

The Text as World

Theories of Immersion

One's memory is apparently made up of millions of [sets of images], which work together on the Identikit principle. The most gifted writers are those who manipulate the memory sets of the reader in such a rich fashion that they create within the mind of the reader an entire world that resonates with the reader's own real emotions. The events are merely taking place on the page, in print, but the emotions are real. Hence the unique feeling when one is "absorbed" in a certain book, "lost" in it.

—TOM WOLFE

When VR theorists attempt to describe the phenomenon of immersion in a virtual world, the metaphor that imposes itself with the greatest insistence is the reading experience:

As [users] enter the virtual world, their depth of engagement gradually meanders away from here until they cross the threshold of involvement. Now they are absorbed in the virtual world, similar to being in an engrossing book.

The question isn't whether the created world is as real as the physical world, but whether the created world is real enough for you to suspend your disbelief for a period of time. This is the same mental shift that happens when you get wrapped up in a good novel or become absorbed in playing a computer game. (Pimentel and Teixeira, *Virtual Reality*, 15)

Literary authors have not awaited the development of VR technology to offer their own versions and dramatizations of the phenomenon. Charlotte Brontë conceives immersion as the projection of the reader's body into the textual world:

You shall see them, reader. Step into this neat garden-house on the skirts of Whinbury, walk forward in the little parlour—they are there at dinner. . . . You and I will join the party, see what is to be seen, and hear what is to be heard. (*Shirley*, 9)

Joseph Conrad's artistic goal prefigures the emphasis of VR developers on a rich and diversified sensory involvement:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. (Preface to *Nigger of the Narcissus*, xxvi)

For Italo Calvino, the transition from ordinary to textual reality is a solemn event, and it must be marked with proper ceremony. The instructions to the reader that open *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* suggest the rites of passage through which various cultures mark the crossing of boundaries between the profane and the sacred, or between the major stages of life. Opening a book is embarking on a voyage from which one will not return for a very long time:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. . . . Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, or lying flat. . . . Adjust the light so you won't strain your eyes. Do it now, because once you're absorbed in reading there will be no budging you. (3–4)

IMMERSION AND THE "WORLD" METAPHOR

The notion of reading as immersive experience is based on a premise so frequently invoked in literary criticism that we tend to forget its metaphorical nature. For immersion to take place, the text must offer an expanse to be immersed within, and this expanse, in a blatantly mixed metaphor, is not an ocean but a textual world. The recent emergence of other analogies for the literary text, such as the text as game (see chap. 6), as network (Landow, *Hypertext*; Bolter, *Writing Space*), or as machinic assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*), should remind us that "the text as world" is only one possible conceptualization among many others, not a necessary, objective, and literal dimension of literary language, but this relativization should be the occasion for a critical assessment of implications that have too long been taken for granted.

What makes the semantic domain of a text into a world? All texts have a semantic domain, except perhaps for those that consist exclusively of meaningless sounds or graphemes, but not all of them con-

struct a world. A semantic domain is the nonenumerable, fuzzy-bordered, occasionally chaotic set of meanings that is projected by (or read into) any given sequence of signs. In a textual world these meanings form a cosmos. "How does a world exist as a world?" asks Michael Heim, theorist of virtual reality. "A world is not a collection of fragments, nor even an amalgam of pieces. It is a felt totality or whole." It is "not a collection of things but an active usage that relates things together, that links them. . . . World makes a web-like totality. . . . World is a total environment or surround space" (*Virtual Realism*, 90–91). For Heim, moreover, worlds are existentially centered around a base we call home. "Home is the node from which we link to other places and other things. . . . Home is the point of action and node of linkage that becomes a thread weaving the multitude of things into a world" (92). Let me sum up the concept of world through four features: connected set of objects and individuals; habitable environment; reasonably intelligible totality for external observers; field of activity for its members.

For the purpose of immersive poetics, a crucial implication of the concept of textual world concerns the function of language. In the metaphor of the text as world, the text is apprehended as a window on something that exists outside language and extends in time and space well beyond the window frame. To speak of a textual world means to draw a distinction between a realm of language, made of names, definite descriptions, sentences, and propositions, and an extralinguistic realm of characters, objects, facts, and states of affairs serving as referents to the linguistic expressions. The idea of textual world presupposes that the reader constructs in imagination a set of language-independent objects, using as a guide the textual declarations, but building this always incomplete image into a more vivid representation through the import of information provided by internalized cognitive models, inferential mechanisms, real-life experience, and cultural knowledge, including knowledge derived from other texts. The function of language in this activity is to pick objects in the textual world, to link them with properties, to animate characters and setting—in short, to conjure their presence to the imagination. The world metaphor thus entails a referential or "vertical" conception of meaning that stands in stark contrast to the Saussurian and poststruc-

turalist view of signification as the product of a network of horizontal relations between the terms of a language system. In this vertical conception, language is meant to be traversed toward its referents. Sven Birkerts describes this attitude as follows: "When we are reading a novel we don't, obviously, recall the preceding sentences and paragraphs. In fact we generally don't remember the language at all, unless it's dialogue. For reading is a conversion, a turning of codes into contents" (*Gutenberg Elegies*, 97).

The concrete character of the objects that populate textual worlds limits the applicability of the concept to a category of texts that Félix Martínez-Bonati calls mimetic texts. This term refers to texts devoted to the representation of states of affairs involving individual existents situated in time and space, as opposed to those texts that deal exclusively with universals, abstract ideas, and atemporal categories. We can roughly equate mimetic texts with narrative texts, though their evocation of particular existents does not necessarily fulfill the conditions of closure and coherence that we associate with the notion of plot. Since the class of mimetic texts includes both fiction and nonfiction, the notion of textual world does not distinguish the worlds that actually exist outside the text from those that are created by it. Both fictional and nonfictional mimetic texts invite the reader to imagine a world, and to imagine it as a physical, autonomous reality furnished with palpable objects and populated by flesh and blood individuals. (How could a world be imagined otherwise?) The difference between fiction and nonfiction is not a matter of displaying the image of a world versus displaying this world itself, since both project a world image, but a matter of the function ascribed to the image: in one case, contemplating the textual world is an end in itself, while in the other, the textual world must be evaluated in terms of its accuracy with respect to an external reference world known to the reader through other channels of information.

The idea of textual world provides the foundation of a poetics of immersion, but we need more materials to build up the project. As we saw in the introduction, poststructuralist literary theory is hostile to the phenomenon because it conflicts with its concept of language. (More about this in chap. 6.) Reader-response criticism, which should be more open to immersion than any other recent critical school,

does not clearly put its finger on the experience, though it often comes tantalizingly close.¹ The building blocks of the project will therefore have to be found in the quarries of other fields: cognitive psychology (the metaphors of transportation and being "lost in a book"), analytical philosophy (possible worlds), phenomenology (make-believe), and psychology again (mental simulation).

TRANSPORTATION AND BEING "LOST IN A BOOK"

The frozen metaphors of language dramatize the reading experience as an adventure worthy of the most thrilling novel: the reader plunges under the sea (immersion), reaches a foreign land (transportation), is taken prisoner (being caught up in a story, being a *captured* audience), and loses contact with all other realities (being lost in a book). The work of the psychologists Richard Gerrig and Victor Nell follows the thread of these classic metaphors to explore what takes place in the mind of the entranced reader. In his book *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* (10–11), Gerrig develops the metaphor of transportation into a narrative script that could be regarded as a "folk theory" of immersion:

1. *Someone ("the traveler") is transported . . .* For Gerrig, this statement means not only that the reader is taken into a foreign world but also that the text determines his role in this world, thereby shaping his textual identity.
2. *by some means of transportation . . .* If there are any doubts as to the identity of the vehicle, they should be quickly dispelled by these lines from Emily Dickinson: "There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away" (quoted in Gerrig, 12, and as epigraph to the whole book).
3. *as a result of performing certain actions.* This point corrects the passivity implicit in the metaphor of transportation and introduces another major metaphor developed in Gerrig's book: reading as performance. The goal of the journey is not a preexisting territory that awaits the traveler on the other side of the ocean but a land that emerges in the course of the trip as the reader executes the textual directions into a

"reality model" (Gerrig's term for the mental representation of a textual world). The reader's enjoyment thus depends on his own performance.

4. *The traveler goes some distance from his or her world of origin, . . .* When visiting a textual world, the reader must "do as the Romans do": adapt to the laws of this world, which differ to various degrees from the laws of his native reality. Readers may import knowledge from life experience into the textual world, but the text has the last word in specifying the rules that guide the construction of a valid reality model.
5. *which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible.* This idea can be interpreted in many ways: (a) When the idiosyncratic laws of the textual world take over, we can no longer draw inferences from the real-world principles that were overruled. (b) Our objective knowledge that fictional characters are only linguistic constructs—as structuralism would describe them—does not prevent us from reacting to them as if they were embodied humans. (c) As is the case with any intense mental activity, a deep absorption in the construction/contemplation of the textual world causes our immediate surroundings and everyday concerns to disappear from consciousness.
6. *The traveler returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey.* There is no need to elaborate here on the educational value of reading, even when we read for pure entertainment. In lieu of a theoretical development let me offer a literary formulation of the same idea: "The reader who returns from the open seas of his feelings is no longer the same reader who embarked on that sea only a short while ago" (Pavić, *Dictionary of the Khazars* [female edition], 294).

The best illustrations of this script come from the realm of fiction, but Gerrig's stated purpose is to describe a type of experience that concerns "narrative worlds"—what I would call the worlds of mimetic texts—not just fictional ones. The metaphor of transportation captures how the textual world becomes present to the mind, not how

this world relates to the real one, and this sense of presence can be conveyed by narratives told as truth as well as by stories told as fiction. Victor Nell writes that "although fiction is the usual vehicle for ludic reading, it is not its lack of truth—its 'fictivity'—that renders it pleasurable" (*Lost in a Book*, 50). Similarly, it is not the imaginative origin of fictional worlds per se that creates the experience that Gerrig calls transportation. But if a theory of transportation—and, by extension, of immersion—should be kept distinct from a theory of fiction, the two cannot be entirely dissociated, because imaginative participation in the textual world is much more crucial to the aesthetic purpose of fiction than to the practical orientation of most types of nonfiction. While nonfiction sends the reader on a business trip to the textual world, often not caring too much about the quality of the experience—what matters most is what happens after the return home—fiction treats the visit as vacation and mobilizes all the powers of language to strengthen the bond between the visitor and the textual landscape.

Another entangled issue is the relation between immersion and aesthetics. We tend to label a literary work immersive when we take pleasure in it, and we (normally) take pleasure in reading when the text presents aesthetic qualities. But aesthetic value cannot be reduced to immersive power: poetry is not as immersive as narrative because its relation to a "world" is much more problematic; and among the texts regarded as narrative, some deliberately cultivate a sense of alienation from the textual world, or do not allow a world to solidify in the reader's mind. For Gerrig, transportation into a narrative world is not dependent on narrative skills. If I read the word *Texas* in a story, no matter how good or bad the text, I will think about Texas, which means that I will be mentally transported to the place: "Some core of processes is likely to allow readers to experience narrative worlds even when the stories themselves are poorly crafted" (*Experiencing*, 5). In Gerrig's Texas example, however, imaginative transportation to Texas is a consequence of the speech act of reference rather than a consequence of embedding the speech act in a narrative context. We must therefore distinguish a minimal form of transportation—thinking of a concrete object located in a time and place other than our present spatio-temporal coordinates—from a strong form of the experience,

by which “thinking of” means imagining not only an object but the world that surrounds it, and imagining ourselves contained in this world, in the presence of this object. The minimal form of transportation is built into language and the cognitive mechanisms of the mind; we cannot avoid it; but the richer forms depend on the resonance in the reader’s mind of the aesthetic features of the text: plot, narrative presentation, images, and style.

For Victor Nell, the experience of immersion—or rather, as he calls it, of reading entrancement—is a major source of pleasure but not necessarily a trademark of “high” literary value. *Lost in a Book*, his investigation of the “psychology of reading for pleasure,” takes its title from a family of metaphors that present equivalents in many languages: “For example, in Dutch the phrase is ‘om in een boek op te gaan’; in German, ‘in einem Buch versunken zu sein’; and in French, ‘être pris par un livre’” (50). The passivity of these metaphors suggests a smooth passage from physical reality to the textual world. It is indeed in terms of easiness that Toni Morrison describes the experience of a young girl who listens for the umpteenth time to the wondrous story of her birth: “Easily she stepped into the told story that lay before her eyes” (*Beloved*, 29). For a reader to be caught up in a story, the textual world must be accessible through effortless concentration: “In terms of attention theory . . . the ludic reader’s absorption may seem as an extreme case of subjectively effortless arousal which owes its *effortlessness* to the automatized nature of the skilled reader’s decoding activity” (Nell, *Lost in a Book*, 77–78). Immersion is hampered by difficult materials because “consciousness is a processing bottleneck, and it is the already comprehended messages . . . that fully engage the receiver’s conscious attention” (77). The most immersive texts are therefore often the most familiar ones: “Indeed, the richness of the structure the ludic reader creates in his head may be inversely proportional to the literary power and originality of the reading matter” (*ibid.*).

But for Nell, the association of immersion with ease of reading is no cause for contempt. Anticipating the objections of elitist literary critics, who tend to judge the greatness of literary works by the standards of the Protestant work ethic—“no pain, no gain”—Nell insists on the importance of immersive reading for both high and low culture. Sophisticated readers learn to appreciate a wide variety of liter-

ary experiences, but they never outgrow the simple pleasure of being lost in a book. This pleasure is limiting only if we take it to be the only type of aesthetic gratification. There is no point in denying that the worlds of the stereotyped texts of popular culture are the most favorable to immersion: the reader can bring in more knowledge and sees more expectations fulfilled than in a text that cultivates a sense of estrangement. But immersion can also be the result of a process that involves an element of struggle and discovery. How many of us, after finally turning the last page of a difficult novel, compulsively return to the first page with the exhilarating thought that deciphering is over and the fun can now begin? In literature as in other domains—ballet, music, theater, and sports—it is through hard work that we reach the stage of effortless performance. The most forbidding textual worlds may thus afford the “easy” pleasures of immersion, once the reader has put in the necessary concentration.

To remain pleasurable, the experience of being lost in a book must be temporary and remain distinct from addiction, its harmful relative. Nell describes the difference between immersion and addiction in terms of eating metaphors: addicted readers are “voracious” consumers of books; they devour the text without taking the time to savor it. The story lives entirely in the present, and when the reading is completed, it leaves no residue in memory: “Addictive behavior . . . predicts an underdeveloped capacity for private fantasy” (212). While the addicted reader blocks out reality, the reader capable of pleasurable immersion maintains a split loyalty to the real and the textual world. The ocean is an environment in which we cannot breathe; to survive immersion, we must take oxygen from the surface, stay in touch with reality. The amphibian state of pleasurable entrancement has been compared by J. R. Hilgard to “dreaming when you know you are dreaming” (quoted *ibid.*). Nell explains:

[Hilgard] writes that the observing and participating egos co-exist, so that the subject is able to maintain “a continued limited awareness . . . that what is perceived as real is in some sense not real.” This disjunction, allowing the reader both to be involved and to maintain a safe distance, is neatly captured by her subject Robert, who comments on a movie screen in which a monster

enters a cave, trapping a group of children: "I'm not one of them but I'm trapped with them, and I can feel the fright they feel." (212–13)

On the basis of these observations, we can distinguish four degrees of absorption in the act of reading:

1. *Concentration.* The type of attention devoted to difficult, nonimmersive works. In this mode, the textual world—if the text projects any—offers so much resistance that the reader remains highly vulnerable to the distracting stimuli of external reality.
2. *Imaginative involvement.* The "split subject" attitude of the reader who transports herself into the textual world but remains able to contemplate it with aesthetic or epistemological detachment. In the case of narrative fiction, the split reader is attentive both to the speech act of the narrator in the textual world and to the quality of the performance of the author in the real world. In the case of nonfiction, the reader engages emotionally and imaginatively in the represented situation but retains a critical attitude toward the accuracy of the report and the rhetorical devices through which the author defends his version of the events.
3. *Entrancement.* The nonreflexive reading pleasure of the reader so completely caught up in the textual world that she loses sight of anything external to it, including the aesthetic quality of the author's performance or the truth value of the textual statements. It is in this mode that language truly disappears. As Ockert, one of the subjects interviewed by Nell, describes the experience: "The more interesting it gets, the more you get the feeling you're not reading any more, you're not reading words, you're not reading sentences, it's as if you are completely living inside the situation" (290). Despite the depth of the immersive experience, however, this reader remains aware in the back of his mind that he has nothing to fear, because the textual world is not reality.
4. *Addiction.* This category covers two cases: (a) The attitude of the reader who seeks escape from reality but cannot find a

home in the textual world because she traverses it too fast and too compulsively to enjoy the landscape. (b) The loss of the capacity to distinguish textual worlds, especially those of fiction, from the actual world. (I call this the Don Quixote syndrome.)

POSSIBLE WORLDS

What does it mean, in semantic and logical terms, to be transported into the virtual reality of a textual world? The answers to these questions are tied to an ontological model that acknowledges a plurality of possible worlds. The fictional worlds of literature may not be, technically speaking, the possible worlds of logicians, but drawing an analogy between the two allows a much-needed sharpening of the informal critical concept of textual world.² Originally developed by a group of philosophers including David Lewis, Saul Kripke, and Jaakko Hintikka to solve problems in formal semantics, such as the truth value of counterfactuals, the meaning of the modal operators of necessity and possibility, and the distinction between intension and extension (or sense and reference),³ the concept of possible worlds has been used to describe the logic of fictionality by Lewis himself, and adapted to poetics or narrative semantics by Umberto Eco, Thomas Pavel, Lubomír Doležel, Doreen Maitre, Ruth Ronen, Elena Semino, and myself. The applications of possible-world (henceforth, PW) theory to literary criticism have been as diverse as the interpretations given to the concept by philosophers and literary scholars.⁴ Since it would be beyond the scope of this section to try to represent the entire movement, I will restrict my presentation of PW theory to an approach that is largely my own, even though it is strongly indebted to the pioneering work of Eco, Pavel, and Doležel.⁵

The basis of PW theory is the set-theoretical idea that reality—the sum total of the imaginable—is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct elements, or worlds, and that it is hierarchically structured by the opposition of one well-designated element, which functions as the center of the system, to all the other members of the set. The central element is commonly interpreted as "the actual world" and the satellites as merely possible worlds. For a world to be possible it must be

linked to the center by a so-called accessibility relation. Impossible worlds cluster at the periphery of the system, conceptually part of it—since the possible is defined by contrast with the impossible—and yet unreachable. The boundary between possible and impossible worlds depends on the particular interpretation given to the notion of accessibility relation. The most common interpretation associates possibility with logical laws; every world that respects the principles of noncontradiction and excluded middle is a possible world. Another criterion of possibility is the validity of the physical laws that obtain in real life. On this account, a world in which people can be turned overnight into giant insects is excluded from the realm of the possible. Yet another conceivable interpretation involves the idea of temporal directionality: the actual world is the realm of historical facts, possible worlds are the branches that history could take in the future, and impossible worlds are the branches that history failed to take in the past.

The distinction of the possible from the impossible is a relatively straightforward matter: all it takes is a particular definition of the criteria of accessibility. A much thornier issue is the distinction of the actual from the nonactual within the realm of the possible. Through its centered architecture, PW theory runs into difficulties with postmodern theory. The idea of a world enjoying special status is easily interpreted as hegemonism, logocentrism, negative valorization of the periphery, and a rigid hierarchical organization based on power relations. Another objection frequently heard against the centered model is that even though we all live in the same physical world and share a large number of opinions about its basic furnishing, there is no absolute consensus as to where to draw the boundary between the realm of actually existing objects and the domain of merely thinkable existence. Some of us believe in angels and not UFOs, some of us in UFOs and not angels, some of us in both, and some of us in neither. Moreover, belief is a matter of degree. I may believe weakly in angels, and the borders of my vision of what exists may be fuzzy. According to this argument, it would take a “naïve realism” to postulate a singular actual world; for if reality is incompletely accessible to the mind, or not accessible at all, there will be inevitable discrepancies in its representation. Postmodern ideologues may further object that the idea of a unique center ignores the cultural and historical relativity of perceptions of reality. The current emphasis on the value of diversity seems

better represented by philosophies that postulate a variety of “world versions” without establishing any hierarchical relations between them, such as the model described by Nelson Goodman in *Ways of Worldmaking*, than by the necessarily centered structure proposed by modal logic.

These objections to the concept of actual world can be circumvented by adopting what David Lewis has called an “indexical” definition of actuality. The opposition between the actual and the possible can be conceived in two ways: absolutely, in terms of origin, or relatively, in terms of point of view. In the absolute characterization, the actual world is the only one that exists independently of the human mind; merely possible worlds are products of mental activities such as dreaming, wishing, forming hypotheses, imagining, and writing down the products of the imagination in the form of fictions. In the relative characterization—the one advocated by Lewis—the actual world is the world from which I speak and in which I am immersed, while the nonactual possible worlds are those at which I look from the outside. These worlds are actual from the point of view of their inhabitants.⁶ With an indexical definition, the concept of actual world can easily tolerate historical, cultural, and even personal variations. Without sacrificing the idea of an absolutely existing, mind-independent reality, we can relativize the ontological system by placing at its center individual images of reality, rather than reality itself. Most of us conceive the world system as centered because this reflects our intuition that there is a difference between fact and mere possibility—an egalitarian model such as Goodman’s cannot account for these all-important semantic concepts—but we all organize our private systems around personal representations of what is actual.

I represent this model as shown in figure 1:

- At the center, a hypothetical real world, existing independently of the mind.
- Superposed upon this world of uncertain boundaries, the representations of it held by various individuals or collectively by various cultures. These spheres are the different personal versions of the “absolute” center. Their boundaries overlap because they reflect the same physical reality, and despite the current emphasis on relativity and differences,

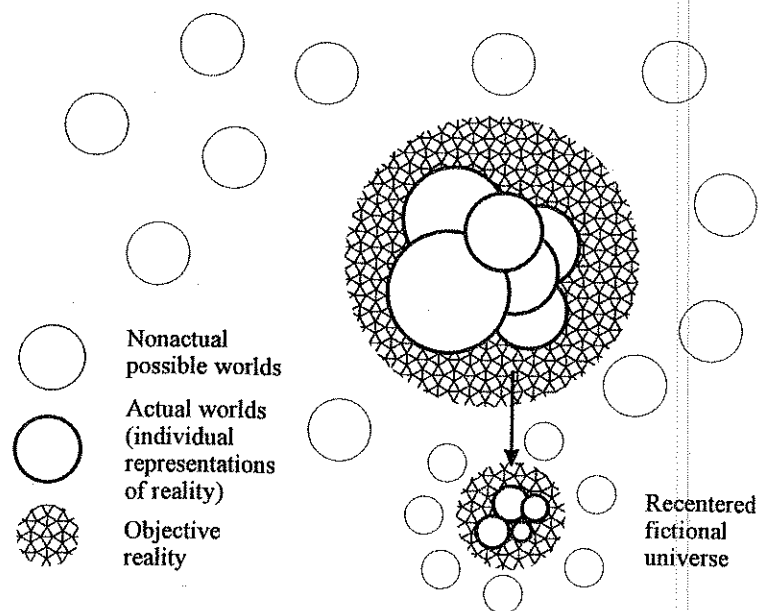


FIGURE 1 | A recenterable possible-worlds model

there is a vast area of consensus as to what exists and what does not.

- Further away, outlined in thinner lines, the worlds that each of us holds to be possible but nonactual. They stand at various distances from our personal center, depending on how difficult it would be to enact them, or on what type of accessibility relations link them to the center. If we interpret possible worlds as textual worlds, the model predicts that for most readers the world of a realistic novel is closer to reality than the world of a fairy tale, because its actualization does not require a modification of physical laws. It also predicts that a modern American reader will see greater discrepancy between reality and the world of *Macbeth* than a contemporary of Shakespeare, because belief in witches was more prevalent in Renaissance England than in the twentieth-century United States.

The applicability of the model to literary theory is not exhausted with the assimilation of textual worlds to possible worlds. In fact, a straight assimilation would be doubly reductive. First, it would obscure the fact that the distinction actual/possible reappears within the semantic domain projected by the text. In the case of mimetic texts, an essential aspect of reading comprehension consists of distinguishing a domain of autonomous facts—what I call the textual actual world—from the domains created by the mental activity of characters: dreaming, hoping, believing, planning, and so on. Mimetic texts project not a single world but an entire modal system, or universe, centered around its own actual world. Second, if nonactual textual worlds were apprehended as mere statements of possibility, there would be no phenomenological difference between counterfactual statements or expressions of wishes, which embed propositions under predicates of nonfactuality, and fictional statements, which, as Lewis observes, take the form of straight assertions of truth.

The concept of immersion is crucially dependent on this distinction. When I process “Napoleon could have won the battle of Waterloo if Grouchy had arrived before Blücher,” I look at this world from the standpoint of a world in which Napoleon loses; but if I read in a novel “Thanks to Grouchy’s ability to move quickly and bring his army to the battlefield before Blücher, Napoleon crushed his enemies at Waterloo,” I transport myself into the textual world and process the sentence as a statement of fact. Both counterfactuals and fictional statements direct our attention toward nonactual possible worlds, but they do so in different modes: counterfactuals function as telescopes, while fiction functions as a space-travel vehicle. In the telescope mode, consciousness remains anchored in its native reality, and possible worlds are contemplated from the outside. In the space-travel mode, consciousness relocates itself to another world and, taking advantage of the indexical definition of actuality, reorganizes the entire universe of being around this virtual reality. I call this move *recentering*, and I regard it as constitutive of the fictional mode of reading. Insofar as fictional worlds are, objectively speaking, nonactual possible worlds, it takes recentering to experience them as actual—an experience that forms the basic condition for immersive reading.

Recentered universes reproduce the structure of the primary system, except that in the primary system we see only the white circle of our personal actual world, while in recentered systems the reader has access to at least some areas of the patterned circle. In a fictional universe, objective reality corresponds to fictional truths, and fictional truths are established by textual authority. This authority means that fictional truths are unassailable, whereas the facts of the actually actual world can always be questioned. In figure 1 the boundaries of the textual actual world are not clearly defined because individual readers will complete the picture differently, and because some texts, especially postmodern ones, leave areas of undecidability or present contradictory versions of facts. (These texts could be represented as having two or more actual worlds, in a blatant violation of the classic modal structure.) The individual representations of reality superposed upon the textual actual world correspond to the personal actual world of characters, while the nonactual possible worlds that surround the center stand for the characters' unfulfilled, or partially fulfilled, private worlds. Here again distance from the center stands for degree of fulfillment.

The idea of recentering explains how readers become immersed in a fictional text, but how does the analysis work for texts of nonfiction? It would seem that in this case no recentering is needed, because nonfiction describes the real world and the reader is already there, automatically immersed in this "native reality" by some kind of birth-right. But where exactly is the reader of nonfiction imaginatively situated: in a text, or in a world? If, as I have suggested, the world-image projected by the text is conceptually different from the world referred to by the text, the reader-persona is located in the reference world, not in its textual image. In fiction, the reference world is inseparable from the image, since it is created by the text, and the contemplation of the image automatically transports the reader into the world it represents. But in nonfiction we can distinguish two moments: (1) one in which the reader constructs the text (i.e., becomes engaged imaginatively in the representation); and (2) one in which the reader evaluates the text (i.e., distances himself from the image, takes it apart, and assesses the accuracy of its individual statements with respect to the reference world). In the first phase, the reader

contemplates the textual world from the inside in, and in the second, from the outside in.⁷

The first phase can be more or less elaborate, the reconstructed image more or less vivid and complete, depending on how badly the user needs the textual information for his own practical purposes, but before we can decide what to believe and disbelieve, remember and forget, we must imagine something, and in this act of imagination we are temporarily centered in the textual world. When the textual and the reference world are indistinguishable, as in fiction, the text must be taken as true, since there is no other mode of access to the reference world, and being centered in the textual world implies recentering into the world it represents. When the two worlds are distinct, the image can be true or false, and the reader evaluates it from the point of view of his native reality. The preliminary operation of imaginative centering in this case does not involve ontological recentering. The distinction of a moment of construction from a moment of evaluation avoids two pitfalls frequently encountered in discourse typology: denying any difference in the mode of reading appropriate to fiction and nonfiction, and treating these two modes as incommensurable experiences. It also explains the phenomenon of subjecting one type of text to the mode of reading appropriate for the other. We read fiction as nonfiction when we extract ourselves from its world and, switching reference worlds, assess its viability as a document of real-world events; conversely, we read nonfiction as fiction when we find the image so compelling that we no longer care about its truth, falsity, or ability to serve practical needs.

MAKE-BELIEVE

Once we are transported into a textual world, how do we bring it to life? Kendall Walton locates the key to immersion in a behavior that we learn very early in life—earlier, arguably, than we learn to recognize the rigidity of the ontological boundary that separates story-worlds from physical reality. The comparison of fiction to games of make-believe is not a particularly new one; it is implicit to Coleridge's characterization of the attitude of poetry readers as a "willing suspension of disbelief" (*Biographia Literaria*, 169), and it has been invoked

by other thinkers, including Susanne K. Langer and John Searle (fiction, for Searle, is "pretended speech acts"). But Walton's project is more ambitious than defining fiction: the stated goal of his book *Mimesis as Make-Believe* is to develop a theory of representation and a phenomenology of art appreciation that make the term *representation* interchangeable with *fiction*. The range of the theory includes not only verbal but visual and mixed media:

In order to understand paintings, plays, films, and novels, we must first look at dolls, hobbyhorses, toy trucks and teddy bears. . . . Indeed, I advocate regarding the activities [that give representational works of art their point] as games of make-believe themselves, and I shall argue that representational works function as props in such games, as dolls and teddy bears serve as props in children's games. (11)

The fictionality of all representations is not demonstrated by the application of the theory to various objects but entailed by the definitions that form the axiomatic basis of the project. Here is my own reconstruction of these definitions:

1. A representation is a prop in a game of make-believe.
2. A prop in a game of make-believe is an object—doll, canvas, text—whose function is to prescribe imaginings by generating fictional truths.
3. A fictional truth is a proposition that is "true in a game of make-believe."

Though Walton proposes no formal definition of "game of make-believe"—apparently taking the concept for granted—a set of rules is easily derived from his analysis:

1. Players select an actual object x_1 —the prop—and agree to regard it as a virtual object x_2 .
2. Players imagine themselves as members of the virtual world in which x_2 is actual. The actions performed by the players with the prop count as actions performed with x_2 .
3. An action is legal when the behavior it entails is appropriate for the class of objects represented by x_2 . A legal action generates a fictional truth.

It is easy to see how these rules apply in the case of children's games. In an example proposed by Walton, a group of children decide that stumps are to count as bears. The decision is arbitrary, since any object could be chosen, but once it has been made, the relation between stumps and bears is much stronger than the linguistic relation between the word *bear* and its signified. In the game of make-believe, stumps do not signify absent bears, they are *seen as* present animals. Every time a child sees a stump, she performs an action that counts in make-believe as an encounter with a bear. Players may flee, climb a tree, or shoot the bear, but not pet it, put a saddle on its back, or walk it on a leash. The propositions that describe what the stump stands for and what the players' actions count as are the fictional truths. Participating in the game means stepping into a world in which the real-world proposition "There is a stump" is replaced by the fictional truth "There is a bear." Every time a player performs a legal move, she makes a contribution to the set of fictional truths that describes the game-world: "I am shooting a bear," "I am fleeing from it." In this creative activity resides the pleasure, and the point, of the game.

In visual representation, the stump is the physical image, and the bear is the represented reality. The painting draws the spectator into its world and confers presence to that which it represents. According to Walton, we behave in front of the painting of a windmill as if we were facing the mill. Inspecting the splotches of color on the canvas counts as inspecting a windmill. The generation of fictional truths is the detection of the visual features of the mill. The legitimacy of moves is determined by the visual properties of the prop, by the nature of the represented object, and by the general rule of the game, which restricts participation to acts of visual perception: fondling a painting of a nude does not constitute a legitimate response, no matter how erotic the painting's effect may be.

The question "What does the prop stand for?" is slightly more problematic in verbal representation. Assuming that the prop is simply the text, a naive answer could read, "The prop stands for the world it projects." But as Walton observes (219), we may say "This is a ship" when pointing to the painting *The Shore at Scheveningen* by Willem Van der Velde, but we would never say "This is a ship" when reading *Moby-Dick*. The difference resides in the fact that while paintings depict iconically, words signify conventionally. The only object that a

text can reasonably try to pass as is another text made of the same words but uttered by a different speaker and therefore constituting a different speech act. The basic fictional truth generated by a fictional text is that "it is fictional of the words of a narration that someone [other than the author] speaks or writes them" (356). The prop constituted by the authorial text simply stands for the text of a narrator who tells the story as true fact. The game of make-believe performed by the reader involves three mutually dependent operations: (1) imagining himself as a member of this world; (2) pretending that the propositions asserted by the text are true; (3) fulfilling the text's prescription to the imagination by constructing a mental image of this world. The range of legitimate actions corresponds to the various world images that can be produced by following the textual directions.

This analysis implies a sharp distinction between texts of fiction and texts of nonfiction. As Walton observes, "It is not the function of biographies, textbooks, and newspaper articles, as such, to serve as props in a game of make-believe." These works are "used to claim truth for certain propositions rather than to make certain propositions fictional" (70). Through a strange asymmetry, however, the distinction "offered for belief" versus "offered for make-believe" is not found in the visual domain. According to Walton, all representational pictures function as props in a game of make-believe, and there is no such thing as nonfictional depiction: "Pictures are fiction by definition" (351). Even pictures primarily used to convey information, such as anatomical illustrations or passport photos, pass as something else and invite the observer to pretend that she is facing that which they represent. All pictures are make-believe because they convey a sense of virtual presence. (Here Walton obviously rejects the idea of a nonillusionist mode of representation, such as we find in pre-Renaissance and postimpressionist art.) Some pictures, such as Vermeer's interiors, invite the spectator to a rich game of make-believe, one in which many details can be inspected, while other images, such as schematic line drawings, flowers and seashells in decorative patterns, or the silhouettes of children on traffic signs, reduce this game to the basic recognition of shapes. But as soon as recognition takes place, the spectator is engaging in an act of imagining and therefore of make-believe. The propositions considered in this act can only be fictional truths, because they are inspired by a copy and not a real object.

The asymmetry between texts and pictures with respect to the dichotomy fiction/nonfiction suggests that fictionality is an essentially verbal category. Without an other to limit and define it, the concept of fiction loses its identity. The asymmetry is partially explained by the fact that pictures do not literally make propositions, but Walton's categorization is above all the consequence of the reinterpretation to which the concept of make-believe is subjected as it crosses the boundary from textual to visual media. In visual communication, as I noted in the preceding paragraph, make-believe refers to pretended presence: the spectator apprehends the visual features of the depicted object as if she were standing in front of it. In the case of fictional texts, make-believe refers to pretended truth for propositions. This pretended truth presupposes pretended existence. Since pretended presence does not occur in verbal communication—linguistic signs normally refer to absent objects—the diagnosis of fictionality rests on incommensurable criteria for the two media: it is like comparing apples and oranges.

The distinction between fiction and nonfiction in the textual domain creates another difficulty for Walton's theory. The assimilation of representation to fiction and the definition of the latter as a prop in a game of make-believe make the embarrassing prediction that texts designed to elicit belief, rather than make-believe, are not representations. Yet Walton himself admits that "some histories are written in such a vivid, novelistic style that they almost inevitably induce the reader to imagine what is said, regardless of whether or not he believes it. (Indeed, this may be true of Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Peru*.) If we think of the work as prescribing such a reaction, it serves as a prop in a game of make-believe" (71). In this argument, well-written works of history such as *The History of the Conquest of Peru* are rescued from the limbo of nonrepresentations by reinterpreting make-believe as "picturing vividly in one's mind." In other words, these texts are representations because they can be read as fiction. Walton makes a distinction between imagining and considering a proposition, and regards these attitudes as constitutive of the difference between fiction and nonfiction—that is to say, between "representation" and its other, that which is offered for belief. On the contrary, I would like to argue that mentally producing a more or less vivid image of situations is an integral part of the reading of mimetic

nonfiction, since it is on the basis of this image that we evaluate the truth of the propositions asserted by the text. The difference between fiction and texts we read for information resides not in the occurrence of an act of imagination but in whether or not it forms the point of the game.

Walton's use of make-believe thus subsumes, and often confuses, two distinct phenomena: (1) regarding texts that describe obviously made-up situations as reports of true facts ("willingly suspending disbelief"); and (2) engaging in an act of imagination, by which depicted objects and their surrounding worlds are made present to the mind. If we disentangle these two aspects of make-believe, the concept is applicable to both the problem of distinguishing fiction from nonfiction (through sense 1), and to the phenomenological description of immersion (through sense 2). While the first sense comes close to being binary, the second is a matter of degree: we can produce sketchy pictures, similar to line drawings, or rich images, similar to a Vermeer picture. When the text restricts itself to abstract ideas and general statements, in other words, when it is nonmimetic in Martínez-Bonati's sense of the term, make-believe as mental picturing reaches its zero degree. I am not saying that all mimetic texts necessarily give rise to a truly immersive experience, but rather that only those texts that are dominated by mimetic statements can be experienced in an immersive manner. The depth of immersion—what Walton calls the richness of the game of make-believe—depends on the style of the representation as well as on the disposition of the reader.

MENTAL SIMULATION

In 1997, when Walton revisits the phenomenology of art appreciation in "Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime," he sharpens his analysis of the mechanics of involvement in a textual world by borrowing from psychology the concept of mental simulation. In its psychological use, the term *mental simulation* is associated with a recent debate concerning the strategies of common-sense reasoning, or "folk psychology." An important aspect of this reasoning is the operations that enable us to imagine the thoughts of others with sufficient accuracy to make efficient decisions in interpersonal relations. In contrast to those psy-

chologists who hold that we are able to make judgments about the psychological state of others by activating "a systematically organized body of information about mental states, their origin, interactions and effects" (Heal, "How to Think," 33), a position known as "theory-theory," simulationists argue that all we need to do to recreate people's thoughts is to use our existing reasoning abilities with different input—what we take to be the beliefs and values of the foreign mind. According to Stephen Stich and Shaun Nichols, we "take our own decision-making 'off-line,' supply it with 'pretend' inputs that have the same content as the beliefs and desires of the person whose behavior we are concerned with, and let it make a decision on what to do" ("Second Thoughts," 91). Simulation theory can thus be described as a form of counterfactual reasoning by which the subject places himself in another person's mind: "If I were such and such, and if I held beliefs *p* and *q*, I would do *x* and *y*."

Through its implicit shift in point of view, the concept of mental simulation dovetails with the ideas of recentering, transportation, and make-believe, but by locating the reader within the center of consciousness of the characters he tries to understand, it goes further than these concepts in explaining the phenomenon of emotional participation. From a human point of view, one of the most beneficial features of the theory of mental simulation is that it enables us to reason from premises that we normally hold to be false, and to gain more tolerance for the thinking processes of people we fundamentally disagree with: "Here the interesting point is that people can think about, and so explore the consequences of and reflect on the interconnections of, states of affairs that they do not believe to obtain" (Heal, "How to Think," 34). Fiction, similarly, has been hailed (and also decried) for its ability to foster understanding and even attachment for people we normally would condemn, despise, ignore, or never meet in the course of our lives. As we project ourselves into these characters, we may be led to envision actions that we would never face or approve of in real life.

This idea is crucial to Walton's appeal to simulation in support of his theory of mimesis as make-believe. He uses the example of imagining himself participating in a spelunking expedition to demonstrate that simulation can become a means of self-discovery. In the theater

of his mind, he crawls for hours in a dark and humid hole until he reaches a shaft so narrow that he must abandon his pack and move forward by wiggling between the hard walls. His headlight goes out, and he lets out a scream of panic as he finds himself in total darkness. Though he does not believe for a moment that he is actually in danger, the simulator undergoes a genuinely upsetting imaginative experience, one that gives him the shivers every time he thinks of it. The act of pretense makes him realize his deep-seated claustrophobia and explains to him his real-life fear of elevators and crowded places. (We cannot, unfortunately, verify this claim, even by replaying the script in our imaginations, because what we would learn in Walton's cave would depend too much on our a priori opinions of his theory.) Through this example—which illustrates not only how we immerse ourselves in the creations of our own minds but also how readers bring textual worlds to life—Walton hopes to answer a criticism that has been frequently raised against his approach to fiction: that if the emotions aroused by fiction are confined to the fictional world and do not engage our real-world selves, reading fiction cannot provide a genuine learning experience. Not so, says Walton: if I can discover my claustrophobia by mentally simulating the cave expedition, I can also discover truths about myself by living in imagination the destiny of fictional characters.

In the spelunking example, mental simulation goes far beyond the attribution of thought to characters; it creates a rich sensory environment, a sense of place, a landscape in the mind. In a reading situation, it executes the incomplete script of the text into an ontologically complete, three-dimensional reality. To the performer of the simulation, the word *cave* does not simply evoke its lexical definition of “natural underground chamber” but awakens all its connotations of darkness, dampness, rough texture, earthy smell, silence occasionally interrupted by the noise of dripping water, and whatever else the simulator may associate with the mental image of the cave. But there is more to simulation than forming a vivid, sensorially diverse representation of a scene or an object; this image must also receive a temporal dimension. Gregory Currie suggests that *mental simulation* is simply another name for an act of imagination (“Imagination,”

161), but if the term is to make a significant contribution to the phenomenology of reading, it should be reserved to a special type of imagining: placing oneself in a concrete imaginary situation, living its evolution moment by moment, trying to anticipate possible developments, experiencing the disappearance of possibilities that comes with the passing of time but remaining steadily focused on the hatching of the future.

It is indeed from this prospective orientation, this relentless assessment of the possibilities that still remain open, that simulation derives its heuristic value. Mental simulation should therefore be kept distinct from retrospective and temporally free-floating acts of imagination, such as storymaking, daydreaming, and reminiscing. When we compose a narrative, especially a narrative based on memory, we usually try to represent “how things came to be what they are,” and the end is prefigured in the beginning. But when we read a narrative, even one in which the end is presented before the beginning, we adopt the outlook of the characters who are living the plot as their own destiny. Life is lived prospectively and told retrospectively, but its narrative replay is once again lived prospectively. Simulation is the reader's mode of performance of a narrative script.

The term *simulation* may be new, but the idea is an old one. Long before a label was put on the operation, Aristotle recommended its practice to authors of tragedy as a way to ensure the consistency of the plot:

When constructing plots and working them out complete with their linguistic expression, one should as far as possible visualize what is happening. By envisaging things very vividly in this way, as if one were actually present at the events themselves, one can find out what is appropriate, and inconsistencies are least likely to be overlooked. (*Poetics* 8.3, 27)

This advice is also valid for writers of narrative fiction. In contrast to narratives of personal experience, novels are often conceived from a prospective stance: the author imagines a situation and tries out many possible developments until a good ending imposes itself. As Currie suggests (“Imagination,” 163), the process of world construction is

only imperfectly under the conscious control of the creator. While simulating the behavior of characters, the novelist comes to imagine them as autonomous human beings who write the plot for her by taking control of their own destinies. There cannot be a more eloquent tribute to the heuristic value of mental simulation than the feeling voiced by many authors that their characters live a life of their own.