

Fiction, Recognition and Resonance

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Abstract

Using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as the main example, the article argues that the public of literary plays and narratives vicariously participate in their fictional worlds, recognize the actions and passions they present and resonate to their ethical echoes. Therefore, literary works do not convey knowledge in the strict sense but rather offer an empathic, unreliable familiarity with the human world, its customs and its ideals.

Keywords: Mimesis; Transport; Empathy; Familiarity

Why does one read poems and narratives? Just for pleasure? Isn't literature useful in more substantial ways? Frequently, an optimist answer to this last question points to the cognitive gains literature offers its readers. Because you read *Hamlet* or attended its performance, you know much more about crime and revenge in general, as well as about some of their more concrete incarnations: regicide, illegitimate access to power, plotting murder, laying fatal traps. In addition, you learn about the difficult psychological relationship between a son and his mother who married her brother-in-law too soon after the death of her husband. True, a sceptic might reply, one does get acquainted with these various aspects of *Hamlet's* tragedy, one remembers them, perhaps check them against one's own knowledge of institutional history, monarchic management and familial relationships to see whether they are plausible or not. That the prince, rather than a tribunal, had to punish the murderer might seem strange nowadays. Hamlet's duty is, nevertheless, plausible, given that in the Middle Age revenge by the family of the victim was a customary way of punishing murder. Even later, under statutory law, it was difficult to imagine bringing monarchs suspected of criminal action to a court of law. That Hamlet dislikes his

mother's rush to marry Claudius is also plausible, given that a brother-in-law was considered a very close relative and marrying one amounted to incest. In addition, the customary period of mourning that everyone and especially members of the royal families had to respect was then much longer and, from Hamlet's point of view, there was the possibility that a male child of his mother's second marriage might be proclaimed the heir of the Danish crown. Yet, the sceptic could continue, what kind of knowledge is involved here? Clearly, it is not scientific. Is it historical? Perhaps it is, but why would anyone interested in the crime-and-revenge options that were available long time ago in a far-away, old-style monarchic country would read *Hamlet* rather than a book of history? How reliable would the historical knowledge found in *Hamlet* be, given that the plays is obviously fictional, its characters speak in hendecasyllabic verses and ghosts often visit the stage?

When reading a fictional work or when attending the performance of a play, one pays a special kind of attention to what happens and what the author or the characters say. In such cases, attention requires some confidence, but not a full, unqualified trust, in the reliability of what the

play or the story lets one see, hear or read. We may call it 'vicarious attention', since it includes a shadow of suspicion, a silent awareness that after all one has to do with products of artistic imagination rather than factual history or testimony under oath. The vicarious modulation of one's attention does not contradict the widespread assumption that representation of human and non-human reality has always been and still is one of the main artistic aims of literature. And since the similarity between the actual world and the fictional realms imagined by literature have been present in all cultures during every single historical period, a term like literary *mimesis* 'imitation' has the potential to describe a wide variety of literary practices.

Even though over centuries these practices took different forms, they all targeted definite facets of the human condition. Aiming to prove that this is the case, *Mimesis* by Erich Auerbach [1] showed how, from Homer and the *Genesis* to twentieth-century writers, literature periodically found new, surprising means of representing human life. Because Auerbach was mostly interested in short textual passages belonging to significant works, his analyses offered persuasive examples of descriptions (for instance, the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*) or speeches (God calling Adam in *Genesis*) that summon a sense of reality, calmly detailed in Homer, stunningly pithy in *Genesis*.

These short passages helped the public move from the actual world it inhabits into the fictional ones imagined by the literary works in question. Most readers of Homer would not have ever seen or used a shield similar to that of Achilles – not even one less richly ornate. To reach the mythical Ancient Eastern Mediterranean world to which the shield belonged, a world supervised by gods and inhabited by kings and warriors, our contemporary readers need to cross a considerable distance, spatial, temporal, and cultural. The *Iliad* transported even Ancient Greek readers or listeners far from their actual life into a legendary realm of long gone heroes. Similarly, *Hamlet* takes its readers and spectators to a story-world (to use a term introduced by David Herman, 2002 [2]) quite different from their own and did the same thing when read or watched in Shakespeare's time [3].

The high-style uses of the word *transport* include references to strong emotions, passions, intense excitement, rapture, ecstasy (University of Glasgow, *Historical Thesaurus of English*, <https://ht.ac.uk/>). Poetry, works of art *transport* their public not only by carrying it to the worlds of fiction, but also by inspiring it with a vicarious version of excitement and rapture. Since these worlds may dwell close or far, be nobler, more trivial or at

the same level as the world taken by the readers to be the actual one, since, moreover, plots, characters, and atmosphere may involve stormy or calmer, astonishing or usual actions and emotions, the transport would be more or less rapturous or more or less reassuring.

Once brought to the story-world, once in touch with its characters, their passions and their actions, the readers and the audience vicariously *participate* in them. They become more than just spectators, since to a certain extent they *are* (vicariously) there, they are affected by what the characters think, feel and do, they accept the story-world's data, history, customs and expectations, perhaps even vicariously *share* the characters' experience and feelings. The public vibrates to Hamlet's anger when he senses a hidden spy's presence in Gertrude's room, to his grief at Ophelia's burial, to his quick decision to pierce Claudius with the poisoned sword. It makes little difference whether this story-world is similar to their own or markedly different. In such cases, as the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus would say, "Far is Near", so that participation, attention and appropriation take place even when the distance seems considerable. Readers and viewers are ready to play the *game of make-believe* (to use a term introduced by Kendall Walton [4]), perhaps because they have a deep sense---at the same time Neo-Platonic and Darwinian---of being members of humankind, wherever it exists and acts. Accordingly, they (in fact, we) tend to accept as worthy of one's vicarious attention and empathy the most obvious as well as the most unbelievable states of affairs that concern human beings [5,6].

We thus accept what literary works show us or, in different terms, we suspend our disbelief concerning the characters' place in the world and their actions, emotions, goals and motivations organized as a plot. The plot's simplest visible/audible facets highlight the major problem that triggers it: most usually, in Vladimir Propp [7] and Alan Dundes [8] classical terms, a *transgression*, for instance a theft or, as in *Hamlet*, a murder, or a *lack*, e.g. his and Ophelia's unfulfilled love. The plot presents the various means to solve them, say, by revenge or forgiveness in the first case, by seduction or marriage in the second. In addition, the story includes descriptions of or allusions to the feelings, habits, physiognomies, gestures, and verbal exchanges of the main or minor actors (Hamlet's monologues, Polonius's fake wisdom, the comedians' thoughts on drama), the setting, buildings and landscapes, dialogues, reflections and moral comments. Beyond its center of attention (characters, plot, and relevant details), it portrays a surrounding world whose dimensions may vary from neighborly narrow to cosmic: in *Hamlet*, for instance, the details of courtly life, on the

one hand and Horatio's speech at the end of the first scene, on the other:

I have heard
The cock that is the trumpet of the morn,
Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
Awake the god of day.... (I, i, v. 164-7)

Narration in epic and the novel is itself an action, as James Phelan [9] persuasively argued, as is, one may add, the way scenes follow each other in a play, revealing what happens. The story or the play may thus emphasize the characters' deeds as well as their cool, slightly emotional, or the deeply passionate mood. Imagining all these elements most often elicits an initial *wonder*, a "where am I?" interrogation, as vivid when one reads an Ancient epic poem as when one watches *Hamlet*, and almost as distinct when one opens a more recent novella or novel, say Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1856), Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* (1958) or Walter Kempowsky's *All for Nothing* (2006). This wonder may initially just be "a modest interest", but in fact, once we step inside the story-world of *Benito Cereno*, of Achebe's novel, or of Kempowsky's evocation of war, this interest becomes quite overwhelming.

In other words, one gradually gets used to the story-world one visits: Ancient Troy in the *Iliad*, old, legendary Denmark in *Hamlet*, late eighteen-century South American shores in *Benito Cereno*, precolonial and colonial Nigeria in *Things Fall Apart* and East Prussia in January 1945, in Kempowski's novel. By vicariously inhabiting these worlds, by participating in their happenings, one begins to *recognize* the nature of the conflict and, at the same time, the people and the objects described¹. For the latter, their kind and use are essential, as are, for the former, their personal features, their way of behaving and their place among their fellow humans. More important, one recognizes the reasons for their actions, the maxims they follow, the values they respect or despise. *Hamlet* shows us the prince's indignation and repulsion for his uncle's crime, his difficult acceptance of the duty of revenge, his tense relationship with Ophelia and Gertrude, but does not proclaim that such feelings, doubts and paths to action, seemingly unknown and unsuspected, necessarily exist in all similar situations. Nothing we see and understand in *Hamlet* triggers a rational eye-opener similar to Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo's discovery of the Earth's movements around the sun and around itself. Rather, when we read the play or

attend its performance we feel both astonished and more or less familiar with what the play shows us. How shocking to realize that the brother of a king has killed the king! Yet thirst for power is a familiar human passion and one soon recognizes that the maxim followed by Claudius, "an earthly crown is the highest good," supports it. After attending a performance of *Hamlet* spectators thus might claim that that they finally know what revenge is, given that the play made them familiar with it.

Moreover, our participation in Hamlet's misfortune goes farther than recognition and familiarity. When one hear him declaiming

The time is out of joint. Oh, cursèd spite
That ever I was born to set it right!
(I, v, v. 210-1)

We let our inner ear catch the wave-length of his anger and *resonate* in consonance with it. Silently, we recognize the moral tenor of Hamlet's feelings: surprise and pain that a criminal transgression has hit so close that he himself must reestablish order. One could submit that we all have an inner moral ear that has a silent access to actual or fictional worlds of ideals and values, allowing us to recognize the various *fields of resonance* that reverberate in these worlds, each with its own ethical relevance².

Among the meanings of *to know* one can distinguish between: 1. to have correctly in one's mind a fact, a piece of information, or an answer, and 2. to be acquainted with, to recognize, to be associate with, to be familiar with a person, a fact, or a situation, to resonate to its moral echoes. What *Hamlet* lets us know belongs to the second meaning of the term, as the result of having vicariously participated in, recognized the prince's experience and resonated to it. Recognition, it should be added, most often amounts to a silent realization, to a "*this is that*," which does not need to formulate the nature of these *this* and *that* in words, because something in us---the heart, the inner ear---instantly senses what they are about.

In *Hamlet*, by the way, this silent, irrepressible, recognition/resonance is part of the play's plot. When a group of actors visit Elsinore, Hamlet meets them (II, ii) and listens to one of them reciting two speeches from a play about the sack of Troy. The second speech describes Hecuba's grief when she witnesses the death of king Priam, her husband:

*The instant burst of clamor that she made
(Unless things mortal move them not at all)*

¹The notion of 'recognition' originates in Flint Shier (1986) wonderful book, which looks at mimesis from the point of view of the spectator. Sébastien Réhault, who recently translated it into French, kindly introduced me to it.

²In "Truth and Resonance" (2016) I developed these insights with examples taken from various fictional narratives.

*Would have made milch the burning eyes of Heaven
And passion in the gods
(II, ii, v. 541-4)*

Left alone on stage, Hamlet reflects on the actor's vicarious, yet compelling participation in Hecuba's tragedy:

all (his) visage waned
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit---and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
(II, ii, v. 581-5)

Although the actor only feigned these feelings, Hamlet was sensitive to their dramatic incarnation and vibrated to the sorrow it evokes. Such silent resonance and recognition, he was told, could sometimes affect "guilty creatures sitting at a play" who

Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefaction.
(II, ii, v. 618-21)

Guilt does not Talk, but it Reverberates:

For murder, though it has no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ,
(II, ii, v. 622-3)

that is, by generating fear, trouble, even, perhaps, remorse. Hamlet would instruct the actors to

Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks,
I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blench
I know my course.
(II, ii, v. 624-7)

When the play is performed before the court and the evil character Lucianus pours poison in the ear of the fictional king, the king who is real-in-*Hamlet's*-story-world rises, screams: "Give me some light. Away!" (III, ii, v. 295) and leaves the hall followed by the court.

Plays---and, we might say, all literary fictions---offer images of human actions and passions that can be recognized not only at their most visible layer but also, and especially, at the next one, the network of desires, decisions interacting with customs, moral guidelines, callings and obligations. This recognition/resonance does not need words: like empathy, it awakens an inner vibration.

Can one call such vibrations *cognitive*? The following quote from Garry L Hagberg [10] answers this question.

He tells us that the interesting questions in actual human practice (and, one could add, especially in literary works) "do not invariably concern knowing, but rather sensing, suspecting, believing, half-believing, seeing-but-not-wanting-to-see, or any of the very many other phenomena of emotionally informed person-perception that range across a vast spectrum" (p. 84).

Literature offers us a multitude of feelings and stories, obviously or less obviously fictional, asking us to recognize and resonate to what they imagine. These feelings and stories help us become aware of many aspects of human life, either when we silently empathize with what they show, or when, after a bit of meditation, we manage to express our recognition and resonance in words, if not even in concepts. Yet, one should carefully handle the impulse to learn from them. Just as in common law trials judges, helped by lawyers, glance through numerous previous cases but pass each sentence by looking at the case before them, lovers of literature who thanks to its power can *appreciate* how rich and diverse human life is, should not forget that fiction does not necessarily offer correct answers to our own questions [11,12].

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