Chapter 27

Mental Calisthenics and Self-Reflexive Fiction

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Works of fiction are wonderful at creating imaginary universes in which we immerse ourselves: barely aware that our bodies are still stuck in (say) twenty-first-century America, with its codes and its customs and its understandings of physics, we fling ourselves heart and soul into nineteenth-century England, where young women can barely go on a date with a soldier without causing a scandal; or into eighteenth-century France, where the slightest insult is going to lead to a duel; not to mention into twenty-third-century Ceti Alpha VI, where travel by transporter beam is an everyday occurrence. But not all novels and plays and films are content with leaving us comfortably ensconced in the illusions they create. Some of them like to wake us up from time to time, bringing to the forefront our dim residual awareness that what we are imagining is not real.

Maybe a narratorial voice reminds us that everything we have just read is made up. ("In this book," insists Marcel Proust's narrator after three thousand pages' worth of events, "there is not a single incident which is not fictitious.") Maybe the voice reminds us that we are reading a work of fiction. (The very first words of Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* are "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*," and there's plenty more where that came from.) Maybe it pushes things even further by claiming that

we are *not* reading a work of fiction. ("It is quite obvious," claims the pesky "author" in Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist*, "that I am not writing a novel.") Or maybe it engages in full-throated arguments with "us": "reader, you're treating me like an automaton" (Diderot); "be quiet and let me go on with my story" (Proust).

Then again, sometimes a character starts writing a book suspiciously similar to the one we are reading, as in André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* (whose protagonist Edouard is writing a book called *The Counterfeiters*), André Gide's *Paludes* (whose protagonist Tityre is writing a book called *Paludes*), Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (whose protagonist "Charlie Kaufman" ends up writing a screenplay about himself writing a screenplay), or Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (whose protagonist Philip Quarles is writing a book about an author writing a book about, perhaps, an author writing a book). Or, more generally, a character takes on characteristics suspiciously similar to those of the author, as when Vladimir Nabokov's creepy commentator Kinbote warns us "I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile."

Let's not forget, either, all those characters who start complaining about their authors (as Luigi Pirandello's "Six Characters" famously do), complaining *to* their authors (as Augusto does in Miguel de Unamuno's *Mist*), apologizing to their authors (as Gabriel does when he calls Raymond Queneau's *Zazie in the Metro* "the typewritten delirium of an idiotic novelist (oh! sorry)"), begging their authors to stop (as Molly Bloom does in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, interrupting her monologue to plead "O Jamesy let me up out of this"), or even planning an attack on them (as, in unrecountable ways, do various characters in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim Two Birds*).

And then, finally, there are characters who straightforwardly admit to being creatures of fantasy, as when Samuel Beckett's Hamm announces, in *Endgame*, "I'm warming up for my last soliloquy"; when a fictional Goethe, in Milan Kundera's *Immortality*, chides a fictional Hemingway "you know perfectly well that at this moment we are but the frivolous fantasy of a novelist"; when Eugène Ionesco's King, in *Exit the King*, is told "you are going to die at the end of the play"; or when Raymond Queneau's Queen, in *Le Chiendent*, admits to having stolen an idea from this book, "the one we're in now, which repeats everything we say as we say it and which follows us and tells about us, a sure piece of blotting paper that's been stuck on to our lives."[1] Not to mention those who, like Irma in Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, look us right in the eye and, disconcertingly, address their words to us.

What are all these fictions, and the many others like them, up to? Why do their authors not just leave us alone in our cozy cocoons of fantasy? What I'm going to suggest here is that at least some of them have a very specific intention: namely, to give us the opportunity to flex a vital mental muscle. By periodically interrupting the action to remind us that what we are seeing is not real, they are deliberately giving us practice in stepping back from our own beliefs. In what follows I'll explain why this might seem like a valuable thing to be able to do; I'll also explain why recent developments in cognitive science appear to support the idea that it might be a feasible and sensible ambition. In the end, I'll be arguing that Diderot, Proust, and company were on to something really important about what fiction can do for us, just as long as it's a particular kind of fiction, combining the right kind of form with the right kind of content.

1.

Let's start with a powerful example from the world of film: Federico Fellini's *8½*. Fellini's

protagonist, Guido Anselmi, is a middle-aged filmmaker suffering from writer's block, spiritual

emptiness, and crippling self-doubt. Critics call him a has-been and a failure; he himself worries

he will never create anything again; his female friends accuse him (not without reason, it should

be admitted) of being incapable of love; his life feels devoid of anything that would justify it, lift

it up above the merely physical, endow it with some kind of higher significance. What is more,

the sequence of events he has experienced fails to hang together, to produce anything remotely

resembling a story: his memories, as presented in the early scenes, constitute what his French

collaborator Daumier rightly calls a "series of completely gratuitous episodes" (fig. 27.1) and his

present-day exploits are little better. (These two problems may well be related, since—if Jean-

Paul Sartre is right—having a "fundamental project" gives every single event a coherent

meaning, whether as a step toward the goal, a setback, or a regrettable diversion. Without a

fundamental project, our experience shatters into a thousand senseless fragments.)

Fig. 27.1: "a series of completely gratuitous episodes."

Over the course of two hours or so, the film presents us with a number of attempted remedies—

remedies via the body (pointless spa treatments), remedies via the heart (fruitless encounters with

women), remedies via the soul (unhelpful interviews with members of the church)—each of which comes to nothing. What finally changes everything for Guido is a simple realization: that instead of shooting the absurd piece of science fiction he had initially planned, he should turn his own life into a movie. Miraculously, all the discordant elements within him now begin to harmonize (fig. 27.2). Saraghina, the symbol of physical love, trades places with Claudia, the symbol of spiritual love (Saraghina now appears in white, Claudia's trademark color; Claudia now appears on the beach, formerly the domain of Saraghina), as though the division between them no longer makes any sense.[2] And soon the other figures come to join them as, hand in hand, father, mother, wife, lover, muse, friends, and everyone else of note begin to dance together in a huge circle, in front of the abandoned set (fig. 27.4).

Fig. 27.2: Saraghina and the woman in white exchanging places

"Why piece together the tatters of your life, the vague memories, the faces, all the people you never knew how to love?" asks Daumier, in what he takes to be an unanswerable rhetorical question. There is, however, an excellent answer available. For the very piecing-together is what allows Guido for once to love all these people; not in the ordinary sense, to be sure, but in the special sense of appreciating them for the place they have in the totality that is his life, one which he now understands as having a certain aesthetic power to it. Is his life a constant frenetic motion turning in circles? Yes; but from a strictly aesthetic standpoint, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Has his life contained its share of disenchantment, on the way to this triumphant re-enchantment? Yes, but that only makes it a better story. The film closes on the figure of young Guido, the black-clad schoolboy whose life was such misery, now dressed in white and leading the band (fig. 27.3). Noise has given way to music, and music is about to give way to a new, perfect silence.

Fig. 27.3: childhood transfigured.

Thanks to the magic of art, then, suffering has been transfigured into aesthetic bliss. Guido's painful mess of a life turns out to have a beautiful shape to it; and each of its inhabitants turns out to have a necessary place within that shape, like tiles within a mosaic, or daubs of paint on a canvas. It is not that all conflicts can actually be resolved; it is just that all conflicts can be seen as vital contributors to a thing of beauty, and hence given a justification, and hence, in a special sense, redeemed.[3]

Fig. 27.4: aesthetic redemption.

2.

It should, I hope, already be apparent that Fellini is playing a Gide-like trick in the closing

sequences, with his character on the verge of making a movie suspiciously similar to the one

we have been watching. But in fact Fellini has been playing analogous tricks throughout.

Although Guido is officially working on some kind of science-fiction picture, in which

survivors of a nuclear holocaust flee to another planet, what he has actually shared with

Daumier is the screenplay for a film about his own life. And so when Guido reviews the

screen tests of actors hoping to star in his movie (fig. 27.5), what we see are women playing

his wife and mistress, men playing cardinals, and boys playing Guido. Not an alien or

spaceman in sight.

Fig. 27.5: the screen tests.

This frequently puts us in a rather odd position, unable to decide whether a given

event depicted on screen is supposed to belong to Guido's reality—what he is currently

seeing, remembering, experiencing—or to his script. Did he really just have a vision of a woman in white, for example, or was he just inventing it for cinematic purposes? When we first see this mysterious figure, we take her to be a hallucination that Guido is actually seeing before him; a few short scenes later, however, we learn that she is merely (or also) a character in the screenplay. "And the capricious appearances of the girl," asks Daumier in his notes to Guido (fig. 27.6), "what are they supposed to mean? An offer of purity? A tender gesture to the hero? Of all the symbols that abound in your story, this one is the worst."[4]
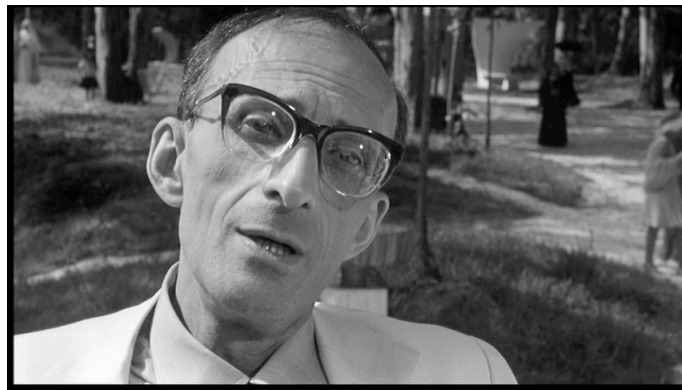

Fig. 27.6: "Of all the symbols that abound in your story, this one is the worst."

And what about the scene involving Carla's high fever? Carla has drunk too much of the spa water, and Guido is not impressed (fig. 27.7a). "What do you expect?" retorts Carla. "You leave me alone all the time." Again, this seems for all the world to be something that is actually happening to Guido. But when we come to see the screen tests (fig. 27.7b), we find various actresses pronouncing a virtually identical line: "You know it's dangerous to leave me alone [*è pericoloso lasciarmi sola*]." Given that the screen tests have been prerecorded, and that we are watching them a mere day after Carla's high fever, we are once again in a quandary: did we witness something "real"[5]—something actually present, right now within Guido's mind or world, like the spa and the sunglasses and Daumier—or something invented?

Fig. 27. 7: "it's dangerous to leave me alone."

What, too, of the truly bizarre conversation between Guido and Carla in which she asks him whether he could "choose one single thing, and … make it the one thing that gives your life meaning," and he replies "No, the character I'm thinking of couldn't" [*no, questo tipo no, non è capace*—literally, "no, not that guy, he couldn't do it"]? Has Guido himself shrunk—in his own mind, if that makes sense—to the status of a fictional character?

In all three of the instances I've mentioned, an event or character suddenly loses its status as something "real" in order to become something fictional. There are also, however, occasions on which things move in the other direction, with figments of imagination oddly making their way into reality (fig. 27.8). All Guido has to do, for example, is tell his sister-in-law that he's "putting everything in [his movie], even a sailor who does the soft-shoe," and a soft-shoeing sailor suddenly appears out of nowhere. And even after Guido is told that it would be the height of absurdity to expect an audience with a cardinal in a spa, that impossible audience with a cardinal is exactly what we see on the screen before us.[6]

Fig. 27.8: the soft-shoeing sailor and the cardinal in the spa.

Over and over again, then, *8½* reminds us that it is just a film. Over and over again, we are forced to oscillate between engagement and detachment. Just when we become absorbed in the story, we are reminded that it's a fiction; just when we become used to treating it as unreal, along comes something emotionally laden, and we return to caring deeply about the characters. Everything we believe is subject to doubt—but everything we doubt can, conversely, become something to believe.

3.

What does this formal feature have to do with the themes of chaos, conflict, and redemption we started with? Many, I am sure, would be tempted to answer that question by invoking some kind of *message*, some kind of deep Truth about the World, the point of all formal features being (they assume) to *mean* something. This, however, would be a big mistake. It is true that any number of film theorists have taken the idea for granted (I'll come back to them later), and that any number of critics—including their fictional brethren in *8½*![7]—have followed suit, but truly astute fiction-makers have always understood that they have more important things to do than *say* things (which they do, in any case, far less efficiently than writers of nonfictions).[8] Instead, at their best, they *do* things; and what a self-reflexive fiction like *8½* does is to *give us practice in believing what we don't believe*.[9]

We saw a moment ago that *8½* forces us to shuttle continually from engagement to detachment. One moment we are worried about Carla's high fever; the next moment Carla is just a character in a screenplay. One moment we are laughing at the pretentious device of a

woman in white; the next moment we see her again, and have our breath taken away (fig. 27.9). Now in sending us on this relentless rollercoaster ride, *8½* gives us two hours' worth of practice at doubting what we believe, two hours' worth of practice at believing what we doubt—practice, in other words, in entertaining an illusion and knowing that it is not true.

Fig. 27.9: known illusions can retain their force.

Why is this so important? Because the kind of redemption Guido achieves—and the kind of redemption available to us, too—depends to some degree on illusion. Guido's mother and father are dead, yet here they are alongside the living; Guido's wife and mistress don't exactly get along, yet here they are dancing in a ring together. Human flourishing, as Nietzsche understood so well, requires a certain degree of self-deception. At the same time, only one kind of self-deception is dignified: the kind that knows itself for what it is. The good life, for Fellini, is not pure escapism; if it were, then the science-fiction movie would be just as satisfactory as the fictionalized story of a life. Rather, the good life is as much truth as one can stand, coupled with the illusion one cannot do without, *at the same time as an awareness that the illusion is illusion*.[10] And that is precisely where self-reflexive fictions begin to do their work.

4.

There is, as far as I know, no concrete evidence (as yet) that what I have said so far is true. As most cognitive scientists will tell you, their own field is in its infancy; in fact, one of the most delightful features of talking to cognitive scientists is the number of times you will hear a famous expert saying "I just don't know." (How often have you heard those four words from a literary theorist?) And if cognitive science is in its infancy, cognitive literary criticism is scarcely out of its swaddling clothes. We are sure, at this point, of almost nothing. Do the ideas above hold water? To borrow the language of cognitive science, I just don't know.

That said, I believe there are a number of findings that make my hypothesis at least plausible, the most important of which is what is sometimes referred to as "informational encapsulation."[11] Many scientists now think of the brain as being organized into a set of functionally specialized systems: a system for seeing, a system for hearing, a system for memory encoding, and so on. This does not mean that each system is confined to a single physical area within the brain; specialization is not the same as localization.[12] It also does not mean that the data are never combined—that the left hand is always in the dark about what the right hand is doing—let alone that there is no central controller.[13] What it does mean, however, is that the brain is capable of performing multiple tasks simultaneously.[14] (The brain, as some like to put it, is a *massive parallel processor*.)[15] And what it also means, most crucially for our purposes, is that the various systems do not always have to be in agreement, or even in communication.[16]

Fig. 27.10: the bent straw illusion.

Optical illusions are an excellent example of this. When a straight straw looks bent once it's placed in a glass of water (fig. 27.10), what's happening is that two separate systems are operating on the same sense data and delivering opposite verdicts. Perception is telling you the straw is obviously crooked; inference is telling you it is still as straight as it was when you put it in the glass. And neither side entirely carries the day. Perception doesn't entirely win, since you don't act as though the straw is bent (by, say, going and getting another straw); inference doesn't entirely win either, since you can't helping seeing the straw as bent, no matter how certain you are that it is straight. (Telling yourself that something is an optical illusion makes no difference to what you perceive. Try it!) At a higher level, it is possible to inspect the deliverances of the two systems—to say to yourself "goodness, I *see* the straw as bent but *infer* it to be straight"—but down in the trenches, the two systems are operating completely autonomously.[17]

What we know about informational encapsulation suggests three things that are relevant for our purposes: first, it is entirely possible to hold two conflicting attitudes towards a single state of affairs (the straw is bent, the straw is straight); second, it is entirely possible to become aware of having those two attitudes (using, presumably, a third subsystem); and such awareness, finally, need not affect our experience (even when we know that the straw is straight, we still continue to see it as crooked).

This ability to entertain competing attitudes simultaneously comes on line remarkably early in life. At the age of three or four, children hosting make-believe tea parties are easily able to keep track of the fact that Susie's cup already has tea in it, whereas Johnny's cup does not—even though, in reality, both cups are empty. (The children, in other words, are simultaneously holding in their mind the proposition "Susie's cup has tea in it" and the proposition "Susie's cup has no tea in it.")[18] It does not take long, either, for the demarcations to be come even more sophisticated. In an ingenious experiment designed by

Deena Skolnick and Paul Bloom, children aged four to six were just as good at adults in answering the question "Does Batman think that Spongebob is real?"[19] (Similarly, and equally surprisingly, Marjorie Taylor found that children with imaginary friends tended to be perfectly aware that the latter did not exist.)[20] Most significantly for our purposes, children playing make-believe are perfectly capable of renegotiating the rules mid-game ("now *you're* the crocodile"), a fact that surely suggests some kind of double consciousness on their part. All of this is not to say, of course, that children make no mistakes; they do better, however, than we often suspect.

5.

The relative autonomy of mental systems—our capacity to compartmentalize, to "quarantine" beliefs from one another[21]—explains, then, how it is *possible* to maintain conflicting attitudes at the same time. In itself, however, that does not explain why it might be *desirable*. This is where the work of Shelley Taylor comes in. Taylor, a psychologist at UCLA, discovered that overly optimistic views of our qualities, circumstances, and prospects actually promote mental health.[22] It is of course possible to go too far—acting on the belief that one is impenetrable to bullets is probably not the best idea, for example, when entering battle—but within certain limits, we are just going to be *happier* if we get it a little bit wrong about how smart we are, how much people like us, and how bright our future is going to be. Researchers have also discovered a correlation between athletic success and propensity for self-deception.[23] Correlation is not causation, but is it not at least possible that William James was right in thinking that the only way to leap across an abyss is to fool ourselves into thinking that there is absolutely no chance of falling?[24]

Perhaps the strongest single piece of evidence, however, is the "mirror box," that wonderful invention designed to provide relief to amputees suffering from phantom pain. A

patient who has lost an arm, for example, can place the other arm next to the mirror, giving herself the illusion of still having both; somehow, miraculously, the phantom pain dissipates. From which we can learn, again, two important things. First, illusions can be highly beneficial; second, and counterintuitively, they can *continue* to be beneficial even after we know them to be illusions. The parallel layering of mental activity not only makes genuine self-deception possible (whatever people like Sartre may have said) but also makes *conscious* self-deception possible. And the nature of human existence makes both kinds of self-deception *desirable*, at least under certain conditions.

6.

Do self-reflexive fictions actually have anything to do with all this, however? As I acknowledged earlier, we don't yet know for sure. But what we do know is that, in a general sense, people get better at what they practice (thanks to the strengthening of neural pathways and more efficient organization of strategies); this can be true, what is more, even when the practice takes place in their imagination. Flight simulators are excellent training for handling real-life aeroplanes, and video games are sometimes made use of by the military: skills are often "transferable" from imaginary to actual contexts.[25] There is even an example that comes very close indeed to what I take Fellini to have in mind. That example is lucid dreaming.

As its name suggests, a lucid dream is one in which the dreamer knows she is asleep, an awareness that is sometimes accompanied by a degree of control over what she experiences. However strange it may sound to non-lucid dreamers, the phenomenon is a real one, as a growing body of research has established. In one series of studies, for example, subjects agreed in advance to count, draw, or make a fist in their dream; later, with the subjects in REM sleep, researchers detected increased activity in the relevant brain areas

and/or parts of the body.[26] Another study found differences in brain activity—in particular, an increase in beta-1 activity in the parietal areas—between lucid and non-lucid dreamers.[27] So here we have another situation, confirmed by experiment, in which (as counterintuitive as it may appear) our senses are deceiving us, and we *know* they are deceiving us, yet we continue to let them do so.

Now the fascinating thing is that it is actually possible to *cultivate* this capacity. There are certain techniques we can use, in other words, to make it more likely that we will develop a degree of awareness and control over our dreams, including—most crucially for our purposes—the practice of asking ourselves repeatedly during the day whether we are awake or asleep.[28] What this means is that we can train ourselves to enter one state of divided consciousness by deliberately entering another state of divided consciousness; being reminded that everything we are experiencing might be an illusion can carry over into other activities, presumably because different states of divided consciousness work more or less the same way. And this in turn means that engagement with self-reflexive fictions could well strengthen our ability to sustain all those illusions that are so favorable to our flourishing.

7.

It might still, of course, be objected that even if such strengthening is *feasible*, and even if it is *desirable*, I still haven't shown that it is *likely*. After all, isn't it the case that for any formal feature one can mention, there are a variety of effects it can generate, depending on the context?[29] A long, tender, ornate speech between lovers might be designed to produce tears, or it might be designed to produce laughter; free indirect discourse can be employed to offer the vision of a world with weaker ego-boundaries (Woolf), but it can also be employed to skewer characters more cruelly (Flaubert).[30] Why assume that Fellini's self-reflexivity will be put, so to speak, to good use?

It has to be admitted that there is no guarantee of the intended uptake. (That, of course, is the fate of every aesthetic object.) But again, artists can at least increase the chances of the desired result taking place. And they do so by means of *priming*. What any number of psychological researchers have discovered is that an initial stimulus makes us more sensitive to related stimuli; certain concepts, thoughts, and attitudes become more salient, more accessible, more likely to affect our judgment and action. If, for example, we are hungry (or have just been shown the word "food"), we will be more likely to read the letter sequence SO_P as "soup"; if, on the other hand, we are in need of a shower (or have just been shown the word "wash"), we will be more likely to see it as "soap."[31] That, I think, is precisely how content works in cases like Fellini's *8½*. In itself, the formal device of self-reflexivity tells us nothing about what it wants us to do with it. But when it is coupled with a plot involving the necessity of life-affirming illusions, everything changes. We have a hard time, I think, *not* connecting the two—not thinking that the happy ending and the repeated breaking of the fourth wall are intimately linked. The content of a literary work primes us, I am claiming, for a particular way of taking up its form.

We are left, then, with the following overall picture, consistent with many results from the world of cognitive science. The content of *8½* serves as priming, making thoughts of necessary illusions more accessible and salient to us; this in turn leads us to understand the form—the self-reflexivity—as an opportunity to hone our capacity for conscious self-deception; conscious self-deception is possible because of the modular structure of the mind, involving a number of mutually encapsulated systems; conscious self-deception is desirable because illusions are sometimes good for us; and fictions can be a venue for its training because we get better at what we practice, even when the practice is only in our head.

8.

This still leaves room, of course, for self-reflexive fictions to have other plausible ambitions, primed by different kinds of content.[32] All that *Verfremdung* in Brecht, for example, is almost certainly designed to make it easier for us to detach ourselves from our rash assumptions, easier to turn the bright light of critical thought onto what we had previously taken as "natural" and immutable.[33] All that metaleptic craziness in Unamuno's *Mist*, similarly, may be part of what the prologue-writer calls "Don Miguel [Unamuno]'s campaign against public gullibility" (assuming, of course, that this prologue-writer is to be trusted). And again along similar lines, Queneau's *Chiendent* may perhaps aim to strengthen our capacity for putting everything in doubt—even what we currently take to be true—as a spur to ever deeper philosophizing. (That, more or less, is Friedrich Schlegel's theory of Romantic irony.)[34] In each of these cases, reflexivity still has the function of fine-tuning our capacity to hold two attitudes at once; here, however, the ultimate goal is not to maintain our beneficial illusions but rather to loosen their grip of their malevolent cousins, to make sure *those* ones are never completely in control.

Or again, the divided state that self-reflexivity cultivates may provide a vital protective shield against crippling internal division: when one finds oneself holding two contradictory beliefs—or indeed feeling two contradictory feelings—and when it is simply not possible to jettison one of them, the only solution may be to step back from both, identifying oneself with the system that inspects them as though from without. (I take this to be Diderot's ambition in *Jacques le Fataliste*.)[35] And then, finally, there are fictions (like Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, perhaps) whose self-reflexivity is a way of entitling themselves to a little heartfelt emotion in a world saturated with cynicism, and others (like

Gide's *Counterfeiters*, perhaps) whose self-reflexivity simply serves a way to explore the resources of the medium.

Still, Fellini was not alone in wanting to put reflexivity in the service of conscious self-deception. Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Marcel Proust, and Luigi Pirandello had preceded him; Woody Allen and Milan Kundera would follow him.[36] There is, after all, no substitute for the maintenance of necessary illusions, and no substitute for self-reflexive fictions as a venue for their training.

9.

In a way, of course, *all* fictions put us in a divided state of mind. (Readers may wish to consider the contributions of Elaine Auyoung and William Flesch, chapters 28 and 18 in this volume.) There is always a part of us lurking around to register that what we are reading or watching is not real: as Kendall Walton so memorably pointed out, horror movies cause our pulses to race and our hearts to pound … but not our legs to carry us out of the theater, or our fingers to dial our friends to warn them of the impending danger.[37] What is more, while we generally root for the protagonist, we also rather like the idea of him or her getting into trouble (no trouble, no plot!).[38] Finally, our empathetic suffering for Clarissa Dalloway finds itself strangely tempered by our enjoyment of the artistry with which her travails are crafted and rendered by Virginia Woolf. So we believe and do not believe, at once; we want and do not want, at once; we feel and do not feel, at once. This is a truly extraordinary triple fact about the experience of (interesting) fiction, one that lies at the heart of its peculiar power.[39]

What self-reflexive fictions do is to ratchet up, and make blatant, that generalized double-consciousness.[40] In the standard case, our sense of the work's fictionality is a background awareness, the kind of awareness we have, while driving, of the steady hum of the engine. With Fellini, by contrast, we are forced to place it at the center of our conscious

attention, while also being invited to maintain somehow the referential illusion, to continue the make-believe game, to keep playing along. By gradually increasing the size of the cognitive weights we have to lift—by putting additional pressure on our simultaneous ability to have and to stand back from a given mental attitude, whether belief, desire, or feeling— reflexive fictions like Fellini's give an intensive workout to our capacity for simultaneous trust and distrust, readying us for the difficult business of life.[41] Yes, that difficult business often involves knowing the truth. But at times it requires us to be ignorant or even frankly mistaken. And when that happens, it is generally better for us to maintain an awareness of what is going on. And for that I think it helps if we have watched a little Fellini.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

[1] Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. Terence Kilmartin, D. J. Enright, and Andreas Mayor (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 225 (translation modified); Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harvest, 1982), 3; Denis Diderot, *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, trans. Michael Henry (London: Penguin, 1986), 30, 74; Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1999, 70; André Gide, *Les faux-monnayeurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); André Gide, *Paludes* (Paris: NRF, 1920), 12; Charlie Kaufman (w.), *Adaptation*, dir. Spike Jones, Sony Pictures, 2002; Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996), ch. 22; Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 300–301; Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. Mark Musa (London: Penguin Classics, 1996); Miguel de Unamuno, *Mist*, in *Novela/Nivola*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 4; Raymond Queneau, *Zazie in the Metro*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Penguin, 2001), 72; James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 769; Flann O'Brien, *At Swim Two Birds* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998); Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove, 1958), 78; Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, trans. Peter Kussi (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 215; Eugène Ionesco, *Le roi se meurt* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 22 ("tu vas mourir à la fin du spectacle"); Raymond Queneau, *Witch Grass*, trans. Barbara Wright (New York: NYRB Classics, 2003), 309; Jean Genet, *Le Balcon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 153.

[2] Cf. to some extent Marilyn Fabe, *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 164–65.

[3] See R. Lanier Anderson, "Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration," in *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, ed. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 225–58.

[4] Similarly, when we first see Saraghina, we take this to be a memory Guido is having, triggered by the sight of a woman who resembles her. But in the very next scene, Daumier discusses this "memory" as though it were actually an episode in the screenplay Guido has given him to read. ("What does it mean?" he asks. "If you want to denounce Catholicism, you need less nostalgia and more logic!")

[5] To be more precise, one should say "true within the fiction" (borrowing Kendall Walton's terminology); I'm just trying to keep my vocabulary as untechnical as possible.

[6] Fellini also plays with editing and sound to illusion-undermining effect; see Fabe, *Closely Watched Films*, 166–71.

[7] Toward the end of the movie, Guido finds himself surrounded by hostile critics. "You has-been," shouts one, "what do think you can teach?" "Do you have anything to say?" asks another. "He is lost. He has nothing to say!" laughs a third, in English. The more astute Daumier, by contrast, realizes that an author's intention can be (among other possibilities) "to make us think" or even "to make us afraid."

[8] See Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (New York: Oxford, 2012), chapter 1.

[9] I have made similar arguments with respect to Mallarmé in *How to Do Things with Fictions*, 9–92.

[10] I am paraphrasing Nietzsche, who wrote both that "the falsest judgements are the most indispensable to us" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Random House, 1966], sec. 4) and that "the real measure of value" is "how much truth … a spirit [can] endure" (*Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York:

Random House, 1969], Preface, sec. 3). In an important article, R. Lanier Anderson refers to the will to truth and the will to illusion as "mutually regulating ideals" in Nietzsche: see "Nietzsche on Truth, Illusion, and Redemption," *European Journal of Philosophy* 13.2 (2005): 185–225. For a list of pro-illusion passages in Nietzsche (giving the lie, among other things, to Richard Rorty's claim that Nietzsche has a pragmatist theory of truth), see Joshua Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 209 n. 37.

[11] The connection between self-deception and informational encapsulation was first suggested to me by Neil van Leeuwen. I subsequently read something like it in Danica Mijović-Prelec and Drazen Prelec, "Self-Deception as Self-Signalling: A Model and Experimental Evidence," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 365 (2010): 227–40, and then in Robert Kurzban's *Why Everyone (Else) Is a Hypocrite: Evolution and the Modular Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), where the idea is more developed but also accompanied by some rather shady arguments about agency. *Caveat emptor*.

[12] On this point, see Kurzban, *Hypocrite*, 47; Paul Ehrlich, *Human Natures: Genes, Cultures, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000), 119; Stephen Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 2009), 30. On functional specialization, see also Ellen Spolsky, "Making 'Quite Anew': Brain Modularity and Creativity," in *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, ed. Lisa Zunshine (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 86–89.

[13] For the combination of inputs in a "global conscious workspace," see Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 318–23 and Ellen Spolsky, *Gaps in Nature: Literary Interpretation and the Modular*

Mind (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 20. For the confident claim that there is no central controller, see Kurzban, *Hypocrite*, 10, 22, 60–62. When faced with the question of how coordination happens, Kurzban helpfully tells us "I don't know" (67).

[14] Edward E. Smith and Stephen M. Kosslyn, *Cognitive Psychology: Mind and Brain* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2006), 42; Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 26 and 77; Spolsky, *Gaps in Nature*, 32.

[15] On parallel processing, see for example Pinker, *op. cit.*, 26.

[16] Theorists who have argued for at least some degree of informational encapsulation include Jerry Fodor, in *The Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983 (see, e.g., 67–72); Donald Davidson, in "Deception and Division," in *The Multiple Self*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 79–92; and Marvin Minsky, in *Society of Mind* (qtd. Spolsky, *Gaps in Nature*, 24).

[17] A variety of additional phenomena, such as blindsight, hemispatial neglect, alien hand syndrome, and self-outwitting, all confirm the independent activity of systems. See Kurzban, *Hypocrite*, 9–18. This is not to say, of course, that "top-down" processes never influence "bottom-up" processes.

[18] I am referring to a classic series of experiments by Alan Leslie. See, e.g., Alan M. Leslie, "Pretense and Representation: The Origins of 'Theory of Mind,'" *Psychological Review* 94.4 (1987): 412–26. For discussion, see Shaun Nichols, "Imagining and Believing: The Promise of a Single Code," *JAAC* 62.2 (2004): 129.

[19] Deena Skolnick and Paul Bloom, "The Intuitive Cosmology of Fictional Worlds," in *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction*, ed. Shaun Nichols (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 73–86.

[20] Taylor is very forthright: "young children," she says, "do not think their imaginary

companions are real." (Marjorie Taylor, *Imaginary Companions and the Children

Who Create Them* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 90.) She found that

when children were interviewed at length about their imaginary companions, they

would often end up warning the interviewer, "it's just pretend, you know!" (112)

There is of course a great deal of variation here, as Taylor herself admits. In general, children

do better (*a*) the older they are; (*b*) the more control they have over the imagining; and (*c*) the

less other people are actively trying to convince them that something is real (as in the case of

Santa Claus). Most two-year-olds are already able to recognize certain acts as pretense (89);

most three-year-olds will be shocked if, during a game involving Playdough "cookies," you

actually put one in your mouth ("yuk, do you always eat that Playdough?") (105); most four-

year-olds are agile enough to handle rule changes in mid-game (104); most five-year-olds

know that what they see on TV and read in fictional books is not real (96); and by the age of

eight, most children know that cultural myths like Santa Claus and the tooth fairy are

imaginary (96). Mistakes continue to be made periodically at all levels, but as Taylor points

out, adults too are liable to be affected by their dreams (111), to care about fictional

characters (113), to conflate an actor with his or her role (97), and to be unwilling to drink

from a perfectly harmless bottle that happens to be marked "cyanide" (101). All in all,

"children's mastery of fantasy is impressive" (116).

[21] The term is Leslie's ("Pretense and Representation," 415).

[22] See Shelley E. Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind*

(New York: Basic Books, 1989); Shelley E. Taylor et al., "Psychological Resources,

Positive Illusions, and Health," *American Psychologist* 55 (2000): 99–109; Shelley E.

Taylor and Jonathon D. Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social-Psychological

Perspective on Mental Health," *Psychological Bulletin* 103 (1988): 193–210. See also Kurzban, *Hypocrite*, 101–19.

[23] Joanna E. Starek and Caroline F. Keating, "Self-Deception and Its Relationship to Success in Competition," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 12.2 (1991): 145–55.

[24] "It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true. Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of maybes, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll into the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom … is to believe what is in the line of your needs, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled." William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956 [1897]), 59.

[25] Anecdotally, Jim Holt reported that memorizing a series of lyric poems improved his capacity to store information—not just poetry, but other things as well—in working memory. See Laura Miller, "Make Kids Learn Poetry," http://www.salon.com/2012/06/13/make_kids_memorize_poetry/.

[26] Morton Schatzman et al., "Correspondence during Lucid Dreams between Dreamed and Actual Events," in *Conscious Mind, Sleeping Brain*, ed. Jayne Gackenbach and Stephen LaBerge (New York: Plenum Press, 1988), 155–79.

[27] Brigitte Holzinger et al., "Psychophysiological Correlates of Lucid Dreaming," *Dreaming* 16.2 (2006): 88–95.

[28] This was Paul Tholey's discovery. See Stephen LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 21.

[29] This is what Meir Sternberg calls the "Proteus principle." See "Universals of Narrative and Their Cognitivist Fortunes," *Poetics Today* 24.3 (2003): 552.

[30] Free indirect discourse, says the inimitable Blakey Vermeule, is "a technique whose main virtue seems to be to slice the character's head off more effectively." *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 44.

[31] See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 52.

[32] For fuller discussion of the following theories, see Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions*, 69–92, 90–92.

[33] Before the action gets going in *The Exception and the Rule*, the chorus enjoins us: "Findet es befremdend, wenn auch nicht fremd . . . *damit nichts unveränderlich gelte*" ("find it alienating, albeit not alien . . . *so that nothing should appear immutable*"). *Die Ausnahme und die Regel*, in *Fünf Lehrstücke* (London: Methuen, 1969), 94; my translation and emphasis. See also *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 136–40.

It is worth pointing out that this ambition—the ambition of training audience members to step back from their own beliefs—is very different from the ambition to *inform* them of something. Quite a few theorists have, unfortunately, decided that it is entirely reasonable to use the device of reflexivity to send some kind of message about the constructedness of

(social) reality. See, for example, Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 115; Christian Quendler, *From Romantic Irony to Postmodernist Metafiction* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 160; and Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), 18–19. This, it seems to me, is a decidedly odd view to hold. If a novel by Gide is enough to convince us that everything is constructed, might not a novel by Balzac be enough to restore our original opinion? What kind of person would one have to be to allow one's mind to be changed on such a fundamental point by a formal device in a work of fiction?

[34] "Étienne … plunged into a series of considerations relative to the necessity of preliminary doubt in all philosophical inquiry" (Queneau, *Witch Grass*, 233). On Schlegel's position, which is much more complex than I am able to explain here, see D. C. Muecke*, The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1967), 200.

[35] See Landy, *How to Do Things*, 90–91; J. Robert Loy, *Diderot's Determined Fatalist: A Critical Appreciation of "Jacques le Fataliste"* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1950), 151; Lloyd Bishop, *Romantic Irony in French Literature from Diderot to Beckett* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1989), 2. And compare Nietzsche: "At times we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking down upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing over ourselves or weeping over ourselves ... we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art lest we lose the freedom above things that our ideal demands of us." (*The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Random House, 1974], sec. 107; emphasis removed.)

[36] For an explanation of how this works in Proust, see Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction*, 143; for Mallarmé, see Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions*, 87–89. For Pirandello, key

evidence comes from his play *Enrico IV*. In Woody Allen's oeuvre, the clearest

example is *Broadway Danny Rose*. Kundera is not an entirely clear-cut case, but there

are suggestions (see *Immortality*, 12, 341, and especially 344) that he is in the Fellini

camp.

[37] Kendall L. Walton, "Fearing Fictions," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 25. Compare to

some extent Bortolussi and Dixon, chapter 25 in this volume.

[38] Compare Gregory Currie, "Narrative Desire," in *The Philosophy of Film: Introductory

Text and Readings*, ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg and Angela Curran (Oxford:

Blackwell, 2005), 139–44; Amy Coplan, "Empathic Engagement with Narrative

Fictions," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62.2 (2004): 147.

[39] By "interesting" I do not mean "canonical." The TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which

is hardly canonical, contains elements of reflexivity; the crucial distinction is not

between "elite" and "popular" but between challenging and facile. To be sure, Fellini,

Proust, and Mallarmé are arguably more likely to have the desired effect, since the

device is more central in them and since their readers and viewers tend to arrive

expecting to contribute a relatively high degree of mental effort. But where a work is

sufficiently ambitious, and where its appreciators are sufficiently diligent, its

commercial appeal should never be counted as a strike against it.

[40] Compare Jean-Marie Schaeffer: "même si la scène implique une 'transgression paradoxale

des frontières,' cette transgression, loin d'être une anomalie, n'est qu'une

exemplification particulièrement explicite de ce qui constitue la caractéristique

définitionnelle centrale de l'immersion fictionnelle, à savoir le fait qu'elle implique

un état mental scindé." "Métalepse et immersion fictionnel," in *Métalepses: Entorses*

au pacte de la représentation, ed. John Pier and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2005), 325.

[41] On fiction as space for "cognitive workout," compare Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 161.