Book Review

MATRAVERS, DEREK. *Fiction and Narrative*. Oxford University Press 2014, viii + 169 pp., $49.50 hardcover.

Reviewed by László Kajtár

It is an entrenched belief in academic and popular cultures that fiction has a special relationship with imagination. While true stories, histories, and biographies demand that the reader believe what he or she reads, fictional stories and most literary narratives necessitate a type of engagement more reliant on the imagination. The paradigmatic image of the reader of fiction is that of Bastian in Michael Ende’s *The Neverending Story*: clutching the book, blocking out the actual world, and completely lost in the imagined fiction.

Derek Matravers’s new volume provides a sophisticated argument that calls into question the view sketched above. In *Fiction and Narrative*, Matravers sets out to criticize what he calls the “consensus view,” which draws the distinction between non-fiction and fiction in terms of representational types: factual representations invite beliefs, while fictional representations invite make-believe or imagination. According to the consensus view, when one reads a factual narrative, the narrative mandates that one form beliefs. When I read an account of the French Revolution, I am supposed to believe that the attack on the Bastille really did occur. On the other hand, goes on the consensus view, when it comes to fictional narratives, the narrative calls for a different kind of readerly attitude. Since Kendall Walton’s seminal 1990 book, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, this readerly attitude is frequently characterized as one of make-believe. When I read about Gregor Samsa’s transformation into a giant insect in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, I am not supposed to believe that this has actually occurred. Instead, I am supposed to play along with the story and imaginatively make-believe the state of affairs. The imagination is the vehicle that carries me through my engagement with the fictional representation.

According to Matravers, this theory is fundamentally misguided. He argues that our relationship to objects and states of affairs depends on whether they are given in our “egocentric space” — the actual, immediate environment that is present to our senses.Crudely put, either we directly experience something and enjoy a confrontation relation on the basis of our perceptual inputs, or we become indirectly aware of something that is not in our immediate environment (by someone telling us about it, for instance) and enjoy a representation relation. In other words, if the cause of our awareness is perceptual input of the object or state of affairs, we relate to it confrontationally, but if the cause is indirect, mediated information, we relate to it representationally. Furthermore, action regarding the
object is possible in the confrontation case, but not the representation case. Thus what Matravers calls the “real distinction” is between two cognitive relations — representation and confrontation — and not between fictionality and non-fictionality. Whether representations represent objects or states of affairs that actually obtain in the world is a further question.

Matravers relies on empirical research into the psychology of text processing and narrative comprehension to support both his criticism and his positive account. On his view, when we process a narrative-type text, we form representation relations with the states of affairs depicted. The product of such a relation is a minimal mental model of what is represented. Matravers cites psychological studies to support his argument that this representational process of forming a mental model is neutral vis-à-vis fictionality. In other words, the same process of mental model formation applies when I read about the history of the French Revolution or the story of poor Gregor Samsa. Narratives represent states of affairs, and the nature of this representation does not depend on the fictional or factual nature of those states of affairs.

Matravers’s appeal to psychology is a provocative but welcome move, especially given the sentimental overtones that frequently characterize discussion of engaging with fictions. Moreover, this approach yields resources for dealing with longstanding, mind-bending problems such as the paradox of fiction or the puzzle of imaginative resistance. Regarding the former, Matravers argues that it is not a paradox and it is not about fiction. The problem is this: can we have genuine emotions in response to fictional works? Can we genuinely fear the creatures of horror movies, even while we believe that they cannot harm us? In Matravers’s framework, the paradox dissipates: both confrontation and representation relations can evoke emotions independent of fictionality. In the final chapter of the book, Matravers also extends his account to film, arguing that imagination is not central to our cinematic engagement either. This is the last step of the book’s sustained argument that imagination is not intimately tied up with fictionality per se.

While *Fiction and Narrative* does require some familiarity with the philosophy of literature, and is definitely not an overview of the basics, the book offers a unique perspective and an argument that should be useful for graduate students and researchers working in the field. Since *Fiction and Narrative* is a compact volume, it is not too difficult to pinpoint particular sites of disagreement. One possible counter-argument against the main thesis is the following. Matravers states that representations can have different uses, but he does not consider the possibility that the nature of the representation might be influenced by the purposes it serves. Fictional and non-fictional narratives are not constructed in the same way, so fictional and non-fictional representations might have different qualities. In other words, the supposed neutrality of representations vis-à-vis fictionality might be called into question if one takes the production of the representations into account. True, it is widely accepted that there are no knockdown formal criteria for a text to be fictional, but it is also accepted that there are various salient markers that signal fictionality. Might not these markers influence the mental models that readers build? And if they do, might not their influence be related to the imagination? This could seem implausible given the empirical data that Matravers cites, but I cannot immediately see how it could be excluded as a possibility. Nonetheless, *Fiction and Narrative* provides excellent impetus to make one rethink some entrenched conceptions and connections that populate the philosophy of literature and art in general.

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