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FICTION AND THE EMOTIONS

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I

IT is a fact about many of us that we can be moved by what we know to be fictional. But it is a fact that has been seen by philosophers as problematic in a variety of ways. Plato worried about the effect that responses of this sort have on our cognitive and moral development; Dr. Johnson wondered "how the drama moves, if it is not credited"; and more recently Colin Radford has started a small industry in philosophical aesthetics with a series of articles arguing that our emotional responses to what we know to be fictional are inconsistent, incoherent and irrational.[1] In this paper, I wish to focus on a question related to but nonetheless different from those raised by Johnson and by Radford: the question of what it is that we are moved *to* when we are moved by fiction. What *kind* of responses are our affective responses to what we know to be fictional characters and events?

This question is related to Dr. Johnson's "causal" question—*how* (or *why*) are we moved by what we know to be fiction?—and to Radford's question—is it *rational* to be so moved?—not least inasmuch as all three are motivated by the same thought; the thought that standardly, at least, we are moved by what we *do* "credit," that our emotional responses are typically founded on *belief*. This thought is central to the theory of emotion that comes closest to current philosophical orthodoxy.[2] On this cognitive theory, beliefs and judgments are central to the emotions, so that if I do not take myself to be threatened or in danger, then I am not afraid (for myself); similarly, pitying another involves believing him or her to be in one way or another a victim of misfortune. And beliefs of this sort would appear to depend on a belief in the existence of the objects in question. Thus it will be difficult to make sense of my claim to be afraid of the burglar in the kitchen if I know full well that there is no such burglar; if I know that there is no burglar, how can I believe that he (who?) threatens me? Again, what would we make of the person who claimed to pity Neill's sister whilst fully aware that Neill has no sister? We pity people because they suffer, and in this case there is nobody—and the person knows it—to undergo the suffering.

The moral with respect to our affective engagement with fiction seems clear. Given that I do not believe that Nosferatu the Vampire exists, I cannot believe that he poses any threat to me; and if such a belief is a necessary element of fear for oneself, as the cognitive theory of emotion holds that it is, it would appear to follow that I cannot be afraid of Nosferatu. Similarly, although what I feel for Conrad's character Winnie Verloc may feel very much like pity, I do not believe that Winnie ever existed, and hence do not believe that she underwent any suffering. And given that pity conceptually involves a belief of this sort, it would appear that I cannot properly be described as pitying Winnie. It is important to notice that, *pace* Radford, the problem here does not, or at least does not initially, concern the *rationality* of our affective responses to fiction; if I lack the relevant beliefs, the question is not whether my "pity" for Winnie is *rational* or not, but rather whether my response is one of *pity* at all.

Several philosophers have come to the conclusion that my response cannot properly

be described as one of pity, or at any rate not as pity for *Winnie*. Ryle, for example, wrote that "Novel readers and theater-goers feel real pangs and real liftings of the heart, just as they may shed real tears and scowl unfeigned scowls. But their distresses and indignations are feigned."[3] And more recently Malcolm Budd has suggested that "It cannot be literally true that we pity Desdemona, or are horrified by Oedipus's self-blinding, or are envious of Orpheus's musical talent, or are distressed by the death of Anna Karenina—even if there should be tears in our eyes when we read the account of her suicide. For, as we know, these people never existed."[4] But if this conclusion is right, then how *are* we to describe those of our affective responses that appear to be "directed" at fictional characters and events? A number of strategies have been proposed in response to this question. One of the most popular involves attempting to redescribe what we are pre-reflectively inclined to describe as pity for Winnie Verloc (for example) as pity for real people who are brought to mind by Conrad's novel, about whom we do have the relevant beliefs.[5] Or (less plausibly) perhaps our affective responses to fiction can be adequately characterized in terms of states of feeling, such as moods, that do not depend on beliefs in the way that emotions do.[6] Or, again, perhaps they are to be understood as "imaginary" or "make-believe" emotions.[7]

However, leaving aside the difficulties involved in these strategies, it may be objected that their adoption would in any case be premature. As we have seen, our problem is generated by the claim that, given that we know that fictional characters *are* fictional, we cannot hold certain beliefs about them, such as a belief that they suffer misfortune. But this claim is, on the face of it, paradoxical. On the one hand, a belief that "a is F" surely entails a belief that "$(\exists x)x$ is a." And where "a" is a fictional character, we do not believe the latter, and hence it would seem cannot (coherently, at least) believe the former. On the other hand, surely we *do* believe, for example, that Emma Woodhouse was handsome, clever and rich. Indeed, believing this would seem to be a criterion of having understood Jane Austen's novel. *Not* to believe it, or to disbelieve it, would suggest either that one has read *Emma* with so little attention that one could barely be described as having read it at all, or that one has simply got things very badly wrong.

One way of dispelling the apparent paradox here, as a number of philosophers have noted, is by construing statements such as "Winnie Verloc had a pretty miserable time of things" as elliptical for statements of something like the form "It is *The Secret Agent*-fictional that Winnie Verloc had a miserable time of things." Thus while it is not true that Winnie had a miserable time, what *is* true is that it is *fictional* that she did; while we cannot (coherently) believe that Winnie had a miserable time, then, we *can* coherently believe that it is *fictional* that she did. And we can believe this without being committed to the belief that Winnie ever existed.[8]

Now if something like this is right, then a simple solution to the problem concerning our affective responses to what we know to be fictional suggests itself. For if those of our affective responses that seem to have fictional characters and events as objects *are* grounded on beliefs—beliefs about what is fictionally the case—then perhaps they *do* after all respect the constraints imposed by the cognitive theory of emotion, and hence *do* constitute emotions "proper." It is this possibility that I wish to consider in what follows.[9]

II

The question I shall be concerned with, then, is this: can my belief that it is fictional that Winnie Verloc suffered (for example), together with certain other facts about me, make it true that I *pity* her?

But it may be objected at the start that this way of stating the question gets things wrong. After all, it may be said, in such cases we do not *actually* believe that anyone undergoes any suffering or misfortune at all. Some seeming support for this objection is offered by Bijoy Boruah, who characterizes attitudes of the kind we are concerned with here variously as "putative beliefs," as "insincere, hypothetical attitudes," as "no more than provisional assents to propositions

about fictional phenomena."[10] But these characterizations are misleading. There is certainly nothing "putative," "insincere," "hypothetical" or "provisional" about my belief that Emma Woodhouse was handsome, clever and rich. I *do, actually,* believe that (it is fictionally the case that) Emma had all of these attributes. There is nothing fictional about *beliefs* of this sort; it is their *content* that concerns the fictional. Beliefs about what is fictionally the case, that is, are just that: beliefs. They are not (as Flint Schier suggests[11]) "unasserted thoughts"; in believing that it is fictionally the case that *p* my attitude is one of judgment, the linguistic expression of which is assertion. In believing that it is fictional that *p*, I believe that it is *true* that it is fictional that *p*. Beliefs about what is fictional, like beliefs about the actual world, are open to assessment in terms of truth and rationality.

However, even if it is granted that beliefs about what is fictionally the case are genuine beliefs, it may be argued that this has little bearing on the real problem that we are faced with here. That problem, it will be said, arises not because in responding to *The Secret Agent* we do not *actually believe* that anything suffers—we do believe that (fictionally) Winnie suffers—but rather because in such cases we do not believe that *anything actual* suffers. The suggestion here is that in order to be correctly described as pitying someone or something, one must believe that the suffering or misfortune involved is actual, and thus that it is experienced by someone or something which actually exists. It is suggested that these beliefs are so central to pity that a person who does not hold them, a person who believes rather that it is fictional that the object involved suffers, and thus that it is fictional that the object exists, cannot properly be described as experiencing pity.

In support of this suggestion, it is sometimes held that beliefs about what is fictionally the case lack the *causal* power to move us. Thus Boruah suggests that such beliefs are no more than "mere recognitions on our part that, fictionally, something or other is the case," and that "mere recognition is not enough causally to explain why we feel any emotion towards fiction."[12] But this is unconvincing. For to the extent that my belief that fictionally Shylock is a victim of injustice can be construed as "a mere recognition that fictionally, something is the case," my belief that many Guatemalan refugees are victims of injustice can be construed similarly as "a mere recognition that, actually, something is the case." And there is no reason to suppose that "mere recognition" of what is fictional is any less causally efficacious with respect to emotion than "mere recognition" of what is actual.

In explaining the generation of many varieties of emotional response, a more helpful notion than those of "mere recognition" or bare belief is that of the adoption on the part of the subject of a certain sort of "perspective"; roughly speaking, one that involves *seeing things from another's point of view.* What makes my belief that many Guatemalan refugees are victims of injustice causally efficacious with respect to emotion, if it is, is the fact that in some way I can see what it must be like to be in their position; to some extent, at least, I can see things from their point of view. And there is no reason to suppose that we cannot adopt this kind of imaginative attitude with respect to fictional characters. Indeed, many works of fiction might plausibly be said to *demand* that we do so; the reader who doesn't see the world of *Tom Sawyer* through Tom's eyes will have understood the novel only in a very thin sense of "understand," if at all. And allowing the audience or reader to see and to understand her fictional world from a variety of perspectives and characters' points of view is a common criterion of an author's success.

The worry concerning the causal efficacy of our beliefs about what is fictionally the case thus looks misplaced. For on the one hand, if one takes belief to be the crucial factor in the production of emotion, there is no reason to suppose that our beliefs about what is fictionally the case will be any more causally impotent with regard to emotion than our beliefs about what is actually the case. On the other hand, if one takes the (I think more plausible) view that the crucial factor in the generation of emotion is something like the adoption of certain sorts of

perspective, it seems clear that this factor can be present in (and indeed is arguably often central to) our dealings with fiction.

But we must not be too hasty here. Even if it is granted that many of our affective responses to fiction are caused in much the same way as many of our affective responses to what we take to be actual, the question I raised at the beginning of this paper, that of what *sort* of responses these are, remains open. Furthermore, even if some emotions result from "seeing things from another's point of view," this is surely not true of all cases of emotional experience. As my neighbor's rabid dog charges towards me, slavering at the jaws, the only point of view with which I am likely to be concerned is my own. And as the spectator at the horror movie shrieks and sinks deeper into his seat, he is hardly interested in the perspective that the monster on the screen has on things. Not all emotions, that is, stem from adopting another's perspective. And this suggests that the various emotions to which we commonly appeal in attempting to describe our affective responses to fiction may not be amenable to treatment as a monolithic group, and hence that in discussing this issue we need to be wary of generalizing, and alert to the differences between various sorts of emotion and affective response.

III

Once again, then, the question I am concerned with is whether the intentionality of (at least some) emotions may derive from beliefs about what is fictionally the case as well as from beliefs about what is actually the case. In what follows, I shall argue that there is at least one emotion that can be based on beliefs about what is fictional. First, however, we should note that there is at least one variety of emotional response that is not of this sort; namely, fear for oneself. Central to fear for oneself, as I noted earlier, is (roughly speaking) a belief that I am threatened by or in danger from the object of my response. And just as I cannot coherently believe that it is actually the case that I am threatened by something that I know to be fictional—for the only monsters who can threaten *me* are actual monsters—so I cannot coherently believe that it is fictionally the case that I am threatened by something that I know to be fictional—for the only people that Nosferatu and the like can threaten are fictional people.[13] Furthermore, because I do not believe that (it is either actually or fictionally the case that) I am threatened by Nosferatu, I do not have the sorts of *desire* characteristic of fear for oneself; I do not have any desire to escape his clutches, or to warn my friends and family, and so on. Hence I am not afraid of Nosferatu, nor of any creature whom I know to be a creature of fiction. Nor, I suggest, can I be *jealous* of what I know to be a fictional character. For central to jealousy are (once again, roughly speaking) a belief that the person of whom I am jealous has, or has designs on, something that is rightfully mine, and a desire to regain or retain whatever that is. And this belief/desire combination is not one that I can coherently have where I know that the object of my response is fictional. The ontological gap between fictional characters and ourselves precludes rivalry with them as well as being threatened by and escaping from them.

Fear for oneself and jealousy are both sorts of response that do not typically result from adopting another's perspective, from seeing things from another's point of view. However, it is not the *causes* of these sorts of response that are problematic here; it is rather the kind of beliefs and judgments that they involve. Fear for oneself and jealousy (and I do not suppose that these are the only responses of this sort) have the following feature in common: they both depend on the subject seeing him- or herself as standing in a certain sort of relation to the object of the response, a relation that cannot obtain between the inhabitants of different ontological "worlds."

The fact that we cannot fear or be jealous of what we know to be fictional characters accords well with our experience; how often, after all, do we really want to describe ourselves as feeling jealous of a fictional character? Fear for oneself may be less obviously dispensable with in this context; however, I would suggest that in most if not all cases where we might be pre-reflectively inclined

to describe ourselves as afraid of something that we know to be fictional, our response will on reflection turn out to be better characterized in terms of fear of actual counterparts of what is represented in the fiction, or in terms of non-belief-dependent reactive states. Thus, for example, seeing Spielberg's *Poltergeist* may make me afraid of *real* ghosts that may, for all I know, be lurking in my bedroom closet; or it may make me afraid *that* there are real ghosts after all. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, my response to the film may be better described in terms of non-emotional states such as shock and alarm; states which a good director will induce through the expert use of camera-angle and editing and sound, and which may *feel* very much like fear. Furthermore, we should remember that not all fear is fear for oneself; we may also experience fear sympathetically, or *for* others, and empathetically, or *with* others. And it may be that although we cannot be afraid *of* what we know to be fictional characters, we can be afraid for and with them.

Both fear for and fear with others, unlike fear for oneself, are sorts of response that (typically, at least) we experience as a result of imaginatively adopting another's perspective on things. And in the remainder of this paper I shall argue that the intentionality of at least one other such emotion can derive from our beliefs about what is fictionally the case. The emotion in question is pity. Along with fear, pity has received the lion's share of attention in the contemporary debate on the issues with which we are concerned, not least because it is one of the emotions to which we appear to be most inclined to refer in describing our affective responses to fiction. For my purposes, pity is also a good "test case" here because it can plausibly be argued that a paradigmatic instance of pity will have all the features or "ingredients" that any emotion of this kind could have. (In this respect, pity may be contrasted with envy, for example, which often does not involve bodily feelings and sensations; and with certain sorts of grief, which may not involve desires of any kind.) I shall proceed, therefore, by considering whether there are any necessary or characteristic features of pity which are such that if a response is founded on beliefs concerning what is fictionally the case, rather than on beliefs about what one takes to be actual states of affairs, then those features of the emotion will be missing from that response. If there are no such features, I suggest, then there will be no reason not to describe certain responses based on beliefs about what is fictionally the case as responses of pity.

IV

A characteristic if not necessary feature of many emotions, including pity, is a physiological/phenomenological one. And it is undeniable that we can be moved to bodily feeling and sensation by what we know to be fictionally the case. As Radford says, "We shed real tears for Mercutio. They are not crocodile tears, they are dragged from us and they are not the sort of tears that are produced by cigarette smoke in the theatre. There is a lump in our throats, and it's not the sort of lump that is produced by swallowing a fish bone."[14] The occurrence of feelings and sensations of this sort clearly does not depend on a belief that the situation witnessed or described is actual.

However, it must be granted that in general the feelings and sensations that we experience in response to fiction tend to be rather different from those that may issue from our beliefs about what is actually the case. As Hume puts it, "the feelings of the passions are very different when excited by poetical fictions, from what they are when they arise from belief and reality." A passion experienced in response to poetry, he suggests, "lies not with that weight upon us: It feels less firm and solid."[15] I shall have more to say about this later, but two points should be noted here. First, whatever Hume may have meant by "weight" and "firmness" and "solidity," the difference between the feelings I experience in responding to a fictional character or situation and those I experience in response to what I take to be actual cannot simply be understood in terms of *intensity*. What I feel for or about a fictional character may in fact be *more* intense than my feelings for or about the starving Ethiopians, or the Guate-

malan refugees whose plight I hear about on radio or television. This may be morally worrying, but it appears nonetheless to be perfectly possible. Secondly, even if it could be established that beliefs about what is fictionally the case typically issue in "weaker" or less intense feelings than those that issue from beliefs about what is actually the case, it would not follow that responses founded on the former sort of belief cannot properly be construed as emotions. For the emotions cannot be defined in terms of the feelings and sensations that they may involve.[16] Whether or not it is a necessary part of pity, then, the "feeling" aspect of the emotion would appear to pose no difficulty for the position that I wish to defend here; namely, that a person may be correctly described as feeling pity for what he or she knows to be fictional.

However, Hume points to a further potential difficulty that we must address here. "A passion, which is disagreeable in real life," he suggests, "may afford the highest entertainment in a tragedy, or epic poem." Experienced as part of a response to what we know to be fictional, the emotion involved has "the agreeable effect of exciting the spirits, and rouzing the attention."[17] These remarks bring us up against a familiar problem in aesthetics, a problem which Hume addressed in more detail in his essay "Of Tragedy." His topic there is the "unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy."[18] For our purposes, the problem that Hume is concerned with may be expressed with regard to pity as follows. A belief that the object of one's response is suffering is clearly not a sufficient condition of pity; in order to be correctly described as feeling pity, one must also be *distressed* by the suffering. If one reacts to the suffering of another with pleasure, one's response will be some form of *schadenfreude*; if one is simply indifferent to it, one will not be experiencing emotion at all. In responding to tragedy, however, we appear to take pleasure in experiencing emotions such as pity. And this raises the question (though it is not precisely Hume's question) of whether one's responses in such contexts really constitute *pity*.

In addressing this question, the first point to note is that our responses to the fictional depiction of suffering and distress do *not* always involve pleasure; what is depicted in a work of fiction may be so harrowing that we are forced to close the book or to leave the theatre. And if we do not do so, it may be not because we take *pleasure* in what is depicted, but rather because we feel for one reason or another that we *ought* to endure it, as we may feel that we ought to suffer through Amnesty International's reports on torture and capital punishment. However, it seems clear that in many instances our experience of distressing fiction does involve pleasure; and it may be argued that in those instances, at least, our response is not correctly described in terms of intrinsically distressful emotions such as pity. For how can we be described as pitying something if we are taking pleasure in watching or reading about its suffering?

But this is unconvincing. For one thing, it is not clear that the pleasure that may be part of our response to a work of fiction even conflicts with, let alone rules out the possibility of, the distress that may *also* be a part of that response. In responding to a work of fiction as to anything else our attention may have more than one object; it may be, then, that our pleasure and our distress have different objects. (Thus we may be distressed by what is depicted in a work, yet be pleased by the manner of depiction.) If the object of the pleasure that we derive from a work of fiction really *is* the suffering depicted therein, then of course that will be a good reason for denying that our response is one of pity. But there is no reason to suppose that we are in general any more prone to take pleasure in fictional suffering than we are to take pleasure in actual suffering. Secondly, as Flint Schier remarked, the idea that we take *pleasure* in watching Oedipus or Gloucester with their eyes out (for example) is to say the least peculiar.[19] In discussions of this issue, that is, "pleasure" would appear to have a somewhat unusual sense, and one that needs to be spelled out. And the important point for our purposes here is that a major criterion of ad-

equacy for any account of "tragic pleasure" is that it be able to show how this sort of pleasure is compatible with (and perhaps even involves) the distress that tragic fiction may also evoke in us.[20] The fact that we can take pleasure in tragic fiction, whatever "pleasure" may mean here, cannot plausibly be construed as ruling out the possibility that our responses to tragedy may also involve the distress that is an intrinsic part of emotions such as pity.

V

An examination of the "hedonic tone" of pity thus supports, rather than casts doubt on, the suggestion that certain of our affective responses to fiction may in fact properly be described as responses of pity. However, the notion of "hedonic tone" as it is commonly applied to emotion is ambiguous; in this context, it can be cashed out not only in terms of feeling and sensation, but also in terms of *desire*. And desire is the only element of pity that we have yet to consider. If it can be demonstrated that a response founded on a belief that it is fictionally the case that someone is suffering may involve the desires as well as the feelings and sensations that are characteristic of pity, then we shall have shown that there is every reason to describe such a response as one of pity.

It can plausibly be argued that a central and indeed necessary feature of pity is a want or desire that the misfortune suffered by the object of the emotion should stop or could be avoided. It may then be argued further that we lack any such desire in responding to what we know to be fictional suffering, and that we do so precisely because we know that the suffering *is* fictional. Hence, it will be said, we cannot properly be described as pitying fictional characters. As it stands, however, this is unpersuasive. In responding to a work of fiction we may indeed desire that (fictionally) a character's suffering should come to an end, that (fictionally) his or her plight will be resolved happily. "How I hope that her father relents in time," we may think, or "How I wish that he didn't have to die." We sit tensed on the edges of our seats hoping that the heroine will get free of her bonds before the circular saw slices her up; wanting a character to realize his mistake before it is too late to rectify it, and so on.

However, with all but the most unsophisticated reader or spectator of fiction, the desires involved are likely to be more complex than this. Every time we see *Romeo and Juliet*, we may wish that Mercutio did not have to die; we may sit through many performances of *Lear*, wishing each time that Cordelia could survive. But suppose that one sees a performance of (what one initially took to be) *Romeo and Juliet* in which the director has obviously been so overwhelmed by the same desire that he arranges Mercutio's survival, letting him off with a minor flesh wound in the shoulder; or that one has not paid sufficient attention to the posters outside and realizes during a performance of *Lear* that one is watching Nahum Tate's version of the play, in which Cordelia survives. One's response in such situations is likely to be one of disappointment, if not outrage. It may be argued, then, that one does not *really* want Mercutio or Cordelia to survive; that at best one has conflicting desires with respect to the suffering of fictional characters: one both does and does not desire that their suffering should be prevented.[21] Does this conflict of desire suggest that we are not properly described as pitying fictional characters?

Two points should be noted here. First, it is far from clear that we are in fact accurately described as having conflicting desires in cases such as those outlined above. We may genuinely and wholeheartedly wish that Mercutio *could* survive; our objection to the performance in which he does is not based on a conflicting desire that he should die, nor does it indicate that we do not really desire his survival. Rather, our objection is based on our knowledge that if Mercutio survives then we are no longer seeing *Romeo and Juliet* but another, (and the chances are) inferior, play. Our outrage at the "happy" ending, that is, need not conflict with our desire that the suffering involved could have been avoided, nor does it show that we do not really have any such desire. Secondly, even if we do have genuinely conflicting desires with respect to the suffering of a fictional character, this fact will not necessarily

count against our being correctly described as pitying him or her. Our having mixed or conflicting desires with respect to another's suffering is not restricted to those cases in which the suffering involved is fictional; it is clear that we can also have conflicting desires with respect to suffering which we believe to be actual. Thus we may wish that the mental anguish and suffering undergone by a person recently bereaved could be ended, but also believe that this suffering has to be gone through if the person involved is to recover fully from his or her loss. Similarly, we might both wish that Lear's suffering could be avoided, and believe that for one reason or another he *should* undergo it. Indeed, there need be nothing altruistic about this conflict of desire; our pity may simply be mixed with a hint or more of *schadenfreude*. Whether or not we really *pity* Lear is to be decided in just the same way that we should decide whether or not we really pity the bereaved person; namely, by looking closely at the desires and beliefs that we have concerning them. The fact that we have conflicting desires concerning the suffering involved, if we do, no more rules out our being correctly described as feeling pity in one case than it does in the other.

A different aspect of the desires that are central to pity, and one that is more problematic, is pointed to by Charlton, who argues that "To be moved emotionally is to be moved to action. I am only moved by someone's plight if I want to help him."[22] (Here Charlton appears to construe "being moved" as synonymous with something like "feeling pity"; it is not true that all emotions conceptually involve some inclination to action—grief, for example, may well not.) Now the suggestion that a central component of pity is a desire to help the person whose suffering moves one does seem plausible. If it could be shown that it is in fact a *necessary* component of pity, then this would provide grounds for denying that any of our affective responses to fictional characters can properly be described as instances of pity. For typically we do *not* desire to come to the aid of what we know to be fictional characters. Indeed, it is arguable that we *cannot* have such a desire. For the "ontological gap" between fictional characters and ourselves is such that logically we *cannot* come to their aid, any more than we can escape from them or regain what is rightfully ours from them; and it can plausibly be argued that one cannot coherently desire what one knows to be logically impossible. However, even if desiring to help what we know to be fictional characters is possible, there would clearly be something odd about having such a desire. For if we understand that the characters that we are faced with are fictional, then we know that nothing that we could possibly do would *count* as helping them. This explains why it is that most of us do not, as a matter of fact, experience any desire to leap onto the stage in order to wrench Desdemona from Othello's grasp, and why it is that we regard those who write in to soap-opera characters offering sympathy and advice as having got something fundamentally wrong.

In assessing Charlton's suggestion, then, we must ask first whether a desire to help the person whose suffering moves one is in fact a necessary component of pity. The fact that I can explain an action intended to aid or to comfort another by saying that I pitied him or her shows that pity *may* involve such a desire.[23] However, *need* I have a desire to help the person whose suffering moves me if I am to be correctly described as pitying him? Consider a case in which you can see that someone is suffering, and where you believe (i) that you have the power to help him, and (ii) that there are no other and overriding reasons not to do so. (This excludes such cases as those in which you may have reason to believe that in some way or other the person in question will ultimately benefit from being left to cope on his own; or in which you believe that your coming to his aid will cause you far more discomfort than you could possibly save him.) In such a case, if you simply have no inclination to help the person in question, then you are probably not accurately described as pitying him. For your lack of any such desire or inclination strongly suggests that you are indifferent to (or perhaps even pleased by) the fact that he is in the plight that he is. Your reaction, that is, suggests (though of course it does not estab-

lish) that you are not *distressed* by his plight, and is thus a good *prima facie* reason to deny that you are correctly described as pitying him.

However, this way of setting the matter up does not show that a desire to help the person whose suffering moves one is a necessary component of pity as such, but at most that such a desire is a necessary component of pity in certain cases. In some instances of pity, I suggest, there is no question of the subject having a desire to help the object of his or her pity. Pity for people from the past appears to be perfectly coherent—I may genuinely feel sorry for my late uncle or for Lady Jane Grey—and yet it seems clear that our emotional experience in such cases does not involve a desire to help the figure in question; the point being, of course, that we *cannot* (in any straightforward sense, at least) help such figures. And it is because we know this that a desire to help plays no part in our emotional response. To take a rather different kind of case, I may know full well that I am utterly powerless to do anything to help a party of mountain-climbers caught in an avalanche, or a group of sailors trapped in a submerged submarine; and because I know this, my feelings with regard to them will typically not include any desire to help them. However, this does not in itself imply that I am indifferent to, let alone pleased by, their plight, and so that I do not pity them. As in the case of pitying historical figures, the distress I feel at their fate will be expressed in desires of a different form: broadly speaking, in a desire that their suffering should stop or could be ended (perhaps by someone who *can* do something to help); or, with respect to the suffering of an historical figure, a desire that it could have been avoided.[24] Although I know that I cannot do anything to help, that I am (in the case of historical figures, logically) powerless to influence the state of affairs that they find or found themselves in, and so do not desire to do so, I *can* desire that things should be or could have been otherwise for them. And if I do have such a desire, then this will constitute good grounds for describing my response as one of pity.

Pace Charlton, then, the desire to help another is not a *necessary* condition of pitying him. Thus the fact that we have no such desire in responding to the sufferings of a character whom we know to be fictional does not in itself rule out the possibility of describing that response as one of pity; the fact that our responses to fictional characters (typically, at least) involve no desires of this sort simply reflects our awareness that we cannot—logically cannot—help, heal, soothe or comfort them. The desire that is necessary to pity must be construed more broadly than Charlton suggests; roughly, as a desire that things should be otherwise and better for the object of one's pity. The question that we must address here, then, is whether a desire of *this* sort is dependent on a belief that the object of one's response and his or her plight are (or were) actual. Is this a desire that we can have with respect to what we know to be a fictional character?

As I have formulated it above, it is not. I cannot desire that things should have gone differently and more happily for Anna Karenina, simply because I do not believe that Anna ever existed. However, I *can* believe that it is fictionally the case that Anna existed, and that it is fictional that she had a pretty miserable time of things. And given that I hold these beliefs, I may also desire that fictionally things should have gone differently and better for her. (It should be noted that there is nothing fictional about such a desire itself; as with beliefs about what is fictionally the case, "fictionality" attaches only to the *content* of such desires.) If I do have such a desire, and if it is founded on a belief that fictionally Anna suffered, and if the depiction of her suffering causes me to experience the feelings of distress characteristic of pity, then, I suggest, there are no good grounds for denying that my response to Anna Karenina is properly to be described as one of pity.

VI

At this point, however, it may appear that we are faced with a rather different problem.[25] For in wishing that fictionally things had gone differently for Anna, it would appear that I am in effect wishing that Tolstoy's novel had been written differently; that *Anna Karenina*, as well as Anna Karenina,

were other than it is. Now I may, of course, wish just that. As a matter of fact, however, I do not; and it seems reasonable to assume that most of those who would describe themselves as pitying Mercutio or Winnie Verloc do not wish that *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Secret Agent* were other than they are. Indeed, it might plausibly be argued that to have such a desire would betoken a failing to engage with the work adequately and fully as a work of art; and hence that feeling pity for fictional characters, inasmuch as it involves having such a desire, is an inappropriate kind of response to them. Furthermore, we *value* certain works of fiction not least because they are capable of eliciting from us emotions such as pity for their characters. If responses of this sort involve our desiring that the work should be other than it is, however, we seem to be left with the very dubious conclusion that part of what we regard as valuable about certain works of fiction involves wishing that they were other than they are.

It would appear that we are faced here with two—equally unpalatable—alternatives. On the one hand, in pitying a fictional character, and hence wishing that fictionally things were otherwise with her, I also wish that the work of which she is a part were other than it is. And the fact that I have this desire suggests that my response to the work in question is in one way or another suspect. On the other hand, it may be that in pitying a fictional character I wish that fictionally things were different with her, and also want the work of which she is a part to be just as it is. And this latter scenario would appear to bring us very close to Radford's view that responses such as pity for fictional characters involve us in incoherence and irrationality. For it is logically impossible that (a) *Anna Karenina* (say) should be just as it is, *and* that (b) fictionally things should go differently for Anna Karenina. And if one cannot coherently desire what is logically impossible, our desiring both (a) and (b) above would involve us in incoherence.

However, this way of setting matters up neglects a third alternative available to us here; namely, the possibility that in pitying a fictional character we desire that fictionally things were otherwise for her, without having any desires at all with respect to the work of which she is a part. It is true that were it to be fictional that Anna escaped her fate, then *Anna Karenina* would not be the novel that it is. However, it does not follow that in *wishing* that fictionally things had gone differently for Anna, I am in effect *wishing* that Tolstoy's novel had been written differently. Similarly, even though it may be a necessary condition of my losing weight that I stop eating iced buns, my desire to lose weight is not in effect a desire to stop eating iced buns; I may desire to lose weight without having any desires with regard to iced buns at all.

The important point to recognize here is that when I feel pity for Anna, and hence wish that things could have gone differently for her, I am focusing on a particular aspect of *Anna Karenina*; roughly speaking, on the *story* that Tolstoy tells. And in focussing on this aspect, I do not have desires with respect to other aspects of the novel, such as its plot structure or its language. When I adopt a different stance towards the novel—when I consider it *as* a novel, or as a work of art, or as a part of Tolstoy's *corpus*—then my desires and my feelings are likely to change. In particular, in looking at the work from these sorts of perspective I am unlikely to have any desire with regard to Anna herself. Recognizing that we can adopt different perspectives in responding to a work of fiction, that we may focus on one or another aspect of that work, allows us to see that wishing that things were otherwise for a fictional character does not involve us in the dilemma outlined above. We can wish that things had gone differently and more happily for Anna Karenina without thereby either being involved in incoherence or responding to the novel in a fashion that is in one way or another suspect.

Recognizing this feature of our responses to fiction also allows us to bring out the truth in Hume's remark that an emotional response to fiction "lies not with that weight upon us"; to explain, that is, why it is that our emotional responses to fictional characters and events are typically (though not invariably) of shorter duration, and are often (though again not invariably) less intense, than are our emotional responses to similar

actual persons and events. In responding to a work of fiction, we tend to adopt a variety of attitudes or stances towards the work; the focus of our concern shifts between various aspects of that work. Thus in watching a performance of *Lear*, I may experience a variety of more or less intense emotional responses to one or more of the characters; as the lights go up, however, my attention is forced back to the fact that what I have been watching is a *play*, and in this case a supreme work of art. And my responses then change; the focus of my attention gradually moves from Lear to *Lear*. If I am moved now, it will probably be the performance, or the play, or Shakespeare's art, that I am moved by. Similarly, when I am "caught up" in a good thriller or spy-novel, my attention and affective responses will be focussed on the characters and events depicted. When I put the book down, this focus shifts; I think of the work as a novel, or as the new Le Carré, or in terms of its structure. And I may now realize that my attention and responses were entirely unmerited, that what has occupied me so intensely for the last hour or so is simply not worth it. Certain writers and directors—John Fowles, for one—are able to force us continually to shift the focus of our attention from one aspect of the work to another; and the ability to make this an integral part of our experience of the work rather than an annoying distraction is one criterion of mastery of the art of fiction.

The fact that our emotional responses to fictional characters tend to be shorter in duration and less intense than our responses to actual people does not mean that we do not or cannot really *care* about fictional characters, then, nor that our beliefs or feelings or desires with respect to such characters are in some way "substandard." It rather reflects the fact that those fictional characters that we do care about are typically part of something else that also demands, and gets, our attention.

VII

Early on, this paper raised the possibility that the intentionality of certain emotions may derive from beliefs about what is fictional as well as from beliefs about what is actually the case. By way of an examination of the structure of pity, I have argued that for that emotion, at least, this is in fact the case. All those features which can plausibly be argued to be necessary to pity—certain feelings and sensations, an attitude of distress, and desire—may be involved in an affective response that is founded on beliefs about what is fictionally the case. And what has been argued here with respect to pity will also hold true with respect to certain other emotions. Just as we may properly be said to feel pity for fictional characters, so a detailed examination of the structures of the emotions in question along present lines will show that certain of our responses to fictional characters may also be properly described in terms of *schadenfreude*; that without distorting either the responses themselves or the concepts in question we may describe ourselves as envying and admiring fictional characters, and as fearing *for* and *with* them. However, we do need to be wary of generalizing here; our affective responses to fiction cannot usefully be treated monolithically, or as though they formed a homogeneous class. What has been argued here certainly does not show that *any* emotion, other than fear for oneself and jealousy, can be experienced for or about fictions. However, the discussion above does strongly suggest that at least some emotions, along with pity, can be so experienced, and has demonstrated the kind of examination that is necessary if we are to get clear about this issue.

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NOTES

1. Johnson's remarks on this are in his *Preface to Shakespeare's Plays* (Menston, England: The Scolar Press, 1969), pp. 26-28. Radford's first article on the topic was "How Can We Be Moved By The Fate Of Anna Karenina?," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 49 (1975).

2. Recent versions of this theory can be found in Anthony Kenny's *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963) and William Lyons's *Emotion* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

3. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 103.

4. Malcolm Budd, *Music and the Emotions* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 128. Similar conclusions are reached by Kenny in *Action, Emotion and Will*, p. 49, and by Kendall L. Walton in "Fearing Fictions," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 75 (1978), p. 6.

5. Johnson advocates something like this in his *Preface to Shakespeare's Plays*; more recently versions of it have been advocated by Michael Weston, "How Can We Be Moved By The Fate Of Anna Karenina? (II)," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Vol. 49 (1975); by Barrie Paskins, "On Being Moved By Anna Karenina and *Anna Karenina*," *Philosophy*, vol. 52 (1977); by Don Mannison, "On Being Moved By Fiction," *Philosophy*, vol. 60 (1985); and by William Charlton, "Feelings for the Fictitious," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 24 (1984).

6. As perhaps is suggested by Charlton's remark in his *Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson, 1970) that "In general, works of art seem to affect our feelings more by putting us into a *mood* than by exciting a directed *emotion*" (p. 97).

7. Roger Scruton talks (very briefly) of "imaginary emotions" in "Fantasy, Imagination and the Screen," in his *The Aesthetic Understanding* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 132. The role of make-believe in our responses to and understanding and appreciation of fiction is a subject that Kendall Walton has made his own; see especially his *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

8. Derek Matravers offers an account of belief about what is fictionally the case in his "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," *Ratio (New Series)*, vol. 4 (1991). I would emphasize that in what follows, I do not depend on any particular account of belief about fiction; I merely assume that a correct account is to be had.

9. I am not the first to consider this possibility; that affective responses grounded on beliefs about what is fictional can be emotions proper has been suggested by Eva Schaper in "Fiction and the Suspension of Disbelief," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 18 (1978), by R. T. Allen in "The Reality of Responses to Fiction," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 26 (1986), and most recently by Derek Matravers in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" As should become clear, I am broadly speaking in agreement with their conclusion, but take a rather different route in reaching it.

10. Bijoy Boruah, *Fiction and Emotion* (Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 60-63 and 68-70.

11. Flint Schier, "The Claims of Tragedy: An Essay in Moral Psychology and Aesthetic Theory," *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 18 (1989), p. 13.

12. Boruah, *Fiction and Emotion*, p. 64. B. J. Rosebury makes a similar point in "Fiction, Emotion, and Belief: A Reply to Eva Schaper,"*British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 19 (1979), pp. 121-24.

13. In *Mimesis and Make-Believe* Kendall Walton argues that it may be fictional that I *believe* that I am threatened by a fictional character, if in responding to the work of which it is a part I play a game of make-believe using the work as a "prop." In which case, Walton argues, it may be fictionally rather than actually the case that I am afraid of the character. I have discussed Walton's account in my "Fear, Fiction and Make-Believe," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 49 (1991), pp. 47-56.

14. Radford, "How Can We Be Moved By The Fate Of Anna Karenina?," p. 70.

15. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 631.

16. As is argued by George Pitcher, "Emotion," *Mind*, vol. 74 (1965); by Errol Bedford, "Emotions," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 57 (1956-57); and by William Alston, "Emotion and Feeling," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan and The Free Press, 1967).

17. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 631.

18. Hume, "Of Tragedy," collected in his *Essays Moral, Literary and Political* (Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 221.

19. Flint Schier, "Tragedy and the Community of Sentiment," in Peter Lamarque, ed., *Philosophy and Fiction* (Aberdeen University Press, 1983), p. 76.

20. The account that Schier began to develop in the two articles cited above is more successful in this respect than any other I have seen.

21. As Radford suggests; see "How Can We Be Moved By The Fate Of Anna Karenina?," p. 77.

22. Charlton, "Feelings for the Fictitious," p. 206. Similarly, Robert Solomon suggests that central to pity is a desire "to soothe, heal, or at least comfort the other." Solomon, *The Passions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 344.

23. Indeed, the fact that emotions may function as motives to behavior is explained, I think, by the fact that they often involve desires of this sort in addition to beliefs and feelings/sensations.

24. My distress may also be expressed in a wish that I *could* help them (which of course is not the same as a desire *to* help them); but it need not be. Nor, *pace* Charlton (in "Feelings for the Fictitious"), need my response involve a desire of the form "Were anyone that I *could* help in Lady Jane Grey's situation, would that I might help them!"

25. I am very grateful to Aaron Ridley for pointing this out to me. A very illuminating discussion of this issue, to which I owe a great deal, can be found in his paper "Desire in the Experience of Fiction," in *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 16 (1992). This is a good place also to thank Curtis Brown and Marianne Melling for their help.