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Volume 2

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Narrative, Philosophy and Life

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Chapter 9
Narrative and the Literary Imagination

John Gibson

The magic of art may be present in the very bones of the story.

(Vladimir Nabokov)

9.1

What I wish to discuss here are two ways of thinking about the imagination and its relationship to literature. The basic difference I am concerned with can be playfully put it terms of the divergence in sensibility and interest we encounter when reading David Lewis on Sherlock Holmes and Friedrich Nietzsche on Oedipus (see Lewis 1978; Nietzsche 1999). It is, at root, the difference between seeing the literary imagination[1] as essentially concerned with *fiction-making* or *culture-making*. Each way of thinking takes seriously that the imagination, both in general and as it concerns literature, is apt to "serve our worldly existence by pulling us out of its dumb immediacy," (Brann 1991: 798) but they differ in respect to how they understand what this "pulling out" amounts to. According to one approach, it makes possible a fugitive act that allows us to create worlds that are in obvious and often wondrous excess of the real—clearly much art puts such freedom to good use. According to the other, it is what allows us not to escape the real world so much as to assert ourselves over it: to achieve, say, sufficient critical distance from "existence" so that we can discover how to infuse it with new forms of meaning and value. The first way of thinking about the imagination is embodied in claims such as Jean-Paul Sartre's that to imagine is "to hold the real at a distance, to free oneself from it, in a word, to deny it." (1972: 198) The second is detectable when a philosopher such as Mary Warnock

The full passage is: "The three facets of the great writer—magic, story, lesson—are prone to blend in one impression of unified and unique radiance, since the magic of art may be present in the very bones of the story, in the very marrow of thought." (Nabokov 1980: 6)

[1] By "literary imagination" I mean nothing technical. The phrase functions to indicate that a point is being made not about the imagination *simpliciter* but as it is implicated in the production of narrative literature.

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argues that the imagination "enables us to see the world, whether absent or present, as significant." (1976: 196. See also Lennon 2010; Pillow 2009)

The savvy reader will wonder why there should be a tension between these two ways of thinking about the literary imagination. I share this sense of puzzlement, but the trick, as always, is to explain philosophically how they might be brought together, and this is what will occupy me here. My argument will imply that a better source for guiding thought about the literary imagination is Kant on Milton, though by this no slight to Lewis or Nietzsche is intended. In Milton Kant found a nearly perfect artistic answer to a precise philosophical question.[2] The question, in Sanford Budick's words, is how an author's creative activity can be "characterized by *independence and spontaneity*—the *originality* (*Originalität*) of the poetic genius, preeminently—and at the same time inherit one's given world, one's past…?" (2010: 1) While I have no intention here of engaging in Kant scholarship, I do hope to show that asking how certain artworks successfully negotiate "independence" and "inheritance" can inspire a fresh way of thinking about the vexed relationship between the unreal and worldly in literature. As I will pursue the idea here, this is to wonder how the literary imagination can create freely and originally, unbounded, in some sense, by the "dumb immediacy" of the real world and its (actual) history, yet do so in such a way that sets the stage not, or not just, for abandoning the world but also, in a manner, for inheriting it: for receiving it in order to offer it back to us in culturally and cognitively significant ways.

It will be no surprise to hear that the labor of the imagination at times issues in *narratives* of an exemplary sort, and I also hope my discussion will cast light on why narrative is such an apt vehicle for the inventions of the literary imagination. Narrative is surely not the only vehicle of the literary imagination—the modern lyric, so frequently hostile to the presence of narrative in poetry, has shown us that this cannot be—but it is clearly among its most frequent and reliable. The imaginative achievement of a great expanse of prose literature is inseparable from its narrative achievement, and what needs to be understood better is how narrative can, at least on occasion, bring into harmony the literary imagination's interest in both the imaginary and the real.

9.2

Let me begin with an unlikely example that raises a serious question. Consider what you would say to someone who claimed that Milton's power of imagination would have been more perfectly displayed had he written *Paradise Lost* without standing upon an inheritance of European Christianity: if the content of his epic poem had been *entirely* an invention of his imagination, Heaven, Hell, Eden, Original Sin and all. Why does it feel, as it should, wrongheaded to think that *Paradise Lost* would have been more imaginative just if Milton had made more of it up? If one

[2] See Budick (2010) for a striking study of Kant's interest in Milton.

thinks that the power of the literary imagination is essentially the power to "deny" the real, to liberate ourselves from "existence", or simply to create imaginary objects and events, why does it not follow as a simple point of logic that *Paradise Lost* would been more imaginative had Milton relied less on the world, such he took it to be, for his content?

The idea of the imagination as the power to abandon, to free oneself from, (etc.) existence is central to many of the theories of the imagination the history of philosophy has given us, and it is for this reason that a philosopher of literature can now get away with claiming that "a contrast with reality seems to be present in all forms of imagining" (New 1999: 72). But from the inevitable idea that the literary imagination "denies" or "contrasts with" reality *in some sense* we surely are not entitled to the conclusion that it is essentially unconcerned with it, as though the contrast must be categorical and the denial absolute. This is why the Milton example is useful. A good part of why the example seems silly is precisely because it runs afoul of our sense that Milton's—and hence literature of a like sort's—claim to creativity, originality, and artistic accomplishment is bound up with his imaginative handling *of* his culture: of his *lebenswelt* or *lebensform*, as certain philosophical traditions would have it.[3] What seems so naive about the question is that it appears to assume that the literary business of the imagination is solely that of underwriting the ways in which literature takes flight from the real and worldly. Since *Paradise Lost* weaves a fictional narrative, surely a good amount of "denial" of the world can be found in its lines. But the denial in Milton's case also seems so intentionally and essentially linked to mode of inheritance that the idea that his claim to imaginativeness would have been strengthened if he had loosened his poem's bond to his world should strike one as risible.

The question, naturally, is just what does it mean to say that a literary work's particular way of "denying" reality can also constitute its mode of inheritance? While the idea is bound to sound obscure at first mention, I hope to show that it brings to view an important problem in literary aesthetics, and one that reveals just how central the concept of narrative should be, but unfortunately is not, to this area of philosophical debate. In this section I attempt to isolate the precise problem and to specify what confronting it requires of us, and in the following section I suggest a strategy for meeting this requirement. But before beginning, I need to bring some clarity to this talk of inheritance and denial.

To insist that the literary imagination can "inherit culture" is to insist that it can, on occasion a least, reveal to us something nontrivial about the texture of real human lives and practices, about the nonfictional world most, but perhaps not all, of us seem to inhabit. There are many ways a literary work might so reveal the human world to readers, and by "culture" I mean to capture in a broad gesture the various forms of worldly import and "real" mattering we might reasonably expect to find one ascribe to literature, from the capacity to engage in precise forms of cognitive

[3] The concept of a *lebenswelt* or "lifeworld" makes its way into the phenomenological tradition via the work of Edmund Husserl, and the notion of *lebensform* or "form of life" into ordinary language philosophy via the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

and epistemic labor (the articulation of truth and the production of knowledge, most obviously) to the pursuit of more diffuse forms of ethical, affective, political, and psychological insight. Quite apart from the question of exactly what it means to say of a literary work that it explores and exposes human culture—the point of this essay is to come to understand this, so it is premature to demand more precision here—when we cannot say this, what we have before us is *whatever* remains when the imagination disengages its interest in the real and worldly: a work of mere fantasy, an exercise in pure make-believe, or "an entertainment", in the unflattering sense of the expression. Note that to claim that an author's work attempts to inherit her culture is to say in a general way that through her literary activity she is attempting receive and present back to readers a world, or aspects of a world, *presumed* to be real. I say "presumed" because authors and audiences might find that what they take to be real will under scrutiny turn out to be a myth, bunk, or false (Milton's Christian worldview, say). But it is the mode of presentation that most matters when trying to understand what literature does with the world and this is what I want to understand better when I speak of inheritance; metaphysical and epistemic concerns about conditions of success are another matter, linked to, but still separable from, the question I am exploring here.

It is easy to bring down to earth philosophy's enticing but misty talk of the imagination's liberation from reality and its abandonment and denial of existence. Whatever else this may consist in, in the context of literature it in large part is a matter of the imagination's way with *fictions*. Surely part of the literary imagination's creative activity just is its creation of fictions, and the imagination would seem to declare its freedom from "dumb immediacy" most assuredly in the particular manner in which it goes about generating fictional content. It is the capacity to tell a story that never happened, and to do so without misleading or being guilty of a lie, that brings into focus the central imaginative feat at the heart of much narrative art. And it should come as little surprise that as we pass from the heyday of phenomenology and existentialism to contemporary philosophy of literature, we see that talk of the imagination's power of denial and abandonment has settled into a less poetic and more systematic study of fiction-making. While there is a healthy diversity in our theories of fiction, in the majority of those currently popular the imagination is linked to various forms of pretense or make-believe, though the latter is clearly dominant. On the make-believe model, when we consume fictions, "we are supposed to engage imaginatively with them, making-believe that the events narrated really have taken place, that the people described really do exist, and so on" (Friend 2003: 37). In a child's game a water balloon can become a lethal bomb and an old doll a dazzling dance partner, and imaginative literature is in effect a highly sophisticated way of using words much as children use these mere objects: as *props* in a game of make-believe.[4] It is generally granted that to call a text fictional is not

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[4] In recent years it has become popular to combine Walton's make-believe theory with speech-act theory. This approach tends to favor making the notion of a fictional utterance explanatorily primary. A fictional utterance is grammatically indistinguishable from an assertion except that it is produced with the recognized intention that "we make-believe what is expressed by [the]

to imply that it is a continuous string of sentences none of which have real referents or that the semantic reach of literary language can never extend beyond the fictional and into the world (though one might worry that the make-believe model will struggle to account for this in satisfying manner. See Gibson 2007: 157–173). Nor does anyone serious think that imaginative literature is so-called because its content is *wholly* made up, untrue, or fictitious. Anything, within reason, can become a prop in a game of make-believe, and to this extent the imagination is perfectly free to roam reality in search of fictions. The "abandonment", the "denial" of existence comes once one decides to make-believe, that is, imagine—it amounts to the same thing on this model—rather than believe what one finds there.

With these clarifications in mind, we can return to trying to understand exactly what it means to say that the literary imagination's way of abandoning existence might also constitute its mode of inheritance. Recast in light of these clarifications, the question is: how can the literary imagination's construction of fictions *also* be its manner of engaging with and exposing a world taken to be real? To move the discussion forward, consider the following suggestion for offering a speedy answer to this question. The suggestion will turn out to be deeply unsatisfying, but seeing why will help us understand what the true problem is.

Say that I claim that the literary imagination can produce narratives with two distinct layers of content, one primary and manifest the other secondary and oblique. On the whole, I claim, literary works explicitly (and literally) speak about fictions and fictional worlds: this, and typically only this, is what the semantic surface of literary works connect readers to, and the content it produces here is simply fictional content. But on a deeper level, I claim, literary works can produce a kind of serious and often even philosophical content distinct from its manifest fictional content. This deeper layer of nonfictional content comes in the form of *implicit* points, *implied* propositions, *suggested* views, *hinted-at* claims about reality that literary works allude to and, in so doing, indirectly make available to appreciation. It is in this spirit that John Searle claimed, and many others have echoed, that while writers explicitly perform pretended illocutionary acts when creating a work of fiction, they may use the texts that are the products of these acts as vehicles for implying serious assertions: '"almost any important work of fiction conveys a "message" or "messages" which are conveyed by the text but which are not in the text"' (Searle 1975: 332). And as Kendall Walton puts it, "perhaps fiction is more often a means of performing other illocutionary acts—suggesting, asking, raising an issue, reminding, encouraging to act—than a means of making assertions about the world." (1990: 78. For variations of this approach, see Kivy 1997: chapter 5; Mikkonen 2013: chapter 2)

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utterance, rather than believe it." (Davies 2006: 42) The virtue of having recourse to speech-act theory here is that its reliance on speaker intentions allows us to offer a tidy way of explaining the difference between something being fictional and something merely being treated as fictional, a basic distinction many worry Walton's otherwise acceptable theory cannot accommodate (see Davies 2006: 40).

Points of this sort perhaps mark one way in which literature can connect to the real—I will just grant this—but I think they miss the hard problem. Before I can state what I take the hard problem to be, note that the emphasis on suggestions, hidden messages, and the like makes the cultural, the *real*, interests of literature at best a clandestine affair, something that is not to be encountered when we bear witness to what a literary narrative actually says but rather only when we move from the manifest content of a literary work to consider a proposition to which it gestures but which it does not contain. Much as I can, if circumstances are just right, convey to you that I no longer really care are to see you by uttering, "I'll see you around," literature, on this view, is revelatory of culture only when it means something other than (or in addition to) what it actually says. There is something to this, as we will see, but my worry is that the very talk of *implying*, *suggesting*, even *making an assertion* identifies the wrong currency of commutation for explaining what we most need explained. I am not concerned with denying that literature can ever imply or suggest propositions; it would be plainly silly to argue such a thing. But I do think we should be very skeptical of any theory which claims that a work of literary fiction itself cannot straightforwardly *contain* that which gives it a purchase on the world, that tells us it cannot really be "in" a literary work. This is because the ways in which we expect literature to expose culture are often too direct, too enmeshed in its manifest content, to be captured fully by talk of implied or indirect assertions and the like. Let me explain.

Imagine that I am beholden to this double-content view and you ask me to demonstrate how this might fashion an attempt to make sense of an actual literary work. Taking up your challenge, and perhaps revealing my innocence, I offer to try to isolate the basic messages I take to be implied by Milton's telling of the story of the fall in *Paradise Lost*. The poem, I say, hints at something basic about the human predicament: "basic" because in Adam and Eve we see, in Milton's words, "the whole included race." (IX.416[5]). The implied message, I say, is that what is most tragic about life is that human separateness is an inescapable feature of it; that we are bound to find ourselves alone even in the company of others and that this is because genuine community is impossible here on postlapsarian earth. Naturally you tell me that this message I have elicited from Milton is mightily underdetermined by anything *Paradise Lost* actually says. So to put some flesh on the point I think implied by Milton's poem, I argue that it suggests a vision of human nature as inevitably leading us to undo our relationship to the very thing that makes genuine community possible: God, or, for the modern reader who must render metaphoric what Milton meant literarily, the good, love, or whatever we take to be the principle that can bind. To support this, I draw your attention to Rafael's words to Adam, "If ye be found obedient and retain/Unalterably His love entire/Whose progeny you are. Meanwhile enjoy/your fill what happiness this happy state/can comprehend, incapable of more," (V.501–6) which concludes with the warning, "Attend: that thou are happy, owe to God/That thou continuest such, owe to thyself/that is, to thy obedience; therein stand/this was the caution given thee; be advised." (V.520–3). In these and surrounding passages, I claim, Milton implies

[5] All book and line references to *Paradise Lost* indicated in parentheses are to Milton 2006.

that human nature is such that once we discover that if we just follow a simple rule we can live in paradise, we inevitably wish to break that rule. Milton's poem, I propose, suggests the idea that the greatest paradox of human nature is that we come to experience whatever makes paradisiacal existence possible as a barrier, a limitation, and so something we have a powerful drive to overcome through a defiant act of self-assertion. The point of Book IX, I conclude, is to intimate that something altogether basic to our humanity leads us to undo the bond that most matters to us, thus leaving us, like Adam and Eve, distanced and doomed to pass "fruitless hours" bickering "in mutual accusation," (IX.1187–8) an activity most couples since Adam and Eve will recognize as familiar.

You may grant that I have provided progressively less unreasonable grounds for my reading, but, if you are clever, you will play the skeptic and ask me why I think the poem implies precisely these propositions and not others. And to relieve your skepticism, I shall have to say more and more about the *poem* to justify the worldly messages I have ascribed to it. But as I do this, I am bound to sense how meager these implied messages feel in respect to the significance of the pieces of the poem I invoke. In other words, I will begin to feel that what is doing virtually all of the work in my account of how Milton reveals something basic about the human predicament is the manifest *text*, the surface, in some sense, of poem itself. Again, this is not to deny that there may be messages, assertions, points, and suggestions implied by the work. But the point I am leading to is that invoking them to explain the poem's power of cultural articulation feels unjust since doing so ignores our powerful sense that it is the fictional *narrative* of the poem and the story it explicitly that is functioning as the primary site of revelation.

Anyone familiar with criticism, with how professional readers actually talk about literary artworks, will have noted that my reading of Milton would have sounded much more natural, and certainly more forceful, had all this double-content talk been dropped and the critical points simply been asserted of the narrative, offered as ways of characterizing its surface and the forms of aboutness it bears. This will only sound odd if one thinks that the narrative a work of imaginative literature weaves can bear no aboutness other than mere fictional aboutness. But this, of course, cannot just be assumed: such a reductive position, and one so unflattering to the literary imagination, should be taken with great suspicion. We need to explore the possibility of locating literature's capacity to give expression to culture much more directly in the work. Consider that in much recent work on self-expression it is thought that in standard cases it is more philosophically accurate to say that a smile after receiving a kindness *manifests*, as opposed to implies, gratitude, or that a shrug upon hearing options for dinner *shows*, as opposed to *intimates* or *indirectly conveys*, indifference. In these cases the relationship between vehicle and expression is too direct, too intermeshed, for the language of suggestion, indirectness, and implicitness to be philosophically appropriate: we are not given mere evidence for the meaning of my gestures but see it, in a significant sense, fully declared in them.[6]

[6] That is to say, in the epistemic vernacular of this debate, that they offer *knowledge*, and not mere evidence, of the mental states so expressed in these gestures. See Green 2007 and Bar-On 2004. If

Philosophical aesthetics is of course littered with kindred ideas about the relationship between work and meaning, form and content. Literary expression, like self-expression, in paradigmatic cases refuses to let message achieve much independence from messenger. Or so we expect, and my point is that we should take this expectation seriously when wondering how imaginative literature gives expression to its interests in the real. And this leads to what I take the hard problem to be: how can we see culture, in the sense used here, revealed, *contained*, in narrative content that is explicitly fictional and is appreciated as such?

The dangerous assumption is that if we are to connect literature to culture and the worldly, we must find in a work of fiction something *in addition to a fictional narrative*. Out of respect for the literary imagination we should attempt to see how fictional narratives might themselves be all we need for the task at hand. What is frustrating about double-content views is their literalism when they wonder how literature might *say* something serious, sending them off as it does in search of genuine or serious "utterances" and that which they convey in standard linguistic contexts: propositions, chiefly, or the content of a discrete "idea", "belief", or "attitude" whose expression takes the form of something fundamentally statement-like. It proceeds as though insight can in effect only be delivered in the assertive mode of speech. While making the problem soft and thus easily soluble, views of this sort ignore the fact that at the most fundamental level literature might engage culture, as it were, narratively and not declaratively,[7] by telling a kind of story and not by producing a kind of claim. It is now generally accepted that narratives bestow a unique kind of meaning, import, and cohesion upon the material they recount (see Goldie 2012: 15–30), and what seems amiss about anything that amounts to a double-content view of how literature is made to matter about life is that *this* power of narrative is overlooked. This is unfortunate, since it would seem to hold out the promise of a novel and intuitive way of approaching the issue: one which treats narrative and the kinds of meaning it is apt to generate as providing the foundation for understanding how fiction binds itself to culture (I return to this in the following section).

While this is frequently overlooked, the hard problem is not whether we can see reality *in works of fiction* but whether we can see reality *in fictions*. There is an important difference here. Recent work in the field often struggles to show that in works of fictions we can find genuine assertions, that is, utterances which prescribe belief rather than make-belief; we can find, in other words, not merely implied but explicit, truth-apt statements about reality in works of fiction (see Davies 2012; Friend 2008; Gaskin 2013: 38–62). This work is important for all sorts of reasons, but note that it offers us little to clarify how fictional narratives engage with culture in the respect in which the question is most challenging and most in need of an

it is worth mentioning, my suggestion is not that we should model literary expression on self-expression. The analogy is fruitful but clearly limited.

[7] As grammarians, so to say, understand a declarative statement. I am unconcerned here with those areas of ordinary language philosophy and linguistics in which declaration is a technical notion for a speech-act that is to be contrasted with assertion.

answer. A response that argues that we can find in literature stretches of truth-apt or world-representing content will repeat the problem of the double-content view but now in terms of two distinct kinds of content *explicitly* found in works of fiction. We want know whether we can vindicate our sense that we experience culture in the explicitly *fictional* content of the work: whether one and the same content can in some basic sense *be* both fictional and worldly. And we ignore this problem more or less entirely if we argue that insights into reality are to be found in those regions of a work that are not fictional, just as we do if we place them in a realm of implied propositions.[8] In fact, since we are talking about imaginative art, we should very much expect the manner in which imaginative literature engages with culture to be, well, imaginative, which would seem to mean: in part bound up with its fiction-making, in part revealed *in its fictional narrative* and not, or not just, in a nest of nonfictional or "genuine" assertions we find uttered on this or that page of a work. We should attempt to see literature's characteristic mode of inheritance not in those moments when its narrative stops abandoning and denying reality but when it does so proudly.

What I have done in this section is identify the burdens we have to assume if we are to take seriously the problem of how the literary imagination engages with both fiction and culture. Even if we still have no answers, we have derived a set of expectations about how we should go about providing such an answer. We expect the mode of inheritance, in central and primary instances, to in some sense be manifest in a work, part of its content and bound up with, again in some sense, its meaning. And we also expect the act of inheritance to be *narrative* in nature, a matter of how a certain story is crafted and expressed and not an issue of how certain kinds of nonfictional utterances might be found lurking in literary-fictive content. Lastly, and to say in effect the same thing, we expect the literary imagination's mode of cultural expression to be of a piece with, indeed contained within, its fictional expressions.

9.3

So how might we move forward? The discussion thus far makes the following line of thought attractive. The literary imagination's power to create fictions is what gives it its most obvious claim to "autonomy", as Kant might put it: its freedom to venture out in often wild and spectacular excess of reality. And the next step is to try to locate the literary imagination's complementary power of cultural articulation in this fictional activity. And we do this, I suggest, by arguing that the cultural significance of this fiction-making consists in large part in how the imagination endows

[8] If one agrees with Stacie Friend that "fiction" is a genre term and functions neither to characterize the status of a work's content (as, say, all made-up or imaginary) nor to specify the kind of cognitive attitude (belief or make-belief) to be taken up in respect to it, then it is question begging to call truth-apt or world-representing stretches of literary language *nonfictional* (see Friend 2007, 2008). I am sympathetic to this but do not rely on this model of fictionality here.

these fictional flights from existence with a kind of *aboutness*. It is in virtue of its ability to make these fictions matter in precise sorts of ways that the literary imagination can create works whose fictions may be of “real” significance. It is often thought that if art is to bind itself to the world, it will do so by generating *representations* of the real. The suggestion here is that we should conceive of the literary imagination as expressing its real interests not mimetically but by producing a certain kind of meaning.[9] This may still be a kind of representation, depending on your theory of representation. But it has little to do with making fictions picture or in some manner generate likenesses of real states of affairs and it has much to do with how seeing how fictions achieve a kind of relevance, a manner of mattering, in fairly precise ways.

It is important to recall that talk of the imagination is welcome just about whenever we have to designate the form of thought that allows us to make present that which is not materially available to the mind or to the senses that feed it. We find the work of the imagination not only when beholding wondrous fictional worlds but also in humbler acts such as taking delight in the image of a friend who has not been seen in years. In fact, we can detect a trace of the imagination’s power to go beyond the merely given in many forms of aspect perception, in coming to see human behavior as endowed with complex ethical and aesthetic properties, even in the ability to see confusion in the furrow of a brow, love in the expanse of a smile, or the French in a Frenchman. At some level these all gesture towards the labor of the imagination, perhaps co-opted by acculturation and made second-nature but still a testament to the mind’s power to make more of the world than “dumb immediacy” offers us. The reason it is so difficult to draw a tidy boundary around the notion of the imagination is that the imagination is implicated in one way or another in such a vast array of cognitive, artistic, emotional behavior. I am not sure what unifies all of these cases, but in the shadow of grand acts of fiction-making are all the workaday feats of meaning-bestowal that make up a good share of out attempt to endow life with sense. It is through this, ultimately, that we make existence amenable, perhaps even tolerable, to human perception; to our ability to look upon it and see a reflection of our interests and values in it. Weaving narratives is one such way in which we do this.

In fact, as it concerns us here the relevant fictional activity of the literary imagination is inseparable from its narrative activity. It is hardly news that narrative is among the most useful tools we have for bestowing meaning, import, and cohesion upon life, fictional or otherwise. And the first philosophical point to be made is that narrative, certainly in the case of literature, is a testament to the imagination as a power of *reconfiguration*, a power that permits us to take material from the common

[9] Arthur Danto often conceives of the representational quality of artworks in this light, making it a matter of their embodied meanings (see Danto 2000). I am reluctant to think of the meaningfulness of artworks, at least in the sense I give it here, as in any interesting respect “representational.” Regardless of this, what I am denying is the relevance of the traditional mimetic notion of representation: the old idea that a literary representation of life somehow offers an image, picture, or mirror of reality.

world and place it in ever new relations (think, again, of Milton and Christianity).[10] But to narrate is also to bestow a kind of order, and an attendant kind of meaning, on the material one recounts. It is a way of showing it to matter in this or that way, in this manner suffusing it with distinct forms of aboutness and significance. The ways in which the literary imagination can take from the common world the beliefs, desires, interests, practices, events and even persons found in it and place them in novel relationships and contexts reveal how its creative activity can be, as Sartre says, a kind of liberation from the world but still, with Warnock, a way of seeing the world as significant. This ability to create from the raw material of a culture's past or present a narrative that endows it with meaning is what I am suggesting we ought to identify with the cultural power of the literary imagination. The inventing of fictions turns out to be exactly what makes available to the literary imagination the tools for stepping into cultural space so that it may reorganize and reorder this space in novel ways.

Consider the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. This is very roughly the distinction between story and narrative, though "fabula" implies something more precise than the English term "story" does. The idea that animated this distinction for the Russian formalists is that a story can be told in many ways, and that each different way of narrating a story will generate a unique meaning. "Meaning" here identifies the distinct sense that is produced when a story is narrated in this way and not another: the narrative organizes a way of thinking and feeling about the events that constitute the story, a framework through which a manner of understanding these events is made possible. When it is said that the same story can be narrated variously, "sameness" is clearly not a concept of identity and it does not suggest the patently absurd idea that the content of a story remains, literally, uniform across various narrative articulations of it. The point is the weaker and more earthbound one that "the story" of common culture material can told in a great variety of ways: the story of the fall would be one example, though at the right level of generality any form of human experience an artist might explore can become that story which can be narrated variously. "Story" here identifies the slices of life around which narrative goals revolve: the goal of telling the story of modern alienation, of small town English life, of the black experience, of the founding of the state of Israel, of teenage angst, and so on (see Gibson 2011). The point is that narration, as the act of telling and so giving determinate shape to a story of common human experience, links that form of experience to a unique way of conceiving its meaning, even its nature (a proper literary example is forthcoming).

If this is so, then narrative meaning is a kind of meaning which accrues to the narrative itself, and it is detected only once we move beyond what its various lines mean and ask what *the narrative means*. "Meaning" here is better seen as an axiological than semantic notion, that is, a term that indicates that a certain stretch of

[10] I ignore here discussion of whether we should be narrativists in respect to actual life and real selves. I agree that narrative has as much potential to distort as it does to reveal, and this admission implies exactly nothing about the extent to which literature makes use of narrative to bear on reality. For an excellent discussion of this, see Goldie 2012: 150–171.

language bears certain kinds of value, in the broadest sense possible. When we ask what a narrative *means*, we are asking, in the primary instance, what the story is a story of, not as a request to catalogue the events which constitute it but to give voice to how and why these events, told in this manner, *matter*: what general concerns they speak to, amplify, or explore. When we pass from standard forms of linguistic meaning to narrative meaning, we are not concerned with the "content" of an expression but with articulating the significance of a series of events or constellation of experiences *expressed in a particular manner*. We are concerned with what they are "all about", as the phrase has it. If you know nothing of me, of the academic profession, or of a life lived in constant fear of nothing in particular, a well-wrought narrative of such a slice of life will imbue your understanding with a form of sudden and rich determinacy. It will give you a sense of the shape of a kind of life lived in a certain way, and the particular shape it is given will prompt a unique understanding of what it *means*—in a perfectly familiar sense of "meaning"—to be me, a professor in the humanities, or a coward. Through the narrative a series of events is, as it were, *made meaningful* in this way or that. Philosophers of language at times distinguish between "linguistic meaning", as Michael Kremer puts it, "and 'meaning' in a broader 'existential' sense of significance." (Kremer 2001: 56). If talk of "existential meaning" feels purple, talk of narrative meaning should not, and it captures the basic idea very well: meaning at times is a matter not of signification but significance. It concerns the import, the consequence, of the events as narrated and attempts to make available a distinct cognitive and affective orientation toward them.

It is in this sense that we can claim that in paradigmatic cases the literary imagination's vehicle of cultural communication is a narrative and not some proposition or suggestion indirectly expressed through it. To see this it is sufficient to point out something crude in thinking about fictional narratives, an idea that in part explains the allure of double-content views of the sort explored above. It is, again, the reductive idea that since the semantic surface of a fictional narrative describes fictions and fictions alone, its aboutness is merely fictional, extending no further than the boundaries of the imagined world the narrative generates. We can now see the myopia of this. Our sense of the meaning of the content of a narrative is only in part determined by the "meaning" of the representational content of the various descriptions which constitute it, which, let us grant, yield only fictions to appreciation. But from the moment we are first introduced to the practice of story-telling as children, we are trained to experience narratives by the light of a conception of *why they matter*, what their point is, of what grander things they are *about*, all of which can extend our experience of narrative aboutness well beyond merely fictional states of affairs and bring it to bear on culture. And note that since this is a claim about how we experience narrative aboutness, it is a claim about how we experience a story's content, of what we find *in* it (see Gibson 2006). This is a crucial point, for if it is sound it implies that, in the case of literature, we experience narrative meaning as part of its manifest content, as, that is, bound up with, *contained in*, the story which unfolds between the covers of a work. This meaning is not *stated* in any literal sense in the language of the work, but since we are not talking about a kind of linguistic meaning,

this is hardly a surprise. We experience narrative meaning in a work not because be glean it off this or that stretch of language but because in our very attempt to understand a work we must form conceptions of its broader cultural and artistic projects, and these are experienced not as readerly projections but as part of the literary narrative itself: of what it is *about*. We can get it wrong, of course, as we can with any act of meaning attribution, be it to sentences, gestures, artworks, and to almost anything else under the sun. The point I am making concerns our experience of narrative content, and its relevance is that it gives us reason to believe that once we form a conception of narrative meaning in the context of literature, we treat that meaning as having primary domicile in the work itself and not, as the double-content view had it, in a realm of implied or suggested propositions. This, I take it, shows how we can make good on the promise to treat the problem as hard, in the sense I gave it above, and still find a way of overcoming it.

Narrative meaning is a species of *imaginative* meaning in at least three overlapping senses. First, it is an expression of the imagination's power of meaning-bestowal, in Warnock's sense of imagination as seeing-as-significant. Secondly, it is imaginative is the altogether obvious sense that in the relevant kind of literature *fiction-making*, the imaginative act par excellence, is what underwrites story-telling and gives it its particular content and so that which the narrative makes meaningful. And, finally, it is imaginative in the sense that if we are to experience a narrative and its aboutness and not just a concatenation of sentences each with discrete meanings, we must make present something which is not immediately given, and it thus demands an act of imaginative transcendence. Most of us are sufficiently competent readers that we do this with ease and usually unawares. But as anyone who has a child knows, the moment a mind becomes capable of explaining a story *without* recounting everything that occurs in it, the moment a mind can get to the point and say quickly and insightfully what a story itself is about, is the moment we know a child has figured out how to put the imagination to work.

Let me now offer a brief literary example, once that will bring to earth my points about stories, narratives, and imaginative reconfiguration. Our literary heritage clearly offers us a surplus of stories of wickedness. Think of Satan, the fictional form in which so much literature offers its particular image of evil. Consider first Dante's representation of Satan, of "Dis", who in *Inferno* is represented as wholly *devoid* of agency, frozen, and simply the furthest pole one reaches in Hell. And note that depicting Satan this way is equal parts brilliant philosophy and brilliant poetry, for it gives all the agency to *us*, the human sinner, and reveals Hell to be a place we voluntarily enter, not prodded by pitchforks and devilish promptings but by *ourselves*. It thus offers us a powerful image of the human as freely evil, and of Dis as having an almost eliminable role in explanations of our propensity to sin. Next think of Shakespeare's own Satan of sorts, Iago, who, unlike Dante's Satan, is pure agency and is presented as entirely human. Iago is evil packaged as the perfectly false friend. His traps reveal him to be a creature possessed of immense creative and improvisational power, a kind of Miles Davis of malice who plays us off one another and in doing so creates the conditions of human separateness so characteristic of how much Renaissance and Early Modern literature imagines Hell. Yet if Dante's

Dis has no voice and so no story to tell, Iago, though certainly with a story to tell, still refuses to render intelligible the source of his evil: "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: From this time forth I never will speak a word." (*Othello*, v.ii.203). For this reason, his behavior is bound to baffle, striking us as human yet inexplicable, incapable of rational explanation. And surely one way of getting at Milton's accomplishment in *Paradise Lose* is to highlight the extraordinary manner in which the voice and activity, if not person, of Satan are made to appear fully human yet now also fully intelligible. Satan's words to Eve sound terrifyingly close to words the better part of human reason would produce, and we hear them as such. When Adam claims, "Nor can I think that God, creator wise/Though threat'ning, will in earnest so destroy us, dignified so high" (ix.937–940), he completes in his own voice an argument begun by Satan and passed through Eve, and we hear ourselves, guided by temptation and desire, but still *reasoning* in an altogether familiar way. The ground of evil here seems finally to have come home and been given domicile in the human mind: wholly a matter of human agency, just as for Dante, and a wholly human voice, just as for Shakespeare, but now also intelligible and capable of explaining itself in terms altogether graspable by creatures such as ourselves.[11]

These poets all use familiar cultural material yet beat out of this inheritance novel, distinct ways of thinking and feeling about this material, of conceiving its meaning, though "meaning" is now used in a purely narratological sense. If each of these poets attempts to tell the story of the sources of human evil, their tellings make available very different ways of making sense of it: of thinking about it, of conceiving its nature and significance, *of understanding it*. If we say this, then we are entitled to say that literature's relation to the real is perhaps better seen as foundational than representational, issuing not in images of the real but in acts of meaning-making which open up new possibilities for grasping the sense of some feature of human experience. In the case of Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, we see works which can each *ground* a way of taking ourselves and our worldly situation to be, offering as they do narratives which organize a purchase on the nature and import of the regions of human culture they address. As we pass from one work to another, we are regarding works that are *constitutive* of a sense we can ascribe to the world. As such, we can say without being guilty of obfuscation that a literary work's particular manner of "abandoning" reality may also constitute its mode of inheritance. For the respects in which these works fashion a distinct sense of features of human circumstance and predicament is inseparable from the respects in which they create fictions

[11] It is true that a culture could possess these stories without possessing a literary tradition, and that my example thus does not say much about the specifically *literary* significance of these narratives: of how the literary and aesthetic dimension of these works matter to their narratives and the value we find in them. A fully developed theory of literary narrative would clearly have to address thus. Here, however, I am simply exploring a point about the importance of possessing stories—about what we acquire in virtue of having access to narratives that organize cultural material in a particular way—and I do not have the space to tackle this larger issue. I think it should be clear that my point about narrative sets up a novel way of approaching these literary and aesthetic issues, but it is another project. I thank Tzachi Zamir for bringing to my attention that I owe a word on this.

that suffice to generate this sense and, with it, a sense of the kind of world we inhabit. In this respect, the literary imagination's fiction-making can at times also essentially be an act of culture-making.

9.4

I have no illusion that I have offered a fully developed account of how we can reconcile the literary imagination's interest in the fictional and the real, or even of exactly what the literary imagination is. What I have tried to do, at root, is motivate an interest in approaching the imagination in a much more expansive manner than we find in contemporary literary aesthetics. We are currently overflowing with powerful, sophisticated theories of the imagination and its role in creating fictions. And I hope the discussion of this essay gives one reason to think that result has been a one-sided view of what the imagination is and why it matters to literature. The aspect of the imagination contemporary philosophers of literature have explored is surely crucial, but it is at best just one half of the story of we should be telling. The other half, I have suggested, will concern the role of narrative in getting these fictions to matter in a particular way, and a way that can vindicate our sense the products of the literary imagination are often, and essentially, cultural artifacts that show us as much about existence as they do about how to escape it.[12]

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[12] An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference in honour of Sanford Budick at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and it is worth saying that the paper itself grew out of an attempt to make sense of Budick's immensely suggestive claim that the way in which poetry, as exemplified in Milton, reconciles originality and inheritance "may be said to constitute culture itself, perhaps even what is considered to be human" (2010: 1). I am grateful to Tzachi Zamir and Sanford Budick for discussion of the ideas presented here and for their hospitality during my stay. Zamir offered extensive criticism on the version published here, and while the argument will still fall short of convincing him, I hope it is clear that it is at least better on account of him.

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