

Imagining Fact and Fiction

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Why does it matter whether a work is fiction or nonfiction? Gregory Currie claims that the distinction is crucial:

There can hardly be a more important question about a piece of writing or speech than this: Is it fiction or nonfiction? If the question seems not especially important, that's because we rarely need to ask it. Most often we know, in advance of reading or hearing, that the discourse before us is one or the other. But imagine we did not know whether *The Origin of Species* is sober science or Borgesian fantasy on a grand scale. We would not know whether, or in what proportions, to be instructed or delighted by it. No coherent reading of it would be possible.¹

Whether or not we agree with Currie's view of its general importance of the distinction, the classification of a text as fiction or nonfiction can certainly make a difference to how we respond to it.² We read history, not romance, to learn about the past. We worry about the serial killer identified in the newspapers, not the fictional psychopath in a popular novel. We praise Shakespeare for the artistically justified distortions in his history plays, whereas we would be critical of such blatant falsehoods in a history of England.

Furthermore, there are serious debates about the classification of works as fiction or nonfiction outside philosophy. Consider the controversies over Edmund Morris's *Dutch: a Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999) and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994). Morris (in)famously inserted himself into the story as a fictional narrator so that he could be on hand to witness many of the events of Reagan's life. Berendt made up a scene and changed the chronology of some events in order to be present when a murder is committed. It is because the books were published as nonfiction that critics objected to such devices. Although we cannot simply assume that such debates hinge on a philosophically interesting distinction, we should expect a theory of fiction to shed light on what is at stake. That is, we should expect philosophical definitions of fiction and nonfiction to clarify the significance of the distinction for understanding and appreciation.

Several recent theories define fiction at least partly in terms of its *function*, in particular its role in prompting a certain sort of response in audiences. These theories have the following two components: (1) a specification of what it means to treat a work *as fiction*, and (2) a further condition, or set of conditions, to distinguish those works that *are* fiction from works that might merely be treated as such. While accounts of (2) diverge, there is considerable consensus that (1) involves make-believe or (in this debate, equivalently) imagining. Thus Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie, David Davies and Peter Lamarque and

¹ Currie, *Nature of Fiction*, p. 1.

² I use 'work' and 'text' interchangeably, as well as 'reader' and 'audience'. In this paper I focus exclusively on verbal fictions.

Stein Haugom Olsen agree that treating a work as fiction means adopting a certain attitude to the content of the work, an attitude characterized by make-believe.³

This way of approaching the distinction reflects the widespread rejection of theories of fiction that rely on semantic notions such as reference and truth.⁴ Many works of fiction refer to real people, places, things and events, and many works of nonfiction make false claims, whether through ignorance or deception. A newspaper article that contains false information does not thereby become fiction. The difference, for the theories under consideration, is that newspaper articles ask us to believe rather than to make believe their content.⁵ This distinction is often (though not always) drawn in terms of intention. For instance Davies writes, ‘Whereas it is a condition for assertion that the speaker intends her audience to *believe* what she states, in fictive utterance the author intends that her audience *make-believe* what is narrated’.⁶ The claim is that fiction can be defined in terms of an intended response of make-believe.

I do not think, however, that this way of understanding the nature of fiction is promising. I argue that there is no interpretation of imagining or make-believe that designates a response distinctive to fiction as opposed to nonfiction. The class of works that invite make-believe, however it is determined, is substantially broader than our ordinary concept of fiction would allow. The question is whether there is a way of understanding the sort of imagining involved in our engagement with fictions that would carve out a narrower category. I consider various possible interpretations and argue in each case that works of nonfiction may invite the same imaginative responses as fiction, just as works of fiction may invite the same cognitive responses as nonfiction. These considerations cast doubt on definitions of fiction that appeal to make-believe, and the attempt to save the theory by restricting it to individual statements rather than whole works is unsatisfactory. A different approach to classification is required if we wish to understand the significance of the distinction.

Waltfiction

I begin with Kendall Walton’s theory, since he introduced the notion of make-believe into discussions of fiction. Walton defines a work of fiction as a work whose function it is to act as a prop in certain games of make-believe. The connection with children’s playing, where the props may be dolls and toy trucks, is intentional; for Walton there is continuity between the two types of game. The idea is that works of fiction are designed to prescribe imaginings about their content, and imagining what is prescribed is participating in the game of make-believe authorized by the work. The notion of *games* makes the connection between correctness on the one hand and the imagination on the other: some moves in a game are licensed, others are not. Other theories of fiction retain the appeal to make-believe while dropping the reference to games.⁷ Even so, they agree that works of fiction guide or constrain

³ Walton, *Mimesis*; Currie, *Nature of Fiction*; Davies, ‘Fictional Truth’; Davies, ‘Fiction’; Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*.

⁴ Theorists who invoke make-believe also typically criticize the view that authors of fiction engage in pretend speech acts, but for my purposes there is little difference between the pretence and make-believe theories since both take fiction to invite imagining rather than belief. For the pretence view, see Searle, ‘Logical Status’.

⁵ Of course belief is not the only attitude other than imagining invited by texts. The debate is typically framed in terms of the contrast between believing and making believe, but the issues arise equally for any other ‘serious’ attitude we might contrast with imagining. The focus on belief should be treated as a convenient simplification.

⁶ Davies, ‘Fiction’, 265.

⁷ See, e.g., Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 47.

our imaginative responses. While I am not prevented from imagining that *Oliver Twist* is eight feet tall, there is a clear sense in which this would be an inappropriate response to Dickens's novel.

It is the function of prompting imaginings that distinguishes fiction from nonfiction on Walton's account:

It is not the function of biographies, textbooks, and newspaper articles, as such, to serve as props in games of make-believe. They are used to claim truth for certain propositions rather than to make propositions fictional. Instead of establishing fictional worlds, they purport to describe the real world.⁸

What determines the function of a work? To answer this question Walton refers to a number of factors that may be relevant, either individually or in combination: these include the author's intentions, the typical uses of the work, views about how the work is appropriately used, and so on.⁹

Walton is often criticized for failing to distinguish between a work's *being* fiction and its being treated *as* fiction.¹⁰ For his criteria of fictionality allow the possibility of classifying a work according to the way it is typically treated. On this approach some works, such as the Greek myths, may be nonfiction for their original audience but fictional for us; but one might instead want to claim that the myths remain nonfiction even though we treat them as fiction. I prefer to construe Walton as relativising the distinction. His notion of function is loosely defined to allow for differences in practice. In particular, he acknowledges that in our own practice we have a tradition of respect for the origins of works, for how they were produced and understood. This appeal to origin sustains the distinction for us, though perhaps not in every case.

By contrast, Walton's critics build reference to intention into their theories: a text does not count as a genuine fiction unless it was intended to prompt make-believe. The crux of Gregory Currie's definition of fiction, for example, is a Gricean explanation of *fictive utterance*, which is the communicative act that characterizes *fiction-making*. In fictive utterance, the speaker wants the audience to make believe a certain proposition *P*, and to do so at least partly as a result of their recognising the speaker's intention that they make believe *P*.¹¹ David Davies and Lamarque and Olsen also adopt this part of Currie's theory. From their perspective, even if we treat the Greek myths as fiction they would not be, on the assumption that they were intended to prompt a response of belief rather than what we may call 'make-belief'.

For the moment it does not matter how precisely the function of the work is determined, though I argue below that the intention to produce make-believe should not be taken as relevant to classification. Instead I want to focus on Walton's claim that any work that has the function of prescribing imagining counts as fiction. Because there is a great deal of fuzziness in making this determination, Walton stipulates that if a work has as just *one* of its functions to prescribe imaginings, it is fiction in this sense.¹² As a result, Walton's category of fiction turns out to be much broader than our ordinary conception: many works we would normally label as nonfiction are included.

⁸ Walton, *Mimesis*, p. 70.

⁹ Walton, *Mimesis*, p. 91.

¹⁰ Currie, *Nature of Fiction*, p. 36; Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 48; Davies, 'Fiction', p. 264.

¹¹ Currie, *Nature of Fiction*, p. 31.

¹² Walton, *Mimesis*, p. 70.

Any work that has, to the smallest degree, the function of serving as a prop in a game of make-believe will count as fiction for Walton. Berkeley's *Dialogues*, because they prescribe imaginings about the conversation between two fictional persons, so qualify. Does every work that involves intentional uses of nonreferring names count as fiction? At certain points Walton wants to resist that conclusion. He says in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 'William Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817) is largely about mere fictions, yet nothing is more unambiguously a work of nonfiction'.¹³ But since according to his theory all pretended reference to fictional characters calls for us to imagine that there are such characters, Hazlitt's book must qualify as fiction. Furthermore, any works of history, biography, and autobiography, newspaper articles, journal entries, and so forth, insofar as they aim in any of their features to prescribe imaginings, will count as fiction for Walton. Yet numerous works of history are designed to get the reader to imagine, say, what it was like to live in a different time and place, and most interesting works have this as at least one of their goals. And the category of fiction for Walton is not limited to narrative texts, but includes any texts containing metaphors as well as all pictures.¹⁴ We are likely to think, by contrast, that the use of nonliteral language does not by itself make a work fictional. And to the extent we are willing to recognize a fiction/nonfiction distinction for pictures, we would presumably say that journalistic photographs, courtroom drawings and the like count as nonfiction.

Pointing out these differences between our ordinary notion of fiction and Walton's conception is no criticism of Walton, however; he agrees that the category he delineates is broader than our ordinary notion. Moreover, he does not take himself to be analyzing that notion and even denies that it is desirable to do so.¹⁵ Walton is interested, not in our everyday concept of fiction, but in those works that prompt make-believe, however we pre-theoretically classify them. Such works he labels as *fiction* or equivalently, *representational art*. I shall call them works of *waltfiction*.

There are various theoretical reasons to be interested in the wider category of waltfictions, most obviously with respect to the role of imagination in artistic representation generally. Still, to the extent that we want to understand our ordinary practice of distinguishing between fiction and nonfiction—the practice that explains controversies over works like *Dutch* and *Midnight*, for example—we should not be satisfied with the category of waltfiction. Consideration of waltfictions does, however, highlight the problem I wish to address. Make-believe is an appropriate response to waltfiction by definition, but the category of waltfiction is broader than the category of fiction. Is there a kind of make-believe that is special to the narrower category?

Imaginative Constructions

There is one form of imagining we can quickly dismiss as special to fiction rather than waltfiction: the experience of mental imagery, traditionally construed as definitive of imagination.¹⁶ Both fiction and nonfiction elicit imagery, a fact illustrated by the following passages. Here is part of Eric Schlosser's decidedly off-putting description of his first visit to a slaughterhouse in *Fast Food Nation*:

¹³ Walton, *Mimesis*, p. 74.

¹⁴ Walton's theory of pictorial representation entails that all pictures 'are fiction by definition' (*Mimesis*, p. 351). His analysis of metaphors also involves recourse to make-believe, in 'Metaphor'.

¹⁵ Walton, *Mimesis*, p. 70.

¹⁶ Arguably visual fictions such as films do not invite (much) mental imagery. As Katherine Thomson-Jones has pointed out to me, this is another reason to deny that imagery is definitive of fiction.

On the kill floor, what I see no longer unfolds in a logical manner. It's one strange image after another. A worker with a power saw slices cattle into two halves as though they were two-by-fours, and then the halves swing by me into the cooler. It feels like a slaughterhouse now. Dozens of cattle, stripped of their skins, dangle on chains from their hind legs. ... The kill floor is hot and humid. It stinks of manure. Cattle have a body temperature of about 101 degrees, and there are a lot of them in the room. Carcasses swing so fast along the rail that you have to keep an eye on them constantly, dodge them, watch your step, or one will slam you and throw you onto the bloody concrete floor. It happens to workers all the time.¹⁷

Or consider this harrowing true account of attempted abortion by a woman who became pregnant in a Soviet camp, quoted in Anne Applebaum's nonfiction tome *Gulag*:

Imagine the picture. It is night. It is dark ... Andrei Andreevich [the camp doctor] is trying to cause me to abort, using his hands, covered in iodine, without instruments. But he is so nervous that nothing comes of it. I can't breathe from the pain, but I endure it without a sound, so that no one will hear. "Stop!" I finally shout from unbearable pain, and the whole procedure is stopped for two days. In the end, everything came out—the fetus, with a great deal of blood. That is why I never became a mother.¹⁸

These passages cause readers to imagine the scenarios described, perhaps too plainly for comfort. I take it that for most readers, the images involved are created rather than recalled from memory.¹⁹ They are therefore clear cases of imaginative construction.

Of course many works of nonfiction do not prompt much imagery: demographic studies or political essays, for instance. Even works such as *Fast Food Nation* and *Gulag* contain more exposition and argument than they do narrative or descriptive elements. I suspect that such observations are responsible for the tendency to associate imagination with fictions, which are paradigmatically narrative, rather than with nonfictions. Yet many nonfictions are largely narrative, and not every section of a work of fiction need prompt mental images. Once we limit ourselves to the narrative element of a work, we should recognize that vivid storytelling, whether fiction or nonfiction, has the capacity to evoke imagery.

Perhaps we should look to a different form of imaginative construction as distinctive of fiction. Walton suggests that one difference between fiction and nonfiction as we ordinarily classify them is that works of fiction generate their own *fictional worlds*.²⁰ While some identify fictional worlds with possible worlds,²¹ on Walton's view a fictional world is just the content we are supposed to imagine when we correctly interpret a work—that is, whatever is 'true in the fiction'. The metaphor of 'worlds' emphasizes the sense in which fictional truth goes well beyond what is explicitly stated: we are supposed to imagine the characters and events represented in a narrative in far more detail than the text provides. A possible distinction between fiction and nonfiction could be drawn from these observations.

¹⁷ Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, p. 170.

¹⁸ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 319.

¹⁹ Thanks to Chad Grine for emphasizing the contrast with memory images.

²⁰ In conversation.

²¹ E.g., David Lewis, 'Truth in Fiction'.

We could say that whereas nonfiction aims to instil beliefs about the real world, fiction prompts us to construct fictional worlds in our imaginations.

It turns out, however, that we engage in just that sort of imaginative activity when we read nonfiction narratives. Our ability to make inferences from a finite number of sentences constitutes a basic aspect of our comprehension of any text, fiction or nonfiction, no matter how short or simple, most of it on a subconscious level. Thus we know that Candide has blood in his veins rather than oatmeal, even though the text does not say this explicitly. As readers we are required mentally to construct or reconstruct the ‘world of the work’, to keep track, for instance, of the main characters and settings, of the chronology of events, and so on. These inferences must draw upon an enormous amount of background knowledge, including the kinds of entities in the world; relations of cause and effect; commonly known facts about history, psychology, science, and geography; and familiarity with discourse conventions.²² The resulting mental representations of characters and events are not merely propositional in form: ‘For readers to carry out complex reasoning with respect to a text ... they typically must construct more elaborate models, situation models, which integrate information from the text with broader real-world knowledge’.²³ A *situation model* is the reader’s representation, not of the text itself, but of the situation the text is about. It may be described as a complex representation of a world, created in a reader’s imagination.

Because this creative process is common to fiction and nonfiction, we should conclude that neither mental images nor situation models, though both arguably products of imagination, constitute a type of make-believe special to fiction. Reading nonfiction often prompts the creation of imagery and of imagined worlds in much the same way as fiction. So far we do not have a way to demarcate the narrower domain of fiction within the class of waltfictions.

Belief and imagination

The reason for the conclusion of the previous section should be obvious: the kinds of imaginative constructions discussed there are consistent with our believing the content that we also imagine. This may sound paradoxical, but the compatibility between belief and make-belief is straightforwardly demonstrated. It is basic to accounts of fictional truth that we import various beliefs about the real world in filling out a fictional world.²⁴ On one plausible interpretation of how we construct fictional worlds, we start with a mental representation of the real world and modify it as required by the story.²⁵ The resulting representation contains all the relevant beliefs about the real world that remain consistent with what is fictionally the case. If we imagine what is fictionally true, and what is fictionally true includes what we believe, then we imagine what we believe.

Moreover, it is standard in psychological theories of the imagination to assume that one can believe and make believe the same content, as Shaun Nichols makes clear:

This is nicely illustrated in an experiment of Alan Leslie’s. Leslie had young children watch as he pretended to pour tea into two (empty) cups. Then he picked up one of the cups, turned it over and shook it, turned it back right side up and placed it next to the other cup. The children were then asked to point at the ‘full cup’ and at the ‘empty cup’. Both cups were really empty throughout the entire procedure, but two-year-olds

²² See Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*; Emmott, *Narrative Comprehension*; and Goldman et al., *Narrative Comprehension*.

²³ Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, p. 6.

²⁴ See Lewis, ‘Truth in Fiction’; Walton, *Mimesis* Chapter 4.

²⁵ Skolnick and Bloom, ‘Intuitive Cosmology’.

reliably indicated that the ‘empty cup’ was the one that had been turned upside down and the ‘full cup’ was the other one On the most natural interpretation of this, the child is *imagining that the cup is empty*. But the child also, of course, *believes that the cup is empty*.²⁶

If this is right, there is no bar to our imagining and believing precisely the same thing, in fiction or in nonfiction.

The obvious rejoinder to this line of thinking is to say that when theorists of fiction invoke make-believe, they mean by this something that *contrasts* with belief. Nichols’s point is just that the contrast rests, not on a difference in the contents of the imagined or believed representations, but instead on their functions.²⁷ One way of construing this suggestion is to say that although the imagination is involved in forming both beliefs and make-beliefs, we do different things with the outputs of these processes. In the case of nonfiction, we could say, we are supposed to integrate our representations with our beliefs about the actual world. By contrast, we need not make this move in response to fiction: we simply enjoy the representations of the fictional worlds for their own sakes.

Studies of the way we store information from fiction and nonfiction in memory support this idea up to a point. A series of experiments investigated the ways in which readers *incorporate* some information into our long-term beliefs while *compartmentalizing* other information into a distinct situation model.²⁸ The results suggested that incorporation was more likely when subjects believed the material to be nonfiction (‘real’) while compartmentalization was more likely when they believed it to be made up, either because it was fictional or because it was created for experimental purposes. We might think of compartmentalized representations as ones contained within the imagination, restricted from our beliefs about the world.

While there is room here for a distinction between belief and imagination, though, the same studies showed that there is no sharp distinction in responses to fiction and nonfiction. When subjects thought they were reading a true account and therefore incorporated more information, they also retained a compartmentalized, coherent story representation in memory; and when subjects thought they were reading a fictional story, they incorporated many claims into their beliefs. In both cases information from a text does not necessarily go directly into a reader’s long-term beliefs; whether or not the text is fiction, information usually passes through a situation model from which readers selectively incorporate. A variety of factors influence the degrees of incorporation and compartmentalization. It is possible that some readers might incorporate more information from, say, a *roman à clef* than they do from a notoriously unreliable autobiography or political treatise. Our responses to fiction and nonfiction involve a mix of belief and imagination.

Even if this is so, it seems to miss an important point. Surely (one might object) the *purpose* of a work of nonfiction is to cause belief, even if it also prompts imagining; and the *purpose* of a work of fiction is to prompt imagining, even if it also causes belief. It is not so clear, however, that fiction and nonfiction do have these different purposes. Such ‘nonfiction novels’ as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965) use real events as an excuse to create an

²⁶ Nichols, ‘Just the Imagination’, 460. The experiment is reported in Leslie, ‘Pretending and Believing’.

²⁷ Nichols proposes a distinction in terms of the relation to desires about real and imaginary situations, but I will not pursue this idea here.

²⁸ Potts et al., ‘Incorporating New Information’; Gerrig and Prentice, ‘Representation of Fictional Information’; Prentice et al., ‘What Readers Bring’; Wheeler et al., ‘Fictional Narratives’.

entertaining narrative. Capote, who invented the genre (or at least its name), chose a brief newspaper article about the murder of a family in Kansas as the subject for a new kind of nonfiction narrative. He insisted that he did not make anything up but his motivation, like that of many recent ‘true crime’ writers and nonfiction novelists, was more literary than journalistic. At the same time, authors of fiction frequently intend their works to induce belief, and in many cases this intention constitutes the primary aim of the work. Think of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), an exposé of the US meat packing industry that helped lead to legislation prohibiting unsafe food handling practices; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), an account of a typical day for a prisoner in a Soviet labour camp; or Joel Klein’s *Primary Colors* (1996), the journalist’s *roman à clef* about Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign. In each of these cases, the fictionalized presentation serves mainly to promote certain beliefs. Fiction and nonfiction do not seem to be distinguished by the overall purposes of their authors.²⁹

Suppose we agree that works of fiction might have the same ends as works of nonfiction (and vice versa). Still, there does seem to be a difference in the *means*. Nonfictions such as *In Cold Blood* prompt belief directly, by explicitly asserting the content we are to believe.³⁰ By contrast, fictions such as *The Jungle* do so only indirectly, by getting us to infer conclusions from content that we merely imagine. Consider this passage from Sinclair’s novel:

Jonas had told them how the meat that was taken out of pickle would often be found sour, and how they would rub it up with soda to take away the smell, and sell it to be eaten on free-lunch counters; also of all the miracles of chemistry which they performed, giving to any sort of meat, fresh or salted, whole or chopped, any colour and any flavour, and any odour they chose.³¹

Given background facts about the novel, the reader knows that she can infer from this sentence that everything following ‘Jonas had told them’ was true of meat packing industry practice in early twentieth-century Chicago. Nonetheless, *what is said* by the sentence—the proposition literally expressed—is not true, since Jonas is a fictional character and thus did not tell anyone of the conditions reported.³² Every sentence that involves the fictional characters that people *The Jungle* is one that we are supposed to imagine but *not* to believe. Call the attitude that consists in imagining-but-not-believing, *mere-make-believe*. Perhaps there is some sense in which mere-make-believe is special to fiction.

Mere-make-believe

The hypothesis suggested by the previous section is this: With respect to the propositions expressed by the sentences in the text, fiction (as opposed to nonfiction) invites

²⁹ Of course we could deny that an author’s purpose or aim in writing a work is the same as the work’s purpose or function. But it will not do to say that a work’s is to invite make-believe *because it is fiction*, if the goal is to define fiction in terms of make-believe. Moreover, the denial is incompatible with those theories of fiction that invoke the author’s intention to invite make-believe. (Thanks to Katherine Thomson-Jones for pressing me on this issue.)

³⁰ See Walton, *Mimesis*, pp. 78-9 on this difference.

³¹ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, p. 162.

³² The relevant contrast is between what is explicit and what is implied.

mere-make-believe, whereas nonfiction (as opposed to fiction) invites belief.³³ This proposal may seem plausible given that mere-make-believe is appropriate to those features of a work that are *made up* (and known to be so),³⁴ and it is common to associate fiction with such features. Moreover, appeal to mere-make-believe would carve out a category narrower than waltfiction, which need not contain any made-up elements. For instance, Walton accepts the possibility of a ‘genre of historical novel in which authors are allowed no liberties with the facts and in which they are understood to be asserting as fact whatever they write’, of which New Journalism, ordinarily classified as nonfiction, provides an example.³⁵

Other philosophers offer a further condition on fictionality designed to rule out such genres. They claim that it is not enough that a work be the product of a fictive utterance intended to invite make-believe; it must also contain fictive *content*, i.e., content that is the product of the author’s imagination. According to Currie, ‘a work is fiction iff (a) it is the product of a fictive intent and (b) if the work is true, then it is at most accidentally true’.³⁶ The condition (b) is designed to rule out cases where an author invites audiences to make-believe a true story. Davies also seems to take the combination of fictive intent and a restriction on content to supply necessary and sufficient conditions for fictionality, though he thinks that a non-accidentally true narrative could still be fiction.³⁷ On his view fictionality requires that (1) the author intends that readers make believe the narrated events, and (2) it is not the case that ‘correspondence with the manner in which events actually transpired was taken, by the utterer, to be a constraint that the ordering of events in [the text] must satisfy’.³⁸ If the author is guided by this *fidelity constraint*, the work counts as nonfiction.³⁹ Though they do not offer necessary and sufficient conditions in these terms, Lamarque and Olsen agree that fictionality requires fictive content. They gloss this as the requirement that ‘how things are (in the fiction) is determined by how they are described to be in a fictive utterance’, rather than the other way around.⁴⁰

Leaving aside the details, each of these proposals is motivated by the assumption that the content of nonfiction narratives is determined by what really happened—as Currie puts it, nonfiction works ‘display counterfactual dependence on the facts’⁴¹—while the content of fictional stories is determined by their authors. In this sense fictional content is ‘made up’, and thus invites mere-make-believe. The connection between nonfiction and belief on the one hand, and fiction and mere-make-believe on the other, is intuitive. Nonetheless, these considerations fail to identify a response distinctive to works in each category.

³³ See n. 5.

³⁴ The qualification, designed to rule out cases of deception, should be assumed in what follows.

³⁵ Walton, *Mimesis*, p. 79. Currie claims that his theory is also consistent with an entirely asserted fiction (*Nature of Fiction*, p. 35). Yet this claim appears to be in some conflict with his view, discussed in the next paragraph, that fiction can be no more than ‘accidentally true’. If an assertion is true, this is unlikely to be by accident. I think we would count a work made up of statements either false or merely accidentally true as the product of deception or ignorance, not as a work of fiction.

³⁶ Currie, *Nature of Fiction*, p. 46.

³⁷ Though Davies does not use the term ‘necessary and sufficient conditions’, he does claim that works failing to meet his criteria of fictionality would fail to be fiction. See ‘Fiction’, p. 266.

³⁸ Davies, ‘Fictional Truth’, p. 52.

³⁹ Davies, ‘Fiction’, p. 266.

⁴⁰ Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 51 (italics removed).

⁴¹ Currie, *Nature of Fiction*, p. 47 (italics removed).

First, we should reject outright the claim that fiction invites no belief, but only mere-make-believe, in its explicit content. We read this in Ian Fleming's *Thunderball* (1961): 'New Providence, the island containing Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas, is a drab sandy slab of land fringed with some of the most beautiful beaches in the world'.⁴² This statement is not only true, it was intended to be true, and any informed reader of Fleming will believe it. It meets all the standard requirements on (sincere) assertion. It might seem tempting to hold that Fleming is not making an assertion because the statement occurs within a work of fiction; however, this begs the question.⁴³ Perhaps the concern is rather that in fiction we cannot ever be sure whether or not a statement is asserted; but nonfiction need not differ in this respect. Our needing to know something about the work or author in order to recognize the relevant speech act does not differentiate the fiction case from any other situation of interpretation. It would be wrong to think that we are supposed to believe, or even take seriously, the proposition expressed by every declarative sentence used in a work of nonfiction, simply because it is a work of nonfiction.⁴⁴ We might need background information correctly to interpret irony or hyperbole, for example.

Leaving aside the common use of nonliteral language, many works of nonfiction contain story elements that are simply made up. These include such controversial cases as Edmund Morris's *Dutch* and John Berendt's *Midnight*, mentioned in the introduction. Despite the debate, *Dutch* is still the only authorized biography of Reagan. Berendt's methods have been subject to more controversy, but even so *Midnight* spent a record-breaking four years on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list. Of course we should not accept the classifications of bookstores and bestseller lists as authoritative. *Dutch* and *Midnight* are borderline cases, and thus should not be taken as definitive of nonfiction. There are, however, many other works of nonfiction that prompt mere-make-believe. Discussions of scientific models posit frictionless planes, point particles and other idealized entities that do not exist. Philosophical dialogues in the tradition of Plato, Berkeley and Hume cause belief only indirectly, by representing the conversations of (fictional) characters. The authors do not make assertions in their own voices, so whatever beliefs we may form are inferred from the mere-make-believe of invented conversations.⁴⁵

To take a yet clearer case, anyone familiar with the conventions of classical history knows that speeches were invented, constrained by plausibility but otherwise more or less the creative output of the author. Both Thucydides and Tacitus, for instance, included invented speeches in their works. A practical reason for this convention is that although one could discover the main points made by a speaker, transcripts or notes from the original speeches were unlikely to be available. There were also stylistic considerations, including 'the ancient writer's conception of the unity of style required for a literary work' and the consensus that frequent 'use of reported speech ... makes for tedious listening; and history should not, if possible, be tedious'.⁴⁶ Similar conventions attached to battle descriptions, which were largely made up. Tacitus's *Annals* and *Histories* are replete with vivid battles and strikingly eloquent speeches, the contents of which readers are not supposed to believe. Of course sometimes the reader is supposed to believe that something like *this* was said, or that

⁴² Fleming, *Thunderball*, p. 116.

⁴³ This is not to deny that we might treat assertions in fiction differently from assertions in nonfiction.

⁴⁴ Sentences that are not used but only mentioned are excluded from consideration here.

⁴⁵ If we agree that philosophical dialogues are nonfiction, then they seem to constitute cases of nonfiction that provoke *only* mere-make-believe in the propositions expressed by the sentences in the text.

⁴⁶ Miller, 'Dramatic Speech', 46.

something like *that* happened; but once we get to such a general level it is hard to see the distinction from historical fictions that are faithful to the general facts while inventing only the specifics.

Significantly, Tacitus does not restrict himself to making up what people said and did; he also dramatizes their thinking, both through inner speech and indirect discourse. Here is a typical passage from *The Annals* (i.69), relating the Emperor Tiberius's train of thought after witnessing the heroism of Agrippina, wife to Tiberius's nephew Germanicus:

This made a deep impression on the mind of Tiberius. 'Such zeal,' he thought, 'could not be guiltless; it was not against a foreign foe that she was thus courting the soldiers. Generals had nothing left them when a woman went among the companies, attended the standards, ventured on bribery, as though it showed but slight ambition to parade her son in a common soldier's uniform, and wish him to be called Caesar Caligula. Agrippina had now more power with the armies than officers, than generals. A woman had quelled a mutiny which the sovereign's name could not check.'⁴⁷

Such passages are noteworthy given that 'inside views' of people's minds from the third person are often considered to be a clear, and even defining, mark of fictionality.⁴⁸

As far as I know there is no controversy over the classification of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* or Tacitus's *Annals* and *Histories*. These are not merely paradigmatic examples of nonfiction; they are still important works of history. Yet they prompt mere-make-believe because some elements of the story are made up. So mere-make-believe cannot be specific to fiction. Even if we accept the authorial intention to invite mere-make-believe as a necessary condition for fictionality, it cannot be sufficient.

Defining Fiction

The considerations of the last section pose the most acute problem for Davies's and Currie's proposals for classifying works, since they seek to offer necessary and sufficient conditions in terms of mere-make-believe. One way to avoid the problem is to focus on fictionality as a property of individual statements or phrases. I discuss this approach below, after considering Lamarque and Olsen's more complex theory of fiction.

Lamarque and Olsen agree with Davies and Currie that fictionality requires a fictive utterance, characterized by a Gricean intention that the audience engage in make-believe, as well as content that is determined by the author rather than by the way events actually transpired. To this extent their theory is subject to the same criticisms as Davies's and Currie's. Yet Lamarque and Olsen also say that the author's expectation that audiences will make believe what they read, and the audience's compliance with that expectation, hinge at least in part on mutual awareness of the storytelling conventions that define the social practice of fiction. It is in virtue of this awareness that audiences adopt the 'fictive stance', which involves the 'disengagement from certain standard speech act commitments, blocking [many] inferences from a fictive utterance back to the speaker or writer, in particular inferences about beliefs'.⁴⁹

Their acknowledgement of the role of conventions suggests that Lamarque and Olsen's proposal might be more sensitive to variations in fictional and nonfictional practices, such as those exemplified by the conventions of classical history; yet their characterization of

⁴⁷ Tacitus, *Annals*, pp. 39-40.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Cohn, 'Fictional versus Historical Lives'.

⁴⁹ Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 46. The bracketed qualifier derives from a clarification on p. 44.

the fictive stance remains static. This is not because they fail to recognize that the practice of fiction evolves; they acknowledge that there are many different sub-practices reflecting different genres and the various purposes that fiction may serve, and that the line between fiction and nonfiction changes over time. Nonetheless, their ‘enquiry is synchronic not diachronic’ because they ‘are concerned to describe the practice as it now exists, in paradigmatic forms’.⁵⁰ As a result, they count as ‘transitional’ in the development of our current paradigm those ‘troublesome border cases—saints’ lives, chronicles, sagas, (early) histories of the world—which involve ... deliberate imaginative embellishment, of a kind we now associate with fiction, though without the attitudes of make-believe characteristic of a more recognizable practice of fiction’.⁵¹

It is certainly true that it can be valuable to understand the practices of writing, reading and criticizing genres of fiction and nonfiction as they now exist. But interpreting past practices from our present perspective fails to do justice to the evolution of storytelling conventions that Lamarque and Olsen themselves acknowledge. There is no reason to think that genres of the past which exhibit some but not all of the features we typically associate with fiction constitute a *transition* to our current practice, as if that practice were the epitome or goal of ‘fictionality’ (compare the assumption that Egyptian art was a primitive, failed attempt at perspective). Even if we accepted that works produced by a ‘fictive utterance’ and which invite the ‘fictive stance’ constitute paradigmatic fictions *for us*, nothing follows about fictionality in general. A theory that has nothing to say about why Tacitus counts as nonfiction despite inviting mere-make-believe is at best incomplete. Lamarque and Olsen could reply that though conventions of accuracy in nonfiction have changed over time, the core of fiction—to invite imagining of made-up content—has remained the same.⁵² But if the conventions of nonfiction shift, so too must the scope of fiction. We would require further argument to think that the conventions central to our own practice should constitute the relevant core.

Furthermore, because the conventions of fiction and nonfiction continue to change, it is unclear what exactly constitutes the current paradigm. If we count as nonfiction *Dutch, Midnight* and many other contemporary works that trace their conventions back to the New Journalism of the 1960s, then the invitation to imagine content that is made up is not exclusive to fiction even now. Of course Lamarque and Olsen are interested in paradigm cases, and we are still inclined to treat these works as peripheral. We do not, however, treat Thucydides or Tacitus as peripheral. It is part of our current practice to classify works from the past as fiction or nonfiction, and in so doing we do not base our judgements exclusively on current conventions. Substantial chunks of Tacitus’s *Annals* are products of ‘fictive utterance’ and invite the ‘fictive stance’, at least as these terms are understood by Lamarque and Olsen; parts of historical novels are asserted and invite belief. If we define the paradigm in terms of mere-make-believe, we ignore the complexities of actual cases.

Perhaps, though, actual cases are too complex to be amenable to philosophical theory. If the works we classify as fiction and nonfiction display a mixture of different features, perhaps we would do better to concentrate on those features than on the vagaries of bookstore classifications. Currie is most explicit in taking this route. He argues that a philosophical theory of fiction should restrict itself to an analysis of fictional *statements*, rather than

⁵⁰ Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 38.

⁵¹ Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 38.

⁵² A similar reply was suggested by Peter Lamarque in response to a presentation of a previous version of this paper.

fictional works.⁵³ Currie dismisses the question of how many statements must be fictional for the work to be fictional:

If we wanted to, we could define a numerical degree of fictionality, but it would be artificial and unilluminating. What is illuminating is a precise account of the fictionality of statements. For in some perhaps irremediably vague way, the fictionality of works is going to depend upon the fictionality of the statements they contain. As long as we are clear about what water molecules are, it hardly matters for purposes of definition that most things we call “water” actually contain much else besides.⁵⁴

The analogy seems to turn on the fact that there is nothing general to say about the proportion of H₂O molecules required for a given stuff to be called ‘water’ in unscientific settings. While possession of H₂O molecules is probably necessary for a substance to count as water in our ordinary sense, it is not sufficient; a cup of tea may contain a greater proportion of H₂O molecules than a bathtub of dirty water, but we count the latter and not the former as ‘water’. Similarly, while containing made-up elements is plausibly necessary for a work to count as fiction, it is not sufficient; many works of nonfiction also contain such elements, sometimes more than in a work of fiction. Currie’s point is that just as scientists should focus on the chemical composition of molecules rather than worry about how the ‘folk’ classify tea, philosophers should focus on the statements that invite mere-make-believe rather than worry about how the folk classify texts.

Yet the analogy is questionable. The reason for the scientists’ restricted focus is that, unlike tea or the liquid that comes out of bathtub taps, H₂O it is a natural kind. There are scientific reasons to identify water with a particular molecular structure, and these are not motivated by worries about how to classify liquids in cups and baths. What is the parallel justification for identifying a ‘molecular essence’ of fiction, other than the role of fictional statements in somehow determining the classification of works? Why should we assume that fiction has such an essence, let alone that it consists in statements that are made up or invite mere-make-believe? Currie claims that the fictionality of a work depends on the fictionality of its parts. But a plausible alternative view is that the fictionality of works has explanatory priority over the fictionality of statements: in short, that a statement, whether made up or asserted, counts as ‘fictional’ because it is contained in a work of fiction, that it invites a certain sort of response or set of responses because of its context rather than its intrinsic features. Identifying what is ‘made up’ with what is ‘fictional’ begs the question against this alternative.

Our concern with classification is first and foremost a concern with works. Thus while we should not expect philosophers to resolve debates over the classification of such books as *Dutch* and *Midnight*, we should expect them to shed light on what is at issue. If we take *Dutch* to be nonfiction, what does this tell us about how to read it or criticize it? If we take it as fiction, what should change in our engagement with the text? Focus on individual statements is unlikely to assist us in answering these questions. After all, there is no controversy over which parts of *Dutch* are supposed to be believed and which merely imagined; it is precisely because some parts are to be believed, and others not, that controversy over this text has arisen. None of this is to deny the importance of determining

⁵³ Neither Davies nor Lamarque and Olsen consider this alternative explicitly. In any case they seem clearly to be discussing the classification of works.

⁵⁴ Currie, *Nature of Fiction*, p. 49. Searle (‘Logical Status’) similarly claims that works of fiction are made up of a mix of genuine and pretend speech acts.

which statements in a work are to be believed and which merely-made-believe. If we wish to avoid forming false beliefs, we need to know that Morris invented characters, just as we need to know that Tacitus invented speeches. But picking out the asserted and unasserted claims in a text is distinct from knowing how to approach the text as a whole.

There seems to be a difference between reading or appreciating a work *as fiction* and reading or appreciating it *as nonfiction*. If we read *Dutch* as nonfiction, for instance, Morris's device of a fictionalized narrator will strike us as groundbreaking, noteworthy, provocative. If we read it as fiction, the device will not have the same effect; we might wonder why Morris chose to narrate from a first-person rather than a third-person point of view, but we are unlikely to find the technique of special interest. A good explanation of this difference is that we treat fictional narrators as *standard* for works in the category of fiction but as *contra-standard* for works in the category of nonfiction biography, in the sense of those terms familiar from Walton's 'Categories of Art'.⁵⁵ Since the identification of standard, contra-standard and variable features makes sense only with respect to whole works that possess a variety of features, the categorization of a text as fiction or nonfiction should make a difference to how we are supposed to read or appreciate it. Prompting mere-make-believe is a standard feature of works of fiction; prompting belief is a standard feature of nonfiction. Yet given the variations in practices and conventions, we should not take these standard features as definitive.

Fiction and Imagination

Does this mean that there is no special connection between fiction and imagination, that there is nothing distinctive about fiction in this respect? That would be a rather counterintuitive conclusion, and it is not the one that I wish to draw. I suggest that theories of fiction have located the connection in the wrong place: instead of focusing on works or individual statements, we should look at the practices that underpin our interaction with various texts. What is right about Lamarque and Olsen's approach is that the works we classify as fiction and nonfiction are part of practices of writing, reading and criticizing texts, guided by various genre conventions. The mistake is to assume that there is a single, unified practice of fiction defined by the features of the works within it. A more promising approach is to say that we count certain works as fiction because they are embedded in the relevant practices—practices associated with particular genres—just as the statements that count as 'fictional' are those embedded in works of fiction. What constitutes 'embedding' in a practice? Our classifications are probably too complex to answer this question straightforwardly, though the sorts of factors Walton identifies in 'Categories of Art'—including features of the text as well as facts about the origins of the work—would surely be relevant.⁵⁶ For instance, I take for granted that the author's intention is a significant factor in classification. It is important to recognize, however, that the relevant intention is not the intention to invite belief or imagining, but rather to produce a work in a certain category. The fact that Tacitus intends readers to engage in mere-make-believe is not in conflict with his intention to write nonfiction history, and it is the latter, not the former, that matters for classification.⁵⁷

A different question is what makes a given practice a practice *of fiction*. Again I doubt that we will find a general answer; but this question highlights a different way to

⁵⁵ Walton, 'Categories of Art'.

⁵⁶ In 'Categories of Art', Walton considers only perceptual art; but with refinements the basic argument should apply equally well to literature.

⁵⁷ This conflict would seem to arise on any theory that takes an intention that audiences engage in (mere-)make-believe to be definitive of fiction.

construe the relationship between fiction and imagination. I am attracted to the idea that the existence of those practices we associate with fiction can be explained at least partly by the purpose of allowing authors to use their creative imaginations to engage audiences in mere-make-believe, even though authors exploiting the conventions of various genres also invite other responses. Anthony Savile has argued persuasively that a developed practice of literature requires traffic in invented characters and situations.⁵⁸ By contrast, the practices associated with nonfiction genres are typically justified by other purposes, even if specific genre conventions permit or require authors to make things up. Of course authors of both fiction and nonfiction write for a variety of different reasons: to entertain, to instruct, to persuade and so on. Those who choose to write fiction rather than nonfiction reject at least some conventions of accuracy in achieving their goals. Because these conventions change over time, what matters to the decision to write fiction or nonfiction also changes. The invitation to merely-make-believe Tiberius's thoughts was acceptable for nonfiction in Tacitus's time; today an author who wanted to imagine the contents of a person's mind is likely to be writing fiction.

A definition of fiction might seem to be lurking behind these comments. Should we say that a work of fiction is one that breaks conventions of contemporary nonfiction practice, specifically those that prohibit making certain things up? This is the wrong conclusion to draw. Conventions change over time, and one catalyst for change is that writers break the rules. There should be a difference between an author's challenging the boundaries of nonfiction and his writing fiction (and vice versa). When Morris puts forward *Dutch* as a work of nonfiction biography, he is saying that the text should be interpreted and criticized with the standards of nonfiction biography in mind. It is from that perspective that his narrative counts as surprising and innovative. Of course classification is complicated, and there are a number of considerations other than intention. The important point is that however it is determined, categorizing a work as fiction or nonfiction should give us some idea of which genre conventions, which standards, we are supposed to apply in interpretation and criticism. I suggest that we give up the quest for necessary and sufficient conditions for fictionality, and focus instead on examining these features of the practices of fiction and nonfiction.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Savile, 'Imagination'.

⁵⁹ I would like to thank the audiences at the Conference on the Imagination and Thought Experiments (Bristol, May 2006); the British Society of Aesthetics Annual Meeting (Oxford, September 2006); and the Aesthetics Forum of the Institute of Philosophy (London, November 2006), for helpful discussion of previous versions of this paper. I would also like to thank Katherine Thomson-Jones for insightful comments on a previous draft.

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