# Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 16, 2024

Edited by Vítor Moura and Christopher Earley

# Towards a Two-Level Account of Imaginative Resistance

## Irene Lonigro[2]

*University of Milan*

ABSTRACT. This paper develops a new account of imaginative resistance based on a two-level taxonomy. It argues that resistance can occur at two distinct cognitive levels. Accordingly, two types of resistance are identified, i.e., resistance of a lower-level kind and resistance of a higher-level kind. Lower-level resistance concerns difficulties in the processing of the fictional content in imagination. Higher-level resistance, by contrast, has to do with the endorsement in imagination of an evaluative attitude towards content. The paper explores the main differences between these two levels, with an emphasis on the role of emotions. It concludes that the puzzle of imaginative resistance cannot be properly addressed appealing to a single phenomenon.

## 1. Introduction

The problem of imaginative resistance refers to psychological difficulties in imaginatively engaging with a work of fiction. Despite the apparent clarity of this definition, imaginative resistance has been analysed along different lines and has given rise to different kinds of puzzles.[3]

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[2] Email: irene.lonigro@unimi.it.

[3] Traditionally, the debate has focused on four main puzzles: the imaginative puzzle, i.e., our disengagement from the work's imaginative prescription; the fictionality puzzle, concerning the principles governing the generation of fictional truths; the phenomenological puzzle, i.e., how 'it is like' to experience resistance, its distinctive 'odd' phenomenology; and the aesthetic puzzle, i.e. if resistance can compromise the work's aesthetic value. Weatherson (2004) is credited with being the first to identify the four puzzles.

In this paper my primary concern will be the *imaginative* puzzle in relation to the fictional context. I will therefore examine our difficulty in following the imaginative project of the artwork, when our imaginative responses diverge from those prescribed by the author. Following the canonical formulation of the problem within the contemporary debate, I will mainly focus on linguistic representations.[4] With this focus in mind, I will try to answer the following questions: where should we locate the source of resistance? And, crucially, are all instances of resistance reducible to one and the same phenomenon?

In what follows, I will defend a *two-level* account of imaginative resistance, in the belief that a dualistic approach better succeeds in clarifying the nature of the puzzle. I will defend what I label as the Asymmetry Thesis, viz., I will claim that both descriptive and moral deviant propositions are good candidates for resistance, but resistance *of a different kind*. Accordingly, I will classify descriptive and moral cases on two different levels of complexity, i.e., lower-level and higher-level respectively. I will conclude that lower-level and higher-level resistance should be separately addressed since they have distinct sources and concern distinct cognitive processes.

## 2. The Asymmetry Paradox

Theoretical principles and speculative opinions change incessantly. Changing our moral opinions and sentiments, by contrast, requires from us a great amount of effort. This idea was convincingly expressed by David Hume in the famous passage at the origin of the debate:

> There needs but a certain turn of thought or imagination to make us enter into all the [speculative] opinions […], but *a very violent effort* is requisite to change our judgment of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind from long custom has been familiarized. (Hume, 1985, p. 247)

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[4] In the original formulation of the paradox, Hume refers primarily to writings. Secondly, I believe that pictorial representations deserve a distinct analysis also in virtue of the controversy over narration in pictures (see Walton, 1990; 1994).

The contemporary debate has resumed this problem in the context of our engagement with fiction. Following Hume, the advocates of the Asymmetry Thesis state that we usually follow the author when she prescribes to imagine factual deviant scenarios, but that we are less tolerant towards morally deviant scenarios (Walton,1994; Gendler, 2000).[5] This thesis has been claimed to be paradoxical. Indeed, the Asymmetry Thesis must explain why we are less prone to imagine deviant moral worlds given how easily we imagine unreal and surreal scenarios in fiction, e.g., time-travels, demons, grotesque distortions of the body.

The Asymmetry Thesis has been challenged by (Yablo, 2002; Weatherson, 2004) who have stated that even descriptive errors can be sources of resistance. Advocates of the Symmetry Thesis defend a monistic approach to imaginative resistance, i.e., they claim that our resistance towards descriptive and moral errors is one and the same phenomenon since its source is the same in the two cases.[6]

In this paper, I will attack this very assumption. I will claim that the difference between descriptive and moral cases should be reframed as a difference between two distinct kinds of resistance. Accordingly, I will distinguish between different causal processes, i.e., lower-level and higher-level processes, which correspond respectively to less and more sophisticated ones. The purpose of this paper is precisely that of clarifying the different types of phenomena involved in lower-level and higher-level resistance.

## 3.  A Two-Level Account

Both parties in the contemporary debate have failed to distinguish the different types of resistance involved in descriptive and moral cases. The advocates of the Symmetry Thesis argue that moral and descriptive errors elicit the same kind of resistance. By contrast, the advocates of the Asymmetry Thesis maintain that our resistance differs in the two cases, but *only in degree.* In what

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[5] The labels 'Asymmetry Thesis' and 'Symmetry Thesis' are mine.
[6] See Tooming (2018) for a more recent formulation of monism.

follows, I will defend a version of the Asymmetry Thesis but, unlike its original formulation in Hume, I will focus on a difference in kind rather than in degree.[7]

My two-level taxonomy is based on three distinct criteria: 1. The kind of concepts at stake; 2. The different imaginative prescriptions involved; 3. The role played by emotions.

What I define as lower-level resistance refers to some difficulties in processing the fictional content in imagination. Higher-level resistance, by contrast, concerns our attitude towards content, once it has been processed in imagination. For this reason, higher-level processes are posterior to lower-level ones since the subject must first have processed the content in imagination to adopt an attitude towards it. These two levels also correspond to different imaginative prescriptions, since only at a higher level the reader is expected to assume in imagination an evaluative attitude towards the content, which crucially involves more demanding evaluative dispositions and affective sensitivities. It is this very attitude that the reader refuses to endorse, even in imagination. I will show how this refusal is primarily grounded in our emotions. For this reason, emotions play a fundamental explanatory role in higher-level processes, but not in lower-level ones.

## 4. Lower-Level Resistance

### 4.1. Response-Enabled Concepts

As previously noticed, Stephen Yablo was among the first to advocate the Symmetry Thesis, arguing – *contra* Hume – that even resistance of a descriptive kind is possible. To prove this, he builds the following story:

> They flopped down beneath the giant 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 *five-fingered* leaf. Here was the *oval* they needed! They ran off to claim their prize (Yablo, 2002, p. 485).

[7] The thesis that we experience a lower degree of effort towards errors of a descriptive kind has also been empirically questioned (see Barnes and Black, 2016).

I agree with Yablo that this is a genuine case of fiction which triggers resistance. In what follows, I would like to consider some aspects of his theory that can be integrated into my account of lower-level resistance.

Yablo explains imaginative resistance by appealing to a specific kind of concepts, that he labels as 'response-enabled' (2002, p. 465). Following Yablo, 'response-enabled' concepts (e.g., oval, crunchy, smooth, lilting) are a special kind of observational concepts which enable stable patterns of responses in the subject. These patterns serve to track the semantic extension of the concepts: for instance, we normally grasp the meaning of 'oval' with reference to a specific recognitional pattern (i.e., 'egg-shaped'). Unlike theoretical concepts, which are normally grasped intellectually, response-enabled concepts are grasped experientially, viz., to determine their extension in a world we must 'cast our gaze over that world' (2002, p. 461). In this respect, they are very similar to response-dependent concepts. Still, following Yablo, what distinguishes response-enabled concepts is that they remain stable across worlds, even included fictional worlds. Accordingly, when an author violates their extension in fiction, we are likely to experience resistance since 'we insist on judging the extension ourselves' (2002, p. 485). In other words, what is stated by the author and how we are invited to react are irrelevant since we evaluate these concepts with reference to our actual criteria.

Although Yablo does not refer to mental imagery, I believe that considering the role it plays would result in an improvement of the theory. The following section will be devoted to this.


### 4.2. The Role of Mental Imagery


The reason why we cannot easily imagine that a five-fingered leaf can be oval is to be found in a conflict within mental imagery. I take mental imagery as a specific type of representation which is crucially related to our perceptual phenomenology, viz., 'it represents objects and their features in a way that resembles the content and phenomenology of perceptual experience' (Stokes, 2019, p. 734).

How do response-enabled concepts relate to mental imagery? As already noticed, response-enabled concepts are crucially related to recognitional patterns of response which remain stable across worlds. My hypothesis is that the ability to successfully recognise a pattern depends on mental imagery in a given sense modality or modalities.[8] So, for example, we associate the meaning of 'oval' with a specific response in a sense modality, typically in the visual domain, and this response is itself related to an instance of mental imagery in that modality. This means that, when response-enabled concepts are involved, mental imagery is the best heuristics we have to test concept application. When response-enabled concepts feature in a contradictory statement, they typically trigger two incompatible instances of mental imagery, that the reader is unable to integrate into the relevant sense modality, i.e., in Yablo's case, the visual one.[9] In these cases, obstacles at the level of mental imagery provide the subject with perceptual evidence for contradiction. Lower-level resistance, then, results from the violation of our standard responses in fiction and manifests itself as a conflict at the level of mental imagery.

## 4.3. Lower-Level Processes

Lower-level resistance manifests itself as the inability to fully process the fictional content in imagination. I therefore endorse a 'cantian' explanation of lower-level resistance (Geldler and Liao, 2016), according to which resistance is better explained as resulting from an inability on the reader's part, when she or he cannot imagine what is prescribed by the work.

When confronted with a passage like Yablo's, a possible strategy would be to break the object down into simpler components (e.g., the oval on one side and the five-fingered shape on the other). Indeed, this would mean transforming the object into a changing one, formed by the alternation of the two shapes. This would result in forming an ambiguous visual object. Still, Yablo's story does not involve a verbal ambiguity. In the story, we are asked to imagine the conjunction of the components and not the components disjunctively, and this is a task we are

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[8] The idea that concept application is governed by association with mental images is also in Tooming (2018).
[9] The same analysis can be also applied to other sense modalities as in Moran's example: 'seven and heaven sound just as they really do in English, but do not rhyme' (1994, p. 101).

unable to perform. Another strategy to process the content would be that of taking an evasive perspective on the object. Again, this would not count as a proper act of imagination, since it would require infringing the principle of 'openness to inspection', according to which a description of an impossible situation should be 'detailed enough to convey the nature of the impossibility' (Sorensen, 2002, p. 343). In both cases, the subject cannot imagine the contradiction, since the intentional content is, in the first case, moving and inconsistent and, in the second, indefinite.

## 4.4. The Objection from Contextuality

Several authors have noticed that contextual as well as individual factors can significantly change our imaginative responses. Accordingly, the same proposition can trigger different reactions depending on the context in which it is embedded. This thesis has led to a sceptical conclusion, i.e., the claim that resistance results from the contingent incomprehensibility of the proposition (Stock, 2005). The objection goes as follows:

  i.   A contradictory sentence p can always be imagined if embedded within a coherent context;
 ii.   If the appropriate context is provided, resistance does not arise;
iii.   Imaginative resistance is not a genuine phenomenon.

Against this objection, I will claim that it is possible to find fixed parameters which determine whether a contradiction is tractable or intractable, namely if the contradiction can or cannot be accommodated within the provided context. I will prove that only intractable contradictions elicit resistance. I will conclude that imaginative resistance is a genuine phenomenon that can be predicted looking at specific accommodation parameters.

Gendler's story 'The Tower of Goldbach' (2000) aims to show that we can imagine impossibilities in fiction, if embedded within a coherent context; hence, that impossibility does not preclude imaginability. I will mention only a part of the story:

> But when God heard this display of arrogance, God was angry. From heaven roared a thundering voice: "My children, you have gone too far. You have understood too many of the universe's secrets. From this day forth, no longer shall twelve be sum of two primes." And God's word was made manifest, and twelve was no longer the sum of two primes. (Gendler, 2000, p. 67)

Following Gendler, the reason why we can conceive impossibilities in fiction is that we focus on precise aspects of the imaginative content, engaging our selective attention. According to Gendler, the many regions of local coherence help the reader to disguise the global incoherence of the story. I agree with Gendler that this story does not trigger any resistance. Indeed, I take this story as a prominent example of tractable contradictions.

## 4.5. Accommodation Criteria

The reason why we do not experience resistance in reading 'The Tower of Goldbach' is that the story meets some parameters: i) response-enabled concepts are not involved since the story focuses on pure *theoretical* concepts; ii) it does not concern how we respond to things, but how things are *in themselves*. Therefore, Gendler's story is not a counterexample to my account since our responses are not at stake here. As a consequence, it does not involve a conflict at the level of mental imagery, since the latter is not directly involved in the task.
Let's try now to change the story a little:

> But when God heard this display of arrogance, God was angry. From heaven roared a thundering voice: "My children, you have gone too far. You have understood too many of the universe's secrets. From this day forth, ovals shall have four corners." And God's word was made manifest, and *ovals were four-cornered*.

Despite having replaced theoretical concepts with response-enabled concepts, the contradiction seems still tractable. Does this prove my theory to be false? Before answering we should look at the context provided. The fictional situation is again the effect of God's decree. We cannot rely on our standard criteria, since our responses are no longer valid in this context.

In a similar vein, a contradictory 'square circle' can be made tractable if embedded in the following scenario, a slightly modified version of Borges' 'The Library of Babel' (2000):

> The mystics claim to have, during ecstasy, the revelation of a *square* room with an enormous *circular* book with a continuous spine that fits perfectly the space of the walls.

In this last example, the represented situation is the effect of mystical ecstasy. Since ecstasy is an extraordinary situation, which presupposes an alteration of our ordinary responses, we cannot evaluate the content employing our standard criteria. As in Yablo's, we cannot form a stable and definite image of the situation. The cognitive conflict is not eliminated; rather, it is accommodated within the context.

As a rule, unless the text explicitly says the opposite, we tend to rely on our ordinary responses to evaluate content. A story can discredit our normal responses if it provides a context in which (i) other criteria apply; (ii) these criteria justify the suspension and the replacement of our standard responses in fiction. If, on the contrary, our responses are explicitly contradicted but not invalidated, imaginative resistance is likely to arise, as in 'Sylvan's Box':

> Carefully, I broke the tape and removed the lid. The sunlight streamed through the window into the box, illuminating its contents, or lack of them. For some moments I could do nothing but gaze, mouth agape. At first, it thought that it must be a trick of the light, but more careful inspection certified that it was no illusion. The box was absolutely empty, but also had something in it. (Priest 1997, p. 575)

Priest's story involves an impossible object, a box which is empty and full at the same time. Central to the story is how the object appears to the character. Since the story does not provide us with further criteria that would replace ours in that context, the contradiction remains intractable.

## 5. Higher-Level Resistance

### 5.1. Against a Monistic Approach

As already noticed, several authors in the debate have defended the Symmetry Thesis. This thesis can be divided into two fundamental claims: (i) we are equally intolerant towards both descriptive and moral errors in a work; (ii) imaginative resistance in descriptive and moral cases is one and the same phenomenon. I agree with the first claim, i.e., I believe that resistance occurs both in descriptive and in evaluative contexts, but I reject the second since it implies a monistic approach to resistance.

The basic idea behind a monistic approach is that the rules governing concept application in the descriptive domain are to be equally extended to the moral (and evaluative) domain. Additionally, this approach presupposes a commitment to cantism, viz., when moral violations are involved, we cannot even form a content in imagination. In Weatherson (2004), the source of resistance is to be found in the violation of grounding relations between higher-level and lower-level properties; Tooming (2018), by contrast, locates the source in a cognitive mismatch at the level of mental imagery. In both authors difficulties concern lower-level processes even in moral cases since we experience obstacles in the very act of processing the fictional content in imagination. This being the case, my distinction between lower-level and higher-level resistance would collapse since higher-level processes would be reduced to lower-level ones.

In the following sections I will show how a monistic approach is open to several problems. First, it cannot account for the distinctive nature of moral (and evaluative) concepts as well as the different nature of the imaginative prescription in the two cases. At a higher level, indeed, the imaginative prescription is more demanding, since it requires endorsing in imagination specific evaluative dispositions and affective sensitivities. Secondly, in higher level cases, the content is apprehended as salient on a personal level, and this explains why emotions are so crucially involved in those cases.[10]

## 5.2. The Source of Higher-Level Resistance

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[10] The idea that evaluative predicates have an important connection with our affective attitudes is not new. An emotional approach to value concepts has been defended by Mulligan (1998), D'Arms and Jacobson (2000; 2023), D'Arms (2005), Tappolet (2016) and Deonna and Teroni (2021).

Consider the famous example by Walton: "In killing her baby, Giselda did the *right* thing; after all, it was a girl." (Walton, 1994, p. 37) It is generally accepted that, in reading a passage like this, we have no problem in imagining the factual content, even in detail. We can in principle imagine Giselda's action, even if we may not like dwelling too much on that content. Resistance arises when we try to imagine that action *as right*. Indeed, here the work does not merely prescribe what to imagine; rather, it also prescribes to assume a certain evaluative attitude towards that content. But what does it mean to perform this kind of task? My claim is that such a task involves higher-level processes, i.e., more demanding processes in which emotions play a fundamental explanatory role.

Unlike lower-level cases, here the source of resistance is not to be found at the level of mental imagery. By contrast, it concerns our emotional engagement with the artwork. In the example of Giselda, the work establishes what is the appropriate form of engagement the reader should have. Resistance arises when the reader is not willing to engage since she or he believes that the fictional scenario deserves a different kind of attitude. This sort of evaluative disagreement is at the origin of higher-level resistance.

Compare Giselda's example with a non-moral case, taken from Kōbō Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes* (1964):

> He recalled that someone had said that there was nothing that tasted so good as one's own ear wax, that it was better than real cheese. Even if it weren't that bad, there were all kinds of *fascinating* things one never tired of smelling … like the stink of a decaying tooth (1964, p. 124).

Also in this case, we resist endorsing the evaluative perspective proposed by the author but, unlike Giselda's sentence, our resistance is not grounded in moral reasons. This passage calls in our aesthetic sensitivity, our sense of what beauty is and what seductive is. In principle, we could imagine that smell as seductive, since strong acrid smells may elicit in us a kind of attraction. Leonardo Sciascia, for instance, in To Each His Own (1992), describes the sweat of the beloved as seductive. Therefore, resistance does not stem from a lack of intelligibility. In both the abovementioned cases the source of resistance is to be traced back to an emotional gap, eloquently described by Richard Moran as 'the distance between what we are enjoined to feel and what we are actually inclined to feel' (1994, pp. 95-96). The divergence between our emotional reaction

(i.e., moral indignation, disgust) and the attitude required (i.e., approval, attraction) is what justifies our resistant behaviour.

### 5.3. The Motivational Role of Emotions

I have claimed that emotions are significantly involved in the causal processes at the source of higher-level resistance. My proposal is that the role played by emotions in higher-level processes is motivational.[11] Consistently, higher-level cases display a motivational profile that lower-level ones do not have. Higher-level resistance is to be conceived of as a kind of action aimed at specific (even if not necessarily conscious) purposes.

Higher-level cases can be consistently analysed along three different dimensions:

i. The reader apprehends the content as evoking the relevant emotion [appraisal];

ii. The emotion itself provides justification for the evaluative disagreement [disagreement];

iii. The relevant emotion motivates the subject to disengage [motivation for action].

I defend a 'wontian' approach to higher-level cases, i.e., I favour an explanation of resistance as unwillingness rather than inability. I therefore assume the not uncontroversial thesis according to which competent readers can in principle extend their emotional repertoire to include different and even contrasting world views. The reason why we are seduced by certain pieces of fiction is precisely that they succeed in making those views intelligible and coherent in that context. Still, in some cases, we are *not willing to* engage with those perspectives since we perceive them as a threat to our emotional integrity. Indeed, that would require endorsing attitudes and dispositions which are perceived as too distant from those which are constitutive of our personal identity. I therefore argue that the influence of emotions on our imaginative engagement is explicable only if the fictional content is apprehended as salient for the reader *on a personal level*.

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[11] The role of emotions in motivating behaviour has been emphasised by Scarantino (2014) and Deonna and Teroni (2012, 2015).

Personal valence is then among the elements that distinguish higher-level cases from lower-level ones.

## 5.4. Personal Valence

As emphasised by Jonathan Mitchell, what is peculiar of affective representation is that the intentional content is apprehended as 'mattering for me, or as being significant for me' (2021, p. 3532). What distinguishes higher-level cases from lower-level ones is that only the first, but not the latter are experienced as having a personal valence. In higher-level cases, the fictional content is apprehended as having a negative valence, viz., the subject experiences an affective attitude of disapproval, repulsion, retreat or disavowal which radically impairs the imaginative task. This 'personal level representation' (2021, p. 3519) is distinctive of higher-level cases and is crucially connected to their motivational profile.

The distinctive personal valence of higher-level representation is what grounds the fact that higher-level and lower-level resistance have different accommodation criteria. Since higher-level resistance has an emotional source, accommodation can ultimately only be achieved by means of emotional regulation. This in accordance with empirical findings on malign moral violations in a text. McGraw and Warren emphasise how humour typically occurs 'in contexts perceived to be safe, playful, nonserious, or, in other words, benign' (2010, p. 2). By contrast, violations perceived as 'malign' are those which elicit strictly negative emotions without the display of humour. I will therefore use 'malign' as an equivalent of 'intractable' in the moral context. What makes a moral violation 'malign', i.e., intractable in that context, is (i) the reader's commitment to the violated norm (see also Veatch, 1998); (ii) a decrease in psychological distance.

In relevant cases of resistance, both a decrease in psychological distance and an increase in cognitive penetrability can be observed, i.e., the work is permeable – at least in those passages – to the reader's affective sensitivity and evaluative disposition. This means that: the fictional sentence is taken seriously and perceived as extending beyond the work's limits; the content is salient for the reader; it represents a threat to the reader's self-interest, i.e., her or his moral, cultural and emotional integrity.

## 6. Conclusion

I have tried to show that the puzzle of imaginative resistance cannot be properly addressed appealing to a single phenomenon. I have therefore distinguished between resistance of a lower-level kind and resistance of a higher-level kind. I have claimed that these two levels should be kept apart since they have distinct sources and concern different cognitive processes. I have also shown that a clear separation between the two can be drawn appealing to emotions. I have concluded that lower-level cases involve less sophisticated processes which concern the processing of content in imagination. Higher-level cases, conversely, pertain to more demanding processes in which emotions play a distinctive explanatory and motivational role.

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