “Reality” is a notion that has always been in contention, realists and nominalists at war with each other, even at war within their own ranks, about whether Reality is to be found “out there” in some world independent of us, or whether it is made, constructed by us collectively for purposes of utility and to assure like-mindedness in the communities where we live. And of course, there have also been those so-called “idealists” who follow Plato’s view that the world is an idealized set of essences to which we have but clouded access through those shadows that the ideal world casts on the cave wall through the cave door.

Today, of course, the “official” or professional philosophical view is that Realism – naive realism – is dead, misleading, childlike. We smile condescendingly at Newton’s naive formula that Man sets forth on a sea of ignorance and simply discovers the islands of truth: *Hypothesis non fingo*. We even mock at Aristotle’s old formula in the *Poetics* arguing that convincing literature

seems real because it “imitates” reality, mimesis: how do we know the “reality” that something is supposed to be imitating? In one fell swoop, Realism and Idealism have been swept into the trash-bin of historical error.

“Reality,” we now prefer to say, is a product of disciplined imagination, shaped and guided by conventions for selecting, organizing, and testing experience against agreed-upon criteria. As in science, “reality” is now taken to be the child of a provable hypothesis derived from some paradigmatic conception of the “world,” the provable hypothesis lending credence to the paradigm from which it was derived. But then, bang! A new paradigm is invented or imagined, other hypotheses are generated and proved, and a scientific revolution offers us a new reality. Divine intervention gives way to Darwin’s evolution; the humoral theory of disease gives way to the world of germs.

I have started our discussion with scientific “realities” because I want to make plain at the outset that while such realities are obviously different from literary or fictional ones, they bear an important family resemblance to them – both are constructed, a matter that will be clearer presently.



So we come now to literary, fictional “realities,” those grippingly credible episodes – like the restless domesticity at the opening of Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*, or the compelling maritime routines in Joseph Conrad’s *Secret Sharer*. The first and most obvious thing about all such fictional realities is that they are products of language, not just of the artistry of language, but of language itself. For just as language created a visual-audible world for the blind-and-deaf Helen Keller, so language speaking to the imagination, creates a “real” world for us when we read or hear compelling stories. Reality is always in the imagination – imagination’s most compelling product.

But it is not just language per se that is “reality creating,” but rather one particular power that language makes possible – the power of narrative, the power to create and to comprehend stories. Without that gift of narrative, without some virtually innate access to it for shaping the world, there is no reality of fiction. So let’s explore what narrative is, what it takes to create a story. That will start us on our way.

A story requires, first, the presumed existence of some initial canonical state of things in the world, some stable ordinariness to which, as it were, our habits of mind are tuned. Stories begin in ordinariness. Marcel Proust (in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *Combray*, p. 3) catches our proneness to this initial canonical state with this telling passage:

Perhaps the immobility of the things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, made so by the immobility of our conception of them.

That is the start.

The very next step in a story is, of course, to bring this taken-for-granted steady state of things into question: to undermine its self-evident ordinari-ness, to put it at risk, even to turn it on its head. Take the young captain in Conrad's *Secret Sharer*, unsure of himself on his initial ship's command. He has decided to weigh anchor early next morning and to give his crew a good night's sleep, he is standing a one-man night watch. All is well, and he routinely does a round of the ship's deck. He notices that a boarding ladder has been carelessly left hanging over the side, and routinely he goes to pull it up. Then, out of the blue, he sees a man in the water hanging on to the end of the ladder. Leggatt, the soon-to-be secret sharer, has shattered the familiar routine of a ship's departure – a disturbing stranger in a strange sea on a strange coast. Ordinari-ness demolished!

Proust, in his unique way, liked to disrupt ordinari-ness in a more philosophical way, as in this passage, again from *Combray*, impeccably designed to smash the taken-for-granted distinction between the real and the imagined.

For a long time, I would go to bed early. Sometimes, the candle barely out, my eyes closed so quickly that I did not have time to tell myself "I'm falling asleep." And half an hour later the thought that it was time to look for sleep would awaken me; I would make as if to put away the book which I imagined was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had gone on thinking, while I was still asleep, about what I had just been reading, but these thoughts had taken a rather peculiar turn; it seemed to me that I was the immediate subject of my book. . . This impression would persist for some moments after I awoke; it did not offend my reason, but lay like scales upon my eyes and prevented them from registering the fact that the candle was no longer burning. Then it would begin to seem unintelligible, as the thoughts of a previous existence must be after reincarnation. (p. 8)

Let's use Aristotle's wonderful term, *peripeteia* for these violations of the expected and ordinary, this second step in narrative. The term literally means "adventure" in classic Greek.

Next in narrative, is the *action*: efforts to undo the peripeteia, to restore the canonical state of things. Narrative action is constrained, of course, by genre, by tradition, by culture. The adventure tale features outward acts, psychological novels inner ones, all intended to cope with the dislocations created by the peripeteia.

If action restores or renews the canonical state of things with which the story began, or replaces it with another, we speak of the story's *resolution* – and again it may take many shapes or, indeed, remain ambiguous. To return to Conrad, the young captain brings Leggatt on board and hides him in his own quarters. The next morning, anchor up and sails set, he brings his ship dangerously close in on shore in treacherously light air, so that Leggatt, the

“secret sharer,” whom he has hidden overnight, can escape secretly over the side, “a proud swimmer,” as the young captain says of him. The ship is saved from going into stays, losing way and drifting ashore, thanks to Leggatt’s floating hat, that had been thrown to him by the young captain in compassion and sympathy. That is the resolution.

A well-formed story, finally, has a *coda*, whether stated or implied: its normative stance, the “moral of the story” as we used to call it. Explicit codas, of course, went out with Aesop, but though we don’t expect “A stitch in time saves nine,” we still search for a story’s normative twist, whether the author intended one or not. Why a “secret sharer” on the young captain’s first and unexpected command, for example? Why the need to hide him? Why the episode of the hat?

Initial canonical state, peripeteia, action, resolution, coda: that is the skeleton of narrative. As I’ve argued elsewhere, a grasp of such narrative structure seems virtually inborn: young children grasp stories structured in this way as soon as they have the language needed to follow it – and even before that in the form of pretend play. You do not have to instruct them in the nature of story! It is our way of organizing even the most minimal extended experience into an orderly form. The narrative form seems to be our uniquely human way of making sense of the world with a minimum of experience, even in the absence of experience. Again to the young Helen Keller. She tells us that, once she had grasped the nature of story – soon after her teacher had given her a first sense of what words were – she was even able to make stories about the visible and audible worlds to which she had no direct access at all.

Note a few gifts that narrative bestows. It provides a form for recognizing departures from ordinariness – a genre for sensing and categorizing possible variations in the world as ordinarily encountered. And it endows one with the means of recognizing sources of disruption and who and what is needed to restore normalcy. In a deep sense, narrative is also our simplest mode of imposing a moral structure on experience. For the peripeteia is a disruption of the valued customary, and a story’s action is a stance with regard to such disruptions. It is no accident that we teach morals through stories.

In the deepest sense, then, a principal function of narrative is to explore alternative versions of the human condition, “possible worlds” as it were. It is the vehicle par excellence for exploring troubles and the possible ways of coping with them. It is no accident that the peripeteia is the “engine” of narrative, as Kenneth Burke once called it. Nor is it an accident that we frame accounts of our own existence in the world as “the story of my life,” troubles included as landmarks.



Let me turn now to a theme I have neglected. It has to do, of course, with the believability of fictional realities, the form of credence we place in them. In what way is our “belief” in fictional reality different from our belief in the “realities” we encounter in our day-to-day encounters with the world? Let me begin with a thoughtful quote from a recent book, Michael Riffaterre’s *Fictional Truth*. He approaches fictional realities from a fresh perspective.

. . .readers need not be familiar with the reality that the text is about in order to believe it true. The only reality against which they need to test the narrative’s truth is language. (p. 8)

Stories, as he puts it further along, must, in some way, be “axiomatic” beyond testability. To demonstrate he offers this scene from Proust’s *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (p. 120):

No one yet was to be seen in front of the church except for the lady in black one sees leaving hurriedly at any given time in provincial towns.

Il n’y avait encore personne devant l’église, sauf la dame en noir qu’on en voit sortir rapidement à toute heures dans les villes de province.

There is no detail to be verified in Proust’s brief account, indeed there is virtually nothing about her – not the lady’s widow’s weeds (if she is a widow), not her imminent transition from lonely prayer to the bustle of a waiting household, nothing to individualize her. She is a pseudo-person, a type, “an actant rather than an actor,” in Riffaterre’s terms. For him, fictional truth is syntagmatic, inherently undeniable, axiomatic, possible rather than just there.

So what do stories do to us, then? For Riffaterre (p. 10), stories “parallel in language the cognitive processes we use in everyday life.” Commenting on a passage from Henry James,

To recognize the truth [of this particular passage], neither experience nor previous reading are needed, only linguistic competence: truth [in fiction] is nothing but a linguistic perception.

But note that the *soi-disant* “nothing but” of syntax is the cradle of the semantically possible. Stories provide templates for possible worlds, “models” for seeing the quotidian in a new perspective. We do not confuse fiction with life. Yet, we travel back and forth on a two-way street between the two, between life and literature. They, stories, provide us with the means of knowing possible worlds without having to experience them – just as the language-gifted Helen Keller could imagine the visible and the audible without being able to see or to hear.

And, indeed, we become better able to understand the real world of experience by seeing it in the light of fictional worlds of possibility. It is this comparison process that gives fiction its most compelling reality – “There but for the grace of God goes life.” But, by the same token, we are also enabled to say

of life experience as we live it, “Am I getting this right? Is there another, a better way of telling this story?” The well examined life, in a word, is one in which LIFE EMULATES ART AND ART EMULATES LIFE, WHICH IN TURN EMULATES ART WHICH EMULATES LIFE WHICH EMULATES ART, ad infinitum. Small wonder, then, that fiction often has a reality like life itself!

And indeed, we can easily encourage travel on this two-way street between life and literature. Let me sketch out a little experiment that a colleague and I carried out in facilitating such back-and-forth travel.



It took place this last autumn at New York University, a Freshman Honors Seminar that I shared with my colleague, Anthony Amsterdam, a law professor renowned for his civil rights litigation, including his current battles to restrain the Bush administration’s over-zealous reactions to the threat of terrorism. We admitted only fifteen students, and the announced topic was how one balances individual liberty and state security in times of trouble, as in a so-called war on terrorism such as we are living through today – a real enough topic, with our classroom only a kilometer from the demolished World Trade Center.

Our group read both legal and literary texts. The former were briefs submitted to, as well as subsequent decisions reached by, the United States Supreme Court in cases involving liberty-security conflicts, including ones currently pending (and much in the news, like the Guantanamo prisoners and *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*). The literary texts dealt with parallel themes, including two versions of *Antigone* – one by Sophocles, the other by Jean Anouilh, two millennia apart. At the end of term each student wrote two sets of imagined dialogues. One was between a present member of the Supreme Court faced with our current problems, and a justice who had sat on the Court when it upheld the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and later apologized for their bad judgment. The other imaginary dialogue was between members of the Chorus of the two *Antigones* reflecting how Creon and his niece Antigone had got into their tragic confrontation: what had gone wrong? I’m going to tell you only about the latter, for the former risks being too technical.

Recall first the deadly struggle between Antigone and Creon, she with her sense of moral duty to bury her slain brother Polynices, and he, Creon, with his sense of kingly duty to maintain order and security in Thebes by denying burial to the slain Polynices, who had been a leader in a revolt against the city. Polynices and his brother Eteocles, recall, had killed each other in mortal combat at the gates of Thebes, battling over how they should take turns on the throne of the city. King Oedipus, their recently dead father, had decreed that the two should share the throne of Thebes. Their uncle, Creon, now King, orders a hero’s funeral for Eteocles but decrees that

Polynices be left to lie unburied, prey to dogs and crows. Antigone, enraged, tries to bury Polynices, and for doing so is condemned to death by Creon, whereupon Creon's son, Haemon, betrothed to Antigone, stabs himself to death in her tomb. Euridice, Creon's wife, then takes her own life in grief. It is a tragic tale.

So what did our students make of it, this tragic tale? Let me tell you first that, not surprisingly, they easily and eagerly travelled between *Antigone* and "real life." They went about it in one of three ways. In the first of them, the whole "mess" was human nature writ large – as familiar in ancient Thebes as among us today. Antigone and Creon needed a good psychoanalyst, one said; another suggested they both needed a friend. "Creon's a real Bush," a third remarked, "preoccupied with his own power." The emphasis was on the personal – both in life and in the drama.

In the second approach, the nature of the state was writ large – any state, whether ancient Thebes or contemporary America. Individual liberty and state security were virtually incompatible in troubled times. "Look at us!" one said. Society creates its own nightmares when liberty and security collide.

In the third approach, the villain was destiny – mythic themes working their way through life, this time with Creon and Antigone their victims. But it was the reverberation of an ancient tragic fate, with origins in the incestuous union of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta, the parents of the ill-fated Antigone and her brothers Polynices and Eteocles. "We've got things like that too: that's life. Look at those power-crazy Bushes! Or look at the ill-fated Kennedys!"

Our freshman were doing what we all do, traveling from literature to life to literature, back and forth. One student even suggested that *Antigone* be made obligatory reading for any judge sitting in a civil liberties case! You might even say our freshmen were reading judicial holdings like novels and novels like judicial holdings. Reading great fiction (and talking about it) encouraged them to look at the real world as a possible one among many that might exist, and to look at fictional worlds as possible models of what the real world might be.



So what does all this have to do with education? God forbid that each time a student reads a novel or a story she should have to dissect it into its initial canonical state, its peripeteia, its action, outcome, and its coda. Yet, unpacking literary fiction is a powerful way of teaching us not only about the subtleties of story but about the possible forms that life takes, particularly about life's dilemmas. Perceptive novelists know this implicitly, and transform their intuitions into fiction.

Take this paragraph from Marcel Proust as a case in point, again *Combray* (p. 15), the same young narrator recounting his mother's "Good night" visits at bedtime:

Sometimes when, after kissing me, she opened the door to go, I longed to call her back, to say to her "Kiss me just once more," but I knew that then she would at once look displeased, for the concession that she made to my wretchedness and agitation in coming up to give me this kiss of peace always annoyed my father, who thought such rituals absurd, and she would have liked to try to induce me to outgrow the need, the habit, of having her there at all, let alone getting into the habit of asking for an additional kiss when she was already crossing the threshold. And to see her look displeased destroyed all the calm and serenity she had brought me a moment before when she had bent her loving face down over my bed and held it out to me . . . like a host for an act of peace-giving communion.

Should our students be more exposed to the fictional truths of literature? Should instruction in literature cultivate the back-and-forth between fiction and life? Think how Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* made newly vivid the deadening effect of commerce on American life? Or how the *Oresteia* has livened the world to the always desperate struggle in life between vengeance and forgiveness. Of literary works of such quality it can indeed be said that they are bigger or realer than life itself – artful models of possible life, particularly of life's inevitable dilemmas.

Literature provides a vehicle for teaching about possible worlds – and not just in literature faculties. My colleague Tony Amsterdam and I, for example, used Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* in a seminar devoted to legal procedure, along with the usual legal stuff, of course. Its effect was electric. It wasn't just the gripping moral anomaly that Melville portrays in that moving drama. Rather, Melville teaches the dilemmas of justice – in possible lives, and yes, as they pose themselves in courts of law in the real world. "I learned to READ in a new way," one student told me several years later. I think he too (like those freshman in our Seminar) – came to read law cases for what they were, but to read them as literature as well. Or perhaps even more important for their careers as lawyers, they also learned to read literature as a source of insights into the law and its arcane ways.

(I should explain, perhaps, that in Anglo-Saxon common law, appellate courts hand down not only their final holding in a case, but also the reasons for having reached their verdict, including *obiter dicta* on their mode of interpreting legal precedents from the past. Anthony Amsterdam and I tried to illustrate in a recent book, *Minding the Law*, for example, how often legal decisions are framed and shaped by narrative conventions. Though Continental courts do not reveal their rationale in so explicit a way, it hardly seems possible that their judges could proceed differently.)

So why not use literary works to help us teach sociology, psychology, pedagogy, even (or especially) history? Why are we so reluctant to widen the two-way street between the possible and the actual? Why do we, indeed, go on thinking that the “reality of fiction” is more suspect and illusionary than the “fiction of reality”?

Indeed, I even think that our law student might have been right about “learning how to read” when he became adept in going back and forth between Melville’s *Billy Budd* and the opinions of the United States Supreme Court. And besides, it also makes them more aware of the medium of story telling, not just its message – the very language of literature. Let me illustrate with an anecdote, again from that Freshman Honors Seminar, a conversation with one of our students. We were walking toward nearby Washington Square after the last seminar meeting in mid-December – the same Washington Square, of course, as in the Henry James novel. I asked him had he noticed how many more subjunctive verb forms there were in Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* than in Sophocles’. “Subjunctives?” he replied, “Why that?” So I told him that Henry James – his old house now directly across from us – had cultivated the subjunctive as a way of portraying the inner doubts of his *fin de siècle* characters. He paused, and then, “Hey, you think life’s become more subjunctive, more full of “might be’s” for us in our times? That’s interesting.” He paused again, and then, “Hey, why didn’t we talk about that in class? That would have been really interesting.”

A good question – and probably the first time the subjunctive had ever taken on any reality for that young man. In my view, we’re still only beginning to appreciate how teaching literature takes us beyond the literary. For the “reality of fiction” challenges conventional reality itself. It is a beckoning entry-way into possibility: present, past, and future.

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