

Understanding Literature Imaginatively

Abstract

This paper has a modest aim. The point is to try to reconcile the intuition that, as Kendall Walton puts it, “make-believe (or imagination, or pretense) of some sort is central, somehow, to works of fiction”, with recent, compelling arguments that it really isn’t (Walton 1990, pp. 4-5; Matravers 2014). I first set out the “consensus view” concerning imagination’s involvement with fiction; I then present and endorse Derek Matravers’ critique of it. I subsequently suggest a way in which the consensus might be retrenched, and argue that this retrenched view suffers from much the same problems as the original. I next argue that this further failure reveals that the consensus view is premised on a mistaken understanding of imagination, and present (though do not, here, argue for) an alternative. I then consider how the territory looks once we recast our conception of imagination. I argue that some of Matravers’ arguments still stand: imagination is not involved in comprehending fictions, and doesn’t ground any interesting distinction between fiction and non-fiction. But I suggest that imagination, properly understood, does figure in fictions at two stages: the creation of a work, and the understanding of a work (where understanding is broadly construed). And, further, imagination grounds an interesting distinction between literature and non-literature. As a sort of addendum, I consider whether the question of imagination’s involvement in fiction is really worth answering, and argue that, thankfully for me, it is.

1 The Waltonian consensus

What we might as well call the “Waltonian consensus” results from the application of a neat piece of mirroring. The starting thought is that works of fiction

(and works of mimetic art in general) function as “props” that prescribe certain imaginings. Fictions contain fictional sentences, which are those sentences that mandate us to imagine their content; to imagine their content is to make-believe their truth, where make-believe is functionally distinguished from belief by its disconnection from action. Our make-beliefs premised on a particular fiction have as their contents propositions that are true in the world of the fiction. Walton politely refuses to be particularly specific about what fictional worlds are, though he does specify that they’re not possible worlds, since the former but not the latter can be both inconsistent and incomplete (Walton 1990, pp. 57-67). It’s probably best to take a metaphysically modest approach here, and treat talk of “fictional worlds” as a sort of non-committal shorthand for something like “the set of propositions true-or-false-in-the-fiction”. But whatever exactly they are, fictional worlds stand in a roughly simulative relationship with the actual world; they mimic its structure and properties and so on, except insofar as these are explicitly varied by the contents of the fictional sentences. The picture of how we understand and engage with fictions is thus a mirror-image of a fairly humdrum picture of how we understand and engage with the actual world. In actuality, we have the world, about which we have beliefs, which guide our action within the world; in fictionality, we have a fictional world, about which we have make-beliefs, which don’t connect with our real-world actions.¹ Just as fictional worlds stand as counterparts to the actual world, make-beliefs stand as counterparts to actual beliefs.²

Walton manages to make this model do a tremendous amount of work on matters related to fiction, including the manner of our engagement with fictional characters, and the ontology of such characters; and the philosophical work in his wake has made the model do even more. The model’s wide acceptance and application is no doubt abetted by its happy confluence with simulationism in philosophy of mind: the idea that, to understand other people’s minds, we imaginatively simulate their mental states (Heal 1986; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Heal 2003; Goldman 2006). This theory relies on an account of imagination as a matter of simulation, and the simulationists’ talk of imaginary counterparts of beliefs and desires matches tidily with Walton’s make-beliefs. Even those who aren’t especially wedded to simulationism as a theory of mind-reading tend to explore the nature of apparently imaginative

¹In some make-believe contexts, make-beliefs they can guide action in the world of the make-believe, but fiction is not a context in which we typically figure as actors.

²TRY TO SHARPEN; ADD REFS

mental states using this vocabulary of simulation, often expressed in terms of “i-beliefs” and “i-desires”, imaginative counterparts of the real things.³

But all the work on fiction is founded on the two fundamental things that imagination (or make-believe) does in Walton’s view. First, imagination distinguishes fiction from non-fiction: specifically, it distinguishes fictional sentences from factual sentences, and fictional works from non-fictional ones. Fictional sentences prescribe imagining, the formulation of a make-belief; and fictional works, again, prescribe imagining, engagement with an imaginary (fictional) world. Second, imagination is crucially involved in understanding a work of fiction (and not a work of non-fiction): you understand a work by imagining just what it tells you to imagine, and thus constructing an appropriate web of make-belief. Matravers argues that imagination can’t ground those distinctions, and isn’t involved in understanding fictions (or, indeed, narratives more generally). The foundations of the Waltonian consensus are thus undermined.

2 The Matravers challenge

Matravers approaches the consensus view like the child commenting on the Emperor’s new clothes.⁴ The Waltonian consensus relies on the idea that there is something *different* happening in the head when you read a fiction than there is when you read a non-fiction, and likewise, when you read fictional and non-fictional sentences. This, Matravers argues, is false. You don’t do anything different mentally to grasp a fictional sentence than you do to grasp a non-fictional sentence; and you don’t do anything different to understand a fictional narrative than you do to engage with a non-fictional one (since it’s understanding whole fictions that I’m mostly concerned with, I’ll leave aside talk of fictional sentences at this point).

With regard to engagement or understanding, Matravers argues that, to grasp what’s going on in a narrative, we construct a sort of mental model, consisting in propositional contents together constituting a web of beliefs about some world, fictional or actual. So far, so Walton; but Matravers’ point is that

³Arguing for both i-beliefs and i-desires: Walton 1990; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Doggett and Egan 2007. Arguing for i-beliefs, but not i-desires: Gendler 2008; Kind 2011. Arguing for i-desires, but not i-beliefs: Schellenberg 2013. Helpful taxonomy and discussion: Liao and Doggett 2014.

⁴Matravers frequently refers to unpublished work by Stacey Friend making broadly the same arguments, so this really should be the Matravers-Friend challenge.

there is no evidence to suggest that we do anything different to engage with fictions than we do to engage with non-fictions. No neuroscientific evidence, no phenomenological evidence, no evidence from psychological work on text-processing, no evidence at all. And further, the evidence—at least, the text-processing evidence—positively suggests that we in fact do just the same thing when reading both fictions and non-fictions.

Furthermore, Matravers argues, there is no useful sense in which fictional sentences or fictional works mandate, prescribe, or tell us to do anything imaginative, where non-fictional ones don't. So not only is there no distinction between how we understand fictions and non-fictions, there is no distinction between how they tell us to understand them (at least, no distinction premised on imagination).⁵

The important distinction in the vicinity, Matravers argues, is thus not between fictions and non-fictions, but between representations and confrontations. Confronted with a wolf, we will believe and behave in a certain manner; confronted with a textual representation of a wolf, we will believe and behave in another manner. And it doesn't matter whether the representation is fictional or non-fictional, *White Fang* or some nature book. To engage with either sort of representation, we construct a model of just the same sort. And in either case, our engagement premised on that model is inert regarding immediate action-guidance, similarly (in)effective regarding belief formation, and affectively coloured in just the same ways.

Now, one could, if one wished, give up on the idea that fiction and non-fiction are distinguished by imagination's involvement, but maintain that the distinction between representation and confrontation is premised on imagination. That is, one could insist that this process of constructing mental models is properly construed as an imaginative process. Matravers concedes that such a move is cogent, but argues that it's problematic, insofar as it obfuscates: using the term "imagination" here, and especially the term "make-believe", implicitly encourages just the view about a special connection with fiction that's being denied, and elides (or makes hard to specify) a reasonable distinction between engaging with a text, and imagining something on its basis (the sights and sounds it invokes, or something like that). Besides all that, imagination is a sort of exciting term, and Matravers' point about understanding representations is that we should be "cautious concerning claims as to what is involved in our imagining the content of a narrative . . . what goes on in our heads when we read is,

⁵LARD WITH REFERENCES; TRY TO GET ARGUMENTS SHARPER WITHOUT MAKING IT LONGER.

generally, a great deal less exciting than we suppose.” (Matravers 2014, p. 73). Model construction, it seems, is a mundane business.

Against the fundamentals of the Walton view, then, we have the following challenges. To the claim that imagination is centrally involved with understanding fictions in a way that it isn’t involved with non-fictions, we have the counter-claims that (a) there’s nothing different involved with understanding either, and (b) the thing that is involved isn’t usefully called or understood as a form of imagination. To the claim that imagination grounds the distinction between fictions and non-fictions, we have the counter-claim that imagination can’t do any such thing, and indeed that there is no hugely significant distinction to be made; rather, there’s a distinction between representations and confrontations.

Now, I find this critique compelling; I think the Waltonian consensus is quite badly undermined by it. And yet I do also find compelling the intuition that imagination is, somehow, involved with fiction; or, if not with fiction, then with a significant and distinct (sub-)class of texts among all the things we might choose to read. What I will suggest soon is that the fundamental problem with the consensus position is that it’s premised on a misconception of what imagination is, which fatally compromises its approach to explaining how imagination is involved with fiction. But to get there, I first want to explore moves open to those seeking to defend (something like) the consensus. Explaining why it fails will bring us closer to the position I wish to endorse.

3 An obvious move, and its failure

What the defender of the consensus might say is something like this: I grant that, at the level of fictional sentences and at the level of *comprehension* of fictions, it’s not obvious how imagination grounds interesting distinctions, or how imagination is involved at all. But when we talk about understanding or engaging with fictions, we’re really talking about something richer and more interesting than mere comprehension. We’re talking about... well, exactly what we’re talking about is not entirely clear, but it’s something like getting involved with the fiction, grasping its meaning, its thematic content, its import for the actual world; the sort of engagement that, broadly speaking, secures fiction’s position at the heart of humanistic discourse. Even if imagination isn’t involved in fiction at the level of comprehension, it is certainly involved at this level, and moreover is involved in a way that it isn’t when one reads non-fiction. So we can retrench the consensus position at this line: imagination is involved in understanding

fiction richly, and is not so involved in understanding non-fictions.

There are (at least) three ways in which this line could be developed, and they're not all inconsistent with each other. The first, simplest way is to expand on this idea of "getting involved with the fiction". While it's true that Walton mainly explicates his ideas of understanding fictions with reference to make-belief, both he and others have appealed to a rather wider range of imaginative mental states which are apparently involved in engagement with fictions: imaginative analogues of desires, emotions, judgements, and so forth. So one could say something like this: to really understand, or get involved with, a fiction, one doesn't just construct a model of make-beliefs; one develops a comprehensive parallel imagined mental life, directed towards the comprehensive parallel fictional world.⁶

This is, indeed, the sort of thing simulationists about philosophy of mind have said about understanding fictions. The problem for our present purposes is that it doubles down on the consensus view without really solving any of its problems. Just the same criticisms that Matravers makes of Walton seem to recur with this more "comprehensive" account. First, the imagination-premised distinction between fictions and non-fictions seems dubious. Why would it not be the case that my i-desires and i-emotions and suchlike are what I engage when I read, say, a biography or a history? If we construe such things as i-desires as phenomenologically akin to the real thing, but distinguished functionally by a lack of connection to action, then it seems that histories or biographies will plausibly be their subjects just as much as fictions are. The mental model we construct out of i-desires, i-emotions, and so on is richer than a mere model of comprehension, but there's no obvious reason to think that it's only richer in the case of fiction, especially if the distinction between imagination and real mental states is meant to be their functional relations to action-guidance. So: the retrenched consensus still gives us no imagination-premised distinction between fictions and non-fictions.

Second, again, it's not really clear why any of this deserves the name imagination. We can't insist that all these belief-like, desire-like, emotion-like state are imaginative because they're directed at fictional entities, unless we have some reason to believe that only imaginative states can be directed at fictional entities. If we've already undermined the basis for thinking that fictions are tied up with imagination at the ground level, the basis for thinking that they are at the higher level evaporates.

⁶TRY TO PIN THIS ON CURRIE?

An additional, almost paradoxical problem with this richer view is that the more comprehensive it becomes, the less obviously it applies to all fiction. The casual reader of the philosophical literature on literature could be forgiven for thinking that the novel was completed as an artform sometime around the publication of *To The Lighthouse*, and never developed further. The kind of model of engagement and appreciation suggested by the "rich" consensus view is excellently suited to (broadly speaking) realist fictions, in which it's plausible that what you're being asked to do is to construct an analogue mental life relative to an analogue world. However, the model seems rather less suited to explaining our engagement with any fiction that incorporates the techniques and tics of postmodernism; that is, any fiction where engagement is not easily understood as world-building.

So this relatively simple development of the consensus does not seem to secure the aims of carving out a distinct role for imagination with regard to understanding fiction, or of providing a distinction between fiction and non-fiction predicated on imagination. More complex developments, however, might fulfill these aims or something similar to them. Such developments would specify a particular, unique thing that fictions do for us, or that we do with fictions, and then argue that those unique fiction-related practices are applications of imagination.

There are (at least) two ways to make these more complex developments. Which you find amenable will depend on your position on the question of why we bother to read fiction. *Cognitivists* argue that (some) fiction teaches us things about the world, in a manner unique to fiction; novels can engage the "moral imagination" (Nussbaum, Freeland); literature can provide rich conceptual comprehension (Gibson); fiction can furnish "dangerous knowledge" (Harrison). Cognitivists might thus say something like this: fictions, uniquely, offer us the chance to grasp a special sort of knowledge made available by a given work; this special sort of learning is, or is facilitated by, an imaginative act.⁷

Non-cognitivists argue that, whatever it is you get out reading fiction, it's not knowledge about the actual world. But many do still think that we engage with fictions in a way that goes beyond the shadow-play of a simulated mental life, and allows us to grasp some deeper, more aesthetically salient aspects of the work. Such a person might then argue that this particular aesthetic engagement

⁷Note that I am not claiming that all or any of the cognitivists named *do* say this; they may well not think that imagination is involved. I am claiming that if one is a cognitivist and also wants to develop the retrenched consensus, this is how you might do so.

is, again, facilitated by imagination, acting this time not as a bridge between the world of the fiction and the actual world, but rather as an interpretative aid to grasping things internal to the fiction. As a representative of such a move, here is Peter Lamarque, reviewing Matravers' book:

Good readers of the novel employ their imagination not just in imagining the propositions expressed but in making connections, pursuing themes and identifying symbolic or figurative meaning. Good historians might praise writing that stirs their imagination, but they will also press the soundness of sources, the persuasiveness of inferences and the comprehensiveness of explanations. Differences in reading practices are palpable and these should inform philosophical discussions of fiction. (Lamarque 2016, p. 619)

Thus, Lamarque thinks, “the connection between fiction and imagination re-emerges”, as does the distinction between fiction and non-fiction premised on imagination (Lamarque 2016, p. 619). There is a difference in “reading practice”; when we read fiction, (1) we read it in a different manner or mode than we do when we read history, and (2) this different manner is distinctively imaginative.⁸

Now, the first notable thing about both the cognitivist and non-cognitivist developments is obvious but important. Both views, it would seem, will not manage to make a distinction between fictions and non-fictions. It is surely not the case that *all* fictions sustain Lamarque's engaged reading, or offer Harrison's dangerous knowledge. Weakly, one might say that all and only fictions should be approached with the presumption that they might do so, but that seems highly dubious; I never approach an airport thriller hoping for enlightenment or deep aesthetic engagement, and I would be silly to do so. So we are now dealing with a rather more refined question: what does imagination have to do with a certain class of fictions? It seems like a central plank of the consensus view, the fiction/non-fiction distinction predicated on imagination, really has gone for good.

Anyway, despite this, I do think that both these developments are defensible, or something like them, and that they provide the best ways we can hope for to secure the role of imagination in fiction; but they aren't defensible on the view of imagination upon which the consensus relies. The trouble is that,

⁸Note that the cognitivist can consistently claim that fiction both furnishes knowledge of the world, and also supports the sort of engaged reading that Lamarque describes. Fictions can do more than one thing. The non-cognitivist denies the first conjunct.

on that view, it seems that imagination is neither necessary nor sufficient for accomplishing the tasks accorded it by either of those developed views.

The starting point, again, is the rich model of comprehension mentioned above; the idea that, in engaging with a fiction, we construct a comprehensive parallel mental life. This simulated web of desires and beliefs and suchlike must then play some sort of irreducible role in supporting either cognitivist or non-cognitivist accounts of reading practices.

On the cognitivist development, the story would then be that, having generated our web of *i*-desires and *i*-beliefs and suchlike, we go on to run processes "off-line", and generate further *i*-beliefs, or *i*-judgements, about the imagined world. These analogues can then, somehow, be assimilated back into our real-world systems of beliefs, desires, and so on. Thus, we grasp the fiction in a rich manner, and learn something from it that informs our thoughts about the actual world.

On the non-cognitivist development, the idea would be that this web of analogue mental states enables or underpins the sort of rich engagement with which they're concerned. Perhaps the idea would be that, once such a parallel mental life has been developed, certain themes or meanings become salient owing to the way in which the web of *i*-states coheres; these themes, meanings, and such like might then be worked up into an account of the work's aesthetic value.

The troubles for both developments start from a sort of puzzlement. Granted that we can sketch an idea of imagination's involvement in either case, the adumbrated models of engagement look unsuited to their ends; imagination seems neither enough, nor needed. We can sharpen this puzzlement into a series of problems. The first derives directly from Matravers' original arguments. In the cognitivist case, one might think that one's actual beliefs, desires, and so on are engaged in the fiction; indeed, this might provide a less circuitous explanation of how such things result in understanding of the real world. In the non-cognitivist case, it's quite unclear to me why any of the mental activities Lamarque lists are properly or usefully described as imaginative. Making connections, pursuing themes, identifying meanings; these sound like quotidian cognitive acts. Just as Matravers claims that the process of building mental models is not, in any exciting sense, imaginative, it's not clear that the mental states involved in understanding fictions more richly are imaginative, whether one is a cognitivist or non-cognitivist.

Those are problems of necessity. The remaining problems concern sufficiency. Take first the cognitivist development. The difficulty is that the view,

with its reliance on make-belief and i-desire and the generation of further such things, delivers a fatally impoverished view of what we do with, and what we get out of, fictions. That is, it fails to give any heft to the idea that understanding fictions in this rich sense is important or profound. On the cognitivist development, the idea, surely, is that we learn something new about the world that is not merely modal: not just what we might feel or do, or how the world might be, were such and such the case. The idea, rather is that we learn something new, something deeper, about some element of the world, and do so in a peculiarly direct way. But on the cognitive consensus model, fiction is reduced to a dessicated possibility-exploration machine. I don't doubt that some fiction serves precisely this function, but it seems a serious mistake to take the undisputed powers and uses of speculative fiction to be the sum total of fiction's powers and uses.

On a somewhat related point, it's not clear how imagination, conceived as this shadow-play of analogues, would ever suffice to teach us something new, in some distinctive way. Because the parallel mental life developed is so close to a real one, the model of learning based on it is close to actual-world learning. But the cognitivist is supposed to be telling us how fiction can, uniquely, deliver surprising insights in a distinctive manner. And that is not an end to which the consensus view of imagination can easily be turned.

As for the non-cognitivist, the question is really an expression of exasperation. Suppose, against my comment above, that we we could, in fact, carve out a particular fiction-related sense of connection-making and theme-pursuit. The recurrent question is what would make that sense imaginative. The problem is that the view of imagination which construes it as a matter of the construction of analogue mental lives seems to have nothing useful to say here. That is, it's not clear how we could even begin to describe the type of experience that would be needed to underpin this reading practice in terms of imagination-assimilation. How does building a world-directed web of mental states allow us to move beyond them, to make something new out of them, to make salient a meaning or a theme or whatever? The problem, perhaps, is that the consensus view seems to encourage us to take a first-personal stance with regard to the novel; to enter into a first-person mental life. But the non-cognitivist seems to want us to use imagination to directly and impersonally interrogate the text, rather than to personally engage with it. And it is not apparent how the simulation model of imagination will allow for that impersonal interrogation, whether it's be done directly, or to be done as a derivation from the imaginative web of belief. So here, the problem is that it's not even clear how imagination could

possibly be the right sort of thing to characterise the mental states allegedly involved in engagement.⁹

Developing either account of imagination's involvement in literature looks hopeless. Perhaps we had better just give up on the idea that imagination is involved at all here, whether at the level of comprehension or at the level of engagement. And yet, there's that nagging thought: surely imagination is involved here somewhere. And I think it is. Something like the lines just mooted are defensible, but the only way to defend them is to abandon the plank of the consensus view left broadly untouched by Matravers: that is, the theory of imagination that underpins the view. If we cleave to this theory, which I call the *imitation theory*, it will remain unclear whether, or how, imagination could possibly be involved in understanding fictions. If we substitute a better theory of imagination, we get a much better picture. On the *lens theory*, we can see how imagination might well be involved in understanding fictions in a rich sense, while not involved in a thin sense (though I will suggest that there is still no good fiction/non-fiction divide premised on imagination). And we can also make sense of the intuition that imagination is involved *somehow* at the base level. The first step, then, is to revise what we mean by imagination.

4 Against imitation

Just as the Waltonian model of imagination's involvement in fiction is fairly called a consensus, so too is the theory of imagination that structures the model. This *imitation theory* says that imaginative acts are imitations of counterpart acts. We've seen already the imaginative imitation of beliefs, desires, and so forth in the Waltonian model. The imitation theory generalizes this idea to the widest possible extent: visualization imitates seeing, conceiving imitates believing, and so on. The constituents, properties, phenomenologies, and functions of imaginative acts are derived from, and specified by comparison with, those of counterparts. Any view of imagination which relies on this procedure of contra-distinction to define, describe, and analyse imaginative acts falls within the ambit of the imitation theory. I will shortly suggest that the problems just encountered by the consensus view are indicative and representative of a set of problems encountered by this theory, but let's first get more clear on what the

⁹THERE ARE DEFINITELY GOOD ARGUMENTS IN THIS CRITICISMS BIT, BUT THEY NEED TO BE TIGHTENED UP AND THE POSITIONS NEED TO BE PINNED ON PEOPLE. NON-COG VS COG THING IS SCRUPULOUS SCHOLARSHIP BUT MAKES THE WHOLE SECTION FUSSY. CAN IT BE ELIDED?

theory is.

Though I'm referring to it to as a "theory", and will continue to do so for brevity's sake, I really have in mind a theoretical framework. Such a framework organises our thinking about a topic or phenomenon, accommodating and aligning observations and intuitions, and providing a central thought or understanding that can be developed in many different ways. The imitation theory is such a framework: it's a general way of understanding or conceptualising imagination that could be filled out in numerous different ways. So understood, the theory is very popular. Many views of imagination are versions of or glosses on it. Imagining a toucan flying is, perhaps, pretending (that) a toucan is flying (Ryle 1949, ch. 8; Langland-Hassan 2012); or entertaining the unasserted thought that there is a toucan flying (Scruton 1974, ch. 7); or having the counterfactual belief that, were there a toucan flying, such and such would be the case (Russow 1980); or representing as possible a flying toucan (McGinn 2004, p. 137; O'Connor and Aardema 2005). While some of these views don't seem to have literal imitation at their core, each of them shares the structure of the imitation theory. In each, imaginative acts are described and defined as counterparts of other kinds of act: pretend seeing against real seeing, counterfactual and factual beliefs, representing as possible and representing as actual. The imitations are often diminutions as well as derivations; imaginative acts, implicitly, are contrasted with "real" acts. Investigation of imaginative acts can be approached by considering ways in which they differ from or resemble their counterparts.

The imitation theory is practically paradigmatic in contemporary philosophy. In particular, it's at the heart of simulationism, of Waltonism, and of all the debates about imagination that are premised upon those views. But the theory is problematic, for three reasons. First, it fails to adequately delimit the extension of "imagination", insofar as it encompasses a motley of mental states that dubiously deserve the label. Second, it provides limited illumination of imagination's intensional features, insofar as "imitation" does not seem to be a notion that can usefully underwrite such often-noted characteristics of imagination as its links with irreality or its peculiar relations to activity and attention. Third, it struggles to say anything interesting or useful about imagination's functions.

This isn't the place to explore the first and second points; if you're not convinced immediately, set them aside and forget about them.¹⁰ The pertinent

¹⁰I explore them in considerable detail in [OMITTED FOR BLIND REVIEW], currently under review.

problem here is the third: the allegation that the imitation theory is unsuited to the task of explaining or underwriting imagination's functions. So let me dwell on that point. Imagination's functions fall into two broad kinds: informational and transcendent. Informational kinds are ways we use imagination to find out about the world; transcendent kinds are ways we use imagination to depart from the world. The imitation theory struggles with both kinds.

Applied to informational functions of imagination, it is usually clear enough how the imitation theory story goes; the trouble is that the story is one in which imagination ends up redundant, one way or another. Take, for example, empathy; suppose that it involves imaginatively engaging with the mental states of another person. The imitation theory should say something like this: you empathize by accurately imitating their mental states. But two worries arise. First, it seems dubious that you could ever know enough about another person's mind to accurately imitate their mental states. Second, if you ever did know enough, it's mysterious what extra insight you would gain from performing the imitation. So on the first worry, imagination is redundant because the job can't be done; and on the second, it's redundant because the job needn't be done. The general point here is that thinking of imagination as imitative encourages us to think that it it successfully informs if it successfully imitates some other informative mental states; and since imitations fall short of the real thing, these success conditions can't be met.

Meanwhile, applied to transcendent functions, the problem is that it isn't even clear how the imitation theory story might go. Take creativity, an obvious transcendent function of imagination. It's simply not clear how you might (re)describe this phenomenon in a way that might make it amenable to imitative analysis. Thinking of imagination as imitation encourages us to think of its transcendental applications in terms of simulation; this misdescribes the phenomena to the point of obfuscation.

These problems are rooted in the fact that on the imitation theory, imaginative mental states are defined and understood in contradistinction to "real" counterparts, in terms of what they lack. And this means that imagination is consistently understood in terms of what it isn't, relative to another state. Thus, however hard they try not to, advocates of the imitation theory seem bound to suggest that imagination is a somewhat etiolated or degraded form of another mental state: the same, but deficient in some salient respect. And this makes it hard to avoid the thought that any given imaginative state is ultimately reducible to its counterpart. Similarly, it makes it hard to avoid the thought that any given informative function of imagination could be better fulfilled by the

counterpart.

Peter Langland-Hassan has said much the same (Langland-Hassan 2012; Langland-Hassan 2015). There's no need, in his terms, to posit a "distinctive cognitive attitude" to account for "imaginative" states. Non-sensory imagination is a form of belief; sensory imagination is the pairing of sensory content with attitudes "copied from" other mental states. I think Langland-Hassan is absolutely right about this, *if* the conception one has of imagination is imitative. If imagination is just derivative imitation of other states, what useful explanatory work can the concept do? What special, distinctive category of mental act is being picked out? The imitation theory doesn't explain or illuminate imagination, but rather risks eradicating it from our taxonomy.

Now, it's an open question, at this point, which of those functional categories is relevant to fiction (perhaps both are): the point is that the imitation view is poorly placed to offer explanation of either. And this gives us a way to offer deeper explanation of why the Waltonian consensus runs into difficulties. Matravers' particular criticisms of the consensus recapitulate a general criticism of the imitation theory: if we understand imagination as imitation, it's hard to see why the states that it imitates aren't sufficient for, and perhaps better for, the things imagination is supposed to do. This general problem has a specific instantiation in the first problem I raised for the mooted models of richer engagement in cognitivist and non-cognitivist terms. It's not clear, it seems, why we should call what's going on there imaginative; and that's because, in general, it's not as clear as it should be on the imitation theory what distinguishes imaginative states from their counterparts. Once you accept that an imaginative state has a direct counterpart, it's not a big step to thinking that they're really two poles of a spectrum; and once you think that, it's another short step to thinking that in the end one simply reduces to the other. Why posit "imagination" as an distinct mental state involved with fiction when the ones we already have in our taxonomy of the mental do all the work required?

The further, more specific criticisms of the developed accounts of imaginative engagement can be seen as instantiations of the problems the imitation theory has with describing and explaining the functions of imagination. The non-cognitivist position, if it can be made good, describes a transcendent function of imagination; and the general problem of the imitation theory is that it fails to allow the basic phenomena involved in transcendence to be approached in terms of imagination. This is just the problem we mooted for the non-cognitivist. Meanwhile, the cognitivist is trying to account for an informational function of fiction in terms of imagination; and as we've just seen, imitative accounts of

imagination make it unclear how imagination could help us to understand, or be informed by, a fiction (or a person) in some imaginative sense that went beyond what we could grasp from plain understanding. Again, the problem here for the consensus recapitulates a problem with the imitation theory.

So, in summary, I think that the problems faced by the consensus view of fiction, and in particular the challenges to the retrenched version, are instances of general problems faced by the theory of imagination on which it relies, general problems which (of course) have specific instances in other contexts; and I think those general problems, and their various instances, are enough to suggest that the imitation theory of imagination is wrong. That suggests a way forward: find an alternative way of thinking about imagination, and see what light it casts on the relation between imagination and fiction.

5 The lens theory

The alternative I favour is the lens theory. By turning a lens (or an arrangement of them) on something, you can produce various sorts of images. Depending on your lenses, and what you do with them, the images might show clarified, magnified, isolated, concentrated, or distorted elements of the target. The images are derived from the target, but differ from it. You don't, in the process, see the lens itself, but you can infer things about its properties from the ways in which the image is related to the original.

Now think of imagination as a lens, or more accurately a set of lenses, or more accurately still a set of lensing activities: mental processes that focus, clarify, concentrate, and refine elements and aspects of contents and characters.¹¹ This is the *lens theory* of imagination.¹² An example: suppose you see a toucan.

¹¹For brevity, I'll often use one term, like "refinement", to stand for all the various lensing processes.

¹²So far as I know, the lens theory has no contemporary advocates except me, certainly not under that name, though some people have said things that could be taken as consonant with it (e.g. Klein, Damm, and Giebeler 1983, p. 15; Jones 1995; Martin 2002; Leeuwen 2011; Leeuwen 2013). It does, however, have quite an impressive pedigree. It's arguably (very arguably) the sort of thing that both Hume and Kant have in mind when they talk about imagination. My development of it is mostly a response to R.G. Collingwood's account of imagination in *The Principles of Art*; Collingwood's account, in turn, is presented as an explication of and improvement on Hume's. On Hume, see Hume 1740, bk. 1 pt. 1 § 1; Pears 1991, pt. 1; Garrett 1997, ch. 1; Dorsch 2016; on Kant, see Makkreel 1990; Gibbons 1994; Thompson 2013; Matherne 2016; on Collingwood, see Collingwood 1938, Bk. II; Desmond 1976.

Your experience involves a complex perceptual content that represents the bird, its surroundings, and so on. On the imitation theory, imagination imitates the experience of seeing a toucan by imitating that content or the character of the act of entertaining it. But on the lens theory, the whole perceptual experience of seeing a toucan is taken as a target. Elements of its content can then be refined; you can, for example, concentrate on just the elements that represent the toucan, or its beak, or its colours. Elements of its act-character can also be attended to: you can focus on what it feels like to see, to be seeing. This is imagination at work. The given element of perceptual experience is focussed on, divided from the rest, and concentrated. What's produced is an idea (or concept, or whatever you like) just of that concentrated element, an idea of the toucan alone, or the features of its beak, or the feeling of seeing (a toucan).

That's how the lens theory deals with visualization. In general, the idea is that imagination delivers a focussed idea of some experiential element, abstracted from its context and refined into clarity. This theory, I think, does much better than the imitation theory does at plausibly delimiting "imagination"'s extension, underwriting imagination's intensional features, and illuminating its functions. These latter, again, are most pertinent to the present paper. I argued that the imitation theory has surprising difficulties with empathy, because thinking of the latter in terms of the former sets up success conditions that are bound to be unmet. But what if imagination is a lens? In that case, empathizing might involve starting from a vague, diffuse sense of what the other is feeling. This feeling can be focused on, refined, perhaps blended with retained imaginative ideas of your own feelings. Now it seems much more viable to get into the other's shoes: you do so, not by fully replicating their mental states, but by trying to sharpen your grasp of the states you're trying to understand. And it's more obvious what you get by doing so. You don't just redundantly repeat your starting point: you get a concentrated, focused understanding of the target state.

So the lens theory sets up different success conditions for empathy: sharpened understanding, not perfect replication. In general, the lens theory encourages us to see the success conditions for imagining differently than the imitation view does. If informational applications of imagining are understood in terms of lensing, success is achieved when the product of the process is a refined, concentrated idea that is illuminating or revelatory of an aspect of the target experience. When we empathize, visualize, conceive, or rehearse, we try to fully understand, concentrate on, or clarify an extant idea or a salient element of it. We succeed when we do, in fact, grasp that clarified idea or element in a way

that reveals something new about its object to us. The lens theory thus provides a fruitful way to think of informational uses of imagination, by providing a particular way of thinking of their success conditions.

Now, what about transcendental uses of imagination? My argument concerning the imitation theory here was somewhat plaintive: it seems difficult to understand how conceiving of creativity in terms of imitation can allow us to even grasp the basic phenomenon, let alone make explanatory progress. The lens theory, by contrast, incorporates explicitly the idea that imagination's processes deliver something new: a refined, clarified idea. Not only does this place novelty at the heart of the theory, it also carves out a particular sort of creation. Imaginative creation is not mechanical, but active refinement; you don't imaginatively create when you make a new cake by following a recipe, but you might do so by adaptation and refinement of existing recipes.

This can be pushed further. The lens theory allows for a special sort of imaginative combination of ideas. Think first of a pair of binoculars. They consist in two sets of lenses, each of which delivers a separate image of the target. But they produce one, seamless, fused image of the target. Think, second, of filters: say, a yellow filter placed in front of a lens. What this does is to infuse the image with a particular glow, again seamlessly: you couldn't look at the resultant image and say, this is the yellow part and this is the rest. What emerges from imaginative processes is still a particular idea, an idea about a particular, with no trace of the seams. This distinguishes the imaginative recombination involved in, say, writing a novel, from the intellectual combination required to make an argument, or the mechanical imitation involved in writing a generic thriller. The joins of an argument are visible: the premises are divisible. But a true novel presents an individual and seamless whole.

Much more needs to be said about imagination and creativity. I can't say it here. But the broader point, again, is that the lens theory can address transcendent uses of imagination better than the imitation theory can. The notion of a lens is flexible enough, and suggestive enough, to allow productive thinking about the ways in which imagination creates new things, and goes beyond the world. It could be that the way in which I've explained imagination's relation to novelty here is, in the end, not sufficient, or on the wrong track. But thinking of imagination as lenses at least gives impetus in the direction of an explanation, by helping to characterize transcendent acts in a fruitful manner; the imitation theory provides little such impetus.

The final point to make about the lens theory's application to imagination's functions returns to the deeper problem faced by the imitation theory. Its proce-

ture of negatively defining types and functions of imagination by contradistinction from counterparts makes it difficult for the theory to say anything illuminating about what makes imagination special or unique. But on the lens theory, acts of imagination and their applications can be conceptualized on their own terms. You can retain the notion of a counterpart as a useful guide; it's handy to think of sensory imagination as the counterpart of perception. But by providing a positive account of what makes something an act of imagination, rather than a negative account of what makes it not some other act, the lens theory allows us to properly describe the special and unique features and functions of imagination; this facilitates further investigation of them.

So much for the lens theory and the imitation theory, at least for this paper.¹³ The point here is not to comprehensively argue for one and against the other, but rather to explore what happens when we substitute the lens theory for the imitation theory in trying to explicate imagination's involvement with fiction. So let's return to fiction, and see where we get to.

6 The new landscape

I began by saying that the consensus view is based on a neat piece of mirroring. The lens theory does not allow for such mirroring. However, it does allow us to reconstruct an account of how imagination is involved with fiction, or perhaps, with literature. The account agrees with Walton that fictional worlds are imaginative; agrees with Matravers that understanding fictions, in the sense of comprehension, does not involve imagination; supports the move mooted above to the effect that understanding, in a richer sense, is an imaginative act; and agrees with Matravers that there isn't an interesting fiction/non-fiction divide premised on imagination, while suggesting that there is perhaps a related division between literature and non-literature. The aim, overall, is to rescue the intuition that imagination has *something* to do with literature, by using a better conception of what imagination is.

To begin with, I'd like to return to Walton's comments about fictional worlds. It's worth reiterating that these are not, in his terms, worlds in the sense implied by the phrase "possible worlds", for fictional worlds can be both incomplete and inconsistent. This gives us a way to understand the sense in which fictional worlds are imaginative worlds, without appealing to our mode

¹³I give an exhaustive, and exhausting, argument for the lens theory and against the imitation theory in OMITTED FOR BLIND REVIEW, which is currently under review.

of access to them. The way to think about fictional worlds is that they are, indeed, models of the sort Matravers envisages, but rather less replete than the word “world” suggests; fictional “worlds” are abstractions from the real world, a focussed set of ideas independent of outside considerations. And this is just what we require, on the lens theory, to call something imaginative: for an idea, or concept, or world to be a product of imagination, it’s enough that it’s a refinement or concentration of some other idea, concept, or world.

This has the rather nice advantage of making it quite obvious how authorial model-making (or writing, as we might call it) is imaginative: the author is engaged in a refining and focussing process. But it does this without forcing us to say that the reader, who also makes a model, also does something imaginative. I agree with Matravers that there’s no sort of special imaginative experience involved in making a model, if that’s taken to mean that every person constructing it is doing something imaginative. Indeed, on the lens theory, it’s apparent that the reader of a fiction (or of anything else) isn’t doing anything imaginative, because they’re not actively refining content themselves; they’re following instructions for building a refined model. There’s a difference here between saying that making a model is an imaginative activity, and saying that the model which emerges is a product of imagination; the difference between designing a lego set and building one. If you follow the instructions, the thing you build is imaginative, the product of someone’s imagination, but you didn’t use your imagination to rebuild it. To grasp or understand an abstraction is not necessarily to employ imagination: rather, imagination delivers abstracts for cognition to grasp.

Here, then, we have two thoughts: what fictions refer to is properly described as an imaginative world, but the way in which we understand that world is not itself imaginative. At least, the way in which we *comprehend* that world is not imaginative; but what about the richer sense of understanding to which the cognitivist and non-cognitivist appeal?

Here, I think we can get more purchase on the idea that imagination is centrally involved in understanding a significant sub-category of texts. Suppose that we do indeed approach certain texts with the aim of engaging in reading practices that (again) engage our “moral imagination”, provide profound conceptual comprehension, furnish “dangerous knowledge”; or, alternatively, that provide some sort of special aesthetic engagement premised on the exploration of themes and meanings.

One way to think about the cognitivist approach, then, is to think that certain texts invite us to abstract from and refine the content they provide with

the aim of reaching some concentrated, focussed understanding of an aspect of the world. The aim is not to grasp the fiction as a whole, but rather to derive from some element of it a richer, sharpened, altered idea; an idea which may be wholly novel, or may interact with pre-existing ideas as a filter interacts with a lens. Similarly, one might think of the non-cognitivist approach as encapsulating the idea that to aesthetically engage with a novel is to steadily clarify and sharpen one's understanding of its thematic import by undertaking the task of refining the content given in the text into some sort of thematic unity.

Sketchy as this model is, it seems that it avoids the problems that dogged the consensus view, in both its original and retrenched forms. First, it is clear enough why we should think of this as a distinctively imaginative process; just the sort of mental activity described is just the sort of mental activity that, on the lens theory, counts as imaginative. Second, it seems apparent that there will be some sort of interesting distinction among texts premised on this mode of engagement, since it is surely not the case that any or all texts will be apt for this kind of refining, abstracting approach. Third, we get a better sense of how the engagement of imagination by texts is exciting; we see how we get something profound and rich out of the text, rather than a dry grasp of some speculative possibility.

The second of these points requires some refinement. In much of this section, I've used the somewhat weaselly word "text", and referred obliquely to an interesting distinction among texts. This is because it's not at all apparent to me that the interesting distinction which can be premised on this specific mode of engagement is a distinction between fictions and non-fictions. After all, there are many fictions which don't invite or reward this kind of engagement, and plausibly, there are plenty of non-fictions that do. However, I would like to suggest that the distinct kind of engagement picked out by the lens theory of imagination underwrites the distinction between literature and non-literature.

Let me say a little bit to pull this divide into focus, though a lot more will need saying. There is, I think, a hazy but real distinction between a sort of writing that deserves some sort of honorific, and some sort that doesn't. The honorific sort, it seems, enjoys to a higher degree some certain set of literary aesthetic properties: style, perhaps, beauty, whatever that is, and so forth. The rest is, in some sense, functional. This divide is commonly supposed to be different to that between fiction and non-fiction: there's literary fiction and there's thrillers, there's literary memoir and there's footballers' autobiographies. Here's a suggestion: the literature distinction is one predicated on whether or not you engage with the work in a characteristically imaginative

way. Those works which count as literary are those which asks us to abstract from our comprehension-model to arrive at some concentrated, focussed understanding of an aspect of the world.

To maintain this line is to deny Lamarque's claim above that readers of (literary) history and readers of (literary) novels are engaged in significantly different exercises. Of course, we might shift certain standards of assessment, aesthetic or otherwise, depending on the sort of book we think we're reading. It's just a mistake to think that the best non-fictional writing is engaged in the same project as the worst, the project of imparting functional information (I don't mean to suggest that much of it is, but then I'm not really that convinced that much fiction is either). The point of reading *literary* history is precisely to gain a richer, deeper understanding of the world via an act of imaginative abstraction from what's given. What you do when you get into a history book is, again, to abstract, refine, focus, and ultimately to shift or enrich how you understand a certain concept or idea. Why else would we read different histories of the same era, or several biographies of the same person? Don't we get just the same profound derangement of our concept of evil from reading a powerful Holocaust memoir, a history, or a novel?

I have to admit, I am not entirely sure about this last point. It seems to me that this is where the argument leads; but it could be that, in fact, the imaginative engagement I have described is peculiar to certain kinds of fiction, and not applicable to non-fictions. I say "certain kinds", because it would still seem apparent to me that the rich engagement is not the way in which we approach all fictions; it seems that, however you take imagination, the concept can't sustain a fiction/non-fiction distinction.

Let me step back and summarise what I'm suggesting. If we think of imagination as lens, as the lens theory suggests, we can give different content to the idea that imagination is involved with fiction. We can moot a conception of "fictional world" on which it makes sense to say that such things are imaginative, insofar as they are refinements of the actual world; but we can still maintain, as Matravers convincingly does, that comprehending such worlds doesn't involve imagination. The reader engages by following instructions to rebuild the model, and this is not an imaginative activity. What *is* an imaginative activity is the higher process of engaging with texts as a way to enrich and deepen our understanding of the world; to do so, we abstract from and refine what is given in the text, from the models we've made, to derive a sharpened, focussed, clarified conception of some element of the model, and hence of the world. There is thus a distinction among modes of engagement, predicated on imagination,

which finds an important distinction among texts. Where that distinction lies is debatable; I've suggested that it's the distinction between literature and non-literature, and that it cuts across the fictional/non-fictional divide, but I'm willing to entertain the idea that it instead is a distinction among fictions. In any case, I hope at least this is established: that thinking of imagination as a lens gives us richer explanatory resources for approaching fiction than the imitation theory preferred by the consensus view. The imitation theory should be abandoned, and our philosophy of fiction should be rewritten accordingly.

7 Why bother?

Quite possibly, you might have found yourself wondering while reading the foregoing whether it was really worth the bother. Taking that thought in the most charitable way possible, the challenge is really this: why does it matter whether or not we get to say that fiction, or literature, or whatever, involves imagination? Why go to all the effort of constructing and defending a grand theory of imagination, just to preserve an intuition that might well be misleading, or confused? If the Waltonian consensus is false, can't we just investigate what's really going on when we read, without worrying about whether "imagination" is the right term to apply to it?

A first line of response to this challenge is to deny that there's much effort expended. The theory of imagination I've sketched is one that I think can be motivated and defended independently of its role here. I think that the imitation theory, in all its forms, is unhelpful; I think the lens theory can do better at uniting and explaining all the various uses of imagination. The issue of imagination's involvement with fiction, and the idea that the lens theory is better at explaining it, is one application of this general approach to imagination. So there's no special effort involved here; the theory of imagination is not ad hoc.

This suggests a second line of response, which perhaps addresses the challenge more squarely. I don't think that the lens theory can tell us what the essential nature of imagination is, if that is taken to be the demand that it pick out some sort of natural-kind-like invariant essence of the imaginative. I think imagination is, in some sense, a construct; I think it's a term that we apply to a range of mental states and their applications, where we discern a commonality, even if that commonality has no underpinning in essential properties of the mental states involved. The point of defending the intuition about fiction, then, and the point of calling it an imaginative activity, is to fit engagement with

fiction into that web of practice and mental activity at the right point. By considering how imagination is involved with fiction, and insisting that it is, we're better placed to see how fictional engagements fit with, mutually support, and overlap activities such as empathizing, moral education, thinking about possibilities, and so forth. We could, of course, give up on the claim that imagination is involved in fiction, or in any of these other activities; we could give up on thinking that imagination is any kind of distinct cognitive attitude. But that move seems to rob us of a useful way of considering what's common among some interestingly similar activities.

8 Conclusion

The consensus view of imagination's involvement with fiction is in quite some trouble. Matravers' arguments that imagination isn't involved in comprehension, and can't mark a fiction/non-fiction distinction, are compelling. A re-trenched version of the consensus view, concentrating on a rich sense of understanding, suffers from problems similar to those of the original, and a new one all of its own. These problems are due to the fact that the consensus view incorporates the imitation theory of imagination. This theory is unsatisfactory, and the problems of the consensus view are instances of general problems with the imitation theory. There's a better theory of imagination around: the lens theory. If we reconsider fiction in the light of this theory, we can sketch out an approach to fiction that ratifies the intuition that imagination is involved *somehow*, without making the unconvincing claims about *how* which undermine the consensus approach. It's an open question, I suppose, whether what we're left with is sufficiently similar to the consensus view to count as an improvement rather than a replacement; after all, the central thought that imagination is important to fiction is preserved. But little else remains. Insofar as the core of the consensus is the imitation theory, the consensus has been undermined. We should instead approach fiction, and literature, with the lens theory in mind.¹⁴

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¹⁴SUGGESTION TO SELF: DROP NON-COG TALK ENTIRELY (GIVE LAMARQUE A FN) AND JUST DO THE COGNITIVIST STUFF. CLEARER LINE AND LESS MATERIAL.

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