How to Do Things with Fictions by Joshua Landy

Introduction

I don’t try to make you believe something you don’t believe, but to make you do something you won’t do.

—Wittgenstein

Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* is one of my favorite books in the world, a novel I teach with as much regularity as enthusiasm. You can imagine my feeling, then, when a brilliant young student recently told me what she thought of it: “Morrison is pretty good,” she said, “but she could have gotten to the point a bit quicker.” Before you rush to condemn my student, let me say right away that it is not her fault; she is in the top 5 percent of the top 30 percent of the young people in the country,1 she is bright and keen and dedicated, and (stated reservations notwithstanding) she likes Toni Morrison, which is greatly to her credit. But it is surely not Toni Morrison’s fault either. (Morrison has repeatedly said that her novels are not recipes, that they do not have messages, and that they do not aim “to give [her] readers something to swallow.”)2 Rather, it is *our* fault, the fault of those whose job it is to tell people how to read. For some reason, we have systematically—albeit unwittingly—engaged on a long-term campaign of misinformation, relentlessly persuading would-be readers that fictions are designed to give them useful advice.3 No wonder my student thought Toni Morrison took too long getting to the point. How else was she supposed to understand the hundreds of pages of apparently wasted space?

Things were not always so. We did not always tell our consumers of fictions that the aim of the exercise is to receive instruction, let alone instruction in the form of propositional content. By “propositional content” I mean an idea or set of ideas, expressible in declarative sentences; by “fiction” I mean a verbal performance in which the events depicted never happened, and in which everyone knows they didn’t. If I believe the story I’m telling and you know it’s false, I’m making a *mistake*; if you believe what I’m saying but I don’t, I’m telling a *lie*; but if neither of us believes it, and if both of us know that neither of us believes it, then the chances are that I’m spinning a *fiction*.4 Thus when Chaucer presents us with a talking rooster who quotes Macrobius and Virgil, he does so in full awareness **(p. 4 )** that there are no talking roosters, erudite or otherwise, and in full expectation that his audience feels the same way. Stories like these, whether told to disciples (Mark’s Jesus),5 circulated on scrolls (Plato),6 recited aloud to a group of listeners (Chaucer),7 read in private (Beckett), or performed on stages and screens, have been around for a considerably long time. And for about as long, many of their producers have been desperately trying to stop us mining them for “messages.”8

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Fiction

What else are we supposed do with fictions? Rather a lot, it turns out. Scores of accounts have been offered over the centuries, so many in fact that it is exceedingly difficult to compress them into manageable form. For the sake of simplicity, I am going to divide them into three main branches, which I will call the *exemplary*, the *affective*, and the *cognitive*. Those perched on the exemplary branch—people like Sidney, Scaliger, Racine, and Rymer9—have generally invited us to consider characters as models for emulation or avoidance (Be like that nice Samaritan! Don’t be like those wicked tenants!). Let us leave Sidney and company sitting there for now; we will return to them in chapter [1](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-1#). There is, however, a more sophisticated sub-branch, whose inhabitants consider the object of emulation to be not an element of content (the actions of the Good Samaritan, say) but a component of form. Fictions, they suggest, can serve as *formal models*, providing templates for structures we may import into our own experience. They may, for instance, show us how to impose narrative structure onto the diverse incidents that make up our life;10 they may hint at the precarious armed truce we might strike between irreconcilable factions within our soul;11 in some circumstances, they may even enable the transfiguration of the visible world.12

The second main branch, the affective, focuses our attention on what fiction does to or for our emotions. According to a first set of affectivists, including Percy Shelley and in more recent years Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Lynn Hunt, fiction strengthens our capacity for empathy and hence our propensity to do good.13 (Chapter [1](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-1#) explains why this is over-optimistic.) According to a second set, who take their cue from Schopenhauer and thus ultimately from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, the point of fiction is to permit us to take up a desire-free attitude to the world.14 Since the objects depicted are not real, and since we know they are not real, we cannot want to *possess* them in any way; aesthetic contemplation thus becomes a foretaste of a certain kind of utopia, the utopia of eternal will-lessness.15 (On one reading, Aristotle’s notion of “catharsis” can be seen as referring to a similarly salutary reduction of emotion.)16 According to a third set, finally, fictions are there neither to strengthen our empathetic connections to the world nor to weaken our appetitive connections but **(p. 5 )** rather to stir up all kinds of feelings in us, feelings of joy, pain, yearning, sorrow, everything with which a human existence should, on some accounts, be full. Either by emotional contagion (the writer genuinely experiencing something and thereby causing us to experience it too)17 or by sheer creative technique (the writer finding a form of words or images virtually guaranteed to do their work),18 great novels and plays and films unleash a flood of sentiment in us. And that flood of sentiment is beneficial because it endows us with a richer inner life: since some of us—especially the blasé urbanites, says Wordsworth, anticipating Simmel and others19—have lost the capacity to register the full force of events, we need a mechanism for reconnecting us to affect. As Franz Kafka so beautifully puts it, “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.”20

We are left with the stoutest branch, the one that has produced by far the most offshoots and received by far the most attention in recent decades. Everyone on this branch—the cognitive—believes that in some way or other fiction grants us access to knowledge, and that increased knowledge is indeed the very point of our engagement with it. Where cognitivists differ is over the kind of knowledge ostensibly granted. Thus at one extreme we find people willing to see a work like *Romeo and Juliet* as giving us knowledge of the world at large; with a touch more modesty, a second group views it as delivering knowledge of a cultural moment; more modestly still, a third group takes it to convey something about its producer; and at the other extreme, it is deemed to reflect only on *us*, its appreciators. By way of concluding this excursus on theories of fiction, let us look a little more closely at the four cognitive approaches, starting with the last and working back.

If it is true, as Wordsworth noted, that our emotions are not always fully present to us, and that we periodically need assistance just to feel what we already feel, it is also true that our deepest *beliefs* are not always fully present to us, and that we need assistance just to know what we already know. Direct introspection not always being the most reliable route to self-knowledge, a *detour* is frequently required, and fictions of a certain kind provide, according to some, the most fruitful detour imaginable.21 They serve as simulation spaces (Currie)22 in which we may experiment with a variety of strategies without the costly consequences of adopting them in real life; they function as battlegrounds (Bakhtin)23 in which different ways of living, grounded in different belief systems, come into conflict, offering themselves for our selective appropriation; they raise questions to which they give no answers (Barthes)24, thereby inviting us to fill the gaps with responses of our own, and since those responses often derive from our deepest commitments, they may—so long as we are paying attention—end up revealing us to ourselves.25 Fictions thus become, to borrow I. A. Richards’s delightful phrase, “machines to think with,” machines that assist us in becoming who we are.26 Or in Friedrich Schiller’s more sophisticated formulation, fictions assist us both in becoming something and, where necessary, in *ceasing* to be it, in softening the borders of the forged personality to allow for a new burst of expansion.27

**(p. 6 )** Fictions, then, can bring about self-knowledge. But they can also, on many accounts, bring about knowledge of *others*. (According to Proust, indeed, it is precisely by doing the latter that they are able to do the former.)28 Thus the novels of Toni Morrison convey to us her various intuitions, intuitions that even she would perhaps not have fully understood without having brought them to expression (Croce29); or, more broadly, they convey to us her deepest essence, her “perspective,” the special way in which she sees the world.30 Like all subjective experience (the “*qualia*” of philosophers), this is something that cannot be transmitted directly, in straightforward declarative statements. It can, however, be intimated via *style*, thanks to the particular inflection a writer places on an otherwise common language, in the unique metaphorical connections she makes, in the shape of the narrations she produces, in the combination of devices she deploys.31 Literary language, being more heavily crafted than everyday speech, carries more readily the indelible mark of its creator.32

Hegelians, of course, feel somewhat differently. For them, what is revealed is not an individual temperament but a collective attitude, a “Zeitgeist,”33 manifest either in ideational content or in formal technique.34 (The “lifeworld” idea, to which Heidegger appeals in his Artwork essay, may well be a related concept.)35 Even the Hegelians stop short, however, of positing an increase of actual knowledge about the world, this being the purview of our last group of theorists. Among these, finally, some regard fiction as granting knowledge by *acquaintance* (we learn what it is like, for example, to be a young African American in pre–civil rights Michigan36); some regard it as yielding knowledge by *revelation* (while it does not itself transmit any truths, the text is here taken to chip away at the barriers standing between us and epiphanic disclosure, thus functioning as a making-ready for Grace37); some, to recall, regard it as delivering *propositional* knowledge; and some regard it as providing a kind of sensory clarification. Rather than letting us know what we know (Carroll) or letting us feel what we feel (Wordsworth), here fictions are said to let us *see what we see*. They “defamiliarize” objects (Shklovsky), presenting them in new and unusual lights, not so that we may learn about them but so that we may simply perceive them at all—simply see them, for the first time, as they actually are.38

Theories of Fiction

1. Exemplary

1.1. Characters (Sidney)

1.2. Forms

1.2.1. The shape of a life

1.2.2. The transfiguration of the world (Nietzsche)

2. Affective

2.1. Increase

2.1.1. Empathy (Shelley)

2.1.2. Other emotions (Wordsworth, Kafka)

2.2. Decrease

2.2.1. Desire (Schopenhauer)

2.2.2. Fear, pity, and similar passions (“Aristotle”)

3. Cognitive

3.1. Knowledge of the world

3.1.1. Propositional knowledge

3.1.2. Sensory knowledge (Shklovsky, Sontag)

3.1.3. Knowledge by acquaintance (Feagin)

3.1.4. Knowledge by revelation (Heidegger, Ricoeur)

3.2. Knowledge of a Zeitgeist

3.2.1. Via content (Hegel)

3.2.2. Via form (Adorno)

3.3. Knowledge of an individual

3.3.1. Specific mental contents (Croce)

3.3.2. Overarching perspective (Proust)

3.4. Knowledge of oneself

3.4.1. Closing (Iser, Carroll)

3.4.2. Opening (Schiller)

4. Formative

By my count, that makes over a dozen non-message-based theories, not to mention the ones I am missing, of the function of fiction. While I find one or two of them unpersuasive (the revelation view has always struck me as fanciful, and for reasons I will spell out in chapter [1](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-1#), the empathetic and exemplary views do not seem to hold up), most are entirely plausible and some extremely compelling. And while claims of universality tend to be overblown—it is surely not the case that *all* fictions aim at defamiliarization, for example, or that *all* fictions aim at expression—it is generally possible, nevertheless, to find a work or two that fits each theory remarkably well, indeed that *needs* the theory in order to be fully **(p. 7 ) (p. 8 )** appreciated. *Hamlet* is a notorious emotion-elicitor, *Madame Bovary* an intriguing emotion-modulator,39 *In Search of Lost Time* a monumental formal model for self-fashioning, *Song of Solomon* a powerful “machine to think with”; there is no shortage of fictions to prove almost every theory right.

We are left, in sum, with a good number of powerful and robust accounts of what happens to us when we read or listen or watch. But in many circles we just do not hear about them when novels and movies and plays are being discussed. We hear, instead, about propositional content. We hear that novels are mirrors, their function being to show us how the world is.40 Or we hear that novels are oracles, their function being to deliver laws of experience, deep abiding truths about the world, “messages” about who we are and how we function and what we ought to do.41 (Even the “deconstructive” school of criticism essentially belongs here, since its practitioners could not imagine literary artworks seeking to do anything other than send messages; *Jane Eyre* and *Effi Briest* become failed efforts at meaning, or better yet, “mean their own meaninglessness.”) Either way, we hear that fictions can save themselves from utter futility only by being directly educational, and that since education is their true task, they had better get on with it. That mind-set is surely what explains a best-selling writer’s otherwise unaccountable complaint that with some novels “you have to read seven hundred pages to get the handful of insights that were the reason the book was written.”42 A seven-hundred-page novel written for the purpose of “insights”? With statements like these, is it any wonder my student feels the way she does about Toni Morrison?

Formative Fictions

It is time, I submit, to reclaim fiction from the meaning-mongers. The method by which fictions are currently being taught in high schools (“Spot the villain!”) and evaluated in the public domain (“Find the message!”)43 has had a genuinely detrimental effect, not just on fiction but also, if I may say, on lives. The relentless consolidation of a dichotomy consigning fiction to either blunt didacticism or utter insignificance has been bad, first, for critics, many of whom have clearly been tempted—against their better judgment, in some cases—to make room in their theories for the message idea44 or, going in the other direction, to celebrate the glorious uselessness of fiction, its ostensible inability to yield anything beyond pleasure.45 It has been bad, second, for writers, some of whom have adjusted their work to the demand or at least felt the burden of its pressure.46 It is bad, third, for their writings, which will gradually find less and less of an audience: if you want to get people to read a novel or watch a play, assuring them that it is morally improving is not much of a winning strategy.47 And it is bad, fourth, for (potential) readers, who are deprived of the *real* reward on offer from **(p. 9 )** sustained engagement with substantial works of fiction. (They may, indeed, be positively *harmed* as a result of reading for the “message.”48) Telling readers to mine fictions for instruction is a surefire way to put their actual benefits out of reach.49

All of us could do with returning to the wisdom of Wordsworth, Schopenhauer, and company, lovers of art who eschewed semantics in favor of pragmatics.50 We could do, in other words, with ceasing to talk about what a text “says”—if indeed there is such a thing—and beginning to talk again about what it *does*. J. L. Austin is right: there are plenty of “things we can do with words” other than just transmitting propositional content.51 (A fortiori, one wants to add, when those words happen to be the constituents of a literary artwork; hence my title, which refers at once to the kinds of attention we may bring to formative texts and to the kinds of impact they may have, in return, upon us.) It is true of course that fictions tend to be “about” something, and this “aboutness,” as we will see in a moment, is an important part of their functioning. Still, aboutness is only one of their features, and (with exception made for hybrids like Proust’s *Recherche*)52 arguably not the most important. Fictions also give *form* to this aboutness; they instigate a *process* (an artwork, as John Dewey and others have noted, is not an object but an experience); and they have an *effect* that goes far beyond the mere delivery of information.53 In Hans-Georg Gadamer’s words, an artwork is not something at which we stare “in hope of seeing through it to an intended conceptual meaning” but is, instead, “an *event*.”54

We should reinstate the pragmatic, then, and be careful while so doing to avoid falling into a second dichotomy, almost as crippling as the first: the moralizing dichotomy, according to which fictions are either morally improving or useless (and therefore, in the minds of some, positively depraving). That will be the subject of my first chapter, in which I offer reasons for seeing the three strands of moralizing discourse about fiction—the message theory, the empathy theory, the practice-space theory—as varying degrees of wishful thinking. The practice-space theory is the most compelling, and it may well be possible to use complex, detailed, and richly ambiguous works of fiction as venues for fine-tuning our skills of navigation through the labyrinth of moral life, but *pace* Martha Nussbaum, this process is far from automatic; it depends, rather, on a deep prior commitment to specific moral principles, as well as to the notion that the aim of fiction-reading is to strengthen them. Not only does moral improvement through fiction take place far less often than is widely suggested, but it is, in addition, not always to be desired. (Though regimes of reading can create conditions in which citizens look to fiction for moral guidance, the cost, as I will explain, far outweighs the reward.) Bakhtin-style clarification of what we already believe, a process that is morally neutral, is a more common and ultimately more beneficial result.

**(p. 10 )** The way forward, as I see it, is to reinvigorate the pragmatic outlook in its broadly ethical, rather than narrowly moral, dimension.55 And that is precisely what I aim to do in this book, by highlighting a way of thinking about (some) fiction that is not exemplary, not affective, and not, properly speaking, cognitive either. There is, I will claim, a set of texts that we might label “formative fictions,” texts whose function it is to fine-tune our mental capacities.56 Rather than providing knowledge per se—whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation—what they give us is *know-how*; rather than transmitting beliefs, what they equip us with are *skills*; rather than teaching, what they do is *train*. They are not informative, that is, but formative. They present themselves as spiritual exercises (whether sacred or profane), spaces for prolonged and active encounters that serve, over time, to hone our abilities and thus, in the end, to help us become who we are.57

Take, for example, the parables in Mark, the subject of my second chapter. Why does Jesus tell so many of them? Is it, as is often said, in order to be more readily understood? In the book of Mark at least, nothing could be further from the truth. Here, Jesus speaks in parables precisely to *prevent* easy access to insight, even—shockingly—where such access might be the very key to salvation. “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God,” he declares, “but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven” (4:11–12). At the same time as keeping the outsider out, however, the parables are designed to bring the insider even further in (“to him who has will more be given” [4:25]). Engagement with parables, that is, offers the elect an *increase* in their talent, a higher level of “faith,” where faith is closely related to abstract thought. For parabolic discourse presents the world around us as nothing more than a storehouse of metaphors: nothing we see is inherently significant, it implies, since the entire visible realm is merely a symbol for a higher plane of experience. At the end of the day, the parables’ aim is not the straightforwardly didactic ambition of communicating a complex message in simple language; it is instead the formative desire to bring a restricted audience to a new way of hearing and speaking, and thus a new way of looking at the world.

Some eighteen hundred years later, sophisticated fictions are still being produced for the purposes of enchantment; the enchantment, however, is no longer always sacred in nature. In chapter [3](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-3#) I present the joint case of stage magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin and Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé,58 both of whom seek to re-enchant the world on strictly rational terms, both of whom see certain types of self-deception as indispensable to that end, and both of whom (crucially) understand that in order to maintain our necessary illusions—in order to preserve them, though we recognize them for what they are—we need to be skilled at adopting a rather peculiar state of mind. It is precisely that state of mind, a state of quasi-simultaneous conviction and distrust, that Robert-Houdin’s tricks and Mallarmé’s **(p. 11 )** poems, with their paradigmatically proto-modernist reflexivity, require for their appreciation. To become skilled at handling modernist fictions (whether upscale or popular) is therefore, I argue, to strengthen our ability to re-enchant the world.

Having addressed two types of enchantment, one worldly and one otherworldly, I turn in my final section to two modes of reasoning. Chapter [4](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-4#) examines the curious case of *Symposium* and *Gorgias*, Platonic dialogues whose protagonist offers arguments that are by turns dazzling and pitiful. Why does the character Socrates fall, at times, into the most elementary fallacies? It is, I propose, because the end goal for Plato is not the mere acquisition of superior understanding but instead a well-lived *life*, where living well is taken to involve being in harmony with oneself. For such an end, accurate opinions are necessary but not sufficient: what one crucially needs is a *method*, a procedure for ridding oneself of those opinions that are false. Now learning a method is a very different business from learning a set of ideas. It requires not just study but *practice*, and practice is precisely what Plato’s dialogues, thanks to the layer of irony between author and protagonist, make possible. If we have a predisposition for detecting and are interested in resolving conflicts within a set of beliefs—if, that is, we instinctively posit logical consistency as a desideratum in life—then we stand to learn, when we read the dialogues, not only *what* to think, but also, and far more importantly, *how* to think.

Is it also possible (and desirable) to learn how *not* to think? For the ancient skeptics, early rivals of the Platonists, the answer was very much in the affirmative. As the skeptics saw it, the most pressing philosophical questions, none of which can ever be satisfactorily resolved, serve only to keep us awake at night. How, though, to escape their grasp? There is no forgetting them, since they lurk around the corner of every decision; nor will argument suffice, since argument is merely a continuation of philosophy. Once again, what we need is not a theory but a method, the method, in this case, of “antilogic,” in which each claim is systematically juxtaposed against its opposite, together with evidence just compelling enough to allow the two of them to cancel each other out. In chapter [5](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-5#) I read Beckett’s trilogy—*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*—as a latter-day work of ancient skepticism, a work that begins from the same premises (intractability), aims at the same telos (ataraxia), and employs the same devices (antilogoi) along the way. What the trilogy offers us, I claim, is not insight and not inspiration but the opportunity to detach ourselves from our desire for certainty and to achieve, for the first time, an enduring peace of mind.

The Temporality of the Reading Experience

Four (groups of) fictions, four opportunities for the fine-tuning of a capacity. In every case, it should be noted, the transaction has much less to do with content than it does with form (this is one of the reasons why only literary texts, and **(p. 12 )** not just any type of writing, will do). Plato’s dialogues would not function as training-grounds for reasoning were it not for the deliberate holes punched into the arguments; Beckett’s novels would not function as training-grounds for ataraxia were it not for the relentless juxtaposition of claim and counterclaim; Mallarmé’s sonnets would not function as training-grounds for lucid self-delusion were it not for the periodic self-reflexive gestures puncturing the mimetic illusion; the words of Jesus in Mark would not function as training-grounds for faith were it not for their heavy use of ostentatiously figurative language. For each capacity there is a specific formal device that corresponds to it, and accordingly a finite set of texts that serve as uniquely propitious training-grounds.

What is more, the transaction has less to do with content than it does with *process*. Message-based theories promise benefits that are the work of a moment (no wonder they have become so popular in our impatient age). The training of skills, however, always takes time. Formative fictions do their work gradually, sometimes indeed in imperceptible increments, and over a multitude of phases.59 In the first, we simply begin reading or listening; we follow the plot; we reconstruct the scene; we decide whether we are engaged enough to continue. So far, so ordinary. When it comes to formative fictions, however, there is always a moment at which the stakes become apparent, a moment at which we realize that we are not just being told a story, a moment at which a crucial offer is put in front of us.60 With Plato, for example, we read along for quite a while thinking that we are merely being given a view of life; it is only some way into the *Gorgias* (or perhaps while we are in the *Symposium*, or the *Parmenides*, or the *Protagoras*, or the *Phaedrus*—as with the parables, more than one story may be required) that the penny drops, that we notice just how poor some of the argumentation is, that we put this together with our picture of who Plato must have been to have been able and eager to write these dialogues,61 and that we see what we stand to gain, at the cost of what effort. Each work, in other words, contains within itself a *manual for reading*, a set of implicit instructions on how it may best be used.62

Assuming that we accept the offer set before us by the manual, we are still only at the start of the second phase. Skills are burnished through repeated exercise, in a benevolent spiral: the more we are capable of, the more demanding our challenges can be, and the more demanding the challenges, the greater the impact on our abilities. Likewise, formative fictions invite us not to one but to several tests, tests of varying degrees of difficulty, our readiness to meet them steadily increasing as we go. Another way of putting this is to say that the second, potentially quite extended phase of reading places us within a special variant of the “hermeneutic circle.”63 We cannot understand a text as a whole without understanding its various parts, Friedrich Schleiermacher pointed out, but neither can we understand the parts without understanding the text as a whole. (What is the significance of the escaped criminal in chapter [1](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-1#) of *Great* ***(p. 13 )*** *Expectations*? Scene-setting, character development, vital plot point? We will not be able to say for sure until we have finished the novel.) The result of this double bind is that we are forced, simply in order to take in each new element we encounter, to form a tentative hypothesis about the totality of the work. In turn, however, new elements cause us to revise our hypothesis, which in turn leads us to interpret new elements differently, which elements in turn generate new hypotheses, and so on, and so on.

In the *formative* circle, by contrast, we begin not with “pre-understanding” but with what one might call a “pre-capacity.”64 We must, that is, already be a little bit good at doing the thing in question: a little bit good at following trains of logic, a little bit good at handling figurative discourse, a little bit good at standing back from our attitudes, a little bit good at juxtaposing claim with counterclaim. It is this minimal aptitude that allows us to meet the text’s first challenge—allows us, indeed, to *recognize* it as a challenge—and thus to begin fine-tuning our capacity. It is the fine-tuning, in turn, that allows us to do better with the next challenge, and so on through indefinite turns of the circle. To him who has will more be given, but only bit by bit.

Let me mention right away one important corollary. To derive the full benefit from Beckett’s trilogy, we said, a reader must already begin with something to bring to the table, not just a shared set of concerns but also a certain degree of talent in the relevant domain. Now this means that the trilogy, like all formative fictions, is elitist. It is not elitist in any shallow sense; it does not discriminate on the basis of externals such as race, class, or gender;65 but as we saw with the parables, it does distinguish between insiders and outsiders, and even as it rewards the former, it doggedly keeps the latter at the door. (Cultural egalitarians may take some comfort in the fact that each of us is excluded from *some* formative fictions, and none of us is excluded from all of them; there is, so to speak, a formative fiction for everyone.) Radically isolating, formative fictions always work on one soul at a time, even in such mass performances as the parabolic discourses of Mark’s Jesus. Studiously meritocratic, they always exclude those who lack the relevant pre-capacity, those who cannot or will not decipher the manual for reading (reliably present, it is nonetheless deliberately discreet), and those who, having done so, are not willing to make the effort it calls for. Unlike certain theories of fiction, then, which consider its effects to be automatic, inevitable, “inescapable” (we will return to these theories and to that word in chapter [1](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-1#)), the approach shared by Plato, Mark, Mallarmé, and Beckett recognizes that some readers have what it takes to be benefited and others not; that there is always a choice to be made; that a text issues offers, not injunctions; and that it is less an obligation than a gift, one we are entirely free to leave unopened.66 Formative fictions never force themselves upon us.67 Without our active participation, they will not do their work.68

Nor, finally, does that active participation cease once we have closed the book. Formative fictions are texts that tend to be reread, texts indeed that reward **(p. 14 )** rereading. (If fictions were nothing more than fancy delivery mechanisms for “messages,” there would be little need to read them so much as once, and absolutely no reason to read them twice; one advantage of the formative theory is that it makes rereading more than a quirk of the eccentric.)69 In some cases, too, the conversations we have with others about the text in question—reasoned argument with fellow Platonists, exchange of metaphors with fellow Christians, and so on—may provide further opportunities for the fine-tuning of our skills.70 And then, at last, there are the delayed-release effects that slowly stretch out, like long tendrils, into the future of our life. The immediate impact of formative fictions is always subtle; their overall impact, if we take them up on their offer, is as diffuse as it is profound. Formative fictions begin from the assumption that there are, in life, no quick fixes.

In Spite of Everything, a Role for Meaning

In what I have said thus far, I have found it necessary to draw a sharp line between message-hunting, which has become the dominant approach in the wider cultural world, and the more agile way in which we need to approach formative fictions if we are to be benefited by them. The distinction is vital to formative fictions, which often include—as part of their “manual for use”—a warning that skills, unlike information, cannot be transmitted directly. (In the *Symposium*, for example, Socrates reminds Agathon that wisdom does not flow from one mind to another via osmosis.)71 Still, it may be worth stating for the record that I am not taking up a position against *any* search for knowledge or *every* ascription of meaning.72 Let us by all means worry over what a work of philosophy or a physics paper or a constitutional document is saying. And let us by all means strive to keep ourselves informed; knowledge, as Jefferson so rightly said, is essential to the functioning of a healthy democracy.73 My point is simply that if truths are what one is after, fictions are the wrong place to start. Citizens who have been trained to seek messages in fiction, and conditioned to trust what they “learn” there, will pick up a lot of misleading, conflicting, and unsubstantiated theories, while in the meantime they are prevented from gaining access to what is actually on offer. (Similarly, by the way, citizens who have been trained to seek moral improvement in fiction may find themselves morally corrupted. Those of us who take morality seriously would do well to protect it against such dangerous habits of reading.)74

By way of a second qualification, I should note that some fictions fall under the category of literary-philosophical *hybrids*, combining strictly literary elements with a set of claims that are actually argued for, as opposed to just being baldly stated by a narrator or character or implied as the supposed inference from an imaginary sequence of events. Many of Plato’s dialogues, in fact, work **(p. 15 )** just this way: while some of the arguments are deliberately slipshod, with a view to prompting a rescue mission on our part, others are presented entirely seriously, with a view to us feeling their force. In such cases, what we should note is that teaching and training cannot *coincide*, cannot take place within the same series of words. When Socrates says Pericles was a bad politician, for example, we do not learn that Pericles was (or that the historical Socrates believed he was) a bad politician; nor, by taking authorial irony into account, do we learn the opposite, that Pericles was a *good* politician; we certainly do not learn that being a good politician in general comes down to improving the moral standing of one’s fellow citizens. We learn, strictly speaking, nothing. We have other things to do besides learning.

My final and most important qualification is that attention to the semantic dimension—the text’s “aboutness,” even if not its “meaning”—is always indispensable. In cases, first of all, where the built-in instruction manual takes the form of assertions, our understanding of the assertions in question is obviously vital to the experience. (One thinks, here, of Plato and Beckett, as will become clear in their respective chapters.) With Plato, what is more, there is an additional reason to pay close attention to the semantic dimension: we stand to hone our skills of argumentation only if we make the effort to fill the holes and mend the faulty arguments, but we will not do that, most likely, unless we find the issues worthwhile.75 There must, in other words, be a careful titration of irony, a studious balance between the closed and the open; formative fictions should leave *some* work for the reader to do, but not *all* the work, and they should offer rewards for progress made along the way.76

With Beckett, similarly, the questions being asked must be properly seductive, must have the proper feel of philosophical glue-traps, in order for the ancient-skeptical therapy to have a chance of taking place. With Mallarmé, where the training consists in the parallel processing of multiple referential dimensions, a base level of mimesis (here is a room, here are some tables, here is a window …) becomes more or less a necessity.77 And with Mark, where what is at stake is a refinement of our ability to move from literal to figurative and back again, there has to be a literal level to start from, even if, as in most cases, that literal level is of minor interest. (The “meaning” of the Sower parable, for example, is that some people are not cut out to understand; hardly a revolutionary idea.) Here one almost wants to say, with T. S. Eliot, that the lure of “meaning” is a kind of ruse perpetrated on the reader, a way “to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog.”78

Whether for the sake of rectification (Plato), cancellation (Beckett), oscillation (Mallarmé), or allegorization (Mark), attention to the semantic dimension is thus always a requirement. It is, however, never the *point*. Far from being the aim of the entire exercise, ascertainment of a formative text’s aboutness is only **(p. 16 )** ever instrumental, only ever a stepping-stone on the way to a higher telos. And that means that it is possible to achieve entirely plausible readings of Marcan parables and Platonic dialogues *while having failed to use them correctly*; it is possible even to spend great lengths of time with them while seeing straight past the benefits they uniquely stand to confer; it is possible, in other words, to get it wrong by getting it right.

A Polite Word to Historians

Historians will no doubt have noticed, perhaps with some alarm, that the chapters in this book are not arranged chronologically. The choice is a deliberate one. I am attempting here to make a contribution to literary theory, not to literary history; the questions I am asking are questions to which history is only intermittently pertinent, often beside the point, and sometimes positively misleading. It is certainly relevant that reading practices and institutions of reading (or listening) have changed over the millennia, and—crucially, for my purposes—that we have the power to reshape them today. It is also relevant that the ancient Greeks made an intuitive distinction between fiction and nonfiction, that Plato founded an Academy, and that he was in direct competition with the Sophists. So too, it helps to know that the book of Mark was transmitted orally before being written down, that it was at one point the rival not only of Matthew, Luke, and John but also of the synthetic “Diatessaron,” and that the Jewish homiletic tradition habitually employed sowing as a metaphor for preaching. And some light is shed, finally, by an awareness that many of Chaucer’s contemporaries expected fictions to serve the needs of religious instruction, or that Mallarmé was writing against a background of widespread disenchantment among artists and thinkers.

When it comes to Beckett, however, my strong suspicion is that history is simply in the way, a dangerous distraction, a red herring at the very best. Beckett scholarship is in fact littered with critics, starting with Theodor Adorno, who wish to cast his most famous works as reactions to World War II.79 Such readings are not just brutally reductive but also tangibly mistaken: by 1938 Beckett had already published *Murphy*, a novel whose protagonist sees himself as being trapped in a skull (107), is fascinated by permutations (96–100), cites Democritus and Geulincx (246, 178), engages playfully with Descartes (109), yearns for “will-lessness” (113), and strives for nothingness via mutual cancellation of contraries (246). The narrators of *Malone Dies* and the *Unnamable* list Murphy as one of their predecessors,80 and they are right to do so: Beckett’s manner may evolve,81 but his core preoccupations remain untouched. Indeed his core preoccupations have remained untouched, so to speak, since the third century ad.82 Beckett’s questions are old ones (“Ah les vieilles questions, les vieilles réponses, il n’y a que ça!”83), and in response he offers us the same skills we have always **(p. 17 )** required. All that has changed is the institutional situation—there are, today, no skeptical “schools”—and accordingly the mode of delivery.

The same is true for formative fictions at large. To be sure, they come into existence at a given moment, perhaps at a moment when the need is particularly pressing (where that is the case, history will enter our discussion). But when the urgency dissipates, the need has a way of enduring. Plato’s Academy has long ceased functioning, yet skills of constructing and testing arguments continue to be of value. A century and more since Mallarmé, many of us still crave a means of re-enchanting the world. And the Christian way of having faith—need it be said?—maintains a powerful hold over the imagination of two billion believers, many of whom enjoy a less-than-detailed grasp of the historical context in which it arose.84 This book is not a story but a typology. It does not seek to chart a progression from Plato to Mark, from Mark to Chaucer, from Chaucer to Mallarmé, and from Mallarmé to Beckett; it seeks, instead, to lay out a series of strategies for flourishing, all of which emerged at a specific juncture and for specific reasons but all of which, more importantly, remain live options today.

The Value of Formative Fictions

What I have laid out here is, then, a proposal for a theory of fiction; it is worth repeating, however, that it is not a proposal for a *universal* theory of fiction.85 Just like the approaches I listed at the start of this introduction—cognitive clarification, emotional clarification, formal modeling, and the like—it applies only to *some* stories and plays and films, and even those stories and plays and films vary among themselves in fine-tuning disparate capacities via disparate formal devices. I take this restriction to be a strength, rather than a weakness, of the view. For one thing, it gives it a better chance of actually being right. (May not the best literary theories, in the end, be the ones of medium scope, embracing a plurality but not the totality of texts?) For another, it lends a certain deserved distinction to the films and plays and stories in question.86 Not every work of fiction is a Parable of the Sower, a *Gorgias*, or a *Molloy*.

That said, there are plenty of additional formative fictions this volume does not have space to address in detail. (My principles of inclusion and exclusion: the main objects of study here are fictions that fall within my linguistic purview, that stand out as clear-cut cases of the formative mode, that serve different formative functions using different formal means, and to whose understanding, finally, I may hope to have something new to contribute.) Perhaps the clearest examples are the *Lehrstücke* of Bertolt Brecht, plays designed to be performed by amateurs, with the training taking place by way of participation rather than mere spectatorship; the infamous Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) aimed to increase the players’ ability to look critically in real life at what **(p. 18 )** they saw around them, “so that nothing should appear immutable.”87 Relatedly, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* may well be inviting us, thanks to its liberal use of free indirect discourse, to practice stepping back from our sometimes overhasty judgments.88 (Free indirect discourse always situates us half inside a belief and half outside it.) And Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, by contrast, could be seen as an affective variant of Beckett’s trilogy, its shifting point of view fostering an aptitude for the juxtaposition, and thereby mutual cancellation, of our emotive investments.89

Then again, fictions set in relatively closed communities where appearances are at a premium (Lafayette, Austen, James, Woolf) often ask their readers to keep track of sources and to reconstruct nested beliefs (A thinks that B thinks that C is in love with her), thus granting them an opportunity to become cannier handlers of social information.90 Kafka’s stories, meanwhile, with their obvious call for allegorical interpretation, their teasing offer of clues, and their refusal to let any interpretive strategy fully pay off, seek to prepare us for a human condition that both demands and resists an attribution of significance.91 Films like Fellini’s *8½* and Charlie Kaufman’s *Adaptation* follow Mallarmé in deploying reflexivity for formative purposes; Marcel Proust’s convoluted sentences stretch the mind’s capacity for keeping multiple hypotheses in play while imposing provisional order on a rich set of material; and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, that wonderful work from which we started, actually switches genre halfway through, encouraging an extremely important kind of mental agility.92

From Austen to Woolf and from Plato to Kaufman, the central literary device in every formative fiction corresponds not just to a specific readerly activity but to a particular top value (what Charles Taylor would call a “hypergood”). While Platonic irony is there for the sake of intellectual exercise, for example, intellectual exercise itself subserves a further end, namely the life of reason. In Mark, similarly, the telos of metaphor is a deeper faith, not merely a richer imagination; in Brecht the alienation effects are subtended by a vision of fruitful political engagement; and the same goes, mutatis mutandis, for the remaining practitioners we have discussed. To be sure, several of the capacities may be detached from their hypergoods and pressed into the service of a different, more comprehensive overall goal. Thus it is arguably a useful thing both to be able to see clearly and to be able to deceive ourselves when necessary (at *Gay Science* 110 and 344, among other places, Nietzsche suggests precisely that); and “dwelling in metaphor,” as I explain in chapter [2](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-2#), can bestow special satisfactions even on non-believers. No single recipe exists, however, for their combination, and no design will include them all. Plato’s strategy for cultivating reason will simply not be relevant to the heirs of Beckett; Beckett’s strategy for overcoming the self will leave Proustians (and Morrisonians) entirely cold; Brecht’s political zeal will fall on deaf Flaubertian ears. In what follows, therefore, my task is to present a series of case studies, not to propose a formula for happiness. There are many **(p. 19 )** authentic ways of being, and this book does not seek to privilege one over another. It issues only conditional imperatives: if you stand in need of skill X, it says, then book Y (or book Y’s very close counterpart) is the one you should be spending time with.

At the same time, we could phrase the imperative more forcefully: if you stand in need of skill X, you really should be spending time with book Y. And the converse imperative—if you are reading book Y, you really should be reading it for X—is just as (conditionally) binding. Where the formative theory applies, in other words, it is the only viable account; there is, I submit, no other explanation that makes sense of the relevant text’s various features, that truly captures how they work and what they are for, that makes them fully available to us. They *can* be read differently, and indeed often *are* read differently, but such (mis)reading comes, as I see it, at a serious cost. The formative theory is the only one that affords a reason for these texts being the way they are, an explanation for why writers with philosophical (or religious) fish to fry have sometimes chosen to place them in literary frying pans. It is also the only one, I like to think, that provides a satisfactory rationale—beyond mere pleasure, and outside of moral improvement—for our continued attachment to them, for the fact that we find it so worthwhile to spend considerable amounts of time in their company. In a way, then, what I am offering here is a defense of the literary, partial perhaps but no less spirited for that. If all we needed were “messages,” the delivery mechanisms would be dispensable; my brilliant but impatient student would be absolutely right. If what we need is training, however, then process is essential, and if a particular kind of process is essential, then form is essential. For certain purposes, the right formative fiction is exactly what we need.

Early in this introduction, we saw that fictions offer a variety of benefits to their eager consumers. Training is only one such benefit, and it takes place in only a relative handful of texts. Works that clarify are more prevalent than works that train; and works that do nothing very much, whether through lack of ambition or lack of skill, are more prevalent than either. Still, that rare gift may well be of the greatest value. Aristotle is surely right that living well is a matter of acting well, and that acting well requires much more than having the correct beliefs, including—I would add—the correct beliefs about ourselves.93 What we need is “virtue of character,” and virtue of character comes from habit, not from insight. (Indeed insight will only be possible in the first place if the ground has been prepared by habits.)94 In other words, meeting the demands of life requires *above all* a range of semi-automatic responses that we have cultivated by means of repetition. Even, then, if they are few and far between, and even if their readers do not always take advantage of them, formative fictions may nonetheless be the most important fictions there are. **(p. 20 )**

Notes:

(1) Although I wish here to pay a compliment to my student, I do not in any way seek to detract from the accomplishment of students at other institutions. My figures—which are admittedly frivolous, and to be taken with the appropriate grain of salt—are loosely based on *U.S. News & World Report*, which (at time of writing) ranks 191 national universities across the United States, and lists several dozen more to which it just refers as “Tier 2.” (Regional and liberal arts colleges are classified separately.) Stanford currently comes in at number five. The 30 percent figure, which is slightly rounded up, is drawn from the 2009 census. See <http://www.census.gov.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2009/tables.html>. The Wittgenstein line in the epigraph comes from Rhees, 43 (italics removed); I am grateful to Richard Moran for bringing it to my attention.

(2) Morrison (in McKay, 420): “I don’t want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them something to feel and think about.” In the same interview, Morrison notes that “if I examine those layers [of character], I don’t come up with simple statements about fathers and husbands, such as some people want to see in the books” (ibid.); elsewhere, she insists that a novel is “not … a recipe” (Morrison, 341) and that “I just cannot pass out these little pieces of paper with these messages on them telling people who I respect ‘this is the way it is’” (in Davis, 232–33). With her deglutitive metaphor Morrison is echoing Henry James, who lamented (427) the “comfortable, good-humoured feeling” some nineteenth-century readers of English novels had “that a novel is a novel as a pudding is a pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it.” I explain below how *Song of Solomon* could be seen as, in part, a “formative fiction.” That said, the novel works more as a *formal model* than as a *training-ground*; hence the lack of a full chapter dedicated to it in this book. My views on Morrison will become clear, I hope, in future work.

(3) When I say “we,” I do not of course mean everyone who speaks or writes about literature: there are plenty of wonderful Aristotelians, Bakhtinians, and Nietzscheans out there, not to mention all the Proustians, Shklovskians, Wordsworthians, and so on, many of whom will be mentioned in what follows. It is just that their (our) views have not really caught on in the wider cultural world.

(4) This is how Philip Sidney, in the sixteenth century, famously distinguished between fiction and lies: “Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth … though he recount things not true, yet … he telleth them not for true” (103). On the same grounds, fiction should also be distinguished from “bullshit,” the eponymous subject of a famous essay by Harry Frankfurt. Liars, writes Frankfurt (130–31), know that what they are saying is false; bullshitters, by contrast, do not know and do not care. Their aim is not so much to convince us of something untrue (ironically, bullshit may accidentally happen to correspond with reality!) as simply to sound impressive. Still, both liars and bullshitters “represent themselves falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth” (Frankfurt, 130), and in this they differ from the maker of fictions.

(5) Lest there be any misunderstanding, I am not claiming that Mark’s Gospel is itself a work of fiction. Since it seeks to persuade readers of its historical accuracy, it can only be (1) the *truth*, (2) a *lie*, or (3) a *mistake*. It *contains*, however, miniature works of fiction, in the form of the parables. When we read, for example, that there was once a man who sent a series of servants (and finally his son) to collect his rent, with disastrous consequences (Mark 12:1–12), we do not assume that Mark’s Jesus has in mind an actual individual to whom this actually happened. All readers of the Gospels, believers and skeptics alike, are more or less obliged to take such tales as fictional.

(6) Of course, many of the characters and incidents depicted and alluded to in Plato have real-life counterparts; this, however, does not prevent the dialogues from being works of fiction, any more than Napoleon’s presence in *War and Peace* prevents that book from being a novel. Plato’s use of anachronism—in the *Gorgias*, for example, Archelaus is already ruling Macedonia [470d], even though Pericles has died very recently [503c]—must have been a clear signal to his contemporaries, for whom such events were fresh in the memory, that the conversations could not have taken place as described, and the imputation to “Socrates” of some strikingly un-Socratic things to say can only have strengthened that impression. (Whatever the historical Socrates believed, he cannot have thought both that genuine knowledge is possible and that it is impossible; at least one of the Socrates-types we find in Plato thus departs dramatically from his flesh-and-blood model.) For further discussion, see chapter [4](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-4#), note 1.

(1) Fourth-century Athenians did not, of course, employ the terms “literature” or “fiction.” It is, however, sufficient for my purposes to establish that they were used to engaging with, and indeed enjoying, written or spoken dialogues that were universally recognized as being imaginary. And we know that they were, since fifth-century comedies (still in circulation during the fourth century) routinely revolved around far-fetched (and non-mythical) plots: no one could possibly assume that contemporary audiences took the *Lysistrata*, for instance, to be a representation of something that had happened in their own homes. Even tragedies—like Agathon’s *Antheus*, the example Aristotle gives at *Poetics* 1451b22–24—were sometimes invented in their entirety. Thus Aristotle can hardly have been alone in understanding that there were truth-tellers (such as historians), there were liars, and then there were poets. (For the contrast between poets and historians, see *Poetics* 1451b1–6.) It seems to me that Plato’s audience may already have suspected, and been invited to suspect, that at least some of what they were reading was neither an attempt to report Socrates accurately (history) nor an attempt to put forward a false view of Socrates (deceit), but instead something else, something to be evaluated on other terms—just as Socrates, in the *Phaedrus* (264c), suggests evaluating fabricated speeches on the basis of their construction, not merely on their effectiveness, and certainly not on their correspondence to speeches that were actually made.

Whether the (implicit) understanding of fictionality dawned in the fifth century, as Margalit Finkelberg claims (26–27), or in the fourth, as Andrew Ford has it (2002:230–31), we may reasonably speculate that Plato’s dialogues postdated it. Ford goes so far as to suggest that “something like the eighteenth-century notion of literature was formulated in the fourth century b.c.e.” (2002:4). Arthur Danto feels similarly: “It has often been noted that the Greeks … did not have a word for art in their vocabulary. But they certainly had a concept of art” (2003:xiii).

(7) Silent reading was already a possibility for some in Chaucer’s time, but not the norm. See Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading*.

(8) Thus Chaucer, as we will see in chapter [1](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-1#), was already mocking the urge to point or draw a moral. Edgar Allan Poe, who saw the aim of literary writing as the production of an *effect* (“Philosophy of Composition,” 453), contrasted this aim with “the heresy of *The Didactic*” (“Poetic Principle,” 468). Charles Baudelaire, backing up Poe’s claims, rebuked the “crowd of people” who “imagine that the aim of poetry is some sort of lesson, that its duty is to fortify conscience, or to perfect social behaviour, or even, finally, to demonstrate something or other that is useful…. The modes of demonstration of truth are other, and elsewhere. Truth has nothing to do with song” (203–4). Gustave Flaubert agreed: “However much genius you may put into some fable taken as an example, another fable can serve as proof of the opposite; for a denouement is not a conclusion” (“Préface aux *Dernières chansons*,” 48; translation mine). And more recently, French author Charles Dantzig has complained that “it is an American vice to think that an artwork has to *teach* something. Likewise, Americans began drinking red wine when they were told it was good for their health; no amount of talk about pleasure would have done the trick. Their thirst for knowledge is naive and honorable” (131, my translation). There are of course plenty of additional names one could mention here; several, indeed, will make an appearance in what follows.

(9) In his famous preface to *Phèdre*, Racine claimed that “the smallest faults are severely punished in it. The mere thought of crime is regarded with as much horror as the crime itself. The weaknesses of love are treated in it as real weaknesses; passions are presented to view only to show all the confusion they cause; and vice is everywhere painted in such colours as to make its ugliness known and hated” (76–77). For Philip Sidney, a good work of literature is a sugared pill (151); it presents examples of goodness and wickedness (148–49), both of which meet their appropriate ends (150). (It is worth noting that Sidney even considers *tragedies* to be cases of poetic justice.) On Thomas Rymer, coiner of the term “poetic justice,” and his borrowings from French critic René Rapin, see Quinlan, 139–45; on Scaliger, see ibid., 22.

The exemplarity view shows up again in Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler*, 4 (esp. 23, 26) and in Percy Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry” (960–61)—Shelley’s enthusiasm for the verbal arts caused him, as we will see, to embrace just about every positive position imaginable—and is still not dead, as evidenced by the twenty-first-century endorsement of Mark William Roche (225, 246). For a more sophisticated presentation of the view, see Thomas Pavel, *La pensée du roman*, 134 *et passim* (I reviewed this volume in Landy 2005); on the notion of exemplarity, see Stierle and O’Neill.

(10) See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, esp. chapters 5 and 6. In the years since the publication of Nehamas’s book there have been several additional contributions, including Paul Ricoeur’s “Life in Quest of Narrative,” J. David Velleman’s “Narrative Explanation,” and (if I may include myself in such august company) my own work on Proust in *Philosophy as Fiction*, chapter [3](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-3#).

(11) The imaginary reconciliation view has had a number of proponents, including I. A. Richards (1926:20), Cleanth Brooks (2007:801), and more recently the sculptor Martin Puryear, for whom the most interesting art “retains a flickering quality, where opposed ideas can be held in tense coexistence” (77). This view, which dovetails in important ways with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s theory of myth (105), may ultimately owe something to Coleridge’s theory of imagination (a faculty that, he says, “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” [150]). It may also, of course, owe something to Hegel—art, as Hegel sees it, gives sensuous expression to the possibility for oppositions to be reconciled—though Hegel, of course, believes that the oppositions are eventually reconciled in *reality*, not just in imagination. For Hegel, cf. Eldridge 2003:77; for the application to states of the soul, see Anderson and Landy, 31–35.

(12) Nietzsche: “How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not? … Moving away from things until there is a good deal that one no longer sees and there is much that our eye has to add if we are still to see them at all; or seeing things around a corner and as cut out and framed; or to place them so that they partially conceal each other and grant us only glimpses of architectural perspectives; or looking at them through tinted glass or in the light of the sunset; or giving them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent—all this we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters” (*Gay Science*, sec. 299). Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, with its idea of the beautiful Apollonian veneer spread over unbearable Dionysian truth, is also relevant here.

(13) In Percy Shelley’s canonical statement, “a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place … of many others” (961). Shelley’s view is echoed by Martha Nussbaum: “the literary imagination,” she says, “seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own” (1995:xvi; cf. 1999:265). See also Lynn Hunt, 32, 40, and chap. 1 *passim*; Richard Rorty 2001:132–33 and 1998:185; Roche, 26.

(14) See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, sec. 2–5, and Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 1:34, 1:38. In aesthetic contemplation, writes Schopenhauer, the attention “considers things without interest” (*WWR*, 1:34, p. 178); “we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror of the object” (ibid.); “then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord … the painless state, prized by Epicurus as the highest good” (ibid., 1:38, p. 196). (We will return to Schopenhauer, and to the “painless state,” in chapter [5](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-5#).) Admittedly, fictions are on this theory only one of a number of phenomena capable of generating aesthetic contemplation, including all the arts and indeed natural scenery besides (Kant, in fact, focuses almost exclusively on the beauty of the world and has next to nothing to say about art). In typically saccharine fashion, Iris Murdoch turns the Kantian-Schopenhauerian idea to moralizing purposes: since “perfection of form … invites unpossessive contemplation” (83), she claims, engagement with great works of art is a way to “clear our minds of selfish care” (82).

(15) Schopenhauer is not the only theorist to describe the experience of reading as a model for utopia. For Adorno, it is a space free from the tyranny of consumption, commodification, and utility (“total purposelessness gives the lie to the totality of purposefulness in the world of domination, and only by virtue of this negation … has existing society up to now become aware of another that is possible” [*Minima Moralia*, sec. 144; cf. *Aesthetic Theory*, 343, and “Commitment,” 314]); for Eldridge, it is a space of maximal autonomy, in which we witness writers bound by no laws but their own (2003:54); and for Gadamer, it is a space of ideal community, in which local differences are overcome by a shared love for and/or understanding of an object. (“In the festive,” writes Gadamer, “the communal spirit that supports us all and transcends each of us individually represents … the real power of the art work” [1986:63].) In similar fashion, Ralph Ellison rightly saw his novels as bringing together readers of different races: “when [the novel is] successful in communicating its vision of experience, that magic thing occurs between the world of the novel and the reader—*indeed, between reader and reader* in their mutual solitude—which we know as communion” (696, my emphasis). On micro-communities forged out of shared affection, see Tamen (3 *et passim*) and Nehamas (2007:81–82).

(16) There is considerable debate as to what Aristotle actually meant by catharsis: perhaps he meant that various emotions—including, but not limited to, fear and pity (see *Poetics* 1449b)—are cleaned away thanks to tragedy (this is the view of Jacob Bernays); but perhaps he meant that they were cleaned *up*, which is to say trained to aim reliably at their proper objects (this is the view of Stephen Halliwell and Martha Nussbaum [1986]). What is more, as Jonathan Lear has shown, neither account squares with what Aristotle says in the *Politics* (8:5–7), where cathartic “music” has no improving effect on character at all. See Lear 1988:300–303. For a full history of catharsis theories, see Ford 1995:111–13; see also Nehamas 1992:301, and Landy 2010:222–23.

(17) Horace, *Ars poetica* 102–3: “si vis me flere, dolendum est primum ipsi tibi” (“if you wish to move me, you must first grieve yourself”). Compare Wallace Stevens, who writes that poetry “communicates the emotion that generates it,” and that “its effect is to arouse the same emotion in others” (111). Stevens, of course, is primarily talking about lyric poetry, but the view can easily be applied more broadly.

(18) I am thinking here of Eliot’s “objective correlative.” As Eliot sees it—rightly, I suspect—there is no need for writers to feel a certain way in order to elicit a comparable reaction in the soul of their readers. What they require instead is the “formula of that particular emotion,” which is to say the sequence of elements most likely to generate the desired effect. (See Eliot 1975:48, and cf. to some extent Diderot 1981:132 *et passim*.) Hitchcock, for example, was presumably not the least bit anxious when he engineered all those scenes that so reliably cause anxiety in spectators.

(19) See Wordsworth, 83, and compare de Quincey, for whom “human sensibilities are ventilated and continually called out into exercise by … literature” (56); hence, for de Quincey, “the pre-eminency over all authors that merely *teach* of the meanest that *moves*” (57). On “Blasiertheit,” see Simmel 1903:325–30, and cf. Adorno: “to be still able to perceive anything at all, regardless of its quality, replaces happiness, since omnipotent quantification has taken away the possibility of perception itself” (*Minima Moralia*, sec. 150).

(20) Letter to Oskar Pollak, January 27, 1904, in *Letters*, 16. Compare Kendall Walton’s view (in “Thoughtwriting”) that literary texts are like speechwriters for the soul, offering us the perfect form of words to use to ourselves when we wish to deepen an emotional experience.

(21) For literature revealing us to ourselves, see Carroll, 126–60, 142; Bloom 2000:29–30; Vogler, 18–19; Beardsley, 574; Felski, 25; Iser 1980:194, 216, 224, 230; Eldridge 1989:20–21; and Eldridge 2003:4, 11, 100, 216–17, 223, 226. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory can also be taken to promise increased self-knowledge at the end of the reading experience (see Iser 2006:34–37), in part because the latter brings to light our tacit presuppositions.

(22) See Currie 1995, *passim*, and Walton 1993:12.

(23) Bakhtin sees the novel as a device for bringing together a number of “verbal-ideological belief systems” (1981:311) in the form of individual characters, as well as for mingling them in hybrid constructions such as free indirect discourse. And since as he sees it “the ideological becoming of a human being … is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others” (1981:341), “an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view” (345–46), the space of reading is (one might infer) the ideal venue for such becoming.

(24) Barthes: “To write is to jeopardize the meaning of the world, to put an indirect question that the writer, by an ultimate abstention, refrains from answering. It is each of us who gives the answer …; there is no end to answering what has been written beyond hope of an answer: asserted, disputed, superseded—the meanings pass, the question remains” (1964:ix). For Kundera, likewise, “novelistic thinking … does not judge; it does not proclaim truths; it questions, it marvels, it plumbs” (2008:70–71). “I have always, deeply, violently, detested those who look for a *position* (political, philosophical, religious, whatever) in a work of art,” adds Kundera, “rather than searching it in an *effort to know*” (1996:91; cf. 1988:7).

(25) I borrow the term “gap” from Wolfgang Iser. For our present purposes the most relevant passage is in *The Act of Reading*, 189; the notion of the gap is, however, ubiquitous in Iser. The view I am defending in this volume has, as will be seen, much in common with that of Iser and of his fellow “reader response” theorists. It departs from them by focusing on a particular activity uniquely elicited by formative fictions and also, more broadly, by placing a greater emphasis on normativity. Rather than describing what readers (whether single individuals or “interpretive communities”) *happen* to do with Plato and Beckett and Mallarmé, I suggest that there is something readers *ought* to do with them, something that—unlike the filling of gaps, in many contexts—they can easily *fail* to do. Over and above the moral “ought” of our responsibility to the author, such cases involve what we might call the eudaimonistic “ought” of our responsibility to ourselves.

(26) Richards 1959: 1. Cf. Schiller, who writes that “thanks to aesthetic culture, the freedom to be what [we] ought to be is completely restored to [us]” (letter 21, p. 147).

(27) Schiller points to two opposed dangers besetting every individual: “in the first case he will never be *himself*; in the second he will never be *anything else*” (letter 13, p. 123). The aesthetic—again, Schiller is speaking of aesthetic experience in general, but fictions are of course included—helps us to steer clear of both dangers, by doing justice not only to our desire for cohesion (what Schiller calls the formal drive) but also to our desire for change, growth, multiplicity (what Schiller calls the sensuous drive; see letter 12, pp. 118–21). It should be added that Schiller has no time for didactic theories of art; it is only a bad reader, he says, who “will enjoy a serious and moving poem as though it were a sermon” (letter 22, p. 152).

It may appear that the desire for unity and the desire for growth are simply incompatible. Consider, however, that the achievement of a certain level of success often leads to a wish to go further, to move beyond, to “transcend oneself,” in Georg Simmel’s phrase (1918). We now see a fresh goal for which to strive, one that was not only unattainable but also inconceivable from the point at which we first started: the desire for growth is, in a sense, nothing but a desire for a new (and superior) form of unity. Life, then, is like the ascent of a peak that conceals behind it, unbeknownst to us, another, taller summit, and so ad infinitum.

(28) Thus Proust, in the preface to his translation of Ruskin’s *Bible of Amiens* (1987:60): “There is no better way of becoming aware of one’s feelings than to try to recreate in oneself what a master has felt. In this profound effort it is our thought, together with his, that we bring to light.”

(29) As Croce sees it, emotions (the interesting ones at least) generate intuitions, and intuitions rise to the level of consciousness only thanks to their expression in art. See Croce 1965:24–25; Croce 1995:18–19; and Kemp, 172 *et passim*. One might compare A. C. Bradley, for whom the creative writer has in mind merely a “vague imaginative mass pressing for development and definition” (23); without the literary text, then, no development and no definition. And one might also compare Georges Poulet (1980:42–45; 1971:278), who gives powerful, lyrical expression to the idea that literature permits a miraculous entry into the thoughts and feelings of another.

(30) Thus Putnam: “if I read Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night* I do not *learn* that love does not exist, that all human beings are hateful and hating…. What I learn is to see the world as it looks to someone who is sure that hypothesis is correct” (488). “That,” writes Simone de Beauvoir, “is the miracle of literature, the thing that distinguishes it from information: an *other* truth becomes mine” (82, my translation). Cf. Jacobson 1996:333–34; 1997:167.

(31) For Proust, style “is the revelation, which by direct and conscious methods would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain for ever the secret of every individual.” (Although this statement is made by Proust’s narrator, at *Time Regained*, 299, we know that Proust feels similarly: see *Essais et articles*, 288, 311.) On metaphor and perspective, see Landy 2004, chap. 1; on the general claim about style, see Wallace Stevens, 120–23; Arthur Danto 1981:198–207; Frank Farrell, 187–89 *et passim*; and M. H. Abrams, 226–31. The title of Abrams’s book, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, is an allusion to W. B. Yeats’s line that “[the] soul must become its own betrayer, … the mirror turn lamp,” which Abrams takes to mark a shift, in the Romantic period, from mimetic to expressive (theories of) poetry.

(32) That, after all, is how connoisseurs sometimes distinguish authentic artworks from forgeries: the assumption is that we reveal ourselves—or rather betray ourselves—in our manner, our unintentional or semi-intentional style, far more than we do in any deliberate gestures we may make. Cf. Ginzburg, *passim*.

(33) Hegel: “In works of art the nations have deposited their richest inner intuitions and ideas” (*Aesthetics*, 1:7; see also the helpful discussion at Eldridge 2003:74–76). In his early phase, Lukáčs follows suit (*Theory of the Novel*, 32, 40), and the irrepressible Shelley is as happy to sign up to the “spirit of the age” idea (969) as he is to more or less everything else. Robert Pippin, mind you, is a Hegelian of a totally different stripe; his brilliant reading of Henry James (2000:54–88 *et passim*) combines a keen interest in *mentalités* with a compelling account of capacities under training.

(34) Frankfurt School theorists could be said to specialize in this approach. Theodor Adorno, for example, calls abstract artworks realistic, since they so perfectly capture, according to him, the abstractness of human relations under advanced capitalism. (See Adorno 1978:306–7; cf. also 1984:45 and 1977:160.) Ernst Bloch, likewise, finds in Expressionist discontinuity a perfect representation of “authentic reality” (22). And Siegfried Kracauer reads the choreography of contemporary dance troupes as reflecting the processes of mechanized production: “the hands in the factory,” he writes, “correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls” (79).

(35) Heidegger’s essay “On the Origin of the Work of Art” is exceedingly complicated, not to say contradictory; while it appears to be offering a single theory of art, it in fact offers three, with uncertain connections among them. In one (164–65), what an artwork does is to reveal the “Being” of specific objects (a Van Gogh painting, for example, reveals the “Being” of peasant shoes). In a second (169–72), what an artwork does is to reveal a lifeworld: a Greek temple, for example, discloses the “world” of the Greeks. In a third (177–78), what an artwork does is to reveal Being itself, which may mean something like the set of all data of experience prior to conceptualization (cf. Gumbrecht 2004:69–70). Officially, this last outcome is a logical consequence of the first. “In the revelation of the equipmental being of the shoes,” writes Heidegger, “beings as a whole … attain to unconcealedness” (178); “the working of the work … lies in a change … of the unconcealedness of beings, and this means, of Being” (184). It is not, however, entirely clear (to say the least) how the one is supposed to lead to the other.

(36) One exponent of the knowledge-by-acquaintance view is Susan Feagin. See esp. 110.

(37) See for example Harries, *passim*; Ricoeur 1978:151–52 and 1975:57, 69; and Sartre, for whom the writer’s job is to “[let] Being sparkle as Being” (106), and thus to “restore the strangeness and opacity of the world” (108). This view is of Heideggerian inspiration; it connects to the third of the theories proposed in the Artwork essay (as described above).

(38) Shklovsky: “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’” (12). See also Tomashevsky, 85, and Eichenbaum, 113–14. Jean Paulhan follows the Shklovsky line, writing that “poetry is always showing us, in strange ways [*étrangement*], the dog, the stone, or the ray of sun which habit concealed from us … poetry [is] seeing with fresh eyes what everyone always sees” (16, 47). So too does Susan Sontag, who bemoans “a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience.” “All the conditions of modern life,” she explains, “conjoin to dull our sensory faculties…. What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” (13–14). In recent years Susan Stewart (*passim*) has produced a powerful expansion, application, and rearticulation of the view, beautiful in its own right. And faint traces of the idea may perhaps already be found in Shelley, for whom poetry removes the “film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being” (967).

(39) On *Madame Bovary* as emotion-modulator, see my “Passion, Counter-Passion, Catharsis,” esp. 228–29.

(40) This position has had a large number of proponents. Balzac famously described the role of the novel as that of competing with the civil register (“faire concurrence à l’État-Civil,” 6). Jean-Paul Sartre insisted that its task is to depict reality—indeed the reality of today (70, 75)—and thus, ostensibly, to inflict responsibility upon its readers (37–38). Georg Lukáčs, who came to feel very much the same way (1977:32, 38), ended up extolling a type of writing that Adorno delightfully dubbed “boy-meets-tractor literature” (1977:173). And Ian Watt not only praised Defoe and Richardson for adopting “the proper purpose of language, ‘to convey the knowledge of things,’” but also castigated Laclos and Lafayette for failing to do so (30).

(41) To take one example among many, René Girard presents fictions as revealing a truth to set against the lies found everywhere else; that is the force of the French title of his first book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. (The “truth” in question, an immensely dubious one, is that no desire is ever spontaneous.) Just as oddly, Iris Murdoch believes that literature “teaches that nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous” (85). For his part, Mark William Roche even sees artworks as making *arguments* (57; see also 84, 208, 211).

(42) David Shields, *Reality Hunger*, sec. 379.

(43) At the 2006 Academy Awards ceremony, the writers gave Jennifer Lopez some lines to read about Paul Haggis’s *Crash*. “In the opening scene,” she intoned, “we are told that people feel so isolated these days that they are not above literally crashing into each other as a way of making human contact.” What is the force of the “telling” here?

(44) Thus Arthur Danto, whom we saw above making an eloquent defense of the expression view, elsewhere insists that artworks are “embodied meanings” (2003:139; see also 13, 25). Umberto Eco periodically speaks of “messages” (1979:22, 120). Wolfgang Iser, who mostly sees fiction as a route to self-knowledge, periodically lapses into deeming it a vehicle for communication (2006:67); *Tom Jones*, for example, ostensibly delivers the “insight that the rigidity of normative principles of eighteenth century thought systems hinders the acquisition of experience” (1980:201n30). Richard Eldridge, who shares Iser’s clarificationist impulses, insists that art is communication (2003:97) and yields truth (2003:42). And Stanley Fish, who pays lip service to the idea of literature as a set of effects, seems only to be interested in the “effect of meaning” (1980:74, 83; cf. Tompkins’s critique, esp. 206 and 223).

(45) Barthes 1975:14 *et passim*. While Barthes’ distinction between “lisible” and “scriptible” overlaps to some extent with the distinction I will be drawing between formative fictions (the parables, the *Gorgias*, etc.) and other kinds of fiction, important differences remain, both at the level of process and at the level of outcome. For one thing, the upshot is something more than mere “jouissance,” that pleasure which Barthes celebrates for its self-indulgent sterility; for another, the formative approach does not accord infinite latitude to the reader, but understands certain types of move to have been anticipated, indeed programmed in, by the author. That is not to say that such moves are *required*—unlike (say) the effort of comprehending individual words and sentences, the effort of “rewriting” is always optional—but if we do choose to take up the offer of active engagement, we will all do so in markedly similar ways.

(46) I am thinking, for example, of J. M. Coetzee’s “At the Gate,” that Kafkaesque depiction of a world in which fiction-writers are stringently required to declare their beliefs.

(47) Francine Prose puts the point particularly well: “only rarely do [high school] teachers propose that writing might be worth reading closely. Instead, students are informed that literature is principally a vehicle for the soporific moral blather they suffer daily from their parents” (78). Philip Pullman makes the same claim in relation to poetry, lamenting that “in an atmosphere of suspicion, resentment, and hostility, many poems are interrogated until they confess, and what they confess is usually worthless, as the results of torture always are: broken little scraps of information, platitudes, banalities” (2008:4). “And this,” adds Pullman, “is the process we call education.” (On the banality of almost all “messages” embedded in literary works, see Stolnitz 1991 and 1992.) Dickens himself, notes Alexander Nehamas, recognized the need to make a different kind of appeal. “In *Oliver Twist*, when Oliver is overwhelmed by the great number of books in Mr. Brownlow’s house, that good man tells him: ‘You shall read them, if you behave well.’ Even Dickens, the most edifying of novelists, could see that aesthetic values aren’t justified by their moral significance and couldn’t bring himself to write, ‘If you read them, you shall behave well’” (2007:138).

(48) I have argued for this in my “Corruption by Literature.” So too, in perhaps stronger terms, has Francine Prose: “the new model English-class graduate,” she writes (83–84), “values empathy and imagination less than the ability to make quick and irreversible judgments, to entertain and maintain simplistic immovable opinions about guilt and innocence…. What results from these educational methods is a mode of thinking (or, more accurately, of *not* thinking) that equips our kids for the future: Future McDonald’s employees. Future corporate board members.”

(49) I speak here of *benefit* rather than *utility*, since I believe the first term captures better the nature of our (ideal) feelings. As a number of critics have suggested (see esp. Booth 1988:172–82 *et passim*), works of fiction are like friends, and while we rightly think of friendship as conferring immense benefits upon our lives, we equally rightly shudder to call it “useful”: to do so would be to take up an instrumentalizing attitude toward the people we are closest to. (Cf. Nehamas 2007:55–57.) We do not *exploit* great works of fiction, but we may nevertheless allow them to help us, and may be tremendously grateful—just as we are to our friends—when they enrich our lives.

(50) On the semantic/pragmatic distinction, cf. Richards: “a statement may be used for the sake of the reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the scientific use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occasions. This is the emotive use of language” (1959:267).

(51) For “locutionary,” “illocutionary,” and “perlocutionary” dimensions of sentences, see Austin, esp. 94–101; for an application to longer utterances, including books, see Skinner 45–46. Since the term “performative” (Austin, 5, 25) has become such a buzzword in my discipline, perhaps it is worth pointing out that there is nothing performative about the texts I will be discussing. The term has a technical sense: a given sentence is a performative if and only if it both declares you to be doing something and itself constitutes the doing. (For example, saying “I promise” both declares you to be promising and is itself the act of promising.) There is no connection between this and what Plato is up to, for example, in leaving holes in the logic and inviting the reader to mend them.

(52) In works that actually advance arguments, it may be appropriate to speak of the articulation and reception of a view; such works, however, are rare. I return to this point in chapter [1](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-1#).

(53) See Dewey, *Art as Experience*; Sartre, 56; Richards 1959:22; Rosenblatt 1978:12, 20–21; Bradley, 4; Cleanth Brooks 1956:213; Iser 1978:281. According to Gary Kemp (173, 189), Croce and Collingwood also insist on the experiential aspect of the aesthetic.

(54) See *Gadamer in Conversation*, 71.

(55) I appeal here to a distinction made by Bernard Williams, who sees morality (which asks what my duty is) as a subset of ethics (which asks simply how I should live). See Williams 1985:1–6 *et passim*.

(56) The idea that minds have a variety of capacities has been around for a very long time; the Greek δύναμις became the Latin *facultas*, which in turn became the English “faculty” (but also, among other things, the German *Vermögen*). I do not wish here to enter into any debates about the nature—let alone, heaven help me, the location—of such mental powers, which is why I am studiously using the word “capacity” instead of the word “faculty.” I hope my reader will concede to me, on the basis of empirical observation, that individuals have the capacity to think logically, to use figurative language, to step back from their representations, and so on, and that these capacities can be strengthened through exercise.

(57) It turns out that enjoying a good novel is an extraordinarily complex process, involving all kinds of mental activity on the part of the reader. Let us distinguish between two categories of activity, one of which involves efforts that are relatively required (and of which we are barely conscious), the other of which involves efforts that are relatively optional (and of which we are at least somewhat aware). In the first category we find (1) the basic understanding of sentences; (2) the visualization of characters and events; (3) the reconstruction of a character’s personality on the basis of scattered pieces of fragmentary and perspectival information; (4) the reconstruction of the chronology of events (extracting *fabula*, as the Formalists would say, from *sjuzhet*); (5) the inferring of events that, though unpresented, must have taken place; (6) the anticipation of future events (suspense and surprise prove that we do this, even if we are not aware of it); (7) the formation of an emotional (or in Walton’s terms “quasi-emotional”) response; (8) the formulation of laws governing the particular fictional universe; (9) the differentiation between figure and ground; (10) the filling-in of gaps; (11) the deciphering of an underlying system of ideas and values; and (12) the taking up of an attitude toward that system. (In almost all of these cases, incidentally, we are dealing with hypotheses that are steadily revised.) The second category includes (13) the monitoring of information sources; (14) a selection among emotional responses, including the rejection of those determined to be unwarranted; (15) the adoption of an attitude toward oneself (what I have been calling “clarification”); (16) the attempt to play the role of ideal reader in order to appreciate the work to the fullest; (17) the construction of counterfactual scenarios (“what if Emma Bovary hadn’t married Charles?”); and (18) the rereading of a work (in whole or in part). It also includes (19) those activities we have seen to be necessary for a full-blooded encounter with formative fictions. For most of the above, see the introduction to Eco 1979; Iser 1978:281–84; Iser 1980:111–17, 166; Todorov 1980:70–75; Bordwell and Thompson, 57, 76, 87–88; Rosenblatt 1978:10–11, 42–43. For quasi-emotions, see Walton 1978; for the laws of a fictional world, see Pavel 1986; for keeping track of sources, see Zunshine 47–65; for counterfactual scenarios, see Morson 1998 and Prince, ii–iii; for rereading, see Cǎlinescu.

(58) Again, it may be asked why I am placing Mallarmé, a lyric poet, alongside writers of fiction. After all, lyric poems do not need to present imaginary situations; they can be aphoristic (Philip Larkin’s “This Be the Verse”), descriptive (Rilke’s “Herbst”), confessional (William Carlos Williams’s “This Is Just to Say”), and so on. Some lyric poems, however, *do* present imaginary situations, and many of Mallarmé’s verses—including “Ses purs ongles,” the primary focus of chapter [3](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-3#)—fall into that category. Indeed, Mallarmé himself uses the term “fiction” in relation to “Un coup de dés”: “la fiction affleurera et dissipera,” he predicts, “autour des arrêts fragmentaires d’une phrase capitale” (“the fiction will surface and dissipate… around fragmentary breaks in a primary sentence” [*OC* 1:392, my translation]). That said, I would have no objection to readers wishing to extend the theory defended in this book to lyric poetry at large. The key distinction I wish to draw here is not between fiction and nonfiction but between literary and non-literary, since the training I am talking about takes place thanks to formal devices like Romantic irony, extended metaphor, or multilayered hypotaxis, and since such devices are more often found (and more often foregrounded) in literary works, whether narrative, lyric, or dramatic.

(59) As Ricoeur points out (1975:49–52), one of the main problems with Structuralism is that it tends to overlook the temporal dimension of literary works.

(60) As I mentioned above, I take to heart Alexander Nehamas’s warning that we do artworks an injustice by treating them as mere means to our pre-established ends. I might, however, qualify this position slightly. While it is true that some artworks have effects on us that no one can predict (and indeed that no one *should* predict), there are cases in which we are free to form substantial prior expectations, with no loss of reverence for the object. When something is labeled a tragedy, for example, we can reasonably expect to be moved (the same, incidentally, is true of Hollywood “weepies,” like *Love Story*); or again, when something is clearly designed as it were for export to other cultures (*Raise the Red Lantern*, say), we can reasonably expect to learn something about what it feels like, or at least what the author thinks it feels like, to belong to a particular national or ethnic or religious group at a given place and time. Formative fictions, finally, constitute an intermediate case. Before we begin reading, we do not know what we want from them or what they want from us (this distinguishes formative fictions from weepies and cultural-immersion pieces). At a certain point, however, we must understand what the offer is and choose, or decline, to take the work up on it (this distinguishes formative fictions from those full-blown Nehamasian catalyst works with their utterly unpredictable effects).

(61) I allude here to Nehamas’s “Postulated Author” article, the definitive theory of intention and interpretation.

(62) Thus Matei Cǎlinescu: “each book, we might say, comes with its own user’s manual” (116–17). “A text,” agrees Todorov, “always contains within itself directions for its own consumption” (1980:77); see also Eco 1979:8, and Peter Brooks, xii. As Iser notes, the manual—what he calls the set of “codes” governing reader-text interaction—is scattered throughout the text, and must be reassembled before we can understand what to do with it (1980:166).

(63) The term is Dilthey’s, the idea Schleiermacher’s (though Ramberg and Gjesdal find it already in Spinoza). Heidegger picked up the idea in *Being and Time*, as did Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. I am grateful to Stanley Corngold for helping me to see its relevance for the formative approach.

(64) In line with Rudolf Bultmann’s *Vorverständnis*, what I am proposing is perhaps a *Vorvermögen*. I return to “pre-understanding” and “pre-capacity” in chapter [2](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-2#).

(65) Notice that even the ability to *read* is, in some cases, not a requirement: the parables, after all, were originally delivered in oral form.

(66) For the literary text as gift, cf. Sartre 60, 67; as we have seen, however, Sartre also considers it a mirror in which the reader should look and be ashamed. The kind of gift you receive from your unfavorite uncle.

(67) This, incidentally, is another reason to keep the term “performative” at bay in the present context. Performative utterances do not require very much work on the hearer’s part in order to “go through”: when someone says “I promise to walk your dog,” for example, all we really need to do is listen. (See Austin, 22.) Formative fictions, by contrast, only function if the reader actively manipulates them, whether (say) by playing with their metaphors, mending their arguments, or unearthing their secret structures.

(68) Again compare Barthes, for whom “the goal of literary work … is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (1975:4; cf. 1988:162). This emphasis on readerly responsibility, and on the possibility of failure, distinguishes my position not only from that of Nussbaum et al. (to be discussed in chapter [1](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-1#)) but also from that of Stanley Fish, who considers us to be almost entirely constrained by the “interpretive community” we have the (mis)fortune of belonging to. A sentence, he says, is “an action made upon a reader” (1980:23); “what happens to one informed reader of a work will happen, within a range of nonessential variation, to another” (1980:52); in the end, “the brakes are on everywhere” (1989:83). As Gerald Graff rather colorfully puts it, Fish’s reader is “a kind of moron” (37).

(69) I am departing very slightly here from Kendall Walton (1978:25–27), who defends subsequent readings of a work as offering experiences similar to the first. On rereading generally, see Cǎlinescu and Maar.

(70) Michael Saler has referred to this as the “public sphere of the imagination” (2005:63). For additional thoughts on the value of readerly communities, see Stow 417–20 and Nehamas 2007:81–82.

(71) “How wonderful it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise. If only wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn” (*Symposium* 175d–e).

(72) My view thus differs from that of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who opposes meaning-mongering not just in the context of fiction but in that of life at large. (See *Production of Presence*, 51–90 *et passim*.) Like Susan Sontag (7), Gumbrecht invites us to focus on the surface of things—to experience their “presence”—rather than seeking to look beneath or beyond them. While I sympathize tremendously with Gumbrecht’s diagnosis of the problem in literary studies, I cannot quite share either his proposed solution or his broader vision. When it comes to literature, first of all, the meaning/presence dichotomy seems a little stark: as I have attempted to show, there are other important options, including clarification, formal modeling, and training. When it comes to the natural world, second, it is not clear that explanations automatically remove enchantment, given the fact that scientific understanding, as Douglas Hofstadter reminds us (434), “doesn’t ‘explain away’; rather, it adds mystery.” And in the human realm, finally, a refusal to look behind behavior to reasons and significance (couldn’t my friend have had a good excuse for showing up late? what will the real consequences be of that new law with the positive-sounding name?) might, in the end, prove both personally and politically damaging.

(73) “Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government” (letter to Richard Price, January 8, 1789, *Letters*, 102).

(74) As we saw above, moralizing theories often start from the idea that sentiment is the route to right behavior, sometimes coupled with the idea that reason is in the way. I must confess to not being quite so sanguine about sentiment, which can (notoriously) lead us in all kinds of undesirable directions, including by means of misplaced and excessive empathy. (It would be a terrible result, for example, if a reader of *Lolita* ended up empathizing with pedophiles.) Nor would I diagnose our contemporary condition as one involving a surfeit of rationality. A little more concern for grounding—a little more willingness and competence to offer reasons for our moral intuitions—could, in fact, go a long way.

(75) The same is true, of course, for works that aim at clarification (see chapter [1](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188561.001.0001/acprof-9780195188561-chapter-1#)): here, too, a genuine interest in the issues at stake is a clear prerequisite for their full effect.

(76) On this point, cf. Iser 1978:275 and 1980:108. It seems to me that aleatory writings, which place such high demands on their consumers—or, to put it another way, which reward them so little—will rarely if ever function as formative fictions. In the face of *Zang Tumb Tuuum*, for example, we are more likely to savor the sentences at a safe distance than to attempt to make them cohere. Formative fictions, by contrast, make it clear that something important is at stake, that some of the pieces have already been put in place, and that some progress is possible, even if that progress should only take the form of charting the contours of the mystery. Amid oceans of ambiguity, their continents of clarity always stand firm.

(77) Another reason to concern oneself with the semantic dimension in Mallarmé is that the poetry, as we will see, systematically *refines away the real*, turning it into pure form. Unlike abstract art, which could be said to give us a foretaste of utopia, Mallarmé’s poetry represents the route one has to travel in order to arrive there. For certain purposes, therefore, it is of greater assistance.

(78) Eliot 1975:93. One might compare here a beautiful paragraph in Proust (*A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, 258) in which the narrator notes that nature has a way of bringing about physical and spiritual fecundity thanks to a series of benevolent deceptions. When bees think they are merely drinking nectar, he points out, they are also spreading pollen; when lovers think they are achieving their goal of sensual pleasure, they are also perpetuating the species; and when we visit a place we have not seen before in order to understand the captivating person who lives there, our real gain is exposure to a new landscape. Pollination, reproduction, and the expansion of the imagination are, for Proust’s narrator, vastly more important than nectar, sex, and understanding. Without the latter, however, the former would never happen.

(79) Adorno on *Endgame*: “after the Second War, everything is destroyed” (1982:122); “Beckett’s trashcans are the emblem of a culture restored after Auschwitz” (143); and most absurdly, “insecticide … all along pointed to the genocidal camps” (145). Similarly, Anthony Uhlmann reads the featureless landscape of *The Unnamable* as an allegory of “wartorn France” (1999:137–86; cf. Calder, 110), while for his part, Gary Adelman believes (why not?) that *The Unnamable* is about a Jew in the Holocaust (67–84).

(80) “Then it will all be over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloys, Morans and Malones” (*Three Novels*, 236); “when I think of the time I’ve wasted with these bran-dips, beginning with Murphy, who wasn’t even the first” (390–91); “I am neither … Murphy, nor Watt, nor Mercier … nor any of the others whose very names I forget, who told me I was they, who I must have tried to be” (326).

(81) Even here, note that *Eleuthéria*, which Beckett wrote after the war, is formally similar to *Murphy* (allowances made of course for the difference in genre).

(82) As Steven J. Rosen rightly remarks, “his skepticism is classical; there is no reason to regard it as a product of a particular historical situation” (53). Reviewing a volume of Beckett’s letters, J. M. Coetzee is struck by what he calls a “serene indifference to politics”; “in the age of Stalin and Mussolini and Hitler, of the Great Depression and the Spanish civil war, references to world affairs in Beckett’s letters can be counted on the fingers of one hand” (2009:13).

(83) *Fin de partie*, 56.

(84) As Sartre and others have recognized, certain features of the human condition—our mortality, for example, or our limited knowledge—are indifferent to history. Even romantic love turns out to be somewhat less culturally specific than many have imagined: see Gottschall and Nordland, *passim*.

(85) Still less is this an *evolutionary* theory of all fiction. For various reasons, well documented by Jonathan Kramnick in “Against Literary Darwinism,” it makes no sense to speak of an aptitude for fiction being an *adaptation*, a trait that could be “selected for.” (If something is not in the DNA, it cannot count as an adaptation.) It is also by no means clear that fiction has been around for very long, in evolutionary terms. Did early humans really exchange acknowledgedly made-up tales around the “Pleistocene campfire,” as Denis Dutton likes to imagine (457)? Impossible to know for sure of course, but the least one can say is that the idea is massively speculative.

(86) Contrast, again, many evolutionary approaches that, more or less by necessity, are committed to the posit that all fictions serve an identical set of purposes.

(87) At the beginning of *Die Ausnahme und die Regel*—one of Brecht’s *Lehrstücke*—the chorus says, speaking of the play to come: “Findet es befremdend, wenn auch nicht fremd … damit nichts unveränderlich gelte” (“find it alienating, albeit not alien … so that nothing should appear immutable”) (Brecht 1969:94, my translation). Brecht is of course highly eloquent on the subject of his own work; see Brecht 1964.

(88) This is Lanier Anderson’s view, as presented viva voce in lectures for our “Philosophy and Literature” class.

(89) See my “Passion, Counter-Passion, Catharsis.”

(90) This is Lisa Zunshine’s compelling theory (see esp. 27–36, but also 159–62). Unlike Nussbaum, Zunshine recognizes that increased social skills need not lead to increased altruism; great manipulators require the ability to “read minds” just as much as great benefactors do. There is, accordingly, no reason to see fiction as making us more moral. In fact, Zunshine is not even sure fiction makes us slicker social operators (35, 125); to that extent (and also to the extent that I see her view as applying only to certain character-heavy, closed-world fictions, rather than to fiction *tout court*) I am reading her a little against the grain.

(91) The ideal response may in the end be a Sartrean one: select an interpretation and commit to it, in full awareness of its partiality. It is worth noting that the opportunity for training is, here as elsewhere, only an offer and not a requirement; large numbers of critics have in fact read Kafka in the light of a single allegorical schema that they themselves have taken to be exhaustive. In the case of *The Trial*, for example, many have ignored all evidence that Josef K. is partly responsible for his situation, preferring to lay the blame squarely at the feet of the Court (and to construe the latter, typically, as a tyrannical state apparatus). For Josef K.’s guilt, see Marson *passim*.

(92) As Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have shown, the vast majority of our actions are driven by automated psychological mechanisms (what they call “System 1”); it is only rarely that System 1 breaks down, causing us to shift to conscious deliberation (“System 2”). (See summary in Kahneman 2003.) I would add, first, that System 2 has the capacity not just to override local decisions but also to make adjustments to System 1; and second, that reading complicated works of fiction, like *Song of Solomon*, may well give us practice at making such adjustments. I have written about Proustian training in *Philosophy as Fiction* (141–45), and about *Adaptation* in “Still Life in a Narrative Age.” On mental agility generally, cf. Boyd, 33.

(93) Aristotle: “those who make the best decisions do not seem to be the same as those with the best beliefs; on the contrary, some seem to have better beliefs, but to make the wrong choice” (*EN* 1112a8–10); “it is our decisions, … not our beliefs, that make the characters we have” (*EN* 1112a3–4). (Here and in what follows, I abbreviate *Nichomachean Ethics* to *EN*.)

(94) “Virtue of character results from habit” (*EN* 1103a15–16); “arguments and teaching surely do not influence everyone, but the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits, … like ground that is to nourish seed” (*EN* 1179b24–26); “we need to have been brought up in fine habits if we are to be adequate students of what is fine and just” (*EN* 1095b4–6).