

The Concept of Involvement and the Paradox of Fiction

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Abstract: I will divide my paper into two parts. First of all, I will discuss three tentative solutions to the paradox of fiction that are, in my opinion, untenable. When arguing against these theories, special weight will be given to a single question: why and how is it possible to calm someone by repeating that what they are reading or looking at is a fiction? In the second part, I will suggest a realistic and anti-judgmentalist solution to the paradox. It rests on what I believe to be general features of imagination, but it also implies an understanding of the primary relationship of involvement – a relationship that, in a way, echoes Heidegger’s notion of *Befindlichkeit*. A concluding remark is devoted to the origin of the paradox: in my opinion it is not only an aftermath of a cognitive theory of emotion, but is also a clue to a mistaken attitude toward fiction.¹

1. *The nature of the paradox and the idola theatri*

The paradox of fiction originates in the fact that we respond emotionally to characters and events we know to be fictional. On the other hand, emotions are connected to events, and it seems that we cannot feel them if we deny the existence of the event that has brought them to life.

Hence the paradox, which might be formulated as follows:

1. we feel emotions regarding fictional events;
2. a condition for feeling an emotion about a state of affairs P is to believe that P really does or did happen;
3. we do not believe that the episodes narrated in a work of fiction really do or did happen or that the propositions asserting them are true.

¹ This paper’s main arguments were presented at workshops and conferences in Milan, Urbino, Lecce and Geneva. I thank all the participants for their interesting and stimulating remarks. I am greatly indebted to Robert Hopkins, Cain Todd and Silvio Bozzi for providing comments helpful in improving and clarifying a previous version of this paper.

There does not appear to be any easy solution, because the suppositions behind this formulation are plausible. To solve the problem, we need to refute at least one of them, and philosophical debate has provided us with three solutions I will refer to, in Baconian fashion, as three *idola theatri*. Let us start with the one that denies the last proposition of the paradox, and asserts that we do somehow believe – when reading – in the fictional worlds of literature.

A. *Can it really be said that we do not believe in the truth of the episodes narrated in a work of fiction?* The first move is to offer a negative answer to this question. To do this, we need not imagine that, after closing the book, the reader really believes that Polyphemus is as real as her nextdoor neighbor: she knows very well that the gigantic one-eyed son of Poseidon is a mythological creature, but the state of reading relegates to the realm of oblivion her awareness that the story does not belong to the real world. As a matter of fact, reading a novel seems to be marked by a dual forgetfulness: the reader forgets, *pro tempore*, both the system of her beliefs and her actual awareness of the *fictional* character of the tale. This might allow her to entertain *for a while* the belief that Ulysses is in danger, without permanently altering her basic system of beliefs: she buries herself in the book and she *believes* that Ulysses is in danger – as long as she is reading.²

If we adopt this perspective, the paradox vanishes: the third proposition must be denied, since we entertain a fleeting belief that the events narrated by a story are true.

There are at least three reasons that support this thesis. First of all, it has the advantage of *explaining* why we feel emotions about fictional contexts: we feel emotions because we deceive ourselves, though only for a short time. This first reason is joined by a second: fictional emotions are separated from real emotions and do not intertwine with them – they belong, in fact, to different horizons of belief that cannot be integrated with each other. Hence the temporal *closure* of the emotions we feel regarding fictional contexts – a closure nicely explained by the *pro tempore* character of the illusion in which we are immersed.

The third reason brings us to the need for quiet and isolation that deeply permeates our attitude as readers or spectators. Reality must be forgotten because it prevents us from believing that the faint voice of the imagination has become the voice of the world.

These considerations may be sufficient to explain what may make this thesis plausible, but I believe there are strong arguments that show it is inadmissible. The first raises the question of whether it is possible, though irrational, to be-

² A similar thesis is advanced by Eva Schaper (1978), Suits (2006) and Paskow (2004).

lieve in the truth of what otherwise is known to be false or impossible. In other words: is it possible to believe *pro tempore* what plainly contradicts what we *firmly* and *permanently* believe?

I do not think so. To believe, it will not suffice to have a peculiar state of mind – a sort of caring of the objects we are aware of. As Wittgenstein argued, I can call an act of mind about *p* an act of believing that *p* only if it rests on a general system of dispositional beliefs and certainties – those basic beliefs and certainties that make up a general picture of the world. The reader is involved in the fictional events and takes seriously what happens to the character in the fiction, but could we *label* her state of mind a belief, if what she thinks and feels does not interact with, and may contradict, her general picture of the world?

Nevertheless, it could be objected that we are not always aware of the arguments that should prevent us from believing in unbelievable propositions. We do have irrational beliefs and feelings: sometimes we simply forget our good reasons and make the most incredible mistakes. In the case of imaginative contexts, however, things are more complex: forgetting, in this case, is not enough, because my loosening of my grip on reality does not yet mean acceptance of the fiction I am engaged in as being real. Here, forgetting will not suffice: it would be necessary, also, to *deceive ourselves* and not to not acknowledge the fictional character of a story. Sometimes deception may be possible, but what do I have to forget in order not to acknowledge that it is fictional that Jack's magical beanstalk reaches the sky in one night? Forgetting something is possible; it is not possible, on the other hand, to forget the *form* of reality – those very basic beliefs and certainties that are part of our world picture and define the realm of our possible beliefs, and this should prevent us from believing in many stories that nevertheless stir our emotions.

Hence our second argument. Works of fiction are *imaginative*: that is, they are marked by a series of features that explicitly draw our attention to the *fictionality* that sets them apart. Let us consider fables. Fairy tales are told in a particular tone of voice, and that tone of voice is echoed in the clauses that open the narrative, the stubborn repetitions, the compliance with a model repeated thousands of times, the presence of things or events that do not exist in everyday life – all this seems to encourage us *explicitly* to acknowledge the *imaginary* character of what we are reading. Were it true that to feel emotions we have to believe in the truth of the fiction in which we are immersed, it would be hard to understand why there is this *underscoring* of the imaginary nature of stories: would it not ruin the effect? But this is not yet the point: to understand a work of imagination we *have* to realize its nature, and the forms of fantasy are not obstacles, but *conditions* that make the emotions we actu-

ally feel possible.³ Some fairy tales are cruel: in Grimm's version of the fable, Cinderella's stepsisters are blinded by pigeons. A grisly ending that does not arouse – and must not arouse – a feeling of pity: whoever listens to the fairy tale does not believe that something similar has occurred and she is not compelled to understand such awful and irremedial suffering in its full meaning and to think it through in all its consequences. On the contrary: the listener understands it for what it is – an event that has to be considered in the simplicity of its narrative function, in its being nothing more than the long-desired punishment that gives the tale a happy ending.

It follows that, to respond emotionally to fictions as we are expected to do, we must understand them as fictions: *fictional marks* – which so often underscore relevant passages in tales, plays, and operas – are therefore not signs of an unfortunate pen, but literary indices that suggest to the reader the right emotional reactions to fictional events.

To sum up: *emotions depend on what we are focusing on*, and to focus on what is not really in front of us, we may need quiet and isolation, but this is not the same as to say that we need to *forget* what is not the goal of our present focus of attention, let alone our general beliefs.

B. *Can we feel emotions for something or someone only if we believe that they really exist and that they are as the story tells us?* The premise of the paradox of fiction lies in a cognitive theory of emotions. To feel *emotions* we need to *believe* that the world is made thus and not otherwise, and according to many philosophers, emotions are complex experiences that have a physiological and phenomenological component (a certain set of sensations that “we experience or feel”), to which is added an intentional dimension without which we cannot assume an orientation with respect to the world. Many have claimed that this intentional attitude must have the features of belief. An emotion is rational if it is oriented correctly with respect to the world, and it can be oriented in a correct, rational way if, and only if, it is based on a set of beliefs – but that is the point: an emotion does not necessarily have to be rational, and as far as our problem is concerned, there is no need for it to be. Emotions need to refer to something, but there is no need to assume that the vehicle of intentional reference has to be a belief: a thought could be sufficient on its own.⁴ After all, it

³ On this subject, see Weinrich (2001) and Novitz (1980).

⁴ As Noel Carroll argues, when standing on a precipice I may entertain the thought of falling over the edge and I may be frightened by the mere content of my thought. ‘Thought – Carroll adds – here is a term of art that is meant to contrast belief. To have a belief is to entertain a proposition assertively; to have a thought is to entertain it non assertively’ (1990: 80). One of the first explicit statements of Thought Theory was made by P. Lamarque 1981: 291-304.

has often been observed that there are persons who need only *think* of certain animals – spiders, snakes, or mice – to feel a strong sentiment of disgust or terror; emotions are like that: whether we approve or not, they make themselves felt prior to the judgment of reason.

These considerations hit the target.⁵ There are no cogent reasons to state that emotions must always imply beliefs, and there is strong phenomenological evidence speaking against this theory. Yet there is still something unsatisfactory about the way the denial of this thesis urges us to explain our paradox and, at the same time, the nature of emotions. Let me dwell on the following example. A child is afraid because she believes that the darkness may conceal a threatening creature, and she calls her parents in search of comfort; it is not a hard task: along with gestures of affection, the parents will have to stage an improbable search for the monster, opening drawers or closet doors, pronouncing words like “See? There’s no one there!” The fear vanishes, but every gesture that brings a negative response to the question “is the monster in here?” implicitly forces the child to think precisely of what she fears, and this seems to cast a shadow of sadism over the image of those loving parents. Actually, that is not so: this course of conduct makes sense, because the emotions are not satisfied with just *representing* their object, they must also somehow sense its presence and force us to think that that presence has to do with us, *involves* us. It is not enough to *assume* that there is a monster in the drawer in order to be frightened by that dangerous creature, because by entertaining non-assertively the proposition *p* – as Carroll argues – I am not involved in a world in which the hypothetical fact that *p takes* – fictionally – *place*. By assuming *p* I take into account an hypothetical event that could happen or could have happened in my own world; by imagining *p*, I put myself in a fictional world in which the fictional event *p* does *happen*. Imagining is different from assuming: it implies an involvement in a given situation, though without implying a presumed existence.

Therefore, denying that emotions rest on beliefs is not the same as saying that to assume, represent, or think that *p* is enough to be emotionally moved by *p*. Emotions are not aroused by the thought of an object. Something else is needed: to feel an emotion for *p* I must be involved in a “world” – the world *p* belongs to.

⁵ As Robert Stecker writes (2011: 295), “The paradox was formulated during the heyday of the cognitive theory of emotions [...]. But now virtually no one accepts that to pity someone, one must believe that they exist or are suffering”.

C. *Do we really feel emotions regarding fictional situations?* – A negative answer to this question has been proposed by Walton. The paradox seems to entail an implicit definition of emotion: emotions are particular phenomenological and physiological states to which the moment of belief must necessarily be added. But if this is so, the paradox also offers us the path to its resolution: it invites us to assert that the things we feel when we read a story are not emotions but *quasi-emotions*, because one essential ingredient is missing – belief. We do not believe, but we can imagine, and what we feel can support a new game and a different attribution of meaning: I can pretend, on the basis of what I feel, that I am *truly* frightened about what Norman Bates – the psychopath in *Psycho* – is about to do. Just as a stick can support the practice of play and become a toy sword, so the state of mind I experience watching that film assigns me the task of pretending to be scared. It is in this form, according to Walton, that the state of mind experienced gains an intentional – and not only a causal – relationship with its object: only because I *pretend* to fear what Norman might do to Marion can the experience the film prompts in me gain an intentional reference – that same intentional reference that in genuine emotions is determined by the appearance of belief alongside the phenomenological states experienced.

Walton is probably right in underscoring some particular features of fictional emotions, but there is something in this solution that seems to me to narrow arbitrarily the extension of the concept of emotion. According to Walton, when imagining *p*, I can feel not a true emotion, but only a quasi-emotion, because an essential ingredient of true emotion is missing – my belief that *p* exists. But what about remembrance of a dangerous situation that no longer exists? I remember *p* – some time ago I involved you in a dangerous situation – and even if I do not believe that *p* still exists, a shiver of terror and remorse overwhelms me *now*. Is this just a physiological state? Is it a quasi-emotion I feel in a game of re-make belief? And what about expectations and their emotional nature? Sometimes we are delighted with the thought of a pleasant future event even if we do not mistake its future fulfillment for its real and current presence.⁶ Is delight at a future event a quasi-emotion or not? We feel emotions about what is uncertain: Peter is afraid that Mary doesn't love him anymore, but he doesn't believe that Mary doesn't love him anymore. So are emotions prompted by uncertainty true or quasi-emotions? To sum up: I believe that the intricacy of our emotional life is misconceived if we try to frame it in the language of emotions and quasi-emotions.

⁶ Similar arguments are put forward by Gaut (2003) and Goldie. For an interesting discussion of Gaut's examples, see K. Stock (2006).

There is a second argument that, in my opinion, greatly undermines the plausibility of Walton's theory. It is worth noticing that, according to Walton, the occurrence of quasi-emotions is made appropriate by what we have to make believe: the quasi-fear I feel looking at the shower scene from *Psycho* is coherent with what the film lets make believe – Marion is in danger. On the other hand, the phenomenological state of mind that prompts my *pretending* to be scared does not depend on my imagining or believing that Marion is danger: according to Walton, the mere act of seeing this very scene on the screen is enough to arouse it.⁷ We have observed as much: the model that guides Walton is that of the stick that can function as support for playful practice that “transforms” it into a sword – and the stick must exist independently of its acting as a prompt in play.

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to notice an asymmetry here: if I stop playing, the stick stops being a sword, though it does not vanish and remains what it is – a piece of wood. But what can be said about the sensation of fear that acts as the “prop” of my quasi-emotions? Let us reflect on the ability to calm someone who is in the grip of a (quasi-)emotion. I see that you are upset and I reassure you, repeating that it is only a story, and demonstrating, at the same time, that your emotions are sensitive to reason. Yet it is precisely this sensitivity that seems to be denied by Walton's theory, which explicitly urges us to think that the psycho-physiological aspect does not depend on the intentional interpretation we place on it.

It follows that, for Walton, my reminder to you that what you are seeing is only a film can, at best, force you to *reinterpret* what you are feeling, but in principle it should not be capable of assuaging your state of consciousness. If I remind you that it is only a game, I will make the sword disappear from your hand, but not the stick; likewise, if we take Walton seriously, if I remind you that it is just a film, for a moment I will put to rest the imaginative interpretation of your experiences, but I cannot alter its actuality. I do not think this is how matters stand. When I repeat to you that it is only a film, at least for a moment the fear subsides: the stick remains in the hands of the child who stops playing, but the shiver of terror subsides in the viewer, and for a moment she is forced to think of the imaginative scene from the perspective of reality – this is the asymmetry mentioned above.

It is not only Walton's thesis that is called into question by the ability to calm someone who is in the grip of a fictional emotion. On the contrary, this simple fact seems to be an inextricable puzzle for all the theories we have discussed so far. Let us look first at the oblivion theory. There is something perplexing

⁷ As Matravers explains (2001: 32). Walton's theory is best expounded in Walton (1991).

about the idea that the gesture used to calm someone who is too caught up in a narrated tale is actually to remind her of the something that she has, in a sense, *forgotten*. This idea seems implausible. Consider a scene like this: I remember something that upsets me and to comfort me, you could tell me it is *just* a memory. But if you say it is not because you have to *remind* me that it is a memory: it seems improbable that I might have forgotten that it is a memory or that I might have confused it with the present. And then: such behavior is also possible in the first person – I can tell *myself* that it is just a memory – but if *I can* do that, then what is it I am supposed to have forgotten? In my view, when I wish to banish an unpleasant memory, I tell myself it is a thing of the past, not to make up for my forgetfulness, but to express my decision to refuse to let myself be moved by something that no longer belongs to my primary field of engagement and that, precisely for this reason, no longer has an incoercible right over my emotions. This is also the case when it comes to products of imagination. If I tell you “it’s only a film: don’t worry” it is not because I need to remind you of a truth that has escaped you: I am not telling you anything new, but I am urging you to abandon, for a moment, the perspective of imagination in which you have too exclusively buried yourself.

What about the “thought theory”? Is it in a better position to unravel the tangle? I do not think so. The child is frightened by the story she is reading, and to calm her down we repeat that it is only a story, but this utterly banal episode becomes mysterious if we accept the thesis according to which one need only think of something in order to feel emotions connected with it. Saying that the monster exists only in the story does not prevent us from thinking about it – so why should we feel less upset? What has changed? From the viewpoint of the theory we are discussing, the reasons for being scared are still all there, but now we feel comforted – why?

It thus seems possible to draw a preliminary conclusion. The fact that it is possible to calm someone by saying that it is only a fiction is evidence that the relationship between emotions and belief is more complex than it seems. The oblivion theory ties emotions and beliefs together with a strong knot; Walton and the “thought theorists” simply cut it, but the fact that it is possible to calm someone by repeating that it is only a story suggests that things are not that easy.

2. *Tabula presentiae et absentiae in proximitate*

In my critical remarks, I have sketched three different ways to unravel the “paradox of fiction”, but not one of them, I believe, has allowed us to resolve the difficulties that formed our starting point in a satisfactory manner. Nev-

ertheless, arguing against those theories, gave us an opportunity to grasp a number of relationships between emotion, imagination, and belief, and we can sketch a sort of Baconian *tabula presentiae et absentiae in proximitate*:

It is possible for S to feel an emotion about the fact that p if	S BELIEVES P (I am afraid of the dog because I believe it is a ferocious dog)	S DOES NOT BELIEVE P (The cat is afraid of the dog even if it does not believe it is a ferocious dog)	S BELIEVES THAT NON P (The child is still afraid of the monster even if she now firmly believes that there is not a monster under her bed)
	True	True	False

It is possible for S to feel an emotion about the fact that p if	S PERCEIVES THAT P (I am afraid of the dog because I see a ferocious dog)	S IMAGINES P (I am afraid of the monster the tale is about)	S ASSUMES THAT P (I am afraid of the monster I simply assume might be under my bed)
	True	True	False

The first outcome of this *tabula* seems to be that emotions in their full meaning do not imply belief, but are nevertheless *sensitive to disbelief*: it is not necessary to believe in the existence of a particular state of affairs in order to be afraid of it; on the contrary, if you change your mind and realize that a particular state of affairs does not exist, you can be upset for a while, but you cannot say that you are scared any longer by something you now believe does not exist.

The second conclusion we can draw is that emotions do not imply belief, but nor can they rest on representations, assumptions, or mere thoughts. You can entertain the hypothesis of an earthquake happening in your town and you can describe the event in as much detail as possible without feeling emotions, but if you perceive or remember or imagine an earthquake – if you are faced with a present, past, or imagined earthquake – you will be *engaged* in this frightening situation and you will be emotionally moved by it.

It follows from these two conclusions that emotions demand a pre-theoretic relationship to their objects: we can be emotionally moved by objects and events if, and only if, we are faced with them and we are aware of them as parts of a world we are involved in. I call this relationship *involvement*. We are involved in the situation we live in, and even if we do not need to be in a cognitive stance toward the surrounding objects to be aware of them, it seems obvious that beliefs are partially responsible for the general picture of the environment we belong to. Involvement is an essential feature of our perceptual awareness of the world, but acts like memory, expectation, and imagination,

too, involve their subject in a world because they posit their objects as if they were experienced by an ego that is faced with them. I call acts like perception, memory, expectation, and imagination – *egocentric acts*, and I suggest that this is one major feature of what we usually call experiences or quasi-experiences.

Furthermore, by focusing on the possibility of calming someone by repeating that it is just a fiction, we realized that emotions have different – and *detached* – scenarios, which are nevertheless organized in a hierarchic structure. I can read a novel to avert my eyes from something real that has upset me, and I can thereby loosen my grip on the real world, but the world stays as it is in the background of my awareness, and I cannot forget it completely. In contrast, when I close the book, I can stop thinking about it: after a while, I usually lose my grip on the fictional world that moved me so deeply just a few minutes before. To sum up: the different emotional scenarios we *live in* have an internal hierarchic structure. There is just one primary form of involvement – our involvement in the here and now, in the real world –, but we can also be secondarily involved in the worlds we imagine and remember.

3. *Vindemiatio prima sive interpretatio inchoata*

We can now return to our problem and try to give it a first preliminary solution. To begin with, let us stress the relevance of one of the points we have made: emotions imply not belief, but involvement. In my opinion, the first reason why the paradox of fiction arises – the first, not the only one – is that rooting in a given situation gets confused with the system of beliefs that converge (or can converge) on that situation. *Emotions do not necessarily imply belief, even if they are addressed to the objects of the environment we belong to*: the mouse fears cats even if it does not believe that a cat is there; a child just a few months old is happy to see her mother, even if she does not thus believe that it is true that the person she will call mother in the future is there. And it would be odd to say that her happiness is only a sheer physiological event.

Prior to believing that a certain state of affairs exists, and prior to being able to doubt that there are sufficient reasons to assert it, we are already engaged by certainties that have to do with our being in a given situation. Now, emotions are forms in which our rooting in the *situation* is made manifest⁸: they do not call for beliefs, but only for the original relationship of *involvement*.

The paradox of fiction rests, therefore, on a dual hypertrophy of belief: in the first place, the world is not “the totality of facts”, and therefore of our true

⁸ Martin Heidegger was among the first to make this point in his *Sein und Zeit* (2006: §§ 29-30).

beliefs, but the environment in which we live. We are in touch with objects even if we do not believe that things are so and so – propositional attitudes come later. In the second place, there is no need to believe that a certain state of affairs exists to feel the relevant emotion; it is sufficient for there to be a pre-theoretical rooting in the world.

It follows that the first step toward unraveling the “paradox of fiction” is to correct its second proposition, which went like this:

2. A condition for feeling an emotion about P is to believe that it is true that P

This statement is too strong. The mouse fears the cat even if it does not believe that the cat is hungry, and you can pity Andromache even if you do not believe that she really exists or that she really deserves such a fate. You read Euripides and you sympathize with Andromache because you are involved in the fictional world the story is about. Involvement is enough.

We can try to reformulate proposition 2 as follows:

2b. A condition for feeling an emotion about P is to be involved in a situation to which P belongs.

As we argued above, I cannot label as a belief a state of mind that is overtly denied by the background system of certainties and convictions. Beliefs should be coherent with the network of our opinions and knowledge, and there are logical constraints inherent in the nature of beliefs.

On the contrary, it is possible – easily possible – to be involved by worlds that are manifestly incompatible with our everyday world. Involvement is not a cognitive stance toward objects, and coherence with the belief system of our everyday life is not a necessary logical constraint that can prevent us from being involved in a different fictional world. I can be moved by what I cannot believe or understand as being a part of my own real world: I can pity Gregor’s fate even if I do not think it is possible for a man to live in an insect’s body. To believe that it is possible to be changed in one night into a monstrous bug, I have to give up many of my strongest beliefs, but I can be involved by Kafka’s tale without losing my grip on my own world. Belief is a relationship to a world – *the* world I believe to be real; instead, I can be involved in different worlds – even at the same time: I can focus my attention on a past event I remember or on a fiction I imagine, even if I am always more or less involved in the real world.

This point requires further investigation. I find myself in this world as a subject that acts and perceives, and emotionally responds to the situation in which he lives. Nevertheless, involvement is not only perceptual in nature, but is also

implied by forms that may be described as *quasi-experiences*. We have already taken a look at this point. If I *assume* there is a monster in the closet I merely entertain the thought of a *possible* state of affairs that is not experienced in any relation to myself and is not posited as something that happens in the world. Matters change if I remember having seen that monster or if I imagine that it is somehow concealed in my closet. In this case, what we are dealing with are intentional forms that may be classified as quasi-experiences for two reasons. Firstly, we do not make any supposition about a possible state of affairs, but we take it as a – *fictional* or *remembered* – fact, as something that *happens*, albeit in the past or fictionally. Imagination, like remembering, is a form of quasi-experience, and fictional events are not states of affairs that could be or could have been the case – they *happen*, though fictionally.

Secondly, imaginative acts posit their object in some relationship with an ego that is not, nevertheless, the ego that stages those same acts and that has them as episodes of its experience. Thus, someone who recalls a certain event cannot help but place the remembered situation in relation to an ego that has lived through it in the past, and therefore not to the ego that now remembers and, remembering, measures the distance from what it has been and from what has happened to it. What is true of memory is also true of imagination, which is a form of quasi-experience and, precisely for this reason, places us in a condition of dual rootedness: as subjects that imagine and turn the pages of a book or sit in the seats in a theater, we belong to the real world, but, as imaginary *alter egos* – who see themselves in relation to the events they witness or read about – , we belong to a fictional situation that is clearly distinct from our real world and involves us to the extent to which, imagining it, we relate it to a self.

There are many different moods and forms of involvement, and they vary as the imaginative situation changes. They have but one feature in common: imagining is a form of quasi-experience and is, like perceptual experience, egocentric in nature. To imagine that *p* is to have it in a perspective-oriented way both in its spatial and temporal nature. Like perceptual environments, imaginative situations *have* to be described in *deictic* terms: fictional events take place in the present or in the past or in a far-removed future, and they occur either *in front of you* or in a *remote* land. Fictional events unfold in a *tensed* time and in an *egocentric* space: they specify the temporal and spatial perspective that gives access to them. Obviously, the temporal and spatial coordinates set by fictional events do not necessarily match the real spatial and temporal coordinates of readers and spectators: as a consequence, part of the imaginative task they have to fulfill is to look at the fictional events from the point of view established (in a more or less defined manner) by the perspective nature of fictional events. Therefore, to imagine that *p* we also have to imagine it from

a particular perspective fulfilling the task that the deictic nature of the fiction posits to its readers and spectators: in order to commit to the full meaning of the fiction, we must assume an *imaginative role* in relation to the fictional world we imagine. Imagining *de re* is always imagining *de se*, but this is not tantamount to saying that I have to imagine myself as a causally empowered inhabitant of the fictional world.⁹ Not at all. Imagining *de se* may entail no more than giving the right weight to the deictic nature of imaginative contents.¹⁰

We can be involved in imaginative contexts, as well as in the past worlds we recall in memories, but the possibility of focusing on different scenarios does not remove the hierarchic structure of involvement we mentioned above. We can awake from a *reverie* and we can stop remembering or dreaming about the future, but we cannot completely erase our primary form of involvement – our real involvement in the here and now. These considerations grant us a better understanding of the sense inherent in that “it is *only* fiction” (or a dream or a memory or a plan for the future) we have cited so often: we use the expression neither to remind someone of something they have strangely forgotten, nor to

⁹ As Husserl argued (1959: 115-116).

¹⁰ I must insist on this point. Sometimes, though rarely, we are asked to imagine participating in the fictional world either as causally empowered inhabitants of the fictional world, as is the case in children’s games of pretending, or as causally empowered narrators, and this is the case of many videogames, which assign to the player the ability to change the plot. More frequently, we are asked to listen to the story as a whole we do not belong to and cannot alter: we have to imagine it as a self-contained event we “experience” as *having happened* in the past or going to happen in the future – in a tensed time prospectively oriented toward us, toward the imaginative role we have to take. Remember: imagination is selective in nature, and the imaginative role has not to be taken in the intricacies proper to a real relationship. As a real man, I always belong to a real environment, to which I am connected by a *network* of relationships of mutual dependence: I cannot even perceive it without being modified by it. Imaginative roles are different. Sure, as a spectator, I can be asked to imagine being present at the fictional event as an *acting* subject. Look at Pontormo’s *Deposition*: Christ’s body has already been removed from the cross and is now on the threshold of the figurative space and we, as spectators, have to imagine that we will soon be invited to bear this heavy weight. On the contrary, we are sometimes called to be present as *mere* spectators of the fictional world: we cannot act, but we can be addressed by characters and we have to imagine *seeing* them, as is the case in many Renaissance paintings or in a number of films – in the first shots of Fellini’s *Otto e mezzo* or Woody Allen’s *Whatever Works*, for instance. It is worth noting that this is not always the case, and that *we are rarely asked to imagine seeing* the scene represented on the canvas or on the screen. Think again of the shower scene in *Psycho*: we cannot imagine seeing Marion and Norman because we cannot imagine being present at the murder, without altering the meaning of the film. But this is not tantamount to saying that our imaginings are propositional and impersonal imaginings. Indeed, it would be wrong to forget the deictic nature of the scene we are watching: just *now*, Norman is *approaching* the spectator when he goes up to Marion to kill her and he *moves away* from the spectator after the murder. Friedrich’s monk by the sea has turned almost completely away from the viewer and he is far away from her. In short: I believe that every effort to understand the spatial and temporal dimension of the fictional event, forgetting its relationship to the point of view from which it is disclosed, leads to a misconstruction of its meaning.

deny the fictional world they have imagined, but to *urge them to abandon, for a moment, the perspective of imagination*. The real world is there, with all its harshness and unalterable laws, but it has to speak in a whisper until we are ready again to grant it the attention it deserves. It is in this case that the word “only” can be useful: the word is a *shifter* that allows us to change gear, to return from the secondary forms of involvement to the primary form – to our real and inescapable involvement with the world. Engagement in the universe of imagination is, indeed, secondary in nature, and this is why asking someone to abandon, for a moment, the centrality of imaginative engagement suffices to reveal its fragility, and to make the emotions that constitute that engagement suddenly vanish. We can awaken from a dream or a fantasy, but not from reality, and this is why the worlds of imagination have, in any case, an ethereal, fragile nature, like earthenware pots forced to travel alongside the iron pot of reality. So, when we tell an excessively involved reader that it is only a story we are asking him to give back to involvement in reality the *primary weight that belongs to it*, and we do not intend to dismiss the reasons for his emotional involvement in fiction.

Is this a satisfactory solution to the paradox of fiction? Not yet, I fear, because there is still a puzzle we must solve. Emotions do not imply beliefs, but – as we said – that does not mean that they are *insensitive to beliefs*. I can be afraid of the big dog barking beyond the garden fence, but if you provide me with good reasons to believe that I am wrong in thinking that the dog is ferocious I can usually free myself of an irrational emotion. Involvement in the world depends on a way of relating to things in the world and a way of having them. Now, an essential feature of belief is its *ability to reshape our picture of the world*; if you persuade me that your dog is not ferocious, there is something different in my world: a friendly dog instead of a wild beast. It follows that what I believe and come to know determines the mode of my involvement: it is not necessary to *believe* that a dog is ferocious to feel fear, but if I believe it is not ferocious and have no doubt about the matter, then I should not allow fear to come into play because something has changed in the world I am involved in.

The emotions do not depend on beliefs, but that does not mean they are necessarily blind and irrational: they are the form in which our involvement in the world manifests itself, and the world in which we are involved determines itself in its form and appearance by virtue, also, of what we come to *know* and have *reasons* to believe. Emotions are *sensitive* to reason and belief.

This is where the puzzle we must unravel lies. Emotions depend on involvement, but involvement is sensitive to belief because beliefs can reshape the picture of the world we live in. But what about imagination? We are moved by fictional events, even if we do not believe in them. But is that not tantamount to claiming that we should not feel emotions about fictional events? When

all is said and done, we do not believe that Gregor really exists, and we know that it is impossible for a similar metamorphosis to happen in the real world. So, if asked, 'did someone called Gregor wake up one morning to find he had turned in an insect?', surely any reader would say 'no', and he would add that it is simply not true that such a strange event really occurred.

If asked: that is the point. As long as we are reading Kafka's novel, these questions do not concern us and, if raised, sound both silly and annoying. They are, first of all, silly, pointless questions: fictions are not true or false descriptions of the real world, and they simply do not demand to be taken as such. But they are also *annoying* questions. They seem to focus on the story in terms of whether it is possible to come across someone in the real world who has exactly the same properties as Gregor, but they ask for an answer that lies *outside* the fiction: they are interested in the real world and they ask if Kafka's book can be used as a true *description* of a real event. Readers know very well that these are killjoy questions and they have to *forget* them – as long as they are interested in Gregor's fictional world. We have to *forget* these questions if we want to enjoy the story. But is this not tantamount to saying that we must come back to the oblivion theory, even if we know that it does not work properly? I do not think so, and I believe that this point of view enables us to begin to glimpse the fact that the paradox of fiction is not only a knot we need to entangle, but also a philosophical disguise for a mistaken attitude toward fiction. The paradox of fiction is a paradox for philosophers not least because it derives from a philosophical misunderstanding of the nature of fiction. But some further remarks are still needed.

4. *Vindemiatio secunda*

Let us recall the third proposition, which went like this:

3. *We do not believe that the episodes narrated in a work of fiction really do or did happen or that the propositions asserting them are true.*

Now, this thesis is endorsable, but it seems to contain a conclusion that should be avoided: the conclusion that forces us to assert that if we *do not believe* that p does exist, then *eo ipso* we must believe that it *does not exist*. This conclusion does not hold because it is simply not true that in order to be involved in a given situation we have to believe something. From the fact that the mouse does not *believe* that the cat chasing it is dangerous it does not follow that the mouse believes that the cat is not dangerous: the mouse simply

does not believe anything at all, even though it is obviously involved in this dangerous situation.

The same holds for fiction. The person reading Kafka's *Metamorphosis* does not believe it is true that Gregor has been changed into a giant bug – fiction does not ask the reader to believe anything – but that does not mean she has to believe that it is false that Gregor has been changed into a giant bug: she simply *has* to refrain from taking up a position on the terrain of belief.¹¹ She *must* refrain from taking up a position on the terrain of belief, if she wants to be involved in Kafka's fictional world.

Let me dwell on this point. We must distinguish between two different questions calling for different answers. It is true: if someone asked me whether a real man, called Gregor, had been changed into a bug, I would have to answer in the negative. This question deals with the real world and asks for a non-fictional understanding of the information we can gather from the novel: it asks if there is someone in the world who meets the description we can gather from reading Kafka's book.¹² On the contrary, if – concerned with the plot of *The Metamorphosis* – you ask me whether Gregor exists or whether it is true that he has been changed into an insect, and if you demand that I reply to your query as an engaged reader, I can only answer either that you have understood the story correctly – the bug is Gregor – or that your question is nonsensical because Gregor is the main character in a tale and his metamorphosis is not a real event, but the crux of the plot. For the reader buried in the fiction, "Gregor" is not the name of an object that can be part of a state of affairs whose existence can be meaningfully asserted or denied: it is the name of a character and, as a character, Gregor is a fictional *unity of meaning* that manifests and builds itself up in the story, and this is tantamount to saying that the possibility of appealing to something independent of Kafka's story to check whether Gregor, *as a character*, exists, is ruled out in principle.

Moreover to check on the truth of an assertion, I need to compare it with something else, retracing it to an independent authority, but precisely this option is denied me by the narrative, because there is no other way to check on

¹¹ According to Frege's *Logik*, fictions are neither true nor false (1983: 141). On the truth-values gap in Frege see McDowell (1998: 199-213). A deeper, but similar thesis, is developed by Husserl (1954: §§ 39-40) and Piana (1978).

¹² Sometimes it may be reasonable to ask whether something in the real world corresponds to the content of a fiction. You may have reasons for asking whether a real man, called Agamemnon, was the king of Mycenae and the commander-in-chief of the Greeks during the Trojan War, because it can help you ascertain the relationship between fiction and history in *The Iliad*. On the other hand, it would be odd to ask if there are beanstalks that reach the sky in one night: no one asks you to believe such a thing when you read the fairy tale about Jack.

whether Gregor has been changed into a bug than to read Kafka's book. In his *Philosophical Investigations* (§ 279), Wittgenstein invites us to imagine a man who places one hand on his head and says that he is precisely that height; the same thing happens with the propositions of a tale: we cannot say we have tested them for the very reason that the story tells us that things are precisely so, because a story cannot be the measure of its own truthfulness. To quote Wittgenstein once again: it is just like buying a new copy of the same morning paper in order to check whether the first was telling the truth (§ 265). If, however, there is no other way to "verify" a story except to read it again, it is because the problem of truth or falsehood cannot be applied to the propositions of a story that do not refer to the world and are not literally true or false.

Hence the correction I would like to propose to unravel the paradox. The correction has to do with the second proposition of the paradox, and it encourages us to note that the condition that prevents us from feeling an emotion regarding P is our belief that P is false. This condition is weaker than the original one. It does not say that to have any emotion regarding S, I must believe in the truth of the proposition asserting that S; it simply insists that I must not explicitly believe that S is false. Or – to say it in a different way – I must not quit the fictional situation I am engaged in, and I have to refrain from asking myself killjoy questions about the real existence of fictional characters and events.

But what about the reformulation of proposition 2b, on which we dwelled in the previous paragraph? In short, what about the thesis according to which the condition for feeling an emotion about P is to be involved in a situation in which P is present? I think that, by saying that the condition that prevents us from feeling an emotion regarding P is our belief that P is false, we are just highlighting a major feature of the concept of involvement – its being addressed to a world that is pre-theoretically given, but is nevertheless continuously reshaped by knowledge and beliefs. Involvement is intentional in nature: I am involved in the world I am aware of. In short, I would suggest making the meaning of proposition 2b more explicit by rewording the paradox as follows:

1. we feel emotions regarding fictional events;
- 2c. to feel an emotion about a state of affairs P, it must not occur to me that I do believe it to be false that P;
3. we do not believe that the episodes narrated in a work of fiction do or did happen or that the propositions asserting them are true (but neither do we believe that the episodes narrated in a work of fiction do not or did not happen or that the propositions asserting them are false).

I believe that these three theses are plausible and mutually coherent. The first expresses a fact that is not refuted by 2 or 3, and 2 and 3 do not contradict each other. It follows, unless I am mistaken, that there is not a paradox of fiction.

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