The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum

Ideas in fiction, or fiction of ideas?

Part 2 Critical

Submitted by

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Abstract

In its creative and critical components, this study examines the intersection between philosophy, literary theory and analysis, and creative writing. It examines and then illustrates how philosophically engaged fiction – often called the *novel of ideas* – engages with the ideas it presents. Can – indeed, *must* – ideas inhabit works of literature, as critics like Mary McCarthy suggest? Or are philosophy and fiction at best uncomfortable housemates, as the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch and others assert? First, the creative project – *The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum* – is a novel that sets off to explore a situation in which pragmatist philosophy challenges idealism. Much of it is set in a time – early twentieth century – when philosophical verities in general were threatened, setting ontology in confusing, complex, and uncertain directions. The process of writing, however, led to exploration of other philosophical stances. Second, the thesis examines literary theory and analysis of categories of fiction and then the specific category of the novel of ideas. To do so, it uses lenses drawn from three facets of psychology: heuristics and biases in cognitive psychology, the dilemma of exploitation and exploration in development psychology, and frame analysis from social psychology.

Writing the creative component began as an attempt to explore how orphanages undertook care at a time when complex ideas based in pragmatist philosophy were challenging established norms. As the writing proceeded – that is, as the story unfolds – other philosophical discussions came into play. That process and the ideas that exploration uncovered, form the bridge between the novel and the critical essay of the thesis.

The critical component discusses the dichotomies writers face as they situate their novels in the publishing landscape. Examining in greater detail one dichotomy – philosophically versus psychologically oriented writing – it then identifies that the term novel of ideas is used theoretical to describe at least two quite distinct roles for philosophy in fiction: enactment of well understood ideas, or exploration of confusing ones. It then shows analytically how that boundary blurs in two contemporary novels. With its discussion of issues in philosophy and the challenges to its role in literature in general and fiction in particular, Chapter 5 of the critical component integrates the critical and creative themes the thesis, viewed as a whole, addresses.

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Full drafts of the creative component – the novel *The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum* – have been critiqued to good effect by readers including my wife, Hilary Glassborow; my brother, Thomas Nordberg; and two dear friends, Terry Bryant and Jan van Straaten. The novel includes its own acknowledgment of sources on the final page.

Author's declaration

This thesis is my own work. Comments of reviewers and the editor of *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (Routledge), prompted revisions to the original draft of what appears here as Chapter 2. Chapter 3 was accepted for publication in *Philosophy and Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press) without requests for changes, though modest alterations occurred during pre-publication copy-editing. Chapter 4 appeared in *New Writing* after minor corrections to the original manuscript.

Creative component

The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum

A Novel

Donald Nordberg

(see separate document)

Critical component

Ideas in fiction, or fiction of ideas?

1. A bridge between *Fleetwood* and the novel of ideas

Introduction

This thesis investigates the intersection of three intellectual practices: philosophy, literary theory and criticism, and creative writing. One of the labels of that intersection is the "novel of ideas"; another is "philosophical fiction." These terms are not consistently defined, as this thesis will show, and critics applying them do not always intend them as compliments.

The following critical component of the thesis concerns questions about how philosophically engaged fiction deals with the experiences of both the reader and the writer. Taking its lead from John Dewey's discussion of aesthetics (1934/1958), it considers each as creative acts. The artist creates the work, yes, but individual members of the audience create it again as their imaginations absorb and then imbue the work with a meaning of their own. This thesis, therefore, concerns both creative writing and creative reading.

The chapters that follow concern in part my own experience in the creation of the novel *The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum*. This first chapter, from the writer's perspective, sets out my motivation in the project and outlines the issues it addresses, while helping the reader anticipate the contributions it makes. Chapter 2 also presents the writer's side but viewed at arm's length. It shows how the pressure to conform with category distinctions conflicts with the urge for novelty.

The next two chapters look at the reader's encounter with philosophical fiction – the novel of ideas. Through the eyes of literary critics and theorists, Chapter 3 identifies two roles that philosophy can take in fiction: enactment and exploration. Chapter 4 uses that distinction to undertake a frame analysis of two contemporary novels showing how each work guides readers to live through enactment and exploration themselves. Chapter 5 then elaborates how philosophical issues shaped my experience during the writing as much as they shaped the novel itself.

Motivation

The novel *Fleetwood* does not, I hope, strike readers immediately as a novel of ideas. My intent was to start with a situation and a group of characters and then, through a minimally pre-conceived plot, see how those characters would develop: character-driven and literary in ambition. The characters and situation have some parallels in my family history. The secrecy that surrounds what happened to those characters in that situation motivated the writing. That mystery and the search for possible explanations drove the work emotionally.

The situation I selected for *Fleetwood*, however, added a cognitive element, through which I could explore a school of philosophical thought I found both attractive and puzzling, even disturbing: pragmatism. Orphanages in the United States in the 1930s were on the cusp of a dramatic rethinking of education, influenced by pragmatist writings and practices, mainly of John Dewey during this time at the University of Chicago (Cmiel 1995).

Concerning fiction-writing, my starting point arose from an experience, twenty-odd years ago, as a long-time journalist and would-be writer of fiction. I wrote a novel, a genre-straining murder mystery and financial thriller with comic subplots, concerning a seemingly intractable moral dilemma. It remains unpublished. In seeking a route to publication, I encountered a seemingly impenetrable, many-layered industry of writers, coaches, scouts, agents, editors, publishers, and booksellers. Critics also populated that landscape: academics interested in form and theory; writers for the journals, magazines and newspapers that take creative work seriously. Now, we add to that the crowd-sourced reviewers on Amazon, Goodreads, NetGalley, and other web sources. The industry wanted, and still wants, to know not just what the story *is*. It demands to know what it is *like*. Categories matter, commercially at least, but also conceptually. Against this background, both the critical and creative work for this thesis could help me understand how categories arise and what authors can do to avoid the category choking off the novelty of a novel.

Quite a few decades ago, when I was an undergraduate, I found novels of ideas formative, intellectually and emotionally. That was a time when we engaged the political through literature: the Cold War (George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), the Vietnam War (Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*). The first pair of works involved limited character depth and used plot as the driving force. Much less so the second pair.

The present project revisits those concerns and pleasures, though with a new focus. More recently critics and theorists have applied the label "novels of ideas" to a variety of works I admired, novels by Paul Auster, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Ian McEwan, and to authors I long wanted to read but hadn't: J.M. Coetzee, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen. My reading of philosophy had moved on, too: "continental" philosophers, including Heidegger, Latour, Foucault, Certeau; pragmatists, including James, Dewey, and Rorty. All presented ontological perspectives that seemed somehow "right" but with puzzling and even disturbing consequences, especially for moral philosophy. Could I unravel these through a thought experiment, through writing a work of fiction?

Where ideas meet imagination …

… two interlocking issues arise:

First, was the legendary critic and novelist Mary McCarthy right when she said that the term "the novel of ideas," introduced by modernist critics in the early 20th century, was not so much contradictory as tautological? She wrote:

> So intrinsic to the novelistic medium were ideas and other forms of commentary … that it would have been impossible in former days to speak of 'the novel of ideas'. It would have seemed to be a tautology. … I sense something derogatory [in the label], as if there were novels and novels of ideas and never the twain shall meet. (McCarthy 1980b).

Or was the legendary philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch right when she said that philosophy and literature should be kept apart? In an interview, the philosopher Bryan Magee asked, "What kind of role can philosophy play in literature?" Murdoch responded:

> It had better keep out. … As soon as philosophy gets into a novel it ceases to be philosophy. It becomes something else. It becomes a plaything of the writer (Murdoch and Magee 1978, at about 26 minutes).

> Philosophy aims to clarify. … Literature is very often mystification
> (1978, at about 2:30 minutes).[1]

In her philosophical writings, Murdoch rejected much of the postmodern and anti-foundationalist thinking that characterizes late 20th century philosophy. Those writers seemed to open the door to moral relativism. By contrast, she drew heavily upon of Plato and saw morality as having a metaphysical underpinning (Murdoch 1970, 1992). Her views were influenced by Plato's "old quarrel" between philosophy's search for truth and poetry's corrupting influence (The Republic, at 607b; see also Barfield 2011; Hayes and Wilm 2017).

Second, in recent theory and criticism, the category *novel of ideas* still gets mixed reviews. For example, Michael LeMahieu sees value in such work and highlights how the opprobrium the category attracted from modernists when attached to 19th century fiction seems to have been displaced when looking at works of philosophically minded novelists in the late 20th century and more contemporary ones (LeMahieu 2015). Sianne Ngai, by contrast, sees the novel of ideas as a gimmick, arguing that using "readymade ideas" illustrates a lack of imagination. She says that one of the characteristics of novels of ideas is that flat characters act as spokespersons for the ideas they represent (Ngai 2020a). As a result, those works tend to have extended monologues, which might apply to Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, as short story writer and novelist George Saunders has remarked (Saunders and Paul 2017).

Other theorists challenge the appropriateness of such categories. For example, Derek Attridge has argued that literary works in general should be seen as involving innovation and uniqueness, while defining these "widely acknowledged properties of art and of our understanding of art under the names 'invention' and 'singularity'" (Attridge 2004, 2). He acknowledges a third property, "alterity" or "otherness," something different from other forms of writing. Alterity is, on his view, inseparable from the invention and singularity. These three are a "trinity … lying at the heart of Western art and practice and as an institution."

In his companion work specifically on fiction, Attridge presents a more nuanced argument, that inventiveness and singularity constitute otherness, though the import is much the same: We value works for their difference. He does

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[1] These quotations come from the video record of the interview. An edited transcript appears in a collection of her writings as Murdoch (1998), which maintains the sense of the argument while rephrasing these passages.

not reject the importance of form, however. Works that flout conventions – the integrity or closure of a piece – "are effective only because of the expectations they thwart" (Attridge 2004, 11). This is an argument with parallels to the analytic approach this thesis develops to show how writers can defy the heuristics by shifting their anchor points (Chapter 2).

A thesis of ideas and fiction

This thesis comes down firmly on both sides of both debates, over categorization versus singularity, and whether philosophy and fiction can co-exist. On the former, categorization is a fact of literary life. The industry is at least as concerned about a work's similarities to others as it is to its otherness. Readers often approach a book for what it is like, not because it is different. At least in its first year, even the twelfth detective novel in a formulaic series may outsell *Finnegan's Wake*. Axiologically, however, we – academics, mainstream critics, and the industry – value novelty, originality, even singularity.

For the latter, can one *do* philosophy through literature? (For the creative part of this project the question becomes: can I?) This is trickier. Philosophy can be enacted. But if the point of philosophy is to achieve clarity and truth, as Iris Murdoch argues, then one mind engaged in making up stories seems, at first glance, an unlikely place to find it. Social scientists seek clarity and truth in the statistical significance. Even qualitative researchers triangulate their truth-claims. One novelist deliberately writing something she knows not to correspond to facts cannot reliably achieve what philosophers call a correspondence quality of truth.

However, if reality is constantly shifting (through historical and contextual contingency), then can truth be anything more secure than what Dewey calls "warranted assertibility," something that works, for now, until it doesn't? (See Dewey 1941; see also Frega 2013.) And if, as Murdoch suggests, we look for truth beyond the ephemera of daily life, fiction might well be a place to discover it, or perhaps uncover a warranted assertion hiding among those ephemera. If so, then Murdoch may be wrong about mixing fiction and ideas, philosophy and literature. Perhaps she was thinking only of novels that enact ideas, rather than ones that explore situations that might yield a different sort of truth (Chapters 3 and 4).

Exploration reminds us of the value of, even virtue in, experimentation in the writings of William James and John Dewey. Experiments constantly test whether

current conceptions still "work" in the face of changing contexts and growing understanding. While superficially appealing, the lack of something constant, trusted and trustworthy, removes the anchor in transcendentalist thinking that allows us to make judgements and then take actions with confidence. These are conceptualizations that I found puzzling, much as I found it difficult to accept relativism as an acceptable explanation of existence. I wondered too that the neopragmatist Richard Rorty might proclaim himself a relativist, deny the inevitability of progress, and then write a book called *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Hope is at least an expression of the value of progress, an aspiration that the randomness in relativism might be overcome. This was the philosophical puzzle I wanted my creative work to explore (Chapter 5). The novel, *The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum*, seeks to do so.

Writing the creative component took the explorative path of the exploration-exploitation dilemma with the aim of delivering to the author a better understanding of philosophical pragmatism. Importantly, however, it led me to uncover other traditions of moral philosophy dealing with issues that pragmatism avoids – Iris Murdoch's tentatively metaphysical approach (Murdoch 1970) and the ethics of care (Tronto 1993). Both helped me become less uncomfortable with the contradictions that pragmatist philosophers, in Cornel West's powerful indictment, often evade (West 1989).

Fleetwood explores a family in which communication, storytelling, and exchanging important facts of the family, simply does not take place. Yet this is not a toxic family. The orphanage at the center of the story is not a cruel place. This "half-orphan asylum" was established in the 1880s as a progressive educational institution. By the late 1920s, however, its methods of operation are confronted by an influx of fresh ideas about care, under the influence of the writings of John Dewey and the practices of his erstwhile collaborator and social activist, Jane Addams. The shifting time perspective of *Fleetwood* – from the 1990s to the 1960s, to the 1920s and 1930s, and back again – afforded an opportunity to play with the historical contingency central to pragmatist thought, and thus explore the challenge it presents to traditional, deontological ethics. In doing so, I sought to defy the parallels between the three dichotomies of categories discussed in the next chapter: *Fleetwood* would be character-led, with a minimal and emergent plot; literary fiction, not genre. It would sit astride the psychological-philosophical divide, with psychology taking the creative lead.

The shape of the thesis and its argument

The creative component, *Fleetwood*, seeks to illustrate how we can cope with the lack of moral anchor points in pragmatism and what fiction can bring to that process. The critical component examines how categorization confronts the creative writer, how the category of philosophical fiction – the novel of ideas – divides in two, and how processes of writing shape how works of ideas-led fiction can straddle that divide.

This component contains three self-contained analyses executed to build a single argument.[2] Chapter 2, "Category choice in creative writing," examines the problem of how writing coaches, the publishing industry, popular criticism, and academic analysis often separate works of fiction into broad pairs of categories, among them character-led versus plot-led, literary versus genre, and psychological versus philosophical. While these dichotomies have rough parallels to each other, each sets too stark a contrast to be of analytic use, descriptively or as prescriptively as they often are. Too many works of fiction straddle the supposed boundaries. Using the theory of heuristics and biases in cognitive psychology, the chapter identifies how writers can adopt a categorization but then bend it by shifting the anchor points that establish the heuristics involves in "defining" the category.

Chapter 3, "Enactment and exploration: Two roles for philosophy in the novel of ideas," unpacks the psychological-philosophical dichotomy in Chapter 2 by drawing on the dilemma of exploration and exploitation in developmental psychology. It argues that works often labelled "novels of ideas" or "philosophical fiction," and writers called "novelists of ideas," demonstrate two distinct ways in which fiction can incorporate philosophical work, by exploiting well developed ideas through enacting them, or by exploring more ambiguous and puzzling ones.

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[2] Chapter 2, 3 and 4 are written as journal articles; each building directly on the one before. Chapter 2 is the manuscript of a 2021 article in the creative writing journal *New Writing* (Routledge). Chapter 3 is the manuscript of an article in *Philosophy and Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press) in the April 2023 issue. Chapter 4 is the manuscript published online first in *New Writing* in the summer of 2023. Referencing has been standardized across all chapters, and a comprehensive list of works cited appears at the end of the thesis. Because of both the novel's setting and the preferred language of one of the journals, the thesis uses American spelling and punctuation throughout.

Chapter 4, "Enacting and exploring ideas in fiction," uses frame analysis in social psychology to identify the heuristics-biases and enactment-exploration distinctions in two contemporary novels: *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers and Elizabeth McKenzie's *The Portable Veblen* (2016). Both received high critical acclaim, prizes, and prize nominations. Though these works share location and thematic similarities, this chapter shows how the techniques of writing (heuristics employed, biases broken) help to create the effects that separate their philosophical stances. *The Overstory*, I argue, is a sophisticated example of enacting well established philosophical positions in a polemical way, while *Veblen* explores issues of identity and moral choice in a philosophically ambiguous world.[3]

The critical component concludes with Chapter 5, examining how both this fictional work of personal history and its philosophical exploration led to unanticipated outcomes.

Contributions

First, the critical component contributes methodologically in its layered approach to using psychology to analyze both literary criticism and works of fiction. It thus illustrates how literary scholars can gain insights from applying such interdisciplinary methods.

Second, Chapter 2 identifies and theorizes the challenge writers and would-be writers of fiction face. It illustrates the expectations of fictional works through three overlapping dichotomies (plot- vs. character-led; genre vs. literary; philosophical vs. psychological). It then suggests how writers can break free these heuristics from their biases through shifting the anchor points.

Third, Chapter 3 looks more closely at philosophically engaged fiction, developing a theoretical distinction between approaches that helps to illuminate how novels "do" philosophical work. Some books labelled "novels of ideas" enact well established conflicts in philosophy as worked examples, while others explore ways to understand less settled and unsettling ontologies.

Fourth, Chapter 4 applies that enactment-exploration dilemma to analyze how two contemporary novels frame their respective arguments or puzzles to

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[3] To illustrate the possibilities of wider applications of the argument of this thesis, Appendix 1 presents several brief analyses of ideas in fiction in novels and long-format television series.

engage readers both cognitively and affectively. It shows how, in *The Overstory*, enactment can blur into exploration to defy heuristic of readymade ideas, and how, in *Veblen*, exploration bursts out through refusing to grab any of the anchor points on offer.

Fifth, *The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum* contributes a worked example of exploration of philosophy through fiction. The learning I derived from the process – about philosophy and fiction-writing – is examined in the critical component's Chapter 5.

2. Category choice in creative writing[1]

Abstract: Would-be writers of fiction face choices as soon as they start thinking about how to get published: What sort of a work is this? Where will the book sit on the shelf? What does the publisher tell the reader about what to expect? And then, where does it sit in company of other works, and where do you sit in the company of other writers? This paper examines three such questions of category choice: plot versus character, genre versus literary, psychology versus philosophy. It asks how do writers – and audiences – make sense of a work of fiction, and with what implications for the process of writing? It suggests how writers might use the differences between them to enhance the experience of reading beyond the expectations set by the categories to which the works have been placed.

Introduction

Fiction is a form of writing with seemingly infinite variety. It can appear at any length and be translated into any language. Its inputs can be drawn from fact or imagination or a combination of the two. Its outputs can come in many different forms: text, audio, drama, film. The processes that connect inputs and outputs can be as varied as human intelligence permits, from the very simple to the extremely complex.

For the would-be writer, this infinite variety presents opportunities for the imagination to thrive. But it also creates obstacles to getting published, getting the work into the hands of readers, and then gaining critical appreciation. Take novels: In the first, literary agents need to be won over, and then publishers. Each wants to know not just what the book is, but also what else it is like. These categories help booksellers target the merchandise by specifying in which field of the database or on which shelf the work should sit. If the writer aspires to success beyond the commercial, the work must in some way address critical, theoretical concerns. These issues point to categories, and the writer faces pressure, almost from the outset, to choose the categories in which the work will fit.

To make sense of this variety, the chain of actors in publishing and criticism often depict the choices writers make, and the experiences readers encounter, in terms of dichotomies. This paper looks at three of them: plot versus character, genre[2] versus literary, philosophical versus psychological. They may be offered as antitheses, dilemmas, or scales. Such simple classification systems appeal by simplifying complexity, making manageable the unruly, and reducing the infinite variety of meanings to something the brain can comprehend. They help us make sense of the world. These categories are not exclusive, as we shall see, nor comprehensive, as we can imagine. But together they give a sense of the variety of approaches to how we make sense of this form.

This essay explores these dichotomies as they are represented in three forms of theorizing about literature: scholarly studies of fiction, popular criticism informed by publishing paradigms, and how-to guides for the would-be writer. It draws out similarities and differences between them and seeks to answer the question: How does category choice help us – writers and readers – make sense of the complexity of fiction, and at what potential risk?

We look first at the psychology of choice and how categorization creates heuristics that aid decisions, in this case what to read and therefore what to publish. We then examine the three such dichotomies – commonplace labels that lead reader decisions about what to read and their expectations about what they will find in fiction. The analysis shows that while the three levels of dichotomies have some parallels, their differences matter, as they bring us increasingly subtle distinctions and greater nuances in setting and fulfilling reader expectations. These pairs of categories and the close but imperfect parallels between them have implications for the works of writers and for how the experience of readers may differ from their expectations.

Heuristic thinking in writing and publishing

Categorizing fictional works can help readers determine where to devote their time and help publishers decide where to invest their effort. It provides such

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[2] NB: In this paper, the term "genre" is used most often as an adjective, with the narrow meaning that publishers and practitioners often deploy to describe science fiction, thrillers, detective novels, etc. It is not meant, therefore, in the more general, theoretical way that would see the romance, the lyric poem, the epic, etc., as overarching genres of literature, as in Frye (1957/2000, 95), or for forms of fictional writing like the novel, the short story, the play, as in McKeon (2000, xiv).

shortcuts for decisions by establishing heuristics, that is cognitive paths or rules of thumb for making decisions under uncertainty and overcome the indecision inherent with bounded rationality (Kahneman 2002; Simon 1990). Heuristics inform intuition in subtle ways, for good or ill, by embedding algorithmic instructions that guide choices (Kahneman and Klein 2009). In this way the formulas through which we categorize works of literature can guide writer decisions and reader expectations, and thus influence the decisions may along the chain of actors in publishing. And the process is dynamic: decisions about what to publish influence writer decisions and reader expectations.

In the terms used by psychologists Tversky and Kahneman (1974, 1124), heuristics are "highly economical and usually effective, but they lead to systematic and predictable errors." They provide three ways to make decisions when information is limited: by signalling whether an option is representative of a type; if it is easily available, because what is present is more likely to seem "right"; and what adjustments from an anchor-point, often the initial position, the phenomenon requires. Tversky and Kahneman describe the concept of the anchor as useful mainly in computational analysis – as in back-of-the-envelope calculations. However, it has a helpful analogue in literary analysis when considering how much the hallmark features of a work deviate from expectations of the form of writing to which it ostensibly belongs. In short, heuristics help us to see things as typical of a class, infusing those individual things with characteristics of the class in absence of much specific information.

In fiction, Culler argues that such categorization aids reading when its "reality is grounded in the expectations and procedures of readers." He illustrates his point with the example of a short newspaper report of a traffic accident, showing how its meaning changes radically simply by breaking the lines and labelling the text a poem. Form is content. Taxonomies are "singularly unhelpful" if used simply as descriptive artifices, he asserts, but they can tell us how to read a text and begin to interpret it. In Culler's view categorization also helps to explain reader puzzlement and discomfort when reading "disquieting works" that fall outside the established categories. Although he does not write directly in these terms, his depiction of the function of categories as norms for understanding resonates with the signaling power of heuristics (Culler 1975/2000, 52).

In psychology, heuristics may speed decisions, but they create biases (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). By leading us to expect similarities to a class,

heuristics make we see greater similarity than we might otherwise detect. For example, if we are familiar with a romance, and a work presents itself in those terms, we are half-way to a decision whether to read it. Such considerations loom large in the marketing decisions of publishers and distributors; they inform decisions of literary agents and other gatekeepers in publishing. While heuristic thinking often leads to "good enough" decisions (Kluver, Frazier, and Haidt 2014, 151), it tends to reinforce the status quo. In a form as flexible as fiction, there must be a risk that in following heuristic prescriptions, writers may stifle their own innovation and creativity.

Categories and heuristics in fiction

Despite such reservations of how categories work, merely descriptive classifications persist, each with its related biases and resulting normative pressures. Yet the distinctions implied in all three dichotomies this paper examines, and the heuristics they inform, are less than clear. Both plot and character are present is virtually every narrative, but how do we know if one is driving? The genre-literary divide is contested. And the psychology-philosophy split can be difficult to sustain when the philosophical tradition a work presents valorizes the empirical (e.g., pragmatism, utilitarianism) over the systematic. Let us look at each in turn.

Plot versus character

A first category choice a would-be writer of fiction confronts is the decision to emphasize plot or character. Writers find it in how-to guides to writing, and readers see it repeated in popular criticism. Writing in *The Guardian*, the critic John Lucas bemoaned the state of fiction when efficient plotting comes at the expense of character development (Lucas 2011). More recently, in a review of a new television adaptation of an Agatha Christie novel, the *Sunday Times* critic Camila Long highlighted the tension between plot and character as the director failed to acknowledge their conflicting imperatives: "Christie didn't do personalities; she felt any hint of psychology could distract from the plot" (Long 2020).

Websites advising would-be authors about how to create their novels or screenplays and advise a choice between characters and plot. For example, the US-based publishing services has a commentary titled "Character Driven v. Plot

Driven Writing: What's the Difference?" It states: "character-driven writing focuses on the inner conflict of the characters that you've created.… Plots that are character driven are commonly referred to as 'literary fiction' due to the fact that they feature characters that possess multiple layers that are exposed as the story develops." By contrast, plot-driven stories focus on plot twists, action, and external conflict. "In plot-driven novels, the characters are usually forced to make quick decisions and, as a result, the development of the characters takes a back seat to the rapidly evolving story" (Dorrance Publishing 2014).

An editors' blog draws the distinction from the writer's point of view: "Some writers prefer building an external world focused entirely on action. These writers enjoy strategically scattering breadcrumbs for the reader to follow. Other writers love delving into the psyche" (NY Book Editors 2017). Matthew Rettino, a self-declared "plot-driven storyteller," tells a story about his conversion to character-driven writing.

> My characters used to be subservient to the plot, rather than drive it. For the longest time, I just didn't have it in me to write a character-driven story.… My characters had to comply with my plot, come hell or high water.… Learning to write character well is crucial, especially if you have literary ambitions (Rettino 2019).

Another writer-coach, Rachel Geseil Grimm, states: "Literary fiction writers tend to avoid plot. We're trained to be plot snobs, focused only on character development and description and point-of-view" (Geisel Grimm 2016).

Another such website urges would-be authors to concentrate on the choice between "plot arcs" and "character arcs" (Kiefer 2018). Yet another says the way to build plots in character-driven fiction is to imagine the worst thing that can happen to the character and start from there (Duke 2014). Robyn DeHart, who describes herself as a "serious plotter," says that character-driven stories identify the arc – the lesson the protagonist will learn – and then plot the points needed to create that (DeHart 2007). That the character learns suggests character development, but DeHart's emphasis is on the theme of the story and its premise/hypothesis. The character may learn, but lesson (plot) does the driving.

In heuristic terms, the choice between plot and character as the focus falls in the first instance on the writer, with consequences for the techniques of expression. Driving by plot points to structure, following roadmaps drawn from prior works, and thus increasing the work's representativeness of the class. In

such works characters are led by the circumstances they encounter. By contrast, driving through character points to agency and learning.

The choice creates biases for the writer in choosing between depicting building structures or developing character, often from the outset. Reader expectations are often set in the first few pages. What these and similar accounts seem to claim is that authors need to choose which element dominates the attention of the audience, and which yields to the other in determining the story's directions into our hearts, minds, and guts. These accounts suggest a clear choice, but they also point towards a second, more disputed dichotomy, focused primarily on reader expectations: the choice between genre fiction and the literary.

Genre versus literary

Several of these practitioners draw an explicit connection between the character-driven and the literary, and implicitly between plot-driven and genre fiction. As explained above, the term "genre" is used here to embrace a variety of story types with recognizable characteristics. The word has an important other use in theory, which may confuse analysis. For the sake of clarity, let us look briefly at that usage before moving our focus to the dichotomy under examination.

According to a classic definition, a work of literature fits in a genre because it adheres to formal, external conventions (Fowler 1971). Traditional notions of genre arise from textual regularities, distinguishing in poetry between odes and sonnets (Freedman and Medway 1994). Lodge draws a link to the notion of genre fiction in this paper by distinguishing between the genres of *romance*, which aims to delight, and *allegory*, which instructs (Lodge 1969).[3] This emphasis on the rules of a type help us understand how the term genre came to be applied in a different sense.

Textual similarities, including diction, plot devices, and character archetypes also characterize works grouped together in each of the sub-forms of what in contemporary usage we call "genre fiction": e.g., thrillers, mysteries, science fiction, fantasy, and stories in which a central idea dominates. Literary fiction is often used in opposition to genre (e.g. Marcus 2003; McCracken 2005); whatever is not genre is literary. The novelist and critic John Lanchester puts it this way: "Nobody wants to define 'literary fiction' for fear of sounding stupid or philistine,

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[3] This echoes and abbreviates the concept of genre in Frye (1957/2000, 303-314)

but at the same time everybody knows what they mean by the term" (Lanchester 2000). That "everyone knows" suggests a consequence of category choice: access to market.

Agents and publishers often channel writers to adopt the genre approach because the category and its subcategories are easier to position with booksellers and readers. Wilkins states that genre authors have to "grapple with unique complexities regarding how their work is positioned in a literary community" (Wilkins 2012, 37), in ways that includes whether they are writing art or for a market, often seen as mutually exclusive. This focus on market rather than literary imperatives is reflected as well in a column in the *London Review of Books* that highlighted how blockbuster books subsidize literary fiction. "The state of publishing – in particular of the kind of fiction which is politely called 'literary', meaning not 'easy reading' as in 'easy listening', or necessarily story-led, not bestselling before it is published – is dire" (Diski 2012).

If the works we label genre novels have a different feel and approach from what is termed literary fiction, the boundary between the categories is blurred. Critics and scholars find it difficult, even churlish, to apply a genre label at the expense of deeming the work to be of literary quality. Some of the most widely read authors of "genre" fiction – e.g., the spy thrillers of John Le Carré (see the comments by Boyd 2015), murder mysteries of Ian Rankin (and comments by Massie 2015) – defy this distinction. Few would argue that Margaret Atwood's dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale* deserves the accolade of "literary" quality. But the distinction persists. The attack on the genre-literary divide works on several dimensions. For example, Hoberek explores the cross-over territory, analyzing two novels that seem to play on the controversy, using the formats and symbology of genre fiction with literary intent. He recounts how postmodernist writers have embraced elements of genre writing in saying "that postmodernism and other late-twentieth-century writing traffics in 'meta-genre fiction'" (Hoberek 2017, 64). Jameson (2017) devotes a book to the literary side of Raymond Chandler's work.

Such hesitation in embracing category distinctiveness is less evident in experimental psychology studies, however, which seem to be able to create a clear-enough separation of the two to conduct experiments on cognition. One study showed that reading the events in narrative fiction – the plot – facilitates social communication and understanding (Mar and Oatley 2008). Kidd and

Castano (2013) found that reading literary fiction improved theory or mind – the ability to impute mental states of others – more than reading either non-fiction of popular fiction.[4] In a third study, separating results for works identified as literary fiction or nonfiction, the researchers found more ambiguous results (Black and Barnes 2015).[5] In yet another experiment, those researchers found that characters in popular fiction were perceived as more predictable that those in literary fiction (Kidd and Castano 2019). Summarizing such work, the psychologist Barnes claims that literary fiction requires higher levels of "imaginative engagement" than reading popular and genre fiction (Barnes 2018, 127).

In heuristic terms, this discussion suggests parallels to those in the plot-character dichotomy, which affect the writer but seem focused more on setting reader expectations. The sub-forms of genre fiction set out with formulas that tell the reader what to expect, i.e., its representativeness. The better established a genre the more available it is to readers. These heuristics set expectations, establish audiences, and feed markets. They create a bias towards the status quo, as we see in works may stick to these conventions.

Discussions of genre fiction often highlight cases where the works diverge from the convention, however. Examples of genre fiction that cross over into the literary category pull away from established structures to create surprise and irony. Characters gain traction, exerting agency against controlling structures, and sometimes preventing the seeming inevitable. Applying the concept of the anchor-point in heuristic theory, they pull away from the anchor of genre conventions. They thus enter the zone of reader experience that blurs into the literary, with its agentic, developing characters as the basis of representativeness, and its defiance against convention providing the anchor-point in the unconventional. The greater the divergence from the heuristic anchor, the more the reader is pulled away from the biases of the heuristic into the uncertain.

As uncertainty grows, readers may lose their mooring but then find another anchor-point in the heuristics of the literary, with its requirement for greater

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[4] In a later paper, Kidd and Castano (2017) equate popular fiction with genre writing.
[5] The "literary fiction" used in this study was short stories by Don DeLillo and George Saunders. DeLillo, as we shall see, is sometimes considered a crossover genre-literary writer, while Saunders' work can defy classification along this dimension. Neither can be termed a mainstream writer of popular fiction, however.

"imaginative engagement." The literary, in the complexity it promises, gives hope of agency through its characterization, but often shapes its plots in recognizable and yet unfamiliar ways, asking readers to imagine something out of the ordinary. That complexity suggests a third distinction, widely evident in academic criticism and theorizing, the even more problematic distinction between the philosophical and the psychological.

Philosophical versus psychological

The third dichotomy is less directly discussed in practical guides or popular criticism, and in scholarly studies it comes up with a variety of labels. What is at stake is whether the force driving the writing lies in exploring the psychological development of fictional characters or in explicating a philosophic stance through fictional narrative.

The psychological dimension involves perspectives of both writer and reader. For writers, it is linked to the field chosen for the work to examine. Psychologically focused works look at interiors, inside the characters' minds and at the relationships between characters, what MacMahon (2018, 221) calls "interiority." For readers, Caracciolo (2014, 29) argues that such "internally focalized texts encourage readers to simulate characters' experiences in a first-person way." This approach, therefore, has strong resonances with literary theorizing associated with theory of mind. From the writer's perspective, the work uses textual devices to portray events and reactions as ways to allow the reader to imagine what the character is thinking. From the reader's perspective, the work allows such "mind reading" to explain one's own behavior and that of others as the product of mental states (Zunshine 2015).

Philosophically focused works, by contrast, look at contexts and abstract concepts. As such, they focus on exteriors, and in particular how ideas manifest in stories and the actions of the characters they portray. Mikkonen (2008, 130) argues that some works may be rightly called "philosophical fiction," in which the author and reader enter a "literary and philosophical pact" to engage in a cognitive exercise, that is, in thought experiments. That exercise is not limited to entertainment but may involve either "serious philosophical consideration or just playful speculation." In *Middlemarch* and *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot is said to have been one of the first women to undertake such fiction writing (Henry 2008). Perhaps a more commonly used term for such works is the novel of ideas.

In heuristic terms, this dichotomy operates from the perspectives of the writer, reader, and critic-theorist. In much of the literary criticism cited here, the distinction between the psychological and the philosophical seems quite sharply drawn: interiors versus exteriors, personality versus system, the workings of an individual mind versus principles for the organization of society. Representativeness, availability, and the anchor-point are rarely in doubt. However, works under either label point to complexity, albeit of different things. That suggests that both will demand cognitive attention. Philosophical fiction may seem to evoke dominantly cognitive responses, but it does so by engaging sympathy or antipathy with characters through affective means. In so doing, they draw readers into the interiors. Psychological fiction may help us feel the emotions of the characters, but it does so through an exploration of the working of the mind. Reader expectations are set in both for a workout. For writers that poses the question of whether these mechanisms operate by design or accident.

Parallels and divergence between the dichotomies

These three dichotomies and the associated heuristics have elements in common, and at first glance they might seem to involve three sets of labels for the same pairs of mechanisms and meanings. Yet the distinctions between them can help us better understand the range of readers responses and the options open to the writer. In this section, we examine the parallels and divergences between, on the one hand, plot-driven, genre, and philosophical fiction; and on the other, the character-driven, literary, and psychological.

The discussion above suggests parallels between the structures of plot, the mechanisms and formulas of genre, and the guiding ideas of philosophical fiction. Similarly, character-led writing shares a more humanist orientation with what we expect in literary fiction. Both work by bringing readers inside the minds of the characters and watching them develop. They become explorations of psychology. These similarities point to two meta-categories, one structural, the other agentic. As we explore here, that depiction is problematic.

These connections are drawn unevenly among the coaches, critics, and scholars who comment on these dichotomies, however. Scholarly studies may pay little attention to what the "how-to" coaches mean by the terms and almost none to the problem the dichotomy is meant to pose. Plot and character, as central elements of narrative, feature in much academic discussion of literature,

and not always in clear opposition to each other. Even in those, however, we see discussion about the degree of emphasis on one or the other. For example, Smith, in her analysis of Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, discusses the "flat characterization" in postmodern novels written against a backdrop of political ideology in which plot dominates (Smith 2018, 303). This depiction echoes the classic formulation of character in E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, which called characters "flat" when they were caricatures, or "humours" in 17th century parlance (Forster 1927).

Smith's statement suggests that postmodernist writers, with their emphasis on the interconnectedness of things and the resulting constraints on human agency, do not portray rounded characters who undergo psychological development, choosing instead to depict a philosophical stance or dilemma, which the characters navigate. The ideas they enact suggest that the focus of attention, of writers and readers, is how the philosophical system, which the character inhabit, operates.

The problems plot-driven fiction addresses are typically how to escape danger (emotion), get to the destination (cognition), or discover where blame lies (moral instinct), but such stories do not entail much change in these dimensions. These sorts of stories point towards the theorizing that a small number of ur-plots can explain much fiction (Booker 2004; Gardner 1998). Works considered to be character-driven and literary, for example, Jane Austen's novels, are those in which psychological development impels the story.

Critics who distinguish between these types of writing suggest they use narrative elements with different weights and to different effects. In genre writing, plot is often said to be the driving force; characters take on an instrumental role in bringing the audience to the resolution of the plot, but those characters undergo little psychological development. This can be seen, though with some irony, in an interview the American novelist Jonathan Franzen gave, in which he spoke disparagingly about E.M. Forster's theorizing about the novel, "as if the writer were trying to distance his work from the mechanistic plotting of genre novels" (Franzen 2012).

This discussion points us towards parallels between the plot-character dichotomy and those of genre-literary and psychological-philosophical. If, in general, plot-focused fiction flattens characters, perhaps to the point of caricature, then we might expect to see plot associated more with genre fiction

and both with philosophical fiction. Similarly, having a character focus may relate more to works deemed "literary" or "psychological."

However, when we look closer, the parallels wobble and the distinctions blur. One of the few explicit discussions of plot-driven fiction in a mainstream academic journal is this: In analyzing William Gibson's science fiction writing, Tobeck (2010, 379) comments how the author seems to test "whether character can be successfully reimagined and re-empowered without having to abandon the popular plot-driven narrative form." This suggests that Tobeck sees a trade-off between character development and maintaining a plot-centric orientation associated with science fiction. Moreover, Gibson's dystopian themes engage with major societal issues, which has led his work to be included in among those considered philosophical fiction. Here, character breaks into the dominance of plot, and genre breaks into the realm of the literary, yet the work is anchored in the philosophical.

If the parallels between the dichotomies are a little too neat, they become more problematic as we examine the subtleties that scholars see in the form of fiction. Consider the genre of detective novels, which are clearly plot-driven – crime leads to discovery of clues, leading to detection. Yes, the character of the detective matters to readers, the personal background and underlying traits and biases generate and help to sustain reader attention. But rarely does the detective undergo a change in his/her moral stance or personality through interaction with the crime. Perpetrators may exhibit many character flaws, but they are static. But it does not have to be that way. Jameson (2017, 1) writes that to Raymond Chandler, "the detective story represented something more … than a mere commercial product, furnished for popular entertainment purposes." "Commercial" and "entertainment" are watchwords for what makes a genre sell.

Some theorists (e.g. Marcus 2003) argue that detective fiction deserves an elevated status because it generates complexity through its dual demand on readers' attention – first, to the crime itself and the moral issues it raises; then, to the process of detection. Here theories of justice and ethics meet theory of mind. It is the complexity that matters, and that is similar in cognitive effect to the multiple layers of character seen in what is typically called literary fiction. In this argument, what distinguishes genre and literary in common parlance may be different from what makes a work of fiction worthy of attention literature. Detective fiction, so construed, is psychological as well as philosophical fiction. And

Jameson (2017, 86) writes, as *The Big Sleep* draws to a close, "suddenly the purely intellectual effect of Chandler's construction formula is metamorphized into a result of unmistakable aesthetic intensity." In the hands of the master, pulp is art.

Palmer discusses how plot builds from the intentional interactions of agents. "When characters undertake joint actions, their embedded narratives overlap during the extent of their joint purpose before diverging again" (Palmer 2004, 168). But having intentions does not preclude that characters develop and that intentions may change over the course of plot events. As we have seen above, the psychological dimension is often applied to a focus in fiction on exploration of a character's mind. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the academic discussion of character-driven fiction comes in studies focused on psychology and often in psychology journals.

We can also see a blurring of categories in some of the experimental research into the psychology of reading cited above. In their overview of experimental research using fiction as a prompt for social sensitivity, Mar and Oatley point to a social purpose in reading fiction. They explore how the events portrayed in narrative fiction simulate the social world, providing "a model when access cannot be direct" (Mar and Oatley 2008, 174), allowing readers a route to infer the intentions and attitudes of others. The authors contend that by simulating abstraction, simplification, and compression – processes used in neuropsychology and memory studies – narratives help us to understand people who are different from ourselves, increasing empathy and the ability to make inferences from social signals. Moreover, plot abstracts events, concentrating sequences into meaning-making series that illustrate characters' intentions and how they reach their aims. This allows readers to test their affective responses to arenas of concepts, ideals, and emotions they would not normally experience.

In this way, plot becomes a vehicle for condensing phenomena into meaningful experiences. What happens to the character on the exterior shows us what happens in the interior. This suggests plot, like character, plays a role readers' enhanced ability to see another person's perspective, often referred to in both psychology and literary studies as theory of mind (Baron-Cohen 2000; Kidd and Castano 2013; Call and Tomasello 2008; Zunshine 2012; Boyd 2009). By engaging affective and cognitive mental processes, both character and plot

can create layers of meaning that we associate with the richer experience of so-called literary fiction.

According to psychologist Barnes, "the effect of fiction on social cognition may depend on the degree to which the reader contributes imaginatively to the text and that, although drawing meaning from literary fiction may *require* high levels of imaginative engagement, popular and genre fiction may *allow* for engaging in this way. This stance is discussed with respect to the role that emotional investment in a story and its characters might play in influencing readers of popular fiction to read in a 'literary' way" (Barnes 2018, 125, emphasis in the orginal).

Genre fiction is said to have less psychological content than literary fiction. But Mar and Oatley (2008, 185), argue: "Although it may be that less emphasis is placed on character and significantly more emphasis is placed on plot for these novels, stories of this type often involve the monitoring of a multitude of characters and their motivations." The "multitude" creates complexity for readers, enriching the psychological experience even in absences of much character development.

Psychologists Rapp and Gerrig conducted experiments to determine how readers analyze narratives; they identified two distinct types, which they label plot-driven and reality-driven. The former were selected because they located "the origin of the processes and representations in readers' strategic contemplation of the possibilities of the plot" (Rapp and Gerrig, 780), for example, by developing preferences for particular outcomes. Reality-driven analysis, by contrast, is "guided by appropriately general expectations about properties of the real world, such as ordinary constraints of space, time, and human behaviour" (Rapp and Gerrig, 779). Plot-driven outcome preferences lead readers to think that their desired outcomes might have happened, despite evidence to the contrary; readers to suspend judgement of the realities and time and space.

In an earlier experimental study, Allbritton and Gerrig found that when readers' desired outcomes were disappointed, they were slower to accept the fact than those whose expectations had been fulfilled (Allbritton and Gerrig 1991). This too may suggest that absent other factors, high levels of engagement with plot create mental blind spots. Plot as well as character, and genre as well as the literary, therefore, provide avenues of psychological exploration for readers; some of that exploration will be cognitive and conscious, other parts affective and

pre- or subconscious. If layers of meaning, like depth of character and complexity of mental processes, are what create what we experience as richness in fiction, then the reasons why the dichotomies blur become more apparent. They also help us to understand better where philosophical fiction might sit in this fuzzy typology of fiction. The dichotomy between the psychological and philosophical may itself arise from attempts to identify fashions in fiction more than describing how fiction works. In positing alternative worlds – whether explicitly, as in science fiction, or the imagined extensions of fictional realism – all works of fiction involve philosophy, at one level or another. Yet there is a class of work that is more self-conscious of its philosophical underpinning, whether in moral or political philosophy, or in questioning the nature of reality or truth. It is perhaps for this reason that some critics equate philosophical fiction with the novel of ideas.[6] LeMahieu, for one, equates them, in saying that "philosophical fiction also flourishes in the contemporary period. … these novels of ideas are animated by an organizing concept or question" (LeMahieu 2015, 181).

But stories with such a central idea need not be what the publishing work counts as genre fiction, with the pejorative meaning the term has acquired. Central ideas have provided the backbone of novels like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm* (Orwell) or *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad). These works enact moral arguments about the nature of power through strong and memorable characters; those characters may even transcend plot in our memories, but they do not develop even as they ascend or descend with the plot. Through their plots – that is, the steps through which we rehearse their arguments and understand their oppositions and resolutions – such works employ characters to embrace initial stances, which then win or lose the argument, and sometimes their lives. Reading them is a largely cognitive exercise; the emotional element arises when the idea-embodied-in-character is confronted by logic but also by moral instinct. One example of the problem in their storytelling technique is cited by LeMahieu:

> No matter how movingly, brilliantly, or convincingly achieved –
> those alpine exchanges between Naphta and Settembrini in
> Mann's The Magic Mountain (1924), for example – such devices

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[6] This position is adopted in Wikipedia, where "novel of ideas" redirects to "philosophical fiction."

always risk appearing crude, forced, contrived. They tell more than they show (LeMahieu 2015, 179).

These examples, from literary theory and explorations into the psychology of reading, suggest that we should treat parallels between plot, genre and the philosophical, and between character, the literary and the psychological with caution. The heuristics which each generates have some elements in common, but also important differences. Their distinctions, and the resulting biases for writer and reader, warrant greater attention.

Implications for creative writers and writing

Categories and their labels set expectations. The heuristics they generate guide purchase decisions and decisions whether to publish, and if so with what effort. The formulaic, even algorithmic implications of this approach fly in the face of the infinite variety of opportunities possible for prose on the page, let alone the sequences in other media. Having three different pairs of possibility, in which the heuristics of half of each pair can seem similar risk creating a strong bias that could narrow the practical possibilities of the form. Agents, publishers, and booksellers all know what sells, and would like more of it. But what sells and endures is not the similarities but the differences.

In terms of heuristics, the representativeness of a work to its class creates recognition and sets expectations. Representativeness opens the possibility of easy recognition and with it, perhaps, easy reading. The more familiar the devices of plot and character, the more available a work can seem. The biases associated with these heuristics bend decisions towards the status quo when the work is known only by its labels. Insofar as the three dichotomies are viewed as parallel, the stronger the association with the familiar.

This paper points towards a view that writers, and readers, can break out of this cycle of sameness, and foster the "imaginative engagement" of readers (Barnes 2018), by considering the implications of heuristics, and in particular of anchor-points. First, the unfolding of a story over time means that a work may look like genre fiction and then stray from its conventions as it unveils its concern with theory of mind develops ambiguities as the narrative progresses. Echoing LeMahieu in the obverse, narrative devices that show more than they tell open possibilities for differing experiences of the events, and with them different

interpretations of their meaning. Second, the earlier the break from the anchor, the sooner the reader is oriented to look for the less obvious. What is available early in a text but less representative shifts the anchor-point and allows readers to grow accustomed to the less- and unconventional. Doing so may also shift the writer's anchor-point, permitting greater experimentation within the conventions. Third, and from a critic's perspective, these approaches may help us explain how works differ, not just in how the mechanisms operate, but also in the way they change the experience of reading and meanings we derive from it.

What's missing

This analysis is based on a partial taxonomy of fiction, three dichotomies rather than all the categories, labels, and heuristics associated with them. In a sense the category of "literary," with its distinct lack of definition (NB: quote above from Lanchester 2000) warrants further examination than this paper has attempted. So-called "literary" fiction includes works that defy the conventions even when sometimes associated with a category (e.g., *Tristram Shandy* as novel of ideas) or categorization at all (e.g., *Finnegan's Wake*). Less conventional genres like magical realism, or labels like postmodern without clear categories, include works that have generated commercial appeal while escaping denigration as "popular entertainment." Critics sometime refer to such works as "experimental" (e.g., Alberts 2007; Marcus 2005) when they cannot find a more meaningful label. Understanding how such writing works, and why some texts appeal to readers while others do not, may yield insights that can help writers, readers, and the various parts of the publishing industry spot hidden gems.

Conclusions

This paper has depicted three dichotomies that writers and readers face, enforced in part by the imperatives of publishing, but also by a human desire to categorize as a way of making sense of the world. Doing so involves heuristics, decision rules that help us create categories through the representativeness of a member to the class, its availability, and the distance its object is from the anchor-point.

The paper also illustrates the parallels between the three dichotomies, and how they provide an over-simplified correspondence, on the one hand, of plot-driven fiction, genre writing, and the novel of ideas; and, on the other, of the

character-led and the literary with the psychological. The former set is based on an underlying assumption that structure matters more than agency, the latter on the reverse. But in simplifying, these categories also ignore the complexity and richness that fiction affords. Because the associated heuristics have biases, by closely following the conventions of one set of categories or the other the writer risks missing out the possibilities of experimentation and exploration and of engaging the imagination of readers.

In an interview, the novelist Dana Spiotta circled around all three dichotomies. She rued the distinction often made between literary fiction, where people "write about emotional things in which the movement is character driven" and others who "write systems novels, or novels of ideas." She adds, however, that "no good novels are divisible in that way" (Johnson 2006). Making such a "false division" of literary fiction involves ignoring the many "authentic, moving characters" in systems novels, and overlooking the "deep structural ideas" in character-based fiction.

Divisions help us see differences, but they can mask similarities. Similarities can disguise the sources of distinctiveness. One of the questions left unanswered in this is how fiction works when the ideas are present but uncertain, when plot is an open route, not a predestined path, and when a text starts as representative of a class but then diverges from it. An undercurrent of this analysis is that violating category distinctions is good for us, as writers, readers, and critics. Deviating from anchor-points brings novelty to novels, telling the reader that what follows is not predictable. Imaginative engagement of readers involves more than linguistic devices that create irony or signal difference.

3. Enactment or exploration: Two roles for philosophy in the novel of ideas[1]

Abstract. I examine the often-denigrated concept of the novel of ideas from its inception and critical decline to its relatively recent revival. Using a variant of the exploitation-exploration dilemma in psychology, I suggest that early usage referred to works that exploit philosophical principles—or better, enact them—by setting philosophical positions in conflict. By contrast, use of the concept for more recent works sees characters and plots exploring philosophical stances. The shift corresponds with the greater attention paid to complexity and ambiguity that are hallmarks of continental philosophy and neopragmatism, and with it greater need to explore philosophical stances through fiction.

I

The novel of ideas is a concept whose time has come, again. Critics have embraced the term in recent years to categorize a widening range of novels. Many bear little resemblance to the social consciousness–raising ones of the nineteenth century that were so labeled when the term "novel of ideas" first came into vogue, applied to works by authors including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, and Emile Zola. They also seem different from those of the middle years of the twentieth century, depicting the supposed horrors of one political movement or another (such as works by Yevgeni Zamyatin, George Orwell, and Ayn Rand). The label has been further applied to works based on perceived social disruption from science or technology development (Mary Shelley, H. G. Wells, and Robert Heinlein).

This revival of interest comes as writers of a different philosophical persuasion began to attract critical attention applying that banner. The themes of science and uncertainty in the works of Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis, sometimes called "systems novels," have been labeled as being "of ideas," as well as some works considered "postmodern" (e.g., Doyle 2018; Hoberek 2007).

That this category – "novel of ideas" – is in vogue is evident from fresh critical discussion of its shortcomings as much as its merits. Positive echoes can be

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found in studies concerning the overlap between the essay and novels (de Obaldia 1995; Ercolino 2014), and between such novels and drama (Puchner 2010). Not all the attention is supportive, however. While defending the category, Michael LeMahieu notes that it is "consistently subject to denigration" (LeMahieu 2015, 177). A recent example is Sianne Ngai's critical account of a limit range of techniques used in works that fall under that label, mechanisms that limit characterization (Ngai 2020b).[2] Timothy Bewes challenges the "intellectual honesty" of works written in this tradition (Bewes 2000).

My article extends these critiques but steps back from their normative stance. Instead, I analyze the concept using a lens drawn from psychology and cognition studies: the distinction between *exploration* and *exploitation* and the dilemma it presents. I argue that critics use the term "novel of ideas" in different ways. Initially it referred to works in which characters embody philosophical positions; they then engage through the devices of plot and narrative in a contest of those stances with others. These authors, and the characters they create, exploit settled philosophical positions or, more precisely, enact a philosophical debate.

By contrast, I argue that a different understanding applies in the recent revival of the term, as applied to works belonging to traditions including existentialism, phenomenology, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. It can apply as well to works conceived in neopragmatist ontologies, which seek to overcome the relativism of the other approaches while also avoiding reliance on the foundationalism and idealism that characterized fictional works in earlier uses of the term "novel of ideas." These philosophies are messier, dealing with complexity, historical contingency, ambiguity, randomness, and the anxieties that arise from them. Such works use plot and narrative not to enact competing philosophies in combat but rather to explore what these approaches mean to the characters standing in for real people as they seek to draw sense from confusion.

First, I outline the dilemma of exploration and exploitation and suggest how it might be translated into the field of fiction. Next, I examine the definitions of "novel of ideas," its origins, and the uses to which it has been put. I then consider the controversy the term has provoked and how the novel of ideas has been revived, before analyzing it via the dilemma of exploitation and exploration. Through examination of literary criticism of works called novels of ideas, I argue that the

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[2] A web post excerpts her discussion of the novel of ideas (Ngai 2020a).

resurrection of the term has something to do with the increasingly complex environment for ideas, that is, philosophical approaches that seek to cope with complexity and uncertainty through exploration, rather than staging a confrontation of fixed ideas, which is exploited by the writer to test ideas by enacting them in the work.

II

In a sense, all fiction – all writing – concerns ideas. LeMahieu says the legendary critic and novelist Mary McCarthy saw the term "novel of ideas" not as contradictory so much as tautological, particularly among nineteenth-century writers like Herman Melville, George Eliot, Honoré de Balzac, or Fyodor Dostoevsky. During that time, "novels and ideas were . . . cut from the same cloth" (LeMahieu 2015, 177).[3] However, Iris Murdoch, a philosopher who became a novelist of repute, saw a fundamental difference between the disciplines and argued they should be kept apart. While philosophy seeks to clarify, she said, "literature is very often mystification" (Murdoch 1998).

Nonetheless, Anthony Quinton has drawn a distinction between ways that philosophy and fiction interact. He speaks of "philosophy in fiction," where the ideas are expressed indirectly and the content is latent, and "philosophy through fiction," where imaginative literary works communicate philosophical conceptions that are already fully worked out. Jukka Mikkonen sees this as meaning that "literary works are subordinated to the function and purpose of philosophical argument." Gilbert Plumer sees similarities between these concepts and his two forms of narrative argument, one in which the argument is offered overtly and the other, where the narrative as a whole expresses the argument.[4] Both these formulations describe philosophy that is well developed, and the ideas are clear, if disputed. Quinton's "philosophy in literature" and Plumer's overt philosophy seem to involve writing that presents what Noël Carroll refers to as popular

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[3] LeMahieu cites the book drawn from McCarthy's lectures at University College London. The first and fourth of these lectures were also published in the *London Review of Books* (McCarthy 1980b, 1980a)

[4] Anthony Quinton's model is articulated in "The Divergence of the Twain: Poet's Philosophy and Philosopher's Philosophy," a 1985 lecture given at the University of Warwick. It is cited and explicated in the introduction to Jukka Mikkonen, *The Cognitive Value of Philosophical Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). Plumer says this view "roughly corresponds" to his (Plumer 2017, 150).

philosophy—"philosophy for the masses." But it begs the question of how a work of fiction might facilitate what Carroll calls "doing philosophy," (Carroll 2013, 170, 179),[5] that is, supporting a theme with an argument, and not just for the masses. To that end, I here develop a different distinction, contrasting works in which the ideas are well developed with those where the ideas themselves are complex, far from settled, and often unsettling.

In real life, we are bombarded with ideas; they demand our attention and command our ability to choose. Among the choices are whether to use an idea already to hand or search instead for something different and perhaps better. In epistemology, the choice is between specialization and innovation (De Langhe 2014). For economists, the question is classically one of efficiency, that is, the allocation of effort (Radner and Rothschild 1975). The dilemma drives organizational decision-making, where situational messiness meets the bounded rationality of human behavior, defying simple economic considerations, including decisions about whether to engage in research and development (March 1991). This dilemma also plays out in group dynamics: When individuals selfishly exploit knowledge discovered by the exploration of other group members, the term "exploitation" can take on a sinister meaning (Toyokawa, Kim, and Kameda 2014).

We decide whether to explore (that is, gather information and fresh ideas) or exploit (use known information and ideas for benefit). We may choose based on personality factors and personal needs, or on whether we are anxious or confident about the future. Utilizing exploration and exploitation at the same time strains the attention of individuals and groups, who then never quite specialize and never quite innovate. That creates the "conflicting choice of opting either for a rewarding familiar option (i.e., exploitation) or for a novel, uncertain option that may, however, yield a better reward in the near future (i.e., exploration)" (Dezza, Cleeremans, and Alexander 2019, 977). In limited circumstances, the dilemma can be resolved, as evidenced by brain scans taken during experiments; these insights are increasingly built into the designs of artificial intelligence systems (Cohen, McClure, and Yu 2007; Gershman 2018). While a recent study offers evidence that selective attention to ready-made ideas—a term I examine further

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[5] See also Vidmar Jovanović (2021).

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below—may help individuals overcome this dilemma (Hallquist and Dombrovski 2019), in many settings, attention is the scarce resource. One needs to choose.

Translated to the realm of fiction, those seeking to engage with ideas seem to face a similar choice. Does a writer exploit well-articulated systems of ideas, finding drama by enacting how the ideas conflict and so clarifying the choice between them? Or does a reader—or indeed a writer—turn to stories to explore and perhaps clarify the messiness of the situation, that is, to look for the philosophical significance of the imagined experience? With this distinction in mind, let's consider the idea of the novel of ideas, historically and critically.

The concept of a novel of ideas is confusingly vague. According to LeMahieu, the concept emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "out of and against a modernist aesthetic ideology, *l'art pour l'art*, which in its most radical form excludes the possibility of a novel of ideas" (LeMahieu 2015, 178). Adherents to modernism set aesthetic value as a final good, dismissing as unworthy the instrumental campaigning of some nineteenth-century novels, including those of Eliot and Dickens, and the didactic character of many French novels of the same period, as well as the works of the Russians Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and much of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's fiction.

The novel of ideas is often set in contrast to the work of Henry James, a novelist whom T. S. Eliot is said to have described in these terms: "He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." McCarthy famously chastised Eliot for that remark; it presented a "snubbing notion, radical at the time but by now canon doctrine, of the novel as a fine art and of the novelist as an intelligence superior to mere intellect" (McCarthy 1980b). Alan Holder, however, sees the matter rather differently, and in a way that is relevant to the analysis presented in this paper.[6] He takes the quote from Eliot to mean "that the novelist's mind did not permit any *a priori* formulations about experience to blind it to experience itself" (Holder 1964, 494).

Among the mid-twentieth-century writers who have attracted the label "of ideas" were those on both sides of the great political-philosophic contests:

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[6] Holder seems to suggest that James was expressing a non- or even anti-foundationalist view of the variety that was current among the developing American pragmatist school of philosophy. Henry James's brother was the pragmatist philosopher William James, whose writing gave the movement its name. See James (1907/1955). Valuing experience over a priori reasoning, he influenced Dewey's epistemology and aesthetic theory (Dewey 1929, 1934/1958)..

Fascism versus democracy, Marxism versus capitalism, collectivism versus individualism – Arthur Koestler, Aldous Huxley, Orwell, William Golding, Rand. Another type of work concerned with ideas focuses on the threat posed by technology and modern life to individual identity: books by Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, and Robert Musil. In more recent times, however, the term novel of ideas has been applied to a wide range of work by writers including Pynchon, Gaddis, Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo, J. M. Coetzee, David Foster Wallace, Ian McEwan, and others. Their work is less easy to classify, as I shall demonstrate. The next step in the process is to examine how critics define and use the term novel of ideas.

As a tool for description or analysis, the term has a somewhat checkered critical reputation. In 1955, Frederick Hoffman defined the concept starting with the negative: "not the novel which incidentally illustrates ideas but the novel which uses them in default of characterization and other qualities of the traditional narratives" (Hoffman 1946, 129). In the 1999 edition of their dictionary of literary terms, J. A. Cuddon and C. E. Preston adopt a dismissive tone in trying to define it:

> **novel of ideas** A vague category of fiction in which conversation, intellectual discussion and debate predominate, and in which plot, narrative, emotional conflict and psychological depth in characterization are deliberately limited. Such a form of novel is perhaps best exemplified by Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow* (1921), *Point Counter Point* (1928) and *After Many a Summer* (1939) (Cuddon and Preston 1999, 602).

Huxley's own account comes in the voice of his protagonist, the writer Quarles, in the novel *Point Counter Point*:

> Novel of ideas. The character of each personage must be implied, as far as possible, in the ideas of which he is the mouthpiece. In so far as theories are rationalizations of sentiments, instincts, dispositions of soul, this is feasible. The chief defect of the novel of ideas is that you must write about people who have ideas (Huxley 1947, 409).

Quarles then complains of how few such people exist, snobbishly illustrating the superiority of such authors to mere mortal novelists.[7]

Rather than choose explicit imprecision, the mathematician and philosopher John Lane Bell employs a broad brush. His manuscript, subtitled "A Survey of the Novel of Ideas," uses as its criterion for selection those in which "philosophical, social, ethical, or scientific ideas play a significant role." That approach embraces a wide range of works in a variety of languages, and two special cases of subject matter (politics and science fiction). He also explicitly equates "novels of ideas" with "philosophical novels" (Bell 2020, 6). His classification, however, contains many gray areas.

Given the range of themes and the variety of approaches such works present, those searching for a definition might indeed settle for calling it "a vague category." Notwithstanding laments in popular criticism about a qualitative decline in the category, or its denigration in literary prize-giving, the novel of ideas is an idea and refuses to die. If so, perhaps we need better ideas about the novel of ideas (Mishra and Moser 2015; Morton 2007).

Two such attempts have been made, by Bewes and Ngai, both notable for their dismissal of the value in and their moral rejection of a large component of works in this messy category. Bewes asserts a normative typology of idea-focused writing that splits the novels of ideas from those he terms "philosophical fiction." He denounces the former as manipulative and dishonest. To qualify as philosophical, however, Bewes states that a work must pass two tests. First, it must explore ideas in a way marked by "the absence of authorial *predetermination* or ulterior motives" (Bewes 2000, 428). Second, it must show "existence of a point of resistance to the values of the objective world." The latter point identifies the novel of ideas as "a work for the market"; to be called "philosophical" a "text should not appeal primarily to the market." There are thus "two forms of literary dishonesty: the thesis-led *manipulation* and the market-led *gratification* of the reader" (2000, 424). Failing either test makes a work philosophically dishonest.[8] He acknowledges that some readers will find this argument "excessively crude" and declares his assessment "provisional" (2000,

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[7] Like other writers of philosophical fiction, Quarles is quarrelsome.

[8] This view has drawn support, but it is far from widely accepted. For example, Cunningham writes that despite the protestations of Bewes, "Today the term [philosophical novel] is often used interchangeably with the more recent concept of the 'novel of ideas'" (Cunningham 2011, 606).

422). But he then makes normative assertions (a philosophical novel "should be a *meditation*"; "the author and the reader should be in quest of a *common* objective"), which color the rest of his argument (2000, 428). I will return to these points later, in examining more recent fictional works.

A second critique comes in the long "Readymade Ideas" chapter of Ngai's book *Theory of the Gimmick*. She describes the concept of the novel of ideas as a response to the industrial revolution. Works of ideas-led fiction arose as scientific advances and new technologies raised questions about established ontologies. Ngai writes that discussion of it, and even the form itself, arose "by most accounts" in the late 1800s. It represented a challenge to the form by integrating externally developed concepts, anticipating the direction taken in conceptual art. The presentation of ideas, she says, "seems to have pushed a genre [i.e., the novel itself] famous for its versatility toward a surprisingly limited repertoire of techniques" (Ngai 2017, 109). In doing so, it works against expectations of the form: the didactic replaces nondidactic representation; static or simple settings replace complex physical and temporal relations between events and their representation; characterization is simplistic, and character development limited. They rely, in Ngai's argument, on gimmicks, and gimmicks are the ultimate tricks of the capitalist trade, which finds its ultimate form in the use of magic.

Both critiques highlight a reduction of complexity in works they think of as novels of ideas. The range of narrative devices is narrower. Time can play a lesser role in two ways; novels of ideas show time as either linear or suspended. Beyond that, characters embody and enact propositions. Problems are examined, even forensically. Monologues replace dialogue. LeMahieu makes the argument this way: Because they require spokesmen, novels of ideas "struggle not to subordinate plot and character to dialogue and commentary; they struggle, that is to say, not to tell more than they show" (LeMahieu 2019, 62).

These analyses, therefore, challenge and even condemn the category epistemologically. These weaknesses, if we chose to judge them so (as Bewes and Ngai do), appear in some of the works they analyze, but it is less clear that they are defining characteristics. The differences between works in this supposed category are perhaps as great as the similarities. Moreover, like the genre of the novel itself, might the works labeled "novels of ideas" demonstrate the same sort

of "versatility" that Ngai ascribes to the genre as a whole? Has the novel of ideas undergone a category creep?

Both these critiques have roots in a reified conception of fiction and the novel. Each presents the novel of ideas as if the novel were a preexisting Platonic form, against which another form – "of ideas" – is assessed and found wanting. In a sense, they echo the modernist attack on much nineteenth-century fiction. For the category to make sense at all, the novel of ideas and its synonym (or perhaps close sibling), philosophical fiction,[9] ought to involve works that exhibit strong ties to issues debated in philosophy. But what if we examine instead the works in question and assess their similarities and differences, and build categories from the bottom up? In keeping with the infinitely flexible form of the novel, what emerges is not a simple dichotomy between novels of ideas operating as a system under exterior, philosophic direction, as opposed to ones that exhibit a psychologically led focus on interiors in works that fall outside this category.[10] Nor do we see a linear development over time. In the next sections I will consider how critics recount the mechanisms of the works they see as novels of ideas, looking first at Eliot, with special attention to *Middlemarch*, then Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four*, and then – through some loops and diversions – to glance at the fictional side of science before moving into more contemporary works.

III

Eliot has attracted attention from popular critics and literary scholars as a writer of fiction with philosophical intent. George Levine finds ontological and epistemological concerns in her life and fiction. He reminds us of Eliot's efforts to complete the G. H. Lewes's treatise *Problems of Life and Mind* and her extensive interaction with scientists, and argues that her novel *Daniel Deronda* can be seen, like Lewes's *Problems*, as an attempt to reconcile religion and science (Levine 1980). But Gillian Beer, who clearly identifies Eliot's fictions as novels of ideas, nonetheless argues that she stands out among novelists of ideas, with characters that are more than mouthpieces, and prose that is aware of ironies: "Abstract

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[9] In Wikipedia, the search term "novel of ideas" diverts directly to "philosophical fiction."
[10] For a further discussion of category dichotomies, see my article presented here as Chapter 2 (Nordberg 2021).

systems and intimate feelings are not kept in separate boxes in her writing" (Beer 1994).[11]

Yet novels of ideas they are. Often seen as describing the emergence of liberalism against hierarchy, Eliot's novels depict the conflict of tradition and individualism. Neal Carroll has argued that her novels—and particularly the earlier ones, *Adam Bede* and *Mill on the Floss*—have a different basis: "Irrational or illiberal types of decision-making in Eliot's novels intervene as if by providence and tend to be formally manifest in the trappings of delegitimized generic types opposed to realism, such as romance" (Carroll 2019, 378). But this interpretation still makes her a writer interested in illustrating the ethical tension emerging in Victorian England's political and social life.

Indeed, Claire Carlisle asserts that Eliot deserves a place as one of Britain's leading philosophers. Among her many projects, Eliot had translated Spinoza's ethics treatise from German to English. Miriam Henson argues that Eliot's writing is, in effect, a translation of Spinoza's ethics into fiction. By contrast, Brian Fay considers *Middlemarch* to be a kind of philosophical dialogue between Eliot and Spinoza, in which the latter's abstractionism is illustrated as lacking and thus undercutting the rightful role of sympathy in human affairs (Carlisle 2020; Henson 2009; Fay 2017). Fay's more nuanced reading of *Middlemarch* details character development in Dorothea and the failure of Casaubon to recognize the human capacity for sympathy. Yet this opposition shows Eliot enacting Spinoza's abstraction against David Hume's priority for passions as a motivator. Whether her novels – and *Middlemarch* in particular – illustrate a philosophy or set various philosophies in contrast, they use plots and characters to enact these stances.

More recently, Maxwell Sater has made the case for an even more subtle reading of the role of philosophy in Eliot's fiction, seeing her as developing an "anti-dogmatic skepticism," a claim that goes "against the grain of Eliot criticism" (Sater 2020, 272). He draws upon a letter she wrote to a reader, Frederick Harrison, who had urged her to expound the positivism of Auguste Comte more directly in her next novel. Although sympathetic to Comte, Sater says, Eliot pushed back: aesthetics is the "highest of all teachings" because it deals with the "highest complexity"; when the aesthetic "lapses" from providing a picture to

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[11] The available electronic version of the book does not offer page numbers.

giving a diagram, "it becomes the most offensive of all teaching" (Sater 2020, 269).

Eliot goes on to remark on the "unspeakable pains" she took in writing *Romola* to achieve idealization, leading her to set the novel in the past (Eliot 2005, 248-249).[12] The implication is that this distance permitted her to escape the complexity of reality. This too points to what I have called enactment: Eliot recognizes and values the complexities, though she distances herself from them to make her ideas come clear. Extending Sater's argument, Eliot's skepticism keeps her from committing to a single stance; settled philosophical ideas contest through her aesthetics for our and her attention.

IV

In Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four* we see a different novel of ideas entirely, though one that shares with Eliot the practice of enacting philosophies in conflict. John Rodden asserts that arguments in the novels of Henry Fielding, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy may succeed because of the richness, the lifelike quality of their narratives. But he says richness is not necessary for persuasion. He sees *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an "argument against political tyranny and totalitarianism," which succeeds despite its heavy plotting and without rich narrative or rounded characters because of the close interactions of its themes and the concerns of readers (Rodden 2008, 156). Heavy plots and flat characterizations are among the distinguishing—and for many critics, the damnable—features of novels of ideas.

Bell comments on how the novel's satire has roots in its parody of the discourse of paradox and ambiguity employed by the state. He notes that "Newspeak," the language of the novel, includes words like "doublethink," which involves holding contradictory thoughts while believing both (Bell 2020, 20). While the truth might be clear to Orwell and to the many readers he managed to persuade, truth in many fields was becoming increasingly difficult to pin down (Dwan 2010; Blackburn 2005; Wittgenstein 1969). The undercurrent of skepticism that Sater sees in Eliot was becoming mainstream. We might have to settle for belief.

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[12] She penned the letter as M. E. Lewes, assuming the surname of her companion, the philosopher and critic G. H. Lewes.

Plumer discusses how narratives are often discussed as "invitations to imagine." But he contends that fiction that presents arguments shared with scientific, historical, and journalistic accounts of the status of being "invitations to believe." The test comes less from a realistic portrayal of life, with its emotional pulls, than from cognitive engagement with the argument: not just is it believable but is it believable under certain rules of the real world? And if so, then those rules must apply to the real world. Being believable is the starting point (Plumer 2017, 152).

We might be uncomfortable when he suggests that the believability of a story leads us to believe that the story presents a law of nature, which makes the story's argument transcendent. But we believe what we read about the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, despite the novel's lack of realistic anchors in the world Orwell knew in 1948. That must be because the narrow argument persuades us that the work's broader argumentation for that fictional world corresponds with our experience. Orwell's enactment of the tension between individualism and the collective, and of the path to totalitarianism alerts us to the dangers of the exercise of power in an ambiguous world, not to the dangers of ambiguity itself. Not long after the publication of the novel, this vice would come to be a hallmark of much postwar philosophizing, under the influence not least of the philosophy of science, where renewed emphasis on exploration seemed in order, as I consider next.

V

To open another direction in novels of ideas, let's look backwards for a moment, drawing on Matthew Beaumont's analysis of late-nineteenth-century utopian fiction, while keeping the enactment-exploration dilemma in mind. Beaumont examines the critique of capitalist ideologies in the novel *Looking Backward*, by Edward Bellamy, and the critique of Bellamy's version of socialism in William Morris's novel *News from Nowhere*, as well as Edwin Abbott's anonymously published *Flatland*. Utopian fiction, Beaumont writes, is "committed almost by definition to looking outside, or questioning at least, the current social formation" and "secretly aspires to repair the damaged relations between writer and readers under capitalism." While both Bellamy and Morris articulate well-defined alternatives, *Flatland* takes us to an imagined universe in which equality at first seems manifest in a two-dimensional world, and yet a social structure emerges based on the angles of each flat-shaped person (Beaumont 2007, 176,

173). This account points us toward the view of *Flatland* as more exploratory than enacting, though still grounded in opposition to the emerging social structure of nineteenth-century industrialization. While directing us into an uncomfortable and unfamiliar world, *Flatland*, like *News from Nowhere*, enacts through imagination competing against ideas of social and political order.

As Beaumont recounts, *Flatland* is also an early example of a novel inspired by developments in science of the period, perhaps the most profound of which was Darwin's theory of natural selection. With its challenge to conventional religion, evolutionary thinking undermined established ideas of a hierarchical cosmic order. Evolution sets both established idealist thought and Utopian-Romantic focus on a transcendent ontology against emerging philosophical uncertainties. Philosophically, these scientific advances destabilized idealism, underpinned skepticism, fueled greater attention to empiricism, and ignited nonfoundational approaches of the type we see in American pragmatism. In Europe, the challenges to conventional religious ontologies gave rise to the early existentialist writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, then Martin Heidegger and what in the twentieth century came to be called "continental" philosophy.

Coupled with Albert Einstein's focus on relativity and Sigmund Freud's on the unconscious, fiction writers found much to think about in their works, including relativism. Then came Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle; Kuhn's depictions of scientific revolutions as social constructions; the counterintuitive findings of quantum, superstring, and chaos theories. Apparently we had lost the anchor-points for the heuristics of philosophical thought – that is, the verities – that had previously seemed to order the universe.

These developments in natural science unsettled more than the physical sciences. Moral perspectives, in the face not just of the horrors of Nazi Germany but also the prospects of nuclear Armageddon, left many seeking absolutes and finding only relativism. The ideas worked their way into artistic and literary life as well. If we fast-forward, we can begin to glimpse the path separating into two strands: one where believability in imagined settings depends on what Plumer calls transcendent arguments; and another, more overgrown and difficult to navigate, which demands exploration of both ideas and settings that lack the anchor of the transcendent. But permit me one more loop before I continue.

VI

If the novel of ideas originally referred to the explication of concepts through narrative enactment, the term has also been applied, belatedly, to a baffling masterpiece from the heart of the Enlightenment. Sometimes called a "postmodern" novel ahead of its time (Bond 2004), Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*[13] offers a chaotic would-be autobiography in which the subject depicts the moment of his own conception and barely manages to get past the first day of the self-described gentleman's life. Brian Shaffer draws similarities with Salman Rushdie's prose (Shaffer 2005), while Ngai sees Sterne anticipating the forms of Musil and Coetzee (Ngai 2020b, 110). The work challenged the nascent norms-in-becoming of the English novel, frequently turning time on its head, conducting defamiliarization through temporal disorientation and misordering of chapter numbers to confound (and delight) the reader,[14] and defying all correspondence of the narrative to reality.

Tristram Shandy's is a life without firm anchor points, a life not so much socially constructed as self-concocted, a life of seemingly random events leaving a door wide open for interpretation or revulsion. One might be tempted to see Shandy, or even Sterne, as a relativist, if one could find in the novel any sort of relation between anything and anything else. Judith Hawley declares the narrator Shandy to be a philosopher, in part through his long digressions to satirize the ideas of the real-life John Locke, and in part through his musings about the philosophy of noses ("no more likely to have been a branch of academic study then as now," Hawley adds, with Sterne-like sarcasm) (Hawley 2017, 243). It is hard to see in this work the presentation of a fixed philosophical stance, except perhaps in the way it undermines and mocks contemporary thinking. Instead, Sterne, through Shandy, is exploring the nature of reality as viewed through the lens of rationality, only to find the lens itself very blurred. In so doing one might be tempted to say he is inventing a language for the antirationalism, nonfoundationalism of philosophers that followed.

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[13] For a link between Sterne, postmodernism, and the Russian Formalists, see Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (2005).

[14] The philosopher David Hume was a fan when few of his contemporaries were (Hume 1776/1888, 255). For the technique of defamiliarization, see Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* (1990).

At the onset of the Enlightenment and its concern for rationality, *Tristram Shandy* raises questions about what is real or ironic, and what is just made up, magical, and yet might still on some level be true. Fiction of some three hundred years later returned to these themes in two different ways. The first are discussions of the technology-led "systems novels" of writers like Gaddis and Pynchon, and the second those of the new novels of ideas from more realistic writers like McEwan and Coetzee.

Tom LeClair uses the term "systems novels" to describe Pynchon, John Barth, Gaddis, Robert Coover, and DeLillo, American writers now often seen as postmodernists. They describe living systems as dynamic and self-correcting processes, with organized complexity, which nonetheless defy "mechanistic study." Systems thinking, he writes, provides for them "a source of ideas and language." Anchoring the language in this emergent but still alien background illustrates the interconnectedness inherent in systems theory. It allows readers to explore how systems thinking describes the complexity of human life in a more tangible way than the physical and social sciences accounts afford. In discussing Pynchon, Katie Muth argues that, if anything, LeClair has underplayed the extent to which systems thinking underpins such novels. She draws upon Pynchon's prior career in missile development at Boeing Company to show how his concerns for technical writing and programming create the vocabulary and grammar of *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, with implications for readers' experience of the ideas behind the stories they relate (LeClair 1987; Muth 2019).

In a rather different way, McEwan's novels are also viewed as being "of ideas." As with the nineteenth-century examples I have presented, McEwan writes of worlds we recognize. But then critical opinion divides. His novels, LeMahieu writes, present "very old questions and debates: faith versus reason, religion versus science, logic versus emotion" (LeMahieu 2015, 182). Judith Seaboyer agrees, but sees McEwan as using this "contemporary realism" as a medium to explore these issues through analogy and speculative fiction (Seaboyer 2005). According to Daniel Zalewski, McEwan believes that something emotionally stirring should happen in novels: "Though he is animated by ideas, he would never plop two characters on a sofa and have them expound rival philosophies" (Zalewski 2009). Elizabeth Weston describes McEwan's *Atonement* as a novel that traces the twentieth century's swing from "modernist amorality to postmodern relativism" (Weston 2019, 92).

Viewed against conventional morality, that swing brings readers into an exploration of the troublesome issues about how to choose when anchor points are missing or obscured. It walks us with the characters through the issues at stake without resorting to the philosophizing apparent in works that more obviously enact debates. LeMahieu puts it this way: "At times, his novels of ideas enact what they denote—form follows content; at other times, their performative function diverges from their constative meaning, but, either way, they consistently explore and demonstrate unexpected capabilities of the genre. In his novels, ideas animate but never overwhelm aesthetics" (LeMahieu 2019, 61).

Coetzee's novels provide another example of how the novel of ideas has morphed in the face of philosophical uncertainties, represented less by characters than by the paradoxes their activities reveal. Puchner observes that in *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Elizabeth Costello,* Coetzee has written works that "barely contain the ideas" presented by their protagonists, while in *The Life and Times of Michael K.*, the character is barely able to speak. In Puchner's eyes, in these and Coetzee's other works, "ideas are sometimes presented as ready-made, but they are also embodied, placed in dramatic scenes and feeling characters who tend to lose control over them" (Puchner 2011, 1, 12). That is, being ready-made does not guarantee the ideas hold together. In her chapter on ready-made ideas, Ngai notes that after the first of the "lectures" the character Elizabeth Costello gives, the "self-cancelling" narrator says that realism "has never been comfortable with ideas" and that characters must in some sense embody ideas, even as the narrative creates uncertainty as to whether any of them is worthy of embodiment. This notion therefore might not be one of the "gimmicks" that Ngai wants to identify with the novel of ideas. The book contains a sense of irony about each of Costello's pronouncements. If we are sure of one thing, it is that Costello's certainties stand on shaky ground. We explore that ground through the narration, never sure of much except that the debate between realism and idealism is far from over.

VII

What are we to make of this stretch of the category "novel of ideas" to such a range and diversity of works? By using the dilemma of exploitation and exploration from psychology as a lens to look at literary criticism and theorizing, this article has illustrated the presence of several distinct types of work called

novels of ideas, with different narrative techniques and underlying philosophical stances. Applied to social critiques of the nineteenth century, the novel of ideas is a label for works that enact (that is, exploit) well-articulated sides of an intellectual and political debate, sometimes drawing upon advances in evolutionary studies that undermined the verities of religion and the social order it created. Advances in technology afforded others to explore the possibilities of different ontologies in a genre that quickly came to be called science fiction. Still others engaged in debate in political philosophy, using characterization and plotting to enact the contestation of ideologies. And through much of this time, and before it, writers have sought to explore the meaning of complex and unsettled lines of reasoning, philosophical stances often labeled by critics as postmodern. That these all have been categorized as novels of ideas is not particularly surprising, either. The novel of ideas, you will recall, is a category that theorists like Cuddon and Preston call "vague." The recent revival of interest in the category among fiction writers and critics suggests a need for greater clarity.

The lens I use here offers insights that a paper of this length can only hint at. First, the raw material for this study has been the writings of critics, not the works themselves. Much could be achieved by applying this lens to individual works and authors, and to collaborative fictions in drama, on stage and screen, allowing a more meaningful typology to emerge.

Second, the category itself, as vague as it may be, warrants further critical thinking. Recall that the enactment-exploration dilemma is one of attention. As Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman demonstrated, categories overcome attention deficits through heuristics, cognitive shortcuts that convey meaning when information is limited. Heuristics rely on being 1) representative of a type, 2) available because they work well enough, while 3) providing anchor points that show similarity amid variety (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). But heuristics create biases, one of the most prominent of which is confirmation bias: we see what we expect to see. In the world of fiction, the conventions of a genre set readers' expectations. What is novel about a novel, however, is how it distinguishes itself from the rest. Confounding such bias through fiction may depend on breaking the anchor points (Nordberg 2021), a few examples of which I have suggested here may lie behind exploration. This confounding may also be what distinguishes the richer forms of enactment from the flat characters and predictable plots

associated with works that might be better called novels of ideology (Suleiman 1993; Carrard 1985).

Third, what is clear from the revival of interest in the novel of ideas as a form of inquiry – among both critics and writers – is the difficulty many writers in our times find in ascribing agency and blame. Our available ontologies of interdependence create ambiguities, and moral truths seem to be historically contingent. The dangers of relativism lurk everywhere we look. These are frequently the problems that the new novels of ideas explore, often without answers.

Finally, this three-pronged approach might be useful in understanding both the mechanisms and the philosophies in other types of novels of ideas than the ones examined here—for example, in magical realism, the sudden injection of a world that follows different ways to experiment with new ideas and explore for truth, not just through the believable but also the unbelievable (Plumer 2017, 158). Could this be why philosophers, like novelists, engage in thought experiments? (Cf. Davenport 1983.) The philosopher Simon Blackburn describes Hume's empathetic argument against narrow rationalism as working in a way that, when we imagine, we "enact in our own minds."[15] Perhaps he might have added "explore" as well.

The novelist and theorist Milan Kundera, often called a postmodernist (Narrett 1992), wants us to remember a difference between the ways that novelists and philosophers think. "Even when they express their ideas directly, in their notebooks, the ideas are intellectual exercises, paradox games, improvisations, rather than statements of thought" (Kundera 1988, 78). Some philosophers may beg to differ. How often might explorations of ideas in fiction be the starting point of philosophical reflection?

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[15] This phrasing refers to David Hume's empathetic view of historical appreciation, in contrast to Wilhelm Dilthey's "Verstehen"; see Blackburn (2005, 212)

4. Enacting and exploring ideas in fiction: *The Overstory* and *The Portable Veblen*[1]

Abstract: Philosophically engaged fiction often employs ideas in ways that reflect the exploitation-exploration dilemma in developmental psychology: by exploiting well articulated theories by enacting their conflicts, or by exploring the uncertainties of puzzling ontologies or moral complexities. We can see this in action in many works, but some novels of ideas seek to defy such categorization, with lessons for readers and writers. This paper analyzes two recent works – *The Overstory* by Richard Powers (2018) and Elizabeth McKenzie's *The Portable Veblen* (2016) – to show how they deal with related concerns and settings through very different approaches. While Powers offers an enactment, its complexity seeks to evade the book becoming a simple polemic. McKenzie's protagonist explores her muddled identity, philosophy and much else while flirting with the enactment of ideas when she does not comprehend.

Introduction

The category of fiction often called the "novel of ideas" is critically disputed. It is denigrated by some as talking shops, stories where characterization suffers at hand of discourse that drives readers to accept or reject "readymade" ideas (Ngai 2020a), thus sacrificing the aesthetic for the ideological. The category is championed by others, who argue that while some politically and socially engaged novels do just that, philosophical novels need not merely report, communicate, or advocate ideas. According to LeMahieu (2015, 189), the proliferation of philosophically engaged works of fiction since World War Two shows that some novels of ideas "do not leave [ideas] intact but instead alter, transform, and examine them."

But how do they do this? What are the techniques such works employ to achieve that greater understanding? This paper examines how two contemporary novels, both critically acclaimed and commercially successful, engage with ideas central to concerns of the 21st century – the natural environmental and the roles

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that large businesses and capitalism itself play. These topics are politically charged, socially relevant, and even of existential importance. They ask readers to contemplate where we, individually and collectively, stand on the challenges facing the natural environment and the political and economic system in which we live. They ask us how we define the meaning of our own lives. Both demands are of philosophical as well as practical significance.

The two novels – *The Overstory*, by Richard Powers (2018), and Elizabeth McKenzie's *The Portable Veblen* (2016) – use the power of fiction to convey urgent intellectual and emotional arguments. But with urgency comes the risk that ideas may rigidify into ideology and lose the ability of fiction to convey complexity that analysis often discards. How can novels of ideas navigate the straits between the transformative and the readymade? How do they avoid the ideological and instead illuminate?

Building on insights on how categories of fiction arise and writers resist them (Nordberg 2021), this paper employs three psychological theories to interpret the works and identify how they are constructed. It conducts a frame analysis to detect the heuristics and biases (Tversky and Kahneman 1974) that underpin their narratives. It then uses the dilemma of exploitation and exploration (Cohen, McClure, and Yu 2007) to examine how these novels direct the attention of readers to their philosophical themes through enacting ideas (i.e., the readymade), or exploring their complexity and perhaps transforming them in the process (Nordberg 2023b). By enacting well-articulated ideas, *The Overstory* runs the risk of being polemical, a presentation of ideology, but it edges into exploration to back away from such critique. In exploring complexity through an enchanting muddle of mental stress and humor, *The Portable Veblen* lets its considerable literary achievement run the risk of allowing its ideas escape examination.

Two novels, two paths

These two novels concern the relationship of human beings, nature and big business. Both have roots that burrow under the beautiful grounds of Stanford University. They have achieved both critical admiration and broad popularity. Both might well be deemed "novels of ideas." However, and at the risk of understatement, they are not very much alike.

In *The Overstory*, Richard Powers leads his eclectic cast of characters, and his readers, deep into the undergrowth of forestry science, the logging industry, and political activism to a near-mystic appreciation of the metaphysics he identifies – on only one occasion – as Gaia, earning it the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *The Overstory* also won a place on the *New York Times* 25-item shortlist for the best book of the past 125 years, alongside such titles as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (New York Times 2021).

Elizabeth McKenzie's *The Portable Veblen* was well received but somewhat less acclaimed (longlisted for the National Book Award, shortlisted for the Bailey's Prize). Her single protagonist wrestles with problems in the pharmaceutical industry, but mainly talks to a squirrel, and tries to fathom without entirely understanding the economic and moral theorizing of her namesake, the 19th century philosopher-economist Thorstein Veblen.

The Powers book is serious. Barack Obama endorsed it during a 2021 *New York Times* interview. "It's about trees and the relationship of humans to trees," Obama told columnist Ezra Klein. "And it's not something I would have immediately thought of, but a friend gave it to me. And … it changed how I thought about the Earth and our place in it" (Obama and Klein 2021). The McKenzie book couldn't do that and didn't try to. A *New York Times* reviewer calls it "screwball comedy with a dash of mental illness" (Senior 2016). It is serious, however. Jonathan Franzen, himself a novelist sometimes labeled *of-ideas*, declares the book "seriously funny" (The Guardian 2016).

The differences lie in the tools of writing: the tone of voice, the diction, the narrative stance, the characterization and plot, and more. Most significant is another feature: how they deploy the ideas that underpin their narratives. Through its various framing devices, the Powers book *enacts* a philosophical stance: a metaphysics, with an accompanying and clear epistemology, and with an ethical system that follows from them. Its starting point is a real-life dispute, only modestly fictionalized, concerning research that showed that trees in forests communicate with each other and help each other in times of distress. McKenzie, by contrast, confronts an imagined world where things don't quite make sense and asks her mad-cap protagonist to *explore* the (to her) often-fuzzy ideas of the philosopher, economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen. His 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class* was the American equivalent of the Communist Manifesto, except

he wasn't a communist, it isn't a manifesto. Though born in America, he considered his Norwegian heritage central to his attitudes to life, as does McKenzie's protagonist to hers. Enactment and exploration are different roles that philosophy can play as writers and readers wrestle with big issues through the experience of fiction (Nordberg 2023b). As we shall see, however, a simple application of this dichotomy obscures the complexity of the storytelling in both books.

Ideas in novels

Calling something a novel of ideas is not always a compliment. The *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes the term as "A vague category of fiction in which conversation, intellectual discussion and debate predominate, and in which plot, narrative, emotional conflict and psychological depth in characterization are deliberately limited" (Cuddon and Preston 1999, 602). It arose in literary criticism as a modernist rebuke to some of the more serious 19th century novels of didactic social critique: works by George Eliot, Honoré de Balzac, Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens (LeMahieu 2015). It was extended to include overtly political novels of the 20th century across the ideological spectrum: works by Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, George Orwell, Ayn Rand. It became attached to some science fiction as well: Edwin Abbott's *Flatland,* Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, the exploration of space in the books of Robert Heinlein. What such works have in common is engagement with philosophical problems, though here too they range among ones concerning ontological, epistemological or ethical issues.

In the late 20th century and into the 21st, the appellation *novel of ideas* has become attached to a wide variety of works that use philosophical issues differently. These are stories set in ontologies that are uncertain or unsettled, drawing upon ideas that wrestle with ambiguity and contingency, often without resolution or conviction (Nordberg 2023b). Novels by a wide range of a recent authors fall in this camp: e.g., Ian McEwan, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, J.M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera (LeMahieu 2015). Many such works raise questions about how characters cope with situations in which they distrust readymade answers. Their rejection of all manner of *idées fixes* deprives them of a template for action or judgment. Such works evade the trap of "readymade ideas" that Sianne Ngai details in her critique of the "gimmick" in novels of ideas

or philosophical fiction (Ngai 2020b). They do so by exploring the philosophical problem, not enacting a solution to it (Nordberg 2023b).

The distinction between the two approaches draws upon work in developmental psychology – often called the dilemma of exploitation and exploration – that identifies two mental processes that are difficult to conduct simultaneously (Cohen, McClure, and Yu 2007). Translated into literature, we can see that works of fiction may follow a similar path. Some enact philosophical ideas, often in conflict with each other, to illustrate what is at stake, in which the authors often pick sides. Oleg Sobchuk (2022) says that few writers are explorers; most adopt the models of innovators. Drawing on an analysis by Underwood et al. (2022) of nearly 11,000 texts of novels that illustrate how writers use the same words and techniques as prior authors, he says, "what is more common: exploration or exploitation? Apparently, it's exploitation" (Sobchuk 2022). That does not, however, demonstrate that works might adhere to certain conventions but then deviate from them. Many critics and theorists question the validity of such computational humanities. And authors may shift how they anchor the heuristics of genre for the sake exploring the ideas they present (Nordberg 2021).

However, other works of fiction explore difficult ideas, particularly those facing up to the counterintuitive ontologies and epistemologies in postmodern philosophy and pragmatism, but also in physics: relativity and quantum mechanics. According to Serpil Oppermann, "Postmodern fictions … transcend false dichotomies in a process of writing that self-consciously interrelates texts and contexts" to create environmental awareness (Oppermann 2008, 243). She states that "many writers, from J. M. Coetzee to Don DeLillo, explore various environmental issues and contest dichotomies between nature and culture, world and word, and text and context" (Oppermann 2008, 244). Jon Doyle shows how socially conscious novels, sometimes called post-postmodern, "fight on two fronts," avoiding "alluringly simplified versions of existence" as they struggle to avoid nihilism of the postmodern (Doyle 2018, 268). They do so, he argues, by engaging in constant questioning in which sincerity and irony challenge each other.

This argument suggests that explorations in fiction may be seen as attempts to achieve an aesthetic appreciation of ideas that can defy rational understanding, or at least those using conventional rationality. With this distinction in mind, let us examine *The Overstory* and *The Portable Veblen* to understand the devices each

uses to project its philosophical understanding. Doing so will help readers and writers to see where readymade ideas end and yet-to-be made ideas begin.

Frames and devices as method

This analysis draws on frames and their devices, a methodology in sociology developed from the work of Erving Goffman (1974). The term framing is frequently used in literary criticism, often in a general way. It also appears in a technical sense in analyses of news stories and political communication: the product of evaluation (for example, positive or negative) and salience (important or less so). In politics, framing effects occur when even small changes in presentation of an issue produce potentially large shifts of opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007). In news reporting, frames arise from decisions about the prominence of elements of a story (Entman 1993).

Communicators make both conscious and unconscious framing judgments as they decide what to include, how to include it, and what to leave out. Robert Entman says that frames use markers in the "presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments." He continues, "Most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include" (Entman 1993, 52, 54).

Entman's list of markers and other elements of news and political storytelling are often called "devices" (Alonso Belmonte and Porto 2020; Skill and Gyberg 2010), which become carriers of symbolic meaning. As they recur, within a work or over time within a stream of work, they convey meaning without further explanation, e.g., a politician's smiling or pouting face. More tangibly, we can think of stock phrases as rhetorical, key words as establishing themes, the positioning of items in a broadcast as establishing a script, and the arrangement of script elements as providing syntax. Each structural component is then infused with content that, through repetition, conveys the meaning of a frame without having to contain all the devices. Frames thus take on symbolic meaning, with but also without the conscious intent of the author, editor or producer.

Two recent books of literary criticism examine framing in terms relevant to this study. Anna Burton's study of trees in 19th century English fiction of Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy illustrates how frame analysis can be used in examining how writers project and readers come to see trees,

individually and in woods and forest, as carriers of meaning in the "[r]ooted and branching discourses that constitute this tradition" (Burton 2021, 205). Adeline Johns-Putra shows how 21st century novels frame a subject – parenthood – not in sentimental terms but instead using the emotions fiction affords to draw attention to issues in intergenerational ethics of climate change. She argues that fictional techniques (we might say "devices") have a role in challenging readers, emotionally and ethically, to consider "the contingency and radical unknowability of our own identities" (Johns-Putra 2019, 167). Devices constitute frames; frames construct heuristics. The question this paper examines is how *The Overstory* and *The Portable Veblen* – with their similarities and formal and conceptual differences – approach this task.

The story of *The Overstory*

The Overstory is an example of a "multi-protagonist" novel, a form that Victoria Googasian sees as having a distinctive value in approaching a subject like climate change, in which characters are important but less so than the systemic issue that is its theme. In *The Overstory*, she identifies "excessive fictionality" in a text that "deliberately foregrounds its allegories," one that also overtly strives to be "character-driven" (Googasian 2022, 209-210).

The cover of the first American edition of *The Overstory* shows concentric circles of views of a forest, showing in their juxtaposition the complexity and interconnectedness of forest life. The first British edition presents an image of nine horizontal layers of different tree species from the base to the top of the crown. The layers are echoes as we meet the nine characters the book is about to introduce; the base-to-crown presentation echoes the narrative structure of the book. These are design elements of the production team, to be sure, not decisions of the author *per se*, but they contribute to the reader's appreciation of the theme: The cover as well as the structure of the writing frame the story.

Sharing the attention of readers, the nine main characters project an image of the universality of the problem. Just introducing them takes up nearly a third of the book's 502 pages. Through these introductions, we become engrossed in the characters. They push any notion of plot into the background. They come from different backgrounds and different attitudes to the issues the book addresses and gradually migrate together, physically and mentally, suggesting a consensus about the issues and perhaps the truths the book seeks to establish.

The basic structure of the book – its four parts – carries labels that echo the arboreal motif of the theme: Roots, Trunk, Crown, Seeds. Jonathan Arac argues that this shape approximates Northrop Frye's category of fiction called "anatomy" (Arac 2019, 138). Garrett Stewart says the novel's "marked patterns of recurrence attune us to the secret 'semaphores' of forest life" (Stewart 2021, 160). Trees provide a metaphor for the characters and their journeys, and the characters are metaphors of nature. This device tells readers more than the structure of the book; it tells us about its content and the function of its multiple protagonists, and it hints that the book's moral intent.

There is no escaping the observation that *The Overstory* is a novel of ideas. The novelist and critic Thomas Mallon expressed discomfort at the direction Powers had taken in his recent work, and specifically with *The Overstory*. "I like Richard Powers' early work very much. But I think today he seems much less interested in being a novelist than in being a saint," Mallon said in a podcast. "Richard Powers is overwhelmed by [the news agenda] and theme is in danger of crushing narrative and character" (Mallon and Paul 2021at ca. 5:30 and 7:00 minutes). It is a "novel of ideas" in its roots, an even firmer anchor point than the type that the sailing metaphor of heuristics theory infers.

Frames/devices in The Overstory

The framing begins immediately, even before the first page of narrative. The device used is its three epigraphs (Powers 2018, ix), one each from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American poet and transcendentalist thinker; James Lovelock, the scientist and nature-spiritualist and the man who popularized *Gaia* as description of Earth as a living system; and Bill Neidjie, an Aboriginal elder and poet/mystic. All three present trees in voiceless dialogue with mankind, though on a scale that people often, perhaps mainly, overlook. The hardback edition (but not the electronic book) presents the four part-titles – Roots, Trunk, Crown, Seeds – in positions on the page that move stepwise higher on the page, the tree thus visually climbing from ground to sky. These devices quietly but obviously set the attentive reader on a path to establish trees and the ecosystem they help constitute as silent actors in the human drama unfolding on the pages.

The following analysis concentrates on the part called "Roots." It begins with a two-page meditation in a different voice from the rest of this part, before

switching to a conventional narrator to introduce and provide extensive background to each of the nine protagonists that we then follow through the plot.

The opening line of the text – "*First there was nothing. Then there was everything*" – signals a unity of existence. This text is in italics, which raises the question: Who is speaking? This is not a conventional, plain-text narrator; that comes two pages later. This is a voice from beyond the narrative, which then reappears at the opening of each subsequent part.

The second line tells us that "*the air is raining messages.*" Is its meaning metaphorical or literal? Trees in this story will send messages. In the next few lines, a woman is leaning against a pine tree in a park, whose "*needles scent the air and a force hums in the heart of the wood.*" These needles are actors, agentic by activating scent, the product of a "*force*" residing in the "*heart of the wood.*" Is this a first example of anthropomorphism building in the book? But "heartwood" is the term used in the timber industry to describe the planks from come the center of the trunk, where the grain is the tightest, the plank least likely to fracture. It is the wood used for roofing the traditional houses built in boreal forests in North America, Europe and Asia. Whether anthropomorphic or technical, this diction is a device that signals comfort, home, security. "*The tree is saying things, in words before words*," that paragraph concludes. The phrase "*words before words*" tells us that we need to translate what follows into a language mere humans can understand, with the unstated implication that meaning may also be lost in translation. The tree's scent "*commands the woman*" and then, "*Trees farther away join in*" (Powers 2018, 3). On this first page, these devices have situated readers in a familiar yet alien place. Among the trees in this story, we may be outdoors, away from society and even civilization, but we are never in the wild space. We are instead in a place with its own rules that we will have to learn.[2]

The crisis that we are about to see unfold may be existential, but it is of collective existence, of humanity, not of individuals. The nine individuals that "Roots" introduces include those who face an existentialist's lack of meaning, but they enter a system in which meaning can be found. I will dwell a bit with each

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[2] The use of "place" and "space" here is in the sense developed by the French social philosopher Michel de Certeau (1984), where "place" is occupied and controlled by social actors and "space" implies freedom of action and absence of constraints. If trees speak, there is no "space," just "place," the place rightly occupied and controlled by trees.

protagonist, and deal less with the plot, because of the role this structure plays in the argument that follows.

The first is Nicholas Hoel. He is a several times great-grandson of a Norwegian immigrant, Jørgen, who arrived in America to live in Brooklyn, New York, where chestnut trees rain "scraps from God's table" (Powers 2018, 5). He and his Irish-immigrant bride become citizens and move to Iowa to start farming. They suffer a bleak winter and death of their firstborn, but they plant chestnut trees, most of which survive, and their family grows too. His son John buries him under a chestnut tree on the farm. Several human generations later, when the trees are just reaching maturity, comes Nicholas. He is not a farmer, but like his generations of forefathers, he is a photographer, though with more sophisticated equipment than they had. Each year he shoots pictures of the chestnut trees. In a literal sense, he frames the theme of this novel. These chestnut trees are a recurring motif – a repeated framing – of the endurance of trees and the fragility of human-scale existence.

Next is Mimi Ma. She is a Chinese-American whose father comes to study engineering in America shortly before the Communists under Mao Zedong seize power. He moves the family to a suburb of Chicago, where he plants a mulberry tree to honor his own father and becomes fascinated with the Yellowstone National Park. Mimi is a "LUG: lesbian until graduation" at her all-female college in Massachusetts, but then transfers to study at Berkeley, the radical-left hotbed, Bay-area branch of the University of California. Her sisters "wander across the map" (Powers 2018, 39). One studies economics at Yale. The other becomes a nurse in Colorado: Ma is a character who embodies America. The tree device – a mulberry in this case – and the device of "everybody" rather than "everyman" in her family point to a framing of universality.

Then Adam Appich, the youngest of four children, each with their own tree outside their house in Detroit, an elm, an ash, an ironwood, and Adam's, a maple. A fifth child arrives. So does a black walnut. The collective of trees constitutes a family. Adam decides to study psychology and wins a place at a college noted for unconventional studies. The tree device here illustrates the diversity of species, like the diversity of disciplines and the differences between siblings. The elm, of course, dies early and first.

Ray Brinckman and Dorothy Cazaly follow, the "two people for whom trees mean almost nothing. Two people … who can't tell an oak from a linden" (Powers

2018, 64). He is a lawyer in Minnesota, she his stenographer. They meet while auditioning for a local production of *Macbeth*, and both get cast. They end up in bed and spend a life together, interrupted by occasional separations ultimately resolved. One day both have car crashes, she while reading a love-note from him instead of looking at the road, he while rushing to hospital to see her. In their shock they resolve to make a new future. They decide to plant trees. The tree device seems heavy handed rather than poetic.

In Palo Alto, California, we meet Douglas Pavlicek, arrested by police for armed robbery. Thanks to a psychologist running an experiment at Stanford University, he gets off by agreeing to join the Air Force and gets shipped off to fight in Vietnam. There he falls from a plane only to land in a banyan tree and be saved. Many years and itinerant jobs later, he serves the world of trees by working for a commercial timber company. But soon he realizes that his job is planting trees in a monoculture for harvesting in just a few years: Douglas firs. The tree device has migrated from the sentimental to shock. He is planting a bad forest.

Then Neelay Mehta, a kid with a Gujarati father and a Rajasthani mother living above a Mexican bakery in San Jose, California, and a misfit. In despair one day he climbs high up an oak tree, considers suicide, but decides not to go through with it. But then he slips. He ends up permanently needing a wheelchair. He writes software code for games, drops out of Stanford, and earns a fortune. As Mehta rolls out of the university, the narrator tells us he cannot see the trees on the mountains: manzanita, laurels, orange madrone, coast live oak, riparian, and redwoods. The trees "work a plan that will take a thousand years to realize – the plan that now uses him, although he thinks it's his" (Powers 2018, 111). The tree device reveals the frame it has created: trees possess a greater intelligence than the wizard of software. The trees have agency on a scale that Mehta cannot conceive.

Patricia Westerford, a scientist with a hearing disability, is the penultimate protagonist. She is modeled on a real-life forest ecologist, Suzanne Simard, whose groundbreaking discoveries (e.g., Simard et al. 1997) also informed Robert Macfarlane's prize-winning nature book, *Underland* (2019a),[3] Peter

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[3] With a conscious nod to the title of Powers's novel, Macfarlane (2019b) has described Simard's work as "The Understory" to his own book *Underland.* Powers nodded back (New York Times 2019).

Wohlleben (2016)'s *The Hidden Life of Trees*, and other nonfiction titles. Like Simard in real life, the character Patricia Westerford faces not just rejections in peer review from the scientific establishment but also, for a time, academic banishment. Her crime – and Simard's – was the stunning claim that trees communicate with each other across a forest. Simard's were backed by experimental evidence and eventually replicated, though they now face renewed if nuanced challenges (Karst, Jones, and Hoeksema 2023). If the tree device in *The Overstory* has so far seemed metaphorical or mystical, in this instance its roots lie in science.

The final protagonist is Oliva Vandergriff, a statistician studying actuarial science, the calculation of risk and probability. Just back from divorce court, drunk, perhaps stoned, she injures her ankle on a bicycle chain while cycling into a snow-covered street called Cedar. A specimen of that tree grows in front of the building where she lives with student housemates. It is a "living fossil … [a] tree with sperm that must swim through the droplets to fertilize the ovule" (Powers 2018, 146). After a shower, naked, still drunk and wet and on the way to bed, she turns off the light and electrocutes herself.

We learn, a few pages later at the start of the second part, "Trunk," that she died, but just for one minute and ten seconds, revived by her ex-husband. Alive again, she rejects the ex-husband, again, and dedicates herself instead to protesting deforestation. Her resuscitation-*cum*-resurrection echoes the scientific work of Westerford/Simard in which forest trees, under attack from various hazards, work to regenerate each other.

The various manifestations of the tree device create a frame of meaning in which trees take on an almost supernatural power. But it is not quite that. The deforestation against which these characters battle through the novel shows the fragility of forests at the hands of humans, as much as humans seem fragile against the strength and life of trees. It has taken almost a third of the book's 502 pages to introduce us to the nine characters, but we have had eight different introductions to the central frame and dozens of devices, some metaphorical, other scientific, all symbolic. The diversity of these devices and the similarity of the frame gives a sense of universality, of truth. But the frame is of fragility, not persistence let alone the eternal.

Through the rest of the book, these characters – each, like the forest they go on to encounter, is damaged in some way – interact in differing constellations,

circling around each other, most eventually convening in a forest being cut down to make way for a commercially oriented logging purpose. The device of their preexisting damage helps to frame this story as a search for wholeness, albeit largely not fulfilled. In an explosion they (somewhat) accidentally set off, Olivia dies a second time, and the groupings disperse. Westerford is eventually accepted as a scientist, as her real-life counterpart was. Seven are committed climate activists, two of them in hiding. One rejects the cause. Olivia is still dead.

As "[s]omething moves" at the base of "motionless trees" – we are led to imagine the "Seeds" of the part-title germinating – the book concludes with a short interjection from the voice that has introduced each part: "*This,* a voice whispers, from very nearby. *This. What we have been given. What we must earn.* This *will never end*" (Powers 2018, 502). We wonder, is this voice, this alternative narrator, something, someone supernatural – or nature itself?

Heuristics and their avoidance in The Overstory

The introductions of the multiple protagonists carry much of the weight of establishing the heuristics that go on to form readers' judgments of the actions that follow and evaluations of the decisions that give rise to them. The dominant frame – humanity within nature but also against it, nature agentic on a long timescale but also constrained and threatened by human agency in the short term – is established through repeated but various separate framings, each using separate but related devices. As we read the rest of the book, the heuristic that the framing has created gives readers a multilayered interpretive schema, a disposition to assess the worth of all the other actors – individuals and organizations – that we encounter. It creates a moral system, *a priori*, a categorical imperative but not a simple one, because people are outside nature as well as within it. The symbolism of these fractured characters, seeking but then not achieving meaning in their quest, encourages us to interpret the rest of the events in that light.

The confirmation bias associated with this heuristic hinders us from asking other questions about those events. Because three characters are scientists – a botanist, someone trained as an economist, and a statistician – and all have participated in creating this heuristic, we relegate doubts about the economics, the statistics, and the science as we are swept through their personal dramas. It is this sensation that leads some critics to question the integrity of this novel's

craft. Recall Thomas Mallon's comment that Powers is "less interested in being a novelist than in being a saint" (Mallon and Paul 2021). As we become aware of the bias, we can at least question whether *The Overstory* slips from being a novel of ideas to being a novel of conviction and perhaps of ideology.

Enactment with exploration in The Overstory

This argument points to the observation that Powers is enacting through fiction a conflict of ideas – preservation and persistence of nature over human agency and immediacy of economic imperatives. This is a story that the critic and climate novelist Nathaniel Rich has called "a darkly optimistic one. Optimistic for the planet, pessimistic for the fate of humanity" (Rich 2018). It takes a stand on an issue in contemporary politics and economics, but also one, as in the epigraphs from Emerson, Lovelock and Neidjie, that invokes a transcendental meaning. Yet it is not entirely transcendental in its philosophical stance, despite the final "This *will never end*" sentence of the transcendent version of the narrator. This may well end. If the enemies succeed in the short term, trees themselves may not survive in the long term.

The craft of this enactment comes from the way in which Powers leaves space for readers to challenge the heuristic. The transcendent narrator may be god-like but it appears only episodically, at the start of each part and again in the final paragraph. Otherwise, we are in a real world. In psychology, a heuristic works by being representative of a type, by being available to those who use it, and by providing anchor points that help users hold firm to the heuristic when it comes under challenge (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). *The Overstory* provides characters on one side of an argument that are representative of many types, creating a sense of the universal about the message. The types and their meanings are available to any readers who are likely to pick up the book. But the anchor points shift, almost from the beginning. Providing lengthy introductions of each character before any action breaks with the convention of most novels – among them novels of ideas – of offering a single, central protagonist to focus the attention – the cognition and affect – of readers. In this way, readers are unsettled from any comfortable prior understandings. Moreover, readers must keep reading to page 157 before the plot begins.

One of the characters – Neeley Mehta – is overtly self-centered, a successful capitalist who has become wealthy by creating unnatural worlds, and he has

reasons to hold a grudge against trees and nature. Accidents and randomness first constitute these characters and then bring them variously together, give readers reasons to doubt even as they build a case for the universality of the argument the book makes. The "darkly optimistic" ending of this novel is not inevitable. It is, to be precise, *evitable*.

This structure, these gaps in the characterizations allow us not to feel manipulated – or at least not entirely manipulated by the transcendent narrator or the author who stands behind it. By breaking from the heuristics of the form – of the novel of ideas and of novels generally – *The Overstory* gives us just enough room for the philosophically skeptical to remain so. It enacts a debate in moral and political philosophy, and it chooses a winning side, which, in the main, loses.

In summary, the impact of *The Overstory* comes not from the ideas it presents. News accounts provide a gripping account of the ideas in this story. Academic papers present harder evidence and more convincing argumentation, and thus greater conventional trustworthiness – validity, reliability and generalizability. In *The Overstory*, what grips us is the breadth and depth of personalities, delivered with considerable economy of expression, and the various paths they take to reach the same conclusion about how to live, and the same anguish about the difficulty of living that way. We empathize with each of these protagonists as they grow more aware of the scale of the crisis and are humbled by seeing their personal limitations in resolving it.

The monism that underpins the ontological premise of this book points us to see this work as an emotional polemic, an example of what Matthew Cole calls "visceral cautionary tales" in environmental fiction (Cole 2022, 132); he argues that *The Overstory* avoids that by showing multiple paths to agency through the different paths of is protagonists.

But the book can be seen in yet another light. The interleaving of the stories of the multi-protagonists and the sense that the trees and other entities in the story are also actors in the story. This is a story that can also be read as an attempt to explore the puzzling but pertinent ontologies of philosophers of pluralism. The French pragmatist Bruno Latour's pluralism argues against the reductionism in most modern (i.e., post-17th century) philosophy that separates mankind from other species (Latour 1988). In this reading, *The Overstory* may seek to evade the polemical by exploring the empathy it creates for the frailty of the characters, frozen in the headlights of the onrushing catastrophe. Even as the

novel *enacts* its conviction that this is a system going out of control, it lets us *explore* the emotions of the actors caught in it.

Navigating with *The Portable Veblen*

Another, but quite different, invocation of Latour's warning against reductionism greets us at the start of Elizabeth McKenzie's novel. The protagonist of *The Portable Veblen* is a woman undergoing an identity crisis. She wants to be connected to the world around her but is cut off from others; she communes with a squirrel because she can't seem to communicate with humans. Veblen Amundsen-Horda has dropped out of university and works as an office temp while freelancing as a translator of works from Norwegian, which she is only just learning. She is a person with a nervous disposition, perhaps inherited from her hypochondriac mother, or from her father, who lives in a mental health facility. Veblen herself takes a combination of prescription anti-depressants.

She shares a rented derelict bungalow in a very expensive city with neuroscientist Paul, who has developed a device to reduce battlefield brain trauma. Because of that invention, he is soon to develop an attachment to the heiress of a pharmaceutical fortune. In the opening pages, however, Paul proposes that Veblen and he get married. Instead of answering immediately, she talks to and then about a squirrel just outside the window.[4] (The publisher's blurb on the cover has already primed readers with this warning: "What could possibly go wrong?")

Even before the novel gets around to explicating the protagonist's given name and its connection to the philosopher-economist, on page 22, his namesake – Veblen Amundsen-Horda – reaches out to another, even more famous philosopher for answers to her uncertainties. The narrator, in a close third-person voice, explains that she often draws upon "the writings of the wonderful William James." The narrator then quotes James himself, advocating a search for "the original experiences which were pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct" (McKenzie 2016, 11). This passage takes for granted that this William James is the philosopher, one of the original pragmatists, the person who gave the name pragmatism to the philosophy, and whose work

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[4] The words *yes maybe no*, repeated again and again, give shape to the squirrel on the cover of the British hardback and paperback editions. American editions use a less evocative illustration.

inspired Thorstein Veblen. And it was this William James whose parable of the squirrel, the man, and the tree illustrated the ontological paradox of what it means to "go around" (1907/1955, Lecture II). For the character Veblen, these facts are just part of the philosophical litter in her mind. She doesn't need an explanation. Why should readers?[5]

In plotting her protagonist's attempt to get from here to a wedding, McKenzie leads us through the puzzles and ambiguities of pragmatism, encounters with the pitfalls of capitalism as viewed through the obscured prism of the nuanced economic writings of her namesake, and by exposure to the darker sides of the medical industry. The ideas in this novel of ideas are not *idées fixes* but instead *idées en flux*. From the earliest pages, we have set sail without an anchor. We can, however, look for the anchor points of an emergent heuristic that may eventually help readers to discover what sort of a novel this is. Here too the analysis will focus on the opening chapters because of the whole they play in introducing devices and establishing the framing.

Frames/devices in The Portable Veblen

The opening three paragraphs of *The Portable Veblen* lay devices that will eventually frame this as a fairytale. It is not portentous, not a sermon. The opening words, "Huddled together," introduce not people but houses. The houses themselves are alive. They are located "in a California town known as Palo Alto," not in the conventional and dull designation: City, State, and a phrasing that – with irony – allows that the reader may never have heard of the city at the heart of Silicon Valley. The paragraph continues: "And in one lived a woman in the slim green spring of her life, and her name was Veblen Amundsen-Hovda" (McKenzie 2016, 1). She is not just young and slim; she is part of the rotation of earth around the sun, and part of nature. Her name invokes something foreign, exotic, and full of as-yet indecipherable meaning.

Lest a reader be lulled into thinking all is well, the second paragraph reverses the sentiment and changes the season. It is just after New Year, and raining. It also reveals the second main actor in the story: a squirrel, raking through the

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[5] In his lecture, James describes an encounter with a squirrel, a creature that may well be the model for the one that serves as the character Veblen's interlocutor. Seeing the man, the squirrel darts to the other side of the tree trunk. As the man circles the tree, the squirrel does too, always evading the man's sight. James wonders: the man has gone around the tree, but has he gone around the squirrel?

fallen leaves for acorns made tastier, now that rain and dew have leeched out the tannins. The squirrel will appear as Veblen's interlocutor at crucial moments in the 400-odd pages to come.

The next paragraph begins, "The skin of the old year was crackling," another metaphor with time itself alive, and the short winter heading toward spring, but "Veblen felt troubled, as if rushing toward disaster.… She wanted to stop time" (McKenzie 2016, 2). Time, too, is part of nature, the old year now animate, a chrysalis, perhaps, containing both maturation and a new beginning – but a development the protagonist would like to avoid.

This fairytale opening of *Veblen* signals an extended metaphor that parallels the one in *The Overstory*, the metaphor of Gaia.[6] We are in a world where all is alive and connected, where the landscape, plants, animals, and even time verge on consciousness, at least most of the time, when we see through Veblen's eyes. That is, Veblen is not entirely aware of her place in the world, her immediate future, or her identity. She is about to undergo a quest for greater consciousness of her being.

Within a few paragraphs, the proximate reason for her anxiety becomes obvious, to her as much as to the reader: Her boyfriend, Paul, offers an engagement ring with a large diamond, housed in a case described in a combined oceanic-and-arboreal metaphor as a "velveteen shell … like a walnut." Rather than saying *yes* or *no*, or *let me think about it*, Veblen replies, "Oh, Paul. Look, a squirrel's watching." But Paul doesn't turn to look, "as if being watched by a squirrel meant nothing to him," the narrator says, reflecting Veblen's own concern, or perhaps her evasion of the existential question she has been posed. Paul asks again. The squirrel screeches. Veblen finally turns to Paul and, after hesitating again, says yes. The narrator continues, "Behind them, the squirrel made a few sharp sounds, as if to say he had significant doubts," which Veblen, "couldn't help translating" as "*There is a terrible alchemy coming*" (McKenzie 2016, 3-4). This proximate reason is, however, only an approximation of the sources of her anxiety.

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[6] Lovelock, who died in 2022, aged 103, would resist any reading that suggests Gaia as metaphorical. He argued that there was scientific evidence to support his claim that Earth is a unitary living system (see Lovelock 1972, 2003). My suggestion here is, however, the reverse, that both novels can be seen as extended metaphors of Gaia, the base rather than the example of metaphor. Analytically, Latour's actor-network approach can better highlight how the pieces interact, which evoking Gaia can obscure.

McKenzie's cast of supporting characters come with a variety of backgrounds signaled through the device of their surnames. For example, among the characters introduced in Chapter 1, Veblen herself is of Norwegian stock on her "father's side," but undeniably American. Her second surname, Horda, is common in central Europe, especially in Ukraine. Paul's surname is Vreeland: Dutch. Her rival for Paul's affection, the heiress to the pharma fortune, has a German name, Hutmacher. Veblen's best friend is Albertine Brooks: English. She meets Paul while working in a lab at Stanford for Dr. Lewis Chaudhry: Indian.[7] This naming approach quietly suggests representativeness through its variety, like the university and indeed America, though not universality in beliefs. Divergence of views – this time between Veblen and Paul – comes to the fore with the start of the second chapter. After a sleepless night listening to noises in the attic, Paul buys what the close-third narration (occupying Veblen's mind) calls a "coffin-shaped" trap. It is designed to capture "nuisance critters," including squirrels (McKenzie 2016, 26-27).

Veblen's house was overrun by nature when Veblen first found it, "so overgrown with vines that the windows were no longer visible." The yard is "neck-high with weeds and ivy … choked with the summer's industry of honeysuckle and jasmine," with animal hair "mixed in the litter of leaves … To her it looked enchanted" (McKenzie 2016, 32-33). In time, she restores the house, to some extent, but it remains a creature of nature.

In Chapter 3, just a week after he proposes to Veblen, Paul takes up a new post in a hospital in a government compound supporting the military, gleaming new buildings alongside remnants of tin-can hangars from the late 1940s and 1950s. But nature is reasserting itself here too, undermining this new center of knowledge creation for military purposes: "Gophers and moles had the run of the lawn," the narrator immediately notes (2016, 38). Suddenly a squirrel spirals down the trunk of a magnolia tree. The narrator relates that this new job will make Paul "the man who would lead Hutmacher [Pharmaceuticals] into a new era…. Physicians received Nobel prizes for innovations like his," another passage of close third-party writing, this time inside Paul's mind. That device is drawn more sharply later on that page, when a "tall, blond woman … leaned over, read his name on his lab coat." Her demeanor "struck him as proof of a giant leap in his

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[7] The other two very minor characters introduced are Luke Hartley: English; and Laurie Tietz: German.

sex appeal." He has just met Cloris Hutmacher, an influential force in decisions about the growth of the business. Having coffee with her, Paul soon finds that he has "gulped and scalded his esophagus, and worse, felt his testes shrivel to the size of garbanzo beans" (40-41). As he attempts to explain his invention to treat battlefield trauma, their conversation veers teasingly close to a male orgasm. As she departs, she gives him a "European-style kiss on his left cheek, and his catecholamines soared" (45). Catecholamines, decoded, are the neurohormones that respond to stress, but who, in Veblen's world, needs that explanation?

These devices establish a pattern that recurs through the book. Paul is – at least mentally and now emotionally – entangled in web of pharma, government, military and sexual desire, a potent rearrangement of President Eisenhower's military-industrial complex of the 1950s. Against that stands Veblen, the woman he has just asked to marry, who seems more comfortable conversing with squirrels than with her fiancé. Perhaps *spins* is a better description of her attitude than *stands*. Nothing in her life stands still. She is the protagonist of this story, however, and her mind is more difficult to read than his.

Like Powers with *The Overstory*, McKenzie uses her novel's locations as devices to import meaning. A few examples: Palo Alto is the home of Stanford University, known for its pharmaceutical and medical engineering research as well as the seedbed of technology firms. Veblen's house, though, sits in a forgotten and un-redeveloped corner of it. In this city, she is a liminal actor, sitting precariously on its fringe. Paul lives there for her, not because he has to. Paul's involvement with Hutmacher Pharma takes him to Washington and then Arlington, Virginia, seats of government and the military as well as home to many large companies vying for government contracts "a stone's throw from the Pentagon" (McKenzie 2016, 56). Paul takes Veblen to a swish ski lodge at Lake Tahoe, to meet friends he "used to hang with in the city – doctors, architects, financiers." Once the friends realize Veblen isn't on a "notable career path, they seemed unable to synthesize her into their social tableau" (64). Veblen is an alien in this setting, unwanted. A few pages later, while driving to visit Veblen's friend Albertine in San Francisco, they pass "half-peopled developments spotting the terrain like outbreaks of inflamed skin." Veblen espouses "the Veblenian opinion that wanting a big house full of cheaply produced versions of so-called luxury goods was the greatest soul-sucking trap of modern civilization" and that their "copycat mansions [...] had ensnared their overmortgaged owners" (74). The

narrator's use of "Veblenian opinion" tells readers already in the know of her devotion to Thorstein Veblen's most celebrated work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* without having to say so. It also signals that the character Veblen is now engaging in elevated thinking. Readers not in the know will have to wait until page 206 for an explanation.

Thorstein Veblen is himself a device to create meaning. Before the remark above, he has appeared only twice in the book, once to let us know where her name arose, a second time when young Veblen tells Paul that her namesake would say that people hate squirrels "because it's the only way to motivate expenditures" on devices to kill or capture them. "It's the same as stirring up *patriotic emotionalism*, because it justifies expenditures for defense" (McKenzie 2016, 30, emphasis in the original). She is intellectualizing her emotional attachment to squirrels. It sets up a delayed ironic reversal when a bit later, on his visit to Washington, Paul expresses his emotional as well as intellectual attachment to the military by wanting "To serve. My country" (58). He wants to visit the Vietnam War memorial to pay homage the uncle who died in combat. The juxtaposition, at a distance, of this intellectual device underscores Veblen's confused emotions, which with subsequent reinforcement asks readers to puzzle over whether one can separate in practice the conceptual difference between these two supposed states of mind.[8]

Veblen's conversations with her closest friend, Albertine, also play across the emotion-intellectual frontier. A minor disagreement with Paul over turkey meatballs, the narrator says in a third-person voice close to Veblen's mind, Paul seemed "duplicitously boyish and charming." But, the narrator explains, "Albertine had been quick to tell her it was a missed opportunity for *individuation*" (McKenzie 2016, 81) an evaluation that rapidly morphs into a recollection of a contretemps with Paul over the virtues or otherwise of eating corn on the cob. The conceptual co-mingles with the absurdly tangible.

Visiting Veblen's childhood home and meeting her mother, Paul is shown bookshelves "crammed with more volumes than they could properly hold" about things from aboriginal weapons to Pre-Raphaelite design. On the top shelf sit 60 volumes containing the works of Thorstein Veblen, which the narrator describes

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[8] The philosopher William James, to whom the character Veblen has already alluded, draws a similar puzzle in his writings: "The essence of life is its continuously changing character; but our concepts are all discontinuous and fixed" (James 1909, 253).

as "still radiating 'redemptive truth and more splendor.' That's how Richard Rorty described the special books on his own parents' shelves, and Veblen couldn't have said it better" (McKenzie 2016, 95).

Readers have encountered "Rorty" before as someone with "writings on solidarity," which the character Veblen had "no trouble applying to squirrels" (McKenzie 2016, 29). They will wait until page 95 to hear that the character Veblen admires his "redemptive truth and moral splendor." That Rorty was a philosopher in the tradition of William James and John Dewey who rethought pragmatism as an antidote of postmodernism comes only on page 118. Readers might look outside the novel and discover that Thorstein Veblen also adhered to pragmatism and that in the 1880s he and Dewey studied together at newly established Johns Hopkins University. These connections are, however, something that the narrator, speaking as if occupying the character Veblen's mind, takes for granted. Her mind is pre-occupied with the domestic crisis of her fiancé meeting his neurotic future mother-in-law. The books are another device that signals this as a novel of ideas, but they are ones that sit on the shelf, "radiating," albeit ideas built upon a rickety ontological base.

In Chapter 9 Thorstein Veblen gets a fuller introduction from the narrator, recounting as the economist smashes the windows of his own house, fearing that it would be sold "through a mishap with the deed." We learn that he then lived for a time in New York in the 1920s in a boarding house "with Mr. James Rorty, author of *Our Master's Voice*," a title that gave "petrifying stories about the reach of the advertising industry" (McKenzie 2016, 183). What we don't hear is that James Rorty was also a radical activist and communist, or that he was the father of the philosopher Richard Rorty, mentioned earlier. But McKenzie has strewn breadcrumbs for readers that there is a novel of ideas lying beneath the surface of this family farce. The device of Thorstein Veblen allows the character Veblen to turn to her typewriter to write her own tirade against the injustice of turning people into consumers (McKenzie 2016, 189-191). It underscores here ambivalence about Paul, the man she says she loves and has agreed to marry.

That ambivalence has been exposed in Chapter 8, when Veblen meets Paul's family, who traveled to San Francisco just to meet her. The narrator, channeling Veblen's thoughts, tells us that "To some, the in-law family is a burden and a curse. But to others it's a close-knit group with a new opening just for you, and that's definitely how Veblen looked at the Vreelands" (McKenzie 2016, 158). Paul

has a new car – thanks to his new job – with twelve speakers in its sound system. Paul's parents, aging hippies, drive a car that Veblen likes, "eccentric … thick with dust and activism" (McKenzie 2016, 161). Paul's older brother Justin is with them, a man with obvious mental problems not given a label but made evident through his actions. They include having the conviction that he, not Paul, is marrying Veblen. McKenzie thus avoids assigning a label that would seem to explain Justin to readers, and thus not trying to come to understand his complexity. That is, McKenzie has avoided anchoring to an available heuristic for the sake of building ones afresh.

Heuristics and their avoidance in The Portable Veblen

The framing established in the opening third of the book is that of a world, a social system and a personal identity of the protagonist in constant motion. There are evil actors – Hutmacher Pharma and Cloris Hutmacher – but the narration is so often depicted from a close-third person perspective inside Veblen's unsettled mind that we cannot be so sure. It creates a heuristic of incomplete knowledge, one in which the reader as well as the protagonist are on a rollercoaster ride, rather than a linear quest for enlightenment.

References to nature – the trees, the overgrown garden at the dilapidated house – carry meaning, but it is not clear what, save that they do not represent something transcendent, something supernatural. Even talking squirrels seem light on meaning. Their discussions are projections of Veblen's own search for meaning. They help her to restore calm at moments of stress, and if they work, then in the philosophy of pragmatism they have some call on having the quality John Dewey called "warranted assertibility" (Dewey 1941), something short of truth, but truth for pragmatists is either a historically situated, contingent concept or a logical mistake.

If we follow the breadcrumbs of ideas, we get a picture of the character Veblen as someone occupying a mental space without clear rules or fixed reference points. The ontology is uncertain, or perhaps, as in the tradition of William James, irrelevant. What matters is only that we find what works and let that suffice until it no longer works, when we adjust and move on. The sketch of communism versus capitalism is present but contested not by its antithesis but because it doesn't account for the things Veblen is feeling.

The mixture of comedy with philosophy, of conviction with confusion, of commitment with capriciousness, undermines simplistic readings of the genre that the text offers and then withdraws. This is not a love story, or a rant against capitalism, or a search for identity, or a plea for collective political action, or another of several other interpretations readers may be tempted to find in its pages. Instead, the story of *Veblen* evades all those heuristics by its use of irony. Readers are offered reasons to like Veblen and Paul and to despise Cloris Hutmacher. But they have reasons not to trust Veblen's views, or Paul's, or the narrator's, as truth-claims. They have reasons, some of the time, to give even Cloris the benefit of the doubt, though not often.

But *The Portable Veblen* is in the end a love story: The plot is girl meets boy, falls in love, lots of stuff happens, and they get married, nearly. The wedding is left in suspension after the intervention of a squirrel. So, what does it tell us, philosophically, about love?

In one relevant passage of many, Chapter 9, titled "The Stoic Glacier Method," Veblen comes close to articulating how to get to love, if not quite what love is. Paul has returned from a family outing. His mother and father like to visit houses on the market that they have no intention to buy. During the outing, Paul says, his father, Bill, told him that he, Bill, "might be part of the problem" between father and son. Veblen replies, glowing "with satisfaction. See? You're using the stoic glacier method." Attempting to clarify, she explains: "It's the slow process of shaping someone's behavior by force of one's own personal stoicism." The narrator then adds, parenthetically and for greater clarity, "('If you wish to be loved, love,' said Seneca, a Stoic of note.)" This does not say that love itself is a process, but it seems to suggest that love is a goal requiring patience and is easily frustrated. Perhaps we cannot get beyond that goal, to some final transcendent good. Paul replies, "Wow. Maybe so," but immediately the next diversion comes, away from anything transcendental to the mundane: Veblen sees the mentally challenged brother, Justin, in Veblen's bedroom, touching her pillow. The narrator notes, "Some drool spilled from his lips" (McKenzie 2016, 191).

Exploration with added enactment in **The Portable Veblen**

In what way is this a novel of ideas in the broader sense a piece of philosophical fiction? Its philosophical link is signaled in the title of the novel, a direct allusion to the title of a 1948 anthology of Thorstein Veblen's writings,

published by the Viking Press. The character Veblen is not, however, our model of the studious and logical thinker. Her mother is a failed philosopher, whose PhD dissertation – on the writing of Thorstein Veblen, what else? – sits incomplete and abandoned on the shelf with his works.

In summary, the framing of Veblen as a scatterbrain in the scattered landscape of ideas shows aspects of the heuristics of an "enacted" novel of ideas, pitting one well-established position against another. But they are quickly upended by the book's depiction of someone whose train of thought has derailed very early on. The repeated framing of this as a book with philosophical pragmatism at its heart is also an illustration of the central problem of pragmatism. Pragmatism's emphasis on evolution and historical contingency may leave the door open to accusations of relativism (Misak 2000), like the ontological and moral puzzles in existentialist and much postmodern philosophy. In this quagmire, the character Veblen can be seen exploring ideas and emotions, trying to find an anchor point – in Paul, and his sense of certainty – to set her mind at lesser discomfort if not entirely at ease. She explores the thinking of her namesake and in so doing sees how little order it can bring to her madcap existence. That realization is, however, strangely comforting: Having *explored* the ambiguities, she has found a way of coping with the confusion, the disorder in the life she will now try to *enact*. Perhaps she finds consolation – as McKenzie's readers might – in her attempts at philosophizing.[9] That the task is not finished is evident in the seven appendices that follow the novel, a novel way for McKenzie to emphasize the break from the anchor point of the form itself.

Conclusions

The Overstory is a novel strong on polemic, enacting its idea through a complex orchestration of voices an important social and moral problem. It tells the story about trees as sentient beings, responsive to each other and reactive to the harm imposed by humanity. The story is sufficiently convincing to have persuaded former US president Barack Obama of the significance of the need of humanity to attend to nature. Its storytelling is sufficiently convincing to have won it a Pulitzer Prize. While its use of frame devices has lodged it firmly in the heuristic of the novel of ideas, it is not quite a simple morality play. The "good" is

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[9] Cf. Boethius (1897)

clear, but the path to reach it is treacherous. It is an enactment of ideas that also makes space to explore their difficulties by breaking from the convention of a central protagonist and then as the mistakes compound.

By contrast, *The Portable Veblen* exudes a desire for understanding of the "good," but its framing devices suggest a reality far less anchored – at least in the protagonist's confused mind – than what *The Overstory* has depicted. The central heuristic that this framing builds is of a comedy teetering on the edge of tragedy but managing, somehow, to avoid falling off the cliff. Philosophy itself can be seen as the hero, saving the protagonist from mental illness or despair. The novel leaves the substance of Thorstein Veblen's writings hanging in mystery. It offers anchor points only to withdraw them quickly, or to question their value. Pragmatism somehow offers her a philosophy of "continuously changing character" (James 1909, 253) that lets her muddle through. It is a novel in which the protagonist explores the complex and unsettled edges of philosophy, edges that now seem to many philosophers to lie, paradoxically, in the center of philosophical debate. The character Veblen longs for certainty; that signals a need that philosophy used to provide, and that the novel of ideas used to be able to enact. Absent that, at least her philosophical meanderings, if not quite systematic exploration, offer relief (and laughter) if not quite consolation.

Each book sits on the opposite end of enactment-exploration divide, though each crosses over as its subject matter grows more complex. In *The Overstory* the moral understanding implied in the transcendental conception of good in Emerson, Lovelock and Neidjie runs aground in the shortcomings of the characters in living up to those ideals. In *The Portable Veblen*, Veblen herself is unanchored and seeks out more comfortable dichotomies good and seeking purpose in the self of the collective. *The Overstory* could have become a morality tale, as Mallon's quip seems to imply (Mallon and Paul 2021). It comes quite close, though Powers balks at the simplification that implies. *The Portable Veblen* could have taken itself seriously, but McKenzie chooses to let the novel laugh at itself and let us laugh with it.

The Overstory nonetheless falls more heavily on the enactment side, inviting criticism that it verges on the ideological end of the spectrum of novels of ideas. Therein lies a danger. Adopting an idea founded on a scientific discovery and building an ontology upon it, and then a moral system, runs a risk in the ever-correcting epistemology of science. As noted above, since the novel's

publication, fresh doubts have been raised about the evidence for the more exaggerated claims in the popularization of Simard's work (Karst, Jones, and Hoeksema 2023). Those doubts have burst into broader public discussion, too (Popkin 2022). While the science Powers situates in his character Westerford is not the same as Simard's, the roots of it look less firm now, its ontology threatened. *The Portable Veblen* steers well wide of that danger. The character Veblen embraces the ever-correcting epistemology and therefore the non-committal evasion of ontology called pragmatism. That runs a different risk: that readers might overlook the serious side of McKenzie's book that Franzen, through irony, highlights. Perhaps that is why it missed out on the prizes that accompany books like that of Powers, which take a stronger moral line. Both these novels of ideas give readers a lot to think about, however, as they seek to dodge the dilemma of enactment and exploration, less (*Overstory*) or more (*Veblen*) successfully.

5. Ideas in fiction? Fiction of ideas?

Abstract: The project of this thesis was consciously one of exploration – of the personal history that shaped the outline of the novel, and of the ideas of pragmatism that, among many other things, influenced so much the outcomes of the orphanage sector in America in the mid-20th century and so much else besides. This chapter summarizes that exploration and the unexpected outcomes from exploring.

Introduction

In its creative and critical elements, this project has explored how fiction and ideas relate to each other. The critical essays identify how the dichotomies often discussed in popular accounts of creative writing blur. We've seen that character-led stories are identified as literary, and literary then as having psychology as its underlying layer of understanding. We've seen too that plot-driven stories are often associated with what is popularly called genre fiction, and many of those are underpinned by less (or more) complex epistemologies, ontologies or ethical systems. We've also seen that those categories blur. The border between the psychological and philosophical is in some ways the most permeable (Chapter 2).

That supposed psychological-philosophical distinction may be the product of at least two different ways that writers use ideas, which critics often then confuse in labelling both "novels of ideas." Some philosophically engaged writers of fiction enact those ideas through plot that set those ideas into conflict. But others use works of fiction as philosophical thought experiments to explore ontologies that are puzzling, epistemologies laden with uncertainty, or moralities confounded by ambiguity (Chapter 3). In practice, this dichotomy also manifests with blurred boundaries, as the two novels analyzed in Chapter 4 show, with varying effects.

The creative element of this project was from its outset a conscious attempt to operate in an area where the blur between categories is great. At its base level, the process of writing *Fleetwood* set out as a personal quest to find plausible explanations for the actions of characters – modeled on but not equal to or even roughly equivalent of members of my family. It was an exploration of the world of

secrets, to find out not so much what happened, but why it might have happened: character-driven, literary, psychological.

It was also, however, from the outset, an exploration at another level. The story is set in a time of social change arising from a philosophical stance driven by the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey. This pragmatic turn came in conscious experiments put into action by Dewey himself in the field of primary and secondary education. In another field, the social reformer Jane Addams, a close associate of Dewey, established a "settlement house" known as Hull-House to experiment with new ways to integrate the swell of immigrants into American society. It became a model that would change American society as much as the immigrants. Pragmatism was also manifest in the judicial work of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., a jurist who was eventually elevated to the US Supreme Court and who had close personal ties to William James, a founder of the pragmatist movement (Menand 2001).

Pragmatism has personal as well as intellectual appeal, in these two ways, among others. First, I was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, where Dewey had done important work, including creating a school that operated – and still operates – on principles he articulated. Second, Jane Addams was a legend in Chicago. I have no evidence that my paternal grandparents had any connection to Addams when they arrived in America and Chicago in the first decade of the 20th century, but both my parents were born within a 10-minute bus ride of Hull-House, as was I.

Pragmatism is, however, a problematic philosophy. In a word used by the philosopher, theologian and political activist Cornel West, pragmatism is an "evasion" of philosophy, with deep-set contradictions alongside its appeal. It dismisses as irrelevant many of the questions that philosophers have long pondered: the meaning of life, whether progress in human life is possible let alone inevitable (West 1989). Its skepticism, its emphasis on historical contingency, and its rejection of metaphysics and the transcendental leaves a door wide open for accusations of moral relativism. To many people, it did not seem to describe well, or seem appropriate for, the world after World War Two. Nonetheless, interest in pragmatism has swelled again since 1980, and not just in the United States.[1] I

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[1] For example, the stream of philosophy called French pragmatism mediates American pragmatism and the postmodern (Frère and Jaster 2019).

wanted to explore pragmatism through this project as well to see if I could better understand the contradictions if not perhaps then find ways to resolve them.

The emergent, only loosely-structured process of writing *Fleetwood* – its developing understanding of the characters, their motivations, and actions – revealed pointers to another layer of philosophical inquiry: the role that hope, love, and care play in shaping our choices in life when transcendent imperatives are absent. This concluding chapter examines how the process of writing the novel illuminated the philosophical issues. Enactment takes place because of the setting. But it is an exploration nonetheless, an improvisation from a clear starting point along a less-than-clear path to an uncertain conclusion.

Pragmatism, skepticism, and *Fleetwood*

The philosopher Nicholas Tampio (2022) calls skepticism a "way of life" and likens it to the approach in American pragmatism, including the ideas of the man who was arguably its founder. "Charles Sanders Pierce [sic] … holds that a scientific consensus gives a prima facie reason to treat a question as useful or useless. Many of us live our lives as pragmatists."[2] Tampio is wary of relativism, an accusation often made against the pragmatists and intensified by Richard Rorty's adoption of that label, albeit in a nuanced way (Rorty 1980).

The creative part of this thesis has skepticism at its philosophical center, if there can be a center of something as amorphous as philosophy, especially an anti-foundational philosophy like pragmatism that grew from concerns over evolution, historical contingency, and impermanence. Skepticism, even for the ancients, like Sextus Empiricus (1996), seems less a *philosophy* – the "system which a person forms for the conduct of life"[3] – than a way of coping with uncertainty. This is not an anything-goes or everything-is-equally-valid approach often associated with relativism. It is an admission of fallibility. Skepticism is less an ontology, or even an epistemology, than an acceptance of epistemological defeat in which belief takes the place of truth in decision-making.

In the creative element of this project, the protagonist of the near-contemporary sections, Nate, knows that he is ignorant of the meaning of the secrets his father, Horace, refused to discuss. That refusal may have been an

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[2] This quote appears in a reply that Tampio makes to a reader's comment, misspelling the surname of Charles Sanders Peirce.
[3] Definition 9.a. from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED 1973).

obstacle to the development of a closer, more overtly loving relationship, to which Nate may have responded with the lack of closer personal relationships through his life to date.

The sections involving the orphanage (mainly Part 3) draw more explicitly on questions of ambiguity and uncertainty. The deputy director, Dr. Jennifer Addam,[4] seeks to transform education at the orphanage in a Deweyan way, embracing uncertainty and skepticism intellectually – at least at first. Later, as the Wall Street Crash becomes the Great Depression, she experiences uncertainty and senses the pain that comes with contingency in the absence of emotional support. Dewey valorized such experience, particularly in his later writing on aesthetics (Dewey 1934/1958). By contrast, Reverend Krueger, who initially appears to represent a foundationalist order, reveals in private moments that he too is open to skepticism. He wishes for a God-centric stability and order, but he has come over time to feel that belief is a statement of doubt, not an affirmation of a transcendental truth. Yet still he hopes.

The novel is thus an exploration of truth and uncertainty, as evidenced in pragmatism and much of existentialist and postmodern philosophy. That stands in sharp contrast to the exploitation of established ideas that many works called *novels of ideas* then enact.

The bridge crossed? Maybe …

I first sensed what it meant to be pragmatic, philosophically, not from Dewey, but instead from reading, then giving up on reading, Rorty's most famous book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). I started again by tackling a 1999 work, aimed at a more general audience, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999). Rorty sometimes called himself relativist. In *Hope*, however, and other works of philosophy and politics, including essays collected in *Achieving Our Country* (1998), Rorty seems to push logic aside, using hope to evade the nihilism that many see in relativism and postmodern thought.

Rorty was often skeptical about the inevitability of progress. Change is inevitable, but not improvement. But here, too, *Hope* and his other writings show belief in progress, if not quite conviction. In the introduction to his book *Objectivity,*

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[4] Her surname alludes to a pioneer of modern social care in America and a friend of Dewey, Jane Addams (for her writings on social reform, see Addams 1911, 1902).

Relativism and Truth (p. 10), Rorty argues that beliefs are "adaptations to the environment, rather than as quasi-pictures," that is, ways of coping with a changing world. In *Fleetwood*, Reverend Krueger expresses hope for progress, while accepting that belief is an admission of doubt.

Race as a challenge to pragmatism

Racial dynamics – a theme sitting beneath the structure of Fleetwood from the first page – presents a challenge to pragmatism. Pragmatism comes in many varieties, but a central principle is its emphasis on the contextual and historical contingency of decisions. That stance seems to invite a charge that pragmatism might tolerate racism as appropriate at points in history, for example, in the "separate but equal" ruling in the US Supreme Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. That ruling was in place at the time my characters were at the half-orphan asylum. Racism was much in evidence in 1960s America, when – as the novel *Fleetwood* mentions – President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law. The need to do so was evident despite the partial and then full reversal of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in Supreme Court decisions in 1948 (Shelley v. Kraemer, concerning housing) and 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education, concerning segregation in schools, though the Court's sweeping opinion extended its application to all aspects of society).

Race is present as an issue in *Fleetwood* in the relationship between the characters but also in the settings of the story. Charleston was the locus of the slave trade in America, while the fictional Middleton action a station along the "underground railroad" that served enslaved people seeking freedom. Race is also present in the background with the hint that Randolph Archibald actions might lie behind Nathaniel Jones's half-orphan status. The competition between the Archibald family and the Fleetwood Foundation over naming rights for the museum may thus have had racial or political motivations, and not just pride and narcissism.

The problem of racism is also a feature deeply involved in the pragmatism movement in America. Take the case of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., a famed jurist philosophically aligned with James and Peirce. As a young man in the build up to the American Civil War, Wendell Holmes took a strong abolitionist stance and fought valiantly in the war, suffering multiple injuries and battling with dysentery. In the words of Menand (2001), he emerged from the war a changed man: "The

lesson Holmes took from the war can be put in a sentence. It is that certitude leads to violence" (61), a view central to the pragmatist anti-foundationalist aversion to metaphysics. This did not mean that he had reversed his view of slavery; instead he embraced the historical contingency central to pragmatist epistemology. Holmes was eventually elevated to the US Supreme Court, two years after the Court had decided the Plessy case. Though Holmes broadly endorsed the pluralist thinking of James, he participated in other cases on race relations during his long tenure on the Court and did not argue for racial equality.[5]

Later pragmatist thinking evolved in a more progressive direction, perhaps unsurprisingly for a philosophic stance rooted in Darwinian thinking. John Dewey – born just before the outbreak of the Civil War – seems to have moved further toward seeing equality of the races in his writing on education (Fallace 2010). Later pragmatists included the black philosopher Alain Locke, who was an important figure in the literary movement called the Harlem Renaissance.[6] The famed black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois was an undergraduate student of William James at Harvard. James persuaded the young Du Bois not to take up philosophy. After a stint studying history in Germany, Du Bois eventually became the first black person to earn a Harvard PhD (Menand 2001).[7] How closely he followed pragmatist thinking is less clear, as much of this writing concern political and sociological issues. Late in life he endorsed policies to encourage blacks in America to emigrate to Africa (Du Bois 2022), as he himself did.

Dealing with questions of race in writing *Fleetwood* brought me no closer, however, to reconciling the persistent tension in pragmatism – that choices should be made on historical contingencies, and that statements of absolutes must be regarded skeptically. But it did reinforce my sense that hope and belief provide a basis for agency and change, if perhaps not the inevitability of progress. Does it allow pragmatists, including James, Holmes, and Dewey, to escape from relativism by evading the moral implications of its pragmatism's ontological ambivalence? Was slavery less wrong in the middle and end of the 19th century than in the middle and end of the 20th, or now?

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[5] William James was prevented by his father from enlisting to fight in the Civil War, a position William came to regret (Menand 2001, 74).

[6] Locke's role in New York literary life is evidenced in his book *The New Negro* (1925). His philosophical writings are collected in Harris (1989).

[7] Pluralism reigned between these two black pragmatists, who disagreed about literature and race in society. See Harris (2004).

The philosophical surprises

The first philosophical surprise came as I grew conscious, in the process of writing *Fleetwood*, of how the intellectual puzzle of contingency became uncomfortable, even painful, in the absence of love, or at least its overt expression. The writing process saw these characters emerge as unable to let themselves love. This emergent theme led me to the philosophical writings of Iris Murdoch, which reject both postmodernism and pragmatism. Most of the way through writing *Fleetwood*, I sought out her book *The Sovereignty of Good*, in which she identifies love as a path to the overarching, transcendent idea of the Good, with its human and deeply unreasoned concern for the other. I found in Murdoch's argument evidence of doubt as well as conviction about whether transcendence is justifiable in the God-less universe. She seems to make instead an affirmation of some sort of faith – perhaps in art if not in a metaphysical being. In Rorty's later writings, *hope* might stand as a proxy for the *love* that I found absent – from the foreground at least – in this story. Hope and love emerge as ways to cope with the uncertainty. In a quest for something good, is love what gives us hope? Or is hope that lets us love?

A second philosophic surprise emerged from the setting of the novel. Writing *Fleetwood* was from its inception an exploration of the world of care, with its core actions set in an institution of childcare. Alongside family ties, it examines the practice of social care, its institutionalization and growing professionalization. Late in the process of writing the first draft of *Fleetwood*, I came across[8] the writings of three scholars who articulated care ethics: Carol Gilligan's empirical work (1993), Joan Tronto's theorizing (1993), and Virginia Held's systematic attempt to build an ethics of care (2005). Each focuses on interpersonal relationships, rather than on individuals and their decisions.

These writers identify four elements in the ethics of care: attentiveness; taking responsibility for the person needing care, but not out of a sense of obligation; being competent to deliver the care required; and understanding what is involved in receiving care. I was impressed with how well this approach encapsulated the themes emerging from the story I was attempting to tell.

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[8] The duty of care arose during audience discussion of one of the papers presented at the Philosophy of Management conference in Oxford (2022). I had heard of the idea before but without realizing its distinctive character, which separates it from other themes in applied ethics.

Attentiveness is challenged by the competing demands on the attention of the characters in *Fleetwood*. Discussions of duty in Part 3 play with the ambiguity of the terms "responsibility" and "obligation," as they are commonly used. By contrast, Tronto's attempt to distinguish between them associates "responsibility" with intrinsic motivation, and "obligation" with an extrinsic and negative motivation of debt.[9] When Krueger thinks of obligation, it is something Tronto would label responsibility, an expression of care for Martha Fleetwood as well as the boys in care. The question of competence in *Fleetwood* is constantly raised, often answered in the affirmative, but not always. Understanding the other person's side of the care equation – which is more complex and visceral than empathy – seems to be something Krueger has at the outset, and it grows through the story. It is something Dr. Addam lacks initially and but learns.

A fifth element is mentioned in accounts of the ethics of care: pluralism, that is, recognizing and responding to the individual needs of each person cared for. Acceptance of pluralism situates it in experience and context in ways broadly compatible with pragmatist thinking (e.g., James 1909). In re-reading the nearly finished draft manuscript I saw the language of those elements laced throughout the text. The need for pluralism is what Dr. Addam brings to the asylum, a central tenet of her pragmatist orientation, courtesy of John Dewey. But hers is book learning, not the experiential kind that Dewey advocates. In her fictional life, Addam develops an affective and not just cognitive understanding of contingency through the experience of the Depression, as Dewey did in his philosophical life.

The ideas in the philosophy of care had emerged unnoticed as I had been writing the novel. The orphanage is an institution of care. Martha Fleetwood intended it as such. The ideas articulated in the ethics of care literature play an important role in Part 5 of *Fleetwood*. In re-reading the nearly completed first draft, I saw, throughout the text, the building blocks that the research of Gilligan, Tronto, and Held had articulated. For me, these narrative elements had lacked a label, until I was quite near the end.

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[9] Tronto argues that obligations are generally regarded as arising from promises made. Responsibilities, by contrast, are embedded "in a set of implicit cultural practices, rather than in a set of formal rules or series of promises." She suggests, "we are better served by focusing on a flexible notion of responsibility than we are by continuing to use obligation as the basis for understanding what people should do for each other." See Tronto (1993, 131-133).

This observation reminds us – reminded me – that this project sought to examine the ontological and epistemological puzzles of pragmatism for the sake of resolving their implications for ethics. Writing this thesis pointed to paths to lead, if not a good life, at least to ones that are "good enough."[10] In the contingent and evolving world that pragmatists posit, that may be the best understanding we can achieve. Turning to the related question behind what we often call novels of ideas, what can readers learn from engaging with fiction, with stories that are not true, not literally, at least?

The ethics of reading and writing

The experience of reading can be creative in much the same way that writing is, as Dewey has argued (1934/1958). But what value does reading fiction bring? The philosopher and literary theorist Martha Nussbaum has argued that reading the great works of literature, the canon, is "an exercise in moral imagination" (McGregor 2015, 114). In discussing the writing of Henry James – William James's brother – Nussbaum (1983, 44) writes, "If our moral lives are 'stories' in which mystery and risk play a central and a valuable role, then it may well seem that the 'intelligent report' of those lives requires the abilities and techniques of the teller of stories." Derek Attridge makes a similar but subtler argument, however, by drawing a distinction between the ethics of reading and its morality. The project of reading, as well as of writing, involves a responsibility – a concern for the other – to be responsive to the "otherness" of the work, its "unpredictability and risk" (2004, 126). With an echo of the distinction made by the philosopher Michel Foucault (1990, 25), Attridge contrasts that ethical stance with merely moral reading, which follows the "specific obligations governing concrete situations in a given social context" (2004, 127).

This separation – of the responsibility to the singular and the obligation to the general – resonates with the themes of the ethics of care, with its emphasis on

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[10] I have noted in Chapter 2 research in moral psychology pointing to an evolutionary benefit from cognitive patterns that are "good enough" (Kluver, Frazier, and Haidt 2014). Daniel Milo, a philosopher of science, makes a more general point, that in genetic adaptation, suboptimal solutions may survive because they arise accidentally alongside very good ones (Milo 2019; see also Nordberg 2020). Pragmatist philosophy emerged in large part as a response to the development of Darwin's insights on natural selection that unsettled metaphysics and traditional approaches to morality (Menand 2001).

the relational and interpersonal, not the individual. I see something similar at work with the process of writing, and in my process in writing *Fleetwood*, and the responsibility – to the particular, the contingent, and the "otherness" – that writers undertake in explorative storytelling, in contrast to the obligation in fiction that enacts.

Toward conclusions

Has the writing of *Fleetwood*, a mere novel, been an example of what Carroll (2013) calls "doing" philosophy in fiction, by which I understand discovering new ideas, creating explanatory ontologies, articulating the basis of knowledge, or attempting to resolve centuries-old debates about the basis for moral decision or the pursuit of a good life? Probably not. The ideas I found through writing the story were already well articulated in philosophy, argued and disputed. The anti-foundational pragmatism of Dewey, filtered in *Fleetwood* through Dr. Addam, stands in opposition to the Kantian universalism of Reverend Krueger. At first they enact a longstanding debate. But in doing so both move to something like the discomfort I have felt with both positions, the skepticism I held towards them, and yet the longing I had for an explanation of ways to act that valued "good," if not accepting the transcendental "Good" that Murdoch sought to defend. In this story hope, love, care – in their presence and absence, deficit and occasional surfeit – is the lesson I learned by writing fiction. While I may not have been "doing" philosophy in writing this novel, I was learning philosophy through using imagination. I may not have *dis*covered something new to the world, but I *un*covered – that is, found – things new to me, things that may *work*, in William James's sense of the term: that *hope* and *care* are ways of coping with ambiguity and uncertainty in the face of the unlikelihood of any *Good*, though perhaps less well than they might had *love* been present.

As this thesis has argued, there are at least two ways that ideas manifest in fiction. One is enactment of well rehearsed arguments, setting competing ideas in conflict that illuminates both and often declares a winner, often with polemical and didactic intent. It is this approach was used disparagingly about 19th century novels that sought to effect social change, as well as 20th century works that addressed political conflict. Sianne Ngai (2020b) says such works use "readymade" ideas as "gimmicks." Ideas rigidify into ideologies.

However, fiction can provide a platform to explore ideas, ideas that are not fully formed, ones that are counterintutive, ambiguous, or paradoxical. In lieu of conducting scientific research on human subjects, fiction allows readers to engage in the fictional equivalent of thought experiments. In that sense, and as Michael LeMahieu (2015) has asserted, all novels concern ideas, just some more consciously than others. The term "fiction of ideas" perhaps applies best to works that use ideas to prompt thoughtful reflection and an openness to emergence, whether their starting point involves enactment or exploration. Examination distinguishes shallow ideas from the profound. To paraphrase Plato (in the "Apology"),[11] perhaps the unexamined *fictional* life is not worth reading.

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[11] At 38a in many texts, and p. 32 in the 1900 Jowett translation listed among the works cited.

Appendix 1 – Examples of fictions and ideas

Introduction

The variety of ways that ideas are considered in fiction is wide and growing. This appendix provides short analyses of further examples that illustrate the argument advanced in this thesis: first, that genre is built upon heuristics, but that novelty comes from breaking the anchor-points of heuristics; second, that some enact well articulated philosophical positions, while others – concerning ambiguous and uncertain philosophy puzzles – are better seen as explorations, and third, that the techniques of storytelling – and anchor-points moved or exploded – can allow depth of characterization to emerge and exploration to surface in fictions of ideas that otherwise enact the ideas they present.

That is, some writers blend enactment and exploration, breaking out of the heuristics and confounding their biases. In so doing they can escape from conventions and break free from enacting readymade ideas so they can explore the uncertainty and ambiguity that has dominated philosophical discussion during the 20th and 21st centuries.

The following eight brief analyses supplement those in Chapter 4 concerning *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and Elizabeth McKenzie's *The Portable Veblen*. Four concern long-format television series to illustrate the presence of similar approaches in scripts and production.

'Herrens Veje' ('Ride upon the storm,' DR Drama)

This 2017-18 Danish television series enacts a "fiction of ideas" in the sense that it takes an idea – Christian faith and the guilt it induces – and sets it against the decline of mainstream religion, the mercantilism of the church hierarchy (property values, fiddling the books) and the growth of the Muslim population. The plot involves a family, many generations of priests undergoing a dissolution (Series 1) and collapse (start of Series 2). Younger son, August, the latest generation of priests, steps out in front of a truck at the end of Series 1, lured into the road by the ghost of a Muslim woman he killed while serving as a priest for the troops in Afghanistan. He reluctantly picks up a gun when his troops come

under attack, and shoots at what he thinks could be a suicide bomber dressed in women's clothing. It is in fact a mother trying to save her children.

At the start of Series 2, August's father is fighting the bishop's proposed sale of August's old church for conversion to a mosque. The older son, Christian, is in Denmark again, making a living writing books and selling a new age spirituality after returning from his own spiritual crisis in Series 1, when he went to Nepal and became something of a Buddhist. There are more layers, too.

For the thesis, this is a character-led exploration of a sociological and philosophical confrontation between competing ideas of religion that challenge the possibility of escaping the challenges uncertainty through religion. The series is both psychological and philosophical, the plot isn't strong, but the ideas are. And the framing device of music – I can't get the theme out of my head. I can't sleep well after watching it.

Pears's *An Instance of the Fingerpost*

The 1997 novel by Iain Pears is an account of the death by poisoning of an Oxford professor in 1663, told from four different vantage points. Critics have drawn analogies to Akira Kurosawa's film "Rashomon" (Kirkus Reviews 1997; Bernstein 1998), but there are significant differences between the two mechanisms and their import. Kurosawa's story gives four accounts of eyewitnesses to a killing, each based on the same facts but on which the witnesses place different interpretations. In *Fingerpost*, three of Pears's narrators have reasons to benefit from the professor's death and reasons to conceal or even change facts. They develop separate theories of why someone else was the murderer. The fourth claims to be the murderer, although the poison was not intended as lethal, as he did not fully understand what the substance was, and wanted instead to spite the professor, who was planning to do what we would now call "self-medication".

This is a novel of ideas in the sense that it deals on multiple levels with questions of epistemology. Restoration England was a time of intellectual tumult. The university scholars are in the process of a major debate in the philosophy of science. Quotations from Francis Bacon introduce each of the narratives, and the book's title is drawn from one of them (Pears 1997, 527). Empiricism is challenging first principles. Experimentation challenges rationality. The Enlightenment is coming, but it isn't here. It is also an exploration of ontology. In

metaphysical terms, it raises questions of God's will, and which version of Christianity is the true faith. Restoration has brought a notionally Protestant, high Church of England king, Charles II, to the throne, but is he a closet Roman Catholic? Supporters of Oliver Cromwell's Puritans still cling on to power, despite Cromwell's death. Ontology is also the issue the reader faces about the murder. Which of these radically different accounts is true? Moreover, most of the characters in the novel were real people, and the varying accounts of their actions dovetail neatly with the biographies of the people these characters represent.

As the final version of the story unfolds, however, the ambiguities are resolved. The fourth account, by a historian, is first and foremost a confession. Of the four narrators, only he claims first-hand knowledge. But even he was not present at the time the professor drank the poison. His is an empirical account, based on evidence. He placed the poison in the bottle of brandy. He is the alibi for the young woman servant convicted of the crime. And he alone knows (or perhaps only "claims") that she somehow did not die in her public execution by hanging. His account even tells his readers about the clues they have perhaps overlooked in this 691-page, 350,000-word verbal romp through 17th Century culture, diction and grammar. He thus demonstrates the superiority of his account to the other three narrators, and the superiority of his knowledge to the readers.

This is a story that unfolds multiple versions of the personalities of the characters, which provides a postmodern, Rashomon-like relativity, at least through the first three accounts. But the world of *Fingerpost* is not relativistic. The novel plumps for history and empiricism over rationality and deduction, and for one narrator telling of the truth and exposing the others as liars. There is "truth" at the end of the story, a truth that explains what readers know was the rest of the story: the collapse of Charles II's reign, renewed religious strife, the shift in the family line of the monarchy, the coming of the Enlightenment, and the slow victory of empiricism over faith. That the victory is slow means the "history" reveals more than even science.

This is not therefore a character-based fictional account. Characters exist, but they are revealed over the four narratives as more complex, multilayered, than in many murder mysteries. But they are revealed as static, not dynamic, and the revelation is a process of coming to knowledge, not of development. Plot is complex, but only because the four narrators seek to disguise or reveal different plots, plots against the king, against the Church of England, against the

dissenters, against the march of science. This is a novel of multiple ideas, enacted though archetypes of the philosophical positions articulated, albeit articulated by narrators with very different ideologies driving the ideas they present.

Watching Rashomon, audiences experience ambiguity and uncertainty. All four accounts are based on the same facts, but the meaning of those facts depend on the witnesses' interpretations. Reading *Fingerpost* is, by contrast, an exercise in experiencing historical contingency. New facts come to light over time; the reader's judgement of their meaning in develops, leading to a "reasonable" understanding of truth.[1] Enlightenment arrives through sustained attention to the accumulating evidence. The 20th or 21st Century reader knows more even than the most reliable of the book's four narrators.

'Sacha,' Radio Télévision Suisse

This 2021 six-part drama crime series, set mainly in Geneva, offers viewers a murder mystery with several epistemological twists. First, the victim doesn't die, though he is in a coma, a condition from which viewers may well hope he never recovers. Second, we know the would-be murderer from the first scene, a public prosecutor, Anne Dupraz, who immediately goes to the police and confesses. Job done. But not quite.

"Sacha" is also a ghost story, though like the murder victim, the ghosts are very much alive. Anne is soon visited by her teenaged self and young-adult self, who nags her adult self to let the full story come out, the story of Sacha, Anne – or is it Nanette – as her parents call her? As elements of her history emerge, Anne is visited by an even younger self, a character who speaks not a word. The three versions of self sit together in the interrogations, in the jail cell, in houses and apartments, as the present-day Anne finds ways to give voice to events of the past. Are these repressed memories or ones she knows full well but just refuses to accept? The narrative flows in short bursts through four time periods, the present, the near past, a time thirty years back, and then another dozen in the past. Viewers live iteratively, vicariously, emotionally, Anne's life story, the

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[1] The term "reasonable" is used here in the sense in law of a "reasonable person's view," and in contrast to rationality, modelled on Cartesian logic. Philosophers use the terms with differing ontological assumptions (Cf. Toulmin 2001; Rawls 2005; Sen 2009).

near parallels facing Anne's daughter and niece in the present time, and Anne's piecemeal development of causal links to others, comes toward the end, to articulate. This is an enactment of psychiatric therapy, with the viewer as psychiatrist, asking the patient unspoken questions, listening to the fractured answers, gradually piecing together a life story that also follows the script, we are led to believe, of academic research into child abuse, prostitution, and the possibility of redemption through acceptance of truth.

Auster's *Oracle Night*

This 2003 novel by Paul Auster has been analyzed often in literary journals (Arce Álvarez 2018; Buday 2019; Ni 2013; Maniez 2009; Moradi 2017; Ni and Lian 2012; Patteson 2008; Peacock 2006; Simonsen 2009) as well as in a psychology journal to demonstrate a model for assessing identity (Barani 2019). It is a novel describing the creative process through a "succession of different fictional layers that overlap and reflect on each other" (Arce Álvarez 2018, 241). Auster, the writer, tells the story of a fictional writer of fiction who breaks through his writer's block by shaping a novel about an editor who is trying to assess a newly discovered novel of a fictional novelist now fictionally dead. The fictional writer draws the initial idea from a friend, a fictional novelist whose surname happens to be an anagram of "Auster".

But the ideas in this work are not just metafiction, though his work is often described this way (Arce Álvarez 2018; Ni 2013), a novel of ideas in that it writes about writing novels. Auster is often called a postmodernist (Butler and Gurr 2008), or moving between modernism and the postmodern (Espejo 2013), though such an attribution is also contested (Peacock 2006). Patteson (2008, 116) describes its subject as "the fragility of the human sense of existence that we call, for lack of a better word, *identity*" (emphasis in the original). The story is thin on plot. Characters move through a landscape, mainly New York, in which they interact in a mixture of the mundane and the magical. Even the interior novel comes to a halt with its protagonist locked inside a dark, underground vault with no means of escape. The magical realism of the Paper Palace (Brooklyn and Manhattan) is not a way of solving an ontological puzzle, but rather a dead end in the main character's search for meaning.

The puzzle arises in part through the way Auster uses the novel within the novel to call attention to time. In it imagination lets the protagonist-novelist of the

outer layer project forward in time, play with alternative futures, then, through the magical power of the blue Portuguese notebook, lose power over the present and future, become lost in time and go missing in (mental, physical?) space even from his wife, and then become stuck in time as his character is locked in the subterranean vault. This play with space-time echoes the growing public familiarity with Einsteinian physics, another intellectual games.

Yet both the novel and the interior novel are more than puzzles or riddles. They project confusion and anguish of the narrator-protagonist of the novel and the protagonist-subject of the interior novel as the events turn their domestic lives inside out. By the end of the book, we are pretty sure but not certain that the narrator has been betrayed, though only through the evidence of his own fictionalization of his life, corroborated by the story of the life of his mentor, told ten years after the events by a biographer, who is also a fiction of the author's invention. We are never sure what is real, except perhaps the pain of not knowing, for sure, where we stand. This cerebral, "clever" metafiction (Peacock 2006; Simonsen 2009) is also visceral, felt by the reader, the author, the narrator-writer and the interior novel's protagonist. This novel is an exercise in character analysis and development as the protagonist-novelist recovers his strength after a pre-book accident, breaks through his writer's block, discovers through his imagined future the secrets of his wife's "past" a decade before his finds its confirmation in the biography of his wife's friend-lover-novelist, maybe. This is a character being re-built, then deconstructed, then reassembled in a state even more worn and tired than he started out.

'Babylon Berlin' (Sky Deutschland)

Series 3 of this 2020 German television production, based on the Gereon Rath detective novels of Volker Kutscher, depicts Berlin under the Weimar Republic in the late 1920s, in the years before the Nazis came to power. Communist sympathizers struggle against the police. Conservatives longing for a return to the aristocracy seek wrest power from the Social Democrats. Decadence reigns in the nightclubs frequented by criminals and corrupt bureaucrats. And all the while, a sentiment of "art for art's sake" takes on a modernist, expressionist direction among the acquaintances of a monied effete heir to an industrial empire waiting for what he correctly sees as the inevitability of a crash on Wall Street. And all take aim at the Jews. The arch criminals launder

their drug money by making movies. They have one of the first "talkies" in German under production, a vampire story, when a spotlight in the rafters suddenly falls onto the set, killing the leading lady in the middle of a stylized expressionist dance number.

This series thus places a variety of readymade ideas in contrast with their opposites. But where it differs from the usual, flat characterization and speechifying that Ngai derides in novels of ideas (2020a) is in the swirl of ideas that compete for the attention of viewers. The mystery of the crime is matched by the mystery of how these ideas clash across alignments the dichotomies they and their opposites create. Conservatives oppose not only the Social Democrats but also the Nazis. But they use the Nazis too. The Modernists-Expressionists live off the excesses of the industrialists, who are mainly conservatives, but also live among them. The criminals live symbiotically with police and politicians and finance the artists and expressionists. Only the Jews stick together, but even they are still embedded in all social classes united and divided by the tumult of ideas. The devices of short scenes with sharp cuts between them, of dialogues overlapping scene changes in ways that disorient viewers, frame this as a story of confusion, and of morality and ontology turned inside out. The brash interiors of the nightclubs and the outburst of technology – of movie-making and emerging scientific criminology – contrast with the stark dilapidation of the street scenes. After twelve hours of viewing, it can be hard to remember even the victim whose death triggered this investigation, but viewers have experienced uncertainty, challenges to conventions, and the co-mingling of beauty and seeming evil.

This series illustrates how the conventions of detective fiction and the heuristics on which it depends can be upended by breaking away from the anchor points that have created the genre. "Babylon Berlin" enacted the well understood dichotomies of ideas and exploits their well understood premises. But at the same time, it disrupts each comfortable certainty with the cacophony of other dichotomies and their repeated recombination and reconstitution. The series thus uses multiple enactments of readymade ideas to explore the ambiguities the underlie the difficulties of modernism, expressionism and politics in Weimar Germany.

Labatut's *When We Cease to Understand the World*

This unconventional novel, or perhaps better put, the non-non-fiction book, was published in 2020 in English translation. In *When We Cease to Understand the World*, the Chilean writer Benjamín Labatut interlaces exposition of some of the most puzzling developments in science during the 20th century with imagined accounts of the puzzlement their discoverers must have felt. Labatut told the *New York Times Book Review* podcast: "The book is trying to deal with these ideas that exceed our understanding and that, in some sense, those ideas infected the form of the book, and made it hang in a strange liminal space where fact and fiction get blurred because it's trying to look at these things that actually blur if you look at them closely." … "[C]ertain ideas and happenings that exceed our capacity for understanding. … The book is trying to deal with these ideas that exceed our understanding and that, in some sense, those ideas infected the form of the book, and made it hang in a strange liminal space where fact and fiction get blurred because it's trying to look at these things that actually blur if you look at them closely" (Williams and Labatut 2021).

'Happy Valley' (Season 3, BBC)

The last ten minutes of the final episode of this three-series, 18-episode BBC drama is what passes for retribution for all the unhappiness that has preceded it. Like many police dramas, Happy Valley is underpinned by a quest for justice.

In the penultimate scene, after packing up her desk and vanishing before her retirement-party even starts, police sergeant Catherine Cawood leaves. Just minutes before, Tommy Lee Royce – who had raped Catherine's daughter Becky's and had fathered of Becky's child – had enacted self-immolation in Catherine's kitchen the morning of Catherine's retirement. Becky committed suicide in Series 1. Earlier in Series 3, Royce had escaped from prison.

In the final scene – that afternoon, the next day? – and out of uniform, she visits the grave of her daughter. Catherine places a finger-kiss on the top of the gravestone, and the camera swings to a new position – face onto the stone – showing in full the inscription. We have seen the stone before, but not from this angle. "Rebecca Cawoon, (Becky)'" it says. Birth and death years, Daughter of … Sister of, and then this inscription: "In God is My Hope."

Calling this saga a "fiction of ideas" is not straightforward, but the elements are there. Royce has been labeled throughout as a psychopath, not the personification of "evil" *per se*, but near enough. The final series offers a glimpse or who that he might be seeking redemption, but there are few if any characters that enact virtue as the counterpart to his viciousness. The "valley" is anything but "happy."

Catherine's mobile phone buzzes. A text message notes the TLR – Royce – has been declared dead from his self-inflicted injuries. Catherine might have killed him but didn't, or just let him burn to death in the kitchen. Waiting is part of the justice she has come to represent, though she is far from a saint.

And yet: "God" and "Hope" are near-enough the closing words. Are these merely irony? Or does that inscription tell us – the hopeful among us at least – that there is a God, or even that there is hope? What does "hope" entail? Hope seems to be, even in a God-less fictional world like this, an aspiration for a route out, for progress perhaps. Hope is at least a way of coping with the existential angst of the story, through all its twists.

Powers's *Bewilderment*

In his first book after the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Overstory*, Richard Powers (2021) uses first-person narration by a scientist, Theo Byrne, concerning his son, Robin, who is somewhere "on the spectrum" (p. 5), though the father wishes not to acknowledge the meaningfulness of the term. In *Bewilderment*, Powers relates how the boy's mother, Alyssa, died in a car accident, having driven into an ongoing vehicle as she swerved to avoid killing an animal crossing the road.

By day, the father is an astrobiologist, seeking objects in the universe that might support life. By night, he invents new planets, somewhere in the universe and full of life forms, as bedtime stories for the nine-year-old Robin. These worlds, and the world that Theo and Robin inhabit, have their own rules. Understanding them is a way that Theo uses to encourage Robin to understand the rules of this world. Facing pressure from the boy's school to calm his behavior through psychoactive medication, Theo enlists a friend of his wife, an old acquaintance and perhaps lover, who conducts clinical experiments in neurofeedback therapy. It involves an fMRI scanner using software powered by artificial intelligence to

encourage people with psychic disorders to find ways of coping. At first, it proves a success for Robin.

Robin's mother was a campaigner for biodiversity, obsessed with species threatened with extinction in a world now so dominated by humankind. When we meet Robin, he shares that obsession. After the initial success of the scanner-based treatment, Robin begins his own campaigning, with little and then some success.

This novel is one *of ideas* in that it explores the epistemological challenge that autism highlights: How do we know something to be true? Specifically, how did Robin's mother know – for sure – that the existence of 98 percent of species by weight on Earth was threatened? That challenge raises the ethical one: What should we do about it? The ontological version comes in the novel's science fiction, the stories he invents, which are made more, rather than less, plausible through Theo's deep understanding of the possibilities for life on other planets in other parts of the universe: What is real?

The characters in this book dominate; plot is there in a broad narrative arc, but its main role is providing opportunities for empathy for a boy who has trouble empathizing and then drawing back from it to maintain a sense of self. On pp. 129-130, we read Theo's recollection of one of his wife's nightmares:

> The first time, I thought she was screaming at someone coming into the room. I shot up, my heart seceding from my chest. My lunge woke her. Still in limbo, she broke out crying.
>
> "Honey," I said. "It's okay. I'm here."
>
> Her rebuff was so violent I almost got up and went to sleep in the other room. Three in the morning, the woman I loved was weeping in the dark and I wanted to tell her how badly she'd just hurt me. That's the ruling story on this planet. We lived suspended between love and ego. Maybe it's different in other galaxies. But I doubt it.

"Between love and ego": the dichotomy separates the other- and self-regarding, empathy and self-interest, perhaps even the collective and the individual. In a different form, the puzzle of Robin's life, too, his inability to read the minds of present others, and yet deeply in love with his missing mother, who sacrificed her life – figuratively and then literally – for the sake of non-human animals.

In this book, Powers enacts the emerging science of autism in fiction, alongside his discursive articulation of the dangers from the loss of biodiversity. But he does so in a way that lets us explore the uncertain, ambiguous epistemology and ontology through the development of his characters, even as the ethics seem firmly fixed, never open to question. It is a story that, for all its tolerance of strangeness, tells us what the meaning of life is. The strangeness makes it affecting, even when the ideas come across as preachy.

How does the book achieve this? One example is this: From the first page onward, Powers makes prominent use of an odd typographical device. Theo speaks in quotation marks, as in the paragraphs cited above. Robin responds in *italics*. So does his dead mother. That device begs questions: Is it an allegory, a signal of an ending? Of Robin's? Or of human life on Earth? The allegorical is never articulated, however. Is this, then, like *The Overstory*, a novel of ideas, or a novel of ideology?

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For journal articles included as part of thesis

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Chapter 3 – *Philosophy and Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press):

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