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Flexing the Imagination

In his *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, William Styron brings to life the leader of the largest and bloodiest slave rebellion in American history. He imagines—and invites his readers to imagine with him—what Nat Turner was like, what motivated him, and how forces such as slavery and religion shaped his views. It is a daunting undertaking. Although *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was initially greeted with critical acclaim (it earned Styron the Pulitzer prize in 1968), it was later criticized from a number of quarters, and some now see it as one of the most racist novels in American history. Some critics felt that Styron did not succeed in painting a convincing portrait of Turner—that he failed to capture accurately the experience of black slavery. Styron himself worried that he may have missed "the religious and emotional center of black experience."[1] Other critics went further and argued that, as a white man, it was *wrong* of Styron even to attempt to try to bring Nat Turner to life. They claimed that for a member of a privileged group to entertain the illusion that she or he understands what it is to be a member of an oppressed group is both arrogant and morally dangerous.[2]

Behind these criticisms lie two related questions. First, to what extent is it *possible* for an author to imagine what it is like to be someone very different than him or her—someone from a different time, a different culture, a different race, a different social class?[3] Second, how should we evaluate such efforts? Are such endeavors *morally* tainted? Here, I focus on the latter question, although the former question lurks not too far behind it. I argue that the difference between morally praiseworthy and morally blameworthy attempts at fictive imagining has to do not only with the fidelity of the imagining, but with the motives of the imaginer. I try to explain why it is that when one has the wrong motives, the imagining can be morally blameworthy; hence, critics are right to be at least concerned about endeavors like Styron's. I further suggest that understanding what can go wrong in fictive imagining can also help us see how, if done for the right reasons, engaging with literature can increase one's powers of empathy and improve one's imagination.

The cases I am concerned with here mostly belong to the genre of historical fiction, but such questions can also be asked about works in other narrative genres as well. Not all realistic fiction does this; Shakespeare's history plays are rife with historical inaccuracies, but these plays are unconcerned with accuracy or fidelity to the historical facts, and, hence, Shakespeare's creating *Henry V* is not a moral mistake because of its inaccuracies. I am interested here in a subset of realistic narrative fiction—a subset we might think of as "accuracy aspiring" fiction. These works are distinguished from broadly realistic works such as Shakespeare's *Henry V*, because they purport not only to portray psychologically realistic characters and plausible actions and events, but to do much more: to accurately report major historical events and social/cultural facts when they are relevant, and sometimes to describe the thoughts and actions of particular characters in ways that are not only psychologically plausible, but that also closely approximate their *actual* actions or thoughts (or the actual actions or thoughts of other persons of the type being imagined).

Questions of accuracy and ethics are conjoined whenever the character depicted in a narrative represents either an actual (living or historical) person or a member of an actual type in a way

that purports to be accurate. And *most* historical fiction (as well as some nonhistorical fiction) does aspire to accuracy; Nat Turner falls in the former category, and Oliver Wiswell (from Kenneth Roberts's book of the same name) in the latter. One can reasonably have moral concerns about both kinds of cases. Oliver Wiswell is supposed to be a realistic depiction of a young male colonist of British descent during the American Revolutionary War, and although we cannot ask whether the imagined Wiswell is true to the "historical" Wiswell, we can still ask whether the imagined Wiswell is true to what we know about actual colonists of that period in similar circumstances—whether Wiswell is depicted as having beliefs, desires, and experiences that were usual at that time to people in his circumstances, and whether his actions were consistent with the actions of actual historical figures in like circumstances. It is reasonable to have moral concerns about imagined characters that represent types, and not just about actual individuals. Most racist and anti-Semitic jokes could never be morally offensive otherwise, because such jokes do not usually name actual persons. Rather, they usually feature a fictional, allegedly "typical" member of the targeted group, but this fact does nothing to redeem the joke's moral character.

These concerns come up not only for authors, but also for readers. If, as many philosophers believe, the practice of reading fiction is in great part a matter of imagining the characters and the world they inhabit, then readers as well as writers participate in imagining characters, albeit in quite different ways.[4] Many novels in school curricula concern events and characters far outside the experience of the children who read them. How can we expect American schoolchildren to engage with *Things Fall Apart* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? What if students, after reading *Beloved*, believe they understand what it is to be a slave? In encouraging students to read such narratives and to empathize with these characters, we may be asking them to do too much; worse, we might be promoting ignorance or arrogance. These concerns stand in stark contrast to the predominant view about reading fiction and education, which emphasizes the *virtues* of fictive imagining. Many educators and philosophers believe that reading novels can strengthen one's imagination and even play a part in one's moral education.[5] Thus concerns about fictive imagining manifest themselves in two different ways concerning even the same work: on behalf of authors who imaginatively create the works, and on behalf of readers who engage with them.

Of course, not all philosophers agree that imagination is essential to fiction, and among those who do, there is little agreement over what imagination amounts to or how it works.[6] I want to sidestep these difficulties here by relying only on a few modest assumptions. I do not claim that the imagination is the *most* important element of appreciating or creating fiction, and I do not claim that appreciation of the formal elements of fiction is unimportant.[7] I only claim that the imagination, broadly construed, plays an important (though not necessarily essential) role in both creating and appreciating many works of realistic fiction.[8] Although imagining takes many forms, I am particularly interested in what we sometimes think of as identifying with a character, that is, imagining what it would be like to be that character, and empathizing with a character—Kendall Walton has called these kinds of imaginings "other-shoe" experiences.[9] For example, one might imagine what it would be like to have some of a character's qualities and experiences, or what it would be like to be in the kinds of circumstances that character faces, or both. This is what I call "fictive imagining."

I. HOW IS FICTIVE IMAGINING POSSIBLE?

Although I said earlier that I would not try to give a complete account of how fictive imagining is possible, the problem cannot be overlooked entirely. What is needed is an account of fictive imagining plausible enough to explain how it is that someone like Styron can even *try* to imagine Nat Turner with a hope of success. In a recent article, Ted Cohen puts forward such an account.[10] Cohen argues that identification with other people (whether they are fictional, historical, or actual) is accomplished through an imaginative dialectic. First, one pictures oneself in the other's circumstances; then one imagines the other in one's own circumstances, and then one begins to imagine having some of the other's traits, and so on, until one finally imagines oneself

as the other—in the other's circumstances, with the other's prejudices, beliefs, desires, moods, and so on. He writes:

> In achieving such an identification, I think, one engages in a dialectic of metaphorical understanding. B is trying to grasp A, to gain some sense of this other person. He likely begins with A=B and then moves back and forth between A=B and B=A, shifting and adjusting. This is the blending one attempts in imagination, a blending of oneself and another, and here one must add to and subtract from oneself.[11]

Cohen is careful not to claim that any of us can do this with complete success, where complete success means an imaginative taking on of all of the relevant characteristics. In the end, he says, "I think we must hope we can."[12] It is clear from Cohen's model—and I think experience bears this out—that it is much *easier* to imagine being someone who shares your background and experiences than to imagine being someone who does not. Further, to identify successfully it is not sufficient merely to know certain facts about a person's beliefs and motivations; one must also know *what it is like to be* a person about whom those facts are true and this involves more than propositional knowledge.

To know what it is like to be a person (rather than just to know facts about a person), we usually draw either on experiences we actually share with that person or on experiences we have that are analogous with theirs, close enough for our imaginations to bridge the gap. The protagonist of Michael Frayn's *Headlong* is Martin Clay, a philosopher on sabbatical, who is supposed to be writing a book but who instead seizes every possible opportunity to be distracted from his work. I think many academics can rely on a similar background and set of experiences to imagine what it would be like to be like Clay—I certainly can, at any rate. Clay and I have enough in common to enable me to imaginatively compensate for our differences without too much effort. Memories of my own experiences mirror Clay's own experiences, and his attitudes and interests are ones that I have myself from time to time, although Clay places different emphases on these than I do. My imagining Clay is made easy by the substantial overlap in our experiences, background, and interests.

On the other hand, when I read *Testament of Youth*, I cannot draw on any such shared experiences to empathize with Vera Brittain—nor, I suspect, can most people now living.[13] I did not grow up in England at the end of the Victorian Era; I did not watch friends and family go off to fight in World War I. But I can draw on some analogous experiences that help me imagine her life—a quiet and protected upbringing, lost when I moved away from home; seeing friends and family go off to fight in other wars, and so on. These analogies have limits, but they get me started. Insofar as I am able to imagine Vera Brittain successfully, it is through these sometimes tenuous analogies and connections. When attempting to imagine someone whose experiences are very different than one's own, the best place to start is with those experiences that generate similar attitudes and responses to the ones generated by the experiences to be imagined. Even if one has never had any experiences with the particular objects in question, one might have had similar feelings about analogous objects. Success in imagining will in such cases be partial, but complete success is probably too high a goal to set for oneself. One can, through shared experiences or by analogy, try to get *some* sense of what it would be like to be another.

There are two important points here. First, we need not, in fact should not, think of fictive imagining as an "all or nothing" enterprise. One may have varying degrees of success, which success depends on one's background and experiences as well as one's imaginative powers. We should expect that complete success is probably impossible, but also that complete failure will also be rare. Second, we ought not assume too much about what is or is not possible to achieve in one's fictive imagining. Some people are probably better at doing this than others, either because they can make better use of bridging analogies or because they have more practice doing so. In the standard case, it will not be easy to tell just how well one has succeeded, but we may reasonably suppose that *some* success is possible, enough to make the enterprise worth attempting in many cases.

II. MORAL WORRIES

If we can grant for the moment that this account of fictive imagining is at least plausible, let us

turn to the moral question. Why would someone object to Styron's literary effort to imagine Nat Turner? Here is one reason. One might think that, although *some* people might succeed in bringing Nat Turner to life, it is not possible for someone like Styron to do so. Styron's experience is simply too distant from Turner's; he was raised by slave owners, not slaves.[14] He cannot hope to understand Turner, and neither can most of his contemporary white readers. (I do not mean to imply that race is the only, or the most, significant barrier to the imagination; gender, culture, age, language, and especially time can also make a difference. But race is one significant barrier.) If some differences are too deep to be crossed through imagination alone, Styron's error is like Icarus's. The error here is connected to the practical limits of the imagination: it is wrong to try to do what is beyond one's abilities.[15] If there are only very few shared experiences between imaginer and imagined, and all bridging analogies are too thin, it just might not be possible to successfully imagine another person's life.

At least some of Styron's critics clearly have this kind of concern in mind. Alvin F. Poussaint writes:

> No one objects to a novelist using the best of his imagination to write a work of fiction that will have color and saleability. However, Styron is a southern white man who has been raised in a racist society and is not free from the impact of its teachings. How will we ever know how well the author has freed himself of his own white supremacist attitudes as he attempts to project himself into the mind of a black slave?[16]

Here the concern is that Styron, given his background and identity, will simply be unable to imagine with any accuracy the mind and life of someone so completely unlike him. Even if Styron has all the right intentions, his race and social position virtually guarantee that he will fail.

Perhaps Styron's difficulty is even greater because his is a background of privilege and Turner's is one of oppression—worse, Styron's social position is partly the direct result of the exploitation of slaves like Turner. According to standpoint epistemology, one's social position determines in part what one can possibly know: and the oppressed or marginalized have a kind of privilege here, since they can (indeed must) understand both the experience of being marginalized and the experience and world of the oppressor.[17] Standpoint epistemology originates with Marx, who argued that only the proletariat have real access to how society works, and only the proletariat are "truly revolutionary."[18] Standpoint epistemologists draw attention to relations of power and the special difficulties that those in power have in trying to understand the world from the point of view of those without power. If something like this is right, then Styron's task is not only difficult because of the great distance between him and Turner, but also because of Styron's privilege: it would be easier for Turner to try to imagine Styron than the other way around.

In any case, it seems that we should say a necessary condition that an act of imagining must meet to be morally appropriate is that the imagining should be reasonably accurate.[19] An inaccurately imagined character is not just an aesthetic failure (though in the standard case it is that too); it may also be a moral failure, when the imagined character represents either an actual person or a token of some actual type such that there is some obligation to the actual person or group being fictionally imagined that the imagination be true to life. Styron himself acknowledges such an obligation, and this is one of the reasons he gives for thinking that the best subjects for historical novels are persons about whom very little is known, for this means that the novelist is not constrained overmuch by the moral obligation to be true to the facts. Nat Turner is nearly an ideal subject in this respect, since there is only one historical document that can be used as a source of information about the real Turner ("The Confessions of Nat Turner," the source of the title of Styron's novel), which itself is of questionable veracity. The novelist who sets out, then, to depict an actual person or a member of an actual group "realistically" is constrained by basic obligations of honesty. So an act of fictive imagining would be morally wrong if the author flouted these constraints.

However, I do not think this can be the *whole* story behind the moral worry. If what is morally dangerous about imagining across difference is that one will probably fail, then success would vindicate the attempt. But this does not seem to be the case; even if one succeeds, there might

still be room for moral criticism. Consider the case of *My Own Sweet Time*, a novel published under the pseudonym "Wanda Koolmatrie," about the life of a young Australian aboriginal woman. It was published by an aboriginal press, it received rave reviews, and the author won an award for aboriginal women's writing—and everyone, critics, publishers, and readers alike, believed that it *was* a realistic depiction of an aboriginal woman's life. It was later revealed that the real author was Leon Carmen—a male, white (that is, nonaboriginal) taxi-driver—who tried to write a sequel to *My Own Sweet Time* and whose identity was subsequently discovered by his publishers. Clearly, critics and readers believed they were reading about the life of an aboriginal woman. So Carmen seems to have *succeeded* (in part at least) in imagining what it is like to be an aboriginal woman, but his fictive imagining seems to be at least as morally questionable as Styron's.[20] Certainly, his novel's success as an imaginative enterprise would not erase the moral questions about the work from the mind of a critic.

And this is not a solitary case. *Fragments*, the alleged memoir of a Holocaust survivor named Binjamin Wilkomirski, won the 1996 National Jewish Book Award for Autobiography and Memoir, the Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize, and the Prix Memoire de la Shoah. It was praised for the accuracy and vividness of its descriptions of the Holocaust. Two years later, it was revealed that the author of the book, whose real name is Bruno Doessekker, is not Jewish and was never in a Nazi concentration camp; in fact, Doessekker never left Switzerland during the war. After the author's true identity was revealed, many were outraged, and his work reevaluated.[21] Yet Doessekker's case is different than Carmen's, since his does not appear to have been an *intentional* deception. Doessekker seems really to believe that he is Wilkomirski, and that the events described in *Fragments* are true, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

So the moral outrage that such imaginings engender should not be understood simply as a response to having been decieved. Otherwise, these cases would be no different than cases of forgery in nonnarrative artworks, for example, van Meegeren's forgeries of Vermeer paintings. Carmen's and Doessker's cases are distinguished from cases like van Meegeren's because they left people feeling angry about what these authors had done through their fictive imagining to the people that they imagined.

Therefore, let us take seriously the possibility that one might reasonably be concerned with the moral character of an undertaking in literary imagination, even when the work succeeds as an accurate realization of the imagined subject. What might we say then? Perhaps there is a sense that somehow Styron may *wrong* the historical Turner by imagining him through his novel. Thomas Nagel, for example, has argued that it is perfectly intelligible to suppose that one can harm a dead man by breaking a promise made to him. This is because, for Nagel, "a man's life includes much that does not take place within the boundaries of his body and his mind, and what happens to him can include much that does not take place within the boundaries of his life."[22] If Nagel is right, then there may be a very real sense in which Turner is harmed by Styron's imagining.

But *why* is Styron's imagining harmful? What makes it a *harm* to Turner rather than a boon? We might understand how spitting on a grave counts as a harm, because we have a social convention whereby such actions are taken to express disrespect. But we still want to know what kind of convention or principle makes Styron's imagining Turner a harm to Turner. One plausible answer to this question is that Styron's imagining constitutes a harm because of the larger political context and history in which it takes place. Members of historically powerful groups (in this case, whites) have a long history of appropriating the stories and traditions of less powerful groups, and this has produced real harms—economic as well as social. It is against this background that Styron's imagining might reasonably be taken to express disdain or callousness toward blacks, in general, or Turner, in particular, and therefore to constitute a harm. Somehow, we might say, Turner is harmed because the historical context makes Styron's imagining disrespectful. The relationship between the person doing the imagining and the person (or kind of person) imagined is crucial to whether or not the imagining is harmful.

However, these political considerations do not apply in every case. Although the cases that

we worry about most often in public fora tend to concern differences of race, gender, or other politically salient differences where the member of the more powerful group imagines a character who is a member of a less powerful group, we can also worry about fictive imagining even in the absence of such considerations. First, there are cases like Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, in which the narrator is a ten-year-old child. When such books are written by and for adult audiences, it is reasonable to be concerned that the portrayals are respectful to children and their experiences. Second, there are cases where an author will fictively imagine the lives of powerful and generally admired figures, as Kenneth Roberts does in his historical novels about the American Revolution (such as *Oliver Wiswell* and *Rabble in Arms*). However, because Roberts makes Benedict Arnold a hero and many revolutionary leaders villains, the book was greeted with some controversy, and some wonder whether Roberts was sufficiently respectful in his portrayals of these figures.[23] Or we have a Japanese author such as Kazuo Ishiguro, who writes about characters like Stevens, an English butler. We might worry about the moral appropriateness of Ishiguro's writing in Stevens's voice.[24] Yet in none of these kinds of cases do these concerns arise because the imaginer is part of a group whose members wield political power over the imagined group.

Nonetheless, we may still want to say that the harm here has to do with a failure to show the right kind of respect. Perhaps a Kantian approach might be helpful in understanding the notion of respect to be employed here. If Kant is right, and we are required to respect other agents as "ends in themselves," there might be some reason to think this dictum could be cautiously extended beyond living rational agents. We sometimes act as if the deceased, future generations, and cultures or peoples were due a measure of respect. Even fictional characters might be worthy of respect insofar as they resemble or represent real people (as Wanda Koolmatrie represents a certain generation of Australian aboriginal women). We might ask something like: Does Styron treat Turner merely as a means, or does he also treat Turner as an "end in himself"?

This kind of extension of Kant's ethics would take some arguing, and I will not try to do that here. We might be able to get by with something weaker. We could say instead that an agent's failure to show respect for the dead, or even for some fictional characters (those who represent real people belonging to certain cultures or periods) reveals something about the agent's moral makeup—that the agent does not have the kind of character necessary for living up to his duties to respect other persons.[25] Here, the idea is that failure to show the right kind of respect for historical or fictional figures violates an indirect duty—it undermines the agent's own moral development, and her propensities to treat real people respectfully. This weaker claim is consistent with Kant's own views, and, hence, does not require any new theoretical work. Whether we take the more robust view, or this weaker view, we can still claim that whether or not one treats characters with respect is morally salient.

I think this is on the right track. These terms—"disrespect" and "harm"—are, however, still not as clear as we would like them to be. We want to know what in this context makes imagining disrespectful or harmful, and why. Kant's account does not offer us any obvious or direct way of clarifying them in this context, and any Kantian account would need significant alteration. We are not much further along than we were before. In what follows, I argue that the difference between respectful or praiseworthy imagining and disrespectful or offensive imagining lies partly in the accuracy of the depiction but also partly in the *motives* of the imaginer.

III. MOTIVES

The moral relevance of motives is easiest to see when we consider prideful or selfish motives for fictive imagining. For example, consider the motives of Leon Carmen in imagining the life of an aboriginal woman: fame, money, the desire to expose what he saw as reverse discrimination in the literary world.[26] "Wanda Koolmatrie" was created to forward these highly questionable ends.[27] Fictive imagining engaged in so that one may further selfish or immoral goals is clearly suspect. The ends cannot justify the means when the ends themselves are unjustified.

A second kind of motive is related to the aims of education: the desire to learn more about

another time, another culture, or another person. The desire to learn more might be a result of a desire for knowledge for knowledge's sake, or it might be a result of a kind of cultural guilt—a feeling that some peoples or cultures have been neglected and hence deserve a kind of imaginative attention. These are some reasons why schools in predominantly white suburbs require their students to read *Things Fall Apart* or *i know why the caged bird sings*.[28] Unlike Leon Carmen, teachers typically do not have selfish or morally questionable motives. On the contrary, their motives seem to be morally praiseworthy; they wish to further their students' understanding of other peoples. However, I think there is reason for concern even when the motives are good. If the teacher engages with the book in such a way that imaging Okonkwo is *merely* a means toward the moral improvement of the reader, or toward increasing knowledge of culture and geography, Okonkwo is still being treated (to use Kant's term again) solely as a means. The motive of learning has nothing to do with Okonkwo in himself.

We also have confusing cases, like Doessekker's. Doessekker is not like Carmen or like the well-meaning schoolteacher. He seems to have imagined himself at Auschwitz as a kind of therapy; Doessekker did have a difficult and abusive childhood in an orphanage and later in foster homes. In a recent interview on National Public Radio, Blake Eskin, author of a study of the Wilkomirski/Doessekker affair, argued that Doessekker's motives had to do with his own desires to come to terms with and understand his difficult childhood.[29] But this kind of self-centered psychological motive does not seem to satisfy the moral worry—it still seems that Wilkomirski's imagining was disrespectful to Holocaust survivors.

Another motive to engage in fictive imagining comes from Kant. In this case the imaginer does not take any interest in the object's relationship to the imaginer or the world. Such a reader would be *disinterested* in Kant's sense; her experience is focused on nothing but "the form of purposiveness of the object."[30] She attends to the formal elements of the work but does not concern herself with its importance in the world. I do not think it satisfies the Kantian worry about respect. It is hard to see how such a reader would actually be involved in fictive imagining as it was described earlier. The disinterested approach certainly involves the imagination, but not *fictive* imagining, that is, imagining what it is like to be someone. It is not clear whether fictive imagining is the sort of experience about which one can render judgments of taste (and, hence, that are properly characterized by disinterest). Kant himself contrasts the "interested" moral approach with the "disinterested" aesthetic approach, so I do not think that this motive applies here.

All of the motives discussed so far are external in one important sense—the reason for the imagining is *external* to the object being imagined. The one motive that can satisfy the moral concern is the one that does not see the imagined object solely as a means to an end, but that takes an interest in the object itself. The imaginer's motives include an interest in and concern for the imagined character himself or herself. When the agent enters the fictional world for the sake of what is being imagined in that world, and not merely for what she can take away from it, she does not treat the character, or the world that the character is drawn from, disrespectfully. The attitude I have in mind is nicely described by Maria Lugones, who argues that "world-travelling" (as she calls it) should be engaged in for the sake of love or friendship, and characterized by a kind of playfulness.[31] This attitude is distinguished both from selfish and from selfless but nonetheless externally directed motives. The attitude is directed internally at the object itself, for the sake of that object.

Most of the time, imaginers have mixed motives. One may write a book to make money, to learn something, and out of an intrinsic interest in the book's subject, all at once. One may also have different motives for different aspects of the project: one *writes books* for money, but creates *this* story with *these* characters out of a fascination with the people of that time and place. But when fictive imagining is engaged in at least in part for the sake of the imagined subject himself or herself, one's project will be tempered by thoughtfulness, carefulness, and humility toward the imagined character. When this internal motive is missing, one's aims may come into conflict with the kind of concern for detail and depth that the object of fictive imagining deserves. This suggests there is a link between having morally good motives

and imaginative success, that those who imagine respectfully will be more likely to succeed than those who do not. But we should not suppose that there is a *necessary* connection between internal motives and success: those with external motives may succeed (Carmen) and those with internal ones may still fail. What is morally required is that fictive imagining be *both* accurate and engaged in at least partly from internal motives. The two requirements are formally separate though the fulfillment of the latter makes the fulfillment of the former easier.

One may object here that the internal motive as described, far from being likely to improve the aesthetic quality of the imagining, is likely to be just the sort of thing that makes fictive imagining sentimental, shallow, and inaccurate. Too close a concern for a person can interfere with our ability to see them clearly—as, for example, parents cannot be trusted to make accurate assessments of their children's strengths and weaknesses, and vice versa. Perhaps the two requirements frustrate each other: an interest in accuracy demands distance and perspective, and an internal concern for the object itself demands closeness and partiality. This would make it at best extremely difficult, and perhaps impossible, to have a morally acceptable case of fictive imagining. Have we got it wrong, or have we set the moral bar too high on one side or the other (accuracy or right motive)?

This objection reads too much into what is meant by an "internal" motive. Internal motives need not be blindly passionate, crazed, or obsessed. Internal motives are distinguished from external motives based on whether or not the attention given to the object is driven purely by aims external to the object. If a motive is internal, then there is something about the imagined character that attracts the imaginers' attention all by itself (not because of some further end). But, and here I differ with Lugones, this need not be loving attention—in fact, a carefully focused hatred can promote this same kind of fascination with an object. (Think of Hannah Arendt's detailed attention to Eichmann and his character.) Internal motives might be part of a feeling of love, hatred, fascination, respect, admiration, disgust, or any number of more complex emotional states—what these states all share in common is that they are focused on the intrinsic qualities of another person.

A motive is internal if it is concerned with the intrinsic qualities of the imagined object, because of a concern for that object, and this concern is not reducible to a concern for some external aim. If the concern and attention would vanish if the other aim were removed, then the motive was not internal. Now even the careful author with purely external motives (Carmen) will take a serious interest in the imagined object itself, but only because of potential benefit of doing so: in this case, greater accuracy in portrayal. The author with internal motives takes an interest in her imagined object because of her interest in the object itself. One reason why we are particularly suspicious of whites imagining black characters—more so than in the reverse case—is that we have good reason to be suspicious of the motives of white writers with regard to their black characters. We do not have the kind of history that makes us worry about Ishiguro's imagining. In this respect, the history and political context in which the work is written make an enormous difference to how we perceive the motives of the writer.

Some of Styron's critics do worry about his motives: they worry that he intends to use his portrayal for political purposes of different kinds. Vincent Harding claims that Styron tries to create a certain image of Nat Turner in order to attain the authority to "judge other dark rebels and their role in America today."[32] Lerone Bennett, Jr. and Ernest Kaiser go further and claim that Styron intended to reinforce slave stereotypes and comfort white readers by showing, through his imagined Nat Turner, that black men are in fact weak.[33] These writers blame Styron not just for his failure to imagine successfully, but also for what they take to be his motives and reasons for imagining in the first place. And when Styron defends himself in his afterword, he defends himself by arguing that his motives were good ones:

> I'm sure that my early fascination with Nat Turner came from pondering the parallels between his time and my own society, whose genteel accommodations and endemic cruelties, large and small, were not really so different from the days of slavery. I think I must have wondered whether this tautly strained calmness might not someday be just as susceptible to violent retribution.[34]

In other places, he refers to his motive simply to understand Turner and Turner's psychology. Styron's motives seem, not surprisingly, to be mixed. Whether or not his critics approve of Styron's project in *Nat Turner* will depend in part, I think, on whether they judge him to have the appropriate internally directed motives, and the humility and carefulness that those motives engender.

IV. FLEXING THE IMAGINATION

This distinction between internally and externally directed motives also yields a further insight: it helps to explain why many philosophers and educators believe that fictive imagining can play a role in moral education and development. Many of us think fictive imagining is not merely morally permissible, but praiseworthy. This might be for two reasons. First, fictive imagining (done rightly) may encourage humility and curb arrogance. When one has internally directed motives, one is more likely to appreciate just how difficult it is to understand another. Hence, one is less likely to arrogantly and prematurely conclude that one has understood another. The internally motivated agent, since he *cares* about the characters, is more likely to recognize his own limits. The externally motivated agent has her gaze fixed beyond the characters, and is less likely to notice what she's missing. This does not guarantee that the internally motivated imaginer will succeed more often or more fully; but he will be modest and careful about supposing that he has succeeded. And it gives us some reason to think that internal imagining cultivates some moral habits, including humility, that we think are worth improving.

The second reason why we might be inclined to think that fictive imagining is morally praiseworthy is this. If imagination is a capacity, then we should expect fictive imagining to stretch and improve that capacity—that is, we should expect that the imagination would improve with exercise. And the ability to imagine what it is like to be another is important not only with fictions, but with real people, and especially with those real people with whom we have little in common. In an indirect way, then, fictive imagining could contribute to the improvement of the moral imagination. Fictive imagining is difficult and morally dangerous, but if done well, it can yield morally significant results: it can help us to understand one another, and to better appreciate just how much there is to understand about others.

Indeed, if we were not able to overcome these moral difficulties in writing or reading fiction, many of the main aims of fiction itself would be lost. Fiction does aim to flex our imagination, and to make it stronger. If our legitimate moral concerns become so intimidating that we do not engage our imagination outside of our immediate experiences, this will surely be harmful to our moral character and understanding in the long run. We must use our imagination to improve it, and this will occasionally mean taking moral risks.

So what should we say about Styron? I am no expert on the historical Nat Turner or Styron's psychology, and will not pass moral judgment on either the accuracy of his portrayal in the book or the motives he had for writing it. I do think we can say this, however. If we wish to question Styron's ability as an author, we must look at the accuracy of Styron's project, but if we wish to examine the moral propriety of his project, we must also question his motives.[35]

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1. William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, 25th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), p. 448.

2. See John Henrik Clarke, ed., *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

3. This question should not be confused with a similar one, discussed recently by Tamar Szabo Gendler. Gendler focuses on cases where a failure to imagine is the result of a kind of moral hesitation—where what is to be imagined is an immoral event or perspective. I am interested in a different kind of case, where it is not what we are asked to imagine that is morally questionable, but rather the *imagining itself* is thought to be morally worrisome. See Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000): 55–81.

4. For example, see Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Harvard University Press, 1990); see also Susan Feagin, *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation* (Cornell University Press, 1996).

5. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

6. For example, see Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990), chap. 2; see also Peter Lamarque, "How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?" *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 21 (1981): 291–305.

7. In a recent piece, Peter Lamarque emphasizes the importance of appreciation of formal elements in getting meaning from fiction. See his "Tragedy and Moral Value," in *Art and Its Messages: Meaning, Morality, and Society*, ed. Stephen Davies (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 59–69.

8. There are plenty of nonrealistic narratives that do *not* encourage or expect the reader to identify with the characters or to see them as accurately resembling real people. Reading absurdist or nonlinear novels such as *Catch-22* or *Naked Lunch* is quite different than reading "realistic" novels such as *Anna Karenina* or *The Shipping News*, and one should not expect the imagination to play the same kind of role. My remarks in this paper are directed only toward the latter sort of realistic narrative.

9. In his Leonard Conference Lecture, "In Other Shoes: Empathy and the Arts," presented at the 2000 National Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics.

10. Ted Cohen, "Identifying with Metaphor: Metaphors of Personal Identification," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999): 399–410.

11. Ibid., p. 407.

12. Ibid., p. 408.

13. It is not crucial here that Vera Brittain's book is a memoir, not a novel; she is, from our point of view, a character to be imagined, and, hence, the book can be read as a novel. Kendall Walton makes this argument in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, chap. 2 ("Fiction and Nonfiction").

14. In his afterword, Styron discusses his grandmother, who spoke wistfully of the days before emancipation, and the slaves she owned. Styron writes of his fascination and horror of hearing about this.

15. It is possible that the error in such cases is not properly a moral error, but rather an intellectual one: a failure to grasp the limits of one's abilities. Of course, such errors of self-knowledge may also count as moral errors on some accounts, but they need not.

16. Alvin F. Poussaint, "The Confessions of Nat Turner and the Dilemma of William Styron," in *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, 17–22.

17. See, for example, Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1983).

18. This phrase, as well as the discussion of each class's standpoint, occurs in Marx and Engels's "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Collected Works, Volume 6* (New York: International Publishers, 1976).

19. The term "reasonable" here, of course, means that this is less a precise rule than a general guide. There will often be disagreement about the scope and depth of this obligation. An interesting case in this regard is Michael Frayn's recent play, *Copenhagen*, which depicts the historical meeting between Neils Bohr and Werner Heisenberg in 1941. Frayn amended later versions of the play where historical research contradicted the actions of his characters; however, he has refused to amend it in other cases—as when, for example, Heisenberg's son told Frayn, "Of course, your Heisenberg is nothing like my father . . . I never saw my father express emotion about anything except music." Here Frayn claims that other artistic aims, including having each character in the play express his viewpoint fully, override his obligation to portray accurately Heisenberg's emotional life. See Frayn, "'Copenhagen' Revisited," *The New York Review of Books* 49 (2002): 22–24.

20. In one important respect, of course, it was clearly more troubling. Carmen used deception to publish and sell his book; Styron did not.

21. See, for example, Philip Gouveritch, "The Memory Thief," *The New Yorker* 75 (June 14, 1999): 48–68.

22. Thomas Nagel, "Death," in his *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 6. I am grateful to Peter Kivy for suggesting the connection between this essay and my topic.

23. Of course, it is possible that these figures do not merit the respect they are usually awarded; this is presumably what Roberts would claim.

24. This concern is mitigated somewhat by the fact that Ishiguro was raised in Britain from the age of six, and so is not as different in background and experience as it might first seem. Still, Stevens belongs to a very different social class, and a different generation than Ishiguro, and although the difference between the two groups cannot be described as simple power difference, the gap is sufficiently wide to make one wonder about the imaginative project.

25. Thomas E. Hill Jr. makes a similar argument when he attempts to explain why we should worry about a person who has no respect for nature. See Hill, "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983): 211–224.

26. According to a *Seattle Times* article, Carmen had been trying to get published for many years. He came forward with his hoax to show that white males like himself are discriminated against in publishing. See Peter James Spielmann, "New Australian Aboriginal Hoax Uncovered," *The Seattle Times*, Thursday, March 13, 1997.

27. There is a complication here that I have overlooked for the sake of simplicity. Leon Carmen's motives in imagining may not be as bad as I have it here. We might distinguish between Carmen's motives in creating the work, or in publishing it, with his motives in the imaginative creation of the central character of the work. Thus, Carmen might be capable of having very different motives once engaged in the imaginative process than he had for initiating the project in the first place.

28. I do not mean to imply that this is the *only* motive for assigning these books, or that these books do not have literary merit. But I do think that in many cases, these books are not selected solely for their literary qualities.

29. On *All Things Considered*, Monday, March 4, 2002. Eskin's book is called *A Life in Pieces*.

30. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), esp. part 1, div. 1.

31. See Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2 (1987): 3–19.

32. Vincent Harding, "You've Taken My Nat and Gone," in *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, p. 23.

33. Lerone Bennett Jr., "Nat's Last White Man," in *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), pp. 3–16; Ernest Kaiser, "The Failure of William Styron," ibid., pp. 50–65.

34. Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, 25th Anniversary Edition*, pp. 438–439.

35. Earlier versions of this paper were given at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in 2001 and at the National Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in 2001. I am grateful to my commentator at the National Meeting, Ronald de Sousa, and to the audiences at both meetings for helpful criticisms and feedback. I also owe thanks to Marcia Muelder Eaton, Matthew Kieran, Sarah Worth, and the members of the University of Minnesota's ethics reading group for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of the paper. Whatever weaknesses remain in the paper are, of course, my own.