

## The Art of the Possible in Life and Literature

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Many authors have celebrated or deplored the power of literature, by its ability to elicit emotion, to refine—or corrupt—moral sense. Most recently, Martha Nussbaum (2001) has argued that literature is an indispensable complement to ethical training; Oatley (2003) has urged that we can think of fiction as providing a “kit” enabling the reader to conduct a *simulation* implemented in on the virtual machine that runs on the reader’s (or “*readerandwriter’s*”) own brain; and in the same vein, Noël Carroll has claimed that “fiction ... augments the range of our imaginative powers ... indispensable for virtually every sort of human intercourse.” (Carroll 2004, 101)

Imaginative fiction undoubtedly allows us a better understanding of the range of what is possible. But not only the possible: for it is—as well known works by Escher or Hogarth<sup>1</sup> make clear—the privilege of art to be able to represent what no one can bring about, namely the impossible. That fact brings potential dangers, for the very fact that the impossible can be represented can falsify our notions of what is possible. But what is it exactly for something to be possible, or impossible?

### 1. Two kinds of possibles

When philosophers talk about modality—what is necessary, possible, or impossible—they typically refer to propositions. Any meaningful proposition *p* has both an *alethic* value (true or false) and a *modal* value. These are partly independent: what is necessary must be true, what is impossible must be false; but what is possible can be one or the other. The modalities can be elegantly disposed around a square of opposition, displaying them appropriately as contraries (which can’t be both true together but can both be false together), as subcontraries (which can’t be both false together but can both be true), and contradictories (which must have opposite truth values at all times). Thus positioned on the square of opposition, the modal properties are seen to be isomorphic with the alethic properties of the propositional forms in Aristotelian logic:

What *All S are P* is to *No S is P*, *Necessarily p* is to *Necessarily not-p*; and what *All S are P* is to *Some S are not-P*, *Necessarily p* is to *Possibly not-p*.

This is neat, but it raises several problems. First of all, this isomorphism conceals a profound difference. Modality is really a metaphysical notion, meaning that it is intrinsically unobservable. You can sometimes establish that a proposition is true or that it is false. But to claim that a true proposition is not merely true but moreover *necessarily* true, or that a false proposition is

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1. Hogarth’s satire on *False Perspective* can be viewed online at <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/spec/hogarth/Aesthetics7.html>. Escher’s prints are widely available; an animated version of some of them, demonstrating the impossibility of what they represent, is available at <http://www.mcescher.com/>.

*impossible*, is more than can ever be established by empirical observation. For a long time, this gave modal logic a bad name: the Empiricists from Hume to Quine proclaimed that there was no such thing as objective necessity. That changed with the model theoretic semantics introduced in the 60's by Saul Kripke and others. In different ways, these semantic systems gave a coherent and manageable account of the relation of "accessibility" from one model or possible world to another, so that we could understand possibility in terms of that relation. On model-theoretic semantics, a proposition is necessary iff it is true in all accessible worlds, impossible iff it is true in none, and possible iff it is true in some of them.

That leaves only the task of determining what it is for a world to be accessible from this one. But that is hardly a trivial task, for it seems to land us right where we started. For 'accessible' means 'possible of access', so what is accessible from this world is just a special case of what we were trying to figure out in the first place: *what is possible?*

The differences between alternative versions of the new modal semantics are mostly a matter of technical detail. But there is one major difference: for Lewis (1970) the actual world is one member of the equal-opportunity set of all possible worlds: the actual is privileged only in being where we happen to be. The word 'actual', in 'the actual world', is a token-reflexive, functioning like 'now', 'here', or 'this' in 'this country'. We can express this by saying that the actual is contained in the possible. But that way of talking obscures the fact that, from another point of view, *the possible is contained in the actual*: what is or is not possible is part of what is real, part of what we have to contend with, to take into account in our planning. Without the possible, a whole class of emotions (fear, hope, doubt, or trust) would literally have no object. Furthermore we construct the entities of other possible worlds with the raw material available in our own. As Nelson Goodman put it, "the only possible entities are actual ones." (Goodman 1973, 55)<sup>2</sup>

Here is one way to see how the possible is contained in the actual. Many properties are dispositional: the actual microstructure of glass is such as to make it possible for light to pass through it; and the liquidity of water supervenes on the arrangement of molecules above freezing. A crucial feature of this way of thinking is that what is possible shifts as the actual world evolves. This is true of what we can do as well as of what can be thought.

Even the most original talent cannot proceed beyond certain limits which are fixed for it by the date of its birth. Not everything is possible at all times and certain thoughts can only be thought at certain stages of the development. (Heinrich Wölfflin, quoted in Galison 1996, 10.)

This is of interest inasmuch as each of us aspires to understand what potential emotions, what potential achievements, defeats, conquests or betrayals *we have it in us* to live through. Those

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2. To say that possible-world semantics tends to obscure this is not to say that it cannot express an equivalent truth. It is a truth *about* any world  $w_i$  that  $w_j$  is or is not accessible from  $w_i$ , where  $w_j$  contains what we would ordinarily say is or is not possible in  $w_i$ . The semantics of Kripke and van Fraassen are more hospitable to the view that the possible is in some sense part of the real rather than the other way around. For them, I exist in all other accessible worlds. For Lewis, only my *counterparts* exist in such worlds, so that for something to be possible for me is merely for it to be true of someone else. That seems somehow precisely to evacuate the very notion I am trying to explicate.

represent a kind of possibility that we might call *potentialities*. They are not merely tied to the modality of some proposition, but represent *actual* dispositions or potentialities of a particular person or things. In the words of Goodman again, “a thing is full of threats and promises.” (40) In the literal sense, however, it is typically humans, or at least biological entities, that issue threats and promises, harbor intentions, regrets, resentments, or desires—all of which states are by their very nature penetrated with non-actual possibility. And while merely possible facts can, as such, play no direct causal role in the natural world, yet facts about pure possibility, mediated by human consciousness, play a determining role in the life of humans. Our consciousness is pervaded at every moment by our thoughts about what is possible, and being wrong about what was possible can have consequences as dire as being wrong about what is true. (Hence we admonish one another: ‘Be realistic!’ or ‘Live your dream!’.)

All of these considerations seem to call for a notion of *individual possibility*, relative to a particular person at a particular time, place, and situation. (Prior 1968)

General and individual possibility are related, but they are not the same. Every statement of particular possibility entails an abstract propositional possibility, but not vice-versa. (*Some man has a thousand children* is possible, but it may not be possible *for any particular* man to have a thousand children. So the realm of particular possibility is narrower, and it seems to be the one that especially touches us.)

## 2. Accessibility and possible worlds

Although possibility and impossibility do not admit of degrees in the same sense as probabilities, there can be different levels or grades of impossibility, conceived as a series of increasingly stringent filters. A first approach begins, at the least stringent level, by excluding from the realm of possibility only what is ruled out by the laws of logic. What is logically possible (travel at “warp speed”, for example) might not be physically possible. Narrower ranges of possibility can then be defined on the basis of further filters: what is chemically impossible might still be compatible with logic, mathematics, and physics, but not with chemistry (providing chemistry isn’t reducible to physics). What is logically, physically, chemically possible might not be biologically, or maybe psychologically, economically, or maybe even aesthetically possible. Possibilities are ordered like Russian dolls containing one another.

The problem with this scheme is that the hierarchy between levels is increasingly unclear as we get into the human sciences. Even supposing there are distinctive laws of biology, economics, anthropology, or aesthetics, it is hard to see how they are to be unambiguously ordered. The graver difficulty about the Russian doll picture, however, is that it remains static in time. This fails to account for the traffic between the possible and the impossible or the necessary that typically results from the passage of time. When Marlon Brando’s Terry Malloy laments that he could have been a contender, he is implying that what once was possible is no longer possible. My actual future is only one of several possible futures; it becomes necessary as it shifts into the past, where roads not taken become impossible-for-me. There was a time when it would have been possible for me to go into medicine or ballet, but that is no longer possible for me now. The world of possibility is pear-shaped (Fig.1): At the start of life, all possibilities are purely abstract.

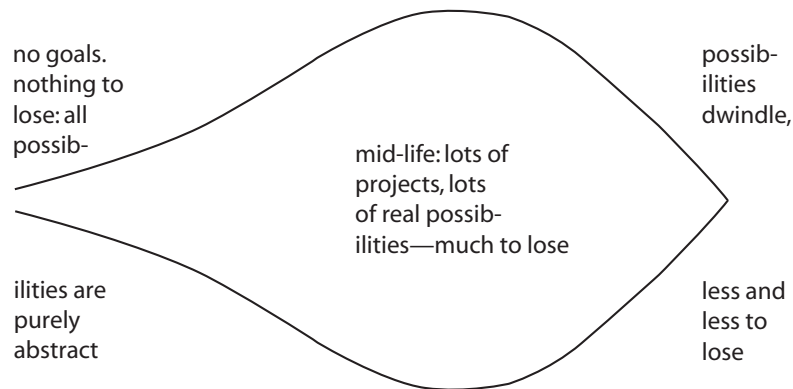


Fig. 1 *The Shape of Possibility*

As you grow up and learn, “mere” possibilities (what’s allowed by the laws of nature and the normal facts about humans) turn into “potentialities” or “real possibilities-for-you”. These are what your capacities and skills open up to you in a concrete way that defines what you are. When you’ve spent many thousands of hours practicing the piano, or learning medicine or psychology, you have acquired potentialities. The realization of determinate goals has become concretely possible. At the end of your life, some of those potentialities have become actual, while others have dwindled and vanished. Death is the tip of the pear, the end point of all my potentialities.

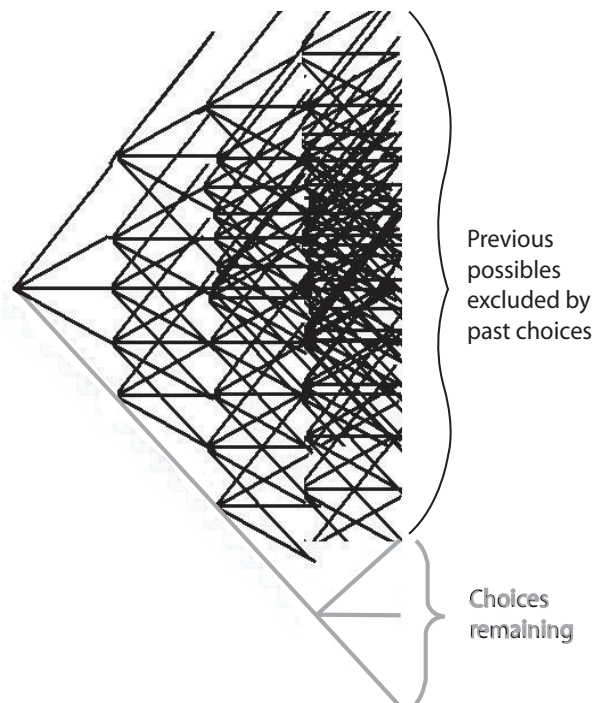


Fig. 2. *The Interweavings of Evolving Possibles*

If we zoom in at random to this picture of a life, we find something like the confused forest of nodes represented in fig. 2. At any given moment in the thicket of life, potentialities have been created by past choices, but those same choices have also irrevocably cut off an indefinitely large number of possibles. As we advance through life, the branchings of possible futures are determined by the path followed so far. It is not possible to jump from one branch to a distant one, though the merging of branches reminds us that the twigs that emerge here or there from a particular branch may in fact be virtually indistinguishable, in their position in the space of possibilities, from those that have emerged from some other branches. Others, however, are now wholly out of reach. If I marry Jane this year, in preference to Jenny, it will make it somewhat more complicated to marry Jenny next year.

### 3. Fiction as the exploration and extension of the possible

Just as art makes it possible to visualize the impossible, fiction allows us to extend the range of the possible. In more conventional fiction, aspiring to reveal “human truth” about real people, we require that even the representation of the impossible retain *verisimilitude*. Verisimilitude is the *appearance* of possibility. Appearances can be more or less vivid, depending on the extent and nature of my ignorance. So the question isn’t really about how probable something is, but how vividly it is *imaginable*. The imaginable is closely related to the *conceivable*, which is traditionally our best guide to the possible. So verisimilitude can be taken as a guide to what is subjectively or apparently possible; but it still leaves a gap between that and objective possibility. We can be mistaken about what is possible or about what is impossible.

One probable source of this fact is that our imagination serves two masters, for we have two-track minds. One mode of imagination is intuitive, derived from phylogenetically selected predispositions, and hence likely to underestimate possibilities undreamed of in the environment of our ancestors’ evolutionary adaptation. The other, on the contrary, derives from the compositional power of language (in a broad sense that must include the conventions of pictorial representation that Hogarth plays with in the picture alluded to at the start), which is largely responsible for the capacity of our representation to outstrip what is “really” possible.

For fictional emotions, in particular, to be “true” is to be *apparently possible*. Of course that depends on each individual’s powers of imagination. Literature is designed to tease and stretch those powers, and imagination can be extended only on the basis of what already exists. It can be expanded only little by little.

### 4. Power and limits of simulation

Keith Oatley has compared fiction both with *simulations* and with *dreams*. These ideas both seem fruitful, but they have rather different implications. In a simulation, we look for a dynamic model in which the causal factors will produce the same results as in real life. Oatley has urged that the writer provides the “kit” for a simulation (Oatley 2003, 166-167): the reader—or rather what he calls the *writerandreader*—puts it together. But of course insofar as we are dealing with emotions, each reader is going to put it together rather differently, because each will fit into her own or his own existing paradigm scenarios or scripts, arising from the different

idiosyncratic set of experiences that have “taught” them the nature of the emotion. Systematic misunderstandings are rife when two people linked by strong emotional ties are in a situation of conflict. For each partner casts the other in her or his private scenario. But the two scenarios are different, and the casting unlikely to match. Inevitably, then, each will be as firmly convinced of her own righteousness as of the perfidious treachery of the other.

The situation is not all that different when I am alone, *writingandreading* a novel. My engagement is now not with another’s competing construal of my current situation, but with the “kit” provided by the writer. Insofar as the model I construct on the basis of the kit goes—as it likely or inevitably must—beyond what is implied by the writer’s instructions, I may again find myself in conflict, not only with the writer’s emotional engagements, but with the writer’s broader cognitive framework. For a striking example, consider S., Alexander Luria’s “mnemonist”. Equipped with a boundless memory rooted in his eidetic imagination, S was unable to read a story:

I was reading this phrase: “N. was leaning up against a tree ...” I saw a slim young man dressed in a dark blue suit (N., you know, is so elegant). He was standing near a big linden tree with grass and woods all around ... But then the sentence went on: “and was peering into a shop window.” Now how do you like that! It means the scene isn’t set in the woods, or in a garden, but he’s standing on the street. And I have to start the whole sentence over from the beginning ... (Luria 1987, 112-113)

Luria goes on to comment: “... a simple passage—a phrase, for that matter—would turn out to be a Sisyphean task.” Obviously S. could never read a novel. On reading the first sentence, he would imagine a whole world, which in some particular the second sentence was bound to contradict. So an entire world had to be re-imagined at every sentence. S. soon gave up this exhausting work. The ordinary reader is more docile, but still brings something to every text, or kit, as evidenced by the dismay often experienced when we see how another, in an illustration or a movie, has imagined the same scene. Much of the time, such discrepancies are hidden below the surface. But they are no less real for that.

In such circumstances, Oatley’s two models—simulation and dreams—take us in different directions. The simulation model requires a kind of coherence. A simulation has to *work*. A dream, by contrast, is exempt from rules of coherence. The uses of simulation in AI and also the role assigned to it by cognitive science are mainly to replace predictive inference. But in a dream there is no prospect of realistic prediction. Sometimes, we are disturbed by the emotions aroused by a fiction, precisely because we aren’t sure where they are taking us. These might be the most interesting cases of response to literature. The most potentially life-changing—in being most disturbing—may lie somewhere between the dream and the simulation, failed simulations that we can’t simply relax and acknowledge as dreams.

In view of their roots in paradigm scenarios learned in early childhood, our spontaneous emotional constructions tend to be repetitious and conservative. Yet art has the power, or at least the ambition, to dislodge us from our ruts. When the possibilities evoked by a simulation/dream are just beyond the rails laid down by the automaticities of my usual emotional responses, literature gets the chance to expand, as the saying goes, our *horizons*. How exactly does it do this?

When we contemplate the possible in imagination, we are *evaluating counterfactual conditionals*. We can do this, Oatley and others have suggested, by running a simulation running on

the virtual machine implemented by my brain. But there is a problem. There is no entailment from the fact that

S evaluates the conditional *if p then q* as true

to the *conditional truth*:

‘S, given that he assents to *p*, will assent to *q*’.

We are notoriously bad at predicting our own reactions to various eventualities. When emotions are involved, this defect is particularly disruptive. Alexander’s general Parmenion is said to have advised him: “If I were Alexander, I should accept Darius’s offer and make peace.” “So should I,” Alexander replied, “if I were Parmenion.” We are not seldom related to our own future selves as Parmenion was to Alexander. When asked how I would feel if I were in situation S, I may well assent to a conditional ‘if S then I would feel E’. That expresses my present assent to the counterfactual, but that assent does not determine what I would feel in situation S. I just may not be able to tell. Oatley writes: “If you interview people about their dreams you will find many who describe their salient dreams as like bad thrillers. They are pursued, or tortured, or find themselves in fights. Moreover, people who have a melancholy disposition are drawn to melancholy books. Angry people are drawn to stories of revenge. People who describe themselves, perhaps with some regret, as a bit cut off, are attracted to stories of alienation.” I don’t believe a word of it, precisely for the reason Oatley cites in the immediately preceding sentence: “Here we border on the unconscious.” (Oatley 2003, 172) The unconscious is famous for erecting defenses and deflecting self-suspicion. So on this, I expect, Freud was right: on those (possibly rare) occasions when people’s dreams are not merely the random outcome of neural events, most of them will be impenetrable without interpretation.

What fiction provides, then, is not a conditional truth about how we might react in possible circumstances, but merely an invitation to assess an emotional counterfactual. For the antecedent of the conditional is not actually satisfied merely by contemplating the situation in imagination.

Still, it does seem plausible to think that fiction can get us some of the way there. After all, we *really* cry over novels and movies, though the mere utterance of a true conditional with the consequent ‘I would cry’ does not make me cry. When we speak of fiction as particularly vivid, we mean that it has the power to turn a conditional proposition into an imaginative simulation of one’s reaction, as it would be evoked by the actual truth of the conditional’s antecedent.

On the other hand, there are reasons to think that this may be an illusion. Milgram’s famous obedience experiments or the (even more grimly topical) Stanford prisoner-guard experiments of Zimbardo (Zimbardo 2004) suggest that we mistakenly attribute to individual *character* behaviour that is actually almost entirely determined by a *situation*. (Doris 2002) Most people (though admittedly, in the experiments concerned, not all: which dilutes the situationist thesis to some extent but doesn’t affect the present point) behave in the same way in the same situations: it is not their moral convictions that rule their behaviour, but the amount of pressure exerted by current circumstances.

Our *judgment* of what we *would* do under such circumstances, by contrast, is far more likely to be determined by our *beliefs* about our own character and moral principles. Unless informed

about those social science experiments—and often even if one knows all about them—one is highly unlikely to make about oneself the more cynical prediction. Or so at least it seems can be inferred from the fact that while most people make the “wrong” choice when they are placed in the actual circumstances of the experiments, most people are all the more indignantly confident in predicting that they would make the “right” choice when asked about the counterfactual situation.

What this illustrates is something we already know about simulations in their home territory, Artificial Intelligence: it is that their reliability as predictive tools rests on the adequacy of the parameters taken into account. They have to be the relevant ones, and they have to be assigned the right values. The good novelist or poet knows the trick of inducing in us the illusion of a realistic simulation. This can take the form of making us cry in the right places and sympathizing with the good guys, feeling righteous indignation at the bad, and so on. Or it can take the opposite form, so that we are brought up short, at some point, by the sudden realization of how utterly we have been identifying with a repulsive lout. It has to do with the aspects of the situation that are made vivid for us. In life, that depends on our emotional predispositions and our perceptual biases. But when I read, the writer is pulling the strings, and what she brings into salience might be entirely different from what I, in that situation, would find salient. Some of the greatest writers have thematized just this effect. In the wonderful climax to Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, Pegeen, who admired Christy for having murdered his father, reacts to the deed itself. “And what is it you’ll say to me,” he cries, “and I after doing it this time in the face of all.” “I’ll say,” she cries, “a strange man is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what’s a squabble in your back-yard, and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there’s a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed.” Her answer suggests that perhaps our best hope for being improved by literature, after all, is not that our spirits might be lifted above our quotidian mediocrity by the tale of “gallous stories”, but that we should be brought short by the sudden sight of the gap between mere fantasy and the *really possible*.

## 5. Can fiction make me a better person?

At the end of his paper on writing and reading, Oatley mentions “three main purposes” for literature. They are “mental chocolate” or sheer enjoyment; the improvement of our performance as “writer and readers”; and thirdly a more general sort of self-improvement, “a kind of improvement for an imperfect species.” (2003, 172) Often, Oatley concedes, it doesn’t work: “we can no longer entertain the comforting nineteenth-century idea that poetry automatically makes us better people.” (2003, 171) Nevertheless, if we could understand how the movement of literature through paths of accessibility from one possible world to the next relates to the way our own real-world emotions can actually be transformed, we might be able to set out the conditions under which people are indeed genuinely changed by art and literature. At the phenomenological level, emotions get transmuted into one another in ways that appear to defy rational explanation. (Elster 1999) Love turns into hate, compassion into annoyance, grief into acceptance: when we say we understand these things, we are doubtless saying no more than that we can remember having experienced them. That is also what is presumably meant by the frequent rehearsals of Pascal’s slogan about passions having reasons that reason doesn’t know.

Perhaps, when the “kit” is used just right, the alchemy might work in the right way. Let me suggest, in conclusion, that a willingness to apply the kit creatively will involve at least two factors, corresponding to the Janus-face of emotions. One will attend to the outward face, the other, to the inward.

The first requires that one be able and willing to question the evaluative adequacy of the paradigm scenario that gives meaning, for each one of us, to each of our emotions. This can lead either to value something previously despised, as when reading about gays might cause an adolescent suddenly to see a despicable outcast as a hero of sexual freedom. Or it might on the contrary cause one to see something previously admired as worthless, as one might come to see moral intransigence as narrow-mindedness, or scholastic success as conformism. These are all instances of *re-gestalt*ing: they rest essentially on our capacity to see the same external facts in a different light, or as forming a different pattern. Such changes of evaluation are like the flipping of a Necker cube or duck-rabbit. In less comfortable instances, they are like the shift of focal point on an impossible figure, which lets one see now one possible shape, and now another incompatible one. In such cases there may be no account of the picture seen that can make it coherent as a representation of a concrete object. The reconciliation exists only at the meta-level, when we settle for looking at it *as a picture*, so that its inconsistency as representation becomes part of what it is intended to convey.

The inward-facing condition for literature to enlarge one’s emotional horizons is harder to pin down. It is a classic trope of the subject that one can contemplate fictional characters with the most sensitive empathy and prove wholly incapable of anything of the kind in relation to living human beings. There must, I venture, be a willingness to *see oneself* as some relevant character in the adjusted paradigm scenario offered by the new, re-gestalted emotion. What I’m not sure of is the extent to which this willingness must be conscious. I’m inclined to think that while no amount of self-admonition will suffice, the process must be a highly self-conscious. For the naturally repetitious nature of our emotional dispositions will need to be tricked into awareness in order to be changed. The subject who wants to achieve emotional progress is like a musician who has been playing wrong notes. She needs to go back and take it slowly, one bar at a time, to overcome the automaticity which the previous practice all too effectively instilled.

## Literature

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