

## Narrative, Fiction, Imagination

### *Introduction*

Recent work at one interface among philosophy of mind, cognitive science, and aesthetics has focused upon the role of imagination in understanding narratives, and fictional narratives in particular.

The sheer amount of imaginative play among human children is often thought to be something of an evolutionary puzzle. If "the perceiving, thinking organism ought to get things right," then imaginative play – usually conceived of as *pretend* play – "should strike the cognitive psychologist as an odd sort of ability." (Leslie 1987, 412; see also Lillard 1993; Leslie 1994) Work on this puzzle has led to the hypothesis, around which a consensus seems to have formed, that evolutionary pressures have produced a distinct mechanism that is part of the information processing apparatus of normal human beings and that is involved in a variety of important cognitive capacities – including counterfactual reasoning, conditional planning, empathy, and visual imagery. (Nichols and Stich 2000, 2003; Nichols, 2006) The specific capacity for pretense is usually thought to underlay this larger imaginative capacity and is seen to develop in human children between 18 months and 2 years of age.

This hypothesis has recently been extended to account for adult interactions with fictions, and especially narrative fictions. And it has connected with an already existing philosophical literature on the role of imagination in understanding fictions (Walton, 1990, and Currie, 1990). However, the state of this extension is a bit more fluid; and no consensus story has yet been forged. Nevertheless, the mutual promise is that philosophers of art can learn a good bit from cognitive science because the interactions with art they are interested in are psychological in character and that cognitive scientists can learn a fair amount from philosophers of art because they seek to understand what turn out to be some of "the more complex and puzzling aspects of human psychology." (Meskin and Weinberg, 2003).

A good deal of work on these matters has gone on in the past two decades and, in the interest of bringing to light some more of those "more complex and puzzling aspects of human psychology," I point out we already have an explanation of narrative that is robust enough to be the focus of the sustained interest of literary theory, cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, yet neither derives its richness from being tied only to fiction nor gains its richness at the expense of leading us into the unacceptable positions embraced or entertained by anti-realists. It is, I will submit, also the proper object of a kind of imaginative activity that is neither belief, pretence, nor "alief". The conception of imagination I propose is not intended to replace, but only to supplement, the conception of imagination as pretense that now dominates in philosophy and cognitive science. It is, however, different in key respects from that conception.

### §1. *Two very brief stories*

Some of you may know this story. On my way to this conference, the weather was bad and the plane bounced its way through the turbulence most uncomfortably. Then, just as we were about to land, the plane swooped up as though buffeted by a sudden updraft and just as suddenly plunged down in a screaming dive towards the ground. Even the cabin attendants were startled and let out involuntary screams. But the pilot regained full control and we landed safely.

After that experience and the long and uncomfortable plane ride, I was in no mood to meet the conference organizer – albeit my friend – \_\_\_\_\_; but, when I walked into the conference center, there she was, and there she greeted me with her characteristic scowl of

disapproval.

"Well," I thought, "At least we are *both* unhappy."

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Now, please, imagine that this little story is a fiction. That is, at least imagine that while the events, places, and people referred to in the story are all real nothing said about them is true.

And now, in contrast, please imagine that the story is *not* a fiction, but the simple truth about my arrival here.

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The possibility that this story is (can be) two stories illustrates both of my themes. The first is that, engaged in listening to (and watching) a narrative, one may find it interesting whether or not it is a fiction. This would seem obvious enough were it not for the fact that it seems to have been denied in the service of something I should like to support, namely, blocking anti-realism. In the this context, "anti-realism" is shorthand for a set claims thought to follow from the very concept of narrative, namely, that "all narratives are *au fond* fictional, that narratives create the objects or events they describe, that the self is a creation of narrative, that narratives are complete with beginnings, middles, and ends (possess 'closure'), that there is no structure of events independent of narrative, that even where narratives do depict an independent reality they inevitably distort that reality" (Lamarque, 2004, 393).

And the second theme is that, whether fictional or not, the story ends with something that is both a bit unexpected and yet, not unexpected at all. It is as though you anticipated it – or something like it – even though you were not at all aware of being in an anticipatory state. And, now, on noticing this, you may ask how you came to be in that state. My answer is that you did so by engaging in an exercise of the imagination that is not readily analyzable in terms of pretense.

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I began work on this paper because of an interest in non-fictional and non-narrative theater. The representations of fictions characteristic of the brilliant career of late Western European literary theater are in reality only a small part – and sometimes no part at all – of the varied life of theater in the rest of the world (and even in the West's *avant garde*). If we are to understand the form, I have thought, we must first get beyond thinking of the dominant tradition in our own practices as paradigmatic of all theater. But that is only a start. We must also ask how this other theater – so remote from our typical experience – actually works. And pursuing that account, rightly or wrongly, has led me here. This paper is a part of that project.

## §2. *The downside of too minimal a sense of what narrative can do*

Peter Lamarque (2004) notes that "narratives can be indentified from formal features alone of individual sentences or sentence strings and no implications about reference, truth, subject matter or discursive ends, can be drawn from such formal identification" (394). And there is surely something right about this. For some sentence or string of sentences to be a narrative, all that seems required is that (1) at least two events or states must be depicted, (2) there must be some loose "non-logical" connection between them, and (3) the relation between the events or states must be temporal. The upshot is that, on this minimal but possibly adequate conception of narrative, we are able to block certain inferences it would be wise to block, namely, inferences to the anti-realist claims listed earlier.

In fact, however, Lamarque concludes two things, as does Olsen (2009): first, that radical anti-realism does not follow from an appropriate account of narrative, but also second, that

narrative *per se* can only be minimally interesting. Their view is that what makes *some* narratives interesting is that they are, for example, historical, autobiographical, or literary narratives, not that they are narratives *per se*. And what has blinded our narratological colleagues to this, according to Lamarque and Olsen, is that they have too readily assimilated narrative with fictional narrative. This seems right.

Lamarque's observation that no inferences with that kind of content follow from anything like a fair understanding of narrative *per se* seems true even if one adopts Noël Carroll's (2001) more substantive characterization of "the narrative connection." Carroll characterizes that connection as requiring this: "(1) the discourse represents at least two events and/or states of affairs (2) in a globally forward-looking manner (3) concerning the career of at least one unified subject (4) where the temporal relations between the events and/or states of affairs are perspicuously ordered, and (5) where the earlier events in the sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the causation of later events and/or states of affairs (or are contributions thereto)" (126).

However, Carroll does draw an inference that Lamarque and Olsen overlook, namely, that by being structured in this way, narratives allow for certain possibilities of presentation that make them interesting. Indeed, they suggest why narratives *per se* might be more interesting than Lamarque and Olsen believe. The possibilities Carroll has in mind are (a) the fact a narrative can be presented with a different temporal ordering than the ordering of (or at least retrievable from) the events recounted (2001: 126) and (b) what he calls "retrospective significance" – the significance of one depicted event is often evident only upon the depiction of another (2001: 125, 127).

The way to block anti-realism is also preserved on yet another and a different kind of account of narrativity, found in recent work by Gregory Currie and Jon Jureidini (2004). This is also a minimal account, but it is aimed at bringing out an important implication that, again, is an implication that Lamarque and Olsen miss. Here is the account:

As representations, narratives of all kinds provide for us what we may loosely call a story-world: a sequence of foregrounded events, together with a more or less elaborated background of other events and standing conditions. These are things that are so *according to the story*, though they may not be so in reality, and will, in the case of fiction, be commonly assumed not to be so. (2004: 418)

Currie and Jureidini draw an inference from the idea of narrative as a product of intentional activity that is responsible for intense interest in narratives, namely that "we know [any given depicted event] happens in the story for a purpose, though it may not be clear yet what the purpose is, or that this purpose connect this event with much else the story contains." (2004: 419)

Thus, both accounts show how narratives allow for, indeed prompt, anticipatory readiness that provides both authors and their audiences opportunities for narrative play and pleasure in that play. Note that the pleasure in the play I am referring to here is conjoined to the thought this is *only* narrative of which we speak, not *fictional* narrative. Fictional narrative *is* but one kind of narrative and narrative *is* a more minimal category, as Lamarque and Olsen rightly observe and as some narratologists and literary theorist fail to observe. But the idea of narrative is richer than Lamarque and Olsen think: moreover, it is richer in ways that still allow for the denial of anti-realism while providing pleasures that are peculiar to narrative *per se*.

### §3. Narrative and imagination: the pretense connection

To date, the study of our imaginative engagement with literature has focused upon our

engagement with fictions (Searle 1975; Watlon 1990; Currie 1990). That study has connected fairly naturally with the literature on pretense in philosophy and cognitive science (Lillard 1986; Leslie 1897, 1994; Nichols and Stich 2000, 2003; Gendler 2003, 2006). The debates about how to distinguish fiction from non-fiction have followed the story laid out by Lamarque, Walton, and Currie that it is neither syntactic nor semantic, but pragmatic, a question of our narrative practices. At that point, the agreement seems to end.

However, notice that the ensuing dispute is about *how pretense is initiated in a fiction* – whether it is determined by the intentions of the author or by the reception of the audience – and not whether *narrative* initiates pretense (Stecker 2009). Indeed, the narratologists and literary theorists whose anti-realist commitments are under scrutiny by Lamarque and Olsen are not the only ones who have recently assumed a tight connection between fictional narrative and narrative *per se*.

This matters. One reason the philosophical and cognitive science literature on pretense is of intense interest to evolutionary psychology is that the pleasures associated with imagination are important for any evolutionary story about how we come to have our present cognitive apparatus and for any evolutionary story about other art practices as well. (Dutton 2008; Humphrey 2002, Tooby & Cosmides 2001) Thus, the failure to remark the relevant inferences from even a fairly minimal model of narrative has committed most research projects in both philosophy, cognitive science and evolutionary psychology to a reduced sense of imagination, that is, solely to what we may now call "pretense-imagination."

There are good reasons for being interested in pretense-imagination. "The act of assuming or supposing involves imagination," as Currie and Jureidini remind us. (See also Nichols 2006; Nichols and Stich 2000; Meskin and Weinberg 2003, 2006) And Denis Dutton (2008) opines that "by allowing us to confront a world not just as naive realists who respond directly to immediate threats or opportunities (the general condition of other animals) but as supposition-makers and thought-experimenters, imagination gave human beings one of their greatest evolved cognitive assets" (106).

The evolutionary interest in the structure of our cognitive apparatus has so far been pushed by the recognition of the ubiquity of fictional narratives. But, arguably, narrative *per se* is also ubiquitous, not only fictional narrative. Are we to suppose that telling tales around what passed for the campfire in the Pleistocene was primarily the telling of *fictional* tales, recognized as such by the tellers and the tellees?

To see the point, one need not decide between whether it is authorial intent or audience uptake that determines if a narrative is a fiction; one need only notice that, between them, they exhaust the options and leave us with the thought that if our Pleistocene ancestors took any delight in narratives at all they did so for the pleasures of employing the pretense-imagination. But, if early narratives – largely concerned with stories about "the people," the cultivation of the land and the ancestors – are reliable indicators *and* if, insofar as there were *pleasures* occasioned by attention to such non-fictional narratives, we might expect those to be pleasures of engaging non-pretense aspects of our imaginations.

But what that idea of imagination might be is so far not well understood.

#### §4. *A supplement to pretense-imagining*

Here is a simple thought experiment. We watch a child play with a toy airplane. She raises her

hand up high and creates an arc in the air before plunging the toy plane earthward in a screaming dive, and she accompanies this with the sounds of the engine struggling up and diving. We notice that she attends to her arm as she makes the arc at the top of the climb, and as she moves her arm, we find ourselves attending to the movements as well. (Nelissen, Luppino, Vanduffel, Rizzolatti, Orban 2005) Which is the part that most clearly engages our imagination, the fiction that this is a plane or the movement of the toy plane and our watching movement of her arm?

If we think imagination consists of pretence, it can only be the former. If we think there is more to imagination than pretense we are as likely to mention the latter as the former. And it is, at least to some extent, this apparently non-pretense aspect of imagining that appears to be recruited when we are responding with pleasure to narratives *qua* narratives, and not *qua* fictions. It seems to be recruited because it is connected to our capacity for anticipation, the capacity that is revealed when we find something significant only in retrospect and that satisfies us because we find we were ready for it – perhaps for the reason that we assumed it had *some* purpose or perhaps entirely subdoxastically.

Is this aspect of our response really not pretense? After all, anticipation seems to involve some sort of supposition. But this is not right, or not right in the relevant ways.

First note that the capacity for anticipation is not exhausted by belief. There are several accounts of what makes some mental state a belief – that it is able to motivate behavior, that it is responsive to changes in the world, that subjects stand in a particular evidential relation to it. I do not decide among these here. I only note, following Gendler (2006: 563-566), that the behavioral model is both attractive and mistaken and I allow it to be sufficient to say that, insofar as an anticipatory state is at all sub-doxastic, we do not stand in the right sort of evidentiary relations to our own anticipatory states, let alone to the relief, release, or satisfaction we feel when our anticipation is rewarded. It often comes as a revelation to us that we were anticipating what just happened. (I leave aside for the moment the question of whether an anticipatory state of mind into which we may get by reading, listening to or watching any narrative is sensitive to changes in the world or the story-world.)

It is not make-belief either. Here is some current wisdom: "beliefs are subject to constraints of mutual consistency and evidential support that imaginings are not; imagining is subject to the will in ways that belief is not" (Currie and Jureidini, 2004: although they go on to raise doubts about this view). Anticipatory states engendered by tracking a narrated sequence are subject to constraints of mutual consistency and so do seem belief-like. But again, insofar as any anticipatory state may be induced sub-doxastically, it is not subject to the will. So, these states seem to be neither beliefs nor imaginings.

Are they then "aliefs"? Tamar Szabo Gendler (2006) coins this term (provisionally) to refer to being in a "mental state that is... associative, automatic, and arational... states that we share with non-human animals... that are developmentally and conceptually antecedent to other cognitive attitudes that the creature may go on to develop [and]... typically, are also affect-laden and action-generating" (557). The examples she offers range from a frog jumping at a BB, puppies batting at the dogs they see in mirrors, a sports fan yelling at a player on the TV, a movie-goer shrieking involuntarily at a sudden movement in a horror movie, a man suspended safely in an iron cage above a cliff (552-553). It is clear that our anticipatory mental states occasioned by listening to, reading, or watching any kinds of narratives have some of these features. And, most importantly, they have those features related to subdoxastic grasp of the situation depicted.

But the anticipatory states we need to explain as part of our imaginative engagements

with narratives are not "aliefs" either. In explicating "alief," Gendler makes clear that aliefs "involve activation of associative repertoires that saliently include representational, affective and behavioral content" (560). So far as it goes, this seems right. But an anticipatory state is, unlike an alief, uni-dimensional, indeed uni-directional. It is aimed, so to speak, at a very specific kind of thing, namely some potential future state(s) of the both the same organism and the same, or some future bit of the same representation.

So, if it is, as it seems to be, an exercise of the imagination to attend to narratives in certain anticipatory ways – to attend to the girl's arm when she is playing with a toy plane, to anticipate a reversal in the story (even without knowing one is anticipating anything in particular), to lean forward in anticipation of what is about to be revealed (Hamilton 2007: 60-62, 75-78) – it would appear there is some genuine imaginative mechanism in addition to the pretense mechanism.

But a more developed account of what that is must await a longer paper.

[3,304 words]

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