

Reading Characters

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Watching Othello's terrible jealousy work in him, we fear for Desdemona and the fear implies our belief that she is in danger. Our knowledge that Desdemona does not exist implies, however, that the belief in her danger is either false or meaningless, and we find ourselves in the position of believing both that she is in danger and either that she is not in danger or that the belief in her danger is meaningless.¹ One way out of this irrational predicament is to deny that we fear for her, arguing that whatever the feeling is, it is not fear, or is quasi-fear, or is fear with a different logic from fear whose object is thought to be real. Another way is to claim that we suspend disbelief in her existence and can, therefore, rationally believe in her danger.²

I will suggest a third way, namely, that 1) Desdemona is a figure of speech that figures our inner life as we read "her," 2) the beliefs that structure our feelings are beliefs generated by taking the soundings of our inner life as it is figured by the characters and their play, and, therefore, 3) Desdemona exists timelessly as a figure of speech and momentarily as a union of structuring figures and reader's feelings.

These are different strategies for solving what may be called the world-world problem of representational art: how can someone in the actual world have propositional attitudes toward some one or event in a fictional world? How can attitudes cross worlds? When fear and other emotions are analyzed

as dispositions to experience characteristic sensations or behave in characteristic ways structured by beliefs, and beliefs as propositional attitudes, the possibility of having feelings toward fictional entities depends on the possibility of taking attitudes towards them. The problem is not that we cannot understand how we can have attitudes toward works of art. They are in the actual world, after all, and we can refer to them. We cannot refer into them, however, because of the axiom of existence governing referring expressions: what is referred to must exist. The play *Othello* exists, the characters Othello and Desdemona do not. At most we can pretend to refer to Desdemona and it might seem to follow that at most we can pretend to fear for her. But it is often the case that we really do feel what is most naturally described as fear and that we feel it even as we are saying "It's only a play, no man will put out her light." How is this rationally possible?

The feeling is the sign that we understand Desdemona's plight, not simply that we see the set of Othello's course and know that he must kill her, but that we understand *what it is like* for Desdemona to suffer his love. The fear occasioned by the play is structured by beliefs, not the false or meaningless belief whose object is expressed by "Desdemona is threatened by Othello's passion" but beliefs about what it is like to be Desdemona, and what it is like to be Othello as well. For to appreciate the enormity of the threat to Desdemona, we must know not simply the general truth *that* jealousy tends to be destructive but *how* the maddening passion is working in Othello, how it is consuming him. These structuring beliefs are the result of an experiment: the subjection of the given to certain procedures for the purpose of discovery. Here, the given is the text of the play and what is sought is knowledge of what it is like to be the characters. From what is given we design and then perform a series of experiments in imagination whereby we identify with the characters against the background of certain conventions.

The task of this paper is to reconstruct these imaginative experiments in such a way as to allow a solution to the world-world problem. The space between actual and fictional on this reconstruction becomes the difference between the set of descriptions true of the reader and the set the reader imagines true of herself. The latter consists of the words in the work and the reader's elaboration of them. It constitutes the objective moment of a character whose subjective moment is constituted by the reader's performance of acts of imaginative identification with it. Or, more precisely, the space between actual and fictional is expressible as the difference between thoughts and feelings generated by what is believed to be true and those generated by what is

imagined true, between the reader's thinking and feeling as herself, one whose history unfolds in the actual world, and as one identified with a particular character.

The reconstruction turns on the role of imagination in the reader's identification, a kind of imagination similar to the imagination of sensations. For to imagine seeing Venice is to have the visual experience of seeing it and to imagine being one in a fearful predicament, Desdemona, is to experience the sensations of fear - not as oneself but as Desdemona.

CHARACTERS

There is a world-world problem because characters do not exist and yet there is such a connection between them and people that people do adopt propositional attitudes toward them; the problem is to explain how this is rationally possible. A satisfactory explanation requires an account of what characters are and what is the connection between them and readers. I have given such an account elsewhere and will summarize it here.³ A character is a set of descriptions given by a text, at least one of which is the description of a typical human characteristic, and a character is more than the words on the pages of its text in that it is whatever further descriptions both are consistent with the words and are such that the reader can discover what it is like to be the characters by performing an experiment in imagination.

A character is elaborated by a reader when the reader adds to the descriptions in the text that constitute the character. The elaboration may be conservative or radical: conservative when supported by received theories of the culture, radical when contradicted by or incommensurable with them. Notice that the requirement that an elaboration be consistent with the words in the text is relatively weak: it does not require that the text imply the elaboration but only prohibits the elaboration from contradicting text. Now, among our culture's theories is the theory that the self is a unity reflected in the consistency of its memories, desires, beliefs and intentions. Therefore an elaboration of a character that unsettles the consistency of the reader's memories, and desires, beliefs and intentions, will be said to be radical on the assumption that the more or less fixed character of the self is analogous to the more or less fixed set of theories and common beliefs and values of the culture: the "set" of self and culture tends to determine the course of each unless it is *subverted*. Some elaborations, then, are continuous with the (reader's) self and the culture, some discontinuous or subversive.

One character can be elaborated in many ways. What is to count as one? The criterion of identity for character is that one character is the *same* as another just in case all of its characteristics (descriptions) are the same. Otherwise, it is different. There are many Othellos. They are, nonetheless, all proliferations of Othello, bound together by the descriptions in the play of which they are elaborations. The many Othellos may be regarded as various members of one kind, and the play's descriptions as the essential underlying structure of the kind.⁴ The connection between characters and people in which I am interested is that what is a character and what a given character is like are determined by the reader's imagination. Something is a character if the reader can imagine being it, and a character is whatever the reader can imagine its being. The direction of this connection is from reader to character. (A connection whose direction is from character to reader is this: ways in which the reader *can* conceive her own identity are given by the ways in which she *does* individuate characters.)

Characters are figures of speech elaborated in the reader's imagination. This construal sets the stage for an answer to How can people have propositional attitudes toward what they know is not real? The procedure by which readers relate themselves to characters in such a way that it is not irrational to have attitudes toward them and feelings structured by the attitudes is given below. Two points should be made at the outset. First, it is a reconstruction; the steps do not add up to a phenomenological description of the reader's activity. The fact that a reader is not aware of performing them does not count against the claim that the steps rationalize his attitudes and feelings toward the characters. Indeed, knowing how to read stories is a complex skill part of whose exercise consists in the automatic performance of the steps in question. The elaboration of characters is part of the design, not the performance, of the experiment and may not itself be automatic. What in the best case *is* routine, however, is the readers's identification with the characters. Second, the best case is that in which the reader approaches the work with the intention of gaining a lively appreciation of the world defined by the work and its characters. The reader may fail in her appreciation, for she may fail in the performance of one of the steps in the procedure.⁵ The point is that what is detailed below does not purport to reconstruct every reading of works in which there are characters, only those readings by which the reader presumes to "enter" the world of the work.

My claim, in brief, is that people often do, for example, fear for Desdemona, shudder when Oedipus raises his wife-mother's brooch to his eyes,

and worry when Tom Sawyer and Becky are lost in the cave. Since people do have feelings toward characters, it is possible for them to do so. What must be shown is how these feelings are possible and why it is not irrational or in some other way wrong to have them. For one could argue that to respond feelingly to art is to mistake art for life and so to err about the nature of art. Or one could say with Plato that the feelings of characters trace themselves in the souls of the responsive audience, and the audience, not realizing that feelings are contagious and are the more likely to intrude into daily life the more they are enjoyed in art, errs about the strength of the (harmful) effects of art,

The following reconstruction of the activity of whoever reads with the appropriate intention explains the possibility of having the feelings and clears the way for explaining their rationality. The rationality of feelings occasioned by literature will appear in the light of an answer to the question why literature matter's to us. John Searle is, I think, right when in *Expression and Meanings* (Cambridge, 1979) he says, "part of the answer (will) have to do with the crucial role, usually underestimated, that imagination plays in human life, and the equally crucial role that shared products of the imagination play in human social life." Strong claims may and have been made about the role of imagination in knowledge and in the determination of the attitudes we may or ought to take toward what we know in part and seek to know in whole. So far as the claims are good and we care about the attitudes we take or the way we position ourselves, and so far as imagination is essentially involved in appreciating most literature, the feelings aroused by the exercise of imagination in reading are not irrational and are more basic to knowing than most people realize.

IMAGINATIVE IDENTIFICATION

Every story is presented through a sensuous medium and involves the acceptance of certain conventions or principles of make believe of the sort that, for example, constitute the children's game of making believe that globs of mud are pies.⁶ Similarly, the audience makes believe that the stage set in the murder scene in *Othello* is the state bedroom in the citadel in Cyprus. It is not sufficient, however, to explain the rational possibility of having feelings about Desdemona to say that one makes believe that Desdemona is real; the forthcoming account might be seen as an analysis of the notion of making believe that Desdemona is real, though it were, I think, better seen as an analysis of our sense of reality.

My strategy is to reconstruct the procedure of identification in three steps: the first involves a play of imagination and is the primary focus of the paper, the second and third involve conventions about characters, experiences and their worlds, respectively. The steps are:

- 1) We imagine that we are in the position of a particular character and that the descriptions that constitute are true of us, and we discover how we find being there.
- 2) We infer that how we find being in the character's position, under its descriptions, is how the character finds it.
- 3) We adopt the character's point of view.

Step One is the performance of experiments in which the reader imagines that he or she *is*, in turn, different characters in the predicaments in which the work presents them. Since characters just are sets of descriptions, a reader's imagining that he is a character C in predicament P is no more than his imagining that the descriptions, including "being in P," true of C are true of him. How does one do this? One answer is that as a first step the reader lays aside what is particular about himself; he does, in short, what David Hume says in "Of the Standard of Taste" *Four Dissertations* (London, 1757) a literary critic must do, namely, consider himself as a "man in general" and forget his "individual being and peculiar circumstances." This will not do, however, if it means that the reader in one fell swoop imagines away all of his particularity. For he would then have to imagine that he was "man in general," which is impossible. Only what is particular can be imagined. A more acceptable answer is that the reader imagines away only those characteristics that he does not share with the character, and in the same act imagines having the related characteristics of the character. The reader, then, never imagines himself a blank slate on which a character's individuality is inscribed.

Even so, what is it for, say, an American woman philosopher to imagine away her nationality, gender, and profession and in the same act to imagine being a Moor and general of daring skill whose latest conquest, of Desdemona, will prove to be a rare defeat? The answer may be read from the way in which what the reader is to imagine is expressed. That is, she is not simply to imagine being a general or, even, a noble Moor in the service of the Venetian state (Othello's identification in the list of *dramati personae*.) She is to have imagined by the play's end being subject to all of the descriptions licensed by the text and her reading of it. The reader is to have imagined being Othello, and Othello may be characterized as one who, unused to defeat,

is defeated by his love, as he may not be characterized as simply one who is a Moor, a man, a general. This is to say that the imaginative experiment is to be designed, where the design is what is usually called interpretation. Although the text delivers the descriptions that constitute the character piecemeal, each piece is embedded in the network of relations that is the text and is not, therefore, merely an item on a list. For example, the first mention of Othello is in I, i where Roderigo says to Iago, "Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate;" he is introduced as the object of another's passion. By the end of the scene, the reader has seen Othello as the thief as of both Iago's lieutenancy and Brabantio's daughter; she has seen his effects on the lives of others and, moreover, seen them only from the others' points of view. Nonetheless, she can imagine being "one who is the object of Iago's fury at having been passed over for promotion and Brabantio's unbelieving and outraged grief at having been deceived past thought by Desdemona."

The reader's understanding of any one description is enriched as she receives more and more descriptions. The character is built up out of its descriptions as the play unfolds, and the reader's experiment consists in performing the imaginative acts in the order in which the play presents their raw material. Othello's unhesitating and sure "Not I; I must be found: my parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly," made in reply to Iago's suggestion that he hide himself from Brabantio, resonates with the reader's knowledge of how Brabantio and Iago feel toward him and the plans to which these feelings have given rise. The words resonate weakly if the reader knows only that they are angered, but strongly if her knowledge of their anger is result of having imagined being Iago, denied the post even after three notables interceded, and Brabantio, unable to comprehend how the daughter who shunned all suitors would willingly go to the "extravagant and wheeling stranger of her and everywhere" and willing himself to renounce fatherhood rather than understand.

When Othello appears, the reader is in position to imagine being Othello rather than being merely the object of Iago's hatred. The difference is that in the normal case a character knows (would know were it actual) what it is doing, whereas it need not and usually does not know all that the reader knows about it. For example, Othello does not, and the reader does, know that Iago hates him, and if the reader has imaginatively identified with Iago, she knows as well the quality of his hatred and in knowing it, knows how its object, Othello, is hated. Despite this difference, Othello is truly one who is hated by Iago as he is one who himself speaks and acts. Now, it might be

thought that since characters are sets of descriptions all of whose members are known to the reader but not to the characters, when the reader imagines the descriptions' being true of her and discovers how she finds being so described, she may not infer that how she finds it *is* how the character finds it. For the reason that the reader's knowing more about the character than it knows about itself muddies the purity of the identification. It is not muddied, however, because the reader knows both that Iago hates Othello and that Othello does not know this. The set of descriptions true of Othello that the reader imagines true of herself, then, includes the description of Othello as one who is ignorant of what he is to Iago. This ignorance is dramatically salient; it is what precipitates the tragedy of Othello.

It might be urged, even so, that the Othello composed of all the descriptions licensed by the play simply is different from the Othello composed of the descriptions Othello could apply to himself and that, moreover, since the reader is privy to the first set by courtesy of the text's author, it is appropriate to distinguish between the authorial construct and the dramatic character, where the former "lives" in the mind of the author whose choices the play reflects and the latter "lives" in the play.⁷ On my conception of characters the two are indeed different, for a character is a certain set of descriptions and one is the same as another just in case all of its descriptions are the same. Nonetheless, there are on my conception indefinitely many more than two Othellos; there are as many as there are elaborations of the text, and elaborations need only be consistent with the text and imaginable by the reader. Moreover, the many Othellos do not naturally group themselves into the authorial, those seen from outside the play, and the dramatic, those seen from within. This is not the place to address the many questions of theory raised by the presumption that there is a clear demarcation between what is inside and what outside a work of literature; but it is worth remarking that the tendency to suppose that there is an Othello which is something more than the set of descriptions that Othello could apply to himself may be overcome by the following reflection. It is natural to suppose that a competent reader does not ignore anything that is in the text; but to construct a dramatic character who is just what Othello knows about himself is to ignore much of what is there in the text about Othello. The tendency to think that the reader should concentrate on the Othello-who-is-what-he-knows-about-himself in order to understand the action of the play stems from a spate of assumptions about people's being centers of consciousness and acting as they do from rational choice and plan. We may be better served by literature, however,

if rather than projecting these assumptions about ourselves onto the text we let the text show us how what we do not know about ourselves is prominent among the causes of our actions. Whether or not this is true, I take it that Othello's ignorance of Iago is as much a part of him as are his sometimes destructively mistaken beliefs.

The elaboration of a character, the design of the experiment the reader is to perform in order to realize what it is like to be the character, clearly does not do itself. But having designed and then performed the experiment, the reader knows straight off what it is to be the character she has imagined being. She does not know it from her past experience or her familiarity with psychology or theories of human motivation. Readers' resources, that is, what they have lived through and what they have learned, contribute to their understanding the text's language and their elaboration of its characters; the design of the experiment is a function of the reader's past and her commitments but the actual performance is not. The *act* of imagination may be distinguished from the *object* of imagination and so, then, may their logics be distinguished. Therefore, from the fact that what the reader brings to the text bears on how she constructs (interprets, elaborates) what is to be imagined, it does not follow that it bears on the performance of the imaginative act. It is precisely because imagination is free in its encounter with literature that literature can make a difference to our lives: it wrenches us from our empirical selves and shows us what we may be, by showing us what we are in the imaginative identification. If our vision is bound by what we are, then everything we look at simply shows us what our histories and our bodies have already "written" there, and imagination cannot change our lives by showing us what we might not have thought to dream. Imagination need only have made this sort of difference to the life of some one reader for those who say that we see in situations, literary or real, only what we have written there to be shown to be wrong. The burden is on the versions of so-called reader response theory according to which readers cannot escape their historically conditioned selves to show either that literature, properly read, does not thrill or that it does not do so precisely by freeing readers from the contingent conditions of their lives.

EXPERIENTIAL IMAGINATION

Not only is the reader's knowledge of what it is like to be the characters not determined by the resources she brings to the text, neither is it a form of propositional or practical knowledge, nor is it a skill. It is not a kind of knowing

that thus and so is the case, nor of knowing how to do anything whatsoever, including how to reason about practical matters. It is knowledge by acquaintance, where the acquaintance occurs in imagination. Call it knowledge by imagination.. What is known are experiences, those the reader has as the result of performing the experiment. The performance at the same time provides the character's subjective side and apprises the reader of what it is like to be the character. It is the performance of an act of *experiential* imagination.

Imagination is experiential when what is imagined is that one is actually participating in a scene rather than merely watching it, even than watching a scene in which one is oneself a participant.⁸ Imagining that one is part of a scene is a matter of visualizing the scene and oneself saying and doing certain things in it. This sort of imagination, call it *propositional*, provides a view of its object from the outside; there is nothing ineffable about its object, and the object is fully expressible in a proposition. The other sort, whose objects are experiences, which are not expressible without remainder in propositions, is not a matter of visualizing a scene outside of which one stands as spectator but of imagining being the character in an act which creates, and in creating reveals, the character's subjectivity.

Only when a work is read with the intention of the reader's gaining a lively appreciation of its world are certain sets of its descriptions enlivened by her feelings. When a work is enlivened in this way, the reader has exchanged certain of her descriptions with those of the character, and the interweaving of reader with character produces something new: a momentary union of reader's feelings as matter and character's descriptions, the texts' words, as form. To the question whose experiences are known by imagination, the answer: characters', when and so far as they are subjected to the creative activity of reading. When they are full blown by the enlivening imagination, they may be said to exist in a strong sense of "exist," strong but nonetheless different from the ordinary sense in which existence is location in space-time. When characters are not full blown, remaining figures of speech figuring, nothing, they will be said to exist in a weak sense. (There is no weak-/strong distinction within the ordinary sense.)

What I am here saying about characters, Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* says about the text:

TEXT means TISSUE; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue - this texture -

the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web.⁹

Texts are made in the act of reading, characters in the act of imaginatively identifying with them, and neither is made once and for all but is composed anew with each act of reading. A moment's reflection on the *plurality* of characters shows how they may be said to "dissolve" into the reading that partially constitutes them. On the one hand, the character is no *one* thing, for its words must be elaborated (interpreted) in some way and may be elaborated in many ways. On the other hand, the character conceived as the union of text's words and reader's feelings is no *one thing*, for it lasts only as long as the reading lasts: it lasts a moment; whereas things have temporal spread.

The raw material from which text and character is made is already contained in the reader as the possibilities of her thought and feeling, but the reader may be said to "unmake" herself in the course of making text or character by imagining away whatever is true about herself that conflicts with what is true about the character. She unmakes herself like Barthes' "spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web". The unmaking is no more permanent than what is made—each lasts a moment only. It may be explained as the performance of an act of experiential imagination, an act of being, say, Othello, now persuaded that his wife has been with Cassio and being moved to say:

Ay, let her rot and perish, and be damned tonight, for she shall not live.
No, my heart is turned to stone, I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O, the world has not a sweeter creature. She might lie by an emperor's side and command him tasks. (IV, i)

The reader experiences the complexity of Othello's state when she imagines being Othello as she reads these words. She does not *imagine* experiencing the state, she actually experiences it: what she imagines is that she is not herself but is Othello. The reader realizes the pathos of proof that his heart is stone—it hurts his hand when he strikes it—which shows that it is not stone at all though he clearly wishes it were. For then it could not be moved by a sweetness so powerful that it might command emperors and does command Othello. He is in thrall. And the reader knows this by an act of experiential imagination, a kind whose salient characteristic is its transparency. To imagine having an experience is, necessarily, to have it.¹⁰ Therefore, when one imagines being the subject of an experience, one has the experience. The truth of this reveals a similarity between experiences occasioned by art and those occasioned by life: the difference lies in the ontological status, not the descriptive content, of their causes and objects. Since experiences are the experiences they are by virtue of how their causes and objects are properly to be

described, identity of this descriptive content of the structuring causes and objects encountered in arts and in life entails, other things being equal, identity of structured experiences. Richard Wollheim puts this nicely in "Imagination and Identification" when he says "I act to myself someone feeling something or other and then react to this...by experiencing the feeling".

Readers know, too, what Othello cannot comprehend and what must, then, break him. He cannot reconcile her perfidy and her beauty, and wishes not that Desdemona were dead, for memory of the contradiction would stay, but that she had never been :

O thou black weed' why art so lovely fair ?

Thou smell'st so sweet that the senses ache at thee.

Would thou hadst ne'er been born ! (IV, i)

Again, how can the beautiful not be good :

Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,

Made to write 'whore' on ? (IV, ii)

Desdemona could not have been made to be whore. But she is whore. Against all nature and all reason. Othello is undone. We here respond to what no mind, not Othello's or ours, can comprehend : to Desdemona's being both black and fair, foul and sweet. We know Othello's state by performing the experiment whereby we imagine being him; the knowledge is by imagination and is no more the Othello would know, were he real. However, in order to perform the experiment we must specify to ourselves what we are to imagine and in doing so come to know what Othello would not be likely to know : that his giving proof that his heart is stone proves that it is not, that what is breaking him apart is his inability either to give up one of two contradictory beliefs, and the feelings to which they give rise, or to reconcile them. The kind of knowledge readers have about the reasons and causes of Othello's state is propositional; their knowledge of its texture and its feel is not.

Again it might be objected that the reader's knowing more about Othello than Othello knows about himself makes what the reader feels in imagining herself to be Othello different from what Othello would feel were he real. For the reader's beliefs are different from Othello's. But, again, feelings are caused as much by what is true about a person, even when the person does not know what is true, as by what a person believes about himself. What is true about Othello is that he is ignorant of Desdemona's innocence. This truth is *written* in him, even though he does not *read* (name) it, and it is what makes him do what he does in the scene that begins with his saying :

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,

Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars !

It is the cause. (V, ii)

Othello takes the cause to be the falsity of the woman before him on the bed, which cause should not be named because too horrible; we may take it to be his false beliefs about the woman, which cannot be named because not known. Indeed, it is the falsity of the beliefs, it is that and why they are false, that demands explanation. And the reader, no more than Othello, has privileged knowledge about why Othello writes "whore" in his mind,

The fact that the reader has characters' experiences, and does not imagine having them, provides the key to the solution to the world-world problem. The reader, watching Othello's jealousy work in him, fears for Desdemona as Desdemona fears for herself :

And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then

When your eyes roll, Why I should fear I know not,

Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel I fear. (V, ii)

For the reader has Desdemona's experiences by identifying with her in imagination and is not, therefore, in the irrational predicament of standing in the actual world and having feelings toward what is known to be not real but is, on the contrary, in the wholly rational predicament of feeling fear as she, all ignorant of its causes, watches the passion attack and master her lord. "She" here names the union of text's words with reader's feelings and spans the distance between actual and fictional worlds. Moreover, the fact that the reader has the experiences as Desdemona and not as herself shows how the reader may be said to unmake herself, dissolving into the character whose subjectivity she provides in reading it. (The full blown character, in turn, may be said to dissolve into the reading that partially constitutes it. By the law of transitivity, then, the reader dissolves into the reading. She becomes her reading, or *she reads herself*. A nice conflation of reader and text.)

TWO CONVENTIONS

Step Two is the inference that how the reader finds being in the character's position is how the character finds it. If the reader, identifying with Othello, feels thus and so she may infer that Othello feels thus and so just in case the now familiar two conditions are satisfied. The first is that the elaboration of the character, which is logically prior to the performance of the experiment, be consistent with the words in the text. The second is that there be an imaginative identification between reader and character. The identification must not be confused with acts of the projection or introjection of one self into another.¹¹ The identification achieved in reading is free of the self whose story is part of the

causal order of the world and part of whose story is its unconscious beliefs and desires, written in the mind of one who cannot read them. Projection and introjection are not. They are so far from being free of the performer's historical and contingent self that they are determined by and performed in the service of that self.

Nor is the imaginative identification with characters to be confused with bonds forged by readers' sympathy for them. Feeling sympathy for others entails having certain beliefs about them; since the relevant beliefs about characters are false or meaningless because characters do not in the ordinary sense exist, it is irrational to feel sympathy for them. Even so, it is not irrational for the reader, identifying with Desdemona as she watches Othello's passion consume him, to feel fear. Having imagined being the character and inferred that how she finds being in its situation is how the character finds it, the reader is said to have the character's thoughts and feelings.

It does not follow, however, that whatever the reader discovers upon performing the experiment is what it is like to be the character with whom she is identifying. Step Two is an inference and it may go wrong. It goes wrong whenever one of its conditions is violated. Nonetheless, the fact that the reader can be wrong does not show that there is one or only a few ways of being right. There is nothing to privilege an elaboration of Othello, nothing prior to the text's being read called "what it is like to be Othello" which is such that its realization in the reader's experience counts as knowing what it is like to be Othello. However the reader finds being in the character's position, so long as the experiment in which the discovery is made is performed properly, is how the character finds it. To perform Step Two is to accept this convention.

Step Three is the adoption of the points of view of the characters with whom one has identified. Points of view are not only "the essence of the internal world," they are views onto a world, points from which a world is viewed, as well, and each point defines a unique perspective on the net-work of relations that is the work. The descriptions that partially constitute Desdemona are embedded in the text but can be considered apart from it, whereas the perspective on the play that she defines cannot be considered apart from the play: a way of seeing the world cannot reveal itself in isolation from the world seen. To adopt Desdemona's point of view, then, is to enter the world of *Othello* in a way that simply imagining her characteristics applying to oneself is not to enter it. The reader does not by the very act of imaginatively identifying with Desdemona enter the

play's world; she must perform the further act of adopting Desdemona's point of view. In the moment of identification, the reader spans the distance between the actual world and *Othello's*; she refers herself into the play. Talk of spans and references presupposes space over or through which the spanning and referring occur. At the moment of the reader's adoption of a character's point of view, however, the space vanishes; there is at the limit only the world of the play.

Moreover, this further act is such that one cannot imagine performing it, one can only perform it. There is nothing that could count as imagining looking at the world from so and so's point of view. For what could one do to imagine looking at the world through Desdemona's eyes other than imagine being Desdemona and look at the world, which look is, perforce, from her point of view? All lookings, imaginings, knowings, in short, all mental acts or states embody the point of view of the agent; this point is, then, not itself the object of a mental act but is an essential feature of the agent. Similarly, the point of view of a character is not the object of the reader's imagination but is a feature of the reader who adopts the character's point of view, entering the text at the site occupied by the character.

There are at least as many perspectives on any one character in a work as there are other characters that bear some relation to it, and the various perspectives on a character figure in the reader's elaboration of it. To enter the text at the site occupied by Iago in the first scene of *Othello* is to be swept forcibly along his lines of sight to Othello. The elaboration of Othello is, then, a partial function of how Iago sees him, and how Iago sees anything whatsoever is a function, in turn, of how Iago is elaborated. Characters mirror each other endlessly, one character's perception of and perspective on another helping the reader to elaborate the other. There is no truth of the matter and, hence, no end of the matter. For there is no reality of Othello, Desdemona, Iago behind the words whose apprehension would elicit from the reader the cry "That's it!"

Characters mirror their worlds, as well, and there are as many worlds of the play as there are characters' perspectives on its situation and as many entrances into the network of worlds as readers' elaborations of characters - in each case, indefinitely many. One may say of the play what Roland Barthes says of language, having called it an endless galaxy of signifiers: "to take (any one) entrance is to aim, ultimately, ... at a perspective whose vanishing point is nonetheless ceaselessly pushed back, mysteriously opened."¹² Step three is adoption of the characters' points of view and acceptance of the convention that the world of the play is the unbounded and many dimensioned complex of

second-order constructs out of characters' viewpoints, where characters are themselves first-order constructs out of the play's language and its readers' inner lives.

THE SOLUTION

Characters are plural, their points of view various, the worlds determined by characters' sightlines themselves plural. The only limits on what is created by the act of reading are the figures and structures of language, on the one hand, and readers' capacities of heart and mind, on the other. Since readers can think and feel only what they can *experientially imagine* thinking and feeling, and since the difference between performing and *imagining* performing a mental activity lies in the reality and fictionality of its causes and objects, readers' capacities for mental life are coextensive with the reach of their imaginations. Language and imagination, not the relatively stable set of the reader's culture and self, are what limit how a text can be read. Texts may be read more or less aggressively, where the most aggressive reading is the one that does violence to the reader's beliefs that are authorized by her culture and its traditions. Such readings involve radical elaborations of characters, elaborations that contradict or are incommensurable with culture's traditions.

Were readings limited by these traditions, there hardly could be readings that unsettle them. But there are. They are utterly different from the readings invited by what Roland Barthes calls the text of pleasure :

the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading,

and are, rather, what are invited by what Barthes calls the text of bliss :

the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.¹³

Yet there could not be readings so violent as to annihilate culture and reader. For there to be reading at all there must be the structure of relations that determine meaning and the energies of readers whose performance of acts of reading make something significant out of what, until staged, remains permanent possibilities of meaning.

Take now the structure of relations that is *Othello* and take the world determined by one reading of the play, a world in which are interwoven the language of the text and the feelings of the reader. This construct out of the reader's activity may be responded to only when the reader has ceased her reading/weaving and stands once again in the actual world as the individual whose own story unfolds in

that world. The reader who now, no longer imagining herself Desdemona, feels fear for Desdemona is irrational, forgetting the stricture imposed by the axiom of reference : one cannot refer and, therefore, cannot direct propositional attitudes into a fictional world. The space between actual and fictional, closed by the fullness of reading, is opened as soon as the reading stops. The reader engaged by the fullness of reading, is not in the position, while reading, to respond to what is read.

The economy of mind is such that if one is actually feeling Desdemona's fear, one cannot at the same time be host to feelings structured by beliefs about one's own predicament in the actual world. In imagining that one is Desdemona, one imagines away (brackets, withholds assent from) the beliefs about one's own predicament that would enable feelings about it. So far as readers entertain their own feelings about anything whatsoever while they are reading, they have not entered the world of the play as one or another of its characters. A fortiori, so far as they have their own feelings toward characters and events within the play they show themselves not to have entered its world and, therefore, to be irrational for believing, for example, both that Desdemona is in danger and that Desdemona does not exist. They transgress the space between actual and fictional.

One might object that it is precisely this transgression that causes the peculiar pleasures of reading. Roland Barthes, for one, traces one of its pleasures—bliss—to such a transgression :

Many readings are perverse, implying a split, a cleavage the reader can keep saying : *I know these are only words, but all the same....(I am moved as though they were uttering a reality)....I know and I don't know, I act toward myself as though I did not know.*¹⁴

He would not deny the irrationality of knowingly responding to what one knows is not real but would claim instead that the experience of bliss consists sometimes in the dizzying defiance of the Law of Contradiction. This is not an objection to the impossibility of attending both to being (in imagination) Desdemona and to being oneself, however. For were it not impossible, there would be no defiance of the laws of logic in trying to be both and the attempt would not have to fail, as it does on Barthes's account, ending in the momentary loss of (the sense of) self characteristic of bliss. I conclude, then, that response to the work constructed by the creative activity of reading cannot, on pain of irrationality, include response to characters within the work. To respond to characters is to treat them as though they were real, existing independently of the network of relations in which they inhere.

Works of literature are, finally, structures of language, and characters are figures of speech. I am not sure, therefore, that the distinction between fictional

and actual is the most perspicuous one with which to approach the question of the rationality of the reader's shudder, made as she watches Desdemona offer to Othello a series of four deals whose rapid succession reflects the speed with which knowledge of her fate is dawning upon her :

O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not !

Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight !

But half an hour !

But while I say one prayer !

Othello cannot deal with her; she has ceased to exist for him as anything but the product of a maddened fancy, and he says as he stifles her, "It is too late"—to negotiate. Desdemona, accepting the moment, switches the allegiance that had until then belonged wholly to Othello and steals the prayer Othello would not grant, crying :

O Lord, Lord, Lord.

The Lord replaces her lord, who now no longer exists for her; when asked who has done this deed, she answers :

No body. I myself. Farewell !

No real man has killed no real woman, and the reader who shudders is irrational or in some way deceived or self-deceiving.

No. For the distinction between actual and fictional cuts deep into language and the mental life only on the supposition that there is something completely independent of language and mind : that nothing is language unless it stands in a privileged relation to what is language-independent, and that thoughts and feelings are true and rational only when they too stand in a special relation to what is mind-independent. What is outside, then, is held to be actual, and language, thoughts, and feelings that lack the proper relation to the actual are fictional or false.

However, if we set aside the vexing question of the truth and the details of this supposition and look at language and mind themselves, we can find there no distinction between actual and fictional. Ignoring the piety that the only possible reason for being interested in language or mind is that they represent the real we go back to Othello and Desdemona, figures of speech that figure our mental life, and heed the objection that they are nonetheless figures that represent people. Logically tied to what they represent, Desdemona and Othello are fictional because the people they purport to represent do not exist. Again no. Characters are logically tied to what they figure, reader's inner lives, not to any other thing they try and fail to represent. The text presents them to us, and we accept them by allowing them to structure our mental acts and attitudes. If there is failure, it is not characters'

failure to represent an independent real but readers' failure to allow the characters to 'play' their thoughts and feelings during the reading.

Yet, the objector continues, because characters are fictional, we can refuse to accept them, as we cannot refuse people whom life presents. I reply that where accepting others is allowing them to figure our feelings, to inscribe themselves on us, to make a difference to us, it is clear that we can and often do refuse to accept people present to us. He continues; but we cannot refuse the physical presence of other people; we cannot walk through them. Nor can we walk through walls. We "accept" matter, but it does not, *qua* matter, bear the press of mind and cannot therefore inscribe itself on us. To accept matter is to yield to what is brute and dumb; this is not what we do when we accept people and characters. In sum, characters as well as people can play our feelings, and we can refuse to let people as well as characters "write" themselves on us or, with us, co-author our lives. Characters, fictional in not inhabiting space-time (the time of their stories is not the time of our science), are not pale images of people and are in ways important and interesting no different from people.

Nonetheless, there are those who insist that the differences are all in all. I think that the intuition on which their insistence is based is this: characters cannot look at us and so cannot acknowledge us. This is true. But it is not cause for lament. For whoever looks at us sees and shows us what we are: characters show us what we may be. Like Yeats's

... sages standing in God's holy fire

As in the gold mosaic of a wall,

they are the singing-masters of our souls, teaching soul not to wait for the look of the other but to clap its hands and sing.

.... and louder sing

For every tatter in its mortal dress,

Nor is there singing school but studying

Monuments of its own magnificence.

Structures of language and figures of speech are, too, monuments of soul's magnificence, forms that may be enlivened by readers who do not take the form of their minds

... from any natural thing,

But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make

Of hammered gold and gold enamelling

To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;

Or set upon a golden bough to sing

... ..

"Sailing to Byzantium"

Such readers take their form from what art has wrought and sing the lives of the characters whose forms they have taken. And the fear of Desdemona is no more nor less wonderful than the song of the golden bird.¹⁵

Notes and References

1. Strictly, it is the statement expressing what is believed that is false or meaningless. Depending on one's theory of reference, a statement using a name with no referent is either assigned the value "false" or said to express no proposition and, hence, to be meaningless.
2. The first solution is in Kendall L. Walton, "Fearing Fiction," *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXV (1978). Walton's quasi-fear is a state similar to real fear, different in that its causes and objects are only make-believedly real. This is like my fear felt while and so far as the reader is imaginatively identified with, for example, Desdemona. Walton requires the truth of the associated beliefs for the correct ascription of fear to an agent, I do not. It is hard to see how to decide this issue without spelling out and justifying a theory of the emotions. My account has an advantage over his with respect to the particular emotion or quasi-emotion felt: I can explain why the reader's understanding the plight of Desdemona causes fear, rather than some other state; he, by his own words, cannot. The second solution is in Eva Shaper, "Fiction and the Suspension of Disbelief," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 18 (1978), an article gives no purchase to the reader's imagination. Moreover, Shaper holds that second-order beliefs about characters entail first-order beliefs about the falsity of the second order beliefs: it has been argued that the prominence of the first-order beliefs would make it psychologically impossible to be moved by characters. This argument belongs to David Novitz, "Fiction, Imagination, and Emotion," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XXXVIII (1980), an article with which I in large part agree. Its thesis that "one can properly understand fiction if one responds in a way that enables one to be moved by it: to feel its tensions and to identify emotionally with its characters," where the full response involves the imagination. We differ about the degree of creativity involved in reading and the consequent privilege of certain interpretations: where he says the reader should think his way into the author's world, I would say into the characters' worlds, and when he says "to the extent that (the reader) follows the authorial descriptions, a reader is said to understand . . . the

work," I would say that the reader is not limited to interpretations that follow logically from the given descriptions but only to what does not contradict them.

3. "Identifying Subjects," *American Philosophical Quarterly* XIX (1982).
4. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Clarendon, 1982) considers fictional characters as "person-kinds" Desdemona is the Desdemona-in-*Othello* kind, a kind having essentially all the properties indicated of it by Shakespeare in the world of *Othello*. Wolterstorff either supposes that the descriptions in the text clearly indicate particular properties or has the problem of identifying what of the various and perhaps conflicting properties indicated by given descriptions are the essential ones.
5. I consider how one can go wrong in identifying with another in "Empathetic Identification," *American Philosophical Quarterly* XV (1978).
6. Kendall L. Walton, "Pictures and Make-Believe," *The Philosophical Review* LXXXII (1973) distinguishes imagination and make-believe on the ground that one can imagine virtually anything, whereas make-believe is tied to the things of the world: one makes-believe of something real that it is something else. Make-believe may be governed by principles, then, as imagination may not. I use the notion of imagination because there is not, I claim, a principled or fixed

connection between the descriptions of a character in the text and the ways the reader may elaborate them, no fixed connection between the signifiers in the work and what they signify.

7. If one defines literature as what is representative of authorial acts of mind, then of course something could not be literature unless there were an implicit author and nothing could be a character unless it were the first-level manifestation of a second-level authorial intention. Whoever holds this conception of literature must acknowledge that *there are* author's constructs. (If she acknowledges them but does not find them interesting, she is one step down the path to framing a different conception of art.) The soundness of this conception of art turns on how good its proponents can make their claims about the artist's originating the work. The notion of origin is essential because that of intention is not adequate to making something art. An artist's intending that a work reflects choices he has made is not sufficient to make the work one of art; for it might reflect his choices in spite of his intention that it do so. For example, I may intend to close the door and put my hand on the knob when the wind closes it, Intended to close the door and did something to that end, after which the door was closed. But we would not say that I had closed the door.

Even so, one might say that were there no conceptual tie to a deliberate choice of some one, a given work would not be counted a work of art. Fair enough, but this allows that the choice be of a reader/observer, one who chooses to regard an object or event in a certain way. There is no escape from the artist, one might insist; to regard anything as art is to see it *as though it were* an embodiment of artist's mind. *This* is precisely what those who argue for the existence of God from the design in the universe say, and one who would say it should be mindful of Hume's arguments against the inference from the appearance of purpose to the existence of (even an implicit) one who purposes,

8. This kind of imagination receives rich discussion in Bernard Williams, "Imagination and the self," *Problem of the Self* (Cambridge, 1973) ; Richard Wollheim, "Imagination and Identification," *On Art and the Mind* (Allen Lane, 1973) : and Zeno Vendler, "Vicarious Experience," presented to the American Society for Aesthetics (New York, 1978).

9. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975) 64.

10. Wollheim, in "Imagination and Identification" begins by saying that "it is a mark of the character whom I centrally imagine (imagine from its point of view) that in imagining what he does I also imagine what he feels and

thinks : that his actions are liberally and appropriately interleaved with his inner states in the flow of what I imagine" and asks how imagining someone feeling something is related to feeling that thing. He concludes that to imagine *a person or character* having an experience is to have it, whereas I say simply that to imagine having an experience is to have it. Wollheim is committed to the view that the content of any imagining corresponds to a thought. and to imagine anything is to imagine the corresponding thought to be true. The thought corresponding to my imagining being someone else is, he claims necessarily false if the thought is "I am that someone else." Wollheim, intent on explicating what is imagined by reference to corresponding thoughts, suggests that the simple "I am that someone else" be replaced by the complex though describing me possessing the properties of the person I imagine myself to be. This thought, though false, is a possible object of imagination: one can imagine counterfactual, but not logically impossible, statements to be true. Now, this is precisely how I understand imagining myself to be another : imagine that the properties of the other are mine. The content of the imagination is explicated *but not exhausted* by reference to the complex thought (that the other's properties are mine.) For the reason for engaging the imagination in this way (what wollheim calls the master thought structuring the imaginative act) is to discover what it is like to possess the properties in question. This is an experi-

ence not a thought, and is not expressible in a proposition.

11. These are primitive identifications. Freud introduced the notion of introjection; introjection consists in the infant's identifying himself with certain figures in the early environment, and the identification is consummated in a phantasied act of oral cannibalism. Melanie Klein claimed that there are in Freud's work seeds of another notion, that of projection. "In projective identification the individual experiences, first, a splitting off of a part of the person and then the

forcing of it into another object.... with the aim of possessing and controlling it." Wollheim, "Imagination and Identification," 76.

12. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974),

13. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 14

14. *Ibid.*, 47,

15. This article is a sequel to "Identifying with Characters in Literature," which appeared in *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* IV (1981).

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