

## A Family Meal as Fiction

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*Abstract:* Stacie Friend’s theory of fiction departs from those approaches that seek to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for a work to count as fiction. She argues that this goal cannot really be achieved; instead, she appeals to the notion of genre to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction. This notion is significantly more flexible, since it invites us to identify standard—but not necessary—and counter-standard features of works of fiction in light of our classificatory practices. More specifically, Friend argues that the genre of fiction has the genre of nonfiction—and only that genre—as its contrast class. I will refer to the particular way in which Friend elaborates this claim as *the contrast view*. I have, nevertheless, the impression that this view unnecessarily narrows down the array of perspectives and attitudes from which we can approach works of fiction. I will thus develop a line of reasoning to the effect that the contrast view should rather be construed as picking out a particular way of relating to works of fiction that lies at the end of a continuum defined by different degrees of reflectivity and estrangement. This implies that the contrast view is false as a general claim about how we experience works of fiction, even though this view may appropriately depict a specific way of approaching such works.

*Keywords:* Fiction; genre; parenthetical; ritual; theatricality.

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A theory of fiction must ultimately account for the role of fiction in our practices and institutions. We can certainly delimit a domain for which a specific theory of fiction could be developed, provided that such a delimitation enhances our understanding of the phenomenon of fiction in this particular domain. I take it that the theory of fiction that Stacie Friend proposes has this localized or partial character, since it focuses exclusively on works of fiction, leaving aside any other manifestation of the phenomenon of fiction. The line of argument in this paper might ultimately be construed as an attempt to show that the way she delimits works of fiction fails to meet the explanatory constraint I just mentioned, namely: that it should enhance our understanding of the role of fiction in this particular domain. But the specific purpose of this paper is rather more modest and will focus on a particular claim in Friend's theory of fiction.

Friend's approach departs from those theories of fiction that seek to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for a work to count as fiction. She argues that this goal cannot really be achieved; instead, she appeals to the notion of genre to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction. This notion is significantly more flexible, since it invites us to identify standard—but not necessary—and counter-standard features of works of fiction in light of our classificatory practices. More specifically, Friend argues that the genre of fiction has the genre of nonfiction—and only that genre—as its contrast class. I will refer to the particular way in which Friend elaborates this claim as *the contrast view*. I have, nevertheless, the impression that this view unnecessarily narrows down the array of perspectives and attitudes from which we can approach works of fiction. I will thus develop a line of reasoning to the effect that the contrast view should rather be construed as picking out a particular way of relating to works of fiction that lies at end of a continuum defined by different degrees of reflectivity and estrangement. This implies that the contrast view is false as a general claim about how we experience works of fiction, even though this view may appropriately depict a specific way of approaching such works.

This paper is structured as follows. In section 1, I will briefly present Friend's approach to fiction as a genre as well as the contrast view as she defends it. In section 2, I will examine a passage from Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, in which Ulrich, the protagonist, compares his

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Excellency's sense of theatricality with that of a play staged in a theater to entertain the middle class; while the former seems integrated into His Excellency's life, the latter responds to a rather divided and schizoid life that manifests itself in many other practices such as the way in which the middle class participate in religious services or how bourgeois males conceive of their sexual activities. We may thus say that middle class members experience fiction as parenthetical with regard to their daily lives. Needless to say, this *parentheticality*<sup>1</sup> squares quite nicely with the contrast view, even though it leaves out other sorts of attitudes toward fiction that may be present not only in His Excellency's sophisticated conversation but in many other rituals and practices, such as a family meal or a conversation between friends. In sections 3 and 4, I will further elaborate this proposal by addressing two objections that could be raised against the idea that His Excellency's conversation—and some other practices and rituals—may actually challenge the contrast view. In section 3, I will thus examine the most obvious objection, namely, that this conversation may be a case where theatricality or fictionality is involved, but it could hardly count as a work of fiction. Hence, insofar as Friend's account is exclusively concerned with works of fiction, Ulrich's remarks fail to provide a straightforward case against the contrast view. I will reply, however, that our reluctance to identify His Excellency's conversation and many other practices and rituals as works of fiction presupposes in turn the contrast view and, more specifically, the idea that parentheticality as an all-or-nothing matter is a crucial feature that works of fiction standardly possess and non-fiction standardly lack. Hence, no independent argument seems to have been provided to deny that His Excellency's conversation or a family meal could count as a work of fiction. In any event, it seems that only parentheticality as an all-or-nothing matter stands in the way of regarding some rituals and practices as works of fiction. In section 4, I will argue however that parentheticality comes in degrees and that, once conceived of in this way, it can easily be recognized as a rather common phenomenon. Thus, I will conclude that the contrast view is false insofar as (a) it presupposes that parentheticality is an all-or-

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<sup>1</sup> 'Parentheticality' is a neologism that I have finally decided to employ in this paper for the sake of simplicity. It refers to the ability to experience a certain activity as parenthetical or encapsulated with regard to one's ordinary life.

nothing matter, and (b) His Excellency's conversation does not constitute an exceptional case but a manifestation of an attitude that is present in many of our practices and rituals that, once we acknowledge the gradual nature of parentheticality, can easily be recognized as works of fiction. Hence, I will conclude that, if we are to understand how we experience and evaluate of works of fiction and theatricality, we better accept that the contrast view is false and also that the experience of fiction as the contrast class of nonfiction constitutes a rather specific—however, dominant in our cultural context—way of relating to works of fiction that lies at the extreme of a continuum with various degrees of reflectivity and estrangement.

### 1. Fiction as a genre

According to Stacie Friend, a theory of fiction must address the two following questions: “First, what are the criteria of membership in each category? And second, what are the effects of classification on our engagement with particular works?” (Friend 2012, 180) She sees these questions as closely interlocked because a suitable criterion must not only fit with our pre-theoretical intuitions about fiction and nonfiction but meet an explanatory constraint, namely: it must account for the effects of classification on our engagement with a certain work.

Standard theories of fiction assume that an answer to the first question must provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for a particular work to qualify as fiction or as nonfiction. The most promising among such theories view fiction as a prescription to imagine and nonfiction as an invitation to believe. These theories must handle in one way or another the fact, however, that some works of nonfiction do include an invitation to imagine and works of fiction frequently comprise statements that the reader is assumed to believe. For this purpose, some theories of fiction have shifted from works to statements and have focused on the necessary and sufficient conditions for both fictive and nonfictive statements. Works of fiction would, as a result, come up as a patchwork of fictive and nonfictive statements (Currie 1990, 49).

Friend objects, though, that this kind of approach can hardly address the second question, that is, shed some light on how a certain combination of fictive and nonfictive statements may invite a specific, unified attitude toward a certain work, instead of a continuous shift from imagining to believing, and vice versa. This is the patchwork problem in Friend's terms (Stock 2011; Friend 2011). She then leaves aside this project and explores an alternative approach. In particular, Friend proposes treating fiction as a genre, and nonfiction as its contrast class:

Classification as fiction or nonfiction, like classification in other genres or categories of art, influences the way we experience, understand and evaluate a work by specifying a contrast class against which the work's properties stand out as being *standard*, *counter-standard* or *variable*. (Friend 2012, 188)

A work will thus count as fiction inasmuch as it possesses some standard features that are identified as such within certain categorization practices.<sup>2</sup> A standard feature is not a necessary condition, since counter-standard features often serve some narrative purpose that may eventually enhance the aesthetic value of a work, as happens with Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* or Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. More specifically, Friend identifies the actual genre of a certain work in terms of a cluster of non-essential criteria that include not only some standard features as they are identified within contemporary practices of categorization but the author's intentions as well:

As with other genres and categories of art, classification turns on a cluster of non-essential criteria: the possession of standard features (including those identified by fictive utterance theorists), the intention of the author that the work be read in a particular category, and the conventions associated with contemporary categorization practices. (Friend 2012, 195)

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<sup>2</sup> "In attempting to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction, we should consider, not how the parts of a work add up to the whole, but instead how the whole work is embedded in a larger context: in particular, the practices of reading, writing, publishing, and so on. I therefore construe fiction and nonfiction as different *genres* into which works may be categorized" (Friend 2011, 175).

As we see, the intention of the author Friend is concerned with does not consist in an invitation or prescription to either imagine or believe, as some standard theories might assume, but has to do with the idea of producing “a work in a certain category. The fact that Tacitus intends readers to engage in mere-make-believe is not in conflict with his intention to write nonfiction history, and it is the latter, not the former, that matters for classification” (Friend 2008, 165).<sup>3</sup>

What are, though, the standard features of fiction and nonfiction? Despite Friend’s impulse to depart from standard theories of fiction, much of what she says when distinguishing between fiction and nonfiction relies on dichotomies that are central to those theories, such as the contrast between asserting and inventing, between believing and imagining, or between names that refer and names that fail to do so:

If we take a text to be fiction, for example, we will expect it to engage us imaginatively through narrative; to deploy certain literary devices; to include invented elements, such as descriptions of what has never happened and names that fail to refer; to make

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<sup>3</sup> This appeal to the author’s classificatory intentions may conflict with the role ascribed to contemporary categorization practices as the context where the standard features of fiction are to be determined, for the intention to produce a work in a certain category could only be relative to the categorization practices of the time, which may in turn differ from the contemporary ones so that a significant number of features that were standard at the time are not so at present, and vice versa. It follows that a work might eventually qualify as fiction in light of the categorization practices of the time when it was produced and as nonfiction according to contemporary categorization practices.

Some might reply, however, that there must be some continuity among such categorization practices for them to be identified as being concerned with fiction as opposed to some other category. This emphasis on continuity across variations in our categorization practices fits quite nicely with Friend’s approach and, more specifically, with her claim that counter-standard features may eventually play a relevant narrative function. It is still unclear whether this continuity across time will suffice to ground the claim I intend to challenge, namely: that fiction and nonfiction are each other’s contrast class. Even though this claim were true of our contemporary categorization practices, it may be rather alien to those practices at the time the work in question was produced.

claims that are not assertions by the author; and so on. If we take a work to be a nonfiction, on the other hand, we will expect an effort to be faithful to the facts; references to real people, places and events; assertions that convey the author's views; and so forth. (Friend 2012, 189)

As it goes, it seems that the main disparity between standard theories and Friend's approach does not lie so much in the sort of features relevant to the process of categorization, but in the fact that Friend does not view those features as necessary—and all together sufficient—conditions but as forming a cluster of non-essential standard features, so that a certain work may include some counter-standard features of fiction and still count as such. Friend is committed to contextualism insofar as she assumes that categorization of a work as fiction or as nonfiction depends on some categorizing practices that may vary over time. Some features that are regarded as counter-standard at some point may become standard at some later stage, and vice versa. Still, the fact that fiction and nonfiction are each other's contrast class is not presented as contextual; on the contrary, the contrast view is a philosophical claim about the genre of fiction and as such it is supposed to hold across all contexts.

Be it as it may, Friend does not present the distinction between fiction and nonfiction as either exhaustive or exclusive (Friend 2012, 205). Regarding exclusiveness, she argues that some works can reasonably be approached both as fiction and as nonfiction, although, of course, they will be experienced, understood and evaluated differently in each case. It seems, however, that exclusiveness should apply to paradigmatic cases of either class, since, if we were to allow for each work to be alternatively approached as fiction and as nonfiction, it is unclear whether we could coherently specify what approaching a certain work in one way or the other may consist of. We can, indeed, mention the reader's specific attitude in each case, but the question is how the content of this attitude is to be individuated if we cannot point out some paradigmatic cases that are presented as exclusively fiction or nonfiction.<sup>4</sup> In any event, Friend also rejects exhaustiveness because neither

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<sup>4</sup> A similar perplexity will be raised when considering in section 3 whether Friend can provide a non-viciously circular criterion to reject some rituals as works of fiction.

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fiction nor nonfiction is individuated by a sheer denial of the standard features of their respective contrast class; therefore, some specific works may fail to sufficiently meet the standard features in both categories. It is clear, however, that the contrast view can only survive if such cases do not spread, that is, if they are rather exceptional, for, otherwise, there is no clear sense in which fiction and nonfiction could still count as each other's contrast class.

So far so good regarding the virtues of fiction as a genre to provide a demarcation criterion that tracks our pre-theoretical intuitions regarding the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Friend stresses, however, that any suitable demarcation criterion must also meet a certain explanatory demand, namely, that it must make sense of how classifying a work as fiction or as nonfiction influences our experience, understanding and evaluation of a given work.

Friend is convinced that standard theories of fiction fail not only because they are unable to specify a demarcation criterion that tracks our pre-theoretical intuitions about the contrast between fiction and nonfiction, but also because the most promising standard theories fail to provide the required explanation, since, according to Friend, they incur the patchwork problem and, therefore, there is no way in which they could make sense of a unified attitude toward a work of fiction. Apparently, Friend's account in terms of genre does not face this problem, since fiction is no longer identified as a suitable combination of fictive and nonfictive statements but by a cluster of non-essential features in the context of our contemporary categorization practices. It is in light of this cluster that the appropriate attitude on the side of the reader toward a certain work is determined. The assumption is that contemporary categorization practices deliver a unified attitude toward a work of fiction that contrasts with the attitude toward a work of nonfiction. And this is why Friend concludes that a view of fiction as a genre provides a demarcation criterion that satisfies the explanatory demand she placed for any successful theory of fiction.

Friend emphasizes that a proper demarcation criterion must account for how the classification of a work as a work of fiction *influences* our attitude toward it, but her understanding of fiction as a genre obliges her to recognize that the way we experience, understand and evaluate a work must in



turn contribute, in an exercise of reflective equilibrium (Goodman 1983, 62-63; Rawls 1999, 19, 42; 2001, 29-32; Ryle 2008, Ch. 2), to determining how it is to be classified. Hence, I take it that Friend should recognize that her demarcation criterion must meet an explanatory demand that goes both ways, that is, how classification conditions our attitude toward a certain work but also how our attitude contributes to the way it is classified. This explanatory constraint forces us to examine the different ways in which we relate to works of fiction. Specifically, in the following section, I will suggest that the presence of theatricality in aristocratic manners challenges a central aspect of Friend's theory, namely: her eagerness to understand works of fiction as opposed exclusively to nonfiction, as if there were not many other—and genuinely significant—ways in which we may relate to works of fiction. In sections 3 and 4, I will elaborate my suggestion by addressing two objections that could be raised against the idea that the theatricality of some practices and rituals might actually challenge the contrast view.

## 2. Aristocratic manners

Ulrich, the protagonist of *The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil, spots a theatrical instinct in the aristocratic manners of his Excellency. He compares such theatrical instinct with the middle-class custom of going to the theater, as an art that can be rented at a modest price:

Ulrich had time for such reflections because he had to wait awhile for His Excellency to speak. The theatrical instinct for disguise and transformation, one of life's pleasure, could here be seen in all its purity, without the least taint or awareness of a performance; so strongly did it manifest itself here in this unconscious, perennial art of self-representation that by comparison the middle-class custom of building theaters and staging plays as an art that can be rented by the hour struck him as something quite unnatural, decadent, and schizoid. (Musil 1995, 85)

As we see, Ulrich places within the domain of theatricality both the behavior of his Excellency and a performance on the stage. He associates theatricality with a taste for disguise and transformation. He is surprised,

however, by the fact that his Excellency manifests no awareness of a performance, while staging a play in a theater requires two sorts of awareness on the side of both actors and spectators: one focused on the content of the play itself and another oriented toward their real lives. Friend's approach to the genre of fiction seems to regard this split between two forms of awareness as an important standard feature of works of fiction. After all, she opposes inventing to asserting, imagining to believing, what one actress pretends to be to what she really is offstage. By contrast, Ulrich does not regard this schizoid form of awareness as constitutive of theatricality; he interprets his conversation with his Excellency as theatrical despite the absence of such a split or dissociation:

And when His Excellency finally parted his lips and said to him: 'Your dear father...' only to come to a halt, there was something in his voice that made one notice his remarkably beautiful yellowish hands and something like an aura of finely tuned morality surrounding the whole figure, which charmed Ulrich into forgetting himself, as intellectuals are apt to do. For His Excellency now asked him what he did, and when Ulrich said 'Mathematics' responded with 'Indeed, how interesting, at which school?' When Ulrich assured him that he had nothing to do with schools, His Excellency said, 'Indeed, how interesting, I see, research, university.' This seemed to Ulrich so natural and precise, just the way one imagines a fine piece of conversation, that he inadvertently took to behaving as though he were at home here and followed his thoughts instead of the protocol demanded by the situation. (Musil 1995, 85)

In the kind of theatricality that inspires this conversation, Ulrich feels unified with the protocol; he follows its constraints as if he were following his own trend of thought; he is not complying with some external demands. The idea of the unity of our conscience emerges again as essential to a kind of theatricality that Ulrich vindicates as superior. This unity opposes to the divided experience that prevails in the ordinary life of the middle-class, as it manifests itself not only when they go to the theater, but also in the way members of this class participate in a religious service or in how middle-class men experience their sexual activities:

‘How much more beautiful she is when she goes wild,’ Ulrich thought, ‘but how mechanically it all finished again.’ The sight of her had excited him and enticed him to make love to her, but now that it was done he felt again how little it had to do with him personally. Another abundantly clear demonstration of how a healthy man can be turned with incredible speed into a frothing lunatic. But this erotic transformation of the consciousness seemed only a special instance of something much more general: for an evening at the theater, a concert, a church service, all such manifestations of the inner life today are similar, quickly dissolving islands of a second state of consciousness that is sometimes interpolated into the ordinary use. (Musil 1995, 119)

If Ulrich were right in his description of middle-class awareness as schizoid or split and in his view of the art of his Excellency as theatrical despite the absence of a divided consciousness, we should then acknowledge that Friend’s characterization of the genre of fiction suits only the kind of theatricality that is typical of the middle class. For in such cases fiction has nonfiction as its contrast class, since fiction as experienced by the middle class presupposes a divided kind of awareness, namely, a sense of *parentheticality* or encapsulation from their daily affairs and concerns. But this is not at all what happens when his Excellency cultivates his outstanding theatrical instinct: there is not a real life external to his theatrical experience, no private life waiting for his Excellency once his conversation with Ulrich is over. His Excellency’s identity is not divided between his public and his private life; the manners that inspire his conversation with Ulrich constitute the fabric of his entire life, the terms in which he will assess its failure or success.<sup>5</sup> All this suggests that the contrast view may misrepresent the genre

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Remains of the Day* (Ishiguro 1989), we hear the narrative of an English butler who takes very seriously the demands of his profession; still he has a private room where he relaxes at the end of the day and any interference is regarded as intrusive; moreover, the title of the novel points to those days that remain once retired as an opportunity to reconsider the value of his life as a butler and to initiate a new life of his own. By contrast, the protagonist in *An Artist in a Floating World* (Ishiguro 1986), a Japanese artist confesses his state of despondency after the defeat in the World War II, but the way he examines his life leaves no room for a sphere

of fiction because it inadvertently focuses on some specific social practices leaving aside other ways in which works of fiction may be experienced, understood and evaluated. There are various reasons, however, why the presence of theatricality in his Excellency's conversation may be discarded as irrelevant to the contrast view. In section 3, I will address the most obvious complaint: the contrast view is exclusively concerned with works of fiction and His Excellency's conversation could hardly be identified as such. I will conclude that only the assumption of parentheticality as an all-or-nothing matter stands in the way of acknowledging that certain practices and rituals can be approached as works of fiction. Hence, in section 4, I will defend the claim that, contrary to what the contrast view assumes, parentheticality is a matter of degree and, as a result, I will conclude that those cases where fiction has nonfiction as its contrast class constitute a rather specific attitude toward works of fiction and theatricality that lies at the extreme of a continuum with various degrees of reflectivity and estrangement.

### 3. Theatricality and works of fiction

To begin with, Friend might certainly object to an unduly transition from theatricality to works of fiction in my previous remarks. Ulrich's considerations dwell on the idea of theatricality but there may be a long way from theatricality to fiction or, more specifically, we may allow for forms of theatricality that are alien to works of fiction. And nothing in Ulrich's observations makes us think that his Excellency's delight in theatricality involved the notion of a work of fiction. After all, we may admit that theatricality is overwhelmingly present in our social rituals but this does not make of them works of fiction.

Let us examine carefully, however, what a theater play consists of, for it may not be so easy to deny that some rituals are theatre plays; in fact, we may ultimately be forced to recognize that those rituals are after all

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of privacy, alien to the strict rules and values that govern his social environment. The sort of unity that articulate his life is also present in *Il Gattopardo* (Visconti 1963), where the Prince has no existence external to his aristocratic condition.

works of fiction. To begin with, we could say that theatre plays admit—and often require—actresses and actors to improvise. The script sets out some guidelines but the actress has to breathe life into them, fill in the gaps, improvise to a larger or lesser degree. We could thus say that Ulrich's conversation with His Excellency adjusts to the idea of a script on which one improvises more or less skillfully. And this applies to all activities in which His Excellency may participate without distinguishing between a public and a private domain.

Friend could retort—as she did in conversation—that the works of fiction she had in mind only concerns written texts, scripts, regardless of their specific implementation in one or another performance.<sup>6</sup> At first glance, this restriction seems somewhat arbitrary. Why should a work of fiction be only a text? Isn't a film a work of fiction? Should we consider that only the script is? After all, a theatre play, even if it is not staged, is a text whose point depends on its being staged by some actresses and actors. We can disregard any particular staging but we must still rely on the idea that it has to be staged.

Some could reply, however, that the existence of a written text is at least a necessary condition for the existence of a work of fiction while Ulrich's conversation with His Excellency is not inspired by any particular text. It is clear, however, that the words and props that compose a theatrical play or a work of fiction could respond to guidelines that are transmitted orally. This is the case with the stories that my grandmother told me, which only in some cases—and accidentally—had been put in writing. So, it does not seem essential that the words that a work is composed of are put in writing for it to exist.

Moreover, just as some rituals are more structured than others, there are also theater plays that are more freestyle than others. There are, indeed, some theater plays that are performed on a stage, but many others tend to blur the idea of a stage by mixing actors and audience. In this case, the story is always in a process of elaboration and the particular words used in

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<sup>6</sup> “My focus is on fiction as a representational work, contrasted with the category of non-fiction” (Friend forthcoming, Ch. 1). “The concept of fiction is familiar... As these examples suggest, the categories of fiction and nonfiction apply first and foremost to works [as opposed to parts of works]” (Friend forthcoming, Ch. 1).

each performance will depend on how each particular audience responds. The linguistic fabric thus created is as ephemeral as a conversation might be. Of course, nothing prevents that fabric from being put in writing, but the same goes for the guidelines and directives of His Excellency's conversations, which could easily be reflected in a protocol book. All this corroborates the accidental character of the connection between writing and theater or, in general, between writing and works of fiction.

Friend could object that the absence of a text is a counter-standard feature—i.e., a feature that deviates from the standard of a previously written text—that some plays may use as an aesthetic resource. In reply to this, I should firstly say that it is far from clear that such a feature is genuinely counter-standard at the moment, but, even if it were, it would again be a totally accidental circumstance. We could easily imagine a context where they were standard and, therefore, it would be quite unreasonable to ground a theory of fiction—whose claims are not meant to be just contextually true—on such a circumstantial aspect of our theatrical practice. And, secondly, I should mention that sometimes the expressive potential of the above-mentioned feature, namely, the one that Friend might regard as counter-standard, lies precisely in the ability to highlight the continuity between theater plays and other practices in which we also use a script and improvise with greater or lesser success. Such practices include Ulrich's conversation with His Excellency, but also many other less striking practices, such as a conversation between friends or a family meal, whose scripts may certainly vary from one to another culture or context.

One could insist, however, that a script open to improvisation is not enough for the creation of a theater play, not even for the presence of theatricality. Religious rituals respond to a script and are open to a certain degree of improvisation, but they are not theater plays. But what else is then required to produce a theater play? Perhaps, the fact that the script is invented and also that it includes invented characters, that is, characters who are known not to exist.

It is true that this last condition may be fulfilled by many works of fiction but, as Friend herself stresses, it is far from being a necessary condition, for there are many works of fiction that, in a more or less direct way, speak about events that have really happened or people that do exist or

have existed, even though they are often adorned or elaborated with invented or counterfactual features. Friend could reply, though, that her theory of fiction is not concerned with providing necessary and sufficient conditions for fiction, but only standard, counter-standard and variable features, whereby my reply may sound irrelevant.

However, once we realize that the presence of invented characters is not a necessary condition for fiction, it is easy to show that the fact that this feature may turn out to be standard depends on the context. Thus, I will later suggest that there are a number of relevant contexts where this feature is not standard but just variable. Enough for now regarding invented characters; as to the invented nature of the script itself, haven't we invented the script of our conversations? Are they not, after all, institutions that we have created?

Maybe then what is missing in a conversation between friends or in a family meal is that participants are not aware of following a script. Should we then accept that, if the participants were aware of this circumstance, a family meal would thereby become a theater play? But such awareness is often present in our practices and celebrations; let us think, for example, of the rituals involved in a Christmas meal.<sup>7</sup> Some participants may be aware of a script, but do people act in such circumstances in the way actresses and actors do on the stage? The answer to this question may depend on whether a certain participant may identify herself with that ritual; in the event that no such identification occurs, one could participate in a Christmas meal the way a member of a rental family might do, as the film *Familia* (León Arenoa, 1996) so comically depicts. In this movie, the protagonist, Santiago, rents a party of actors and actress to act as his relatives for his 55<sup>th</sup> birthday. The action runs for 24 hours in Santiago's country house. But all this is unknown to the viewers who for a long while are convinced that they are just watching a movie whose plot revolves around a family gathering to celebrate Santiago's birthday. Their naive approach is apparently confirmed by the fact that Santiago angrily manifests his dislike for his son's

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<sup>7</sup> The specific rituals associated with a Christmas meal will certainly vary from one family to another and from one to another culture; still, such meals tend to be highly ritualized, so that certain attitudes and behavior are normatively required and expected.

present or even when Santiago claims that his son is insincere when the latter claims to love him. From time to time, some details strike us as strange, though; like when the protagonist complains that he had not ordered a child with glasses, but the viewers may still leave aside such remarks as a joke or a peculiarity of the script. Little by little, however, it becomes clear that all these people are just members of a theater company that Santiago has rented to perform a birthday celebration. Perhaps, Friend would like to reserve the idea of a theater play to a certain kind of participation in this performance, namely, as a member of the rental family. But this proposal sounds rather arbitrary at this stage. In fact, the movie invites us to distinguish how actors and actress participate in the celebration from Santiago's own attitude toward the situation, given that the latter's aspiration is to feel for a few hours that he does have a family after all, that is, to experience for a while that family as his own. But the contrast between the members of the rented family and Santiago himself suggest the plurality of our relationship to a script and, therefore, that our attitude toward it is not confined to the contrast between fiction and non-fiction, that is, to the contrast between an actress onstage and offstage.

Friend might, nevertheless, reply that Santiago is not really confronting the script as a work of fiction and, as a result, stick to the idea that a theater play is only such if we relate to the script the way the members of a rented family do. However, this response sounds viciously circular. If a demarcation criterion is to be of any interest, it is necessary to identify in advance the set of objects for which one intends to offer such a criterion; otherwise, any criterion would be trivially correct. However, if the criterion to demarcate a set of objects depends on whether we have a certain attitude toward them and any object before which we do not have that attitude is excluded from the set, then this demarcation criterion becomes trivial and devoid of any explanatory power, contrary to the explanatory constraint that Friend herself proposed for an adequate theory of fiction proposed. The only way to avoid this circularity is to have a preliminary classification of the objects at issue and then, in an exercise of reflective equilibrium, to elucidate the criteria to which this classificatory practice may respond to. From this point of view, it does not seem that Friend could so easily reject that there is a variety of ways in which a family celebration may be



experienced as a work of fiction. Thus, we should include that of the members of the theater company, Santiago's and even our experience in those situations where we may not feel seated at the table with our own family but with a provisionally adopted or an adoptive family. Quite often it is not so much that we feel that we are not seated with our own family, but rather that our way of being there has lost the naturalness that we attribute to our childhood or, in other words, that our experiences as adults imply a degree of reflectivity and estrangement similar to that of our relationship with a family that we adopt in order to relieve the sorrows of emigration or exile, or a family that adopts us in our orphanage.<sup>8</sup>

All this seems to lead us to the extravagant conclusion that a family meal is a work of fiction; but is it really so extravagant? That it seems so extravagant responds, in my opinion, to the tendency to conceive of our life as divided and, therefore, to leave aside or misinterpret any practice that does not respond to this pattern. We could, however, imagine some social contexts where performances on stage were an extreme case of theatricality, like in a society in which people called 'guernicas' bas-reliefs similar to Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. In this context, the latter would appear as peculiar for its bidimensionality. This example, suggested by Friend herself, shows that the fact that a certain feature is standard or counter-standard depends on the context.<sup>9</sup> Relatedly, I will argue that the relevant class of contrast when

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<sup>8</sup> See, in this respect, Truffaut (1959, 1968, 1970, 1979) whose protagonist needs so desperately to adopt a family that he seems to fall in love only with girls who are members of an ordinary, respectable family, and also Livingston (1990) and Butler (1993) regarding the ball culture developed in New York City by some Afro-American, Latino, gay and transgender communities. Participants in these balls are arranged in 'houses' whose masters are referred to as mothers because of the complex, protective role they play in their lives. All this suggests that such houses act as surrogate families for their otherwise abandoned and isolated members.

<sup>9</sup> "As a painting *Guernica's* flatness counts as standard, but as a *guernica* that is the most salient feature of the work, the one that distinguishes it from other works of the same kind... What has happened here is that we have switched the relevant contrast class: the set of works with which the work of in question is compared, a set with different standard, contra-standard, and variable features. As a result of the switch, we focus on different features of the work, taking some features as more

relating to works of fiction may equally vary from one to another context. Some might think that contextualism should not be a problem for Friend's approach, given she is remarkably a contextualist concerning those features that may be regarded as standard for a work of fiction. Still, Friend could hardly be a contextualist with respect to the contrast view itself, given that as a philosophical claim this view should hold across all contexts. Hence, it seems that the contrast view must presuppose that parentheticality holds across all contexts; moreover, it can be argued that the contrast view must conceive of parentheticality as an all-or-nothing matter because, otherwise, the transition from fiction to nonfiction—or vice versa—ought to be approached as a continuum, contrary to what the contrast view trivially defends. Hence, we can conclude that the contrast view presupposes that parentheticality is an all-or-nothing matter that holds across all contexts. This is, however, the presupposition I intend to dispute in the next section.

#### 4. Parentheticality

In section 2, I argued that the contrast view is committed to the claim that our relation to works of fiction involves the idea of a parenthesis and, therefore, to the claim that the split between two sorts of awareness that Ulrich presents as constitutive of the way the middle-class experiences theater, sex and religious services is necessarily a standard feature of fiction. Ulrich is convinced, however, that theatricality does not require such a parenthesis and can be imbricated in our daily practices and rituals. Besides, I have just suggested that what stands in the way of regarding such practices and rituals as works of fiction is just an understanding of parentheticality as an all-or-nothing matter. Now, I will examine a number of practices and rituals to vindicate a gradual understanding of parentheticality. But, before engaging in this discussion, it may be relevant to introduce a terminological qualification. So far, I have been referring to works of fiction as the main target of my exploration given that this is the explicit purpose of the contrast view. But, from now on, I will mainly talk of fiction in general,

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salient and foregrounding these while leaving others in the background" (Friend forthcoming, Ch. 3).

without confining myself to works of fiction. To motivate this shift I will rely on the conclusion reached in the previous section, namely: that many of our activities and rituals could be understood as works of fiction, only if parentheticality were not an all-or-nothing matter. Hence, if I succeeded in motivating that parentheticality is a gradual matter in some such activities, I would also have proved that the parentheticality of our relation to works of fiction should be construed as a matter of degree and, therefore, that some of our activities and rituals can legitimately be individuated as works of fiction and such that the contrast view will turn out to be false. Let me now sketch a defense of the gradual nature of parentheticality.

My discussion in the previous section already suggests that parentheticality is a matter of degree. There, I stressed the plural ways in which a person may regard a certain group of people as her family, namely: as a member of a rental family, as the renter of such family, as an exile who forms a temporary family with their compatriots, or as someone who is adopted by a family much like members of the family-in-law typically are. But the gradual nature of parentheticality can be perceived in many other activities as well. Think, for instance, in how seriously we take—or we may reasonable take—our commitment to certain goals. Consider the way that an amateur runner sets a goal for one of her ordinary training sessions and compare the seriousness of her commitment to that of her decision to run the London marathon this year. We can in turn see how this second commitment may differ in seriousness and prominence in her life compared to some of her family or professional projects. The runner's attitude toward these disparate goals and endeavors varies in seriousness and prominence. It could then be argued that those different degrees of seriousness and prominence reveal to what extent the corresponding activity is regarded as more or less parenthetical, since the goal of an ordinary training session may be perceived as important in the context of that activity even though the importance attached to it can hardly trespass the boundaries of this particular activity. There is, indeed, room for variation from one to another person, but someone who took the specific workout of each ordinary training session too seriously, who placed it at the center of her life and were thus unable to perceive that its importance is only relative to a certain context and therefore parenthetical, will be regarded as weird or even insane. Our

capacity to discern how seriously we can reasonably be committed to certain goals—and, thus, our capacity to acknowledge different degrees of parentheticality—contributes to outlining the boundaries of sanity or weirdness.

The previous remarks suggest not only that parentheticality is a matter of degree, but also that parentheticality may not be a specific standard feature of our relation to fiction as opposed to nonfiction. To confirm this last point, we may consider the experience of many pilgrims on Saint James' Way. It is very common among them to share very intimate aspects of their lives during their long daily walks or when gathering in the evening to have dinner or a drink. One could say that in a few days one gets to know more intimacies about a bunch of people and get a deeper sense of bonding with them than with those other people that one has known for years. And, yet, this happens partly because of the parenthetical nature of the experience. Of course, while on the Way, pilgrims promise each other to meet afterwards; in their normal life, so to say, but such later meetings rarely occur. And this is not an accident because the intimacy and transparency reached is favored—and, almost, enabled—by its parenthetical condition, that is, by the fact that it will have no direct implications for one's daily life where one does not want to meet those eyes who know so much about oneself. Some may be tempted to regard those experiences of intimacy and transparency as deceitful or fictional just because they are parenthetical but, in such a case, we should acknowledge that the way we relate to fiction is not just by contrast to nonfiction because sincerity is constitutive of the experiences I am reporting. If, on the contrary, one should deny that the idea of a parenthesis is not a feature specific to fiction as opposed to nonfiction, then Friend still owes us a standard feature that might ground the idea that fiction and nonfiction are each other's contrast class, for, if I am right, her contrast between the genres of fiction and nonfiction hinges on the opposition between parenthetical vs non-parenthetical activities or experiences. I must finally stress that the parenthetical experience on Saint James' Way is far from exceptional and is to be found in various degrees in many other social practices, such as a therapy session, a teenager's Summer camp, a trekking, a touristic trip, a club, and so on. All this suggests that, if we are to understand our relation to theatricality and works of fiction, we better consider that those cases where fiction has nonfiction as its contrast

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class as a rather specific attitude toward works of fiction and theatricality that lies at the extreme of a continuum with various degrees of reflectivity and estrangement.

## 5. Conclusion

Friend's theory of fiction, unlike others that seek to provide sufficient and necessary conditions, focuses on the ways in which we interact or relate to works of fiction, that is, the way in which we experience, understand and evaluate them. I do celebrate this opening of fiction theory to the plurality of our social practices. My concern is, however, that Friend's approach may not have gone far enough in this respect, given that it is confined to an experience of fiction that views nonfiction as its contrast class. In defense of her view, Friend may take refuge in the idea that her research is not interested in the phenomenon of fiction as such, but only in the way we relate to works of fiction. Friend vindicates the concept of a work of fiction as autonomous and as trivially opposed to that of nonfiction, so that a theory of fiction should only be concerned with a demarcation criterion that takes into account the disparate ways in which we relate to a work depending on whether it is fiction or nonfiction. I have argued, though, that the alleged autonomy of works of fiction, the sharpness of their contours, which Friend takes for granted, is not genuinely independent of the contrast view itself. To this end, I have examined some experiences of theatricality that have, at first sight, a bearing on the phenomenon of fiction and, in the light of Ulrich's reflection on his conversation with His Excellency, I have suggested that the contrast view may provide a reasonable account of the way the middle class relates to works of fiction but fails to express a more general truth about how we experience and evaluate works of fiction.

In sections 3 and 4, I have addressed some objections to the relevance of Ulrich's remarks as a challenge to the contrast view. The first objection has been that, even though his Excellency's performance may include elements of theatricality, it can hardly be considered a theater play and, therefore, a work of fiction. I have thus explored a number of criteria in virtue of which Friend could distinguish certain practices and rituals, such as his Excellency's conversations or a family meal, from works of fiction.

Yet, none of these criteria have been really useful. I have thus reached the seemingly extravagant conclusion that a family meal is a work of fiction. I have suggested, however, that our perception of their extravagance depends on a way of conceiving of our lives as divided between the public and the private, between our working hours and our leisure time; in other words, it seemed that only parentheticality as an all-or-nothing matter stands in the way of recognizing some of our practices and rituals as works of fiction.

I have then argued, though, that parentheticality does come in degrees. I have thus dwelled on the different ways in which one can participate in a family celebration; in such circumstances, the degrees of awareness one may have of the script to be followed or the degree of pretense imposed by the need to adapt to a script that one does not feel fully identified with. I have distinguished occasions where one could feel like a genuine participant in a meal with one's adopted or adoptive family, in contrast with the idea of being a member of a rental family, as comically depicted in *Familia*. If, in order to defend the contrast view, we insisted that we are only dealing with a theater play if we relate to the script of a family meal the way in which members of a rental family relate to each other; then we would be trapped in a vicious circle, since, on the one hand, we would identify a work of fiction on the basis of the kind of estrangement that is specific to this situation and, on the other, we expect our demarcation criterion to explain our ability to take this kind of distance. Moreover, I have suggested that parentheticality is a rather common phenomenon that is hardly confined to our relation to fiction or, complementarily, I have invited the thought that parentheticality is hardly a standard feature of our experience of fiction as opposed to nonfiction, contrary to what the contrast view defend. All this has allowed me to reject the contrast view and conclude that, if we are to understand how we experience and evaluate of works of fiction and theatricality, we better consider that the experience of fiction as the contrast class of nonfiction is a specific way of relating to works of fiction that lies at the extreme of a continuum with various degrees of reflectivity and estrangement.

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