

Formative Fictions: Imaginative Literature and the Training of the Capacities

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Abstract While it is often assumed that fictions must be informative or morally improving in order to be of any real benefit to us, certain texts defy this assumption by functioning as *training grounds for the capacities*: in engaging with them, we stand to become not more knowledgeable or more virtuous but more *skilled*, whether at rational thinking, at maintaining necessary illusions, at achieving tranquility of mind, or even at religious faith. Instead of offering us propositional knowledge, these texts yield know-how; rather than attempting to instruct by means of their content, they hone capacities by means of their form; far from seducing with the promise of instantaneous transformation, they recognize, with Aristotle, that change is a matter of sustained and patient practice.

I don't try to make you believe something you don't believe, but to make you do something you won't do.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Discussions of Wittgenstein*, 1970

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is one of my favorite books in the world, a novel I teach with as much regularity as enthusiasm. You can imagine my

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1 feeling, then, when a brilliant young student recently told me what she
 2 thought of it: “Morrison is pretty good,” she said, “but she could have got-
 3 ten to the point a bit quicker.”¹ Before you rush to condemn my student,
 4 let me say right away that it is not her fault; she is in the top 5 percent of
 5 the top 30 percent of the young people in the country,² she is bright and
 6 keen and dedicated, and (stated reservations notwithstanding) she likes
 7 Morrison, which is greatly to her credit. But it is surely not Morrison’s
 8 fault, either. (Morrison has repeatedly said that her novels are not recipes,
 9 that they do not have messages, and that they do not aim “to give [her]
 10 readers something to swallow” [quoted in McKay 1983: 420].)³ Rather,
 11 it is *our* fault, the fault of those whose job it is to tell people how to read.
 12 For some reason, we have systematically—albeit unwittingly—engaged on
 13 a long-term campaign of misinformation, relentlessly persuading would-
 14 be readers that fictions are designed to give them useful advice. No won-
 15 der my student thought Morrison took too long getting to the point. How
 16 else was she supposed to understand the hundreds of pages of apparently
 17 wasted space?

18 Things were not always so. We did not always tell our consumers of fic-
 19 tions that the aim of the exercise is to receive instruction, let alone instruc-
 20 tion in the form of propositional content. By “propositional content” I
 21 mean an idea or set of ideas, expressible in declarative sentences; by “fic-
 22 tion” I mean a verbal performance in which the events depicted never hap-
 23 pened, and in which both parties know they didn’t. If I believe the story
 24 I am telling and you know it is false, I am making a *mistake*; if you believe
 25

26 1. As Meir Sternberg has rightly reminded me, the term *point* can mean a variety of things,
 27 including “effect.” Suffice it to say that the context of my student’s utterance made it clear
 28 that she had propositional content in mind.

29 2. Although I wish here to pay a compliment to my student, I do not in any way wish to
 30 detract from the accomplishments of students at other institutions. My figures—which are
 31 admittedly frivolous and to be taken with the appropriate grain of salt—are loosely based on
 32 *US News and World Report*, which (at the time of this writing) ranks 191 national universities
 33 across the United States and lists several dozen more as “Tier 2.” (Regional and liberal arts
 colleges are listed separately.) Stanford currently comes in at number five. The 30-percent
 figure, which is slightly rounded up, comes from the 2009 census. See www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2009/tables.html.

34 3. Morrison: “I don’t want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them
 35 something to feel and think about” (ibid.). In the same interview, Morrison (ibid.) notes
 36 that “if I examine those layers [of character], I don’t come up with simple statements about
 37 fathers and husbands, such as some people want to see in the books”; elsewhere she insists
 38 that a novel is “not . . . a recipe” (Morrison 1984: 341) and that “I just cannot pass out these
 39 little pieces of paper with these messages on them telling people who I respect ‘this is the way
 40 it is’” (quoted in Davis 1994: 232–33). With her deglutitive metaphor, Morrison is echoing
 41 Henry James (2003: 427), who lamented the “comfortable, good-humoured feeling” among
 some nineteenth-century readers of English novels “that a novel is a novel as a pudding is a
 pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it.”

what I am saying but I do not, I am telling a *lie*; but if neither of us believes it, and if each of us knows that neither of us believes it, what I am spinning is now a *fiction*.⁴ Thus when Geoffrey Chaucer presents us with a talking rooster who quotes Macrobius and Virgil, he does so in full awareness that there are no talking roosters, erudite or otherwise, and in full expectation that his audience is on the same page. Stories like these—whether read in private, recited in public, spoken to small audiences, or performed on stages and screens—have been around for a considerably long time. And for about as long, many of their producers have been desperately trying to stop us mining them for “messages.”⁵

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Fiction

What else are we supposed to do with fictions? Rather a lot, it turns out. Scores of accounts have been offered over the centuries, so many in fact that it is exceedingly difficult to compress them into manageable form. For the sake of simplicity, I am going to divide them into three main branches, which I will call the *exemplary*, the *affective*, and the *cognitive* (see table 1). Those perched on the exemplary branch—people like Philip Sidney, Julius Caesar Scaliger, Jean Racine, and Thomas Rymer⁶—have generally

4. This is how Philip Sidney (2002: 103) in the sixteenth century famously distinguished between fiction and lies: “Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth . . . though he recount things not true, yet . . . he telleth them not for true.” On the same grounds, fiction should also be distinguished from “bullshit,” the eponymous subject of a famous essay by Harry Frankfurt. Liars, writes Frankfurt (1988: 130–31), know that what they are saying is false; bullshitters, by contrast, do not know and do not care. Their aim is not so much to convince us of something untrue (ironically, bullshit may accidentally happen to correspond with reality!) as simply to sound impressive. Still, both liars and bullshitters “represent themselves falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth” (ibid.: 130), and in this they differ from the maker of fictions.

5. Thus, Chaucer, as I have noted elsewhere (Landy 2008: 68), was already mocking the urge to point or draw a moral. Edgar Allan Poe (1956a: 453), who saw the aim of literary writing as the production of an effect, contrasted this aim with “the heresy of *The Didactic*” (Poe 1956b: 468). Charles Baudelaire (1972: 203–4), backing up Poe’s claims, rebuked the “crowd of people” who “imagine that the aim of poetry is some sort of lesson, that its duty is to fortify conscience, or to perfect social behaviour, or even, finally, to demonstrate something or other that is useful. . . . The modes of demonstration of truth are other, and elsewhere. Truth has nothing to do with song.” Gustave Flaubert (1974: 48) agreed: “However much genius you may put into some fable taken as an example, another fable can serve as proof of the opposite; for a *dénouement* is not a conclusion” (my translation). And more recently, the French author Charles Dantzig (2009: 131) has complained that “it is an American vice to think that an artwork has to *teach* something. Likewise, Americans began drinking red wine when they were told it was good for their health; no amount of talk about pleasure would have done the trick. Their thirst for knowledge is naive and honorable” (my translation).

6. In his famous preface to *Phèdre*, Racine (2001: 76–77) claimed that “the smallest faults are

1 invited us to consider characters as models for emulation or avoidance (be
 2 like that nice Samaritan! don't be like those wicked tenants!). There is,
 3 however, a more sophisticated sub-branch of the exemplary whose inhabi-
 4 tants consider the object of emulation to be not an element of the narrated
 5 world (the actions of the Good Samaritan, say) but a component of form.
 6 Fictions, they suggest, can serve as *formal models*, providing templates for
 7 structures that we may import into our own experience. They may, for
 8 instance, show us how to impose narrative order onto the diverse incidents
 9 that make up our lives;⁷ they may hint at the precarious armed truce we
 10 might strike between irreconcilable factions within our souls;⁸ they may
 11 even enable the transfiguration of the visible world.⁹

12
 13 severely punished in it. The mere thought of crime is regarded with as much horror as the
 14 crime itself. The weaknesses of love are treated in it as real weaknesses; passions are pre-
 15 sented to view only to show all the confusion they cause; and vice is everywhere painted in
 16 such colors as to make its ugliness known and hated.” For Sidney (2002: 151), a good poem
 17 is a sugared pill; it presents examples of goodness and wickedness (*ibid.*: 148–49), both of
 18 which meet their appropriate ends (*ibid.*: 150). (It is worth noting that Sidney even con-
 19 siders *tragedies* to be cases of poetic justice.) On Rymer, coiner of the term *poetic justice*, and
 20 his borrowings from the French critic René Rapin, see Quinlan 1912: 139–45; on Scaliger,
 21 see *ibid.*: 22.

22 The exemplarity view shows up again in Samuel Johnson's *Rambler 4* (1820: esp. 23, 26)
 23 and in Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" (1994 [1821]: 960–61)—Shelley's enthusiasm for the
 24 verbal arts caused him, as we will see, to embrace just about every celebratory position
 25 imaginable—and is still not dead, as evidenced by the twenty-first-century endorsement of
 26 Mark William Roche (2004: 225, 246). For a more sophisticated presentation of the exem-
 27 plarity view, see Thomas Pavel 2003: esp. 134 (I reviewed this volume in Landy 2005); on the
 28 notion of exemplarity itself, see O'Neill 1986 and Stierle 1994.

29 7. On the idea that fictions provide formal models for imparting narrative structure to a life,
 30 see Nehamas 1985: esp. chaps. 5 and 6. In the years since, there have been several additional
 31 contributions, including Paul Ricoeur's "Life in Quest of Narrative" (1991), J. David Velle-
 32 man's "Narrative Explanation" (2003), and (if I may include myself in such august company)
 33 my own work on Proust in *Philosophy as Fiction* (Landy 2004: chap. 3).

34 8. The imaginary reconciliation view has had a number of proponents, including Cleanth
 35 Brooks (2007: 801), I. A. Richards (1926: 20), and more recently the sculptor Martin Puryear
 36 (2007: 77), for whom the most interesting art "retains a flickering quality, where opposed
 37 ideas can be held in tense coexistence." This view, which dovetails in important ways with
 38 Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1955: 105) theory of myth, may ultimately owe something to Samuel
 39 Taylor Coleridge's (1884 [1817]: 150) theory of imagination (a faculty which, he says, "reveals
 40 itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities"). It may also, of
 41 course, owe something to G. W. F. Hegel—art, as Hegel sees it, gives sensuous expression to
 the possibility for oppositions to be reconciled—though Hegel believes that the oppositions
 are eventually reconciled in *reality*, not just in imagination. On Hegel, compare Eldridge
 2003: 77; for the application to states of the soul, see Anderson and Landy 2001: 31–35.

42 9. Friedrich Nietzsche (1974 [1882–87]: sec. 299): "How can we make things beautiful,
 43 attractive, and desirable for us when they are not? . . . Moving away from things until there
 44 is a good deal that one no longer sees and there is much that our eye has to add if we are still
 45 to see them at all; or seeing things around a corner and as cut out and framed; or to place
 46 them so that they partially conceal each other and grant us only glimpses of architectural
 47 perspectives; or looking at them through tinted glass or in the light of the sunset; or giving

The second main branch, the affective, focuses our attention on what fiction does to or for our emotions. According to a first set of affectivists, including Percy Bysshe Shelley and in more recent years Wayne Booth, Lynn Hunt, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Rorty, fiction strengthens our capacity for empathy and hence our propensity to do good. (Shelley [1994 {1821}: 961]: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place . . . of many others.”)¹⁰ According to a second set, which takes its cue from Arthur Schopenhauer and thus ultimately from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2001 [1790]), the point of fiction is to permit us to take up a desire-free attitude to the world.¹¹ Since the objects depicted are not real, and since I know they are not real, I cannot want to *possess* them in any way; aesthetic contemplation thus becomes a foretaste of a certain kind of utopia, the utopia of eternal will-lessness.¹² (On one reading, Aristotle’s notion of “catharsis”

them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent—all this we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.” Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (1966 [1872]), with its idea of the beautiful Apollonian veneer spread over unbearable Dionysian truth, is also relevant here.

10. Shelley’s view is shared by Nussbaum (1995: xvi): “The literary imagination . . . seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own” (cf. Nussbaum 1999: 265). See also Booth 1998: 377–79; Hunt 2007: 32, 40, chap. 1; Roche 2004: 26; Rorty 1998: 185, 2001: 132–33.

11. See Schopenhauer 1958, 1: secs. 34, 38; Kant 2001 (1790): secs. 2–5. (Schopenhauer is, of course, both drawing on and going beyond Kant’s original pronouncements; my remarks here concern the former more than the latter.) In aesthetic contemplation, writes Schopenhauer (1958, 1: sec. 34, p. 178), the attention “considers things without interest”; “we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror of the object” (ibid.); “then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord . . . the painless state, prized by Epicurus as the highest good” (ibid.: sec. 38, p. 196). Again, fictions are on this theory only one of a number of phenomena capable of generating aesthetic contemplation, including all the arts and indeed natural scenery besides. (Kant, in fact, focuses almost exclusively on the beauty of the world and has next to nothing to say about art.) In typically saccharine fashion, Iris Murdoch turns the Kantian-Schopenhauerian idea to moralizing purposes: since “perfection of form . . . invites unpossessive contemplation” (Murdoch 2001 [1970]: 83), she claims, engagement with great works of art is a way to “clear our minds of selfish care” (ibid.: 82).

12. Schopenhauer is not the only theorist to describe the experience of reading as a model for utopia. For Theodor Adorno (1967: sec. 144), it is a space free from the tyranny of consumption, commodification, and utility (“total purposelessness gives the lie to the totality of purposefulness in the world of domination, and only by virtue of this negation . . . has existing society up to now become aware of another that is possible” [cf. Adorno 1978: 314; 1984 {1970}: 343]); for Richard Eldridge (2003: 54), it is a space of maximal autonomy in which we witness writers bound by no laws but their own; and for Hans-Georg Gadamer, it is a space of ideal community in which local differences are overcome by a shared love for and/or understanding of an object. (“In the festive,” writes Gadamer [1986: 63], “the commu-

1 can be seen as referring to a similarly salutary reduction of emotion.)¹³
 2 According to a third set of affectivists, finally, fictions are there neither
 3 to strengthen our empathetic connections to the world nor to weaken our
 4 appetitive connections but rather to stir up all kinds of feelings in us, feel-
 5 ings of joy, pain, yearning, grief, everything with which a rich internal
 6 life should, on some accounts, be full. Either by emotional contagion (the
 7 writer genuinely experiencing something and thereby causing us to experi-
 8 ence it too)¹⁴ or by sheer creative technique (the writer finding a form of
 9 words or images virtually guaranteed to do their work),¹⁵ great novels and
 10 plays and films unleash a flood of sentiment in us. And that flood of sen-
 11 timent is beneficial, because it grants us a richer inner life: since some of
 12 us—especially the blasé urbanites, says William Wordsworth, anticipating
 13 Georg Simmel and others¹⁶—have lost the capacity to experience the full

14
 15 nal spirit that supports us all and transcends each of us individually represents . . . the real
 16 power of the art work.”) In similar fashion, Ralph Ellison (1995: 696) rightly saw his novels
 17 as bringing together readers of different races: “When [the novel is] successful in commu-
 18 nicating its vision of experience, that magic thing occurs between the world of the novel
 19 and the reader—indeed, *between reader and reader* in their mutual solitude—which we know
 20 as communion” (my emphasis). On micro-communities forged out of shared affection, see
 21 Nehamas 2007: 81–82; Tamen 2004: 3.

22 13. There is considerable debate as to what Aristotle actually meant by catharsis. Perhaps
 23 he meant that various emotions—including, but not limited to, fear and pity (see Aristotle
 24 2001: 1449b)—are cleaned away thanks to tragedy (this is the view of Jacob Bernays [2006
 25 {1857}]); but perhaps he meant that they were cleaned *up*, which is to say trained to aim
 26 reliably at their proper objects (this is the view of Stephen Halliwell [1998] and Nussbaum
 27 [1986]). What is more, as Jonathan Lear (1988: 300–303) has shown, neither account squares
 28 with what Aristotle says in the *Politics* (1998, 8:5–7), where cathartic “music” has no improv-
 29 ing effect on character at all. For a full history of catharsis theories, see Ford 1995: 111–13; see
 30 also Landy 2010b: 222–23; Nehamas 1992: 301.

31 14. Horace (1970: *Ars poetica* ll. 102–3): “Si vis me flere, dolendum est primum ipsi tibi” (if
 32 you wish to move me, you must first grieve yourself). Compare Wallace Stevens (1951: 111),
 33 who writes that poetry “communicates the emotion that generates it” and that “its effect is
 34 to arouse the same emotion in others.” Stevens, of course, is primarily talking about lyric
 35 poetry, a literary mode that need not contain any fictional elements; since emotion-eliciting
 36 is a common feature of works in all modes and genres, however, the view can easily be
 37 applied more broadly.

38 15. I am thinking here of Eliot’s “objective correlative.” As Eliot sees it—rightly, I suspect—
 39 there is no need for writers to feel a certain way in order to elicit a comparable reaction in
 40 the souls of their readers. What they require instead is the “formula of that particular emo-
 41 tion” (1975: 48), which is to say, the sequence of elements most likely to generate the desired
 effect. (Compare to some extent Diderot 1981: 132.) Alfred Hitchcock, for example, was
 presumably not the least bit anxious when he so brilliantly engineered all those scenes that
 reliably cause anxiety in spectators.

42 16. See Wordsworth 1876: 83 and compare Thomas de Quincey (1889–90: 56), for whom
 43 “human sensibilities are ventilated and continually called out into exercise by . . . litera-
 44 ture”; hence, for de Quincey (*ibid.*: 57), “the pre-eminency over all authors that merely *teach*
 45 of the meanest that *moves*” (quoted in Abrams 1953: 331). On “Blasiertheit,” see Simmel 1971a
 46 [1903]: 325–30, and compare Adorno 1967: sec. 150: “To be still able to perceive anything at

force of events, we need some mechanism for reconnecting us to affect. As Franz Kafka (1978: 16) so beautifully puts it, “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.”¹⁷

We are left with the stoutest branch, the one which has produced by far the most offshoots and received by far the most attention in recent decades. Everyone on this branch—the cognitive—believes that in some way or other fiction grants us access to knowledge and that increased knowledge is indeed the very point of our engagement with it. Where cognitivists differ is over the kind of knowledge ostensibly granted. Thus at one extreme we find people willing to see a work like *Romeo and Juliet* as giving us knowledge of the world at large; with a touch more modesty, a second group views it as delivering knowledge of a cultural moment; more modestly still, a third group takes it to convey something about its producer; and at the other extreme it is deemed to reflect only on *us*, its appreciators. By way of concluding this overview, let us look a little more closely at the four cognitive approaches, starting with the last and working back.

If it is true, as Wordsworth noted, that our emotions are not always fully present to us, and that we periodically need assistance just to feel what we already feel, it is also true that our deepest *beliefs* are not always fully present to us and that we need assistance just to know what we already know. Direct introspection not always being the most reliable route to self-knowledge, a *detour* is frequently required, and fictions of a certain kind provide, according to some, the most fruitful detour imaginable.¹⁸ They serve as simulation spaces (Gregory Currie [1995])¹⁹ in which we may experiment with a variety of strategies without the costly consequences of adopting them in real life; they function as battlegrounds (M. M. Bakhtin [1981])²⁰ in which different ways of living, grounded in different belief sys-

all, regardless of its quality, replaces happiness, since omnipotent quantification has taken away the possibility of perception itself.”

17. Letter to Oskar Pollak, January 27, 1904. Compare Kendall L. Walton’s (2011) view that literary texts are like speechwriters for the soul, offering us the perfect form of words to use to ourselves when we wish to deepen an emotional experience. On the relationship between affect and cognition, see Sternberg 2003: 383.

18. For literature revealing us to ourselves, see Beardsley 1975: 574; Bloom 1995: 29–30; Carroll 1998: 142; Eldridge 1989: 20–21, 2003: 4, 11, 100, 216–17, 223, 226; Felski 2008: 25; Iser 1980: 194, 216, 224, 230; Vogler 2007: 18–19. Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory can also be taken to promise increased self-knowledge at the end of the reading experience (see Iser 2006: 34–37), in part because the latter reveals our tacit presuppositions.

19. See also Walton 1993: 12.

20. Bakhtin (*ibid.*: 311) sees the novel as a device for bringing together a number of “verbal-ideological belief systems” in the form of individual voices, as well as for mingling them in hybrid constructions such as free indirect discourse. It is not always transparent what benefit (if any) is supposed to accrue to the reader, but it seems to me that we can usefully juxtapose Bakhtin’s thoughts about fiction with his thoughts about life. As Bakhtin sees it, “the

1 tems, come into conflict, offering themselves for our selective appropri-
 2 ation; they raise questions to which they give no answers (Roland Barthes
 3 [1964]),²¹ thereby inviting us to fill the gaps with responses of our own,
 4 and since those responses often derive from our deepest commitments,
 5 they may—so long as we are paying attention—end up revealing us to
 6 ourselves.²² Fictions thus become, to borrow I. A. Richards’s delightful
 7 phrase, “machines to think with” (Richards 2001 [1924]: vii) machines that
 8 assist us in becoming who we are.²³ Or in Friedrich Schiller’s more sophis-
 9 ticated formulation, fictions assist us both in becoming something and,
 10 where necessary, in *ceasing* to be it, in softening the borders of the forged
 11 personality to allow for a new burst of expansion.²⁴

ideological becoming of a human being” is “the process of selectively assimilating the words
 of others” (ibid.: 341), “an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available
 verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values” (ibid.: 345–46). I
 rather suspect Bakhtin may have seen novel reading as a privileged locus for individuals’
 “ideological becoming.” And even if he did not, we still could.

21. Barthes (ibid.: ix): “To write is to jeopardize the meaning of the world, to put an indirect
 question that the writer, by an ultimate abstention, refrains from answering. It is each of us
 who gives the answer . . . there is no end to answering what has been written beyond hope of
 an answer . . . the meanings pass, the question remains.” For Milan Kundera (2008: 70–71),
 likewise, “novelistic thinking . . . does not judge; it does not proclaim truths; it questions,
 it marvels, it plumbs.” “I have always, deeply, violently, detested those who look for a *posi-*
 21 *tion* (political, philosophical, religious, whatever) in a work of art,” adds Kundera (1996: 91),
 “rather than searching it in an *effort to know*” (cf. Kundera 1988: 7).

22. I borrow the term *gap* from Wolfgang Iser. He uses it to cover a number of related
 phenomena; the one I have in mind is perhaps most clearly described at Iser 1980: 189.
 (For a more careful typology of gaps, see Sternberg 1993: 311n29.) The theory I am pre-
 24 sents in this essay has, as will be seen, much in common with that of Iser and of his fel-
 25 low “reader response” theorists. It departs from them by focusing on a particular activity
 26 uniquely elicited by formative fictions and also, more broadly, by placing a greater emphasis
 27 on normativity. Rather than describing what readers (whether single individuals or “inter-
 28 pretable communities”) *happen* to do with and Plato and Beckett and Mallarmé, I suggest
 29 that there is something readers *ought* to do with them, something that—unlike the filling of
 30 gaps, in many contexts—they can easily *fail* to do. Over and above the moral “ought” of our
 31 responsibility to the author, such cases elicit what we might call the eudaimonistic “ought”
 of our responsibility to ourselves.

23. Cf. Friedrich Schiller (1993 [1795]: 147, Letter 21), who writes that “thanks to aesthetic
 culture, the freedom to be what [we] ought to be is completely restored to [us].”

24. Schiller (ibid.: 123, Letter 13) points to two opposed dangers besetting every individual:
 34 “In the first case he will never be *himself*; in the second he will never be *anything else*.” The
 35 aesthetic—again, Schiller is speaking of aesthetic experience in general, but fictions are of
 36 course included—helps us to steer clear of both dangers by doing justice not only to our
 37 desire for cohesion (what Schiller calls the formal drive) but also to our desire for change,
 38 growth, multiplicity (what Schiller calls the sensuous drive). (See ibid.: 118–21, Letter 12.) It
 39 should be added that Schiller has no time for didactic theories of art; it is only a bad reader,
 40 he says, who “will enjoy a serious and moving poem as though it were a sermon” (ibid.: 152,
 Letter 22).

41 It may appear that the desire for unity and the desire for growth are simply incompatible.
 Consider, however, that the achievement of a certain level of success often leads to a desire

Table 1	Theories of fiction	1
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1.	Exemplary	2
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1.2.	Forms	4
1.2.1.	The shape of a life	5
1.2.1.1.	Synchronic (Richards)	6
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3.	Cognitive	16
3.1.	Knowledge of the world	17
3.1.1.	Propositional knowledge	18
3.1.1.1.	Of particulars (Georg Lukács, Jean-Paul Sartre)	19
3.1.1.2.	Of laws (Mark William Roche)	20
3.1.2.	Sensory knowledge (Shklovsky, Susan Sontag)	21
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3.1.4.	Knowledge by revelation (Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur)	22
3.2.	Knowledge of a <i>Zeitgeist</i>	23
3.2.1.	Via content (G. W. F. Hegel)	24
3.2.2.	Via form (Theodor Adorno)	25
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4.	Formative	31

Fictions, then, can bring about self-knowledge. But they can also, on many accounts, bring about knowledge of others. (According to Marcel Proust, indeed, it is precisely by doing the latter that they are able to do the

to go further, to move beyond, to “transcend oneself,” in Simmel’s (1971b [1918]) phrase. We now see a new goal for which to strive, one which was not only unattainable but also inconceivable from the point at which we started: the desire for growth is, in a sense, nothing but a desire for a new (and superior) form of unity. Life, then, is like the ascent of a peak which conceals behind it, unbeknownst to us, another, taller summit, and so ad infinitum.

1 former.)²⁵ Thus the novels of Morrison convey to us her various intuitions,
 2 intuitions which even she would perhaps not have fully understood without
 3 having brought them to expression (Benedetto Croce);²⁶ or, more broadly,
 4 they convey to us her deepest essence, her “perspective,” the special way in
 5 which she sees the world. (“If I read Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night*,”
 6 writes Putnam [1976: 488], “I do not *learn* that love does not exist, that all
 7 human beings are hateful and hating. . . . What I learn is to see the world
 8 as it looks to someone who is sure that hypothesis is correct.”)²⁷ Like all
 9 subjective experience (the “*quale*” of philosophers), this is something that
 10 cannot be transmitted directly, in straightforward declarative statements.
 11 It can, however, be intimated via *style*, thanks to the particular inflection a
 12 writer places on an otherwise common language, in the unique metaphori-
 13 cal connections he or she makes, in the shape of the narrations produced,
 14 in the combination of devices deployed.²⁸ Literary language, being more
 15 heavily and finely crafted than everyday speech, carries more readily the
 16 indelible mark of its creator.

17 Hegelians, of course, feel somewhat differently. For them, what is
 18 revealed is not an individual temperament but a collective attitude, a
 19 “*Zeitgeist*,”²⁹ manifest either in ideational content or in formal tech-
 20

21 25. Thus Proust (1987: 60), in the preface to his translation of John Ruskin’s *Bible of Amiens*:
 22 “There is no better way of becoming aware of one’s feelings than to try to recreate in one-
 23 self what a master has felt. In this profound effort it is our thought, together with his, that
 24 we bring to light.”

25 26. As Benedetto Croce sees it, emotions (the interesting ones at least) generate intuitions,
 26 and intuitions rise to the level of consciousness only thanks to their expression in art. See
 27 Croce 1965 [1913]: 24–25, 1995 [1909]: 18–19; Kemp 2003: 171–93, esp. 172. One might com-
 28 pare A. C. Bradley (1941: 23), for whom the creative writer has in mind merely a “vague
 29 imaginative mass pressing for development and definition”; without the literary text, then,
 30 no development and no definition.

31 27. “That,” writes Simone de Beauvoir (1965: 82), “is the miracle of literature, the thing that
 32 distinguishes it from information: an *other* truth becomes mine” (my translation). Cf. Jacob-
 33 son 1996: 333–34, 1997: 167; Poulet 1971: 278, 1980: 42–45.

34 28. For Proust (1993a: 299), style “is the revelation, which by direct and conscious methods
 35 would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which
 36 the world appears to each one of us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain
 37 for ever the secret of every individual.” (Although this formulation belongs to the narrator
 38 of *Time Regained*, we know that Proust himself feels similarly: see Proust 1994: 288, 311.) On
 39 metaphor and perspective, see Landy 2004: chap. 1; on the general claim about style, see
 40 Abrams 1953: 226–31; Danto 1981: 198–207; Farrell 2004: 187–89; Stevens 1951: 120–23.
 41 The title of M. H. Abrams’s book, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, is an allusion to W. B. Yeats’s
 (1936: xxxiii) line that “soul must become its own betrayer . . . the mirror turn lamp,” which
 Abrams takes to mark a shift in the Romantic period, from mimetic to expressive (theories
 of) poetry.

29. Hegel (1975: 7): “In works of art the nations have deposited their richest inner intu-
 itions and ideas” (see also the helpful discussion in Eldridge 2003: 74–76). In his early phase,
 Georg Lukács (1971: 32, 40) follows suit, and the irrepressible Shelley (1994 [1821]: 969) is

nique.³⁰ (The “lifeworld” idea, to which Martin Heidegger (1977) appeals in his artwork essay, may well be a related concept.)³¹ Even the Hegelians stop short, however, of positing an increase of actual knowledge about the world, this being the purview of our last group of theorists. Among these, finally, some regard fiction as providing knowledge by *acquaintance* (we learn what it is like, for example, to be a young African American in pre-civil rights Michigan);³² some regard it as yielding knowledge by *revelation* (while it does not itself transmit any truths, the text is here taken to chip away at the barriers standing between us and epiphanic disclosure, thus functioning as a making ready for grace);³³ some, to recall, regard it as delivering *propositional* knowledge; and some regard it as offering a kind of sensory clarification. Rather than letting us know what we know (Noël Carroll) or letting us feel what we feel (Wordsworth), here fictions are said to let us *see what we see*. They “defamiliarize” objects (Victor Shklovsky), presenting them in new and unusual lights, not so that we may learn about them but so that we may simply perceive them at all, simply see them, for the first time, as they actually are.³⁴

as happy to sign up to the “spirit of the age” idea as he is to more or less everything else. Robert Pippin, mind you, is a Hegelian of a totally different stripe; his brilliant reading of Henry James (2000: 54–88) combines a keen interest in *mentalités* with a compelling account of capacities under training.

30. Frankfurt school theorists could be said to specialize in this approach. Adorno (1978: 306–7), for example, calls abstract artworks realistic, since they so perfectly capture, he says, the abstractness of human relations under advanced capitalism (cf. also Adorno 1977: 160; 1984 [1970]: 45). Ernst Bloch (1977: 22), likewise, finds in Expressionist discontinuity a perfect representation of “authentic reality.” And Siegfried Kracauer (1995: 79) reads the choreography of contemporary dance troupes as reflecting the processes of mechanized production: “The hands in the factory,” he writes, “correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls.”

31. Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1977) is notoriously complicated, and I am singling out one of the three functions he (perhaps contradictorily) assigns to art. Ostensibly, art not only (1) reveals a lifeworld (ibid.: 169–72) but also (2) reveals the “Being” of specific objects (ibid.: 164–65) and (3) reveals Being itself (ibid.: 177–78), where “Being” means perhaps something like the set of all data of experience prior to conceptualization (cf. Gumbrecht 2004: 69–70).

32. One exponent of the knowledge by acquaintance view is Susan Feagin (1996: esp. 110).

33. See, for example, Karsten Harries (1978); Ricoeur (1975: 57, 69, 1978: 151–52); and Jean-Paul Sartre, for whom the writer’s job is to “[let] Being sparkle as Being” (Sartre 1988: 106) and thus “restore the strangeness and opacity of the world” (ibid.: 108). This view is of Heideggerian inspiration; it connects to the third of the definitions offered in the artwork essay (as described above).

34. The idea originated with Shelley (1994 [1821]: 967), for whom poetry removes the “film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being,” but found its most famous articulation in Shklovsky (1965: 12): “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar.’” See also Eichenbaum 1965: 113–14 and Tomashevsky 1965: 85; for a discussion of the term’s shifting applications in Formalist (and post-Formalist) theory, see Sternberg 2006. Jean Paulhan (2006: 16, 47) follows the Shklovsky line, writing that “poetry is always

1 At my count, that makes over a dozen non-message-based theories of
 2 the function of fiction (and I am fully aware that there are many I have
 3 overlooked). While I find one or two of them unpersuasive (the revela-
 4 tion view has always struck me as fanciful, and for reasons I will spell out
 5 shortly, the empathetic and exemplary views do not seem to hold up), most
 6 are entirely plausible and some extremely compelling. And while claims of
 7 universality tend to be overblown—it is surely not the case that *all* fictions
 8 aim at defamiliarization, for example, or that *all* fictions aim at expres-
 9 sion—it is generally possible to find a work or two that fits each theory
 10 remarkably well, indeed that *needs* the theory in order to be fully appreci-
 11 ated. *Hamlet* is a notorious emotion-elicitor, *Madame Bovary* an intriguing
 12 emotion-modulator,³⁵ *In Search of Lost Time* a monumental formal model for
 13 self-fashioning, *Song of Solomon* a powerful “machine to think with”; there is
 14 no shortage of fictions to prove almost every theory right.

15 We are left, in sum, with a good number of powerful and robust accounts
 16 of what happens to us when we read or listen or watch. But in many circles
 17 we just do not hear about them when novels and movies and plays are
 18 being discussed. We hear, instead, about propositional content. We hear
 19 that novels are mirrors, their function being to show us how the world is.³⁶
 20 Or we hear that novels are oracles, their function being to deliver laws of
 21 experience, deep abiding truths about the world, “messages” about who
 22 we are and how we function and what we ought to do.³⁷ (Even the “decon-
 23

24 showing us, in strange ways [*étrangement*], the dog, the stone, or the ray of sun which habit
 25 concealed from us . . . poetry is also seeing with fresh eyes what everyone always sees.” So
 26 too does Susan Sontag (2001: 13–14), who bemoans “a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory
 27 experience.” “All the conditions of modern life,” she explains, “conjoin to dull our sensory
 28 faculties. . . . What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more,
 29 to *hear* more, to *feel* more.” In recent years Susan Stewart (2002) has produced a powerful
 30 expansion, application, and rearticulation of this view, beautiful in its own right.

31 35. On *Madame Bovary* as emotion modulator, see my “Passion, Counter-Passion, Catharsis”
 32 (Landy 2010b: esp. 228–29).

33 36. This position has had a large number of proponents. Balzac (1951: 6) famously described
 34 the role of the novel as that of competing with the civil register (“faire concurrence à l’État-
 35 Civil”). Sartre (1988: 70, 75) insisted that the role of the novel is to depict reality—indeed
 36 the reality of today—and thus, ostensibly, to inflict responsibility upon its readers (ibid.:
 37 37–38). Lukács (1977: 32, 38), who came to feel very much the same way, ended up extolling
 38 a type of writing that Adorno (1977: 173) delightfully dubbed “boy-meets-tractor literature.”
 39 And Ian Watt (1957: 30) not only praised Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson for adopting
 40 “the proper purpose of language, ‘to convey the knowledge of things,’” but also castigated
 41 Madame de Lafayette and Pierre Choderlos de Laclos for failing to do so.

42 37. To take one example among many, René Girard (1965) wants to see fictions as revealing
 43 a truth to set against the lies found everywhere else; that is the force of the French title of
 44 his first book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. (The “truth” in question, an immensely
 45 dubious one, is that no desire is ever spontaneous.) Equally oddly, Murdoch (2001 [1970]:
 46 85) believes that literature “teaches that nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to
 47 be virtuous.” Roche even sees art as making *arguments* (2001: 57; see also ibid.: 84, 208, 211).

structive” school of criticism essentially belongs here, since its practitioners could not imagine literary artworks seeking to do anything other than send messages; *Jane Eyre* and *Effi Brest* become failed efforts at meaning, or better yet, “mean their own meaninglessness.”³⁸ Either way, we hear that fictions can save themselves from utter futility only by being directly educational, and that since education is their true task, they had better get on with it. That mind-set is surely what explains a best-selling writer’s otherwise unaccountable complaint that with some novels “you have to read seven hundred pages to get the handful of insights that were the reason the book was written” (Shields 2010: 128). A seven-hundred-page novel written for the purpose of “insights”? With statements like these, is it any wonder my student feels the way she does about Morrison?

Formative Fictions

It is time, I submit, to reclaim fiction from the meaning-mongers. The method by which fictions are currently being taught in high schools (spot the villain!) and evaluated in the public domain (find the message!)³⁹ has had a genuinely detrimental effect, not just on fiction but also, if I may say, on lives. The relentless consolidation of a dichotomy consigning fiction to either blunt didacticism or utter insignificance has been bad, first, for critics, many of whom have clearly been tempted—against their better judgment, in some cases—to make room in their theories for the message idea⁴⁰ or, going in the other direction, to celebrate the glorious useless-

38. I am largely referring here to the de Manian strand of deconstruction; for a discussion of Paul de Man on Proust, see Landy 2004: 72–73. Still, one can occasionally find similar moves in Jacques Derrida (1987: 144), as, for example, when he speaks of Kafka’s *Vor dem Gesetz*: “‘Before the Law’ does not tell or describe anything but itself as text. Not within an assured specular reflection of some self-referential transparency—and I must stress this point—but in the unreadability of the text . . . the impossibility of acceding to its proper significance. . . . The text . . . speak[s] only of itself, that is to say, of its non-identity with itself.” (This statement is rather ironic given that Derrida has just produced a highly allegorical reading, telling us exactly what, in his opinion, the story “means”; but let us leave that aside.)

39. At the 78th Academy Awards (2006) ceremony, Jennifer Lopez presented prepared remarks about Paul Haggis’s *Crash*. “In the opening scene,” she intoned, “we are told that people feel so isolated these days that they are not above literally crashing into each other as a way of making human contact.” What is the force of the “telling” here?

40. Thus, Arthur Danto (2003: 139), whom we saw above making an eloquent defense of the expression view, elsewhere insists that artworks are “embodied meanings” (see also *ibid.*: 13, 25). Umberto Eco (1979: 22, 120) periodically speaks of “messages.” Iser (2006: 67), who mostly sees fiction as a route to self-knowledge, periodically lapses into deeming it a vehicle for the communication of ideas; *Tom Jones*, for example, delivers the “insight that the rigidity of normative principles of eighteenth century thought systems hinders the acquisition of experience” (Iser 1980: 201n30). Eldridge, who shares Iser’s clarificationist impulses, insists that art is communication (Eldridge 2003: 97) and yields truth (*ibid.*: 42). And Stanley Fish

1 ness of fiction, its ostensible inability to yield anything beyond pleasure
 2 (Barthes 1975a: 14).⁴¹ It has been bad, second, for writers, some of whom
 3 have adjusted their work to the demand or at least felt the burden of its
 4 pressure.⁴² It is bad, third, for their writings, which will gradually find less
 5 and less of an audience: if you want to get people to read a novel or watch
 6 a play, assuring them that it is morally improving is not much of a winning
 7 strategy.⁴³ And it is bad, fourth, for (potential) readers, who are deprived of
 8 the *real* reward on offer from sustained engagement with substantial works
 9 of fiction. They may indeed be positively *harmed* as a result of reading for
 10 the “message.”⁴⁴ Telling readers to mine fictions for messages is a surefire
 11 way to put their actual benefits out of reach.⁴⁵

13 (1980 [1970]: 28, 65), who pays lip service to the idea of literature as a set of effects, seems
 14 only to be interested in the “effect of meaning” (cf. Jane P. Tompkins’s [1980: esp. 206 and
 223] critique).

15 41. While Barthes’s distinction between “*lisible*” and “*scriptible*” overlaps to some extent
 16 with the distinction I am drawing between formative fictions (the parables, the *Gorgias*, etc.)
 17 and other kinds of fiction, important differences remain both at the level of process and
 18 at the level of outcome. For one thing, the goal of formative fictions is something more
 19 than mere “*jouissance*,” that pleasure which Barthes celebrates for its self-indulgent ster-
 20 rility; for another, the formative approach does not accord infinite latitude to the reader but
 21 understands certain types of move to have been anticipated, indeed programmed in, by the
 22 author. That is not to say that such moves are *required*—unlike, say, the effort of comprehend-
 23 ing individual words and sentences, the effort of “rewriting” is always optional—but if we do
 24 choose to take up the offer of active engagement, we will all do so in markedly similar ways.

25 42. One thinks, for example, of J. M. Coetzee’s “At the Gate” (2004), that nightmarish
 26 Kafkaesque depiction of a world in which fiction writers are always required to declare their
 27 beliefs.

28 43. Francine Prose (1999: 78) puts the point particularly well: “Only rarely do [high school]
 29 teachers propose that writing might be worth reading closely. Instead, students are informed
 30 that literature is principally a vehicle for the soporific moral blather they suffer daily from
 31 their parents.” Philip Pullman (2008: 4) makes the same claim in relation to poetry, lamenting
 32 that “in an atmosphere of suspicion, resentment, and hostility, many poems are interro-
 33 gated until they confess, and what they confess is usually worthless, as the results of torture
 34 always are: broken little scraps of information, platitudes, banalities.” “And this,” adds Pull-
 35 man, “is the process we call education.” (On the banality of almost all “messages” embedded
 36 in literary works, see Stolnitz 1991, 1992.) Charles Dickens himself, notes Nehamas (2007:
 37 138), recognized the need to make a different kind of appeal. “In *Oliver Twist*, when Oliver
 38 is overwhelmed by the great number of books in Mr. Brownlow’s house, that good man tells
 39 him: ‘You shall read them, if you behave well.’ Even Dickens, the most edifying of novelists,
 40 could see that aesthetic values aren’t justified by their moral significance and couldn’t bring
 41 himself to write, ‘If you read them, you shall behave well.’”

42 44. I have argued this point in my “Corruption by Literature” (Landy 2010a). So too, in per-
 43 haps stronger terms, has Prose (1999: 83–84): “The new model English-class graduate,” she
 44 writes, “values empathy and imagination less than the ability to make quick and irreversible
 45 judgments, to entertain and maintain simplistic immovable opinions about guilt and inno-
 46 cence. . . . What results from these educational methods is a mode of thinking (or, more
 47 accurately, of *not* thinking) that equips our kids for the future: Future McDonald’s employ-
 48 ees. Future corporate board members.”

49 45. I speak here of *benefit* rather than *utility*, since I believe the first term captures better the

All of us could do with returning to the wisdom of Schopenhauer, Wordsworth, and company, lovers of art who eschewed semantics in favor of pragmatics.⁴⁶ We could do, in other words, with ceasing to talk about what a text “says”—if indeed there is such a thing—and beginning to talk again about what it *does*.⁴⁷ It is true, of course, that fictions tend to be “about” something, and this “aboutness,” as we will see in a moment, is an important part of their functioning. Still, aboutness is only one of their features, and (with exception made for hybrids like Proust’s *Recherche*)⁴⁸ arguably not the most important. Fictions also give *form* to this aboutness, they instigate a *process* (an artwork, as John Dewey and others have noted, is not an object but an experience), and they have an *effect* which goes far beyond the mere transmission of information.⁴⁹ In Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (2001: 71) words, an artwork is not something at which we stare “in hope of seeing through it to an intended conceptual meaning”; rather, “the work is an *Ereignis*—an *event*.”

One way to reemphasize the pragmatic dimension of fiction is to shine the spotlight on a group of texts whose function is not exemplary, not affective, and not, properly speaking, cognitive either but what we might call *formative*, their ambition being to assist us in fine-tuning our mental capacities.⁵⁰ The kind of activity a formative text invites us to undergo, by

nature of our (ideal) feelings. As a number of critics have suggested (see esp. Booth 1988: 172–82), works of fiction are like friends, and while we rightly think of friendship as conferring immense benefits upon our lives, we equally rightly shudder to call it “useful”: to do so would be to adopt an instrumentalizing attitude toward the people we are closest to (cf. Nehamas 2007: 55–57). We do not *exploit* great works of fiction, but we may nevertheless allow them to help us and may be tremendously grateful—just as we are to our friends—when they enrich our lives.

46. On the semantic/pragmatic distinction, cf. Richards (2001 [1924]: 250): “A statement may be used for the sake of the reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the scientific use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occasions. This is the emotive use of language.”

47. Since the term *performative* (Austin 1975: 5, 25) has become such a buzzword in my discipline, perhaps it is worth pointing out that there is nothing performative about the texts I am discussing here. The term has a technical sense: a given sentence is a performative if and only if it both declares you to be doing something and itself constitutes the doing. (For example, saying “I promise” both declares you to be promising and is itself the act of promising.) There is no connection between this and what Plato is up to, for example, in leaving holes in the logic and inviting the reader to mend them. On the misuse of Austin by literary scholars, cf. Gorman 1989.

48. In works which actually advance arguments, it may be appropriate to speak of the articulation and reception of a view. Such works, however, are rare.

49. See Bradley 1941: 4; C. Brooks 1956: 213; Dewey 1980; Iser 1978: 281; Richards 1959: 22; Rosenblatt 1978: 12, 20–21; Sartre 1988: 56. According to Gary Kemp (2003: 173, 189), Croce and R. G. Collingwood also insist on the experiential aspect of the aesthetic.

50. The idea that minds have a variety of capacities has been around for a very long time; the Greek *δύναμις* became the Latin *facultas*, which in turn became the English *faculty* (but also, among other things, the German *Vermögen*). I do not wish to enter here into any debates

1 means of a salient formal device (authorial irony, Romantic irony, shifting
 2 point of view, intricate hypotaxis, . . .), bolsters in each case a correspond-
 3 ing capability: emotional control, social awareness, logical reasoning,
 4 hypothesis-generation, conscious self-deception, Zen-like detachment,
 5 even religious faith. Increased agility makes us better at doing what the
 6 text expects of us, which in turn leads to still greater agility not just as
 7 reader but, more generally, as liver of a life. Thus rather than providing
 8 knowledge per se—whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge,
 9 knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation—what such texts
 10 give us is *know-how*; rather than offering us a new set of beliefs, what they
 11 equip us with are *skills*; rather than teaching, what they do is *train*. They are
 12 not informative, that is, but formative. They present themselves as spiri-
 13 tual exercises (whether sacred or profane), spaces for prolonged and active
 14 encounters which serve, over time, to hone our abilities and thus, in the
 15 end, to help us become who we are.

17 The Parables in Mark

19 Take, for example, the parables in Mark, those marvelous miniature fic-
 20 tions embedded within an otherwise nonfictional narration.⁵¹ What are
 21 they doing there? Why does Mark's Jesus choose to speak so frequently in
 22 parabolic form?⁵² These days, of course, many would say that Jesus was
 23 aiming for *intelligibility*. He was talking to a lay audience, not an audience
 24 of trained theologians: they didn't know about the Kingdom of God, but

26 about the nature—let alone, heaven help me, the location—of such mental powers, which
 27 is why I am studiously using the word *capacity* instead of the word *faculty*. I hope my reader
 28 will concede to me, on the basis of empirical observation, that individuals have the capacity
 29 to think logically, to use figurative language, to step back from their representations, and so
 30 on, and that these capacities can be strengthened through exercise.

31 51. Lest there be any misunderstanding, I am not claiming that Mark's Gospel is a work
 32 of fiction. Since it seeks to persuade readers of its historical accuracy, it can only be (1) the
 33 *truth*, (2) a *lie*, or (3) a *mistake*. It contains, however, miniature works of fiction in the form
 34 of the parables. When we read, for example, that there was once a man who sent a series of
 35 servants (and finally his son) to collect his rent with disastrous consequences (Mark 12:1–12),
 we do not assume that Mark's Jesus has in mind an actual individual to whom this actually
 happened. All readers of the Gospels, believers and skeptics alike, are directed to take such
 tales as fictional.

36 52. "He did not speak to them without a parable" (Mark 4:34; cf. Matt. 13:34). Here and
 37 throughout, English translations are from *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version* (1952);
 38 Greek versions are from *The Interlinear New International Version* (1976). I will use "Mark" as
 39 shorthand for "the Gospel of Mark," while taking no position on the identity of its author.
 40 Nor, I wish to point out, am I taking a position on the historical Jesus. The author of Mark—
 41 and, one assumes, the community which preserved and disseminated that Gospel—had a
 particular vision of Jesus's mission. I am writing here about this vision, which may or may
 not be an accurate one. No one, of course, can be certain either way.

they did know about farming. By assimilating the unknown (the Kingdom) to the known (seeds and soils), then, Jesus gently eased them into cognizance of the Kingdom of God.⁵³

As Frank Kermode (1979) points out in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, there are a number of problems with this approach. First of all, the underlying ideas are not always that difficult to understand. Take the famous parable of the sower (Mark 4:3–8),⁵⁴ in which some of the seed falls by the wayside and is eaten by birds, some falls on stony ground and barely germinates, some falls among thorns and is choked, and some falls on fertile ground and yields a rich crop. According to the official explanation of the parable (Mark 4:14–20), the point is that certain people are blocked by their mental constitution from perceiving and accepting the truth.⁵⁵ Are we really supposed to think that first-century Israelites would have had a hard time grasping a claim like that? Not only is it rather straightforward in itself; it is also one that they have heard, so to speak, over and over again from the

53. This was the central claim of Adolf Jülicher (1963 [1888]), who transformed parable interpretation in the late nineteenth century. (For discussion, see Ricoeur 1975: 91.) Compare Amos N. Wilder (1964: 86) (“he said the same things in what we call layman’s language in his parables of the Kingdom . . . he brought theology down into daily life”), B. T. D. Smith (1937: 20) (“by means of simile and similitude the unfamiliar and difficult can be explained in terms of the known”), and—to some extent—John R. Donahue (1988: 11) and *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Brown et al. 1990: 605). Such hermeneûts are following the general line of Martin Luther and John Calvin, who saw Jesus as striving, in Calvin’s words, to “represen[t] the condition of the future life in a way that we can understand” (quoted in Kissinger 1979: 44, 50). John Chrysostom added that the parables “make [Jesus’s] discourse more vivid” (ibid.: 28; compare Joachim Jeremias 1954: 9). And a third set of interpreters, including Ricoeur (1975: 90), Dan Otto Via Jr. (1967: 19), and (again) B. T. D. Smith (1937: 20), take the parables also to carry *persuasive* power as implicit arguments by analogy. All three groups assume that the parables are designed to transmit ideas in a readily accessible manner. As Frank Kermode (1979: 25) puts it, “The opinion is maintained with an expense of learning I can’t begin to emulate, against what seems obvious.”

54. The sower parable is also found at Matt. 13:1–23, Luke 8:4–17, and Thomas 9.

55. To be fair, there is substantial disagreement about the meaning of the sower parable. In addition to the basic interpretation I just gave, which is also that of Donahue (1988: 46), the following have been offered: (1) the Kingdom of God will arrive, in spite of all setbacks (Jeremias [1954: 92]); (2) the Kingdom of God will arrive mysteriously and unexpectedly, unaffected by human action (Albert Schweitzer quoted in Kissinger 1979: 92); (3) we must actively help to bring about the Kingdom of God (John Maldonatus quoted in Kissinger 1979: 57); (4) the Kingdom of God is already here (C. H. Dodd 1937: 148–50, 154–56). (The Jeremias view is echoed by Brown et al. 1990: 655; Grant 1977: 92–93; Hunter 1971: 36; and *The New Interpreter’s Bible* 1995: 309.) In each instance, however, the purported statement is readily comprehensible, requiring (one would think) no elaborate means for its transmission. For those who take the function of parabolic discourse to be transparency, it must be a curious result that the sower has yielded such various and indeed incompatible construals, with reading (2) going against reading (3) and reading (4) going against all the others. (On the maelstrom of competing views, see Bultmann 1963: 200.) As T. W. Manson (1955: 57) so beautifully puts it, “Whole volumes have been written in exposition of compositions whose meaning is supposed [according to contemporary scholars] to be obvious.”

1 Prophets. It seems a little odd to think that such an innocuous assertion
2 should need special clothing in order to become comprehensible.

3 In fact—and this is the second problem—the parable makes such a claim
4 *less* easy to identify, not more. Astonishingly, when the parable concludes,
5 the first thing that happens is that the inner circle of Jesus’s acquaintance,
6 “those who were about him with the twelve” (Mark 4:10) crowd around
7 him begging him to explain the parable.⁵⁶ And the same thing happens
8 on every other occasion: “He did not speak to them without a parable,
9 but privately to his own disciples he explained everything” (Mark 4: 434)⁵⁷
10 Why should Jesus need to offer an elucidation in each case? If the aim of
11 parables is to make things plain, surely the poorest of listeners should be
12 able follow them automatically, a fortiori the disciples. Yet the disciples are
13 obviously just as perplexed as anyone else.⁵⁸ Far from taking a complicated
14 idea and making it clearer, then, Jesus is taking a simple idea and render-
15 ing it unintelligible. In our day, he could have made a great career as a lit-
16 erary theorist.

17 The final and decisive problem with the standard view is that it directly
18 contradicts what Jesus himself says about his practice. “To you,” he says,
19 “has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside
20 everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and
21 may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be
22 forgiven” (Mark 4:11–12). This is a stunning moment, one in which, con-
23 trary to everything we might expect based on the currently dominant form
24

25 56. “And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concern-
26 ing the parables” (Mark 4:10). Here the Revised Standard Version is clearly superior to the
27 King James, which has “And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve
28 asked of him the parable.” Given the Greek—“ἠρώτων αὐτὸν . . . τὰς παραβολὰς”—it should
29 read “they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parables,” plural, which
30 is to say, “they that were about him with the twelve asked him about the parables.” The
31 “twelve” in question are, of course, the apostles (Andrew, Peter, Simon, and company), and
32 “those who were about him” are presumably other disciples: still members of the (apparent)
33 in-group, that is.

34 57. Matthew departs from Mark on this point: in Matthew, Jesus is not presented as explain-
35 ing all of his parables. Still, he does have to explain the sower (Matt. 15:15–16) and also the
36 Weeds of the Field (Matt. 13:36). On the unintelligibility of parables even in Matthew, see
37 Cadoux 1931: 18; Jones 1964: 64; Via 1965: 430–31.

38 58. The parables are to some extent an invention of Jesus, but they do have a precursor in
39 the prophetic *mashal*, and the *mashal* was notoriously obscure: as Ezek. 17:2 indicates, *mashal*
40 was quasi-synonymous with *hidah*, “riddle.” When the people criticize Ezekiel for speak-
41 ing in parables at Ezek. 20:49, they are complaining about his opacity. (On the frequent
42 abstruseness of Old Testament and rabbinic parables, see Cranfield 1963: 160; Daube 1956:
43 142; Kermode 1979: 29; Oesterley 1936: 4–5; for a different approach, see Sternberg 1985:
44 48–57, 428–30.) It is not impossible, then, that the question “why do you speak in parables?”
45 means, among other things, “why do you speak so cryptically?” The standard understanding
46 of the parables as designed for ease of comprehension turns this on its head.

of Christianity, Mark's Jesus insists that some people are just not meant to be saved. If he spoke clearly, he implies, they might understand; if they understood, they might repent; if they repented, they would be forgiven; if they were forgiven, they would be saved; *and that would be a terrible thing*. The point of the parables is precisely to *prevent* easy interpretation, so as to keep outsiders safely at the door.⁵⁹

If Jesus speaks in parables, then, it is not in order to reach the widest audience. On the contrary, it is in order to *divide* the audience, fracturing it into a segment that catches on and a segment that does not. The parables are there to keep the unworthy in the dark, "lest they repent"—lest they make a cheap conversion, that is, for the wrong reasons and therefore (presumably) without the conviction necessary to sustain it. The parables readily sacrifice quantity for the sake of quality: rather than attracting a world full of superficial adherents, Jesus is after a narrow clique of the deeply committed, and the parables are the test which allows him, in the words of another parable, to keep hold of the big fish and throw away the minnows.⁶⁰

That, mind you, is only one of the effects Jesus wants from his parables. Still in the context of the sower, Jesus adds that "to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away" (Mark 4:25). The parables, it may be inferred, do not just take away the little that outsiders have—namely, their minimal desire to listen to parabolic discourse—by frustrating their desire for easy access. They also bring the insiders even closer, giving them more of what they already have. Now this thing that they "have," which both permits access to and

59. In Mark this reticence is part of a broader strategy. It is not just that Jesus (1) deliberately uses the parable form in order not to be understood by the masses. He also (2) refuses to explain them except to the disciples; (3) disdains to perform miracles for those who do not already believe in him; and (4) insists on keeping his true identity a secret. (On Mark's "messianic secret," see Wrede 1971.) In all cases, Jesus has the option of being clear—giving the priests a direct answer, letting the disciples spread his fame, performing miracles before unbelievers, using more transparent language—but deliberately chooses to make it difficult for people to understand, and hence to be converted, and hence to be saved.

60. Mark's vision resembles that of Thomas, who places his version of the sower right after the "Dragnet": "And He said, 'The Kingdom is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea full of small fish. Among them the wise fisherman found a fine large fish. He threw all the small fish back into the sea and chose the large fish without difficulty. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.' Jesus said, 'Now the sower went out, took a handful (of seeds), and scattered them . . .'" (Koester and Lambdin 1978). As Elaine Pagels (1979: 140, 147) has demonstrated, one part of the early church chose to be maximally inclusive—maximally "catholic"—with the result that it became enormously successful; the "Gnostic" sects, by contrast, kept the bar high and, unsurprisingly perhaps, died out. To be sure, these sects depart drastically from Mark in positing a new *principle* of selection, having to do with initiates' secret knowledge of a hidden God (*ibid.*: 14–15, 22, 36–37, 40), but they share nonetheless the ethos of exclusion. (For the influence of Mark on the second-century Gnostic theologian Valentinus, see *ibid.*: 14; for parables as test, cf. Manson 1955: 76.)

1 further strengthened by the parables, cannot be knowledge,⁶¹ since the dis-
 2 ciples have more knowledge than anyone about the Kingdom and about
 3 the right way to live and yet remain, as we have seen, completely mysti-
 4 fied. The parables must therefore require, and sustain, something differ-
 5 ent. But what?

6 We have to wait a few chapters before we receive the answer. In chap-
 7 ter 7 Jesus travels north to the area around Tyre and Sidon, briefly leaving
 8 behind him the fellow Jews on whom, at this point, he is still focusing all
 9 his efforts.⁶² When a local woman asks him to heal her daughter, he refuses,
 10 explaining that the Jews must take priority: “Let the children first be fed,”
 11 he tells her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to
 12 the dogs” (Mark 7:27). Quick as a flash, however, the woman replies, “Yes,
 13 Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mark
 14 7:28). And Jesus is instantly persuaded. “For this saying you may go your
 15 way,” he says; “the demon has left your daughter” (Mark 7:29). Why the
 16 change of heart? What has shifted between the start of the conversation,
 17 when Jesus considered it wrong to heal the girl, and the end of the con-
 18 versation, when he considers it right? Is it that the Syrophoenician woman
 19 has proved that she believes in him? Surely not: she already did so before
 20 the conversation started. The only difference is that she has *said* some-
 21 thing. “*For this saying you may go your way*”: the Syrophoenician woman’s
 22 achievement clearly takes the form of a particular use of language. To be
 23 worthy, it turns out, is nothing other than *to be able to speak in metaphors*.

24 Now metaphoric competence, and hence insidership, admit of three
 25 levels. On the first, there is merely the dim intuition that metaphorical
 26 discourse has something appealing about it. The disciples do at least have
 27 this: when Jesus calls Andrew and Simon, they respond immediately just
 28 because he says he will turn them into “fishers of men” (Mark 1:16–18). No
 29 other reason is given; they are, we may speculate, simply gripped by the
 30 metaphor.

31 The second level adds a capacity to translate figurative language into lit-
 32 eral language. (Surprisingly perhaps, the disciples do not seem to possess
 33 such a skill. When Jesus at one point tells them to “beware of the leaven of
 34 the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod” [Mark 8:15–16], they think he
 35 is complaining that they didn’t bring any bread. Is it blasphemous to think
 36 of the Gospels as containing occasional moments of comedy?)
 37

38 61. This is also an objection to those who, like Via (1965: 432), read the “more” that will be
 39 given as referring to a literal explanation (the seed is the word, the thorns are temptations,
 40 and so on).

40 62. This changes abruptly in the final chapter of Mark (16:15), when, having returned from
 41 the dead, Jesus charges his eleven faithful apostles to spread the word to the world at large.

The third level, finally, involves the capacity to translate in the other direction, from literal to figurative; or better yet, to operate exclusively on the figurative plane. This is the level of the Syrophenician woman, whose facility with figurative speech—her ability not just to interpret nonce coinages on the fly but even to respond in kind—catapults her into the realm of the truly worthy.

We finally have an explanation, I think, for the rather enigmatic statement about those who have and those who have not. Those who “have not,” which is to say those who have a tin ear for metaphor, are liable to be driven away by parables; one imagines swathes of impatient listeners irritatedly deserting the camp, thus removing themselves still further from any chance of salvation. At the same time, those who “have”—namely, those who are already intrigued by, or indeed comfortable with, figurative discourse—are rewarded with ever greater mastery, as their efforts to decode the parables (perhaps in multiple ways) lead to their adoption of figurative terms in place of literal ones and eventually, who knows, to the creation of their own original imagery. It is because there are degrees of insidership, from the bluff eagerness of the disciples to the keen agility of the Syrophenician woman, that receiving more of what one already has is not just an empty paradox.⁶³ And it is because they solicit and challenge our interpretive abilities that the parables afford us movement up the ladder of expertise. Far from being designed to communicate information more effectively, they serve, instead, to make us better at handling and producing figurative language.⁶⁴ They are what allows the transformation

63. It is important to bear in mind that the book of Mark portrays the disciples as *lacking the status of full insiders*. (On this point, cf. Drury 1973: 371; *New Interpreter's Bible* 1995: 569; Ricoeur 1982: 354; S. H. Smith 1991: 366.) To be sure, they are better off than those who simply “have not” (that is, those who have no interest in and/or talent for figurative language whatsoever); they are not, however, at the level of those who “have” (like the Syrophenician woman). This may seem like a strange result, and some might worry that it leaves Jesus with no true believers at all, something he can surely not have wanted. (Meir Sternberg has raised this objection to me.) The inference, however, does not follow: in Mark, being a physical insider (like the rather obtuse apostles) is not the same as being a spiritual insider (like the highly astute Syrophenician woman). Given the otherwise undistinguished nature of the Syrophenician woman, there is no reason not to think that others like her—*true* insiders—were among those who first heard the parables. And even if there had been none, nothing would have prevented early readers of Mark from taking *themselves* (and their successors) to be the intended audience of Jesus's pronouncements. Compare here Nehamas's (1998: 89) theory that Plato is implicitly presenting himself as the only person to have understood Socrates; on Nehamas's view, this counts as an interpretive triumph for the former, not as a communicative failure for the latter.

64. Cf. Ricoeur (1982: 355), who writes that the aim of the parables is to “engendrer chez [le lecteur] la capacité de poursuivre le mouvement de métaphorisation au-delà de la lecture” (instill in [the reader] a capacity to continue the movement of metaphorization beyond the time of reading) (my translation).

1 from enthusiasm to proficiency, from proficiency to creativity. They are
2 what turns a novice into a true son of God.

3 It might seem deeply counterintuitive that Jesus would place so much
4 weight on what is, after all, merely a communicative option. Why should
5 being a true son of God have anything to do with the sophisticated use
6 of figurative language? What does this rather literary capacity have to do
7 with faith? The answer is that parabolic discourse is not *just* a communi-
8 cative option. Rather, it incarnates a state of mind, one in which the world
9 around us becomes nothing more than a storehouse of imagery. It implies
10 that nothing we see is inherently significant, the entire visible realm merely
11 standing as a symbol for a higher plane of experience. Seeds are important
12 only as metaphors for preaching, bread as metaphor for belief. To move
13 away from literal language to figurative language is, therefore, to move
14 away from the body and to the spirit. It is to see the world from God's point
15 of view.

16 That, after all, is how Jesus himself so frequently uses language, rebuk-
17 ing Andrew and Simon (as we saw above) for being actual anglers when
18 they could be fishers of men; responding, when asked where his family
19 is, that his brothers and sisters are those around him;⁶⁵ telling the rich to
20 lay up treasures in heaven rather than treasures on earth. Jesus habitually
21 rejects the literal meaning in order to press for a figurative sense, just as he
22 habitually rejects immanence in order to press for transcendence. Spiritual
23 aptitude is inexorably tied to a particular way of seeing the world, which in
24 turn is inexorably tied to a particular way of speaking. Salvation depends
25 on our ability to think parabolically, to dwell in metaphors, since to dwell
26 in metaphors is to consider the entire sensory realm as a shadowing forth
27 of a higher plane of experience.⁶⁶

28 In Mark, then, the parables do not seek to teach; they seek to train.
29 Their reward is not increased knowledge but increased skill. Their aim is
30

31 65. "And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your
32 brothers are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?'
33 And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my
34 brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother'" (Mark
3:32-35).

35 66. Cf. Manson (1955: 81), who writes that the parable's "object is . . . to turn the affec-
36 tions from things that change and pass to things that have the quality of eternity," and also
37 to some extent Ernst Fuchs (1964: 155). Ricoeur (1975: 34, 84, 104) too sees the parable form
38 as redescribing human reality from the standpoint of the Kingdom idea; for him, however,
39 what does the work is not the metaphor itself but the striking twist at the end of each par-
40 able, the "extravagance," as he puts it, that shows that Jesus's Kingdom "is not of this world"
41 (Ricoeur 1982: 359). As for Donahue (1988: 2) and McFague (1975: 61), both briefly gesture in
this direction, but both come down in the end on the side of parable as expression of Jesus's
individual perspective.

not the straightforwardly didactic ambition of communicating a complex message in simple language; it is instead the formative desire to bring a restricted audience to a new way of hearing and speaking, and thus a new way of looking at the world.

Other Cases

Not all fictions offer themselves as training grounds for mental capacities. The parables, however, are by no means alone in doing so. To take a particularly perspicuous example, Plato's writings often raise a question very similar to that posed by the parables in Mark: if the aim is to transmit ideas, why choose such an ineffective method of delivery?⁶⁷ I am not just referring to the fact that they take the form of dialogues; it is, after all, quite possible to write dialogues with a relatively plain didactic intent. I am referring, instead, to the fact that some of them feature a protagonist who produces a mixture of excellent arguments and transparent fallacies, fallacies deliberately placed in his mouth by the author.

In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates reminds his interlocutor that the

67. I am operating on the assumption that Plato's dialogues are best thought of as works of (philosophical) fiction. Fourth-century Athenians did not, of course, employ the term *fiction*. It is, however, sufficient for my purposes to establish that they were used to engaging with, and indeed enjoying, written or spoken dialogues that were universally recognized as being imaginary. And we know that they were, since fifth-century comedies (still in circulation during the fourth century) routinely revolved around far-fetched, and nonmythical, plots: no one could possibly assume that contemporary audiences took the *Lysistrata*, for example, to be a representation of something that had happened in their own homes. Even tragedies—like Agathon's *Antheus*, an example given by Aristotle (2001: 1451b22–24)—were sometimes invented in their entirety. Thus Aristotle can hardly have been alone in understanding that there were truth tellers (such as historians), there were liars, and then there were poets. (For the contrast between poets and historians, see *ibid.*: 1451b1–6.) Whether the (implicit) understanding of fictionality dawned in the fifth century, as Margalit Finkelberg (1998: 26–27) claims, or in the fourth, as Andrew Ford (2002: 230–31) has it, we may reasonably speculate that Plato's dialogues postdated it.

Admittedly, Plato's dialogues feature numerous protagonists with real-life counterparts. Still, the “Socrates” we find there frequently espouses opinions that the historical Socrates is generally taken not to have held. (Whatever the historical Socrates believed, he cannot have thought both that genuine knowledge is possible and that it is impossible; at least one of the two Socrates types we see in Plato thus departs dramatically from his flesh-and-blood model.) What is more, the dialogues contain anachronisms that would have been immediately obvious to contemporary readers. (If Pericles has just died [*Plato 1987*: 503c], why is Archelaus already doing so well [470d]?) It seems to me, therefore, that Plato's audience may already have suspected, and may have been invited to suspect, that (some of) what they were reading was not an attempt to report Socrates accurately or even an attempt to put forward a false view of Socrates but was instead something else, something to be evaluated on other terms—just as Socrates, in the *Phaedrus* (Plato 1995: 264c), suggests evaluating fabricated speeches on the basis of their construction, not just on their effectiveness and certainly not on their correspondence to speeches that were actually made.

1 famous Pericles nearly met with death by execution, and infers from this
 2 that he cannot have been a good politician (or even a good citizen, for
 3 that matter [*ἀγαθός* . . . *πολίτης*, Plato 1987: 515d]). After all, he says, good
 4 politicians make their constituents just, and just individuals do not seek
 5 to harm those who have improved them. If the Athenians nearly voted to
 6 execute Pericles, this is cast-iron proof of his poor citizenship. Socrates's
 7 argument is already deeply problematic, being both historically inaccurate
 8 (the Athenians did not come as close to inflicting the death penalty on Peri-
 9 cles as Socrates suggests [Irwin 1979: 237])⁶⁸ and tendentious (even if we
 10 grant Socrates the assumption that the task of good politicians is to make
 11 their subjects better people, why should we think they are to be blamed
 12 if their attempts fail?). Matters become still worse, however, when Socra-
 13 tes goes on to claim that he, Socrates, is the one true politician in Athens.
 14 What happens if we hold him to the same standard he has set for Pericles?
 15 It is not pretty. Had Socrates been a good citizen, then the Athenians—"it
 16 necessarily follows" (Plato 1987: 515d)—would have become better under
 17 his care; had the Athenians become better, then they would not have con-
 18 demned him to death; but they *did* condemn him to death in a court case
 19 spearheaded by a man who, within the world of Plato's dialogues, had
 20 been exposed to Socrates's claims and methods.⁶⁹ So Socrates, by his own
 21 logic, cannot have been a good citizen. An absurd result, revealing (as will
 22 any *reductio* worth its salt) the patent presence of a dubious premise.

23 As with Mark, so here we should speak not of a failure to communicate
 24 but of an ambition to train. The end goal for Plato is not the mere acqui-
 25 sition of superior understanding; it is a well-lived *life*, where living well is
 26 taken (among other things, but importantly) to involve being in harmony
 27 with oneself. For such an end, accurate opinions are necessary but not suf-
 28 ficient: what one crucially needs is a *method*, a procedure for ridding oneself
 29 of those opinions that are false. Now learning a method is a very different
 30 business from learning a set of ideas. It requires not just study but *practice*,
 31 and practice is precisely what Plato's dialogues, thanks to the layer of irony
 32 between author and protagonist, make possible. The dialogues can help us
 33 only if we take up an active stance toward them, picking holes in the logic,
 34 even mending them for ourselves. For Plato to be successful, then, his char-
 35 acter Socrates has at times to come to grief; a level of authorial irony is
 36 indispensable to the overall goal.⁷⁰

37
 38 68. Neither did Pericles build ships and walls in order to please the people, as Socrates says
 39 (*Plato 1987*: 521a); on the contrary, the people had to be *forced* to accept these measures (*Thu-*
 40 *cydides 2003*: 1.90.3; *Herodotus 7.144.1–2*). Socrates's story, Irwin (1979: 235) concludes, "is
 41 a perversion of the historical conditions."

69. Anytus, the most powerful of Socrates's three accusers, is a character in the *Meno*.

70. What I am saying here is somewhat controversial, and my brief presentation will no

Although considerations of space prevent me from exploring other cases in any detail, let me quickly mention a few more to give at least an idea of my theory's scope. One could, to start with, speak of Romantic irony in Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry,⁷¹ in Federico Fellini's *8½*, and elsewhere, a device designed (I believe) to fine-tune our capacity for maintaining necessary illusions in the face of an awareness of their falsehood.⁷² One could

doubt raise all kinds of worries. First of all, is the Pericles fallacy really a fallacy? Is there not a more charitable way of construing Socrates's remarks? Second, even if we are dealing with a fallacy here, could it not be an isolated occurrence? Third, if there are indeed several argumentative errors in the dialogues, would Plato have recognized them as fallacies? Fourth, could Plato in such instances not just be making *mistakes*, perhaps under the influence of the historical Socrates? Fifth, if the mistakes are deliberate, why think that they actually serve the purpose I claim for them? And finally, how does my ironic reading differ from a Straussian reading (that is, the type of reading practiced by Leo Strauss and his followers, looking for hidden messages in the dialogues)? To address all of these questions would require not just a richer analysis of the *Gorgias* (to answer the first question) but also discussions of other dialogues (to answer the second); evidence from the *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, and *Protagoras* (to answer the third); a discussion (for the fourth) of the "developmental hypothesis," according to which Plato's views changed substantially over the course of his career; and a reconstruction of the "manual for use" (for the fifth). Since I do not have room for all that here, I refer the interested reader to Landy 2007, where I also list the major scholars who affirm the existence of Platonic irony (such as John Cooper and Charles Griswold) and those who deny it (such as R. E. Allen, Terence Irwin, Nehamas, and Gregory Vlastos).

71. Again, it might be asked why I am placing Mallarmé, a lyric poet, alongside writers of fiction. After all, lyric poems do not need to present imaginary situations. (Consider, for example, Rainer Maria Rilke's "Herbst," August Stramm's "Schwermut," or William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "This Is Just to Say.") Some lyric poems, however, *do* present imaginary situations, and many of Mallarmé's verses fall into that category. Indeed, Mallarmé (1998: 392) himself uses the term *fiction* in relation to *Un coup de dés*: "La fiction affleurerait et dissiperait," he claims, "autour des arrêts fragmentaires d'une phrase capitale" (the fiction will surface and dissipate . . . around fragmentary breaks in a primary sentence) (my translation). That said, I would have no objection to readers wishing to extend the theory presented in this essay to lyric poems more generally. The key distinction I wish to draw here is not between fiction and nonfiction but between literary and nonliterary, since the training I am talking about takes place thanks to formal devices such as Romantic irony, extended metaphor, or multilayered hypotaxis, and since such devices are more often found (and more often foregrounded) in literary works—whether narrative, lyric, or dramatic.

72. By "Romantic irony" (also known as self-reflexivity or self-consciousness, and with close cousins in metalepsis, parabasis, metafiction, and the "breaking of the fourth wall") I mean the intermittent establishment and undermining of a referential illusion, the periodic reminder that what we are reading, watching, or looking at is an author-made representation. Thus James Joyce (1990: 769), after giving very believable life to Molly Bloom, has her beseech him in the middle of her monologue, "O Jamesy let me up out of this"; Proust (1993a: 225) constructs an extraordinarily elaborate fictional world, only to let a narratorial voice announce that "everything has been invented by me in accordance with the requirements of my demonstration" (translation modified); Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* begins, "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*" (1982: 3); and so on. Some theorists (Furst 1988: 308; Gumbrecht 2000: 209–10; Muecke 1967: 189) take moments like these to be the expression of a generalized self-doubt; some (Bell 1999: 16; Russell 1980: 183) read them as explorations of how a given medium operates; some (Schlegel 1958: 628; 1967: 131) consider them efforts in the

1 also speak of antithesis in Samuel Beckett as offering practice in detach-
 2 ment from our (semi)beliefs, very much on the model of the ancient skept-
 3 tics.⁷³ One could speak of the shifting point of view in Gustave Flaubert's
 4 *Madame Bovary*, somewhat analogously, as providing training in the juxta-
 5 position, and thereby mutual cancellation, of our emotive investments.⁷⁴
 6 Or one could speak of the various *Verfremdungseffekte* in Bertolt Brecht's
 7 *Lehrstücke* as strengthening (ideally) the participants' ability to take a dis-
 8 tance from what they see around them, "so that nothing should appear
 9 immutable."⁷⁵

10
 11 direction of self-liberation; and some (Eysteinnsson 1990: 113–15; Quendler 2001: 160; Waugh
 12 1984: 2, 18–19) view them as an attempt to help the reader see through the veils of illusion.
 13 However things may stand in other cases, when it comes to Mallarmé, Proust, and Fellini—
 14 three creators who strongly believed in necessary illusions—the point is not to help us see
 15 through our fantasies but, quite the contrary, to help us *sustain* them while at the same time
 16 retaining the dignity-preserving awareness that they are not real. What Romantic irony does
 17 in such cases is to give a workout to the conscious self-deception muscle, ratcheting up the
 18 difficulty of maintaining the make-believe and thus training us for real-world situations in
 19 which certain types of credence are both elusive and vital. For further discussion, see Landy
 20 2009: 125–29.

21 73. Again, I realize that this is very compressed. I am referring here to the frequent tendency,
 22 especially in Beckett's trilogy of novels and in *Texts for Nothing*, for the narrative voice
 23 to issue a statement followed by a retraction ("affirmations and negations invalidated as
 24 uttered," as the narrator of *The Unnamable* [Beckett 1994: 291] puts it). One example: "It has
 25 not yet been our good fortune to establish with any degree of accuracy . . . what exactly it
 26 is I seek, find, lose, find again, throw away, seek again, find again, throw away again, no,
 27 I never threw anything away, never threw anything away of all the things I found, never
 28 found anything that I didn't lose, never lost anything that I mightn't as well have thrown
 29 away, if it's I who seek, find, lose, find again, lose again, seek in vain, seek no more" (ibid.:
 30 388–89). Although most critics assume that Beckett is simply trying to *inform* us of some-
 31 thing—that free will is an illusion, for instance, or that the self is in language, or that René
 32 Descartes is wrong, or that there is no ground for epistemological certainty—it seems to me
 33 that such informing is beside the point. For Beckett as for the ancient skeptics, the real goal
 34 is not knowledge but peace of mind; the real problem is not a false belief but an addiction
 35 to unsolvable philosophical questions; and the real solution is not a course of instruction but
 36 a *practice* involving the production of opposite hypotheses on any given issue. "Owing to the
 37 equipollence [*ισοθλήθειαν*] of the objects and reasons thus opposed," writes Sextus Empiricus
 38 (1933: 1.4.7), "we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense [*ἐποχήν*] and next to
 39 a state of 'unperturbedness' or quietude [*ἀταραξίαν*]." Mutual cancellation, suspension of
 40 judgment, peace of mind; in Beckettian terms, "find again, lose again, seek in vain, seek
 41 no more." For claims of Beckett sending a message, seeking to convince, telling us some-
 42 thing, etc., see Bataille 1986: 131; Blanchot 1986: 147–48; Calder 2001: 1; Cousineau 1999:
 43 120; Fletcher 1970: 176; Hamilton and Hamilton 1976: 11; Hayman 1970: 156; Kenner 1974:
 44 10. For Beckett's use of the term *ataraxy*, see *Molloy* (Beckett 1994: 42); *Watt* (Beckett 1953:
 45 207–8). And for further discussion, see Landy 2010b: 226–28.

46 74. See Landy 2010b: 228–29. Needless to say, one could juxtapose emotive investments
 47 to all kinds of other ends; in my article I explain why it makes sense to think of Flaubert as
 48 having the goal of detachment in view.

49 75. At the beginning of *Die Ausnahme und die Regel*—one of Brecht's (1969: 94) *Lehrstücke*—
 50 the chorus says, speaking of the play to come, "Findet es befremdend, wenn auch nicht

Then again, certain fictions set in relatively closed communities in which appearances are at a premium (Jane Austen, Henry James, Madame de Lafayette, Virginia Woolf) could be seen as granting us the opportunity to become better at handling social information, whether by keeping track of sources or by reconstructing nested beliefs (A thinks that B thinks that C is in love with her).⁷⁶ Franz Kafka's stories, with their obvious demand for allegorical interpretation, their teasing offer of clues, and their refusal to let any interpretive strategy fully pay off, arguably prepare us for a human condition in which an attribution of significance is both impossible and required.⁷⁷ And Proust's convoluted sentences stretch the mind's capacity for keeping multiple hypotheses in play while imposing provisional order on a rich set of material (see Landy 2004: 141–45).

In many ways, the texts I have just listed are very different from one another. They belong to a variety of periods, a variety of national traditions, and a variety of modes and genres (parable, philosophical dialogue, lyric, drama, novel, film). What they have in common is the ambition to train rather than to teach, as well as the desire to do so by means of form rather than content. (This is one of the reasons why only literary texts, and not just any type of writing, will do.) Plato's dialogues would not function as training grounds for reasoning were it not for the deliberate holes punched into the arguments; Beckett's novels would not function as training grounds for tranquil detachment were it not for the relentless juxtaposition of claim and counterclaim; Mallarmé's sonnets would not function as training grounds for lucid self-delusion were it not for the periodic gestures puncturing the mimetic illusion; the words of Jesus in Mark would not function as training grounds for faith were it not for their heavy use

fremd . . . damit nichts unveränderlich gelte" (Find it alienating, albeit not alien . . . so that nothing should appear immutable) (my translation).

76. This is Lisa Zunshine's (2006: esp. 27–36 but also 159–62) theory. Zunshine is under no illusion: unlike Nussbaum, she recognizes that increased social skills need not lead to greater altruism; great manipulators require the ability to "read minds" just as much as great benefactors do. There is, accordingly, no reason to see fiction as making us more moral. In fact, Zunshine (*ibid.*: 35, 125) is not even sure fiction makes us slicker social operators; to that extent (and also to the extent that I see her view as applying only to certain character-heavy, closed-world fictions rather than to fiction tout court) I am reading her a little against the grain.

77. The ideal response may in the end be a Sartrean one: select an interpretation and commit to it, in full awareness of its partiality. It is worth noting that the opportunity for training is, here as elsewhere, only an offer and not a requirement; large numbers of critics have in fact read Kafka in the light of a single allegorical interpretation that they have taken to be exhaustive. In the case of *The Trial*, for example, many have ignored all evidence that Josef K. is partly responsible for his situation, preferring to lay the blame squarely at the feet of the Court (and to read the latter, typically, as a tyrannical state apparatus). For Josef K.'s guilt, see Marson 1975.

1 of ostentatiously figurative language. For each capacity there is a specific
 2 formal device that corresponds to it and a finite set of texts that serve as
 3 uniquely propitious training grounds.⁷⁸

6 **The Temporality of the Reading Experience**

7 In formative fictions, then, the crucial transaction has more to do with
 8 form than it does with content. And it also has more to do with *process*.
 9 Message-based theories promise benefits that are the work of a moment
 10 (no wonder they have become so popular in our impatient age); the training
 11 of skills, however, always takes time. Formative fictions do their work
 12 gradually, sometimes indeed in imperceptible increments, and over a
 13 multitude of phases.⁷⁹ In the first, we simply begin reading or listening;
 14 we follow the story; we reconstruct the scene; we decide whether we are
 15 engaged enough to continue. So far, so ordinary. When it comes to formative
 16 fictions, however, there is always a moment at which the stakes
 17 become apparent, a moment at which we realize that we are not just being
 18 told a story, a moment at which a crucial offer is put in front of us.⁸⁰ With
 19 Plato, for example, we read along for quite a while thinking that we are
 20 simply being told how things are; it is only some way into the *Gorgias* (or
 21

22 78. For a formative fiction to count as propitious, it must, as we saw above, combine the
 23 conspicuous deployment of a specific formal device with an inbuilt “manual” that encourages
 24 a particular way of using it. (After all, any formal device can be put to multiple ends:
 25 see Sternberg [1982: 112] on the Proteus Principle.) It is likely, as a result, that in each case
 26 only a small number of texts will be propitious. At the same time, there is likely to be more
 27 than one contender. For example, Plato’s *Symposium* (1989) would arguably work just as well,
 28 mutatis mutandis, as his *Gorgias* (or his *Protagoras*, for that matter).

29 79. As Ricoeur (1975: 49–52) points out, one of the main problems with structuralism is that
 30 it tends to overlook the temporal dimension of literary works. Ricoeur’s own practice remedies
 31 this deficiency.

32 80. As I mentioned above, I take to heart Nehamas’s warning that we do artworks an injustice
 33 by treating them as mere means to our pre-established ends. I might, however, qualify
 34 this position slightly. While it is true that some artworks have effects on us that no one can
 35 predict, there are cases in which we are free to form substantial prior expectations with no
 36 loss of reverence for the object. When something is labeled a tragedy, for example, we can
 37 reasonably expect to be moved (the same incidentally is true of Hollywood “weepies,” like
 38 *Love Story*); or again, when something is clearly designed, as it were, for export to other cultures
 39 (*Raise the Red Lantern*, say), we can reasonably expect to learn something about what
 40 it feels like, or at least what the author thinks it feels like, to belong to a particular national
 41 or ethnic or religious group at a given place and time. Formative fictions, finally, constitute
 an intermediate case. Before we begin reading, we do not know what we want from them
 or what they want from us (this distinguishes formative fictions from weepies and cultural
 immersion pieces). At a certain point, however, we must understand what the offer is and
 choose, or decline, to take the work up on it (this distinguishes formative fictions from those
 full-blown Nehamasian catalyst works with their utterly unpredictable effects).

perhaps while we are in the *Symposium*, or the *Parmenides*, or the *Protagoras*, or the *Phaedrus*—as with the parables, more than one story may be required) that we notice just how poorly the protagonist is making his case, that we put this together with our picture of who Plato must have been to write these dialogues,⁸¹ and that we see what we stand to gain, at the cost of what effort. Each work, in other words, contains within itself a *manual for reading*, a set of implicit instructions on how it may best be used.⁸²

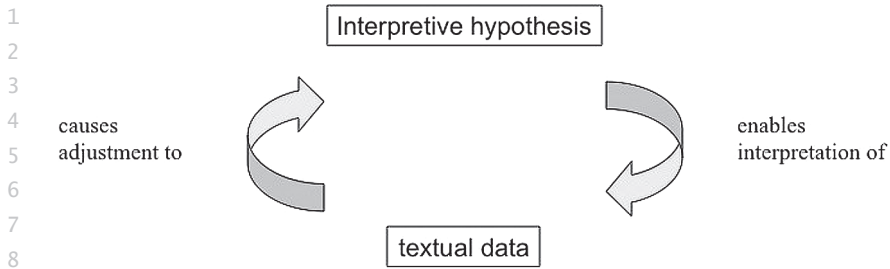
Assuming that we accept the offer set before us by the manual, we are still only at the start of the second phase. Skills are burnished through repeated exercise in a benevolent spiral: the more we are capable of, the more demanding our challenges can be, and the more demanding the challenges, the greater the impact on our abilities. Likewise, formative fictions invite us not to one but to several tests, tests of varying degrees of difficulty, our readiness to meet them steadily increasing as we go. Another way of putting this is to say that the second, potentially quite extended phase of reading places us within a special variant of the “hermeneutic circle” (fig. 1).⁸³ We cannot understand a text as a whole without understanding its various parts, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1977: 113) pointed out, but neither can we understand the parts without understanding the text as a whole. (What is the significance of the escaped criminal in chapter one of *Great Expectations*? Scene-setting, character development, vital plot point? We will not be able to say for sure until we have finished the novel.) The result of this double bind is that we are forced, simply in order to understand each new element we encounter, to form a tentative hypothesis about the totality of the work. In turn, however, new elements cause us to revise our hypothesis, which in turn leads us to interpret new elements differently, which elements in turn generate new hypotheses, and so on, and so on.

In the formative circle, by contrast, what is both required for and burnished by the reading experience is not understanding but technique (fig. 2). We begin not with “pre-understanding”—that tentative hypothesis about

81. I allude here to Nehamas’s (1981) “Postulated Author” article, the definitive theory of intention and interpretation.

82. Thus Matei Călinescu (1993: 116–17): “Each book, we might say, comes with its own user’s manual.” “A text,” agrees Tzvetan Todorov (1980: 77), “always contains within itself directions for its own consumption”; see also Eco (1979: 8) and Peter Brooks (1992: xii). As Iser (1980: 166) notes, the manual—what he calls the set of “codes” governing reader-text interaction—is scattered throughout the text and must be reassembled before we can understand what to do with it.

83. The term is Wilhelm Dilthey’s, the idea Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher’s (though Bjørn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal [2005] find it already in Benedict de Spinoza). Heidegger picked up the idea in *Being and Time*, as did Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. I am grateful to Stanley Corngold for helping me to see its relevance for the formative approach.



9 **Figure 1** The hermeneutic circle
10
11

12 global interpretation—but with what one might call a “pre-capacity.”⁸⁴ We
13 must, that is, already be a little bit good at doing the thing in question: a
14 little bit good at following trains of logic, a little bit good at handling figu-
15 rative discourse, a little bit good at standing back from our attitudes, a little
16 bit good at juxtaposing claim with counterclaim. It is this minimal apti-
17 tude that allows us to meet the text’s first challenge—allows us indeed to
18 recognize it as a challenge—and thus to begin fine-tuning our capacity.⁸⁵ It is
19 the fine-tuning in turn that allows us to do better with the next challenge,
20 and so on through indefinite turns of the circle. To him who has will more
21 be given, but only bit by bit.

22 Let me mention right away one important corollary. To experience the
23 full benefit from Beckett’s trilogy, we said, a reader must already begin
24 with something to bring to the table, not just a shared set of concerns
25 but also a certain degree of competence in the relevant domain. Now this
26 means that the trilogy, like all formative fictions, is elitist. It is not elitist in
27 any shallow sense; it does not discriminate on the basis of externals such
28 as race, class, or gender;⁸⁶ but as we saw with the parables, it does distin-
29 guish between insiders and outsiders, and even as it rewards the former,
30 it doggedly keeps the latter at the door. (Cultural egalitarians may take
31 some comfort in the fact that each of us is excluded from *some* formative
32 fictions, and none of us is excluded from all of them; there is, so to speak, a
33

34 84. In line with Rudolf Bultmann’s (1960: 294 *Vorverständnis*, what I am proposing is perhaps
35 a *Vorvermögen*.

36 85. All verbal performances, of course, require *some* pre-capacities for their adequate pro-
37 cessing. Not all of them, however, are rich in innovative metaphors, deliberately contradic-
38 tory claims, authorial irony, and so on; for a vast number of everyday utterances, then, there
39 is no need for specialized interpretive techniques. My point here is simply that formative
40 fictions require pre-capacities, not that other texts do not. The difference between formative
41 and nonformative texts consists more in what *happens* to these pre-capacities.

86. Notice that even the ability to *read* is, in some cases, not a requirement: the parables,
after all, were originally delivered in oral form.

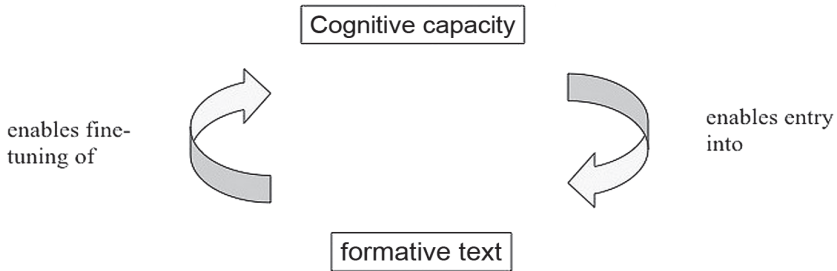


Figure 2 The formative circle

formative fiction for everyone.) Studiously meritocratic, formative fictions always exclude those who lack the relevant pre-capacity, those who cannot or will not decipher the manual for reading (always present, it is nonetheless deliberately discreet), and those who, having done so, are not willing to make the effort it calls for. Unlike certain theories of fiction, then, which consider its effects to be automatic, inevitable, “inescapable,”⁸⁷ the approach shared by Beckett, Mark, Mallarmé, and Plato recognizes that some readers have what it takes to be benefited and others not; that there is always a choice to be made; that a text issues offers, not injunctions; and that it is less an obligation than a gift, one we are always free to leave unopened.⁸⁸ Formative fictions never force themselves upon us.⁸⁹ Without our active participation, they will not do their work.⁹⁰

87. Two theorists who consider the effects of fiction to be automatic are Nussbaum and Booth. Writing about Dickens’s *Hard Times*, for example, Nussbaum (1999: 278) states that “it is impossible to care about the characters and their fate in the way the text invites without having some very definite political and moral interests awakened in oneself.” Nussbaum (1995: 10) feels in fact that *all* novels do moral work without any help from us: “The genre itself, on account of some general features of its structure, constructs empathy and compassion in ways highly relevant to citizenship.” Booth (1998: 378–79), similarly, holds that “all of our aesthetic judgments are *inescapably* tied to ethics”; when we read, he says, we are “*inescapably* caught up in ethical activity” (ibid.: 374; my emphasis).

88. For the literary text as gift, see Sartre 1988: 60, 67; as we have seen, however, Sartre also considers it a mirror in which the reader should look and be ashamed. The kind of gift you receive from your unfavorite uncle.

89. This, incidentally, is another reason to keep the term *performative* at bay in the present context. Performative utterances do not require very much work on the hearer’s part in order to “go through”: when someone says “I promise to walk your dog,” for example, all we really need to do is listen. (“To have promised,” says J. L. Austin [1975: 22], “I must normally (a) have been heard by someone . . . (b) have been understood by him as promising.” Not too tricky for the promisee.) Formative fictions, by contrast, only function if the reader actively manipulates them, whether, for example, by playing with their metaphors, mending their arguments, or unearthing their secret structures.

90. Again compare Barthes, for whom “the goal of literary work . . . is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes 1975b: 4; cf. Barthes 1988: 162).

1 Nor, finally, does that active participation cease once we have closed
 2 the book. Formative fictions are texts that tend to be reread, texts indeed
 3 that reward rereading. (If fictions were nothing more than fancy delivery
 4 mechanisms for “messages,” there would be little need to read them so
 5 much as once, and absolutely no reason to read them twice; one advan-
 6 tage of the formative theory is that it provides a rationale for rereading
 7 beyond that of re-experiencing, or better understanding, pleasures deliv-
 8 ered in the first encounter.)⁹¹ In some cases, too, the conversations we have
 9 with others about the text in question—reasoned argument with fellow
 10 Platonists, exchange of metaphors with fellow Christians, and so on—may
 11 provide further opportunities for fine-tuning our skills.⁹² And then, at last,
 12 there are the delayed-release effects that slowly stretch out, like long ten-
 13 drils, into the future of our lives, as parabolic mysteries return to gnaw at
 14 us, Mallarmé’s sonnets replay themselves in our minds, or we cook up,
 15 while driving to work, a new riposte to Socrates.⁹³ The immediate impact
 16 of formative fictions is always subtle; their overall impact, if we take them
 17 up on their offer, is as diffuse as it is profound. Formative fictions begin
 18 from the assumption that there are, in life, no quick fixes.

19 In Spite of Everything, a Role for Meaning

20
 21
 22 In what I have said thus far, I have found it necessary to draw a sharp line
 23 between message-hunting, which has become the dominant approach in
 24 the wider cultural world, and the more active way in which we need to
 25 approach formative fictions if we are to be benefited by them. The dis-
 26 tinction is vital to formative fictions, which often include—as part of their
 27 “manual for use”—a warning that skills, unlike information, cannot be
 28

29 This emphasis on the reader’s responsibility, and on the possibility of failure, distinguishes
 30 my position not only from those of Nussbaum et al. but also from that of Fish, who considers
 31 us to be almost entirely constrained by the “interpretive community” we happen to belong
 32 to. A sentence, he says, is “an action made upon a reader” (Fish 1980 [1970]: 23); “what hap-
 33 pens to one informed reader of a work will happen, within a range of nonessential variation,
 34 to another” (ibid.: 52); in the end, “the brakes are on everywhere” (Fish 1989: 83). As Gerald
 35 Graff (1981: 37) rather colorfully puts it, Fish’s reader is “a kind of moron.”

36 91. I am departing very slightly here from Walton (1978: 25–27), who defends subsequent
 37 readings of a work as offering experiences similar to the first. On rereading generally, see
 38 Călinescu 1993; Maar 1997.

39 92. Michael Saler (2005: 63) has referred to this as the “public sphere of the imagination.”
 40 For additional thoughts on the value of reading communities, see Nehamas 2007: 81–82;
 41 Stow 2006: 417–20.

42 93. Meir Sternberg has rightly pointed out that I am offering no evidence for this claim. I
 43 am basing it on my personal experience and on the reports of other readers. Still, we may be
 44 the exceptions, and I will be happy to retract if proven wrong.

transmitted directly.⁹⁴ Still, it may be worth stating that I am not taking up a position against *any* search for knowledge or *every* ascription of meaning.⁹⁵ Let us by all means worry over what a work of philosophy or a physics paper or a constitutional document is saying. And let us by all means strive to keep ourselves informed; knowledge, as Thomas Jefferson (1900: 102) so rightly said, is essential to the functioning of a healthy democracy.⁹⁶ My point is simply that if truths are what one is after, fictions are the wrong place to start. Citizens who have been trained to seek messages in fiction, and conditioned to trust what they “learn” there, will pick up a lot of misleading, conflicting, and unsubstantiated theories, while in the meantime they are prevented from gaining access to what is actually on offer.

By way of a second qualification, I should note that some fictions fall under the category of literary-philosophical *hybrids*, combining strictly literary elements with a set of claims that are actually argued for, as opposed to just being baldly stated by a narrator or character or implied as the supposed inference from an imaginary sequence of events. Many of Plato’s dialogues, in fact, interleave instructive and formative elements in just this way: while some of the arguments are deliberately slipshod, with a view to prompting a rescue mission on our part, others are presented entirely seriously, with a view to us feeling their force. In such cases, what we should note is that teaching and training cannot *coincide*, cannot take place within

94. In the *Symposium*, for example, Socrates reminds Agathon that wisdom does not flow from one mind to another via osmosis: “How wonderful it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise. If only wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn” (Plato 1989: 175d–e). Information may be shared directly; wisdom, however, can only be acquired through training, since it is a form of craft knowledge, consisting not in packets of data but in habits of mind.

95. My view thus differs from that of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004: esp. 51–90), who opposes meaning-mongering not just in the context of fiction but in that of life at large. Like Sontag (2001: 7), Gumbrecht invites us to focus on the surface of things—to experience their “presence”—rather than seeking to look beneath them for hidden meanings. While I sympathize tremendously with Gumbrecht’s diagnosis of the problem in literary studies, I cannot quite share either his proposed solution or his broader vision. When it comes to literature, first of all, the meaning/presence dichotomy seems a little stark: as I have attempted to show in this essay, there are other important options, including clarification, formal modeling, and training. When it comes to the natural world, second, it is not clear that explanations automatically remove enchantment, given the fact that scientific understanding, as Douglas Hofstadter (1980: 434) reminds us, “doesn’t ‘explain away’; rather, it adds mystery.” And in the human realm, finally, a refusal to look behind behavior to reasons and significance (couldn’t my friend have had a good excuse for showing up late? what will the real consequences be of that new law with the positive-sounding name?) might, in the end, prove both personally and politically detrimental.

96. “Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government” (Jefferson to Richard Price, January 8, 1789).

1 the same sequence of words. When Socrates says Pericles was a bad citi-
 2 zen, for example, we do not learn that Pericles was (or that the historical
 3 Socrates believed he was) a bad citizen; nor by taking authorial irony into
 4 account do we learn the opposite, that Pericles was a *good* citizen; we cer-
 5 tainly do not learn that being a good citizen in general comes down to
 6 improving the moral standing of those around us. We learn, strictly speak-
 7 ing, nothing. We have other things to do besides learning.

8 My final and most important qualification is that attention to the seman-
 9 tic dimension—the text’s “aboutness,” even if not its “meaning”—is always
 10 important. In cases, first of all, where the inbuilt instruction manual takes
 11 the form of assertions, our understanding of the assertions in question is
 12 obviously vital to the experience.⁹⁷ With Plato, what is more, there is an
 13 additional reason to pay close attention to the semantic dimension: we
 14 stand to hone our skills of argumentation only if we make the effort to fill
 15 the holes and mend the faulty arguments, but we will only do that, most
 16 likely, if we find the issues worthwhile.⁹⁸ There must, in other words, be a
 17 careful titration of irony, a studious balance between the closed and the
 18 open; formative fictions should leave *some* work for the reader to do, but
 19 not *all* of the work, and they should offer rewards for progress made along
 20 the way (cf. Iser 1978: 275; 1980: 108). In the face of aleatory writings (*Zang*
 21 *Tumb Tuuum*, say), we are more likely to savor the sentences at a safe dis-
 22 tance than to attempt to make them cohere; formative fictions, by contrast,
 23 make it clear that something important is at stake, that some of the pieces
 24 have already been put in place, and that some progress is possible, even
 25 if that progress should only take the form of charting the contours of the
 26 mystery. Amid oceans of ambiguity, their continents of clarity always stand
 27 firm.

28 With Beckett, similarly, the questions being asked must be properly
 29 seductive, must have the proper feel of philosophical glue traps, in order
 30 for the ancient-skeptical therapy to have a chance of taking place. With
 31 Mallarmé, where the training consists in the parallel processing of mul-
 32 tiple referential dimensions, a base level of mimesis (here is a room, here
 33 are some tables, here is a window) becomes more or less a necessity.⁹⁹ And
 34

35 97. We have already seen one example of an assertion forming part of a manual for use:
 36 “To him who has will more be given” (Mark 4:25). Only a *portion* of the instruction manual,
 37 however, takes the form of assertions such as this. I am grateful to Meir Sternberg for press-
 38 ing me on this point.

38 98. The same is true, of course, for works which aim at clarification: here too a genuine
 39 interest in the issues at stake is a prerequisite for their full effect.

40 99. Another reason to concern oneself with the semantic dimension in Mallarmé is that the
 41 poetry systematically refines away the real, turning it into pure form. Unlike abstract art,
 which could be said to give us a foretaste of utopia, Mallarmé’s poetry represents the route

with Mark, where the prize is a refinement of our ability to move from literal to figurative and back again, there has to be a literal level to start from, even if, as in most cases, that literal level is of minor interest. (The “meaning” of the sower parable, for example, is that some people are not cut out to understand; hardly a revolutionary idea.) Here one almost wants to say, with Eliot (1975: 93), that the lure of “meaning” is a kind of ruse perpetrated on the reader, a way “to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog.”¹⁰⁰

Whether for the sake of rectification (Plato), cancellation (Beckett), oscillation (Mallarmé), or allegorization (Mark), attention to the semantic dimension is thus always a requirement. It is, however, never the *point* here. Far from being the aim of the entire exercise, ascertainment of a formative text’s aboutness is only ever instrumental, only ever a stepping-stone on the way to a further telos. And that means that it is possible to achieve entirely plausible readings of Marcan parables and Platonic dialogues *while failing to use them correctly*; it is possible even to spend great lengths of time with them while seeing right past the benefits they uniquely stand to offer; it is possible, in other words, to get it wrong by getting it right.

The Value of Formative Fictions

What I have laid out here is a proposal for a theory of fiction; it is worth repeating, however, that it is not a proposal for a *universal* theory of fiction.¹⁰¹ Just like the approaches I listed at the start of this essay—cognitive clarification, emotional clarification, formal modeling, and the like—it applies

one has to travel in order to arrive there. For certain purposes, therefore, it is of greater assistance.

100. One might compare here a beautiful paragraph in Proust (1988: 258 and 1993b: 365–66) in which the narrator notes that nature has a way of bringing about physical and spiritual fecundity, thanks to a series of benevolent deceptions. When bees think they are merely drinking nectar, he points out, they are also spreading pollen; when we think we are achieving our goal of sensual pleasure, we are also perpetuating the species; and when we visit a place we have not seen before in order to understand the captivating person who lives there, our real gain is exposure to a new landscape. Pollination, reproduction, and the expansion of the imagination are, for Proust’s narrator, vastly more important than nectar, sex, and understanding. *Without the latter, however, the former would never happen.*

101. Still less is this an *evolutionary* theory of all fiction. For various reasons, well documented by Jonathan Kramnick (2011), it makes no sense to speak of an aptitude for fiction being an *adaptation*, a trait that could be “selected for.” (If something is not in the DNA, it cannot count as an adaptation.) It is also by no means clear that fiction has been around for very long in evolutionary terms. Did early humans really exchange knowingly made-up tales around the “Pleistocene campfire,” as Denis Dutton (2004: 457) likes to imagine? Impossible to say for sure, of course, but the least one can say is that the idea is massively speculative.

1 only to *some* stories and plays and films, and even those stories and plays
 2 and films vary among themselves in fine-tuning different capacities via dif-
 3 ferent formal devices. I take this restriction to be a strength, rather than
 4 a weakness, of the view. For one thing, it gives it a better chance of actu-
 5 ally being right. (May not the best literary theories, in the end, be the ones
 6 of medium scope, embracing a plurality but not the totality of texts?) For
 7 another, it lends a certain deserved distinction to the films and plays and
 8 stories in question.¹⁰² Not every work of fiction is a parable of the sower, a
 9 *Gorgias*, or a *Molloy*.

10 Still, the formative theory applies to a fair number of texts. And where
 11 it does apply, it is, I venture to suggest, the most satisfactory account: for
 12 the parables in Mark, say, there is no other explanation that makes ade-
 13 quate sense of their various features, that fully captures how they work and
 14 what they are for, that makes them wholly available to us. They *can* be read
 15 differently, and indeed most often *are* read differently, but such (mis)read-
 16 ing comes at a tremendous cost. The formative theory thus offers a reason
 17 for certain texts being the way they are, an explanation for why writers
 18 with philosophical (or religious) fish to fry have sometimes chosen to place
 19 them in literary frying pans. It also offers a reason—beyond mere plea-
 20 sure and outside of moral improvement—for our continued attachment
 21 to those texts, for the fact that we find it so worthwhile to spend consider-
 22 able amounts of time in their company. (As we saw above, the formative
 23 approach accounts for rereading; not all theories do.) In a way, then, what
 24 I am offering here is a defense of the literary, partial perhaps but no less
 25 spirited for that. If all we needed were “messages,” the delivery mecha-
 26 nisms would be dispensable; my brilliant but impatient student would
 27 be absolutely right. If what we need is training, however, then process is
 28 essential, and if a certain kind of process is essential, then form is essential.
 29 For certain purposes, the right formative fiction is exactly what we need.

30 Early in this essay, we saw that fictions offer a variety of benefits to their
 31 eager consumers. Training is only one such benefit, and it takes place in
 32 only a relative handful of texts. (Works that clarify are more prevalent than
 33 works that train; and works that do nothing very much, whether through
 34 lack of ambition or lack of skill, are more prevalent than either.) Still,
 35 that rare gift may well be of the greatest value. Aristotle is surely right
 36 that living well is a matter of acting well, and that acting well requires
 37 much more than having the correct beliefs, even—I would add—the cor-
 38 rect beliefs about ourselves.¹⁰³ What we need is “virtue of character” (Aris-
 39

102. Contrast, again, many evolutionary approaches which, more or less by necessity, are committed to the position that all fictions serve an identical set of purposes.

103. Aristotle: “It is our decisions . . . , not our beliefs, that make the characters we have”

totle 1985: 1103a15–16), and virtue of character comes from habit, not from teaching. (Indeed, teaching will only be possible in the first place if the ground has been prepared by habits.)¹⁰⁴ In other words, meeting the demands of life requires *above all* a range of semiautomatic responses which we have cultivated by means of repetition. Even if they are relatively rare, then, and even if their readers do not always take advantage of them, formative fictions may nonetheless be the most important fictions there are.

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(*Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle 1985: 1112a3–4); “those who make the best decisions do not seem to be the same as those with the best beliefs; on the contrary, some seem to have better beliefs, but to make the wrong choice” (ibid.: 1103a15–16).

104. Aristotle: “Virtue of character results from habit” (ibid.: 1103a15–16); “arguments and teaching surely do not influence everyone, but the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits . . . , like ground that is to nourish seed” (ibid.: 1179b24–26); “we need to have been brought up in fine habits if we are to be adequate students of what is fine and just” (ibid.: 1095b4–6).

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