The Philosophical Quarterly

CONTENTS

IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE AND CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

By Bence Nanay

We experience resistance when we are engaging with fictional works which present certain (for example, morally objectionable) claims. But in virtue of what properties do sentences trigger this 'imaginative resistance'? I argue that while most accounts of imaginative resistance have looked for semantic properties in virtue of which sentences trigger it, this is unlikely to give us a coherent account, because imaginative resistance is a pragmatic phenomenon. It works in a way very similar to Paul Grice's widely analysed 'conversational implicature'.

I. THE REAL PUZZLE OF IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE

The problem of imaginative resistance is really (at least) three problems:[1]

(a) We experience resistance when we are engaging with fictional works which present certain (for example, morally objectionable) claims

(b) We experience resistance when we imagine that certain states of affairs have certain properties (for example, that a morally objectionable state of affairs is not morally objectionable)

(c) Sometimes authorial authority breaks down: the author of a fictional work cannot make certain (for example, morally objectionable) claims true in fiction.

Puzzle (a) is about our engagement with certain fictional works (or maybe even non-fictional texts).[2] Puzzle (b), in contrast, is about our imagination. For puzzle (a), we need an agent (a reader) and a text (a fictional work). Puzzle (b) does not require anything but our imagination. Puzzle (c) is again about a text and what is true in the text. While puzzle (a) and puzzle (b) are

---

[1] See, e.g., B. Weatherson, 'Morality, Fiction and Possibility', *Philosopher's Imprint*, 4 (2004); K. Walton, 'On the (So-called) Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance', in S. Nichols (ed.), *The Architecture of the Imagination* (Oxford UP, 2006), pp. 137–48.

[2] See T.S. Gendler, 'Imaginative Resistance Revisited', also in Nichols (ed.), *The Architecture of the Imagination*, pp. 149–74.

about an agent engaging with a text or imagining a certain state of affairs, puzzle (c) is not really about us: it is about what is true in fiction.[3]

When we read the text

G. In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl

the last phrase of this utterance (allegedly) startles us and makes us stop.[4] Our engagement with the fiction of which this sentence is part breaks down: as Tamar Gendler says (p. 159), we experience a 'pop-out'. This is puzzle (a). We may also think that the author of this sentence just cannot make it true in the world of fiction that Giselda was right to kill her baby because it was a girl. This is puzzle (c). Forgetting about the sentence (G), if you try to imagine that killing babies because of their gender is good, do you resist this or find it difficult to do so? If so, you are encountering puzzle (b).

These three puzzles are intricately related, provided that we accept certain background assumptions. Many philosophers think that our engagement with fiction essentially implies the exercise of our imagination.[5] If this is true, then there is an important connection between (a) and (b): maybe the answer to (b) gives us an answer to (a). If, in turn, truth in fiction also depends on what we are (supposed to) imagine, then there is also a link between (b) and (c).

I shall not say much about (b) and (c) here, as I am not fully convinced that they are really very puzzling. I do believe that (a) is a genuine puzzle, and (b) and (c) would not sound too puzzling without the intuitions mobilized in (a). It is because we are startled by the last phrase of (G) that we conclude that the author cannot make it true that Giselda did the right thing when she killed her baby because of its gender. Although this may be more contentious, it may also be because we are startled by this last phrase that it sounds convincing to say that we cannot imagine that killing her baby is the right thing for Giselda to do.

In other words, (a) is a genuine puzzle, whatever our philosophical views are. (b) and (c), in contrast, only become puzzling if we make some philosophical assumptions about the nature of truth in fiction or about the connection between imagination and fictionality. Anyone who resists any of these philosophical assumptions will not find (b) or (c) particularly puzzling. One possible example is Luis Buñuel:

[3] Brian Weatherson (p. 2) calls (a) the phenomenological puzzle, (b) the imaginative puzzle and (c) the alethic puzzle. Kendall Walton (p. 138) goes along with Weatherson's labels, but renames (c) 'the fictionality puzzle'.

[4] Walton, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 68 (1994), pp. 27–50, at p. 37.

[5] Walton, *Mimesis and Make-Believe* (Harvard UP, 1990); G. Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge UP, 1990).

> When I reached the age of sixty, I finally understood the perfect innocence of the imagination. It took that long for me to admit that … the concepts of sin or evil simply didn't apply; I was free to let my imagination go wherever it chose, even if it produced bloody images and hopelessly decadent ideas.[6]

It is not clear that Buñuel is talking about cases like (b), but it is clear that he thought that moral concepts simply fail to apply in the case of imagination. Thus he would have denied that everyone experiences resistance when trying to imagine that Giselda's action is morally praiseworthy. Having observed the bewilderment of a number of my students at puzzle (b), I doubt that Buñuel would be an isolated case. I do not intend this quotation from him to be an argument against the validity of puzzle (b). I do not intend to say much about puzzle (b) at all. But I find it important to point out that (a) is puzzling without any philosophical background assumption. In any case, this paper is about puzzle (a).

Puzzle (a) is, then, as follows. When we read (G), the last phrase of this utterance startles us and makes us stop. Our engagement with this fictional text is interrupted for a moment. What is to be explained is why we are reluctant to (or find it difficult to) engage with such fictional narratives, why these sentences are 'striking, jarring in a way that the earlier sentences are not' (Weatherson, p. 2), or, to put it differently, why these sentences 'pop out' (Gendler, p. 159). We feel that there is something wrong with these sentences; sometimes we go back and read them again to check whether we got them right the first time. Our engagement with the fiction breaks down.

II. SEMANTICS *VERSUS* PRAGMATICS

If we try to specify what sentences trigger imaginative resistance, we face the following two problems. First, what kinds of sentences trigger imaginative resistance very much depends on the individual *S* who is engaging with the fictional text, *S*'s moral sensibility, *S*'s sense of humour, etc. The division between sentences that trigger imaginative resistance and the ones that do not is different for each person.

One could assert that those people who do not experience imaginative resistance in response to morally questionable claims just lack moral sensitivity and can be disregarded. The assumption that some people have the 'right' kind of moral sensitivity, whereas others have a deviant one, is extremely problematic in itself, but another worry is that while some moral absolutist could advance this point, the same strategy would not work in

---

[6] L. Buñuel, *My Last Sigh* (New York: Knopf, 1983), pp. 173–4.

another important type of cases where imaginative resistance occurs, when an unfunny joke is claimed to be funny, for example.[7] Even those who believe that there is one right kind of moral attitude will be unlikely to think that there is one right kind of sense of humour.

Secondly, even the same readers may experience imaginative resistance when they encounter a sentence in one context, while not experiencing anything of that sort when they encounter it in another context. Some sentences that normally trigger imaginative resistance fail to do so if they are embedded in a surreal *genre* or a parody.

One possible way of accounting for the context-dependence of imaginative resistance would be to limit the scope of the *explanandum* to what Gendler calls 'non-distorting fiction', fiction in the case of which 'in general (though there will be numerous exceptions), if something is true in the fictional world, it will be true in the actual world'.[8] The problem with this suggestion is that it is unclear where the distinction between distorting and non-distorting fiction lies. A piece of fiction can start out as non-distorting and change slowly into distorting fiction, like Boris Vian's *L'écume des jours*. It can also go back and forth between these two subcategories, like Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*. Further, as we sometimes encounter imaginative resistance even in the case of distorting fiction, this way of limiting the scope of the phenomenon seems misleading. Moreover, in order for this suggestion to help, we would need to assume that normally we interpret sentences as being part of non-distorting fiction. But it is not clear that this would be true of everyone. A literary theorist who works on surrealism, for example, may not be so inclined. In short, restricting the problem to 'realistic' or 'non-distorting' fiction does not get rid of the dependence of our 'imaginative resistance' reactions on the context and *genre* in which the sentence occurs.

To summarize, the set of sentences that trigger imaginative resistance varies from person to person and from context to context. One important desideratum for any solution to the problem of imaginative resistance is to explain why this is so.

In order to give an account of what sentences trigger imaginative resistance, we need to explain in virtue of what properties sentences trigger imaginative resistance. But the answer to this question depends on what properties we consider to be possible candidates. One way to set out to answer this question would be to look for *semantic* properties in virtue of which sentences trigger imaginative resistance. This is what the overwhelming majority of the proposed solutions to the puzzle have endeavoured to

[7] See Walton, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality', pp. 43–4.
[8] See Gendler, 'The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance', *Journal of Philosophy*, 97 (2000), pp. 55–81, at pp. 77, 76.

do.[9] Steve Yablo says that those sentences trigger imaginative resistance which contain response-enabled (or 'grokking') concepts. Brian Weatherson says that those sentences do so which violate his 'virtue' condition: we experience imaginative resistance when the higher-level properties described in a sentence are not what they are supposed to be on the basis of the in-virtue-of relation and the description of lower-order facts. Gendler says ('Imaginative Resistance Revisited', p. 162) that those sentences trigger imaginative resistance which 'express appraisals that are either mandated by or prohibited by' whatever the reader takes to be true in the story. These accounts give very different solutions to the puzzle, but they all specify semantic properties in virtue of which sentences trigger imaginative resist-ance. These semantic properties can be indexed to the agent who is reading the text, and at least in Gendler's case, they can also be sensitive to the context of the sentence within the fictional work.

I aim to show that looking for semantic properties in virtue of which sentences trigger imaginative resistance is a mistake. Imaginative resistance is not a semantic but a pragmatic phenomenon. More precisely, it is very similar to one of the most widely analysed pragmatic phenomena, conversational implicature. Hence when looking for properties in virtue of which sentences trigger imaginative resistance, we should not be focusing on what is said by these sentences, but rather on what is implicated by them.

III. CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

I shall argue that the experience of imaginative resistance when reading a text can be explained with the help of the widely analysed phenomenon of conversational implicature. Grice's account of conversational implicature is as follows. When we are having a conversation, we assume that the others observe what Grice calls the 'co-operative principle': when the co-operative

[9] G. Currie, 'Desire in Imagination', in T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds), *Imagination, Conceivability, and Possibility* (Oxford UP, 2002), pp. 201–21, 'The Capacities that Enable us to Produce and Consume Art', in M. Kieran and D. Lopes (eds), *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts*, henceforth *IPA* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 293–304, and 'Imagination and Make-believe', in B. Gaut and D. Lopes (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 335–46; G. Currie and I. Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds* (Oxford UP, 2002), ch. 2.1–2; D. Matravers, 'Fictional Assent and the (So-called) "Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance"', in *IPA*, pp. 91–106; K. Stock, 'The Tower of Goldbach and Other Impossible Tales', in *IPA*, pp. 107–24, and 'Resisting Imaginative Resistance', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 55 (2005), pp. 607–24; J.M. Weinberg and A. Meskin, 'Puzzling over the Imagination', in Nichols (ed.), *The Architecture of the Imagination*, pp. 175–202; E. John, 'Literary Fiction and the Philosophical Value of Detail', in *IPA*, pp. 142–59; S. Yablo, 'Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda', in Gendler and Hawthorne (eds), *Imagination, Conceivability, and Possibility*, pp. 441–92; Weatherson; Gendler, 'The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance' and 'Imaginative Resistance Revisited'.

principle appears to be violated, we try to interpret the speaker's utterance in a way which would be consistent with the co-operative principle. As Grice says,

> The hearer is faced with a minor problem: how can [the speaker's] saying what he did say be reconciled with the supposition that he is observing the overall co-operative principle? This situation is one that characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature.[10]

The hearer tries to reconcile what the speaker says with the co-operative principle by asking himself what the speaker could have meant which would not violate the co-operative principle. This directs his attention to what the speaker thinks and what he may have wanted the hearer to think.

My claim is that something analogous happens when we read sentences like (G). Like conversational implicature, imaginative resistance is also triggered by sentences that seem to violate the co-operative principle.

The root of the analogy between conversational implicature and imaginative resistance is the following. When we read a piece of fiction, we assume that the author observes something reminiscent of the co-operative principle. As Gregory Currie emphasizes, we can 'think of story-telling as a rather one-sided conversation'.[11] Thus when we are reading a story we take the author to be observing some kind of co-operative principle, just as we take people with whom we are having conversations to do so. The co-operative principle we take the author to observe can vary depending on the *genre*, as I shall show in §V. Still, whenever we read a fictional text, we assume that the author observes some kind of co-operative principle.

When we read a sentence like (G), this utterance seems to violate the co-operative principle. We are trying to reconcile this utterance with the principle by asking ourselves what the author could have meant which would not violate the co-operative principle. This directs our attention to the author, or rather to the author's act of utterance. But directing our attention to the author's act of utterance means directing our attention away from the world of fiction, which is, by definition, the product of, and as a result, different from, the author's act of utterance: this is the reason why our engagement with the fictional work breaks down and we experience a pop-out sentence.

To go through this more carefully, here is Grice's analysis of how we decipher conversational implicatures. His example (p. 24) is a conversation

---

[10] P. Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', in P. Cole and J.L. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. III: *Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press 1975), repr. in his *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Harvard UP, 1989), pp. 22–57, at p. 30.
[11] Currie, 'Characters and Contingency', *Dialectica*, 52 (2003), pp. 137–48, at p. 146; see also his *The Nature of Fiction*.

between *A* and *B* about a mutual friend *C*, who now works in a bank. When *B* says 'He likes his colleagues and he hasn't been to prison yet',

> *A* might reason as follows: (1) *B* has apparently violated the maxim 'Be relevant' and so may be regarded as having flouted one of the maxims conjoining perspicuity, yet I have no reason to suppose that he is opting out from the operation of the co-operative principle; (2) given the circumstances, I can regard his irrelevance as only apparent if, and only if, I suppose him to think that *C* is potentially dishonest; (3) *B* knows that I am capable of working out step (2). So *B* implicates that *C* is potentially dishonest (p. 31).

It is important that Grice is not committed to saying that we go through steps (1)–(3) explicitly. The understanding of conversational implicature is very quick and automatic; we do it all the time. His analysis is not an analysis of our conscious thinking when deciphering conversational implicatures: it is an analysis of what happens in our minds when we hear sentences like 'he hasn't been to prison yet', presumably unconsciously.[12]

What matters for my analysis of imaginative resistance is that the transition from (1) to (2) directs *A*'s attention to what *B* thinks (and, if we go as far as (3), what *B* wants *A* to think). In short, (2) directs *A*'s attention to *B*. But in the case of engaging with a fictional text, this means that the reader's attention is directed at the author, or more precisely to the act of the author's utterance. But the act of the author's utterance is by definition outside the world of fiction. Thus as readers' attention is directed away from the world of fiction, our engagement with the fictional work breaks down for a moment: we experience a pop-out, a certain resistance to going along with the text.

When Walton's example (G) startles us and makes us stop, we experience something very similar to the starting-point of understanding conversational implicatures: this cannot possibly be what is meant here. Whoever utters (G) appears not to observe the co-operative principle. But why would the speaker violate the co-operative principle? Maybe, rather, he is blatantly failing to fulfil one of the maxims, signalling that he must have meant something else. Maybe he is joking? But at this point our attention is being drawn to the maker of the utterance, the author. Once our attention is drawn to the author, it is drawn away from the world of fiction: we stop engaging with the fictional work.

Another famous example of imaginative resistance comes from Stephen Yablo (p. 485):

---

[12] See K. Bach, 'The Top 10 Misconceptions about Implicature', in B.J. Birner and G. Ward (eds), *Drawing the Boundaries of Meaning* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006), pp. 21–30.

> They flopped down under the great maple. One more item to find, and yet the game seemed lost. Hang on, Sally said. It's staring us in the face. This is a *maple* tree we're under. She grabbed a jagged five-fingered leaf. Here was the oval they needed! They ran off to claim their prize.

When we reach the penultimate sentence, it really seems that the author appears to violate the co-operative principle. He appears to violate what could be thought of as a minimum requirement of the co-operative principle, namely, that there should be no blatant contradiction between two adjacent sentences (without there being any indication that he is aware of this contradiction). But we have no reason to suppose that the author in fact violates the co-operative principle. So we stop, go back, and ask what he may have meant. But by asking this question we are attending to the intentions of the author and not to the fictional world. Our attention is drawn away from the world of fiction; our engagement with the fictional text breaks down. Similar analyses could be given for the other famous examples of imaginative resistance.

I said that a minimal requirement of the co-operative principle is that there should be no blatant contradiction between two adjacent sentences (without there being any indication that the author is aware of this contradiction). But is this so? We do not encounter the phenomenon of imaginative resistance when we are reading Gendler's elaborate *Tower of Goldbach* story (about twelve no longer being the sum of two prime numbers), in spite of the fact that it is mathematically impossible for the main premise of the story to be true.[13] But then how is it that we do experience imaginative resistance when we are reading Yablo's story? I need to give an explanation not just of why imaginative resistance occurs when it does (as in the case of Yablo's or Walton's story), but also of why it does *not* occur when it does not (as in Gendler's *Tower of Goldbach* or Weatherson's time-travel examples).[14]

The response is that in Yablo's story we encounter a blatant contradiction between two sentences where one immediately follows the other. In Gendler's we do not encounter anything of this kind. To put it very simply, in Gendler's story, impossibility is a semantic feature: the sentences in the story are about an impossible state of affairs. But, as I have pointed out, imaginative resistance is not a semantic but a pragmatic phenomenon. If this is true, then it is not surprising that we do not experience imaginative resistance when reading the *Tower of Goldbach* story. At no point in our

---

[13] Gendler, 'The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance', pp. 67–8; the same point applies to Weatherson's time-travel examples (p. 9).

[14] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify my position on this.

engagement with Gendler's narrative do we stop and think that this cannot possibly be what the author means (which then would direct our attention to the author and away from the world of fiction). The author tells a story about an impossible state of affairs and she does this well, without making us wonder about whether she really means what she is saying.

When we are reading Yablo's story, in contrast, we encounter an odd clash between two sentences one of which immediately follows the other. Again the problem here is not that it is impossible for both sentences to be true; it is impossible for all (or at least most) of the sentences in Gendler's story to be true, yet there is no sign of imaginative resistance when we read that story. The fact that it is impossible for both sentences in Yablo's story to be true at the same time is a semantic fact, and if I am right, imaginative resistance is not a semantic phenomenon. The reason why we encounter imaginative resistance when we are reading Yablo's story has to do with the pragmatics of these sentences: it seems to go against our conversational practices that anyone would utter the one after the other without signalling awareness of the fact that there is a blatant contradiction between them. When we read one sentence that says p and then read the next sentence that says not-p, we stop and ask ourselves whether we have misunderstood something or whether the author really meant to say what he seemed to be saying. But this directs our attention to the author himself and away from the world of fiction – we encounter imaginative resistance.

A more general worry about the account sketched here could be that it is too unspecific. I have argued that we encounter imaginative resistance when the author appears to violate the co-operative principle. But I have said very little about the details of the maxims of the co-operative principle which we implicitly take the author to observe.

This lack of specificity is intentional. I shall argue in §V that the co-operative principle which we implicitly take the author to observe is very different depending on the *genre* of the fictional discourse in question. In the case of realistic fiction it is quite strict. In the case of absurd novels, it is much more lenient. As a result, there is no universal answer to the question about what exact maxims we expect the author to observe. Grice (pp. 26–7) gives this list of maxims when he describes the co-operative principle of our everyday conversations (he did not intend the list to be exhaustive, and did not consider these maxims to be equally important):

a. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required
c. Do not say what you believe to be false

d.   Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence
e.   Be relevant
f.   Avoid obscurity of expression
g.   Avoid ambiguity
h.   Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
i.   Be orderly.

While most of these maxims seem to play a role in our engagement with some *genres* (it is unclear how maxims (c) and (d) apply in the case of fictional discourse), none of them plays a role in our engagement with all *genres*. Maxim (b) or (h), for example, is intentionally and consistently ignored in *nouveau roman* narratives. Maxim (e), in turn, is very rarely observed in absurd novels. Further, not even every realist fiction observes the last four maxims.

Grice's maxims are supposed to fill in the details of the rather general principle that we expect the author to make his 'conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which he is engaged' (p. 26). But what is the 'accepted purpose and direction' of fictional discourse? Without attempting to answer this complex question, it needs to be noted that whatever it is, it must presuppose that the reader can understand and follow the author's story. Thus a minimal version of the co-operative principle in the case of fictional discourse would be that we expect the author to make his 'conversational contribution such as is required' for the reader to be able to understand and follow the story. If we are left wondering whether the author can possibly mean what he has just said, then he has failed to make his 'conversational contribution such as is required', since this would prevent us from being able to understand and follow the story. But as different utterances prevent the reader from being able to understand and follow the stories of different *genres*, the maxims we implicitly take the author to observe will also be different depending on the *genre* of the story we are engaging with – as I shall show in §V.

Finally, I need to address a very simple potential worry about applying Gricean considerations about conversational implicature to solve the puzzle of imaginative resistance. Grice's account of conversational implicature, and especially his analysis of the four maxims of the co-operative principle, has been criticized.[15] One may wonder whether these criticisms would jeopardize my account of imaginative resistance. My response is that my analogy

---

[15] See D. Wilson and D. Sperber, 'On Grice's Theory of Conversation', in P. Werth (ed.), *Conversation and Discourse* (New York: St Martins Press, 1981), pp. 155–78; W.A. Davis, *Implicature* (Cambridge UP, 1998); see also Bach, 'Conversational Implicature', *Mind and Language*, 9 (1994), pp. 124–62, and 'The Top 10 Misconceptions about Implicature', for a thorough analysis.

between conversational implicature and imaginative resistance only con-
cerns the existence of the co-operative principle and our initial reaction to
sentences seemingly violating the co-operative principle; our attention is
drawn to what the speaker may have meant which would not violate the co-
operative principle. What I say about imaginative resistance does not
presuppose anything Grice says about what comes after this initial reaction
in the process of deciphering conversational implicatures. As most of the
objections to Grice's account of conversational implicature (especially
Sperber's and Davis' objections) are precisely about these later stages of
the process of deciphering conversational implicatures, my solution to the
puzzle of imaginative resistance is not jeopardized by these objections.[16]

IV. THE AUTHOR *VERSUS* THE FICTIONAL CHARACTER

A striking feature of imaginative resistance is that we have no problem
engaging with fictional works where the *characters* have different moral/
aesthetic/humour standards from ours. If I read that one of the fictional
characters, Bill, utters (G), this does not prevent my engagement with the
text: I do not experience imaginative resistance. I am likely to come to think
that Bill is a terrible person (or that maybe he is joking). But I do not stop
engaging with the fiction. I stop engaging with the fiction only if I take the
author to be saying (G).

   The same goes for non-moral instances of imaginative resistance. If the
author says that a really dumb knock-knock joke is hilariously funny,[17] then
we experience imaginative resistance. But if one of the fictional characters
says so, then we do not. As Yablo says (unpublished MS), 'surrounding a
knock-knock joke with people who crack up when they hear it does not
make it funny; it makes the people around it into goofballs, or anyway bad
judges of funniness'. If we want to explain imaginative resistance, we also
need to explain why we experience it only when the author claims some-
thing and not when one of the fictional characters does so.

---

[16] I am not the first person to bring in Gricean considerations in explaining imaginative
resistance. Tamar Gendler ('Imaginative Resistance Revisited', p. 163) writes that the explana-
tion of pop-outs is at least partly '*quasi*-Gricean: since the author couldn't be using the words
to tell us something informative (merely) about the fictional world, we look for some other way
that the phrase might be informative'. But while according to her the Gricean processes
remind us that the sentences we read are really about the actual world, I have argued that
they direct our attention to the author's act of utterance. An even more important difference is
that while Gendler, in spite of her reference to Grice, attributes the phenomenon of
imaginative resistance to certain semantic properties of certain sentences, I argue that imagin-
ative resistance is a pragmatic phenomenon.
[17] Walton, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality', pp. 43–4.

The account I outlined above can explain this puzzling difference. If Bill utters (G) to Jane, we are startled. This cannot possibly be what Bill meant. Bill appears not to observe the co-operative principle which we take to govern their conversation. But why is he failing to observe this co-operative principle? Maybe he is blatantly failing to fulfil one of the maxims, thus signalling that he must have meant something else. Maybe he is joking? None of this stops us from engaging with the fictional work, as Bill, to whom our attention is drawn, is part of the fiction: he is a fictional character.

This important distinction between attending to the author and attending to one of the characters may also help to explain another puzzling feature of imaginative resistance. It seems that we experience imaginative resistance much less often (if at all) when engaging with visual fiction, films, theatre performances or narrative paintings. There are pieces of visual fiction, like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, that present us with a morally objectionable perspective. We may resist engagement with works of this kind; for example, we may walk out of the cinema. But it is unlikely that we experience, at any point of the film, the 'pop-out' Gendler describes, or, as Weatherson would say, that we experience any scenes as 'jarring', in a way that earlier scenes were not. It is difficult to imagine what would be an equivalent of the bewilderment we experience at the penultimate sentence of Yablo's maple leaf story if we watched a film version of this story. An account of imaginative resistance must be able to explain this difference between literary and visual fictions.

I do not mean to suggest that we never experience 'pop-outs' when we are watching a movie or a theatre performance. There are some cases when our engagement with a visual fiction does break down in a way similar to the classic literary instances of imaginative resistance.[18] But these instances are much less common than literary examples of imaginative resistance.

[18] One possible example is the following. If a fictional character looks into the camera, this can have the effect that is similar to the pop-outs we experience in literary examples of imaginative resistance. In Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou*, Ferdinand and Marianne are driving a convertible and we see them from the back of the car. She turns around and starts waving. Ferdinand asks who she is waving to, to which she responds 'To the audience'. At this point, most viewers experience a pop-out; their engagement with the visual fiction breaks down for a moment. This pop-out experience, which could be taken to be quite similar to the one we experience when we read (G), may be explained in the same way as literary cases of imaginative resistance. Maybe we can talk about co-operative principles which visual fictions observe. Film theorists tell us that an important minimal 'co-operative principle' that most non-experimental films observe is that characters do not look into the camera, as it was discovered very early on that this distracts the audience from engaging with the movie: M. Vernet, 'Le regard à la caméra: figures de l'absence', *Iris*, 1 (1983), pp. 31–45; F. Casetti, 'Les yeux dans les yeux', *Communications*, 38 (1983), pp. 78–97. If this is true, then Godard's sketch apparently violates this co-operative principle. Hence our attention is directed to the apparent violator of this co-operative principle, the author. This, as in the literary cases, prevents us from engaging with the fiction: we experience pop-out.

My explanation of why we encounter fewer instances of imaginative re-
sistance is simple. In the case of visual fiction, it is difficult to see what would
be the equivalent of the (literary) author's utterances. In visual fiction, all
sentences are uttered by the fictional characters. But, as I have remarked, in
the case of literary fiction, these utterances (by the fictional characters) do
not trigger imaginative resistance. What triggers imaginative resistance in
the case of literary fiction is that *the author* says something which appears
to violate the co-operative principle. But in visual fiction, authors are much
more disguised. We do not catch them saying something that appears to
violate the co-operative principle, as they do not literally utter anything.

V. THE CONTEXT-DEPENDENCE OF
IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE

I said at the beginning of the paper that which sentences trigger imaginative
resistance very much depends on the individual who is engaging with
the fiction, our moral sensibility, our sense of humour, etc. Further, even the
same readers may experience imaginative resistance when encountering a
sentence in one context, while not experiencing anything of that sort on
encountering it in another context. One important desideratum for any
solution to the problem of imaginative resistance is to explain this.

In order to show how the account I outlined above satisfies this desidera-
tum, I need to return to the concept of conversational implicature. In an
everyday conversation, the sentences that appear to violate the co-operative
principle can be very different depending on the person who understands
them and on the context of the conversation. As Grice says (p. 31),

> To work out that a particular conversational implicature is present, the hearer will
> rely on the following data: (1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together
> with the identity of any references that may be involved; (2) the co-operative principle
> and its maxims; (3) the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance; (4) other items
> of background knowledge; and (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant
> items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both
> participants know or assume this to be the case.

For my purposes, (2), (3) and (4) are particularly important: in the case of
conversational implicature, whether an utterance appears to violate the co-
operative principle depends on what the co-operative principle is and it also
depends on both the context of the utterance and the background
knowledge of the hearer.

Similarly, in the case of reading a fictional text, the sentences that appear
to violate the co-operative principle can be very different depending on the

sensitivity of the reader (which would be the equivalent of (4)) and on the context in the fictional work (the equivalent of (3)).

Further, whether an utterance appears to violate the co-operative principle clearly depends on what this co-operative principle is, and this may help to explain why the experience of imaginative resistance is sensitive to the *genre* of the text. Whether a sentence triggers imaginative resistance depends on the *genre* of the text it is imbedded in. The same sentence is more likely to trigger imaginative resistance in a realistic novel than it is in an absurd one. An account of imaginative resistance must be able to explain this difference.

In her original account ('The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance', p. 76), Gendler limited the scope of the puzzle of imaginative resistance to what she called 'non-distorting fictions', fiction in the case of which 'in general (though there will be numerous exceptions), if something is true in the fictional world, it will be true in the actual world'. Although it is true that most cases of imaginative resistance occurs in texts that are broadly realistic, it would be a mistake to deny that imaginative resistance can occur in what Gendler calls 'distorting fictions'.

My account explains both why we find instances of imaginative resistance in all *genres* and why they are more frequent in the case of realistic *genres*. As we take the author to respect some kind of co-operative principle regardless of the *genre* of the text, we can experience imaginative resistance in all *genres*. But the co-operative principle which we take the author to observe can be different in the case of different texts from different *genres*. Hence the sentences that appear to violate these instances of the co-operative principle can also be very different depending on the *genre* of the text. In the case of realist fiction, the co-operative principle may be quite strict; in the case of a *nouveau roman*-style work of fiction, it may be quite unusual, and in the case of a surrealist novel, it may be quite lenient, for example.

As the strictness of the co-operative principle depends on the *genre*, the likelihood of sentences appearing to violate it also depends on the *genre*. When we are reading a piece of realistic fiction, we assume that the co-operative principle the author is observing is fairly strict. Thus there may be more sentences that appear to violate this strict co-operative principle.

If, in contrast, we are reading an absurd novel, we probably do not assume that the author is observing a strict co-operative principle. Yet we do assume that the author is observing some kind of co-operative principle, maybe a very lenient one. As a result, we can experience some sentences even if they are embedded in this *genre*, as popping out, as seemingly violating the co-operative principle we take the author to be following. It will just be less likely than in realistic fiction.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to point out that this solution to the problem of imaginative resistance remains neutral with regard to the scope of the problem. The puzzle of imaginative resistance was initially raised as a puzzle about sentences expressing morally dubious claims. Much of the vast literature on imaginative resistance was concerned with broadening the scope of the puzzle: besides sentences expressing morally despicable propositions, it seems that lots of other kinds of sentences also trigger imaginative resistance: evaluative sentences, sentences describing five-fingered maple leaves as oval, and sentences describing unfunny jokes as funny. Some accounts of imaginative resistance have been criticized because their explanatory scheme worked only in a subset of these cases, but not in others (as in Yablo's and Weatherson's criticisms of Gendler's original account). An important challenge many accounts of imaginative resistance faced was to find a common denominator that sentences of these diverse kinds all share.

If, as I suggest, imaginative resistance is not a semantic phenomenon, but pragmatic, then this common denominator will not be a semantic property all of these sentences share, but a pragmatic feature, the fact that they all appear to violate the co-operative principle which we take the author to be observing. This leaves open what semantic properties these sentences have – whether they are about morality, humour or oval maple leaves. Thus my account allows for the diverse variety of sentences that induce imaginative resistance.[19]

Syracuse University, New York