

Impossible Fiction and the Reader

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Abstract

I ask how audiences engage with impossible fiction, defined here as any fiction of any media which represents an absolute impossibility (excepting cases of empty reference). In particular, I am interested in how impossible fiction is absorbed, understood and enjoyed by its readers. I focus on the practices of readers, and in particular their beliefs and imaginings concerning the content of impossible fiction. I consider three significant issues in this area.

First, the concept of normalisation, which I adapt from literary theory. Normalisation explains observations from Daniel Nolan and Derek Matravers about the tendency for readers to view impossible fictions as examples of unreliable narration. Second, the puzzlement readers experience when a work of impossible fiction proves to be beyond conventional understanding. Considering work by Umberto Eco, as well as philosophical treatments of the sublime, I suggest that this puzzlement may have unique effects on the reader's aesthetic judgements of a fiction. Third, I consider when and why impossibilities are and are not part of what the reader imagines while engaged with an impossible fiction. This follows work by Tamar Gendler and Kathleen Stock on how readers imagine impossibilities in fiction.

Each of these analyses is accompanied by examples from the wide range of impossible fictions, from postmodernist experiments like Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de Rendez-vous* to contemporary horror such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. The range of examples from fiction is almost as diverse and disparate as existing academic work on reader engagement with impossible fiction, but I draw out common features in both bodies of literature. I combine work in imagination, fiction and narratology in order to provide a robust, principled description of how and why readers engage with impossible fiction.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

There is a class of fiction which depicts impossibilities. These impossible fictions feature bizarre, contradictory events or objects. They include the temporal paradoxes of *Back to the Future*, the eldritch horrors of H.P. Lovecraft, and the absurd convolutions of Terry Pratchett. They include the postmodernist experiments of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Gilbert Sorrentino and Flann O'Brien, as well as the fourth wall-breaking antics of *Deadpool* and *The Stanley Parable*. These are all stories, which makes them natural, appropriate objects of aesthetic attention and appreciation. Yet the philosophical literature on impossible fiction offers little discussion of this aesthetic aspect. Instead, the vast majority of philosophical work on impossible fiction discusses their implications for logic or metaphysics.¹ Topics include how theories of fictional truth are affected by impossible fictions, and what implications these fictions have for the rules of logic in fictional worlds. These issues are heavily discussed, and this thesis does not pursue them. Instead, I focus on impossible fictions as stories. I consider the experience of readers who are faced with these sorts of extreme fictions. My goal is to provide a compelling account of how fictional impossibilities systematically change the ways in which readers engage with, appreciate and understand fiction.

My central question, then, is how the cognitive aspects of engagement with impossible fiction differ from engagement with standard, possible fiction. I answer this question with three key claims:

1. Impossible fictions prompt the reader to *normalise* the fiction. This is a process by which the reader attempts to either explain or explain away the presence of impossible elements.
2. The practice of normalisation is remarkably flexible. It can account for how readers engage with even the most challenging impossible fictions.
3. Readers can engage imaginatively with impossible fictions, and frequently do so in the same way that they typically engage imaginatively with fiction.

Each of these claims is the subject of a chapter in this thesis. A thesis overview is included at the end of this introduction which indicates where each claim is discussed.

¹ For example, Lewis (1983b), Badura & Berto (2018), Nolan (2007) and Priest (1997).

In the process of discussing impossible fiction, I make a further significant claim. This is that there is a productive way of talking about the events of stories without discussing fictional truth-statements—that the question ‘What happens in the story?’ is one about reader psychology and aesthetic experience as well as one about ontology of fiction. I look at how readers answer the question without reference to theories of fictional truth. Readers have particular *impressions* of what occurs in the fictions they read, and these impressions are responsible for the nature of the experience readers have. They are more directly responsible for the experience readers have than formal accounts of fictional truth. This differentiation between fictional truth and reader impressions is important for my work because it allows me to discuss reader experiences at a general level. This thesis is intended to be theory-neutral in terms of what constitutes fictional truths, and the concept of impressions saves me from committing to a single account of fiction when discussing fictional impossibilities. A full account of reader impressions and their significance is given in Chapter 2.

The overall conclusion of this thesis is that fictional impossibilities can affect reader experience in significant ways, but not in *unique* ways. Not only is fiction itself much too broad a church for definitive statements like ‘Engagement with impossible fiction is distinct from engagement with other kinds of fiction’ to hold up, readers are extremely flexible when it comes to engaging with fictions of all kinds. In fact, I recommend that generalised claims about how readers interpret impossible fiction tend to be misleading. Attempts to pigeonhole the ways in which impossible fiction is read are doomed to failure at the hands of a single idiosyncratic reader. This is a feature of my claim rather than a flaw. My overall conclusion does not only give insight into how readers *do* respond to impossible fiction; it also promises to shed light on reader engagement with other cases of non-standard fiction.

My methodology is theoretical rather than empirical. This is for two reasons. The first is that there is very little empirical data available about how readers respond to impossible fiction. The second is that, even if empirical studies were set up, there must be some conjecture about which effects on the reader are due to fictional impossibilities and which are due to other idiosyncrasies in the fictions used as test cases. There is no control group available; no pair of fictions which are identical save for the fact that one contains a logical impossibility. This makes an experimental approach to the issue less appealing, since it would be difficult if not impossible to show that results were actually the effects of fictional impossibilities. Instead, I limit this thesis to a theoretical investigation.

This does not reduce my work to intuitions alone. Some limited work in analytic philosophy exists on the subject, notably from philosophers such as Tamar Gendler (2000),

Kathleen Stock (2003; 2017) and Derek Matravers (2014). These philosophers offer insight into impossible fiction which helps refine and calibrate my arguments. Another resource is the substantial volume of research in literary studies concerning reader responses to impossible and unnatural fiction. These also contribute to my argument, although they must be analysed carefully in order to align their claims with analytic aesthetics. My theorising can therefore be supported by existing work, even if finding conclusive empirical evidence is not practical.

Theorising is for nothing if it does not take into account the responses readers have to real works of fiction. To illustrate and test my arguments, I draw extensively on works of fiction. Practically speaking, the sample fictions I draw on are most frequently works of film and literature.² These are not the only available media which support impossible fiction—in fact, I do not rule out any medium. Frequently the fictions I mention are impossible fictions, which I describe in order to demonstrate a particular point about impossible fiction in general. On other occasions, I describe standard, possible fictions. This is usually in order to make a comparison between impossible fictions and standard fictions. In some cases, it is because the possible fiction has been the subject of theory or criticism which is relevant to cases of impossible fiction. Where there is potential confusion, I clarify whether I consider the fiction to be impossible or possible.

As mentioned above, I do not think that my main three claims are unique to impossible fictions. Other, so-called ‘unnatural’ fictions—a category of fictions which depict impossible or uncanny events of any kind—may have similar effects on the reader to those of impossible fiction. There are many parallels between my project, an investigation of the aesthetic effects of impossible fiction, and Jan Alber’s sustained focus on the poetics of unnatural narrative (2014; 2016; Alber and Heinze 2011). Impossible fictions, however, have several distinguishing features which set them apart from unnatural fiction. There are necessary and sufficient conditions for impossible fiction (discussed in Chapter 1), while the category of ‘unnatural fiction’ is vague. Furthermore, philosophers are sometimes prescriptive about how impossible fiction is interpreted on the basis of metaphysical commitments to possible worlds (Hanley 2004; Lewis 1983b; Nolan 2007). These concerns do not apply to unnatural fictions, which only sometimes violate metaphysical necessity. Due to these differences, it is worth discussing impossible fictions separately from unnatural fictions in general. More could be done to develop philosophical work on unnatural

² To avoid convolution, I refer to engagement with fictions as ‘reading’, and to the audience of any work of fiction as ‘readers’, no matter which verb and noun would normally be used.

narratives, and to bring the fruits of narratological work in this area to bear on philosophy of fiction. However, such work falls outside the scope of this thesis.

I conclude this introduction with a synopsis of each chapter.

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for later arguments by discussing how the distinct areas of possibility and fiction intertwine. My goal in this first chapter is to establish a concrete definition of impossible fiction. In order to do so, I search for the strongest sense of impossibility available, which I call *absolute* impossibility. I do this by investigating how philosophers have defined various kinds of necessity, including logical, conceptual, analytic and metaphysical necessity. This work leads me to an initial, simple definition: a work of fiction is an impossible fiction if it represents an absolute impossibility. That is to say, impossible fictions represent things which could not occur in any possible world. This restrictive definition allows me to isolate fictions which are impossible in a non-trivial, philosophically interesting sense.

This simple definition is not sufficient. In the second half of the chapter, I discuss a counterexample: standard, possible fictions which include empty references and therefore could not occur in any possible world. To better understand this problem, I consider the work of Saul Kripke. Kripke's account of fictional names and predicates suggests they are *all* empty expressions (Kripke 2013). I revise my simple definition to accommodate these cases: a fiction is an impossible fiction if it represents absolute impossibilities *besides those merely involving empty references*. I defend this revised definition against potential criticisms.

Chapter 2 continues this groundwork. It considers what it means for a fiction to represent an absolute impossibility. I investigate three potential explanations of representation: fictional truth, direct content (the words, images and sounds which make up fiction), and Craig Bourne & Emily Caddick Bourne's notion of truth to a story (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016). I argue that none of these are appropriate for modelling representation for my work. Instead, I argue that reader impressions—the reader's beliefs and imaginings which relate to the fiction—best explain what it means for a fiction to represent absolute impossibilities. I define and defend the concept of reader impressions. I also discuss its relationship with Stock's similar concept of F-imagining. By defining representation in terms of impressions, I keep my account applicable to a wide range of theories of fictional truth. A benefit of this is that a discussion of impossible fiction can be conducted in a way which does not exclude Lewisian philosophers of fiction—key players in existing discussions of impossible fiction.

Chapter 3 marks the start of my analysis of the effects of impossible fiction on the reader. I address the theme shared across arguments from Daniel Nolan, Richard Hanley and Derek Matravers: that impossible fiction is best interpreted as unreliable narrative (Hanley 2004; Matravers 2014; Nolan 2007). In order to account for the fact that some impossible fictions resist this sort of interpretation, I introduce and explain the notion of normalisation. Normalisation, originally developed by structuralist theorists, is the process by which readers tend to interpret in ways which make them more able to access and enjoy a work of fiction. Work by Tamar Yacobi, combined with related work by Matravers, gives a list of principled methods of normalisation (Yacobi 1981; Matravers 2014). This list helps to show why some impossible fictions sponsor an interpretation of unreliable narration, while others do not.

Chapter 4 concerns the normalisation of more challenging works of fiction. I use the example of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de Rendez-vous*, a challenging and deliberately obscure work of impossible fiction. It is not clear how readers unfamiliar with Robbe-Grillet's work can normalise this fiction. To show how normalisation can proceed, I discuss Umberto Eco's work on impossible fiction (Eco 1994). In particular, I analyse Eco's claim that there are first-level, naive readings and second-level, reflective readings available to the reader. I criticise Eco's characterisation of the first-level reader, but I show how his picture of the second-level reader fits within my account of normalisation. I finish by suggesting reasons why reading the twisting narrative of impossible fictions like *La Maison de Rendez-vous* can be pleasurable in and of itself.

Chapter 5 concerns the relation between impossibility and imaginability. I engage with the debate on whether the reader is able to imagine what is depicted in an impossible fiction. This debate creates a tension between widely accepted theories about the imagination. If reading fiction successfully involves close imaginative engagement, but people are not able to imagine the absolutely impossible, it is not clear how readers can successfully engage with impossible fiction. I investigate several ways of dissolving this tension. I also suggest that the reader's ability to imagine indeterminately—that is to say, to imagine that something is determinate without actually imagining a specific state of affairs—allows her to phenomenally imagine (i.e., form imaginings which are phenomenally rich) many impossible fictions to precisely the same extent that she does possible fictions.

I synthesise the lessons from these three argumentative chapters into the following: there are several philosophically interesting aspects to the experience of impossible fiction, but each of these aspects might also be found in the process of reading non-impossible fiction. There are no effects on the reader's experience that are *unique* to impossible fiction.

This is partially due to the sheer malleability of fiction: different readers will find different things striking, and there is no guarantee that two readers will have the same experience given the same work of fiction. However, general principles can be found which show typical responses to this kind of fiction. These show the diversity of ways in which readers can engage with impossible fictions.

Impossible fictions are more than just metaphysical curios. They are different enough from typical fictions that it is not clear whether standard models of the reader's imaginative and narrative engagement can accommodate them. My thesis shows when and how they can, and it offers explanations of what happens when they cannot.

1. Impossibility and Fiction

And as they drifted up, their minds sang with the ecstatic knowledge that either what they were doing was completely and utterly and totally impossible or that physics had a lot of catching up to do.

- Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

1.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the definition of impossible fiction which I use in this thesis. My goal is to isolate a class of fiction with philosophically interesting impossible content. In order to do so, I explain how notions of possibility, necessity and impossibility interact with fiction. In the first half of the chapter I argue that there is a type of necessity which is absolute. This necessity applies to all circumstances in a completely unrestricted fashion. In the second half of the chapter, I consider how absolute necessity is represented in fiction. Fictions which break this type of necessity, with one notable exception provided by Kripke, are what I call impossible fictions.

I argue that this class of impossible fiction deserves special attention. Impossible fictions complicate standard ways in which readers engage with and enjoy works of fiction. This has knock-on effects on the reader's understanding and aesthetic appreciation of these fictions. For this reason, part of my approach is to differentiate between uninteresting, standard ways in which fictions represent impossibilities, and significant, contra-standard representations of impossibility in fiction. My definition is restrictive in that it only addresses the strongest sense of impossibility. This is in order to isolate this latter kind of fiction.

I begin by outlining how philosophers discuss possibility and necessity. I seek out the strongest sense of necessity, a project shared with several other philosophers such as Daniel Nolan and Francesco Berto. I contrast this absolute necessity with the merely relative, restricted types of necessity which are routinely broken in typical works of fiction. This gives a simple definition of impossible fiction: any work of fiction which depicts something absolutely impossible is a work of impossible fiction.

The remainder of the chapter discusses how Saul Kripke's work on fictional reference complicates this simple definition and demands its revision. I outline Kripke's

objection: the existence of empty fictional references. This is problematic for my definition, as according to Kripke no fictional names refer to possible entities. This makes the simple definition of impossible fiction vacuous, as it includes all works of fiction which include fictional names. In order to accommodate this issue, I revise the definition to specifically exclude cases of empty references from impossible fiction.

In an appendix to the chapter, I show how my revised definition articulates previous, less targeted or extensive attempts to define impossible fiction. I outline the definitions used by, among others, Kendall Walton, David Lewis, Tamar Gendler, Kathleen Stock and Nolan. The only philosopher whose work on impossible fiction goes against my revised definition is Derek Matravers. I offer some challenges to Matravers's definition, as well as some reasons why Matravers may not have much at stake in his definition of impossible fiction.

1.2 How are impossible fictions impossible?

This section introduces the notion of impossibility. I show how philosophers distinguish between various different kinds of impossibility, and illustrate these kinds are represented in fiction. The purpose of the section is twofold. First, it lays out the vocabulary I use to discuss necessity and impossibility in fiction. Second, it introduces the notion of absolute necessity. This, I argue, is the kind of impossibility which characterises impossible fiction.

Impossibility is one of three basic modal states along with necessity and possibility. If something is necessary, then it *must* be the case. If something is possible, then it *may* or *may not* be the case. If something is impossible, it *must not* be the case. When we call something impossible, we claim that it is neither necessary nor possible. However, there are many senses in which something can be necessary, possible or impossible. We might consider whether something is *physically* possible. For example, it is physically impossible for human beings to fly. We might consider whether it is *legally* or *ethically* possible to commit murder. An action may be possible in one respect but impossible in another. For a person, flying is legally possible but physically impossible. These different strains of possibility reflect different constraints on the set of objects and circumstances we consider when judging whether something is necessary, possible or impossible. Asking if it is physically possible for a human to fly is analogous to asking if a flying human could, must or cannot be included on the list of objects which are governed by the laws of physics. We place different restrictions on our use of the term 'impossible' by stating which kind of necessity we are discussing.

Given all of these restricted senses of impossibility, types of impossible fiction may seem to be equally varied. There are fictions which represent biological impossibilities: situations which defy the laws of biology. The enormous Godzilla, for example, is so large that it should collapse under its own weight. In the dozens of films, comics and television shows in which Godzilla features, however, the monster is fully mobile. Many fictions feature physical impossibilities. The laws of physics necessitate that nothing with mass can travel faster than light, but science fictions such as *Star Trek* regularly flout this fact. Poorly researched hospital dramas might depict medically impossible deaths and cures. *Grey's Anatomy* is infamous in this regard. Courtroom media may depict scenarios which are legally impossible—the trial depicted in *Duck Soup* would never hold up in a real courtroom. Works such as *Hackers* and *Swordfish* depict computer hacking far outside the realms of technological possibility. In some sense, all of these fictions are impossible. They are impossible with regards to certain restrictions found in the actual world; the restrictions of physics, of biology, of medicine, law and technology.

Although these are cases of fiction which represent something impossible, these are not examples of what I refer to as 'impossible fiction'. This is because these works are not remarkable by the standards of fiction. Fiction frequently trades on situations which are, when considered relative to the actual world, impossible. Just as murder is physically but not legally possible, the above-mentioned cases are possible under a restricted sense of the term. They do not represent alethic impossibilities: statements which imply by their mere utterance that they are true (Kment 2017). It *could have been* the case that the square-cube law or the speed of light were different, so *Godzilla* and *Star Trek* represent restricted, contingent impossibilities. This makes them uninteresting for my purposes, as an investigation into these weakly impossible fictions is effectively an investigation into fiction as a whole. In order to isolate philosophically interesting cases of impossible fiction, I must find a maximally unrestricted, alethic kind of impossibility.

Finding an unrestricted kind of impossibility is precisely Francesco Berto's project in his work on impossible worlds. In the following, written with Mark Jago, Berto outlines the most likely candidate for the kind of impossibility which characterises impossible worlds:

This... is about worlds which are not possible, with "possible" understood in an unrestricted sense. Start with the intuitive idea of the totality of possible worlds, which capture all and only the genuine possibilities. The worlds we are interested in are not there. These worlds are often called logically impossible worlds, as logical laws such as the Law of Non-Contradiction or the Law of Excluded Middle are assumed to be the most general and topic-neutral: they are supposed to hold at all possible worlds (Berto and Jago 2018).

Berto and Jago isolate necessities which are binding in all possible worlds. This gives a working notion of unrestricted necessity: if something could occur in a possible world, then that thing is not unrestrictedly impossible.

The same principle can be applied to a definition of impossible fiction. If a fiction contains only events which could take place in a possible world (as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Swordfish* do), then it should not count as an impossible fiction. Including these fictions would result in a weak definition which accommodates the majority of works of fiction. Instead, impossible fictions are those which represent things which could not be manifested in *any* possible world. Berto provides an example of this unrestricted type of impossibility: logical impossibility. A fiction which includes this type of impossibility would have the form:

(1) In fiction F , p & in F , $\neg p$.

By representing logical impossibilities, this fiction violates the law of non-contradiction. This is seen far more rarely in fiction than restricted impossibilities, but many logically impossible fictions exist. Jorge Luis Borges's 'The Garden of Forking Paths' contains just such a contradiction: the short story features a novel in which all outcomes of events are manifested at the same time (Borges 2018). This makes 'The Garden of Forking Paths' an impossible fiction.

Every object and event, no matter the manner of its existence, should obey the law of non-contradiction. This makes the law of non-contradiction *absolutely* necessary: it applies in all cases. This can be compared with the merely *relatively* necessary laws broken in *Godzilla* and *Swordfish*. *Godzilla* is impossible relative to certain laws of nature, such as the square-cube law. On a planet with weaker gravity, *Godzilla* would be possible. *Swordfish* is impossible relative to the limitations of early-2000s computer systems. A different computer system would make the events of *Swordfish* entirely possible. An inconsistent fiction (i.e., one which breaks the law of non-contradiction) is absolutely impossible, as the law of non-contradiction holds in all circumstances. An absolute impossibility is an unrestricted impossibility; one which applies to all possible worlds, and can never have any counterexample. This is the sort of impossibility which I focus on in this thesis.

1.3 Example: 'Sylvan's Box'

What do absolutely impossible fictions look like? We have already seen 'The Garden of Forking Paths', where a character possesses an infinite novel. There are many others

besides this. This section introduces a standard case of impossible fiction: the short story 'Sylvan's Box', written by Graham Priest (1997). I outline the impossible elements of 'Sylvan's Box', and comment on its suitability as a sample case of impossible fiction. I also show how examples of literary fiction expand on the kind of absolute impossibility represented in 'Sylvan's Box'. This helps contextualise the work on absolute impossibility in the previous section and shows how real fictions can represent these sorts of impossibilities.

It is easy to write an impossible fiction. I myself can do so right now:

Ladybird: Once upon a time, there was a ladybird named Sam. Sam was red all over, but also was not red at all. Sam had six legs, and no legs. Sam was very happy about this situation but wasn't happy about it one bit.

'Ladybird' is an impossible fiction (I count three absolute impossibilities, provided that all six legs are counted together), but it is a vestigial one. It is a world apart from 'The Garden of Forking Paths' in terms of literary style and quality. While it is easy to pen a logically impossible fiction like 'Ladybird', these perfunctory stories are vulnerable. They can be charged with failure to properly represent fiction in general. Nolan calls this a state of quarantine—fiction written in a tightly controlled environment where outside factors are removed (Nolan 2015: 59). Quarantined fictions are not easily subject to issues such as artistic licence, metaphor and interpretation, which means that the philosophical claim they are used to demonstrate is not so easily generalised to non-quarantined fictions. We would do better to draw on real examples when illustrating how absolute impossibilities are represented in fiction. The drawback to this approach is that these examples are frequently convoluted and difficult to explain without a great amount of detail. Fortunately, there is a middle ground available. There is an impossible fiction with the trappings of literary fiction, but the specific and easily understood impossibility of a thought experiment. This is Priest's 'Sylvan's Box'.

'Sylvan's Box' depicts the discovery of a logically impossible artefact in the belongings of a recently deceased man (a fictionalised version of Priest's colleague, philosopher Richard Sylvan). The first-person narrator (a fictionalised version of Priest himself) has discovered a box labelled 'Impossible Object':

Carefully, I broke the tape and removed the lid. The sunlight streamed through the window into the box, illuminating its contents, or lack of them. For some moments I could do nothing but gaze, mouth agape. At first, I thought that it must be a trick of the light, but more careful inspection certified that it was no illusion. The box was absolutely empty, but also had something in it (Priest 1997: 575).

This passage represents an inconsistent object. The box that narrator-Priest describes breaks the law of non-contradiction: something cannot be both p and $\text{not-}p$ at the same time. The plot of 'Sylvan's Box', brief as it is, revolves around this logically impossible box. This makes 'Sylvan's Box' an exemplar of impossible fiction. One *must*, Priest argues, interpret the story as impossible in order to engage with it properly. Indeed, Priest is so convinced that the story is essentially impossible that he claims, 'anyone who misapplied the principle of charity to interpret the story in a consistent way, would have entirely misunderstood it (Priest 1997: 580).' This is because the actions of the characters would make no sense if the box were actually a consistent object. According to Priest, a reading of 'Sylvan's Box' which claims the object is not impossible, merely presented in a deceptive and impossible-seeming way, would make less sense than one which claims the box is impossible.

'Sylvan's Box' makes a good case sample of an impossible fiction for several more reasons: it is well-known as an ostensibly impossible fiction; it clearly represents an absolute impossibility; and it is not easily subject to Nolan's notion of quarantining.

The first of these reasons, that 'Sylvan's Box' is already relatively well-known as an impossible fiction, is beneficial because it licences using the story as a sample impossible fiction. There is no need to attempt to justify a reading of the story as impossible, as this is the default reading that Priest encourages us to take. It is the context in which the work is discussed in philosophy. When attempting a definition of impossible fiction from scratch, it is good to ensure that cases already widely recognised as impossible fiction are accommodated. 'Sylvan's Box' serves well as such a fiction.

The second reason is that the fiction clearly represents an absolute impossibility. This is due to the fact that the impossibility represented is a violation of the law of non-contradiction. As I have already discussed via Berto, logical inconsistency is perhaps the most intuitively clear example of something which is unrestrictedly, absolutely impossible. Priest presents an alethic impossibility: by saying 'the box was absolutely empty, but also had something in it', we necessarily say something *false*. This impossibility is intuitively stronger and more binding than those broken in *Star Trek* and *Grey's Anatomy*. An object should not, cannot have contradictory properties, even in cases of fiction. That 'Sylvan's Box' depicts an intuitively alethic and absolute impossibility is why it makes a compelling exemplar of impossible fiction.

Finally, 'Sylvan's Box' benefits from that fact that, while specifically designed by a philosopher to pump intuitions about impossibilities in fiction, it is nevertheless recognisable as a story. This helps it avoid the charge of quarantining from Nolan, explained above. A

quarantined fiction is one which bears little resemblance to real works of literary fiction. 'Sylvan's Box' is short, and unlikely to win awards for its literary merit, but it has a plot and defined characters. It can function as an aesthetic object, not merely as an argument or philosophical example. 'Sylvan's Box' is not quarantined, but still contains a logical impossibility which is difficult to interpret away—this is a virtue for an exemplar impossible fiction.³

Other examples of logically impossible fiction can be found in works from various media. Unlike the case of 'Sylvan's Box', however, the contradictions present in other works of impossible fiction are not always made explicit. A contradiction may be suggested without being described in detail, and the logically impossible elements of a fiction may be subject to interpretation. Certain character crossover fictions, such as the work of Flann O'Brien and Kathy Acker, feature such contradictions. The coexistence of two fictional characters from different works is not an obvious contradiction, yet it might nevertheless be considered contradictory upon reflection. Fictions are frequently taken to be isolated and independent of one another, which would make several crossover casts of characters logically inconsistent (McHale 1987: 57). For example, Captain Ahab is killed by the titular whale in *Moby-Dick*, but he is killed prematurely by Deadpool in *Deadpool Killustrated*. If we take seriously the notion that a character can cross over to another work of fiction, then Ahab is both killed by the whale and not killed by the whale: a logical impossibility. Another example of logically inconsistent fiction is provided by Nolan, who argues that certain fictive personifications of abstract entities are contradictory (Nolan 2015). The concept of Death does not have arms, and so cannot carry a scythe. Despite this, Death is frequently depicted as robed and scythe-bearing, which Nolan argues constitutes a violation of the law of non-contradiction.⁴ Both the crossover and personification cases can be formalised into logical contradictions, though the formalisation is less obvious and more prone to challenge than that of 'Sylvan's Box' and similar fictions. This is why, despite the multitude of logically impossible fictions, 'Sylvan's Box' makes a compelling example of this kind of fiction.

1.4 The simple definition of impossible fiction

This section establishes my simple definition of impossible fiction: any fiction which represents at least one thing which is absolutely impossible (i.e., that could not occur in any

³ Several philosophers have claimed that the impossible box *can* be explained away. Chapter 3 of this thesis investigates arguments to this effect.

⁴ See Bourne and Caddick Bourne (2018) for an argument against this claim.

possible world) is an impossible fiction. In order to inform that definition, however, I must consider whether there are other kinds of absolute necessity besides logical necessity. I address three potential candidates for absolute necessity: metaphysical, analytic and conceptual necessity. I argue in all cases that the status of these as absolute necessities does not alter my simple definition. I assume for the sake of argument that these are absolute necessities, but I also argue that the definition does not stand and fall on their inclusion. The simple definition, however, does not stand up to criticism, and it must eventually be replaced. However, the details of this criticism as well as a replacement definition are only illuminating if the simple definition is motivated and established first.

I am interested in all kinds of absolute, unrestricted necessity. Logical necessity is one of these. Berto and Jago, amongst others, take logical necessity to be the widest form of necessity available. To Berto and Jago, if something is logically impossible then it is impossible in all other senses (Berto and Jago 2018). However, other philosophers claim that *metaphysical* necessity is equally strong as, or even stronger than logical necessity. In fact, metaphysical necessity is a popular choice for the strongest, least restricted kind of possibility available (Kment 2017; Kripke 1980: 36; Nolan 2011). There is substantial disagreement amongst philosophers over the limits of metaphysical necessity. Some see logical necessity as synonymous with or a subtype of metaphysical necessity (synonymous: Bricker 2008: 8; subtype: Fine 2002). Others, notably Nolan, claim that not all metaphysical impossibilities are logically impossible. Truths about the existence of God, the nature of time and space, and perhaps causation may be metaphysically necessary even if their negation does not constitute a logical contradiction (Nolan 2011: 325–326). Metaphysical necessity must be accounted for when searching for unrestricted kinds of possibility.

It is not my goal here to definitively identify metaphysical necessity. It is also not my goal to distinguish between logical and metaphysical necessities, or to take sides in the debate over whether they are distinct or coextensive. Metaphysical necessity is only relevant to impossible fiction if metaphysical impossibilities are absolute impossibilities. If impossible fictions are those which are impossible in the strongest, least restricted sense, then these metaphysical necessities should be included in the definition of impossible fiction. If metaphysical necessity is absolute (in the sense that it holds in all possible circumstances), then metaphysically impossible fictions are impossible fictions. I proceed under the assumption that this is the case, though this assumption is not load-bearing with regards to my definition of impossible fiction. The inclusion of metaphysical impossibilities in impossible fiction is conditional on their unrestrictedness.

The same goes for two other potentially absolute necessities: analytic and conceptual necessity (Nolan 2011: 325). Neither of these types of necessity have universally accepted definitions. However, 'analytic necessity' suggests that which is implied by definition. It is analytically necessary that a bachelor is unmarried, or that a circle is round. Analytically necessary truths are those which are necessary without any reference to the world. Again, it is possible that this category coincides entirely with logical necessity. Whether or not it does is not important to my definition; I mention it here only to indicate that it is a candidate for absolute necessity. All that matters for my work is that analytically impossible fictions are included in my definition if and only if analytic necessity is absolute. For the sake of argument, I take this to be the case.

Conceptual necessity follows the same pattern established by metaphysical and analytic necessities with regards to impossible fiction. Conceptual necessity is a notion introduced by Leibniz, who takes it to refer to the dependency of concept *y* on concept *z*, in virtue of the containment of *y* in *z* (Newlands 2018). For example, the concept of checkmate depends on the concept of chess. It is conceptually impossible, therefore, to achieve checkmate in a game of darts, as the conceptual dependency on chess has been broken. Conceptual necessity is covered in greater detail in the appendix to this chapter, with particular reference to the work of Tamar Gendler and Kathleen Stock. For now, I only raise it as another kind of absolute necessity which may not be encompassed by logical and metaphysical necessity combined. Just like analytically impossible fictions, conceptually impossible fictions are included in my definition if conceptual necessity is absolute, which I grant for the sake of argument.

This discussion of modality suggests that a good definition of impossible fiction should reflect the different ways in which philosophers use the term 'impossible'. Ideally, it should use the term in the absolute sense. *Godzilla* is not an impossible fiction, but 'Sylvan's Box' is. Both depict something impossible, but they depict things which are impossible in distinct ways. *Godzilla* could not take place in our own world, but it could have taken place under different circumstances. If Earth's gravity had been weaker, for example, *Godzilla*'s enormous mass would not pose any problem. 'Sylvan's Box', on the other hand, depicts events which could not have taken place no matter what. There is no way the world could have been such that there could be an empty box with something in it. There is no possible world in which 'Sylvan's Box' could have taken place. In an absolute sense, only one of these two fictions is impossible.

The distinction between absolutely and relatively impossible fiction, as illustrated by the comparison between 'Sylvan's Box' and *Godzilla*, gives me my working definition of

impossible fiction: a fiction is an impossible fiction *iff* it represents at least one circumstance which could not occur in any possible world. Conversely, any and all fictions which could take place in a possible world are *not* impossible fictions. I take this to be synonymous with the following: a work of fiction is an impossible fiction if it depicts an absolute impossibility. Call this the *simple definition* of impossible fiction.

The virtue of this simple definition is its flexibility and applicability. It is sensitive to future developments in philosophy concerning necessity. It captures the notion of impossible fiction without the need for an exhaustive list of types of absolute necessity. It leaves us able to differentiate between a fiction which is chronically impossible and one which is impossible merely at one moment, while still recognising that both are impossible fictions. As the appendix to this chapter shows, it accommodates most of the ways in which philosophers have previously talked about impossible fiction where they did not offer a full definition of their own.

I do not, however, take the simple definition to be the most successful definition of impossible fiction. This is because there is a class of fictions which is captured by the simple definition but is not impossible in a philosophically interesting way: fictions with empty references. The next section explains why empty references are absolutely impossible, and hence why fictions with empty references fall under the simple definition. It also shows why these fictions should nevertheless not be considered impossible fictions. My task then is to preserve the virtues of the simple definition while revising it so as to remove this problematic class of fictions.

1.5 The problem of empty references

This section introduces a problem case for the simple definition of impossible fiction. The definition, it transpires, applies to more works of fiction than it ought. This includes works of fiction which should not fall under the definition of impossible fiction. These are works which include empty references. Empty references cannot be actualised in any possible world, because there is no referent to satisfy the reference. According to the simple definition, this makes any fiction with an empty reference an impossible fiction. I show why this is a problem using the example of Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full*. I then discuss Kripke's work on fictional names (Kripke 2013). Kripke goes further than cases like *A Man in Full*. He argues that all fictional names and fictional predicates are empty references. I analyse Kripke's argument and show that his objection is strong enough to motivate revising the simple definition of impossible fiction.

The problem posed by empty references can be demonstrated by ‘that thing with the cup’—the scandalous sexual act undertaken by Serena and Charlie Croker in Tom Wolfe’s *A Man in Full*. As Gendler establishes in ‘The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance’, Wolfe’s description lacks any referent (Gendler 2000: 72). To the disappointment of curious readers, Wolfe made up the name without any notion as to what Charlie and Serena might be doing. This fact threatens to leave *A Man in Full* within the bounds of simple definition of impossible fiction. The argument for this can be formalised.

- (1) There is no act which satisfies the description ‘that thing with the cup’.
- (2) If there is no act which satisfies ‘that thing with the cup’, then there is no possible world where ‘that thing with the cup’ is performed (*from the definition of possible worlds*).
- (3) There is no possible world where ‘that thing with the cup’ is performed (*from 1 and 2*).
- (4) If there is no possible world where ‘that thing with the cup’ is performed, then it is absolutely impossible to do ‘that thing with the cup’ (*from the definition of absolute impossibility*).
- (5) It is absolutely impossible to do ‘that thing with the cup’ (*from 3 and 4*).
- (6) Any fiction which represents the performance of ‘that thing with the cup’ represents an absolute impossibility (*from 5*).
- (7) In *A Man in Full*, Serena and Charlie perform ‘that thing with the cup’.
- (8) *A Man in Full* depicts an absolute impossibility (*from 6 and 7*).
- (9) If *A Man in Full* depicts an absolute impossibility, then it is an impossible fiction (*from 8 and the simple definition of impossible fiction*).

Therefore, *A Man in Full* is an impossible fiction (*from 8 and 9*).

The problem is that, intuitively, *A Man in Full* should not be counted as an impossible fiction. It does not have the obviously impossible events of ‘Sylvan’s Box’ or *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. It is painstakingly researched and highly realistic throughout. If *A Man in Full* is an impossible fiction, then the definition of impossible fiction used seems too strong. A similar case can be made for nonsense literature. There is no action which counts as gyring or gimbling, but it is the case in Lewis Carroll’s ‘Jabberwocky’ that the slithy toves gyre and gimble (Carroll 2001). It is not so intuitively objectionable that ‘Jabberwocky’ might be an impossible fiction than it is that *A Man in Full* might, but it is odd that something nonsensical could have modal properties at all. The simple definition has labelled *A Man in Full* and ‘Jabberwocky’ impossible fictions. I see this as a fault in the simple definition.

This problem is developed much further by Kripke in his *Reference and Existence*. Kripke questions what kind of existence we should take fictional characters, objects and entities to have. His central hypothesis, explained in greater detail below, is that fictional names cannot refer to any possible entity. Effectively, all fictional names are empty references in the same way as the rigid designator ‘that thing with the cup’. The same applies to fictional predicates: they are empty expressions. This means that there is no possible world where Serena Croker exists, let alone a world where she enacts ‘that thing with the cup’. There is also no possible world where the predicate ‘is a dragon’ can apply. If Kripke is correct, the simple definition of impossible fiction is useless. Defining impossible fiction as any fiction which depicts absolute impossibilities means any fiction which includes fictional names or predicates is impossible. The remainder of this section investigates Kripke’s claim to determine whether this threat demands the revision of the simple definition.

In Kripke’s John Locke lectures, *Reference and Existence*, he combines the notion of fictional reference with his earlier work on modal aspects of names and identities in *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke 1980). Most notably, Kripke develops the idea that the meaning of a name cannot be the same as a description. For example, ‘Moses’ cannot mean ‘the man who led the Israelites out of Egypt’, since this would leave us unable to parse a sentence like ‘It is possible that somebody other than Moses could have led the Israelites out of Egypt’ (Kripke 2013: 32–36). Kripke uses the example of Sherlock Holmes to compare such a case to fiction. According to Kripke, the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ cannot apply to just anybody (2013: 41). It is intended to pick out an individual. We cannot interpret the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ as, say, ‘the person who solved the mystery of the Speckled Band,’ else we could not understand a sentence like ‘if Sherlock Holmes had not solved the mystery of the Speckled Band, Mycroft could have done so.’

It seems reasonable to separate the identity of Sherlock Holmes from the deeds performed in the Sherlock Holmes stories. However, Kripke shows that doing so means that Sherlock Holmes does not exist in any possible world. Take a real or possible person who *did* solve the mystery of the Speckled Band. This person does not have the identity of Sherlock Holmes in virtue of having done the things described of Holmes in these fictional works. Kripke writes in *Naming and Necessity*:

I hold the metaphysical view that, granted that there is no Sherlock Holmes, one cannot say of any possible person that he would have been Sherlock Holmes, had he existed. Several distinct possible people, and even actual ones such as Darwin or Jack the Ripper, might have performed the exploits of Holmes, but there is none of whom we can say that he would have been Holmes had he performed these exploits. For if so, which one (Kripke 1980: 158)?

Somebody may have been in the right place, at the right time, doing the appropriate things, but this does not give us any reason to suppose that this possible person is Sherlock Holmes. This leads Kripke to conclude that Sherlock Holmes is not the name of any possible person. Kripke develops this further in *Reference and Existence*. Since 'Sherlock Holmes' does not refer to any possible object, a sentence which refers to Sherlock Holmes does not express a real proposition. Instead, a sentence using a fictional name is pretence: it creates the illusion of reference to a possible entity (Kripke 2013: 29). Sentences which include the name of a fictional character appear to refer to a unique person, but do not actually do so. When the sentence is read, the reader pretends that she is reading a sentence with propositional content, when in fact she is not.

Kripke does not deny the possibility that we may have been *mistaken* about Sherlock Holmes. It might turn out that Conan Doyle wrote his stories as a factual report of a friend, but these reports through coincidence and error came to be thought of as fictional. However, in this event, we still cannot sensibly claim it is possible for the fictional character Sherlock Holmes to really exist. Instead, we have simply applied the label 'fictional' mistakenly—Holmes never was a fictional character, but rather a real person erroneously called fictional.

Kripke applies the same principles to fictional predicates. He describes 'empty predicates... "[is a] unicorn"... "dragon," "chimera" and so on—various mythical types of species (2013: 43).' Just as was the case with fictional names, we do not have enough information to isolate a possible species which is identical to the fictional species. He explains that having a good description of the creature's appearance is not enough:

[C]an one say that under specific circumstances there might have been unicorns? Well, of course there might have been animals that *looked* like white horses and had one horn. But that isn't sufficient... A situation in which there are animals *looking* like tigers in the Antarctic is not necessarily a situation in which there would have been *tigers* in the Antarctic. There has got to be another condition that these hypothetical animals must satisfy to be tigers, that is, that they are of the same species, have the same internal structure... Unfortunately, the story just doesn't tell us what the external structure of a unicorn is supposed to be, and therefore it hasn't told us which hypothetical animal to look out for in another possible world (Kripke 2013: 47).

If we were to find horned horses, Kripke argues, we could not declare that these horses are unicorns. We have insufficient information about the properties of unicorns to determine that *these* animals are unicorns. Compare the unicorn to the bandersnatch. We do not, on reflection think that bandersnatches are possible creatures. This is because we recognise intuitively that we do not have enough information about bandersnatches to identify them

(Kripke 2013: 51). The same principle applies to unicorns. It is only because we think we *could* identify a unicorn if we saw one that we are tempted to say that they are possible. Kripke therefore claims that references using fictional predicates, such as 'is a unicorn', are not real propositions.

None of this is to say that Kripke thinks that fiction is senseless. Nor does Kripke think that fictional characters are *impossible* (García-Carpintero and Genoveva 2014: 292). Rather, his claim is that the conventions which govern fiction are radically different to those which govern genuine references. Fiction is more than just writing on a page or images on a screen. It involves a complex practice of telling and reading stories in a way superficially similar to reporting facts. The storyteller pretends to be relating real events, but typically without any intent to deceive the reader. The reader, meanwhile, typically pretends that the events of the story are true, despite the fact that she does not believe they are. It is due to this practice of pretence that Kripke thinks fictions make sense despite never referring to existing objects.

If Kripke is correct, though, my simple definition of impossible fiction fails. The simple definition targets fictions which are not manifested in any possible world, but according to Kripke this applies to all fictions. All works of what I have been referring to as 'standard, possible fiction' are in fact works of impossible fiction. Unintuitively, this suggests that we should not call fictions 'impossible' just because they are not possible. A definition of impossible fiction needs to capture the distinction between impossible fiction and standard, possible fiction. It should show why it is that certain kinds of fiction are different, with respect to the kind of events and objects they depict, from others. It should help articulate the difference in possibility between *Jane Eyre* and H.P. Lovecraft's eldritch 'The Call of Cthulhu'. Prior to investigating Kripke, it was tempting to use absolute impossibility to show this difference: *Jane Eyre*, it seems, could have taken place if the world had been slightly different, whereas *The Call of Cthulhu* could never have taken place no matter how different the world was. Kripke shows that this approach to defining impossible fiction does not work, since even *Jane Eyre* could never have taken place. The proper nouns used throughout, from 'Jane' to 'Pilot', do not refer to possible entities. The predicate 'owner of Thornfield Hall' is empty—there is no person to whom it could be appropriately applied, even if a real estate was actually named Thornfield Hall. According to my simple definition, both *Jane Eyre* and *The Call of Cthulhu* are absolutely impossible, and this indicates that the simple definition is insufficient for distinguishing between interestingly and trivially impossible fictions.

Perhaps there is still some hope for the simple definition. Perhaps Kripke's account is mistaken. Two major philosophers of fiction who disagree with Kripke's account of fictional names are Lewis and Gregory Currie. If the account of either philosopher is correct, then the simple definition of impossible fiction will be salvaged.

To Lewis, a fictional name refers to the bearer of that name in any possible world where the story is told as known fact (Lewis 1983c). Fictional names are far from empty under this understanding; they refer to an entire class of possible objects. Currie, on the other hand, claims that fictional names are bound variables. The reader, Currie claims, make-believes that these existentially quantified variables refer to specific individuals (Currie 1990: 151-152). Both of these approaches sidestep Kripke's concern by recasting the practice of using fictional names as *more* than pretence, and both could with a little extension do the same for fictional predicates. Anybody who agrees with Lewis or Currie, or for some independent reason claims that fictional names are not empty references, will be able to use the simple definition (provided that they do not hold all fictions to be absolutely impossible for some other reason).

Despite Lewis's and Currie's promises that the simple definition of impossible fiction can be saved, I end this section by committing to its revision. Lewisians and Currians will not need further convincing that we can differentiate between absolutely and relatively impossible works of fiction. It is the Kripkean who must be accommodated in a meaningful definition of impossible fiction. Convincingly rejecting Kripke's model of fictional names would require an extensive and off-topic argument about the nature of fiction. Instead of committing to this, I argue that a slight modification of the simple definition can accommodate Kripke. Furthermore, Lewisians and Currians would be able to use this revised definition just as effectively as the simple definition. The following section refines the simple definition into one which a Kripkean could use to distinguish impossible fictions like 'Sylvan's Box' from regular fictions like *Jane Eyre*.

1.6 The revised definition of impossible fiction

This section revises the simple definition of impossible fiction in light of Kripke's claims. I introduce a revised definition which I take to successfully distinguish between trivially and interestingly impossible fictions. I stipulate that impossible fictions are those which are absolutely impossible in some sense other than the inclusion of empty references. This definition may seem ad hoc, but it successfully captures fictions like *A Man in Full* in addition

to addressing Kripke's potential issue with the simple definition. I explicate and defend the revised definition, and I indicate the benefits of adopting it.

If all fictions are absolutely impossible in virtue of the empty references they contain, then the absolute impossibility of certain fictions ceases to be philosophically interesting. There is nothing distinctive about the absolute impossibility of the referent of an empty reference. My definition must accommodate this typical feature of fiction, and instead identify only interestingly impossible fictions. The simple definition is not able to achieve this, so I move to a revised definition which can: a fiction is an impossible fiction *iff* it represents at least one absolute impossibility, and this absolute impossibility consists in something other than empty reference.

This revised definition responds to Kripke by necessitating that impossible fiction contain some kind of distinctive content which standard, possible fictions lack. Merely being absolutely impossible is not sufficient—Kripke shows that it is a standard feature of fiction to be absolutely impossible. Instead, the revised definition considers the kind of absolutely impossible content which impossible fictions contain. 'Sylvan's Box' is absolutely impossible because it contains empty references, but it is an impossible fiction because it contains a logical contradiction. Even if the references were meaningful, the fiction would still be absolutely impossible. This distinguishes it from other works of fiction which do not have this additional kind of absolute impossibility.

My revised definition could be attacked as ad hoc. I am willing to bite this bullet. The simple definition was only unfit for purpose due to the existence of fictions with empty references. Eliminating the simple definition altogether would eliminate with it the merits I listed above: its simplicity, its lack of reliance on a concrete list of absolute impossibilities, and its sensitivity to future developments in our understanding of absolute necessity. I argue that an alternative definition of impossible fiction would, at best, be coextensive with the revised definition. Such a definition would likely require lengthy explanation and defence. Admitting to an ad hoc definition is, ultimately, a much simpler way to express my definition.

A consequence of adopting the revised definition is that standard, non-Kripkean cases of empty reference, such as Carroll's bandersnatch, are not counted among impossible fictions. I view this as an additional benefit to the definition. The fact that Charlie and Serena perform that thing with the cup should not render *A Man in Full* an impossible fiction. There is nothing obviously impossible about it even when one discovers that there is no such activity. Empty references of this kind are unremarkable in fiction. Heffalumps, grumpkins, snarks and fearsome critters all show that fictions commonly draw on similar empty references. They can easily be accommodated by our standard practice of

engagement with fiction. There is no special difficulty in pretending or make-believing that snarks and bandersnatches exist, or that two people can perform that thing with the cup. There is no difference between pretending that 'heffalump' is a meaningful reference and pretending that 'Jane Eyre' is a meaningful reference (besides the content of the pretence). If *Jane Eyre* shouldn't be classed as an impossible fiction, nor should *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

I consider the revised definition a marked improvement on the simple definition. The following section shows how it can be used on both paradigm and edge cases of impossible fiction. The appendix to this chapter shows how the revised definition captures the spirit of previous definitions of impossible fiction. Due to these features, it is the definition of impossible fiction I use for the remainder of this thesis.

1.7 Applying the revised definition

With the revised definition established and defended, I can show it in action. This section tests out the revised definition on Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* to show how it identifies this work as an impossible fiction. With this trial successful, I show how the definition applies to more ambiguously impossible fictions. These include works where impossible elements are well-hidden and likely to be missed by the casual reader. It also includes cases of metafiction, of fictions which are inadvertently absolutely impossible due to an authorial error, and cases of imaginative resistance.

In Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, a magical parasite is drawn from the foot of the protagonist. The creature is impossible—its appearance is described as a hole with no edge (Gaiman 2013: 136). This is absolutely impossible, because having an edge is a necessary condition of something being a hole.⁵ This makes *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* absolutely impossible, independent of the absolute impossibility of its empty references. It is therefore an impossible fiction. Since the revised definition distinguishes between these sorts of significant impossibilities and trivial impossibilities, a Kripkean is able to distinguish between standard and impossible fiction just as a non-Kripkean can. This test case is successful, but more complex cases remain.

One less obvious case of impossible fiction is where absolutely impossible content is difficult to notice. These fictions are liable to be characterised as possible fictions. While

⁵ 'For every hole there is a hole-lining; for every hole lining there is a hole' claims Argle in 'Holes' (Lewis and Lewis 1983: 5).

it would be difficult to read 'Sylvan's Box' and fail to realise that it depicts a logical contradiction, in other cases the absolutely impossible element is noticeable but presented more subtly. Terry Pratchett's *Going Postal* features a letter-sorting machine with circular gears inside. These gears have 3 as the ratio of their circumference to their diameter, rather than pi (Pratchett 2005: 194–199). Recognising this as absolutely impossible requires more specialist knowledge than the previous examples. It is feasible that a reader may fail to recognise the fact that *Going Postal* contains absolutely impossible content of this kind. Some other fictions depict impossibilities in a way which is even easier to miss. Kubrick's film adaptation of *The Shining* features a hotel with impossible geometry. With no floor plan shown in the film, recognising this requires close attention to detail. It should be expected that most viewers do not recognise its absolute impossibility. I argue that the revised definition captures the impossible nature of these fictions. Readers who miss these subtle absolute impossibilities and label *Going Postal* and *The Shining* standard, possible fictions are mistaken. The revised definition enables philosophers to resist this mislabelling and insist that these are cases of impossible fiction.

Other cases are even less cut-and-dried. Fiction rarely deals in absolutes; the fact that two different readers may notice or not notice a contradiction is, I think, inevitable but not problematic. Whether or not a fiction is recognised to be impossible is a product of several things: how much attention the story draws to the impossible element, how familiar the reader is with the area of impossibility in question, how much attention the reader is paying, etc. Some impossible fictions may even be the subject of dispute—perhaps we should not, on balance, consider them to be impossible fictions after all. This sort of discussion is supported by the revised definition. It allows for substantive, meaningful interpretation and criticism of fiction with regards to its impossible content. I demonstrate this by paying attention to several cases where judging the impossibility of a fiction is difficult: metafiction, author mistakes and imaginative resistance.

First, metafiction. Broadly speaking, a metafiction is a narrative which draws attention to its own fictionality. In the process of doing so, some metafictions highlight the fact that their characters are fictional entities. This is not problematic on its own, as many works of fiction contain other, embedded works of fiction (such as *The Murder of Gonzago* within *Hamlet*). However, certain metafictions go further than this. In Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Mother is represented as a fictional character who meets and talks to real people (Pirandello 2004). This makes her an absolute impossibility, since fictional characters cannot meet real people—they have a different kind of existence to real people. Other works of metafiction display similar impossibilities. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, a character from a film flees out of the screen to fall in love with a member of the

audience, and the other characters go on strike to demand his return. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, an aspiring author is held hostage by his own fictional characters. These metafictional representations of certain characters as real and other characters as fictional, but then show both the fictionally real and fictionally fictional characters interacting. This makes them works of impossible fiction. The revised definition tracks this, and labels all of these examples as impossible fiction.

Not every metafiction is impossible, and not every impossible metafiction is impossible due to its metafictionality. Joan Didion's novel *Democracy* is metafictional, as the narrator is explicitly identified as the author herself. However, the story itself is consistent and possible, meaning that *Democracy* is not a work of impossible fiction. Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, on the other hand, is a metafiction and an impossible fiction. However, it is impossible due to its content (a house which is larger on the inside than on the outside) rather than due to its metafictionality (which manifests in the novel's structure—it is partially an academic critique of a short film). Metafiction and impossible fiction are closely connected subjects, but they are not coextensive. Cases of metafiction are particularly susceptible to interpretation. It is frequently difficult to pinpoint exactly when reality and fictionality clash in a way which is absolutely impossible, and different readers may interpret this in different ways. The revised definition allows us to debate the impossibility of metafiction in a principled way. It allows us to distinguish between absolutely impossible metafictional works like *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and metafictional works which only hint at their own fictionality such as *Northanger Abbey*.

Next is the issue of author mistakes in works of fiction. Infamously, John Watson's war wound changes location between *Sherlock Holmes* tales. Described on different occasions as being in his leg (*The Sign of the Four*) and being in his shoulder (*A Study in Scarlet*), it is clear that Arthur Conan Doyle forgot that he had placed Watson's wound somewhere different. Looked at uncharitably, this is a contradiction—Watson only has one wound, but it is in two different places. However, this is not an interesting contradiction. It is comparable to continuity errors in film—an error which would likely have been altered if noticed before release. It is not part of the fiction that there is a mic boom shadow visible in *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. Nor is it part of the *Sherlock Holmes* series that Watson has a contradictory war wound. Ideally, absolute impossibilities like Watson's war wound should not qualify *Sherlock Holmes* as an impossible fiction.

Fortunately, readers are not committed to viewing every single word of a book as part of the fiction contained within. Errors and quirks in writing and representation can be interpreted away during the standard process of engaging with fiction. A viewer does not

take it that Cathy Gale of *The Avengers* is black-and-white, but instead attributes this quirk to the physical transmission of the fiction. Similarly, a viewer can interpret the mic boom shadow in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* as a feature of transmission rather than a part of the fiction. So too can a reader interpret the contradictory reports of Watson's war wound as a mistake by Conan Doyle which should not play a significant role in the story. The revised definition demands that the fiction represent an absolute impossibility, but on this interpretation of *Sherlock Holmes* no absolute impossibility has been represented. A contradiction was featured in the words which make up the fiction, but it was not represented in the fiction itself. This means that Conan Doyle's mistake has not rendered *Sherlock Holmes* an impossible fiction. This also means that, in the event that the presumed mistake is eventually decided to be significant (perhaps if a contradictory war wound somehow turned out to be a major clue in Holmes's investigation), then it may turn out that the fiction should be classified as an impossible fiction after all. The revised definition is able to accommodate this change of heart as well.

Another topic in the philosophy of fiction is relevant to impossible fiction: imaginative resistance. This area of study deals with a distinctive asymmetry between certain propositions in fiction. In almost all cases, the reader is willing and able to imagine the propositions which make up a fiction. Ridiculous and fantastical propositions are imagined in much the same way as mundane, realistic propositions. In some other cases, however, the reader resists imagining propositions contained in the fiction. Most notably, deviant moral propositions seem to consistently evoke resistance from readers. Kendall Walton suggests such a fiction:

Giselda: In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; *after all, it was a girl* (1994: 37. Walton's italics).

The reader is assumed to have no difficulty imagining the act of infanticide, even if she finds doing so distasteful. What she finds difficult to imagine is that Giselda's actions are morally commendable as the fiction states. This difficulty may be due to an unwillingness to imagine the proposition in question (Gendler 2000). It may be because she is unable to imagine the proposition at all (Walton and Tanner 1994). Whatever the nature of the block, the reader undergoes imaginative resistance to the fiction. My question is whether these resistance-causing fictions are impossible fictions.

It could be claimed that resistance-causing fictions depict *normative* impossibility. This is the case if it is impossible that Giselda behaved morally according to the normative standards which govern our attitudes towards moral obligations. To claim that her behaviour

was appropriate is therefore normatively impossible. If normative impossibility is absolute, then the revised definition asserts that resistance-causing fictions are impossible fictions.

Certain theoretical commitments inform whether or not normative necessity is absolute. Take the proposition 'slavery is just'. To consider this absolutely impossible is to consider slavery to be, by definition, unjust. This would in turn imply commitment to some form of objective moral realism. This also requires an essentialist account of moral truths: they must be true in all possible circumstances. Neither of these two commitments, objective moral realism or absolute necessity of moral truths, is required in order to consider the proposition 'slavery is just' to be *false*. Furthermore, a fiction which ostensibly depicts moral, upstanding behaviour in an event where a character is keeping slaves does not necessarily violate normative necessity. The fiction does not necessarily imply that the slave-keeper's behaviour is moral *in virtue* of the character's slave-keeping practices (Walton and Tanner 1994: 47). Resistance-causing fictions can be considered to be impossible fictions, but believing this requires strict commitments to particular metaethical and metaphysical accounts. It also requires interpreting the fiction in such a way that fictionally moral behaviour is fictionally moral in virtue of immoral fictional actions.

Resistance-causing fictions are not unequivocally impossible in the manner of, say, 'Sylvan's Box', but could be considered absolutely impossible with the right set of background commitments. The notion of impossible fiction has little impact on the work already done on imaginative resistance, which is mostly concerned with issues about imagination (why it is that readers resist imagining the contents of these fictions) and fictionality (whether or not resistance-causing propositions can be fictionally true). Its status as impossible fiction ultimately rests on whether normative possibility is absolute. Those who argue that it is may use the revised definition to claim that resistance-causing fictions are impossible fictions, and vice versa. The revised definition is sensitive to this ongoing ethical and metaphysical debate.

I consider the revised definition to hold up well against these difficult cases of fiction. At no point does it label intuitively standard fiction as impossible or intuitively impossible fiction as standard. It also allows for meaningful debate over a fiction's status as impossible. Appropriate evidence in this debate would include reasons to agree with a particular interpretation of the fiction, and reasons to consider particular kinds of necessity as absolute. Given that these are relevant criteria for judging a fiction to be impossible, and given that there are no cases where the revised definition results in an unintuitive judgement, I consider it a successful definition of impossible fiction.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a definition of impossible fiction: an impossible fiction depicts circumstances, characters or events which are absolutely impossible, but are absolutely impossible for some other reason than merely being empty references. This definition avoids several potential ambiguities and problems. It avoids classifying fictions with only relative impossibilities as impossible fictions, as fictions frequently depict physical, biological, legal and other related types of impossibilities. It also covers Kripke-style cases where fictional references have no referent, removing this common phenomenon in order to strengthen the definition of impossible fiction.

The definition is sensitive to interpretation of fiction and to arguments about necessity. Exactly what cannot occur in any possible world is not universally agreed upon—commitments to doctrines like property essentialism, necessitarianism about the laws of nature, and moral realism all play a role in establishing which propositions are impossible under all circumstances. However, this is simply to say that there are some cases of impossible fiction which might be disputed, not that the definition itself is not viable.

The next chapter investigates how fictions represent absolute impossibilities. The wide range of accounts of fiction means a diverse spread of additional factors which affect whether a work of fiction can be said to represent an absolute impossibility. Since my investigation is not concerned with the metaphysical nature of fiction, I do not commit to a single account of fictional truth. Instead, I show that there is neutral ground between different theories of fiction on which my investigation can be conducted. I have ensured that the definition of impossible fiction is theory-neutral with regards to the nature of fiction. The next chapter builds on this theory neutrality to centre discussion on the reader's experience rather than the fiction itself.

2. Impressions of Fiction

The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live: a live thing, a story.

- Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter defines impossible fiction in terms of representing a particular kind of impossible content. The task of this chapter is to discuss what exactly is involved in this representation, and to show how representation relates to the reader's engagement with and experience of impossible fiction. I claim that, for my purposes, representation is best thought of as the reader possessing a particular appropriate *impression* of the fiction.

What is an appropriate impression of a fiction? It is a judgement the average reader makes about what occurs in a story she is reading. These judgements are not typically informed by theories of fictional truth. Rather, they are impressions; impressions of a story's plot, characters and content. They are not knowledge about the nature of a fictional world. They are intuitive understandings of what is happening in a story. They are instinctive, sometimes involuntary responses—parsing and comprehending information which is gained from paying attention to a fiction. If these judgements would be made by a suitably engaged and informed reader, then they are appropriate impressions of a fiction. Impressions are further characterised, and contrasted with fictional truth, later in this chapter.

Along with impressions, this chapter frequently discusses the nature of representation. The kind of representation I am interested in is the representation of a story's content. This is representation in a descriptive sense, rather than representation through allegory and symbolism. *The Chronicles of Narnia* descriptively represents a lion, Aslan, by including certain propositions about his appearance and temperament. In turn, Aslan represents Jesus, but does so in an allegorical or symbolic sense. I am interested in the former, descriptive sense of representation rather than the latter, allegorical sense of representation. Discussions of representation throughout the rest of the chapter are all intended in this descriptive sense.

I begin the chapter by interrogating this notion of descriptive representation. I ask what feature of a work of fiction enables it to represent its content to the reader in this way. The notion of fictional truth is one possible explanation, but I show why fictional truths do not always match up with what is represented by the fiction. Another candidate is direct content—my term for the naive, immediate content of a work of fiction such as words and pictures. However, direct content can also be differentiated from what is represented by a fiction. Truth to a story, a concept borrowed from Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne, is sufficient for explaining representation (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016). However, truth to a story is itself based on the reader having certain impressions of the fiction she reads. While fictional truth, direct content and truth to a story are important concepts in their own right, I look to these impressions for an account of descriptive representation.

I show that reader impressions are successful in describing how fiction represents things to its readers. I explain the nature of reader impressions, describing their content, character and appropriateness conditions in detail. I explain the relation between reader impressions and fictional truths, arguing that, for most accounts of fiction, they are closely linked. I show that reader impressions are a property of the reader's engagement with a fiction rather than of the fiction itself. This, I claim, makes them theory-neutral, and a better tool than fictional truth for discussing reader engagement with impossible fiction. A theory-neutral account of representation broadens the application of my account. It also helps the thesis focus on typical methods of reader interpretation and engagement with fiction, rather than ontology of fiction. I am interested in the character and quality of the reader's experience—how we typically enjoy, appreciate and, most importantly, *understand* fiction. This means that I am *not* interested (strictly in this thesis) in analysing or providing an account of the nature of fictional truth. I do not make any claims about metaphysics or ontology of fiction. I am instead concerned with judgements that everyday readers make concerning the fictions they read. This chapter develops and explains the term 'impression' as a description of this sort of engagement with fiction rather than as a description of fictional truth.

In order to further specify the nature of reader impressions, I contrast them with a similar notion: Stock's concept of F-imaginings (Stock 2017). F-imagining is the minimal level of imaginative engagement with fiction made by readers. It is a strictly propositional, non-imagistic form of imagining. I argue that impressions are a slightly richer, wider form of reader engagement with fictions than F-imaginings. I also claim that F-imaginings form part of the content of reader impressions, supplemented by richer, phenomenal imaginings. I then contrast impressions with fictional truth, and finally describe how reader impressions of a fiction can be more or less appropriate. In an appendix to the chapter (Appendix B) I offer

some suggestions as to why several accounts of fiction are not only compatible with, but actively benefit from the introduction of reader impression. This justifies my focus on the nature of reader impressions rather than fictional truths for the remainder of the thesis.

2.2 Representation and fictional truth

The previous chapter established my definition of impossible fiction: those fictions which represent an absolute impossibility, besides the inclusion of empty references. It might well be asked of this definition what it means for a fiction to descriptively represent something in the first place. To answer that, I must find an effective model of descriptive representation. This model of representation should satisfyingly complete the following: ‘a fiction descriptively represents x if and only if...’ Not only can many different things be descriptively represented (people, places, events, emotions, experiences), these things can be descriptively represented in different ways (verbally, visually, through implication, through implicature). This section discusses whether fictional truth is a convincing candidate for this model. I argue that using fictional truth to model representation unnecessarily limits the scope of this thesis. If an alternative model can be found, it should be used instead.

One seemingly reasonable way to talk about the representation of absolute impossibilities is by talking about fictional truths. Using fictional truths, our model of representation is finished like so: ‘a fiction descriptively represents x if and only if x is true in that fiction.’ It seems intuitive to claim that anything fictionally true in a given fiction is represented by that fiction. On this model, a fiction would be an impossible fiction if and only if it contained a fictional truth which was absolutely impossible (besides empty references). While this model is an effective way to talk about representation, it is not the model I use in this thesis.

I do not use fictional truths for my model of representation, but this should not be taken as a rejection or belittlement of the concept of fictional truth. Accounts of fictional truth offer us lots of useful things. They give us semantics of fiction, descriptions of fictional worlds and truth conditions for statements about a fiction. Some accounts of fictional truth offer ways to generate secondary fictional truths, articulating intuitions about features of a fiction otherwise left indeterminate. There are many reasons to be interested in fictional truths. Despite these reasons, using fictional truths to explain representation harms my project more than it helps.

I do not consider fictional truth to be the optimal model of representation because committing to a single account of fictional truth harms the generality of my arguments. My overall goal in this thesis is a general description of the effects of impossible fiction on a reader. Committing to a single account of fictional truth does not further this goal. I do not reject the notion that there is a correct account of fictional truth, but I do claim that discussing fictional truths as part of my project would make my description less general. There is a live debate on fictional truth with no clear consensus. Among the well-supported accounts in contention for the definition of fictional truth are: intentionalist theories of several kinds, including moderate or modest (Carroll 2001; Stecker 2006), extreme (Stock 2017) and hypothetical (Levinson 1996); inference to the beliefs of a fictional author (Currie 1990); prescriptions to make-believe (Walton 1990); and the events which occur in relevant possible worlds (Lewis 1983c). If I were to explicitly commit to any one of these accounts, the applicability of my account of impossible fictions would suffer. It would be susceptible to the same weaknesses as whichever account of fictional truth I chose. Committing to any one of these accounts would limit my discussion substantially, and automatically make my arguments less useful and relevant to a philosopher subscribed to a different account.

This might be considered a superficial issue. If the points I make about the effects of impossible fiction on the reader are generalisable, there should be little stopping me from committing to a specific account of fiction. Alternatively, I could hedge my bets by using fictional truth for my model of representation without identifying a single account of fictional truth to use. Neither of these are effective options, and for the same reason: at least one account of fictional truth—the possible worlds account—outright prohibits absolutely impossible fictional truth. If fictions represent possible worlds, then fictions cannot represent events which could not occur in any possible worlds. Merely talking about impossible fictional truths excludes possible worlds accounts like those of Lewis. By extension, this excludes the wealth of philosophy influenced by his work on fiction, such as that of Bourne and Caddick Bourne and Richard Hanley (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016; Hanley 2004). These writers are directly involved in debates on impossible fiction, and simply ignoring their work would limit the scope of my argument immensely.

This is not, by itself, a good reason to reject fictional truth as a model of representation. If fictional truth *is* the best way of modelling representation, then it is the model which should be used. However, my commitment to generality is motivation to test other models before committing to using fictional truth. If there is a sensible way to talk about representation of absolute impossibilities besides in terms of fictional truth, then the above issues can be avoided altogether. This would not necessitate rejecting the entire concept of fictional truth, but rather putting it to one side as irrelevant to this specific issue.

Ideally, a successful model of representation will be compatible with all accounts of fictional truth. Given that this would make my work far more generally relevant than if it were limited to a single account of fictional truth, I see this as a goal worth pursuing. The remainder of this section therefore moves on from fictional truth to explore two other ways in which representation can be modelled. These are through direct content, which is the individual words, sounds and images which make up a work of fiction, and truth to a story, the narrative which a work of fiction presents to a reader.

2.3 Representation and direct content

This section describes another potential candidate for modelling descriptive representation. This is the *direct content* of a fiction. This concept requires some exposition, which I provide. I also require the tools to make a systematic judgement about the suitability of direct content for modelling representation. I introduce two criteria which I use to test direct content: that it should correlate with what the reader imagines of the fiction, and that it should support the representation of absolute impossibilities. Using these two criteria shows that direct content is not suitable for modelling representation.

To begin, I expand on the two criteria I use to judge a suitable model of representation. The first criterion is that representation directly correlates with what the reader (appropriately) imagines of the fiction. This criterion ensures that an account of representation describes how typical readers access and understand what is represented by a fiction. It does so by ensuring that readers imagine what is represented by a fiction, therefore tying representation to the reader's experience of what is represented. I also use a second criterion: an effective account of representation must support the representation of absolute impossibilities. This criterion is more self-interested on my part. It ensures that the model of representation is useful for my project. Given that I start from the assumption that fictions *do* represent impossibilities, it would be a poor model of representation which could not extend to the representation of absolute impossibilities. These two criteria help me judge whether direct content is a suitable way of modelling representation.

By direct content, I intend the literal meaning of the words and/or images which constitute the work of fiction. This is the work's content prior to implicature and interpretation on behalf of the reader. It is the information the work contains at its most basic level. Take the following extract from *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*:

A: Santiago Nasar put on a shirt and pants of white linen, both items unstarched, just like the ones he'd put on the day before for the wedding. It was his attire for special occasions (García Márquez 1996: 3).

The direct content of this extract is just the literal meaning of the two sentences. It includes the fact that Santiago Nasar puts on two items of clothing. It includes the fact that neither are starched, and that they are the sorts of clothes he wears for special occasions. It does not contain such information as:

B: Santiago Nasar considers today to be a special occasion.

or

C: Santiago Nasar is wearing underwear.

These pieces of information are gained through implicature. They are therefore generated by the reader (along with conventions of communication) rather than by the text itself.⁶ They are not part of the direct content, but rather belong to the imaginative responses which are prompted in the reader by the extract. It is not a problem to think that, given A, B or C is true. Nor is it a problem to think that B or C is what Garcia Marquez intends to be communicated by A. However, this information is not actually *contained* in A, merely implicated by it. The direct content of A is no more than the meaning of the words which make up A.

It is tempting to think that this literal meaning of a text is no more than its propositional content, but visual fiction can have similar literal meaning. Take, for example, Vermeer's *The Music Lesson* (illus. 1). Just as with extract A, this image has direct content: 'A young woman is standing at a virginal,' 'a pitcher is set on a table,' 'it is daytime', and so on. Also as with extract A, the reader naturally tends to elaborate on this direct content. The Royal Collection's description of the painting illustrates how this might proceed. The non-direct, implicated content is italicised:

A striking feature of the composition in this part is the mirror on the wall where the slightly blurred reflections include the young woman's face, part of the table and the legs of an artist's easel. *The implication of this glimpsed easel is that Vermeer shares the same space as the figures he is depicting* ('Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman' n.d., my italics).

The catalogue description of *The Music Lesson* describes the direct content of the painting (the mirror and the reflections within), but also information derived from or implicated by the

⁶ The most popular account of implicature and conventions of communication is that of Grice (1989).

direct content (that the artist is present but unseen). The direct content in *The Music Lesson* can be distinguished from content in *The Music Lesson* discovered or derived through interpretation. Assuming that pictures do not have propositional content, it follows that direct content is the list of propositions depicted by and/or contained in the fiction.⁷ In this way, visual fiction has direct content in the same sense as written fiction.



Illus. 1: The Music Lesson (Vermeer 1662–1665)

⁷ See Grzankowski (2015) for a challenge to the view that pictorial content is non-propositional. If Grzankowski is upheld, direct content is simply the propositional content of a fiction.

Direct content as I have defined it seems a viable candidate for explaining how fictions represent things. This can be modelled as follows: 'a fiction descriptively represents x if and only if x is part of that fiction's direct content.' To judge how well this model performs in practice, I consider now how direct content fares with the criteria I list above.

Direct content passes one criterion easily, as it can clearly express absolute impossibilities. Take an extract from *House of Leaves*:

[He] proceeds to measure the distance from the far end of the master bedroom to the far end of the children's bedroom. The total comes to 32' 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ " which the house plans corroborate—plus or minus an inch. The puzzling part comes when Navidson measures the internal space. He carefully notes the length of the new area, the length of both bedrooms and then factors in the width of the walls. The result is anything but comforting. In fact it is impossible.

32' 10" exactly.

The width of the house inside would appear to exceed the width of the house as measured from the outside by $\frac{1}{4}$ "... He double checks his work, makes sure the line is straight, level and taut and then marks it. The measurement is still the same.

32' 10" exactly (Danielewski 2001: 30).

With no sense of implicature or elaboration on the direct content, an absolute impossibility—that the house is larger inside than outside—has been expressed. No further information is needed in order to render this piece of direct content absolutely impossible. This means that direct content satisfies the second criterion: that fiction should be able to represent absolute impossibilities.

While it passes this criterion, direct content fails the other: that it must correlate with what the reader imagines of the fiction. In this regard, direct content and representation come apart from one another in several ways. What a reader imagines of a fiction frequently differs from its direct content. This difference can go in either direction. Readers may find that some direct content is not represented by the fiction, while in other cases *more* than simply the direct content is represented.

For an example of direct content which is not represented by a fiction, consider the errant boom seen in *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, mentioned in the previous chapter. The mic is part of the direct content of *Plan 9*, since it is included in the set of moving images which make up the fiction. However, no competent reader would include the boom in what she imagines of the fiction. She may notice the boom, but she will recognise that its inclusion in

the shot should not be considered part of the fiction itself.⁸ This means that fictions represent more than just their direct content. This is regularly demonstrated in the theatre. A rumbling metal sheet represents thunder, while a painted backdrop might represent a haunted forest. The direct content of the play is simply that there is a given sound, or a given image behind the players. The reader imagines that there is a faraway castle rather than a static image, or a rumble of thunder rather than a clanging sheet of metal.

Fictions can also represent certain things which outright contradict their direct content. It is part of the direct content of William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst* that Emily Dickinson speaks a certain amount (in fact, quite a lot). However, the play represents Dickinson as shy and reserved. This representation proceeds despite the direct content rather than because of it, but it is nevertheless the case that in *The Belle of Amherst* Emily Dickinson is represented as shy. In the case of *The Belle of Amherst* and in the case of the painted backdrop, the fact that the play *represents* certain things relies on a certain convention recognised by the audience, rather than merely the existence of direct content.

Works of fiction often contain discrepancies between direct content and what the reader imagines. This means that there is a discrepancy between direct content and represented content. It is therefore not guaranteed that a fiction with impossible direct content represents an absolute impossibility to a competent reader. Direct content is not a suitable model for descriptive representation.

2.4 Representation and truth to a story

Perhaps the better model of representation is truth to a story, introduced by Bourne and Caddick Bourne in their *Time in Fiction* (2016). This section introduces and explains truth to a story. It then uses the same criteria from the last section (correlation with what the reader imagines and ability to represent absolute impossibilities) to test truth to a story's suitability as a model for representation. However, in the process of applying these criteria, truth to a story yields an even more primitive notion of how readers engage with fictions: impressions. I show that, while truth to a story passes both criteria, it is based on the notion

⁸ This issue is similar to the problem of 'silly questions' which Walton discusses in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, and the upcoming example of *The Belle of Amherst* is borrowed from here (1990: 174–183). Since Walton's concern is fictional truth, the comparison is not worth going into in detail. It is worth mentioning, though, that Walton agrees with the notion that certain parts of a fiction should not be imagined by the reader.

of reader impressions. I claim that it is therefore worth investigating this more fundamental notion, reader impressions, as a model of representation instead.

Bourne and Caddick Bourne approach the issue of truth to a story in the context of an account of fiction heavily influenced by Lewis. Bourne and Caddick Bourne see fictions as descriptions of specific possible worlds. Fictional truth, in this model, is truth at a relevant individual possible world. A proposition *p* is fictionally true *iff* it is true at the possible world which the fiction describes.⁹ Bourne and Caddick Bourne recognise that this account is susceptible to an existing problem with Lewisian-style theories of fiction: the presence of absolute impossibilities in some fictions. As no possible worlds contain absolute impossibilities, it follows that impossible things cannot be fictionally true. The apparent existence of impossible fiction is at odds with the account. Bourne and Caddick Bourne's response to this problem is to draw a distinction between the possible world which the story represents, and the impression of a coherent narrative that is given to us by the story:

In many cases, we have argued that what we are dealing with is really a *combination* of fictions—which we have called the *story*—which gives the misleading impression of being a description of a single world when in fact it is a complex of descriptions of many worlds. In this way, we have distinguished two levels—the level of individual fictions and the level of the story as a whole (2016: 195).

Bourne and Caddick Bourne claim that, through the juxtaposition of fictional worlds, an impression is given of a single narrative. The impression is misleading insofar as it makes it appear to the reader that something absolutely impossible has happened in the fiction. Nothing impossible has happened in any fictional world, but the shift in perspective between worlds has made it appear that something absolutely impossible has occurred. Due to this ability to mislead the reader, no possible world need be contradictory—the contradiction is simply an impression given by the multitude of possible worlds which are represented.

Bourne and Caddick Bourne suggest that there are two levels at which we can talk about what is occurring in the fiction. One is the truth in fiction mentioned earlier—that *p* is true at the world which the fiction represents. The other is truth *to a story*. A story may be composed of multiple *fictions*, which in Bourne and Caddick Bourne's parlance means that a story can be a description of more than one possible world. Only one possible world is

⁹ This differs from Lewis's approach, which claims that the incompleteness of certain fictions arises because some fictions are such that we are unable to say definitively which possible world they represent (1983c: 270). Bourne and Caddick Bourne claim that a possible world can be incomplete, and therefore the fictional world is the world which fits exactly the conditions set by the fiction (2016: 219–223).

described at a time, but the story may switch between these worlds with no outward indication that it has done so. A single story may express an absolute impossibility, since it is composed of several fictions which are all individually possible. In this event, the absolute impossibility is true to the story, but not fictionally true.

Bourne and Caddick Bourne leverage the distinction between fictional truth and truth to a story in order to explain how various unusual fictional phenomena are compatible with a possible worlds account of fiction. They deny the existence of impossible *fictions* but accept the existence of impossible *stories*. Considering that Bourne and Caddick Bourne are happy to use the term 'impossible fiction' despite their account prohibiting the existence of impossible fictional truths, it seems they use 'impossible fiction' to indicate a work of fiction rather than a fictional world (on their account works of fiction and fictions may have a one-many relation, which makes the difference between a work of fiction and a fiction more significant). This move from impossible fictions to works of impossible fiction does not interfere with my revised definition of impossible fiction, which applies as well to works of fiction as it does to fictions.

The wider relevance of truth to a story is unclear. Any philosopher who does not follow a possible worlds account of fiction would likely find truth to a story redundant. Since most other accounts of fiction have no problem with absolutely impossible fictional truths, there is no motivation to distinguish between the fictional truth and truth to a story. Instead, other theorists are likely to claim that truth to a story just *is* fictional truth. This means that, to most philosophers of fiction, impossible truths to a story are the same thing as impossible fictional truths. To any possible worlds theorist of fiction, however, truth to a story is a powerful tool to distinguish between possible worlds and narratives.

Truth to a story passes both of my two criteria for modelling representation. It correlates with what the reader imagines, prioritising the reader's experience over the fictional truth at stake. It accommodates representations of absolute impossibilities—indeed, this is what it is introduced to explain. Truth to a story can model representation as follows: 'A fiction descriptively represents *x* if and only if it is true to the story that *x*.' In the event that a story is constituted of multiple fictions, then these fictions collectively represent *x*. But is truth to a story the best candidate for modelling representation? The answer depends on what exactly makes a proposition true to a story. Both fictional truths and direct content have standards of correctness. Fictional truth is set according to the theory of fictional truth being used, while direct content is set according to the words, images and sounds which constitute the fiction. To be certain that truth to a story can account for descriptive representation, I must determine how it comes to be set.

Bourne and Caddick Bourne have an account of how truth to a story is set. They argue that 'being true to a story is a matter of according with the impressions created, by the way in which that story is packaged, concerning what fictionally happens—even when those impressions are misleading (2016: 196).' In other words, for a proposition to be true to a story, it must match the impression that the story gives. For it to be true to the story that p , it must be the case that the story (i.e., the fiction or fictions which comprise a single narrative) gives the impression of p . This has only delayed a full explanation, as it remains to be seen what exactly it means for a reader to have a particular impression created by a story.

It transpires that impressions are a more fundamental way to explain representation than truth to a story. Modelling representation using truth to a story collapses into modelling representation using impressions. I expand on both of these points, and explain reader impressions, in the following section.

2.5 Impressions of fictions

As discussed in the previous section, Bourne and Caddick Bourne claim that reader impressions create conditions under which we can determine what is true to a story. Something is true to a story if it accords with the impressions which that story creates (2016: 196). What Bourne and Caddick Bourne do not offer is a full explanation of what they take these impressions to be. My goal in this section is to further characterise reader impressions. This section defines reader impressions, showing how they determine truth to a story. This enables me to discuss their aptitude for modelling representation in the next section. First, however, I demonstrate exactly what reader impressions are.

When reading and paying attention to a story, a reader has a basic understanding of that story. If pressed, she could probably give a quick explanation of this understanding. Somebody watching *Citizen Kane*, for example, should reply that the story is about a reporter investigating the life of a recently deceased rich man. A person reading *The Wind in the Willows* might tell us that the story is about anthropomorphic animals and motorcars. This ability to comprehend a story should come as no surprise—it is how we engage with fiction in an everyday context. We read, or watch, or listen to the story, and in the process of doing so develop ideas about what it is that takes place in the story and how. This understanding is composed of particular beliefs about what occurs in a story. Some of these beliefs are propositions like those above. They state what, within the story, occurs. Some beliefs relate to how characters and other fictional entities might be sensorily imagined. Our

reader could tell us her ideas about what Mole from *The Wind in the Willows* looks like—that he is short, has dark fur and glasses, etc. These beliefs include sensory information about the characters and locations which the story features. Readers develop ideas about many other aspects of the stories they read. We form beliefs about character psychology: readers recognise that a character feels a certain emotion. We also understand relations—that Elizabeth Bennet is older than Kitty Bennet, or that murdering somebody caused Raskolnikov's guilt. In comprehending a narrative, a reader builds an account of its contents—her ideas about what occurs and how—which can be anywhere on a spectrum from perfunctory to extremely rich. These ideas, no matter how sparse, are what I call the reader's impressions.¹⁰

Reader impressions, then, are a set of beliefs and imaginings about what the reader takes to occur and exist in a story. The term 'about' is deliberately ambiguous, as impressions can include both propositional (i.e., about the occurrences themselves) and non-propositional (i.e., about the phenomenal qualities and characteristics of these occurrences) beliefs and imaginings. The former set might include propositions such as 'Harry Potter is casting a spell', or 'Dallas has been killed by the alien.' These are the propositions of the story itself, beliefs about what occurs in the story which we acquire in the process of reading the work of fiction. However, impressions are composed of more than descriptions of the plot. The latter set includes affective responses, objectual imaginings (e.g., mental images) and other non-propositional thoughts which relate towards the characters, events, objects and settings of the fiction: Don Quixote is tall while Sancho Panza is short; Desdemona pitiable while Iago is detestable; Tatooine covered in desert and Hoth covered in ice. All of these are beliefs and imaginings about what the content of the story is *like*, and so are also about what the reader takes to exist and occur in the story.

Our impressions can be complex and sophisticated, not merely propositional imaginings, and not only copies of whatever we are reading. However, depending on our level of engagement with the fiction itself, they might also be very basic. A reader skimming a copy of *Crime and Punishment* might form simple impressions about the plot. A leading expert on Russian literature, on the other hand, will form a far richer set of impressions, including more complex details such as the relative social standing of each character. An axe-murderer would probably have a similarly complex, yet significantly different set of impressions, perhaps including judgements about the feeling Raskolnikov has as he swings

¹⁰ There is an echo here of how Hume uses the term 'impression' in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1969: 49). I do not use the term of art as Hume does, but it is a happy coincidence if it captures the same sense of immediacy of experience.

his axe. The reader's circumstances, including her level of engagement with the text, will heavily influence the quality of her impressions. It will also inform the *kind* of impressions she forms: speed-reading *The Passion of New Eve* is likely to result in mostly propositional impressions, but the vivid imagery contained in the novel means that careful reading is likely to create richer sensory impressions.

Having established what reader impressions are, it may be helpful to consider what they are *not*. Reader impressions are not the totality of mental activity which occurs while engaged with a work of fiction. The reader may well have concurrent, unrelated thoughts. Impressions also do not include thoughts about the real world which are influenced or inspired by the story. Watching *Moonlight* may well result in certain thoughts about conditions for gay black men in the US, but these thoughts are not directed at the story of *Moonlight*. Judgements about the work of fiction itself (that a book is heavy, that the sound in a cinema is too quiet) are not impressions, though these judgements may influence the impressions which a reader forms about the story that work of fiction contains.¹¹ The only thoughts and imaginings I count as impressions are those which are specifically to do with what occurs and exists in a given story. This means that certain thoughts about the real world can still count as impressions of a fiction. For example, imagining that Vronsky looks like Lee Van Cleef is an impression of *Anna Karenina*, since it expresses a belief about what part of that story is like. Calling on one's real knowledge of Amsterdam while reading *The Goldfinch* is a way of forming a richer impression of the novel. These thoughts are still directed towards the story itself, even though their content draws on the real world.

This description of impressions develops Bourne and Caddick Bourne's notion of truth to a story. Bourne and Caddick Bourne claim that truth to a story is determined by reader impressions, and impressions as I have described them can fulfil this role. This is the case both for propositional impressions and non-propositional impressions. It is true to the story that the Xenomorph kills Dallas in virtue of the fact that the typical reader has an impression of this while watching *Alien*.¹² It is also true to the story that the Xenomorph is scary, in virtue of the fact that the typical reader has an impression of its scariness (whether through affective imagining, or through recognition of its in-story effect on characters) when it appears. My account of impressions explains why it is true-to-the-story that Anansi is

¹¹ In a very simple case, a noisy cinema may result in several missed lines of dialogue. This could significantly alter the reader's impressions.

¹² I offer a more rigorous set of standards for 'typical' impressions later in this chapter.

clever, or that Charles Foster Kane is regretful, without either of these being expressed in propositional form by the stories which contain those characters.

2.6 Representation and reader impressions

This section shows how impressions are an effective way to model descriptive representation. I first outline the motivation for adopting reader impressions as a model of representation. I then use my two criteria from earlier in this chapter to test if reader impressions are able to explain representation. Since they pass both criteria, I conclude that reader impressions are the optimal way for me to discuss the representation of absolute impossibilities in fiction.

There is a major reason to adopt reader impressions as a model of representation: if representation can be modelled in terms of reader impressions, then I am able to circumvent discussing fictional truth while investigating reader engagement with impossible fictions. This avoids controversy over whether or not fictional truth can be absolutely impossible (Lewis, Hanley and Bourne and Caddick Bourne would all deny that it can). However, no account of fictional truth turns on denying that readers form particular beliefs and ideas about the content of a fiction. Impressions are the way that readers understand fiction—an issue separate to the nature of fiction itself. This separates my discussion from issues surrounding the metaphysics of fiction, and instead situates it around the issue of reader experiences. By discussing impossible fictions in terms of impressions, I am able to keep my argument applicable across multiple philosophical theories of fiction.

In order to show that impressions are a reasonable model of representation, I refer back to the two criteria mentioned earlier. Those criteria are, first, that representations should correlate with what the reader imagines of the fiction and, second, that the model should accommodate representations of absolute impossibilities. Reader impressions appear to satisfy the first criterion for modelling representation. They are correlated with what the reader imagines to be happening in the fiction: in fact, they *are* what the reader takes to be happening in the fiction. I take this as sufficient evidence that reader impressions pass the first criterion.

It remains to be demonstrated that reader impressions pass the second criterion. If impressions are to be an effective model of representation, it must be the case that a reader can have an impression of something absolutely impossible. I argue that a reader can have an impression of absolute impossibilities, and that therefore readers can have impressions

of impossible fiction. This satisfies my second criterion for a model of representation. To provide evidence for this claim, I draw from Stock's work on how readers imagine impossible fictions on a basic, propositional level.

2.7 Impressions and F-imaginings

To support my claim that reader impressions are an effective way of accounting for representation, I draw on Stock's work from her 2017 *Only Imagine*. I point out the close resemblance between my notion of reader impressions and Stock's notion of F-imaginings. Based on this comparison, I claim that F-imaginings are an aspect of reader impressions. I use this as evidence that readers can have impressions of absolutely impossible fiction.

Stock characterises F-imagination as a particular kind of imagining that readers extend to the contents of fiction (2017: 20–29). It is the minimum appropriate imaginative reaction to works of fiction: imagining no more and no less than the propositional content contained in and implied by the fiction (Stock 2017: 20–22). This means it is a strictly propositional kind of imagination, as opposed to a sensory or phenomenal kind of imagination (Stock 2017: 23–24). To F-imagine p , one thinks of p as being the case, where 'thinks of' is not synonymous with 'believes' (Stock 2017: 22). Readers F-imagine the propositions which make up a fiction, and they are disposed to conjoin the propositions which they view as members of the same fiction. This, Stock suggests, is the baseline level of imagination which readers use when engaged with fiction. The reader may have concurrent mental images with phenomenal properties, but these are separate to the F-imaginings themselves.

To Stock, F-imagining is an important aspect of fictional truth. The extreme intentionalist account Stock lays out in *Only Imagine* argues, broadly speaking, that something is fictionally true if and only if the author intends her reader to F-imagine that thing as a result of reading the work of fiction. This particular application of F-imagining is not relevant to my work here. However, certain characteristics of F-imagination have a range of implications for reader impressions. In particular, I am interested in extending Stock's argument that readers can F-imagine absolute impossibilities to my account of reader impressions. In order to do so, I must first specify exactly how F-imagining and impressions are related to and different from one another.

Given that both impressions and F-imaginings are related to the immediate experience of the reader, it is worth making absolutely clear that impressions are different

from F-imaginings. Impressions can be (though are not necessarily) non-propositional and phenomenally rich; F-imaginings are strictly propositional. F-imaginings relate strictly to fictional truth; impressions may correlate with fictional truths, but there are circumstances where they may come apart.¹³ Both F-imagining and impressions are concerned with the issue of what readers *do* when they read fictions. However, the notion of impressions aims at a wide concept of how readers respond to fictions while F-imagining describes a specific imaginative aspect of this response. This shows how impressions and F-imaginings are different. Next, I show how they are related.

Given this difference in scope despite a shared interest, I claim that F-imagining and impressions are related as follows: F-imagining that p is sufficient but not necessary for having the impression that p . Impressions are a collection of beliefs and imaginings (of various kinds) about a narrative. F-imaginings are the component of an impression which relates to propositionally imagining that narrative. This fits with Stock's claims about the nature of F-imagining. She is clear that F-imagining is not the only appropriate response when reading works of fiction; simply that it is the only *necessary* appropriate response (Stock 2017: 25). Readers may also form objectual, phenomenally rich imaginings based on the fiction they are reading. Stock stipulates that these imaginings are not relevant for defining fictional truth. I have no objection to this, since as I have specified, the question of fictional truth is separate to the discussion of impressions. However, I agree that readers *do* frequently have these richer imaginings. F-imaginings, objectual imaginings, feelings and phenomenal experiences together form this richer impression of a fiction, but not all impressions must be so rich. Sometimes elements of this combination are missing, such as when the reader is not deeply immersed in the fiction or when the work itself is not of high quality. In these cases, the impression is less sophisticated and developed than it would be otherwise. At other times, all of these features may be present, and the reader's impression of the fiction is correspondingly richer. In other cases, such as visual media, a reader may have phenomenal, objectual impressions which do not have a propositional component. While Stock would argue that these readers do not attain minimal appropriate engagement with the fiction in question, these readers still form an impression. Impression-forming does not directly correspond with minimal engagement with fiction, so it can be differentiated from F-imagining in this regard. A reader who F-imagines the content of a fiction has an impression of that fiction. Not every reader who forms an impression of a fiction F-imagines

¹³ In addition to the case of impossible fictional truths which Bourne and Caddick Bourne suggest, fictional truth and impressions come apart any time the reader has a mistaken impression.

that fiction. In other words, F-imagining is sufficient but not necessary for having an impression.

Another important difference to note between F-imaginings and full impressions is how readers embellish and draw inferences from fiction. Readers use assorted principles when forming impressions of fiction. Philosophers have already isolated, described and named some of these principles. For example, we may draw upon Walton's Reality Principle in order to flesh out a visual imagining of a fictional character, perhaps by assuming that a human character has typical human anatomy unless told otherwise (Walton 1990).¹⁴ We may draw on closure under logical implication in order to form an impression of the events of a plot which are suggested rather than stated. Sometimes we may imaginatively elaborate on information given by the fiction in order to arrive at a more detailed, pleasing impression.¹⁵ Recent phenomena like 'headcanon' (a fan-generated idea about what occurs in a story) and fanfiction-writing show how readers regularly engage in surprisingly complex elaborations of fictional material (see, e.g., Mullis 2018 and Thomas 2011). Full impressions frequently go beyond the remit of fictional truth and into personal responses to the work of fiction in question.

F-imaginings do not draw on these inferences and elaborations. They are far more sparse than impressions are capable of being. Stock argues that:

The generation of implied fictional content, and so the imaginative path of the reader, do not necessarily proceed like [it would if formulating a counterfactual]. That is, they do not inevitably proceed via the sorts of inferences we would make with respect to belief with the same content... making inferences from fictional content as to what to imagine is not inevitably or even *often* like counterfactual thinking (Stock 2017: 177–179).

Stock argues that F-imaginings do not operate under the principles described above. This is because propositional imagining is not belief-like with respect to making inferences. Readers do not F-imagine based on inference or embellishment, but only on what is included in the fiction itself and, according to Stock, what they recognise the author to intend them to F-imagine (2017: 21–22). I do not have space to rehearse Stock's full argument, but fortunately there is no need for me to. Nothing about this quality of F-imagination

¹⁴ See also Ryan's minimal departure (1980), Bourne and Caddick Bourne's actuality principle (2016: 19–20), and Friend's reality assumption (2017). Again, I am interested in what these sources suggest about what readers imagine, not how this imagining relates to fictional truth.

¹⁵ See Nichols & Stich's Script Elaborator for a suggestion as to how this sort of elaboration may proceed (2000).

changes the nature of impressions, as F-imaginings form only part of a reader's impression. Impressions themselves do not always proceed in the manner that Stock describes of F-imagining. Since this issue is separate from fictional truth, Stock's main interest, this picture of impression-forming does not threaten Stock's inference-free characterisation of F-imaginings or vice versa. For now, I have shown that F-imagining and impressions are closely related but not identical.

2.8 F-imagining and impossible fiction

I argue that Stock's work on F-imagining absolute impossibilities is *prima facie* evidence that reader impressions satisfy my final criterion for representation: a reader can have impressions of absolutely impossible things. Stock argues that readers can F-imagine absolute impossibilities, as I explain in this section. F-imagining is part of how impressions are formed. This, I claim, means that readers are able to form impressions of absolute impossibilities.

The relation between F-imagining and impressions is important for showing that reader impressions can pass my second criterion for modelling representation. Earlier in this chapter, I made it a condition for accepting any account of descriptive representation that it shows how absolute impossibilities are represented to readers. F-imagining helps show that impressions are capable of doing so. Stock claims that, since F-imagining is strictly propositional, one can F-imagine an absolute impossibility. There is no need to objectually imagine this impossibility, and in fact Stock suggests that the pressure to objectually imagine impossibilities helps explain why imagining the impossible is typically considered beyond human capacity (2017: 143). All that is required to F-imagine the absolutely impossible, Stock argues, is that one also imagines there is a suitable explanation for the absolute impossibility (2017: 141). Imagining this explanation helps by countering the reader's conviction that the impossibility could not obtain. Just as how a person may come to believe a fact she previously thought untrue based on the promise of an explanation, a reader may F-imagine the absolute impossibility despite her recognition of its impossibility by also imagining there is some explanation for it. This explanation does not need to be imagined in any detail; the reader need only F-imagine that some fact explains the contradiction rather than imagine *how* the fact explains the contradiction. In this way, readers F-imagine impossible fictions. This, I claim, is evidence that readers can have impressions of impossible fictions.

Given that F-imagining p is sufficient for having an impression of p , a reader can have an impression of an impossible fiction. This impression is (at least partly) composed of the F-imagining that, in the fiction, something absolutely impossible is true.¹⁶ That impression may not have any mental images associated with it, and if it does, then those images may not themselves be impossible (I imagine a box when reading 'Sylvan's Box', but this box is not both empty and full). However, if part of the impression is that the reader believes something absolutely impossible occurs in the story, then that suggests the impression is of an absolute impossibility. The reader is therefore having an impression of an impossible fiction. This satisfies my final criterion of a model of representation: that a work of fiction should be able to represent the absolutely impossible.

Now that I have established how F-imaginings support the idea that reader impressions are a suitable model of descriptive representation, I make some observations about the quality of impressions of impossible fiction. As Stock points out, part of the general resistance to the idea that readers imagine impossibilities might be that the relevant kind of imagining is (incorrectly) assumed to be rich, detailed and perhaps objectual (2017: 143). It is not clear that readers are able to imagine impossible fiction with this kind of phenomenal clarity.¹⁷ In contrast, F-imagining is low-level and sparse. This means that it serves the purpose of showing that readers have impressions of absolute impossibilities, since impressions are not necessarily vivid or objectual imaginings. An impression of an impossible fiction may still be rich and vivid, but the actual impossible proposition is entertained at the level of F-imagination; richer imaginings of non-impossible content may accompany this propositional imagining.¹⁸ When I read 'Sylvan's Box', I propositionally imagine an impossible box, but complement this with objectual imaginings of a (possible) box and the narrator's shocked reaction. Together, these form an impression of 'Sylvan's Box' which serves to make it true that: 1) the story represents an impossible box, and 2) it is true to the story that the box is empty and has something in it, while also making it the case that I have a rich and detailed set of imaginings about the story. Given this, a reader

¹⁶ Perhaps it also includes the belief that, in the fiction, some other proposition explains this set of circumstances. Stock argues that a similar statement is the case for F-imagining impossible fictions. I am not so certain that it applies in the case of reader impressions, but its inclusion would not be problematic.

¹⁷ This idea is discussed further in Chapter 5.

¹⁸ It can and has been argued that people can imagine absolute impossibilities in a stronger, even objectual sense. There is not space to do justice to this idea, but it is discussed extensively by Peter Kung (2010; 2016).

can have an appropriate impression of an absolute impossibility whether or not the impossibility is fictionally true.

I have argued that reader impressions are a convincing way to discuss the representation of impossibilities in fiction, showing that reader impressions are correlated with what readers imagine of a story. This section has shown, through appeal to F-imagining, how readers can have impressions of absolute impossibilities. This means that reader impressions have cleared both of my criteria for modelling descriptive representation. The proposed model is as follows: a fiction descriptively represents x if and only if the reader has an impression of x while reading that fiction.

The following section isolates the final problem with this model of representation. What remains to be shown is that impressions are not subjective or arbitrary, but rather that they are subject to standards of appropriateness. Impression-forming is a varied and individualistic practice, but this does not mean it is a free-for-all. I discuss in the following section how standards of appropriateness can be drawn for impressions. This will allow me to redraw my proposed model to the following: a fiction descriptively represents x if and only if the reader has an *appropriate* impression of x while reading that fiction.

2.9 Standards of impressions

It cannot be the case that for a fiction to represent x is for it to merely give the impression that x , otherwise fictions would genuinely represent any x which is part of a reader's impression by mistake or accident. This section offers standards of appropriateness for reader impressions of fictions. Many, perhaps even the majority of truth-apt impressions of fiction will correspond with the fictional truths contained in that fiction.¹⁹ However, reader impressions come apart from fictional truths in several important ways. Since fictional truth cannot give a standard for appropriate impressions, this section gives an alternative condition: the impressions of competent, engaged readers. This shows that reader impressions are non-arbitrary and can be held to a meaningful standard of correctness. Armed with this set of standards, I can conclude that impressions successfully account for descriptive representation.

¹⁹ This is true even for Bourne and Caddick Bourne's definition of fictional truth, assuming that impressions of impossible fictions are in the overall minority.

Fictional truths are generally considered to be set features of a given text. In defiance of the Le Guin quote which heads this chapter, it does not matter whether a reader finishes, concentrates on or even actually reads *Middlemarch*; it is fictionally true that Dorothea and Casaubon honeymoon in Rome. Reader impressions, however, can vary wildly. A reader might easily misinterpret, skip over or outright ignore key information in a text. Returning to *Middlemarch*, a reader may through inattention miss key information. Such a reader may have no impression of where Dorothea and Casaubon honeymoon, or she may even have a mistaken impression (e.g., that they are in Milan, or in Rome, Ohio). This reader has *inappropriate* impressions.



Illus. 2: Ames Room (Stannard 2010)

Precisely what standard makes this reader's impressions inappropriate is not immediately clear. Given that impressions do not necessarily map onto fictional truths, fictional truth cannot serve as a measure of the appropriateness of impressions. If fictional truth is the underlying 'fact' of the matter, our impressions are the viewpoint we have upon these facts. This viewpoint might be distorted or even erroneous, but such a viewpoint can still be the appropriate viewpoint to take. Optical illusions such as the Ames Room (illus. 2) are founded on such principles. The Ames Room illusion only functions if the viewer adopts a specific and misleading angle on the room. Similarly, an appropriate first time viewing of *The Sixth Sense* is one where the reader spends much of the film erroneously believing

that Malcolm is alive and not a ghost. Erroneous impressions are not necessarily inappropriate.

Also making this task difficult is the fact that impressions are likely to vary at the individual level. Two different readers bring two different perspectives to the same work of fiction and will have two different impressions as a result. The content of these impressions depends on a myriad of factors: the direct content of the fiction, the reader's knowledge of the fiction in general, her familiarity with the circumstances which the fiction describes, her level of engagement, etc. Attempting to fix the appropriateness of impressions through appeal to these influencing factors would require listing them in full—a difficult task, even ignoring the fact that the list could be challenged as non-exhaustive. There is no doubt that different reader impressions of the same fiction can be wildly varied.

Despite this variance, the impressions of competent, engaged readers have broad similarities. Competent, engaged readers all have the impression that Dorothea and Casaubon travel to Rome. They all have the impression that Macbeth kills Duncan with a dagger. It is this feature which I claim sets the standard of appropriateness for impressions. The less likely it is that an impression would be had by a competent, engaged reader, the less appropriate the impression. This is a necessarily vague standard, since there is no absolute level of competency or engagedness to which a reader can be compared. However, I claim that there is an intuitive idea of competency and engagedness which can be used to give a standard of appropriateness to reader impressions. This approach offers some merits which compensate for the lack of absolute standard. Some examples illustrate how the standard of a competent, engaged reader can positively identify the appropriateness of various impressions:

- (1) Obviously false impressions can be discounted. In Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*, Glen Runciter sits in a 'massive, old-fashioned, walnut-and-leather swivel chair (Dick 2012: 36)'. No competent, engaged reader would, reading this line, have the impression of a tiny, plastic folding chair. Having such an impression is not appropriate.
- (2) Superficially ambiguous fictions can support a particular impression over another. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, it is strongly implied that heroine Tess is raped by Alec d'Urberville. A competent, engaged reader is likely to spot this implication, but it is feasible that she misses the suggestion amongst Hardy's prose. It is therefore not an appropriate impression that Alec does not rape Tess, though this is less inappropriate than the impression that Glen Runciter sits in a small plastic chair.

- (3) Genuinely indeterminate and ambiguous fictions support impressions of any viable interpretation. In John Fowles's *The Magus*, it is left ambiguous as to whether the novel's protagonist is witnessing supernatural events or merely being tricked. A competent, engaged reader might have either impression, justified by any number of principled approaches to interpretation. Either impression is appropriate. This means that impressions show how specific and contrasting interpretations of a fiction can be justified, even if the fictional truth is indeterminate.
- (4) Standards of competency among readers can vary across time. This is accommodated by the account. Lady Macbeth scolds her husband, asking if he is 'letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would"/Like the poor cat i' th' adage? (Shakespeare 2015: 168)' A contemporary reader would recognise the allusion to an old saying: 'the cat wanted to eat fish but dared not get her feet wet' (Shakespeare 2015: 168). This saying is likely to feature in the impression of the competent contemporary reader, as she follows through on the allusion made by Lady Macbeth. The modern reader, though competent and engaged, is unlikely to be familiar with the adage, and so it is unlikely to feature in her impression of this scene. Both contemporary and modern readers are competent and engaged, and neither has privileged impressions. Both are appropriate impressions of this scene, even though they are different. Modern readers can still have appropriate impressions despite failing to grasp a fiction's original meaning.
- (5) The same principle applies to cases where impressions of fiction are more radically revised. Modern readers may form the impression that Prince Hamlet has an Oedipus complex—an impression which contemporary playgoers would not have shared since the concept was not yet coined. Either impression is appropriate, since both have been formed by competent, engaged readers.
- (6) Impressions can be misleading in terms of accurately capturing fictional truth, but still be appropriate impressions.²⁰ Bourne and Caddick Bourne agree that a reader *should* form an impression of an impossible object while reading 'Sylvan's Box', even though they claim that it is not fictionally true that there is an impossible box.
- (7) In John Ford's 1956 *The Searchers*, Debbie is introduced as the niece of Ethan. Gregory Currie claims that *The Searchers* can be interpreted in such a way that Debbie is the daughter of Ethan, and the suggestion that she is his niece is a lie perpetuated by Debbie's mother and Ethan (Currie 2004: 148). Currie offers a detailed argument in favour of this reading, pointing out details in the film which

²⁰ This point is developed in Appendix B using the example of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

support the claim. A competent, engaged reader may fail to spot these clues, and instead form the impression that Debbie is Ethan's niece. Currie's reading represents that of a competent and engaged reader, who is also hyperattentive to particular details in the film. A reader who, like Currie, has the impression that Debbie is Ethan's daughter has an appropriate impression, but the fact that a non-hyperattentive reader fails to notice these clues does not render her impression inappropriate. Currie's hyperattentive reading does not set the standard of appropriateness, but rather goes above and beyond it.

These examples show that an account of appropriateness can be constructed for reader impressions. It does not offer a definitive verdict on every feasible impression, but it does allow for a measure of impartial judgement on blatantly inappropriate impressions. Armed with this set of standards for appropriate impressions, I conclude that reader impressions capture the meaning of the term 'represent' in my revised definition of impossible fiction. The full definition, then, is written out: a fiction is an impossible fiction if it gives its reader an appropriate impression of at least one absolute impossibility, besides absolute impossibilities which merely consist in empty references.

2.10 The importance of impressions

Impressions are theory-neutral. There is no account of fiction which rejects the idea that a reader forms an impression of a story. Yet impressions can have impossible content. When reading an impossible fiction, we will often form impressions of impossible things. This is acknowledged even by theorists with commitments against the existence of impossible fiction. This includes Lewis, who speaks of an inconsistent fiction's 'distinctive peculiarity', even though he denies that fictional worlds are themselves inconsistent (Lewis 1983b: 277). It is acknowledged specifically by Bourne and Caddick Bourne, who use the term 'impression' to describe how the fiction can represent the impossible without actually containing impossible fictional truths (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016: 103). To have an impression is, in part, to understand a detail in the narrative of the story. It does not make any kind of commitment to the nature of fictional truth. This means that even theorists committed to opposing impossible fictional truths can accept that we can have impressions of absolute impossibilities.

The significance of this is that it allows me to write about the implications of impossible fiction for readers without alienating theorists who do not countenance the existence of impossible fictional truths. It prevents me from being forced to commit to a

specific account of fictional truth which justifies the features of impossible fiction that I discuss. After all, whether or not a fiction is impossible depends purely on ontological commitments about what constitutes absolute impossibility. As Nolan writes, whether or not we interpret a fiction as impossible or possible ‘will depend on our other theoretical commitments (Nolan 2007: 670).’ Not only does our ontology contribute to classifying what kinds of fictional truth count as impossible, it also legitimises specific interpretations of fictions. For example, a committed presentist might resist the idea that *Back to the Future* should be interpreted as about a boy who goes back in time. Not only should the presentist hold that any fictional world which included time travel would be impossible, they may prefer interpretations of fiction which avoid time travel as a result.

If Nolan is right, then writing about the aesthetic and experiential impact of impossible fiction would be difficult. Precisely what constitutes an impossible fiction is too variable, and any reader might reject the interpretation which leads to a result which they consider to be impossible.²¹ It is the concept of impressions which salvages the ability to write about the effects of impossible fiction on the reader. When fictional truth itself is not at stake, ontological commitments become less pressing. Even a presentist can have the *impression* that a character travels in time, despite the fact that they might on reflection decide that interpreting this as the fictional truth of the matter is not tenable. Bourne and Caddick Bourne take this point to be so obvious that their concern is to demonstrate how we might still reject impossible fictional truths *despite* the fact that our impressions are of impossibility. By focussing on impressions of impossibility, I avoid Nolan’s concern about the contentiousness of impossible fictional truths.

2.11 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that impressions are a distinct element of engagement with fiction, separate from both direct content and fictional truth. This has allowed me to clarify my revised definition of impossible fiction: to represent an absolute impossibility is to give a reader an appropriate impression of that absolute impossibility occurring in the story. I have argued that by focussing on impressions, I am able to discuss reader responses to impossible fictions without presupposing a specific account of fiction or making particular ontological commitments. I can now discuss reader engagement with impossible fiction in

²¹ This can be done by suggesting that the narrative is unreliable—a move made independently by both Nolan (2007) and Yacobi (1981). How Nolan, Yacobi and others make this move is discussed in the next chapter.

a way compatible with all accounts of fictional truth. This completes my exegesis of impossible fiction. The next step, then, is to discuss precisely how impossibilities affect reader engagement with and experience of fiction. The remainder of this thesis discusses the effect that impossibilities have on reader impressions, judgements and sentiments.

3. Normalisation

“Truth must of necessity be stranger than fiction,” said Basil, placidly. “For fiction is the creation of the human mind, and therefore is congenial to it.”

- G.K. Chesterton, *The Club of Queer Trades*

3.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the way readers form impressions of impossible fictions. In particular, I look at the idea that the optimal impression to form of an impossible fiction is that it is a work of unreliable narration. While several philosophers have argued that it is reasonable to interpret impossible fictions as works of unreliable narration, I show that there are cases of impossible fiction where this interpretation is problematic. I argue that the process of *normalisation*, first discussed in structuralist theory but since adopted by literary theory and scientific modelling, explains how readers are equipped to form impressions of impossible fictions.²² Normalisation is a kind of interpretive practice which justifies or eliminates deviant and incongruous elements in a text. Absolute impossibilities can be one such element, and I show how readers normalise impossible fictions. This discussion shows why it is that certain impossible fictions resist an interpretation of unreliability.

The chapter is split into three major portions. The first portion introduces philosophical arguments in favour of interpreting impossible fictions as works of unreliable narration. The second portion shows how these arguments reflect concerns which are expressed in work on normalisation. The third portion considers these arguments in light of lessons learned from normalisation. I show why impossible fictions do not need to be interpreted as works of unreliable narration. Since the chapter is broken into thirds, there is no convenient place to pause halfway; as a result, this chapter is longer than the other four. There follows a short breakdown of each of these major portions in order that the overall goal of the chapter remains clear despite this extra length.

²² For an overview of the structuralist origins of normalisation, see Culler (1975: 131–160). For its place in more modern narratological theory, see Alber (2016: 46–55). For an overview of scientific (re)normalisation, see Butterfield & Bouatta (2014).

In the first portion of the chapter, I respond to the work of several philosophers who link impossible fiction with the literary technique of unreliable narration. Daniel Nolan and Derek Matravers both suggest that readers might be disposed to interpret impossible fictions as unreliable, but neither go into much detail on how and why this interpretation proceeds. Richard Hanley, on the other hand, sees unreliability as the *only* sensible interpretation of some works of impossible fiction. I claim that, by investigating the wealth of literary theory which has been written on unreliable narration, a clearer image of the principles which underpin unreliability is available. I draw on Angsar Nünning's account of unreliable narration in order to show that Hanley's threat is a genuine contender. Sometimes, absolute impossibilities alone seem to justify interpreting a work of fiction as unreliably narrated. However, I indicate that in practice Hanley's account fails: the film *Looper*, an impossible fiction, resists being interpreted as unreliably narrated. This prompts the question: why do some impossible fictions lend themselves to interpretations of unreliable narration while others do not?

In order to answer this question, the second portion of the chapter investigates the practice of normalisation. Work on this subject shows how and when reader impressions of impossible fiction differ. Drawing on research into normalisation requires investigating work in narratology and literary theory. I see many areas of potential synthesis between this work and the analytic approach of Hanley, Nolan and Matravers. In order to understand normalisation, I outline its structuralist roots in the form of work by Jonathan Culler. In order to put normalisation into practice, I investigate the work of Tamar Yacobi, who offers the most extensive account available of how normalisation helps readers access deviant works of fiction. The reader, unable to understand the fiction at face value, must draw upon supplementary principles in order to engage with the text. I focus in particular on what Yacobi calls the 'perspectival principle'; the assumption that a text has an unreliable narrative due to the incongruity or inconsistency of its content.²³ Doing so gives me the tools needed to answer the question from the first portion.

²³ In doing so, I am attempting a description of what readers actually do, but I do not attempt to provide decisive empirical evidence. My focus is theoretical: the notion of normalisation has repeatedly appeared in narratology, and bears investigation. Some empirical evidence for the hypothesis may be found in Liao, Strohmingner & Sekhar Sripada's 'Empirically Investigating Imaginative Resistance', which concludes that certain genre expectations can reduce the effects of imaginative resistance (2014). If considering genre can allow readers stronger imaginative access to fictions, it seems that justifying the deviant aspects has helped the reader interpret the fiction. This is the claim made by Yacobi's generic principle, covered later in the chapter. This is not conclusive evidence, however, so while its existence is interesting it is not evidence I draw from extensively.

The third portion ties together the first two. Normalisation aims to increase certain qualities in fiction (namely coherence, consistency and rationality), and it is only in particular cases that using the perspectival principle achieves this. This means that absolute impossibilities alone are not sufficient motivation to posit unreliable narration. This is illustrated with several examples of impossible fiction which I consider.

3.2.1 Unreliability and impossible fiction: Graham Priest and Daniel Nolan

A man, Graham, visits the home of a recently deceased friend in order to help sort his unfinished papers. While doing so, he finds a box tucked away in the friend's study. The box, he discovers, is both empty and has something in it. Shocked, he shares this box with a companion, Nick. Graham and Nick agree that the box is extraordinary, but they disagree on how to proceed. Eventually, Graham drives away with the box, while Nick buries the same box outside. There really is an impossible object, which really is both buried at the house and taken away from the house.

So runs 'Sylvan's Box', Priest's case study in impossible fiction. As the previous chapter shows, readers are able to form impressions of absolute impossibilities in fictions like 'Sylvan's Box'. Priest claims that such an impression is the *only* sensible interpretation of the story. I agree that the above paragraph is an appropriate impression for a reader to form of 'Sylvan's Box'. But is it the only appropriate impression available? Here is an alternative suggestion.

Graham (a man who is committed to the existence of real logical contradictions) visits the home of a recently deceased friend in order to help sort his unfinished papers. While doing so, he finds a box tucked away in the friend's study. The box, Graham is convinced, is both empty and has something in it, but he is mistaken. He sees it as impossible, but this is only an optical illusion. Really, the box is empty. Shocked, he shares this box with a companion, Nick. Graham and Nick agree that the box is extraordinary, because Nick experiences the same illusion as Graham, but they disagree on how to proceed. Eventually, Graham drives away with the box, while Nick buries a different box (which both think is the original) outside. There was no impossible object or impossible action, but both men were mistakenly convinced that there was. The story has been recast as an *unreliable narrative*.

This recasting of 'Sylvan's Box' is suggested by Nolan (2007). Nolan responds to Priest's claim that the only reasonable interpretation of 'Sylvan's Box' is as an impossible fiction. He argues that another reasonable interpretation is that the narrator is unreliable. Under this interpretation, there is no impossible object in the story. Instead, there is only a false claim from the narrator that there is an impossible object. While Priest may have written 'Sylvan's Box' as an unequivocally impossible fiction, Nolan's interpretation gives a reasonable and consistent reading of the fiction. Such a reading is ontologically parsimonious, explaining the behaviour of the characters without relying on the existence of an impossible object. Under Nolan's interpretation, 'Sylvan's Box' ceases to be an impossible fiction.

On the subject of whether this is the *better* interpretation, Nolan is noncommittal (2007: 670). He claims that the reader's theoretical commitments are the deciding factor in whether this reading is more or less preferable. If she opposes the idea that fictions can contain impossible truths, she will prefer the reading of unreliability. As his own commitments do not prohibit impossible fiction, Nolan is content to interpret 'Sylvan's Box' as a genuinely impossible fiction. He does however warn that, while unreliability remains a viable option for providing consistent readings of impossible fiction, theorists who claim that fictions cannot contain impossible content will never be convinced otherwise.

3.2.2 Unreliability and impossible fiction: Richard Hanley

This section introduces Hanley, who is just the kind of theorist that Nolan describes. Hanley is a committed Lewisian about fiction.²⁴ I run through Hanley's arguments about impossible fiction. This includes the 'chunking' method of dealing with impossible fiction, and his claim that certain impossible fictions must necessarily be interpreted as unreliable. I specify my disagreement with Hanley, showing how his argument is against the spirit of my project.

Hanley's general project in his 2004 'As good as it gets' is to defend a Lewisian account of fiction. Due to this, he is more insistent than Nolan that the consistent, unreliable reading of 'Sylvan's Box' is the correct reading. For the most part, Hanley's paper dedicates itself to defending the 'chunking' method of understanding impossible fiction (the 'method of union', to Hanley). Under this account, impossible fictions represent multiple juxtaposed possible worlds which may or may not be consistent with one another. This means,

²⁴ I.e., fictional truth is determined by a set of relevant concrete possible worlds, and so cannot be impossible.

according to Lewis and Hanley, that contradictory propositions can be included in fictions without the fiction containing an inconsistent conjunction. The fiction does not represent a single world where both p and $\neg p$ hold. Instead, the fiction represents world 1, where only p holds, and world 2, where only $\neg p$ holds. It may appear that these two are a single world, but this is narrative sleight of hand. In this way, both p and $\neg p$ are fictionally true, but the conjunction $p \ \& \ \neg p$ is not. This method, Hanley claims, is the sensible way for a Lewisian to account for impossible fiction (Hanley 2004: 123). It is closely related to the metaphysical account to which Bourne and Caddick Bourne subscribe, described in the previous chapter. Bourne and Caddick Bourne also argue that fictions are individual possible worlds, and that fictional impossibilities represent this chunking together of multiple worlds rather than a single, inconsistent world.²⁵

Just as with Bourne and Caddick Bourne's ontological account of fiction, the use of chunking to explain the metaphysics of impossible fiction has no implications for my project. I have already clarified that I am interested in impossibility at the level of reader impressions rather than fictional truth. I have no issues with which metaphysical standpoint the Lewisian elects to take. It is this issue of metaphysics which motivates Hanley, who attacks Priest's claim that 'Sylvan's Box' demonstrates a genuine counterexample to Lewis's model of fictional truth. He does so by claiming, just as Nolan does in his later paper, that the more reasonable interpretation of the story is one where the narrator is unreliable. To Hanley, in fact, 'Sylvan's Box' is unreliable insofar as it is contradictory (2004: 125). There are no inconsistent pairs of propositions to be chunked, only the single consistent proposition that the narrator *believes* that the box is empty and has something in it. Chunking targets fictional truth rather than impressions or truth to a story. The suggestion that 'Sylvan's Box' should be interpreted as unreliably narrated, on the other hand, has ramifications for what is true to the story of 'Sylvan's Box' and which impressions are appropriate for its reader to form.

I object to any account which claims that the reader does have the scope to interpret a fiction like 'Sylvan's Box' as impossible at the level of truth to the story. Hanley does not make it clear why chunking is not perfectly able to accommodate 'Sylvan's Box'. By claiming that one possible world contains an empty box and another possible world contains an occupied box, the Lewisian should be able to accommodate the story in her ontology. Priest protests that applying chunking to 'Sylvan's Box' makes the actions of the characters irrational, but this should not trouble the Lewisian (Priest 1997: 580). It is in the nature of Lewis's modal realism that there exists a world with an empty box and a world with a full

²⁵ See p. 46.

box (in fact, many of each of these worlds) where relevant counterparts of Graham and Nick behave in the way described in 'Sylvan's Box'. It is, after all, *possible* for two people to behave in such a way towards an ordinary box. All that the Lewisian requires for her chunking account of fiction is this set of worlds. This would make 'Sylvan's Box' palatable to the Lewisian, and still validate the reader's impression of absolute impossibility.

Instead of taking this route, Hanley opts to interpret 'Sylvan's Box' as an unreliable fiction. This implies that the reader should not have an impression of an impossible object. Instead, the reader should have an impression of a fallible or untrustworthy narrator who gives a misleading description of a possible object. Nolan and Hanley's claims about unreliable narration imply that a reader can and perhaps should have the impression that works of impossible fiction are unreliably narrated. This claim impacts on my work as, effectively, Hanley argues that readers have their hands tied when they form impressions of impossible fiction. Instead of being able to form whatever impression most appeals to them, they must interpret impossible fictions as unreliably narrated. Given that my project explores the wide range of effects that impossible fiction can have on a reader, it comes as no surprise that I object to how Hanley limits the reader's options for engaging with impossible fiction.

Due to his switch in focus from fictional truth to the kind of impressions readers have of impossible fiction, Hanley becomes an issue for my project. His claim, that impossible fictions like 'Sylvan's Box' must necessarily be interpreted as unreliable, is one to which I strenuously object. However, Hanley is not the last philosopher to suggest that unreliability and impossible fiction are tightly connected. The following section explains how Matravers links these two ideas.

3.2.3 Unreliability and impossible fiction: Derek Matravers

This brief section introduces Matravers's work on impossible fiction. I show that, while he does not go as far as Hanley, Matravers too suggests that a viable interpretive move is to read impossible fiction as unreliably narrated. I then summarise Nolan, Hanley and Matravers, and indicate how I will proceed with analysing their arguments.

While Hanley and Nolan suggest unreliability as a reasonable answer for Lewisians to the notion that certain fictions are absolutely impossible, Matravers's approach to unreliability assumes that impossible fiction is a real phenomenon. His interest is similar to mine—describing what the reader can and does do while reading impossible fiction. Among

the reading strategies he lists (which are described in more detail later in this chapter) is the 'rejection' strategy. Matravers sees it as a viable option for a reader to assume that the impossible elements of the story are some kind of misreport, and to reject the idea that the story should be taken at face value. Instead, the reader assumes that the narrator is unreliable (Matravers 2014: 131-132). While Matravers does not claim that unreliability is a more or less appropriate way to interpret impossible fiction, he thinks it is an interpretation available to the reader. This links the two notions, impossibility and unreliability, in a way reminiscent of Nolan and Hanley. Clearly there is some motivation for the idea that impossible fiction is interpreted as unreliable beyond commitments to a Lewisian account of fictional truth.

Matravers, Hanley and Nolan all agree that one potential response which the reader can have to impossible fiction is to interpret it as unreliably narrated. Nolan goes further than Matravers, indicating that there is some motivation for general readers to interpret impossible fictions in such a way that impossible elements are written off as the products of an unreliable narrator. Hanley goes even further than Nolan, claiming that the unreliable reading is the preferred option for the general reader, and that 'Sylvan's Box' and other impossible fictions earn an incredulous stare from 'otherwise platitudinous folk (Hanley 2004: 125)'. The remainder of this chapter investigates all of these suggestions. I ask the following: is unreliability, in fact, an appealing and rational way to interpret impossible fictions? In which cases is unreliability more or less viable an interpretation?

In order to answer these questions, I analyse the principles which underpin judgements of unreliable narration. If readers opt to interpret impossible fictions as unreliable, whether consciously or unconsciously, there must be some factor motivating this interpretation. The first step in this investigation is a closer look at what motivates and justifies judgements of unreliable narration in the first place. While philosophers have discussed unreliable narration, the most established work in the area is in literary theory. Consequently, I draw on this resource to determine whether unreliable narration itself supports the use to which it is put by Matravers, Nolan and Hanley.

3.2.4 Unreliability and impossible fiction: unreliable narration in literary theory

This section draws on literary work on unreliable narration. I do this in order to inform my judgement on whether unreliability is a mandatory or even appropriate interpretation of

impossible fiction. While the concept of unreliable narration was first articulated by Wayne C. Booth, it has been further refined and developed by more recent literary theorists (Booth 1961). I investigate Angsar Nünning's 2008 account, as it summarises and reflects on a range of theories of unreliability in order to codify unreliable narration. In particular it synthesises Nünning's own earlier reader-focussed work with the more holistic, author- and text-inclusive approaches to unreliability offered by theorists such as James Phelan and Greta Olson (Olson 2003; Phelan and Martin 1999). This gives some independent indication of the sorts of qualities works of fiction should have if somebody is to reasonably claim that a work is unreliably narrated.

In general, Nünning follows the received wisdom on unreliability—that the unreliable narrator is one whose word the reader has some motivation to suspect—but finesses on this with his cognitive model of unreliable narration (Nünning 2005: 100; Rimmon-Kenan 1983). This model responds in part to Booth, who originally classed unreliable narration as an objective, text-immanent phenomenon. Nünning's cognitive reconceptualisation argues that unreliable narration is an interpretive method constructed by a reader, but that nevertheless textual phenomena and authorial intention can be seen to inspire, encourage and guide this sort of interpretation. Booth's model holds that only textual phenomena are required for a judgement of unreliability (Olson 2003: 95). Nünning agrees that textual phenomena contribute to judgements of unreliability, but also claims that the reader's own standards of normalcy provide the base point from which judgements of unreliability are made (Nünning 2005: 95). In other words, the actual content of a text can indicate to a reader that she should consider the narration unreliable, but this indication is relative to the reader. Take a paradigmatic unreliable narrator, such as Francis of Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). After telling his story, Francis is revealed in a closing twist to be a patient in a mental asylum. The fact that the narrator is a patient in an asylum is what triggers the judgement that he is an unreliable narrator. However, this judgement only makes sense against the background assumption that patients at mental asylums are unlikely to provide reliable testimony. If this background assumption could not be taken for granted, then the mere fact that Francis is in a mental asylum would not be sufficient indication that his testimony is unreliable.

To Nünning, unreliable narration is an interpretive strategy the reader uses. Coming to adopt this strategy successfully and appropriately requires three elements: 1) the author's own agency, 2) textual phenomena and 3) reader judgements (Nünning 2005: 90–91).²⁶

²⁶ Nünning is neutral towards whether this triumvirate refers to the implied author (i.e., the persona of the author which can be discovered from the text alone) or the actual author (i.e., the flesh-and-

These three features are all demonstrated by *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Author agency is present: the writers of the film introduce the twist in order to cast doubt on all of Francis's prior testimony. The fact that Francis is shown in a mental asylum is the relevant textual phenomenon. The reader then judges, based on her ability to correctly recognise that the textual phenomenon is an invitation from the author to infer unreliability, that Francis is not a reliable narrator. All three of these aspects combined result in an appropriate judgement (and corresponding impression) of unreliable narration.

Nünning emphasises the reader's own role in identifying the elements of the text which hint at its unreliability. The reader judgement is crucial, since it is only in virtue of this judgement that authorial agency and textual phenomena are recognised. No matter how an author invites her reader to infer that a narrator is unreliable, the inference itself is made by the reader. This reader may be positioned in such a way that the invitation is not apparent—the narrative may not strike a reader as unreliable. To use Nünning's example, a male pederast may fail to notice that Humbert Humbert of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is an unreliable narrator, since to this reader there are no suspicious or untoward features in the text (1999). It is the reader's judgement which allows her to determine whether an element of the text indicates the author is inviting her to posit unreliability. Without this judgement, there cannot be a diagnosis of unreliable narration.

To summarise: Nünning argues that unreliable narration is a way in which readers interpret texts rather than something found in a text. However, he also claims that in order to interpret a text as unreliably narrated, a reader must identify invitations from the author for her to infer unreliability. His account offers a way of independently verifying the claims that Nolan, Hanley and Matravers make about unreliable narration. While Nünning's model of unreliable narration is not the only account which literary theory offers, Nünning is a prolific and respected voice in debates on unreliable narration (Shen 2013). His work is therefore a suitable yardstick for philosophical work on unreliable narration. I consider whether the arguments posed by Nolan, Hanley and Matravers about impossible fiction are compatible with Nünning's model. If they are not, then there is reason to suspect that they (and particularly Hanley) respond to ideological commitments about impossibility rather than consideration of the literary technique of unreliable narration. If, however, their arguments

blood person or people who authored the text). Phelan recasts the implied author as a partial representation of the actual author, drawing a closer relation between the actual and implied author than previous theorists (Phelan 2005, cited in Nünning 2005: 99). Nünning seems content to proceed under Phelan's definition of the implied author, although he notes that the nature of the author in the triumvirate remains open to debate (2005: 99–101).

are compatible with Nünning, it will be clear that they represent a serious concern about impossible fiction.

3.2.5 Unreliability and impossible fiction: are impossible fictions unreliable?

Armed with a clearer image of how readings of unreliability can be licenced, this section reviews the judgements of unreliable narration made by Nolan, Hanley and Matravers. I argue that, on a fairly charitable interpretation of Nünning, there is good reason to take the claims these philosophers make seriously. Some impossible fictions do lend themselves to a reading of unreliable narration. I review 'Sylvan's Box', as well as Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* to show how this is the case. However, I ultimately argue that absolute impossibilities alone are insufficient licence for a reading of unreliable narration. To show this, I use *Looper*, an impossible fiction which does not seem to sponsor a reading of unreliable narration. This leaves us with a problem: why do some impossible fictions lend themselves to readings of unreliability, while others do not?

Nolan, Hanley and Matravers all claim that the absolute impossibilities found in an impossible fiction are sufficient cause for the reader to judge the text as unreliable. However, Nünning's model requires more than this. In the case of an impossible fiction like 'Sylvan's Box', two of Nünning's three features of unreliability are demonstrably present. Certainly, reader judgements of unreliability are fulfilled: Nolan, Matravers and Hanley each make these judgements. Arguably, there are also textual phenomena present: the absolute impossibilities themselves motivate these reader judgements. What remains to be demonstrated is authorial agency. To Nünning, this agency is expressed in the form of invitations for the reader to infer unreliability. His example is the self-important, emotionally stunted manner of the narrator in Ian McEwan's 'Dead as They Come' (Nünning 2005: 102). This manner is a clue; by leaving it, the author indicates that the text is not reliable.²⁷ The narrator's clear inability to pass reasonable judgement on his own qualities invites the reader to consider whether his judgements of reality are also flawed. The equivalent in the case of impossible fiction would be to interpret the mere fact that absolute impossibilities are mentioned as sufficient indication that the author is inviting the reader to infer unreliability.

²⁷ Nünning leaves it indeterminate whether he refers to the actual author or the implied author in this context (see the previous footnote for further detail).

Nolan ends his argument on this point, sceptical about but undecided on the idea that impossible elements alone justify a reading of unreliable narration. Matravers, similarly to Nolan, suggests that unreliability is a potential route of interpretation for readers of impossible fiction, but does not claim it is a mandatory or even appropriate way of interpreting *every* impossible fiction. Matravers may even think that reading an impossible fiction as unreliable requires some further evidence beyond the impossible element alone. I suspect this is the case, since he claims that the so-called rejection strategy is an option 'if the reader has independent reason to believe that the narrative obeys the reality principle (Matravers 2014: 132)'. If positing unreliable narration is licenced by the suspicion that the fiction obeys roughly the same laws as the real world, then impossible fictions which clearly do not obey the reality principle may not licence the use of unreliable narration. Hanley, however, is compelled to say that impossible elements *are* sufficient evidence of an inference invitation from the author. He claims to be 'forced' to doubt the reliability of Priest's narrator with regards to the narrator's description of the impossible box, indicating that the box itself is what triggers his interpretation of unreliability (Hanley 2004: 125). There is disagreement, then, on whether or not absolute impossibilities can validate judgements of unreliable narration. Perhaps Nünning can help decide the matter.

To Hanley's credit, impossible elements of a story do, to some extent, fit Nünning's description of textual clues to unreliability. Absolute impossibilities are violations of presupposed norms, e.g., that a box must be either empty or occupied. This violation is one of a range of signs and signals which Nünning claims qualify as relevant textual phenomena indicating unreliable narration (Nünning 2005: 102). However, Nünning portrays the judgement of unreliability as one which combines various features of a text—one feature alone does not typically constitute an inference invitation (Nünning 2005: 102). A judgement of unreliable narration should only be upheld if it is supported by multiple features in the fiction. Perhaps, however, absolute impossibilities are so extreme that they justify a reading of unreliability by themselves. Some examples of inappropriate and appropriate readings of unreliable narration help show why, though this may seem plausible to theorists like Hanley, I do not agree that this is the case.

First, a closer look at the unreliable reading of 'Sylvan's Box'. Priest's short story does have several features which support a reading of unreliable narration. Its narrator describes himself as emotional from the process of looking through his friend's unfinished papers. He suffers from the heat of the day. He has no equipment with which to test the box, and we rely on the word of the narrator and his similarly tired colleague. Perhaps these factors all contribute to some misjudgement on the narrator's part, making him what Olson calls a 'fallible' narrator (Olson 2003: 101–102). On a slightly different reading, the narrator

is more underhanded. He admits his support for the idea that contradictions can be instantiated in the real world. He muses on the possibility of proving this and the celebrity status this would bring him. Perhaps the narrator exaggerates the evidence and misleads the reader, making him an 'untrustworthy' narrator (Olson 2003: 102–103). These are relatively flimsy grounds on which to base a reading of unreliable narration (certainly compared to a fiction like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), but there are insufficient grounds to dismiss this reading outright.

Supporting Hanley's argument, there are impossible fictions which can be similarly read as unreliable due to their absolute impossibilities. Calvino's *Invisible Cities* stars a fictionalised version of Marco Polo, who narrates descriptions of fantastical cities to a fictionalised Kublai Khan. The descriptions of some of these cities are inconsistent with one another. The cities of Cecilia, Penthesilea and Trude are all described in ways which cannot coexist, since each covers the extent of the earth: Cecilia has engulfed everything that surrounds it, Penthesilea is composed of endless suburbs with no centre, and Trude covers the entire world (Calvino 1997). Each of these cities is individually possible, but they are not compossible. This makes Polo's description of the Khan's empire impossible. This in turn suggests that Polo is exaggerating to the elderly Khan. A reasonable interpretation of the story is that the absolutely impossible elements are down to the misleading descriptions which one character gives—the narrator Polo is unreliable (McHale 1987: 43–44). The fact that Polo's descriptions of cities are fantastical and impossible is, in this instance, direct evidence for the reading of unreliability. However, once again further supporting evidence can be found for the reading of unreliability. The Khan is openly sceptical of Polo's claims. He reports discerning a subtle pattern beneath Polo's wild accounts (Calvino 1997: 5). The impossible descriptions of cities or the Khan's suspicion may not have sufficed to justify a reading of unreliability alone, but together these features *do* licence such a reading.

A counterexample to Hanley would be an impossible fiction where unreliability is not an appropriate reading. Rian Johnson's 2012 *Looper* is one such fiction. In *Looper*, time travel technology exists and is frequently exploited for criminal purposes. A character in trouble with the mob, Seth, is killed when the mob kidnap his younger self and mutilate him. As Seth desperately tries to find his younger self, the mobsters begin to remove the younger Seth's limbs. As they do so, the older Seth's limbs disappear, replaced with healed scars and aged damage. This presents a logical impossibility: Seth loses his hands while young, loses his hands while old, and has not lost his hands between these two points. Claiming unreliability, however, seems unpalatable in this case. Time travel and the accompanying paradoxes are core features of the narrative. Doubting the reliability of the depiction of time travel is tantamount to doubting the reliability of the premise of the film. At no point is the

process of time travel portrayed in a way which suggests its depiction is misleading. The unreliable reading of *Looper* is far less compelling than that of 'Sylvan's Box' or *Invisible Cities*.

We are presented with a puzzle. In some instances, absolute impossibilities seem to provide evidence and support for a reading of unreliability. In other instances, they do not. The impossibilities in *Invisible Cities* support a reading of unreliability, while those of *Looper* do not. Nünning has suggested the prerequisites for a reading of unreliability, but now I must investigate what motivates this interpretation over others. This completes the first major portion of this chapter, which has set up a problem with the way philosophers claim impossible fiction can be read.

The second portion of this chapter searches for a solution to this problem. I find that solution in narratological work on normalisation. Normalisation is the process by which readers interpret what they read in accordance with their expectations of and underlying assumptions about a fiction. I claim that normalisation explains why readers form impressions of unreliable narration, and that a close look at the subject accounts for the disparity between interpretations of impossible fictions like *Looper* and impossible fictions like *Invisible Cities*.

3.3.1 Normalisation: interpreting fiction

This section lays the groundwork for future discussion of normalisation. To do so, I characterise the process of forming impressions of fiction as interpretive. I claim that this interpretive process tends to aim towards maximising three qualities in fiction: consistency, coherency and rationality. I explain each of these concepts and show how they guide our interpretation of fiction.

When the reader forms her impressions of a fiction, she performs a kind of interpretation. She interprets the direct content of the fiction (its constitutive words, images and sounds—see pp. 41–43), using it to inform the impressions she draws. This interpretive activity is often low-level or even unconscious. It is far more primitive than other types of interpretation, such as the interpretation of themes or symbolism. It is a matter of parsing the fiction and understanding that it is representing a particular set of circumstances. Take the following extract from Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, where the narrator, Naoe, overhears her daughter and son-in-law speculate about her oncoming senility:

“She started to stick her hands inside her pants, but I caught her in the act and she stopped and started laughing,” Keiko continues...

“Maybe her crotch is itchy,” Shinji suggests.

There is a gurgle in my chest, up my throat, and at the back of my mouth. I bite my blankets to muffle the sound but snort through my nose instead (Goto 1997: 40–41).

Forming an impression of this scene involves interpreting several pieces of information which are obvious, but not explicit. For example, the reader must interpret the fiction in order to arrive at the fact that Naoe is laughing. Similarly, at no point in the scene (including outside the given extract) is it made explicit that Naoe is in bed, or that she tries to hide the sound of her laughter from Keiko and Shinji. These are all extremely basic pieces of information which any competent reader can glean from the extract alone, let alone from the wider context of the novel. However, the information must still be extracted via interpretation, as it is not explicitly stated in the direct content of the fiction. The reader interprets the gurgling as Naoe laughing, and the blankets as indicating that she is in bed.

Some philosophers, such as Peter Lamarque, might challenge the idea that I have described an act of interpretation. Lamarque argues that an object can only be interpreted in the event that its meaning is unclear (Lamarque 2000: 98). There is no real ambiguity in the extract from *Chorus of Mushrooms*; a reader who does not think that Naoe is laughing, or that she is in bed, is simply wrong. Nothing turns on the use of the term ‘interpretation’ in this chapter, so this potential objection is not damaging. If, as Lamarque claims, interpretation is at its broadest definition the practice of making sense of things, then it should be clear that the practice I have described is similar to interpretation (Lamarque 2000: 98). Lamarque, and others like him, might therefore think of the process described above as interpretation-like rather than an act of actual interpretation.²⁸ Where such a reader objects to the use of ‘interpretation’ in this chapter, the word could be replaced with ‘interpretation-like’ with no impact on my arguments.

The low-level interpretation described above is how the reader makes sense of the fiction and forms her impressions. To interpret a fiction in a way which makes no sense would be pointless and arbitrary. Assuming that readers do not interpret purposelessly or arbitrarily, this means that a reader will make her best effort to interpret fiction in a way which makes sense to her. The reader does not imagine that Naoe is suspended from the

²⁸ To Beardsley, for example, the activity I describe is a combination of *explication* (interpreting the contextual meaning of words) and *elucidation* (interpreting the features of the world of the text which are suggested but not stated by those words) (Lamarque 2010: 291).

ceiling—part of her impression is that Naoe is in bed, because that is where people are usually wrapped in blankets. When Mrs Sommers is hungry in Kate Chopin's 'A Pair of Silk Stockings', the reader's impression is that Mrs Sommers hasn't eaten recently (Chopin 1897). If a character lets go of an object, then, unless given a reason to think otherwise, the competent reader's impression is that the object falls. The reader recognises a causal relation between Inigo Montoya's desire to kill the Six-Fingered Man, and the fact that the Six-Fingered Man killed Inigo's father—she does not think the two are merely coincidental. Fiction is constantly interpreted and decoded by the reader in order to turn the words on the page into an impression of a unified narrative.

When the reader forms impressions of a fiction in this way, I claim that she is generally guided by three qualities of fiction: (1) coherence, (2) consistency and (3) rationality.

- (1) *Coherent* fiction is broadly unified in tone, style and subject. The reader's impression is not that Mrs Sommers is hungry because she is secretly a bear disguised as a human. This would not be coherent with the rest of Chopin's short story. The existence of aliens is a coherent aspect of *The X-Files* but would be incoherent in *Fraiser*. This should not be confused with logical coherency—a logically impossible fiction may still be coherent, and a logically possible fiction can be incoherent.²⁹
- (2) A consistent fiction contains events and characters which, however unlikely, could have really occurred. That is to say, it could feasibly be discovered that a consistent fiction was mistakenly classified and is actually a work of nonfiction. Consistent fictions are logically possible, containing no internal contradictions. The characters and events of *Jane Eyre* are all compossible, making it a consistent fiction. Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where various fictional characters drug their own author, is an inconsistent fiction.
- (3) A rational fiction contains events which relate to one another in sensible ways, rather than in arbitrary ways. The reader's impression is that Naoe is laughing *because of* what Shinji says, rather than coincidentally. This is because that interpretation maximises the rationality in *Chorus of Mushrooms*. An irrational fiction, such as Jim Henson's *Tale of Sand*, features non-sequiturs and suspension of typical rules of cause-and-effect (the same desert contains an American Football team out training,

²⁹ Matravers deals with a similar concept in *Fiction and Narrative* (2014: 80). His notion of 'global coherence' combines elements from my notions of coherence and rationality.

a used car dealer, a Civil War-era Confederate army, a gramophone with records which conjure the object which they have recorded, and a beach—complete with killer shark).

These three qualities are not present in every fiction, nor are they always present in equal amounts. Some fictions, authors, genres or movements challenge one or more of these qualities. Surrealism challenges the quality of rationality; M.C. Escher challenges the quality of consistency; Steve McCaffery's non-narrative fiction *Panopticon* challenges all three. Sometimes an interpretation will privilege one quality over another: frequently, a reader may favour coherency over rationality in cases of magic realist fiction, or consistency over coherency in cases of historical drama. Generally, however, all three are the rubrics which guide how the reader forms her impression of a fiction. An interpretation which maximises these three qualities is generally preferred to one which diminishes them. Usually, they are deployed without conscious effort—an interpretation which satisfies all three principles seems more *right* than interpretations which do not—but this is not the only way that they guide our interpretive activity.

Sometimes readers must actively interpret fictions which are harder to resolve than the ones suggested above. These are cases where there are genuine competing explanations to choose between. This active interpretation is not low-level or unconscious, unlike the type of interpretation I have discussed until now. It is interpretation in the sense which Lamarque discusses, and it requires conscious thought to conduct. However, it too aims towards maximising coherency, consistency and rationality, as an example shows. While watching the ending of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the reader must interpret the sequence in which Bowman passes through a vortex of colour near Jupiter, awaking in a stylish bedroom. In order for the reader to understand this scene, she must actively interpret what is taking place in the film. The direct content alone is not enough to provide a coherent, consistent and rational impression of the scene. If the reader does not exercise conscious, active interpretation, then the scene will not make sense. When performing this interpretation, the reader still aims to maximise the three qualities. For this reason, a common interpretation is that Bowman has made contact with an alien race. This interpretation is coherent (Bowman learns earlier in the film that his mission is to investigate an alien artefact on one of Jupiter's moons). It is consistent (there is nothing logically impossible about the existence of aliens). It is also rational (the kaleidoscopic vortex is explained as alien technology, and Bowman wakes up in a bedroom because the aliens have constructed it for him), eliminating the non-sequitur appearance of the bedroom. In this example, coherence, consistency and rationality can be seen to guide our interpretive behaviour at both unconscious and explicit, conscious levels.

This section has established that readers form their impressions by interpretation of fiction (or, if we are cautious about labelling this interpretation, by an interpretation-like activity). When interpreting fiction in this way, readers are guided by three principles: coherence, consistency and rationality. The following section defines normalisation and shows that it is an extension of this activity.

3.3.2 Normalisation: defining normalisation

The desire to develop a coherent, consistent and rational impression of a fiction leads the reader to normalisation. Normalisation is the process by which a reader interprets a text in a way whereby the text makes sense to her. It is the way in which she ensures that the fiction seems unified and sensible, without any arbitrary, deviant or outlying elements. To normalise a text means to relate that text to a particular viewpoint, convention or principle. Often, this viewpoint is the same we use in the real world—many fictions can be interpreted by applying the standards of the real world. However, some fictions cannot be properly interpreted when using these standards. In these cases, the reader draws on supplementary principles. These include genre conventions and historical context, but there are many other, more complex principles of normalisation which readers can use.

This section characterises normalisation further by explaining Culler's concept of *naturalization*. This requires careful and sensitive reading, since Culler's account is embedded in the language of structuralism (which I am not committed to). In order to ensure that Culler's work is relevant to analytic philosophy, I express the process of normalisation in direct comparison to Donald Davidson's principle of charity. Many fictions can be interpreted using the principle of charity: the assumption that we are being told something rational (i.e., something which we consider to be true). However, fictions are not expected to conform to the truth in the same way as real rational speakers. When fictions deviate from the standards of the real world, readers must use a different principle to successfully conduct their interpretation. Explaining Davidson helps articulate the idea of normalisation in non-structuralist terms. Following this section, I go into greater detail on the principles and conventions which readers adopt when they normalise challenging works of fiction.

Normalisation helps readers maximise the coherence, consistency and rationality of the fiction they read. It is part of the interpretive practice by which readers form impressions

of fiction.³⁰ This means that normalisation is psychological, but it has a normative element as well. It is psychological in that there are no standards for what makes a fiction seem more coherent, consistent and rational to an individual reader. However, it is normative insofar as it contributes to reader impressions. The impressions formed as the result of normalisation are subject to standards of appropriateness as discussed in the previous chapter (pp. 58–61). Normalisation is therefore conducted poorly if it results in an inappropriate reader impression, even though the reader herself may feel that she can make better sense of the fiction. This is not usually an issue, as normalisation of standard, possible fiction tends to require minimal effort. It is not a challenge to interpret most fictions in a way which maximises coherency, consistency and rationality. This is why ‘A Pair of Silk Stockings’ and the extract from *Chorus of Mushrooms* pose little issue to a competent reader. Her normalisation of these works is straightforward: it can be done without conscious effort.³¹

Normalisation is less straightforward in cases of impossible fiction, because absolute impossibilities reduce the fiction’s consistency and rationality. A reader may therefore be inclined to interpret an impossible fiction in a way which minimises or outright ignores absolute impossibilities. However, the coherence of impossible fictions frequently rests on the fact that the absolute impossibilities take place. *Back to the Future* would be far less coherent if the temporal paradoxes were not part of the reader’s interpretation: they drive its plot and inform the behaviour of the characters. In cases of impossible fiction, the quality of coherency therefore regularly conflicts with consistency and rationality. This introduces the risk that a reader will normalise in such a way that she forms an inappropriate impression of the fiction, such as one where *Back to the Future* involved no time travel. There are several strategies for normalising impossible fictions, which I explain in detail in the remainder of this chapter. A study of normalisation helps identify the characteristic elements of reading impossible fiction, as reading impossible fiction often involves normalising to a greater extent than is needed for standard fiction.

Normalisation is not a novel concept. The term as I use it has its origins in structuralist theory, though it has been developed in later literary theory as well. Similar

³⁰ Alongside language comprehension, empathy, and other faculties required to interpret from words, sounds and images to a full narrative.

³¹ For clarity, I wish to distinguish between successful normalisation and actual appreciation of fiction. While successfully normalising a fiction may better position a reader to admire and enjoy that fiction, it may also lay bare the fiction’s aesthetic flaws. In much of what follows I discuss how readers, unable to engage with and enjoy an impossible fiction, normalise a fiction and reap aesthetic rewards for having done so. While this is a possible outcome, it is by no means the only possible outcome.

notions have been alluded to the sciences, particularly in quantum field theory (Butterfield and Bouatta 2014). Concerns uncannily similar to those expressed in work on normalisation have also reared their head in philosophical aesthetics, notably in Matravers's work on interpretation (2014: 85–86). For this thesis, though, I focus on the well-established and heavily discussed theories of normalisation in literary and narratological theory. This body of work gives a strong foundation on which to build an analytic account of normalisation. It does, however, require careful analysis. Concepts do not always translate directly from literary theory to analytic philosophy. This is particularly true of the structuralist origins of normalisation, which is directly challenged by Twentieth Century analytic philosophy of language (Herman 2005: 574). Despite this historical disagreement, I argue that the practice of normalisation can be described in terms agreeable to analytic philosophers.

For an overview of the structuralist account of normalisation, I look to Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975). Culler refers to the practice as 'naturalization', but in order to avoid confusion with naturalism I continue to use the term 'normalisation'. To Culler, normalisation is the process of interpreting fiction as if it were a communication.³² Just as communications can be interpreted in multiple ways according to different contexts, so too can fictions. Ambiguous phrases (e.g., 'I saw a man with a telescope') require that the recipient of communication decide on an interpretation. This interpretation is usually based on factors such as the context of the utterance, the intonation and stresses of the speaker, and personal knowledge of the intent behind the utterance (if the speaker is holding a telescope, the meaning is clear). Culler's claim is that in cases of fiction these contextualising factors are absent. Direct communication has a level of nuance which allows the speaker to indicate the optimal interpretation of their utterance, but in the indirect communication provided by fiction the task of finding an optimal interpretation is left to the reader. To do this, the reader must find a context in which the text makes sense. In order to do so, readers relate fictions to particular contexts and conventions. By interpreting the fiction in this way, the reader is able to better understand it (Culler 1975: 134). The process of determining a context which makes the fiction coherent and understandable is normalisation.

For the most part, the context which fictions are related to is everyday life. Culler claims that most narrative literature is intelligible precisely because readers relate its content to typical human concerns and behaviour (1975: 144). However, fiction often

³² To some philosophers, fiction literally is a communication (e.g., Currie 1990). To Culler, it is not actually a communication, but is read as if it were. In terms of actually reading fiction, the difference is unimportant.

deviates from the acceptable standards of real life. While impossible fiction is the most relevant example of deviant fiction, it is not the only kind. Genre fiction frequently flouts rules which apply to the real world, as do fairy tales, unnatural narratives and metafiction. These deviant fictions require different contexts in order to be normalised. They must be understood in terms of something besides the everyday. In order to understand how different contexts can be usefully applied, I turn to work in philosophy of language.

By specifying that texts are treated as communications, Culler leaves open the possibility of drawing on the rich selection of work in analytic philosophy which deal with communication. The notion that sets of conventions or frames of reference are relevant for understanding communications is well-discussed in philosophy of language. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, states that shared frames of reference are essential for understanding a speaker in his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009: 225). Lewis claims that utterances bear meaning only in relation to a language or population (Lewis 1983a: 173). In particular, however, Davidson's concept of radical interpretation helps understand how Culler's ideas can be applied. Radical interpretation deals with the interpretation of communications where the receiver has no knowledge at all of the communicator's language or meaning. Instead of understanding the speaker directly, she must interpret what the speaker says. Davidson claims that 'all understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation', since a shared language is no more than a convention which simplifies interpreting the meaning of another speaker (Davidson 1984b: 126). In Davidson's terms, normalisation is radical interpretation: attempting to understand the meaning of an utterance when the speaker cannot explain herself.

Under typical modes of communication, radical interpretation proceeds upon a simple assumption: that the speaker is saying something that we consider to be rational and true (Davidson 1984a: 196). We approach the process of radical interpretation with a charitable attitude towards the speaker's rationality. This is Davidson's principle of charity. It is a key element of radical interpretation, as it allows Davidson to escape a recursive trap: we cannot know the beliefs of a stranger if we do not understand her language, and we cannot understand the language of a stranger if we do not know her beliefs (Avramides 2003: 90; Davidson 1984b: 127). Assuming rationality on the part of the speaker allows the process of interpretation to gain a toehold. This is an effective move to make when interpreting the utterances of somebody in the actual world whom we believe to be rational. However, this principle does not apply so easily to interpretation of fiction.

Throughout his description of the principle of charity, Davidson highlights agreement between the speaker and the interpreter as the most important presupposition of

interpretation. Under standard conditions, this agreement will be on matters of belief about the world. Fictive utterances do not, however, necessarily express beliefs about the world. Taken as communications, they do not necessarily express any beliefs at all.³³ As Culler points out, a common method of normalisation is to assume that the fiction refers to the real world: when using such a method, the principle of charity is a reasonable approach to take. However, the principle of charity cannot be used to interpret all works of fiction. It would frequently lead us to inappropriate conclusions. Assuming that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or *Labyrinth* express only rational beliefs is clearly inappropriate, and an interpretation of these fictions which turned on this assumption would be correspondingly flawed. Davidson's account alone cannot explain the interpretation of fiction, even if we treat fictions as communications.

Davidson accepts that we may make *maximum* sense of a speaker even if we do not make *absolute* sense of their utterances (Davidson 1984b: 197). When interpreting actual communications, this is achieved through the principle of charity. The interpretation which a receiver settles on may not be identical to the speaker's intended meaning; the important thing is that it is close enough the goal of the communication is achieved. In the case of interpreting fiction, alternative principles may maximise the sense a reader makes of the fiction. Fictions do not necessarily express rational beliefs, but this does not mean they are necessarily inconsistent, random or unpredictable. I claim that the reader can still interpret the fiction in a principled manner, but she cannot rely on the principle of charity to do so. Instead, the reader must call upon different principles in order to interpret the fiction. Finding the principle which most suits the fiction is what allows us to make maximum sense of the fiction. Readers are able to interpret fictions in multiple ways, according to multiple principles, and can meaningfully debate which interpretation is most suitable. If the reader is able to radically interpret fiction using an appropriate principle in place of the principle of charity, she maximises her understanding of the fiction.

What is needed to complete the account of normalisation is a set of reasonable, intuitive principles which can stand in for the principle of charity when radically interpreting

³³ I say not necessarily, since some fictions are likely to express the beliefs of their authors. Compare J.R.R. Tolkien's 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit (Tolkien 1991: 3)' with Milan Kundera's 'A person who longs to leave the place where he lives is an unhappy person (Kundera 1984: 26).' It is likely, though not strictly necessary, that Kundera expresses a belief about the actual world, whereas Tolkien certainly does not. Furthermore, a reader may still consider truths about the actual world when they come to interpret impossible fictions. For example, principles of reality/minimal departure (such as those of Walton (1990) Friend (2017) and Ryan (1980)) may still influence interpretations.

fiction. These different principles are candidates to replace the principle of charity as a framework for the reader to use when interpreting the fiction. They may make it so that the fiction is coherent: forming a statement or set of statements which is broadly unified in tone, style and subject. They may make the fiction internally consistent: logically compatible and not self-contradictory, even if it contradicts the actual world. They may also make the fiction rational: certain fictional events entail others in sensible ways, rather than being arbitrary. These principles can serve as grounds needed for radical interpretation. Rather than it aligning with the reader's beliefs, the reader can agree that the fiction is coherent, consistent and rational by an alternative principle.

I identify six different principles of normalisation. Five are provided by Tamar Yacobi: the genetic, generic, existential, functional and perspectival principles. I supplement these principles with one proposed by Matravers: the reconciliation strategy. Readers use these principles to normalise challenging, deviant and unusual works of fiction, including impossible fiction.

3.3.3 Normalisation: principles of normalisation

This section discusses the first four of Yacobi's principles: the genetic, generic, existential and functional principles. I begin by establishing the need for definitive principles of normalisation. I describe how readers decide which principle to use, and I illustrate with examples how normalisation proceeds according to these principles. These illustrations include examples of how these principles can be used to normalise impossible fiction.

The previous section established that, when it comes to interpreting a fiction, the typical analytic methods of interpretation cannot always apply in their original forms. This is because they tend to revolve around truth. Lewis's account of language, Grice's maxim of quality and Davidson's radical interpretation all refer to rational reporting of truth as one of the important aspects of successful communication (Davidson 1984b: 138; Grice 1989: 26–28; Lewis 1983a: 167). An author of fiction, however, is not bound to rationally report what she believes to be true. The nature of the actual world is not necessarily an accurate predictor of the author's meaning. Given this, the reader must sometimes find a different system by which to calibrate their interpretation. Normalisation requires finding and implementing a suitable principle by which to interpret a fiction.

The mere fact that a reader adopts a particular principle does not guarantee that she will successfully normalise the fiction, or that the impressions she forms as a result will

be appropriate. Principles can be misapplied. Some fictions are extremely resilient to normalisation (Steve McCaffery's aforementioned *Panopticon*, for example, makes every attempt to resist the reader's efforts to immerse herself in and understand the fiction (Bernstein 1987: 44–47). The reader's ability to draw on principles to help interpret a text does not automatically render the text interpreted. Adopting a principle does allow the reader to begin normalising otherwise intransigent works of fiction. It is a crucial first step on the way to successful normalisation.

Settling on a convention to use is not a matter of trial and error. Readers often have a clear idea of which convention best suits a given fiction. This may be determined by the purpose for which the reader interprets the text (for enjoyment, for academic deliberation, to understand a particular issue, etc.). Sometimes the reader needs no alternative principle, and her point of reference is the actual world. Such is the case with realist fictions, and this is why we may find factual mistakes jarring, even though we recognise that we are reading a work of fiction. At other times, we may use genre conventions, historical viewpoints (we do not quibble with the portrayal of Friday as a reformed cannibal in *Robinson Crusoe* despite the historical non-cannibalism of the Naso, because we know that in Defoe's time the indigenous Carib people were painted as savages), or others. We may use multiple different frameworks at various points in the fiction—as Davidson states, we are able to quickly re-evaluate how we interpret words according to the most reasonable theory available to us (1984a: 196). Different readers may feel that different frameworks are more appropriate for the same fiction, and compare the consistency, coherence and rationality of the resulting interpretation as evidence for their chosen framework.

The process of normalisation is complex and individualistic, but it is still expressible with only a slight modification of existing accounts of interpretation: the reader chooses the framework within which the fiction makes the most sense, rather than only using beliefs to guide her interpretation of the author's utterances. This conception of normalisation owes something both to Davidson (the attitude to interpreting unfamiliar and strange communications) and to Culler (the notion that other principles might replace the principle of charity when it comes to interpreting fiction). As seen in the paragraph above, normalisation is used for general reading; a reader naturally interprets a fiction in a way which normalises its content and maximises consistency, coherence and rationality. This is not a difficult task in most cases, as works of fiction are often fairly consistent and rational to begin with. However, impossible fictions frequently require a more drastic process of normalisation than other works of fiction, as they tend to be less consistent, coherent and rational. This section explains and analyses several potential principles of normalisation which can be used to normalise impossible fiction. I explain the principles of normalisation

provided by narratologist Tamar Yacobi, illustrating how these principles help readers normalise impossible fictions.

Yacobi is specifically interested in the interpretation of works of 'deviant' fiction: fictions with incongruous elements which violate the norms of our own world (Yacobi 1981). This makes her work relevant to impossible fiction, which is a clear case of deviant fiction. Particular parts of a fiction may also be deviant in the sense that they are not in keeping with the rest of the fiction. These are the parts of a fiction which lessen its coherency (in my sense of the term). Sudden shifts in theme or tone may lead to fictions which are deviant in this regard. Yacobi attempts to provide principles which capture how readers accommodate these deviant elements in their interpretation of a fiction. She offers five principles; five frameworks which can be used to replace the principle of charity in the process of interpretation. She names them the five principles of normalisation, framing her discussion in terms of 'reconciling and integrating' incongruent elements with the rest of the text (Yacobi 1981: 113). In other words, her interest is explicitly in the principles by which readers interpret *deviant* elements of a text rather than about interpretation in general.

The five principles which Yacobi describes can be split into two categories. One category normalises through exclusion: it seeks to eliminate deviant elements from the fiction. This normalises the fiction, as there are fewer deviant elements to interrupt reading. The other category normalises through justification. It seeks to justify the presence of deviant elements in the text so that readers do not view these elements as deviant in the first place. Each one is a possible way for the reader to normalise a fiction, but it is not the case that each one will be appropriate or applicable in every instance. Sometimes a particular principle will be more readily accessible than others. A particular principle may be inappropriate for a specific text. More than one principle may be deployed at once. They are methods that readers use to normalise rather than ironclad rules of interpretation. I outline and demonstrate the first four—genetic, generic, existential and functional—below. These are all principles based on justification of deviant elements. The final, fifth principle, the perspectival, is the only exclusionary principle. It is discussed in its own section following this one, as it relates to the work of Nolan, Hanley and Matravers discussed above.

The first of Yacobi's principles is the *genetic* principle. When interpreting according to the genetic principle, the reader pays particular attention to the causal history of the text and its author. This causal history includes the circumstances in which the text was authored—the political and social mores of that time and place, the author's personal beliefs and practices, etc. The causal history also incorporates any editing or censorship which the text has undergone. It is, as Yacobi describes, the collection of 'factors that produced the

text without coming to form part of it (1981: 114).’ To interpret according to the genetic principle is to lay emphasis on the psychological and environmental forces which influenced the production of the text itself. The genetic principle can be used to normalise morally deviant fiction from the *Iliad* to the *Carry On* franchise, normalising problematic elements through awareness of historical context.³⁴ In some instances, readers will form a richer, more appropriate set of impressions by using the genetic principle when interpreting fiction. For example, a reader familiar only with the Homeric Odysseus must adopt the genetic principle when reading Virgil, where Ulysses is cruel and deceitful. If she does not, she risks fundamentally misunderstanding the position of the character in the *Aeneid*. Even if readers do not adopt, or even recognise the validity of these historic morals, she increases the coherence and consistency of the fiction by recognising their presence. The fiction no longer seems arbitrary as its morals, however reprehensible, are contextualised by historical thought. The genetic principle also normalises issues like scientific inaccuracies. The inaccurate portrayal of volcanoes in Verne’s *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* can be attributed to contemporary misunderstanding of volcanology, and contemporary readers normalise it as such. The notion that historical context normalises factual errors of this kind can be traced back as far as Hume, who warns that ‘the poet’s monument’ will collapse if we do not make allowances for changes in ‘manner and custom’ (Hume 1995: 236).

The genetic principle can help normalise impossible fiction in much the same way as these examples. In some cases, absolute impossibilities are present in a work of fiction due to certain genetic conditions. ‘Sylvan’s Box’ is one example: Priest explicitly attempts to write an impossible fiction, and this attempt is part of the history of the fiction. A reader who is aware of Priest’s efforts will recognise that the impossible elements of the story should form part of the reader’s impression. The impossible box can be recognised as a coherent aspect of the fiction because part of the history of the fiction is its attempt to give the reader an impression of the impossible box. In a similar way, depictions of absolute impossibilities abound in medieval miracle plays, but modern readers recognise their religious and historical context when reading these fictions. We are able to rationalise and accept the portrayal of miraculous events in these plays because we have normalised them using the genetic principle.

The second principle is the *generic* principle. Interpretations which favour the generic explanation look to the ways in which our expectations given by conventions of genre fiction differ from the expectations we have of reality. Deviations from reality are

³⁴ This should not be confused with the issue of imaginative resistance, which focusses on fictions which attempt to represent these deviant moral values as fictionally true (see Gendler 2000).

deemed acceptable if they are included in this difference. Genres involve, according to Yacobi, a slightly different set of rules than reality, and generally this set is more limited and simplified (1981: 115). These simplifications may include, for example, the outlandish coincidences which power the comedy genre. They also include the convention of the mystery genre where the culprit must be an individual known to the investigator. A popular example of how genre modifies our expectations is seen in *Othello*. In reality, a Moorish general speaking in beautiful iambic pentameter would be unusual. Within the genre of Shakespearean tragedy, however, it is unremarkable. In fact, it would interfere with the conventions of some genres if the text were to attempt to depict realistic, non-deviant events.

Genre is perhaps the clearest case of how an alternate framework can give consistency, coherency and rationality to a text. When Westley is brought back from the dead in *The Princess Bride*, the reader's interpretation and experience of the story is influenced by its fantasy setting. If the actual world was the only point of reference for interpreting *The Princess Bride*, this resurrection would be incoherent (Reiner 1987). However, given the fantasy conventions of magic and miracles, the resurrection is made consistent and coherent with the other events of the film. Genre conventions can also help the reader interpret which events of the text are to be taken as actually occurring in the story. Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* is not a fantasy novel—the world it depicts seems similar in many relevant ways to our own. It seems more like a work of realist fiction; one which emulates the real world in every way besides explicit departures from it. When protagonist Charles sees a great grey monster while sitting by the sea, the conventions of realist fiction are violated (Murdoch 1999: 20). This makes the reader disinclined to take this section of the story literally. Instead, she may interpret the sea monster as either Charles being fictionally mistaken about the identity of the creature, or as a figurative inclusion which illustrates the protagonist's self-indulgence. In this way, she has been guided by genre conventions to an agreeable interpretation of the text. If *The Princess Bride* had resurrected Westley with advanced technology rather than magic, a reader may well normalise it in a similar way to Charles's sea monster: it contradicts genre conventions, so the fiction is more coherent if the anomaly is interpreted non-literally.

Like the genetic principle, the generic principle normalises a fiction in the sense of reassuring the reader that it is appropriate to interpret the fiction in a seemingly deviant way. This includes interpreting a fiction as absolutely impossible. H.P. Lovecraft's cosmic horror is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5 of this thesis, but it is worth mentioning now. Lovecraft's fiction illustrates how the reader's knowledge of a genre changes the way she normalises works of fiction. Themes of madness and extradimensional monsters are

standard fare for members of the cosmic horror genre, and Lovecraft's works regularly feature bizarre, geometrically impossible shapes and buildings. It is important for these elements of the stories to be recognised in an interpretation, since the cornerstone of the genre is fear of the unknown (Hull 2006: 10; Kneale 2006). The reader recognises the validity of these elements of the text if she recognises the role they play within the wider genre of cosmic horror. If she is not familiar with the tropes of cosmic horror, she may think that the characters' descriptions of geometric impossibilities are a symptom of madness rather than (as would be appropriate for Lovecraft's work) the cause.

The third principle is Yacobi's *existential* principle. This principle focusses on differences between the real world and the story world in order to reconcile deviant elements in the text with the rest of the story. This is done on a diegetic level (i.e., within the story)—it involves the reader changing her understanding of the nature of the fictional world she is experiencing. Yacobi's example is Kafka's *Metamorphosis*:

Neither actual reality nor any established stylization of it dictates (and accounts for) Gregor Samsa's startling appearance as a giant insect. To say that Kafka's "Metamorphosis" postulates a world accommodating the transformation of the human into the nonhuman is to devise an organizing principle that is both referential and predominantly intra-textual: it derives more from the peculiar structure of reality the reader attributes to the work than from any pre-existent constraints or legitimations (Yacobi 1981: 116–117).

In the example case of *Metamorphosis*, the reader cannot successfully normalise the text simply through appeal to the actual world. Instead, she must accept that the fictional reality of the text is such that human beings can turn into monstrous vermin. According to Yacobi, this is a significant break from the rules of our own world—it is not a simplification or stylisation of our reality, but an indication that *Metamorphosis* represents a different kind of world to ours.

Impossible fiction can be normalised using the existential principle. Dan Abnett's science fiction series *Ravenous* is set in a universe where faster-than-light travel is possible thanks to an alternate dimension: the Warp. The Warp is a dangerous realm of absolute chaos and madness (Abnett 2019: 283). Its existence is built into the story of *Ravenous*—spaceships transition to the Warp in order to travel vast distances, individuals draw magical power from it, and dangerous creatures which escape the Warp are a peril to the characters of the series. The existential principle is a natural way for readers to normalise *Ravenous*, since the world of the story is so different to the actual world. The reader can recognise that the world of *Ravenous* differs to our own in substantive ways, and that to attempt to understand it as something which could obtain in our own world would be misguided. The

world this fiction represents has a different set of rules to our own, which involve the existence of an absolutely impossible alternate dimension. Recognising that the world of *Ravenor* has these features is a way of normalising the fiction, as it justifies the existence of these otherwise-deviant elements.

The fourth and final of Yacobi's justificatory principles is the *functional* principle. I return to this principle in future chapters when discussing several responses to impossible fiction. When normalising according to the functional principle, the reader keeps an eye on *why* it is that deviant elements are included in the text. Where the existential principle integrates deviant elements into the world of the story, the functional principle does not attempt this integration. Instead, it prioritises the formal properties of the fiction, and highlights how deviant elements contribute to these properties. Yacobi explains the difference:

The existential operation more or less plausibly relates the experienced anomaly (e.g., inconsistent behavior) to some referential feature or law (e.g., psychological complexity) and thus turns it into an integral or even natural part of the fictive reality, whereas the aesthetic or formal operation explains the function of that anomaly within the structure of the text (e.g., satiric flexibility) without necessarily integrating it with the world of the text (1981: 117).

This means that the generic principle is itself a functional principle—genre is one means by which to deduce the function of a deviant aspect of the text. Yacobi thinks it significant enough to warrant its own category despite this: the generic principle is set out by how widely recognised ('institutionalised,' in Yacobi's own words) it is in literary theory and philosophy of literature (Yacobi 1981: 117). However, there are functional principles besides the generic. For example, readers can rationalise contrived coincidences in stories as plot-essential. There would be no real story to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* if not for the fact that Mina so happens to be in Whitby when Count Dracula arrives, or that a suitor to one of Dracula's victims (Lucy, who happens to be a friend of Mina's) is close friends with Van Helsing, an expert on vampires. Readers can accept these contrivances because the story is predicated on their existence.

The functional principle can be used to normalise cases of impossible fiction. In particular, the technique seems apt for normalising paradoxical time travel stories. A viewer who does recognise the absolute impossibility in *Looper* described above—a man losing body parts in real time as his past self is mutilated—may well also recognise the role this scene plays in the film. The scene establishes the danger posed by the mob to the film's characters. The scene sets up the film's finale, where a character kills himself to prevent

his future self from killing a young boy. It is also an exciting and distinctive scene—there is an aesthetic function to the absolute impossibility.

These four principles—genetic, generic, existential and functional—are all ways in which Yacobi understands normalisation to be conducted. Each one is a framework which the reader adopts in order to justify the presence of incongruous elements in fictions. By interpreting the fiction according to each principle, reader impressions of incongruity are shown to be appropriate rather than mistaken. Each principle shifts the reader's focus to a different extratextual element in order to explain the deviances. This, as Yacobi points out, does not necessarily make any of the text more credible or imaginable (1981: 114). What it does do is rationalise the presence of the deviant element, making the reader able to see why the deviant element was included. This promotes the coherency and rationality of the fiction by indicating why impressions of deviant elements are appropriate. However, none of these four principles promote consistency, since inconsistent parts of the text are not made consistent despite being normalised. It is Yacobi's fifth principle which addresses consistency, and this principle is what I turn to now.

3.3.4 Normalisation: the perspectival principle

Yacobi's fifth principle concerns unreliable narration. The previous four principles were all justificatory, operating by justifying the presence of deviant elements in a fiction. This final principle, the *perspectival* principle, normalises by interpreting the text in such a way that some of its features are the product of a character or narrator's perspective rather than features of the story itself. This section explains the perspectival principle. I highlight how it resembles the approach adopted by Nolan, Matravers and Hanley with regards to unreliable narration and impossible fiction.

The perspectival principle is the mode of interpretation where the reader actively attempts to substitute incongruous (i.e., inconsistent, incoherent or irrational) elements of the text for congruous ones. She does so by attributing the presence of these incongruities to the perspective from which the story is told, rather than to the fictional world itself. The incongruities are not taken literally; rather they are seen as interfering with an accurate description of the fictional world. In other words, the reader posits unreliability. She interprets the fiction in such a way that her impression is not that an incongruous element is part of the story, but instead is misleadingly included in the telling of the story. From the premise that the story has been distorted by the influence of perspective, the reader may or may not attempt to decrypt the narration. Doing so requires analysing the reason why the

perspective has distorted events, and accounting for this distortion while interpreting the events of the story. She may instead accept that the perspective has distorted the fictional events beyond recognition: simply recognising that the narrative does not accurately reflect the fictional world is an important recalibration in itself (Yacobi 1981: 118–119). Either way, the reader uses the perspectival principle to explain the presence of incongruities in the fiction. They are present because they are the creation of an unreliable narrator.

Absolute impossibilities, when recognised by the reader, frequently count as incongruous elements in the story. Their alienness comes from their lack of consistency, which often prompts normalisation. The interpretation of the story as unreliable is one way of normalising an impossible fiction—a method which, as seen above, is highlighted by Nolan and Hanley. Discussing normalisation has shown why this reaction occurs: the interpretive strategies described earlier in this chapter can be attributed to normalisation according to the perspectival principle. This renders the fiction consistent by showing how the seemingly inconsistent elements are not in fact to be taken as literal—they are not true to the story.

Nolan and Hanley both suggest that the reading of unreliability is a technique which readers can and will deploy when reading impossible fiction. However, if Yacobi is correct then readers actually have an array of different techniques with which they normalise any incongruent fiction, including impossible fictions. Matravers is more sensitive to this than Nolan and Hanley, as he recognises that there are multiple responses readers can have to impossible fictions (Matravers 2014: 131). His ‘rejection strategy’ is very similar to the perspectival principle—it is the strategy by which a reader takes the narrator to be unreliable in order to engage with an impossible fiction. Matravers lists three other strategies for reading impossible fiction, which are explored in the following section.

3.3.5 Normalisation: Matravers’s strategies

This section introduces Matravers’s three remaining strategies for reading texts. I show how one of his three strategies, the ‘weird world’ strategy, is a restatement of one of Yacobi’s principles, much like his rejection strategy is of Yacobi’s perspectival principle. I describe also discuss his ‘disregarding’ strategy, but I defer discussion of the activity it describes until Chapter 5. I then consider Matravers’s ‘reconciliation’ strategy. I show how it differs from Yacobi’s five principles and deserves to join them as a reasonable principle for conducting normalisation. This completes the second major portion of this chapter, and I take the opportunity to summarise my arguments so far.

Two of Matravers's strategies make no further contribution to the discussion of normalisation. Matravers's 'weird world' strategy is markedly similar to the existential principle. Just like Yacobi's existential principle, it involves discarding the reality principle as a guide for generating impressions of the fiction. Instead, the reader recognises that this fiction represents a world very different from our own. Since I have already explained the existential principle in detail, I continue using Yacobi's principle rather than Matravers's strategy. Matravers also suggests a 'disregarding' strategy, according to which the reader does not reinterpret but simply ignores impossible elements of a story. This is effectively the opposite of normalisation—it removes deviant elements from consideration rather than compensating for them. This strategy does not belong in an account of normalisation, but the notion of disregarding certain aspects of impossible fictions is investigated further in Chapter 5.

Matravers's fourth and final strategy is the 'reconciliation' strategy. When a reader adopts this strategy, she attempts to find a reason why the reported impossibility is actually possible. Matravers's example is the undecayed face of eighteen-year dead Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*. The reader may reconcile this incongruity with the actual world by speculating that Catherine was buried in lime which slowed the decay of her skin (Matravers 2014: 132–133). This is closely related to unreliability, following the same principle that accurate information about the 'true' events of the story has not been provided by the narration. It is worth distinguishing it from unreliability, however. The perspectival principle recasts the information provided by the text gives as unreliable. The reconciliation strategy, on the other hand, adds information to that already given by the text in order to rationalise incongruities. The reconciliation strategy is not helpful for taking impossible fiction at face value—any way of reconciling the fiction with the real world would necessitate the removal of the absolute impossibility—but it identifies a method of normalisation distinct from Yacobi's five principles, and deserves to be considered alongside them as a viable way of normalising deviant fiction.

This makes six methods of normalisation: Yacobi's four justificatory principles, Matravers's reconciliation strategy and the shared approach of perspective/rejection. All six are available to readers as replacements for the principle of charity when interpreting impossible fiction. The arguments from Hanley and Nolan, discussed earlier in the chapter, focus solely on the perspectival principle. As this section has shown, doing so oversimplifies the behaviour of readers. In fact, readers regularly draw on the other principles when normalising impossible fiction. In these cases, there is no reading of unreliability.

This completes the second major part of this chapter. The first identified a typical approach to impossible fiction among philosophers: to claim it can and perhaps should be identified as unreliably narrated. I challenged this approach with an example of an impossible fiction which resists this style of interpretation: *Looper*. This second portion has taken a closer look at the techniques readers use when faced with deviant and difficult fiction. I have established six principled ways in which readers normalise fiction. The final portion of this chapter will take the lessons learned in the second and apply them to the first. With the close understanding of interpretation given by my investigation into normalisation, I can now show why it is that some impossible fictions are amenable to interpretation as unreliable while others are not.

3.4.1 Unreliability revisited: applying the perspectival principle

This third major portion of the chapter ties together the previous two. I suggest that consistency, coherency and rationality guide readers to normalise works in particular ways. This explains why certain principles of normalisation are more appropriate than others for a given fiction. Earlier in this chapter, I used *Looper* as an example of an impossible fiction which resists a reading of unreliable narration. This section uses the lessons of normalisation to show exactly why it is that *Looper*, among other fictions, resists this reading. First, I use *1984* as a trial run of a deviant fiction which resists normalisation via the perspectival principle. Following this, I apply the same principles to *Looper*.

As I have argued, a reader normalises a fiction in order to maximise its qualities of coherence, consistency and rationality. The reader may attempt to deploy any principle of normalisation when faced with an incongruous fiction. However, certain principles of normalisation are more or less appropriate than others for use with a given fiction. It is not appropriate to use a particular principle of normalisation if the use of that principle has too negative an impact on any of the three qualities. Principles are also inappropriate if they do not successfully normalise the fiction (for example, the generic principle has little to offer 'Sylvan's Box' as this story has no clear genre). Others are inappropriate because they undermine or distract from key themes of the fiction, and in doing so reduce its coherence. What exactly constitutes 'too negative an effect' is not fixed. It may frequently be a matter for debate. However, an example helps show that some applications of particular principles have overly negative effects on a fiction.

Take a non-impossible fiction, George Orwell's *1984*. The novel opens with the clocks striking thirteen (Orwell 1987: 3). This is an unusual, incongruous element of the

fiction when considered in terms of Davidson's principle of charity. It therefore suggests to the reader that a fresh principle is required for successful interpretation of the text. Appropriate principles might include the existential (e.g., the world of *1984* is one which is different to ours with respect to time measurement, using units of thirteen or more rather than twelve), the generic (e.g., the fact that major upheavals in society, including in measurement of time, are a common trope in dystopian fiction) or the functional (e.g., the unusual time hints at the differences between the society of *1984* and the reader's own, while the unlucky number thirteen sets a tone of dread). These normalisations increase the coherence, consistency and rationality of *1984*. They explain why it is that an incongruous element is present in the fiction: its presence is justified either by reference to differences between our world and the world of *1984*, or in terms of setting a scene and tone for the fiction. It would be *inappropriate* to normalise the clocks of *1984* according to the reconciliation strategy (e.g., supposing that time in *1984* is measured in the same way as our own world, but these clocks are broken and chime an extra time each hour), or the perspectival principle (e.g., imagining that protagonist Winston has miscounted the numbers on the clock). Each of these normalisations reduces the coherency of *1984* by dispelling the sense of unease which the reader develops at this sinister introduction, and by eliminating the uncanny difference between our world and the world of *1984*. Using these would result in the reader forming inappropriate impressions of Orwell's novel.

Earlier in this chapter, I suggest that it is inappropriate to normalise *Looper* according to the perspectival principle. Comparing *Looper* directly with 'Sylvan's Box' helps to show why this is the case. 'Sylvan's Box' can be appropriately normalised by the perspectival principle. Doing so increases the consistency and rationality of the fiction without necessarily sacrificing coherence. An unreliable reading of 'Sylvan's Box' is a coherent fiction, but it is about two men who believe that they have found an impossible box rather than actually about an impossible box. An existential normalisation, which would validate the reading of the box as absolutely impossible, is also possible. However, it is not any more compelling than the perspectival reading: both are appropriate ways to interpret 'Sylvan's Box'. The perspectival reading does no significant damage to the fiction's overall coherence.

Looper, on the other hand, would be impoverished by this relatively arbitrary reading of unreliability. There is no motivation to avoid calling 'Sylvan's Box' unreliable, since it is short and simple enough a fiction that the reading of unreliability based on a single, impossible feature does not interfere with other aspects of the text. Richer works, such as *Looper*, seem less liable to these revisionist interpretations. This is because the absolutely impossible features are accompanied by many other features which are not so supportive

of a judgement of unreliable narration. Better interpretations of *Looper* can be found by using other principles. I have already discussed how using the functional principle can normalise *Looper* earlier in this chapter (pp. 91–92), but I now show that the generic and existential principles can do just as convincing and appropriate a job of normalising the fiction.

3.4.2 Unreliability revisited: normalising *Looper*

To show even more conclusively that *Looper* should not be normalised according to the perspectival principle, I look at which modes of normalisation better suit *Looper*. This shows that, in some cases, an appropriate impression of an impossible fiction is one where that fiction is not unreliably narrated. This is a convincing reason to deny Hanley's assertion that readers *should* interpret impossible fictions as unreliable.

Looper benefits from normalisation according to the generic principle. It is a soft science fiction/action film, and as a member of this genre it is likely to contain suspenseful scenes which showcase futuristic technology. Seth's mutilation is exactly this sort of scene: the gruesome application of time travel technology fits well into the genre. A viewer who recognises the absolute impossibility which occurs during the scene may well accept that this deviant aspect can be explained as one of the genre's conventions. Rather than seeking to understand or eliminate the impossible element of the film, she may recognise that paradoxical happenings like this are standard fare for Hollywood depictions of time travel. While Seth's mutilation is incongruous with the real world, it is not at all out of place in the genre to which *Looper* belongs. This reader has normalised *Looper* according to the generic principle.

Alternatively, the existential principle interprets the world depicted in *Looper* as operating according to different laws to our own. The fiction supports this kind of normalisation: antagonist Old Joe tells his younger self that he doesn't want to 'talk about time travel shit, because we'll start talking about it and then we'll be here all day making diagrams with straws. It doesn't matter (Johnson 2012).' There is a simple account of how this happens: readers are able to entertain the idea that the world of a story is importantly different to our own in terms of people and places, and by the same capacity can imagine that the world of the story is different to our own in terms of what is possible. Stock's approach to propositionally imagining absolute impossibilities, described in the previous chapter, may offer a more detailed account of how readers imagine this. According to Stock, the reader is able to imagine that the world of *Looper* is different to our own, provided that

she imagines there is an explanation of how this difference can obtain (Stock 2017: 141). The reader imagines that, in the world of *Looper*, there is some explanation of why it is that Seth is mutilated synchronously with his past self. As Old Joe and Stock both recommend, there is no need for her to imagine this explanation in detail; she only needs to imagine that it is available (Stock 2017: 141). In much the same way that I accept there is an explanation for why it is that octopuses can change colour without knowing what it is, the reader imagines there is an explanation for the absolute impossibility in *Looper*. This justifies the presence of the impossibility, normalising *Looper* by the existential principle.

Not only are the existential and generic principles more effective when normalising *Looper*, using the perspectival principle would likely damage the aesthetic pleasure gained from the film. It would confuse the plot: the mobsters carve an address into Past Seth's arm, which appears as scars on Seth and allows him to find the mobsters. How did he discover the address, if not by this mutilation? It would also confuse the film's themes: the film deals with short-sightedness, changing what seems to be an inevitable future, and decisions made in the past catching up to oneself. Thinking of Seth as unreliable reduces the resonance of this scene with these themes, making the interpretation seem contrived. Finally, as mentioned in the discussion of the functional principle, it would remove the set-up this scene provides for the film's finale, where the protagonist kills himself in order to kill his future self. Thinking of Seth as an unreliable narrator lessens the coherence of *Looper*, even though it increases its consistency. Reducing the coherence of a text can diminish its aesthetic effect, and aesthetic considerations carry weight when it comes to normalising impossible fictions. If a perspectival reading would harm the aesthetic effect of the fiction, it is less appealing for this reason. This is not to support the notion that the *correct* interpretation of a work of art is whichever interpretation maximises its aesthetic value (such as Davies 2007: 15–17). Rather, it is reasonable to suppose that readers tend to avoid interpreting works of fiction in ways which actively diminish their aesthetic value.

Any appropriate impression of *Looper* includes the belief that Seth was mutilated in real time as a result of the same injuries being inflicted on his past self. This impression is absolutely impossible, but it is still appropriate. Believing that this mutilation occurred in some other way, and that the event as depicted in the film is fallible or untrustworthy, is not an appropriate impression of *Looper*. In fact, I contend that it is pre-theoretically obvious to viewers that *Looper* is not a case of unreliable narration. Friends I interrogated generally rejected the idea that the film is unreliably narrated at any point, even when they (commonly) claimed to have recognised the inconsistencies in the film. This evidence is anecdotal, but I suspect it is reasonably representative of the film's wider audience.

If normalising according to the perspectival principle makes for a less satisfying aesthetic experience than alternate methods, then there is no motivation to normalise in that fashion. Hanley might protest at this: his motivation for claiming that impossible fictions are unreliable is that they otherwise cannot be accommodated under a Lewisian account of fiction. However, as I have emphasised, differentiating between reader impressions and fictional truths removes the need for Hanley to consider any impossible fiction unreliable. The reader's impression does not need to correspond exactly with the fictional truth of the matter, as Bourne and Caddick Bourne show. Naturally, my preferred solution for Hanley is to agree that chunking is the better solution for 'Sylvan's Box'. Hanley has already condoned the chunking approach to impossible fiction, meaning that there is little motivation for him to perspectivally normalise impossible fictions rather than chunk them. I cannot see what damage it would do to Hanley's work to accept the use of chunking in this case. In fact, it would make Hanley's approach to impossible fiction all the more consistent—adopt chunking wherever possible.³⁵ Hanley's attitude of considering a story unreliable insofar as it is inconsistent is insensitive to the literary technique of narrative unreliability, and it undermines the efficacy of chunking in the first place. Ultimately, my point is that writing off *all* readings of impossible fictions which *do not* posit unreliability is excessive. It lacks sensitivity to the nuances of interpreting fiction. It does not reflect the way in which people read, think of and interpret fiction. This becomes increasingly apparent as a fiction grows in complexity—while short and simple impossible fictions seem amenable to the perspectival principle, longer and richer impossible fictions are more resistant. It is better for a Lewisian like Hanley to follow Bourne and Caddick Bourne in differentiating between fictional truth and truth to the story. This allows the Lewisian to accept the effective interpretations of *Looper* I have proposed.

3.4.3 Unreliability revisited: summary

It is a popular notion in analytic philosophy that unreliable narration accounts for the presence of absolute impossibilities in some fictions. This has been used in order to preserve Lewisian theories of fiction by claiming that impossible fictional truths are illusory—

³⁵ Other cases, such as Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, may be less susceptible to chunking. Hanley discusses several in the paper (2004: 122–125). These cases are rare enough to be exceptions to a general rule. Even so, Bourne and Caddick Bourne offer some extremely sophisticated accounts of chunking which accommodate complex impossible fictions like *Groundhog Day* and Haneke's *Funny Games*, so perhaps there is still hope for a chunking account of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016).

the narrator of these impossible fictions is unreliable, and this is why she misreports these fictional truths as impossible. I agree that some cases of impossible fiction are best interpreted as the product of an unreliable narrator. However, I disagree with the idea that this interpretation is universally applicable to impossible fictions, or that it is always the preferable interpretation. I also disagree with the idea that these unreliable readings are necessary in order to maintain a Lewisian account of fiction. Bourne and Caddick Bourne's distinction between fictional truth and truth to a story augments chunking the Lewisian's account to the point where heavy-handed treatments of impossible fiction as unreliable are unnecessary.

Work on normalisation in literary theory sheds light on how readers react to deviant and unusual fictions, including impossible fictions. The idea that readers draw on supplementary principles and strategies in order to make sense of impossible fictions is corroborated by work in the philosophy of language and in the philosophy of fiction. While normalisation is not a rigorous approach—it is highly subjective, and different readers may find different methods more effective for engaging with the same text—it is not arbitrary, and certain applications of the principles of normalisation can be rejected. I claim that Hanley's blanket approach of applying the perspectival principle to impossible fictions frequently results in such misplaced applications.

Yacobi's five principles of normalisation, along with Matravers's four strategies for reading impossible fiction, offer some insight into how readers engage with and respond to impossible fictions. Between Yacobi and Matravers, there are six unique principles under which reader responses to impossible fictions can be broadly grouped. They include the four justificatory principles: genetic, generic, existential and functional, as well as the two interpretive principles: perspectival and reconciliatory. This shows that readers respond to impossible fictions both in terms of the impressions they form (the interpretive principles) and the attitudes they hold to these impressions (the justificatory principles).³⁶

³⁶ While they are the only accounts I focus on in this thesis, Yacobi and Matravers do not between them exhaust the variety of principles readers might use to normalise fiction. There is extensive work on the idea of normalisation in structuralist and literary theory, varying under the name 'normalisation', 'naturalisation', 'recuperation', 'conventionalisation' and many others besides (Culler 1975: 137; Alber 2016: 47–57). Of particular note is the notion of *vraisemblance* developed by Tsvetan Todorov, which has heavily influenced the notion of interpreting fiction according to certain specific frames of reference (Culler 1975: 162; McHale 2005: 627). I have limited my investigation to Yacobi and Matravers for several reasons. First, they capture between them several key ways of normalising fiction—enough to compose a solid account of normalisation. Second, both deal explicitly with impossible and unnatural fiction rather than standard works of fiction, which reflects the goals and interests of this thesis. Third, both are far more accessible than other accounts. Todorov in

Which principle the reader uses to normalise a given impossible fiction depends on what that principle offers the coherence, consistency and rationality of the fiction in question. Of these three features, I argue that coherence is the most dominant. Readers are willing to engage with an inconsistent and irrational text provided that it is coherent in theme and tone. This is why not all impossible fictions are normalised by using the perspectival principle to interpret away impossible elements. In some cases, like *Looper*, absolute impossibilities contribute substantially to the overall coherence of the fiction. Appropriate interpretations must therefore preserve these impossibilities.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced an account of how readers respond to absolute impossibilities in fiction. I have done so by expanding on arguments by Matravers, Nolan and Hanley to show how and why readers posit unreliable narration. I have also shown alternative responses to impossible fiction, developed through an investigation of normalisation. The work of Yacobi, supplemented with Matravers, offers insight into the principles by which readers normalise fiction. These principles show why it is that certain works of impossible fiction resist being interpreted as unreliably narrated.

The next step is to investigate how versatile this concept of normalisation is. There are some works of fiction which seem extremely resistant to normalisation. The following chapter shows how even these more complex cases can be interpreted by average, non-specialist readers. Just as Basil says placidly in the heading quote from *The Club of Queer Trades*: fiction is always congenial to the human mind. I show just how flexible the human mind can be when it interprets impossible fiction.

particular is difficult to marry with the style and language of analytic philosophy, while the work of Yacobi and Matravers is easy to incorporate into my argument.

4. Complex Normalisation

Whatever is useful and necessary to man, lies level to his abilities, and is easily acquired; but whatever exceeds the common size, is always great, and always amazing.

- Longinus, *On the sublime*

4.1 Introduction

Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1965 *La Maison de Rendez-vous* (henceforth *Maison*) is a complex impossible fiction. Its narrative contains twisting contradictions and confusing repetitions. A reader must normalise the fiction (to interpret it in a way which the reader can understand, and which accounts for seemingly deviant elements of the text) in order to engage with it in any meaningful sense. As a postmodernist novel, there are compelling normalisations to be made of *Maison* using the generic or genetic principles (emphasising the genre conventions and historical circumstances which contribute to the unusual narrative). However, doing so requires specific expertise. An average reader cannot be expected to show understanding of and sensitivity to the conventions of French Postmodernism. Readers lacking this sort of expertise will not be able to normalise the fiction by these otherwise compelling methods. In fact, it is not clear at all how an average, non-expert reader can normalise fictions like *Maison*. Given that the previous chapter established normalisation as the primary way in which readers access, understand and enjoy impossible fiction, this poses a problem. Is a non-expert reader, one who has insufficient knowledge to draw on the generic and genetic principles, doomed to find *Maison* and impossible fictions like it completely inaccessible?

This chapter answers that question: no. *Maison* can be normalised by a non-expert reader. This reader may have an ill-informed understanding of Robbe-Grillet and the work of fiction itself, but this does not mean that her normalisation and ultimately her impressions of *Maison* must only be partial. The way in which this normalisation can proceed is not obvious. To help show how it can be done, I draw heavily on work by semiotician Umberto Eco. Eco suggests that there are two levels at which such fictions are appreciated: a first-level reading, which is confusing and frustrated; and a second-level reading, which critically reflects on how the first-level reading is brought about. In other words, Eco's argument is that readers can take a naive or a reflective approach when reading fictions like *Maison*. This, Eco claims, allows the reader to enjoy her 'logical and perceptual defeat', and to

appreciate the self-disclosing nature of the fiction (Eco 1994: 77). This chapter analyses Eco's argument, and suggests several ways of interpreting these cryptic claims.

I begin by giving a more detailed explanation of *Maison*, explaining its impossible elements. I observe that, despite its unintuitive structure and content, it is frequently well-received and garners positive reviews. In order to find an explanation for this, I introduce Eco's work on impossible fiction. I outline Eco's argument, including the key concept of the Model Reader. This argument shows that Eco considers impossible fictional worlds to be outside the realm of conceivability. Instead of conceiving of the fictional world as she would in standard cases of fiction, Eco thinks the reader has a two-level experience: one naive reading where the reader tries and fails to comprehend the impossible fiction, and another, critical reading where she reflects on the techniques and conventions which the impossible fiction draws upon and subverts. I register several disagreements with Eco, but decide that his second-level reading is, effectively, a method for normalising the fiction according to the functional principle.

Moving on to Eco's suggestion that a reader undergoes a logical and perceptual defeat, I suggest that the defeat in question is the reader's inability to intuitively understand the story of *Maison*. Regarding Eco's claim that this defeat is the source of pleasure, I draw an analogy between interpreting impossible fiction and solving puzzles. In both cases, the kind of pleasure available is a cathartic pleasure: the enjoyment of finally feeling able to rationalise that which was previously beyond understanding. When the reader recognises the source of her frustrated attempts to conceive of the fiction, she gains cathartic pleasure. I suggest that this image is plausible but unlikely to occur regularly. However, there are other reasons why logical and perceptual defeat may be pleasurable.

In the final section, I discuss two of these other reasons. One is the heightened attention to detail which a challenging fiction can force the reader to deploy. The other is the fact that some works play on a reader's ability to recognise when she cannot, and indeed is not supposed to fully engage with a fiction. These show why even unintuitive and normalisation-resistant fictions like *Maison* can be enjoyed by readers.³⁷

³⁷ This chapter makes frequent use of non-definite language: 'can', 'may', 'might', etc. This is not intended to weaken the argument: I argue that the behaviour I describe in this chapter really does take place. I refrain from definite language because readers are frequently idiosyncratic and difficult to generalise. One reader may think *Ulysses* is utterly inaccessible but beautifully written, another may think it is easily followed but sloppily communicated, a third might give up after two pages. It is not feasible to definitively capture the experience of all three readers in a single account, but it is possible to describe how a reader might reasonably behave.

4.2 Example: *La Maison de Rendez-vous*

Throughout this chapter, I return to a particular example of impossible fiction: Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de Rendez-vous*. This section gives an overview of *Maison's* plot and impossible elements. These are, respectively, convoluted and myriad. The novella regularly contradicts itself, shifts between scenes and moves from the main story to a story-within-a-story without any warning. I highlight the difficulty that a typical reader has in intuitively understanding and in normalising *Maison*. I also point out that this difficulty does not necessarily prevent a typical reader from enjoying the novella. In fact, the typical reader's inability to intuitively grasp the fiction can play a significant role in her enjoyment of the fiction.

Maison is about a murder which occurs during a Hong Kong aristocrat's party. The novella is written so that events make sense at the point they occur, but they are rendered impossible by things which happen earlier or later in the novel. For example, a dog is at once stuffed and still alive in the following:

[A mannequin bends her elbow] in order to control a big black dog with shiny fur walking in front of her.

The animal has been mounted with great skill. And were it not for its total immobility, its slightly overemphasised stiffness... one would think it was about to complete its interrupted movement... Strolling in front of the shop-window, the girl in the black sheath... continues walking with the same even gait past the buildings, holding on its taut leash the big dog with the shiny fur whose half-open mouth drools a little, then closes with a dry snap (Robbe-Grillet 1987: 133–135).

Each time the dog is mentioned, its features make sense. In the first instance, it is incredibly lifelike, but inanimate. In the second, it is alive enough to drool and close its mouth. However, when juxtaposed these two descriptions are inconsistent. Robbe-Grillet's use of the definite description 'the' heavily implies that the living dog and the stuffed dog are the same animal. This means that this dog is both alive and dead—an absolute impossibility. This is far from the only contradiction in the novel. William Ashline identifies another: Edouard Mannaret, the victim of the novel's murder plot, is killed but manages to speak to one character on the telephone and another in person after his death (Ashline 1995: 2). Just like the dog, Mannaret is alive in some scenes and dead in others, with no regard for continuity. Robbe-Grillet specialist Bruce Morrisette describes the process:

Johnson is pursued by the police because he has killed Mannaret, the money-lender; when he manages to evade the officers, Johnson... proceeds to the scene of the crime, but there “actually” kills Mannaret, and in the fashion already described by the police. This time there is no... solution, and, in fact, Mannaret (or his double, or triple) will die several times, and at various hands (Morrissette 1966: 822).

The story of *Maison* is full of temporal shifts. Johnson’s pursuit isn’t merely presented as occurring before he murders Mannaret; the murder actually *does* occur after the pursuit. These inconsistencies make *Maison* an impossible fiction. As the previous chapter claims, this means that readers will, under typical circumstances, attempt to normalise the fiction. *Maison* is interesting, however, because normalising it poses a challenge.

Some readers are well-equipped to normalise *Maison* according to the generic or genetic principles discussed in the last chapter (pp. 87-90). These well-informed readers are aware of Robbe-Grillet’s techniques, his preoccupation with the experimental *nouveau roman*, and of the stylisations of postmodern French literature. The frequent non-sequiturs and deviations contained in *Maison* can be correctly attributed to these genre quirks, or to Robbe-Grillet’s idiosyncratic approach of reinventing his style and subject with each work of fiction. Normalising *Maison* does not pose a significant challenge to these readers. However, while such readers represent a proportion of *Maison*’s readership, they do not exhaust it.

Not every reader is aware of the relevant genre conventions or biographical history, and consequently is unable to use them to normalise *Maison*. Not only this, but the convoluted impossibilities of the story are so extensive that the reader may have difficulty using alternative principles of normalisation. In particular, the perspectival principle seems poorly placed to help normalise the fiction: the aforementioned fluctuations in time make it difficult to see how the narrator could mislead the reader in any minor way. Instead, adopting the perspectival principle would involve rejecting almost all of the narrative, and claiming that most of the narration bears almost no resemblance to what should be taken as occurring in the story.

As a result of this inconsistency and irrationality, *Maison* undermines the standard methods readers use to engage with impossible fictions. Under typical circumstances, a reader has an easy, natural understanding of a fiction. This allows the reader to make complex inferences and predictions while forming her impressions. This includes low-level information, such as causation (Anna Karenina’s failed relationship with Vronsky was the reason for her suicide) and simple counterfactuals (if no train had been approaching, Anna would not have died when she threw herself on the tracks). In some cases, this also includes

more sophisticated processes. Such processes might include positing narrative unreliability, complex counterfactuals (If Anna and Vronsky had made any friends in Italy, their relationship would have been successful) and the ability to imagine the events of the fiction in close detail. These abilities are present in many impossible fictions as well.³⁸ In the case of *Maison*, however, these abilities are absent. The repeated contradictions and temporal inconsistencies make it difficult to follow the plot or understand the characters' motivations. The reader's impressions are constantly undermined by the unannounced changes in the narrative.

As a shorthand for this ability to intuitively comprehend a fiction, I follow Stephen Yablo in using the term 'grokking' (Yablo 2002: 485). To grok a concept is to understand it comfortably, intuitively and profoundly. The act of is what makes a difficult fiction grokkable to a reader. This is why very little normalisation is required for standard, possible fictions, but a great deal of normalisation is required for certain impossible fictions. While the competent reader of *Anna Karenina* is able to grok what she reads with little effort, the reader of *Maison* is not. Due to its inconsistencies and contradictions, the reader of *Maison* cannot, for example, make predictions or detailed inferences about the story. The information on which she bases her inferences is subject to revision and erasure by the shifting narrative. Inability to grok a fiction does not indicate a total lack of understanding; the reader is still able to form some kind of impression of the fiction. However, this impression will be sparse and uncertain. This means that the kind of imaginative engagement the reader has with *Maison* is qualitatively different to her easy, natural engagement with a fiction like *Anna Karenina*.

The inability to grok *Maison* can prevent the reader from enjoying the experience of reading the fiction in much the same way that it is difficult to enjoy a play performed in an unfamiliar language, or which one has only joined halfway through. However, it may also offer a unique kind of experience. Disliking *Maison* is not the only reasonable or even likely response to this challenging fiction. The novella has many positive reviews. Critical reviews describe *Maison* as 'poetic, amusing, captivating' ('La Maison de Rendez-vous & Djinn', n.d.). User reviews on Goodreads are widely positive ('La Maison de Rendez-vous', n.d.). These people all report enjoying *Maison*. I claim that this enjoyment is not in spite of the contradictions in the text. Instead, I argue that these contradictions are themselves a source

³⁸ Priest assumes this in his brief questionnaire in 'Sylvan's Box: A Short Story and Ten Morals', arguing that readers will not infer that the box was shot into space at the end of the fiction (1997: 579).

of enjoyment. The reader's inability to grok *Maison* can itself be a source of aesthetic pleasure.

To make this argument, I draw on work concerning the appreciation of fictions which challenge readers in this way. My primary source is Umberto Eco, who writes on the pleasures of impossible fiction in his 1990 *The Limits of Interpretation*. Eco claims that impossible fictions 'self-disclose'—highlight their own fictional nature (1994: 77). According to Eco, this self-disclosure means that there are two general experiences of the impossible fiction: one naive reading, where the reader is confused and disarmed by the fiction's impossible elements, and a higher-level reading where the reader appreciates the narrative techniques which brought about the naive reading. The following section provides the groundwork needed to properly understand Eco's claim.

4.3 Overview of Eco

This section provides a summary of Eco's comments on impossible fiction and the theoretical assumptions which drive them. As with Culler and Yacobi in the previous chapter, Eco draws on methodology and terminology from outside analytic aesthetics. My analysis therefore takes care to be sensitive to Eco while still indicating how his comments are relevant to an analytic account. I indicate which aspects of Eco's argument I see as informative contributions to my analysis of impossible fiction, and which I see as misguided or irrelevant. Eco's overall point is that the pleasure to be gained from impossible fiction is found either in recognising our own inability to conceive of the fiction, or from recognising the fiction's inability to describe impossible things. I disagree with this. I do, however, agree that both of these are potential sources of aesthetic pleasure for readers of impossible fiction, and understanding Eco's argument helps understand why this is the case.

In *The Limits of Interpretation*, Eco proposes an account of reader responses to impossible fictions. Eco establishes the existence of fictions which represent 'impossible possible worlds' (1994: 76). These worlds are 'self-voiding'—they establish a certain proposition as part of the fiction, but then contradict themselves and so void the original proposition (Eco 1994: 76). His account of how readers might enjoy these fictions is not clearly stated, as Eco's primary interest is not aesthetic pleasure but rather a study of fictional worlds more generally. However, I claim that it is possible to extract from Eco an argument which runs as follows:

E: the reader can gain pleasure from reading impossible fictions because her inability to conceive of the content of the text encourages a higher-level, critical reading.

Eco's account suggests how readers may respond to impossible fictions when many methods of normalisation are unavailable or undesirable. My goal is to reconstruct Eco's argument, expressing it in analytic terms, and confirm my interpretation of it. This requires close reading and analysis of Eco. However, it first requires clarification of a concept Eco develops in earlier work on semiotics: the 'Model Reader'.

To Eco, fiction-making is communicative. It is a process whereby information is encoded by an author, to be decoded by a reader. The Model Reader is the reader who can interpret the text in the way intended by the author (Eco 1984: 7).³⁹ The Model Reader has the ability to decode the expressions of the text in such a way that she finds the information which the author originally encoded. Different texts have different Model Readers—Eco suggests that linguistic codes (language and dialect), literary styles and particular 'specialization-indices' (jargon and other domain-specific language) featured in a text are factors which determine that text's Model Reader (Eco 1984: 7). This means that Model Readers only exist in relation to a particular text—there is no universal Model Reader. The Model Reader of Cervantes's original *Don Quixote* is Spanish-speaking and familiar with the tropes of chivalric romance. The Model Reader of *The Mote in God's Eye* is English-speaking, has read other works from the *CoDominium* series, and has some basic grounding in physics. There can also be multiple Model Readers for a single text, provided that the text has multiple equally appropriate interpretations (Eco 1994: 77). The concept has been entertained outside of semiotics—Eco's Model Reader is similar to Jerrold Levinson's notion of an ideally comprehending reader (Levinson 2006).⁴⁰ The significance of the Model Reader to Eco is that she is the only reader who can decode the author's expressions with total accuracy. This does not entail that she has complete knowledge of the text. The Model Reader of a devious mystery novel may not be able to solve the case of the murder (Eco 1994: 77). Rather, the mark of the Model Reader is that she will not interpret any expressions in a way which the author did not intend.

With the meaning of the term clarified, I can explain the significance of the Model Reader to Eco's work on impossible fiction. The relevant aspect of Eco's Model Reader is

³⁹ It is not clear exactly what kind of interpretation Eco is referring to. Going by the evidence provided in the rest of this paragraph, the most likely kind of interpretation at stake is the understanding of communicative utterances, just as the previous chapter discussed in the context of Culler.

⁴⁰ See DeMaria Jr. (1978) for a historical overview of the ideal reader.

the response she has when reading impossible fictions, as opposed to her response to standard, possible fictions. Eco claims that, typically, the Model Reader of a fiction is led to conceive of a world as part of reading the text (1994: 75).⁴¹ This does not pose a challenge in the case of standard, possible fictions. However, he argues that even a Model Reader is incapable of conceiving of the kind of world which an impossible fiction represents (Eco 1994: 76). She is therefore 'requested to display exaggeratedly generous flexibility' in her interpretation of impossible fiction (Eco 1994: 76). In other words, she must take certain elements of the story for granted rather than conceiving of them as she normally would. The fact that the Model Reader must alter her mode of engagement in this way shows that Eco thinks the interpretation of impossible fiction is fundamentally different to the interpretation of standard, possible fiction. The intended, ideal reader of a possible fiction conceives of the world which that fiction represents. The intended, ideal reader of an impossible fiction, however, does not conceive of the world which that impossible fiction represents. The notion that readers cannot conceive of the content of impossible fiction is interesting in its own right—it is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. However, the asymmetry found between the reader's engagement with possible fiction and with impossible fiction alone has a significant implication for the reader's experience.

The implication is that this reader's experience is impoverished. The reader of impossible fiction has a different experience than the ideal experience of standard fiction. The difference is that this reader has a reduced kind of engagement with the fiction. It does not involve conceiving of the fictional world, whereas engagement with standard fiction does. It is reasonable to suspect that the reduced engagement that the reader has with the fiction correspondingly reduces the pleasure which the reader gains from the experience. If it did not, then this reduced form of engagement would be appropriate for standard fiction as well. This implication can be illustrated by *Maison*. If even the Model Reader of *Maison* is unable to conceive of the bizarre world the novella represents, then a typical reader is unlikely to fare any better at conceiving of this world. Instead of engaging closely with the fiction by conceiving of its content, Eco thinks readers must take for granted that Mannaret is dead despite talking to other characters, or that the animate dog is in fact a statue.⁴² If

⁴¹ Since I have avoided discussion of the metaphysics of fiction, the idea of a fictional world has not featured heavily in this thesis. The closest analogue which features in this thesis is the idea of a story (as opposed to a fiction), and I interpret 'conceiving of a fictional world' along the lines of 'conceiving of a story'.

⁴² Compare this with learning new facts about the world. Learning that a cube is three metres wide is not a difficult fact to conceive of. However, learning that a cube is spherical is much more difficult to understand. Arguably, we have no meaningful conception of what it is like for a cube to be spherical. However, if given by a suitably reliable source, a person has no difficulty in taking

this less imaginatively rich way of reading a work of fiction is not ideal for standard cases, then it is reasonable to suppose it is, overall, a less desirable kind of engagement.

Eco, however, thinks readers of impossible fictions like *Maison* can still have an experience which is net positive. The experience of reading impossible fiction, he argues, has two distinct layers. The first is the 'illusion of a coherent world and the feeling of some inexplicable impossibility (Eco 1994: 77)'. This first-level reading is the experience a naive reader has when an impossible fiction partially conceals its own impossibility. The second layer is a critical experience which analyses 'the brilliant narrative strategy by which the first-level naive reader has been designed (Eco 1994: 77)'. This exercise grants the reader 'the pleasure of [her] logical and perceptual defeat (Eco 1994: 77)', and it grants this pleasure because she is unable to conceive of the world of the fiction. These quotations are not self-explanatory, and reading Eco leaves us with several questions. Why we should think that a first-level reader is under the illusion that an impossible fiction is consistent? In what sense is the reader logically and perceptually defeated? Why does the reader's logical and perceptual defeat grant pleasure? These quotations therefore require unpacking, and that is the task of the following sections.

4.4 First-level reading of impossible fiction

This section explains Eco's account of first-level reading of impossible fiction. This, according to Eco, is the reading which gives the reader the 'illusion of a coherent world and the feeling of some inexplicable impossibility (1994: 77)'. I cover Eco's general description of how impossible fiction is read at this level, which includes a comparison to viewing impossible images. I identify exactly what Eco means by the 'illusion of a coherent world', as well as the sense of 'inexplicable impossibility'. However, I have several criticisms of Eco's account, all around the same theme: while it may describe the Model Reader's experience, it does not reflect the general experience of reading impossible fiction.

Eco's notion of first-level reading should not be confused with first-*time* reading. Rather, it refers to a naive approach to reading fiction. However, in order to understand the first-level reading impossible fiction, we must first understand how Eco thinks the reader

unintuitive information for granted, even if she has no conception of how that information could be actualised. One can take for granted that birds see more colours than humans, even if one has no concept of what seeing more colours would be like. Similarly, a reader can take for granted that, in *Maison*, Mannaret is both alive and dead without having any clear concept of a living dead person.

responds to impossible fiction. Eco compares reading an impossible fiction to studying a picture which depicts a geometrically impossible object, such as the work of Penrose or Escher. He labels these 'visual instances' of impossible possible worlds (1994: 77). These are pictures which might appear superficially possible, but with closer scrutiny demonstrate an impossibility. Take the Penrose triangle (illus. 3). Comparing each of the three corners of the triangle, it is apparent that the triangle is impossible. It bends back on itself in a way which is not permitted by geometry. Each angle is individually possible but taken together as one shape they result in an impossible whole. It is easy to notice this, since we can view the entire shape at once. This point is important when comparing visual impossibilities with what Eco calls 'verbal' impossibilities.



Illus. 3: Penrose triangle

To Eco, a verbal text is a fiction communicated using words, rather than a single image. This category includes most forms of narrative fiction.⁴³ Verbal texts can represent impossibilities, but in a different way to visual texts. This difference is due to the extended nature of verbal texts. While the reader can view the entirety of a visual text in one instant, a verbal text is viewed in sequence. This means that, while the impossible elements of a visual text can be immediately identified, a Model Reader identifies a verbal text as impossible over time. The reader must use her long- and short-term memory to detect contradictions in the text (Eco 1994: 78), as she cannot immediately compare two aspects

⁴³ Eco does not make it clear whether he considers moving image to be a verbal or visual text. Given his comments, discussed shortly, about the extension of verbal texts through time, I am inclined to think that moving image counts as a verbal text.

of the text to check for consistency. The verbal text might maintain the facade of consistency for a long time before its inconsistency is noticed, if the inconsistency is ever noticed at all. This is what Eco means when he writes that an impossible fiction gives an illusion of coherency (1994: 77). The impossible elements of verbal texts require the use of memory to identify, and until the impossible element is recognised, the fiction appears, illusorily, to be consistent. This answers the first of the questions listed at the end of the previous section. The reader is under the illusion that the fiction is possible for at least part of the time that she reads it, because the impossible elements of the fiction only become apparent over time.

I do not find this picture of first-level reading convincing. As a counterexample to Eco's argument, a reader can already be aware that a fiction is impossible before she begins to read it. Such a reader is never under the illusion that the fiction is possible. This reader is not a Model Reader—her experience is based on information gained from outside the text itself, not from her ability to appropriately interpret the text. Perhaps Eco is content to ignore this reader's experience and focus on how readers engage with impossible fiction in ideal circumstances. However, this non-Model Reader shows that Eco's portrait does not represent the actual experience of many readers. His description of the first-level experience of reading impossible fiction is, consequently, not particularly enlightening when analysing what readers *actually* tend to experience.

I also disagree with Eco's distinction between visual and verbal texts—that impossible elements of visual texts are immediately apparent, whereas impossible elements of verbal texts require the reader's faculty of memory. The case of *Sylvan's Box* shows that some verbal texts require almost no memory at all. Instead, these texts are upfront about their own inconsistencies, and will often draw attention to them. Some visual impossibilities, on the other hand, may be so intricate or so large-scale that a keen memory is required to notice their inconsistencies. Imagine, instead of a Penrose triangle, a Penrose chiliagon. It would take careful inspection, as well as the faculties of memory and imagination, to notice that the one thousand-sided shape is impossible. However, in general I take Eco's point—verbal texts have a tendency to draw upon these faculties to a greater degree than visual texts. They are more likely to give a reader the illusion that they are possible.

One realistic, representative sense in which readers may be under the illusion that an impossible fiction is possible is in the event that the reader does not notice the impossible elements of a verbal text. Eco argues that some texts seem possible despite being fundamentally impossible. His example is *Back to the Future*, which avoids drawing attention to its temporal paradoxes by focussing its narrative on the immediate experiences

of Marty McFly (Eco 1994: 79). Another example can be found in *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, where Grandma Georgina is accidentally de-aged to minus two years old. The absolute impossibility of Grandma Georgina being de-aged to minus numbers is not the focus of the narrative—instead, it is the dangerous expedition to rescue her from ‘Minusland’ which demands the reader’s attention. In the cases of *Back to the Future* and *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, it would hardly be surprising if the average reader never noticed any impossibilities at all.

In such a case, it is unlikely that the reader would have a sense of an ‘inexplicable impossibility’ as Eco claims. If she has not noticed any impossibilities at all, then she will simply assume that she is reading a standard fiction. It is only in a specific case that the reader can have such a sense: one where she recognises that the fiction is impossible but does not understand which aspect of the fiction makes it impossible.⁴⁴ I consider the case where the reader notices no impossibilities at all more likely state of affairs than the case of inexplicable impossibility Eco describes. For a reader to possess the sense of inexplicable impossibility that Eco describes, she must be able to recognise that a fiction is not possible without necessarily understanding which element of the fiction is impossible.

Charitably speaking, *Maison* could be considered an example of this sort of fiction. While ‘Sylvan’s Box’ draws attention to the exact nature of its impossible elements, *Maison* does not. It represents events which clearly contradict one another, but it is difficult to escape a sense of ambiguity in the content of the fiction. Lubomír Doležel observes that the world of *Maison* is ‘tentative, unfinished, crumbling into a sequence of frustrated events (Doležel 1998: 165).’ *Maison*’s narrative is not definitive; it could be several conflicting narratives or a single impossible narrative. It is difficult for the reader to get a firm grasp on what actually occurs in *Maison* because she cannot easily tell whether some elements of the story should be interpreted non-literally. This means that, despite the reader’s strong sense that something impossible is taking place in *Maison*, it is difficult for her to pin down a precise reason why the fiction is impossible. This is how, as Eco claims, a reader can have a sense of inexplicable impossibility during a first-level reading.

⁴⁴ Failure to fully understand a fiction could also occur in some situations where impossibilities are not involved. There are some circumstances of which a reader could not conceive due to ignorance. A fictional depiction of synaesthesia, for example, might be so alien to a reader as to be inconceivable. If so, it might be the case that the pleasure Eco describes is a feature of reading impossible fictions, but not uniquely so.

While *Maison* bears out some of Eco's claims, I am sceptical about the idea that Eco accurately portrays the experience of real readers.⁴⁵ The contrast between *Maison* and 'Sylvan's Box' shows this: while the former may produce some sense of inexplicable impossibility, the latter makes it extremely clear to the reader precisely which aspect of the fiction is impossible. Many impossible fictions take the same approach as 'Sylvan's Box'. They are upfront about their own impossibility, and deliberately call the reader's attention to their impossible elements. Other impossible fictions, like *Back to the Future* and *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, are impossible in a way which a typical reader does not notice or is not sufficiently informed to realise is impossible. In these cases, the reader has no sense of impossibility at all. Both of these scenarios go against Eco's claim that first-level readers of impossible fictions have a sense of imperceptible impossibility. Accordingly, I do not find Eco's comments on first-level readers convincing.

Generally, I do not think that Eco's description of the first-level reader fairly represents the naive experience of impossible fiction. On the other hand, Eco's arguments about second-level readers of impossible fiction are interesting, and I do not think that the problems with his picture of first-level readers interfere with these arguments. I explain why this is the case in the following section.

4.5 Second-level reading of impossible fiction

This section explains Eco's second-level reading of impossible fiction. I also explain why, although the second-level reading is not exclusive to impossible fiction, Eco sees impossible fiction as particularly conducive to second-level reading. I introduce Lubomír Doležel's analysis of *Maison* and show how it relates to Eco's arguments. I show that both Doležel and Eco's positions on second-level reading are kinds of normalisation. This normalisation proceeds according to the functional principle, as outlined in the previous chapter. I explain why it is that the functional principle works so well for *Maison*, and why Eco's model of second-level reading is not so well supported by other kinds of impossible fiction.

Eco characterises the second-level reading of impossible fiction as the reader's ability to critically analyse a text, and in doing so 'enjoy... the brilliant narrative strategy by which the first-level, naive reader was designed (1994: 55).' This reader appreciates the construction of the text itself rather than the narrative which that text contains. Note that this type of reading can be performed with all kinds of different fictions, not only with impossible

⁴⁵ Although, in fairness to Eco, this is not his primary objective.

fictions. Take most mystery novels: the first-level reader falls for red herrings and suspects the innocent character; the second-level reader appreciates how the author brings that first-level reader to do so (Eco 1994: 55). Regardless of what the first-level reader's experience actually was, the second-level reader critically reflects on how the fiction managed to bring about this experience.

Like the first-level reading, second-level reading should not be confused with 'reading for the second time'. Second-level reading of impossible fiction involves an appreciation of the devices used to bring about the experience of the first-level reader. The second-level reading is a critical interpretation rather than a semantic interpretation: the second-level reader is interested in the effect the fiction has on her rather than the meaning of the fiction itself (Eco 1994: 77). This sort of reading can be performed during a first-time reading of a fiction, and readers are capable of switching between first- and second-level reading on the fly.

There are two observations to make of this second-level reading. The first is that this second-level reading can apply to impossible fictions which do not give the reader a sense of incomprehensible impossibility, the first-level reading experience which Eco describes. This means that the previous section's criticisms of Eco's account of the first-level reading of impossible fiction do not directly affect the second-level experience. My second observation is that this second-level experience is, ultimately, a principled way of approaching normalisation. More specifically, I claim that second-level reading falls within the domain of normalisation by the functional principle (more on this later). I argue this shows that general readers *are* equipped to normalise even complex impossible fictions like *Maison*.

In the previous section, I argued that Eco's portrayal of the first-level experience of impossible fiction—a sense of inexplicable impossibility—is unconvincing. However, the sense of inexplicable impossibility is not the only viable target of the second-level reader's critical analysis. The second-level reader may also appreciate how the impossible element confuses the first-level reader, or how the impossible elements were revealed to the reader. The second-level reader may admire the language used to communicate the impossible elements of the fiction, or the way in which the fiction remains engrossing despite its bizarre inconsistencies. There is no reason to suppose that *only* the sense of incomprehensible impossibility is a valid target of the second-level reader's appreciation. The second-level reader may find many other things to admire about the effect the fiction has on the first-level reader.

Eco considers impossible fiction to be particularly conducive to second-level appreciation, and in this regard is supported by Doležel (Doležel 1998: 164–166; Eco 1994: 77). This is because both Eco and Doležel see impossible fiction as a member of a wider class of ‘self-disclosing’ fictions. These are fictions which call attention to their own fictional nature. This is fiction ‘flaunting its hidden foundations’, to use Doležel’s phrase (1998: 162). By doing so, the fiction invites a critical analysis rather than a naive analysis. It encourages a reading which focusses on the fiction’s use of conventions rather than on the story which arises from that usage. The same thing happens upon viewing a Penrose triangle. Rather than appreciating the shape primarily as an artistic object, the viewer tends to appreciate it primarily as a clever depiction of an object which cannot really exist. The reader of impossible fiction who recognises the impossibilities represented is likely to appreciate it as a fiction which *attempts* to represent impossibilia rather than one which actually represents the impossible. So claims Doležel of *Maison*, arguing that the aesthetic achievement of Robbe-Grillet’s novel is that it ‘reconfirms the ultimate impossibility of constructing a fictionally authentic impossible world (1988: 493).’

In light of my previous chapter, Doležel’s comments here are highly reminiscent of Yacobi’s functional principle. This is the principle by which readers justify the presence of deviant elements in the text by considering their function. If they play a role in the text’s formal or aesthetic properties, then the reader can proceed with certainty that the deviant elements are justified (see p. 91 for further discussion). Doležel’s functional normalisation of *Maison* works by considering the function of the impossible elements of the novella. In the case of *Maison*, the function of the impossible elements is to encourage the reader to perform a second-level analysis of the fiction. Eco offers a similar approach of functional normalisation for impossible fiction, explaining that the reader can gain pleasure from a text which ‘speaks of its own inability to describe *impossibilia* (1994: 77)’. Given that the text ‘speaks’ of its inability by inviting the reader to perform a second-level reading, Eco’s analysis here is extremely similar to Doležel’s. For both Eco and Doležel, a reader can enjoy impossible fiction by performing a second-level reading. I claim that this reading falls within the domain of the functional principle of normalisation.

I do not disagree with Eco and Doležel that this is a way in which readers might enjoy an impossible fiction. However, I have a similar disagreement with Doležel’s characterisation of reading impossible fiction as I have with Hanley’s (see pp. 67–69). Like Hanley, Doležel effectively claims that fictions cannot represent absolute impossibilities. Rather than interpreting absolute impossibilities as part of the narrative, both Hanley and Doležel claim that readers must draw on a different principle to correctly interpret the text. By focussing the discussion on the nature of fictional worlds rather than stories, Doležel

unnecessarily limits the ways in which a reader might interpret *Maison*. Where Hanley focusses excessively on the perspectival principle of normalisation, I argue that Doležel focusses excessively on the functional principle. It is worth noting that Doležel is not as prescriptive about his normalisation of impossible fiction as Hanley, as he does not argue that there is only one viable interpretation of an impossible fiction. However, I see Doležel's functional normalisation as particularly applicable to *Maison* and less applicable to other cases of impossible fiction.

This sort of functional reading is less effective when applied to fictions which are impossible in a less systematic way. Returning to the example of *Ravenor* from last chapter helps show this (see p. 90–91). The impossible element of *Ravenor*, the alternate warp dimension, is a major part of the fiction's *setting*, but a very minor part of the fiction's *plot*. Performing a second-level reading of *Ravenor* may be enjoyable and enlightening, but the novel itself does not question the foundations of fiction-making in the same way that *Maison* attempts. Interpreting the impossible warp dimension as a tool to encourage a second-level reading would be misguided. As established in the previous chapter, I consider the better normalisation of *Ravenor* to be an existential normalisation (or, to Matravers, a 'weird world' strategy): the reader normalises the impossible elements of the fiction by recognising how they differentiate the world of *Ravenor* from her own world. This shows that Doležel and Eco are overzealous—a fiction can contain impossible elements without necessarily making a comment on the nature of fiction-making or the hidden conventions of fiction. It is not the case that second-level reading is always an appropriate way of engaging with impossible fiction.

As is also established by the previous chapter, the fact that second-level reading gives the reader a way of normalising impossible fiction does not guarantee that the reader will successfully normalise the fiction, or that she will enjoy the fiction as a result. Attempts to conduct a second-level reading may fail. Conducting a second-level reading may only reveal that there is not much to be gained from critical approach to the fiction. Whether or not a second-level reading *does* normalise the fiction, there is no guarantee that aesthetic pleasure will be part of the outcome. Some impossible fictions are simply *bad works of fiction*, aesthetically speaking. Some readers are simply aesthetically insensitive readers. A fiction must be of suitable quality to aesthetically reward a second-level reading, and a reader must be capable of appreciating this quality in order to benefit from the reading. If both of these factors are in place, then conducting a second-level reading can increase the enjoyment the reader gains from the fiction.

I argue that Eco's second-level reading of impossible fiction is an example of functionally normalising a fiction. This is a particularly appropriate way of normalising *Maison*, as it does not require the specialist knowledge mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. This is a significant contribution by Eco to my investigation of how readers access and enjoy impossible fiction, but it does not exhaust Eco's contribution. The last aspect of his work on impossible fiction to investigate is the notion that readers can gain pleasure from the fact that they are logically and perceptually defeated by a work of impossible fiction. What precisely this means is the topic of the next section.

4.6 Logical and perceptual defeat

This section investigates Eco's claim that readers gain pleasure from their logical and perceptual defeat. I begin by clarifying exactly what Eco means by this defeat—the reader's inability to conceive of an impossible fictional world. I am in favour of the idea that readers can, to some extent, conceive of absolute impossibilities, so I offer a different suggestion. I argue that, instead of being unable to conceive of impossible fictional worlds at all, readers are unable to conceive of impossible fictional worlds with the same intuitive ease as they can possible fictional worlds. Readers cannot grok impossible fictions, and this changes the nature of their engagement with them. This is still a defeat, but in a weaker sense than Eco's original claim.

Eco writes that the reader is logically and perceptually defeated. Which endeavour has the reader been defeated in? Given Eco's comments, the most reasonable answer is that the reader fails to conceive of an impossible world (Eco 1994: 76). According to Eco, readers endeavour to conceive of the world represented by a fiction. However, Eco claims that in the case of impossible fiction this effort is interrupted. The Model Reader is not capable of conceiving of the world represented by an impossible fiction, and so is defeated in the effort to do so (Eco 1994: 76). This does not imply that the reader cannot access or enjoy the fiction at all. The notion of defeat is with regards to the attempt to conceive of the fiction. A reader who is defeated in the attempt to conceive of a fiction may still develop an appropriate impression, and she may find the experience stimulating or pleasurable. In this context, then, the terms 'defeat' and 'failure' are not pejorative or dismissive. Instead they refer exclusively to this inability to conceive of the fictional world.

It is not clear whether Eco is correct to claim that a reader cannot conceive of what is represented by an impossible fiction. While the received wisdom in analytic philosophy is that the absolutely impossible is inconceivable, Gendler and Stock both argue that readers

can, to a degree, conceive of impossible fictional worlds (Gendler 2000; Stock 2017). This question is developed further in the next chapter. However, I argue that even if readers do conceive of impossible fictional worlds while reading impossible fiction, they do so differently to how readers conceive of possible fictional worlds. I return to the notion of grokking a fiction: while readers can grok a possible fiction (and perhaps impossible fictions which conceal their impossibilities), they cannot grok recognisably impossible fictions. I take it that conceiving of a grokkable concept is phenomenally different to conceiving of a non-grokkable concept. A reader may be able to conceive of a box which is empty and has something in it, but she cannot do so with the same intuitive ease as she can conceive of an empty box. This means there are two claims to be made about the reader of impossible fictions: a stronger claim and a weaker claim. Eco's strong claim is that readers are unable to conceive of impossible fictional worlds, and so are defeated in their attempts to do so. My weaker claim is that readers are unable to grok fictions which they recognise to be impossible, and so they are defeated in their attempts to conceive of impossible fictions as they would possible fictions.

Maison vindicates my weak claim, but Eco's arguments are important for showing why this is the case. In particular, Eco's claim that memory plays a key role in identifying impossible fiction is borne out. This is because the reader of *Maison* is required to keep track of the statements made about various characters, places and events if she is to recognise the contradictions thrown up by the fiction. *Maison* is difficult to follow—the narrative moves fluidly from scene to scene, without exposition or explanation. Doležel describes it as 'a sequence of *drafts*, with recurring cuts, new beginnings, corrections, deletions, additions etc. (1988: 493, Doležel's italics).' If she does not maintain focus, the reader is likely to be confused by these shuffled, unfinished or corrected lines of narrative. Only the attentive reader (which includes but is not limited to Eco's Model Reader), one who keeps track of the events of the novel, will recognise exactly which elements contradict other parts of the story. However, it is this attentive reader who is best positioned to recognise that she cannot grok the fiction. The inferences which a reader is usually able to draw from fictions are not so easily drawn from *Maison*, as the novel does not follow the logical laws which these inferences are built upon. A typical inference such as 'Mannaret is talking to the police, therefore Mannaret is alive', taken for granted in other works of fiction, cannot be made of *Maison*. If inferences such as this are part of the conception readers usually form of fictions (which I think they are), then *Maison* cannot be conceived of in the same way as works of possible fiction.

Whether Eco is correct or not about the reader's ability to conceive of an impossible fictional world, the reader has been defeated. She recognises that her original goal,

engaging with *Maison* as she would a standard fiction, cannot be attained. In the following chapter, I partially retract the claim that readers cannot engage with impossible fictions as they do possible fictions (§5.5). I discuss cases where readers are able to do just that. However, for the purposes of this section, it is sufficient to say that *Maison* is not one of these cases. It is labyrinthine enough that the reader is very likely to be defeated in her attempt to conceive of *Maison* as she would a standard fiction. This defeat may occur quickly, or she may spend a considerable amount of time attempting to grok the fiction. However, the notion of defeat is important, as it is only when she stops trying to interpret the impossible fiction as she would a possible fiction that the reader is able to begin normalisation.

4.7 Frustration and catharsis

I have characterised the reader's defeat. What remains to be seen is why Eco claims this defeat can be pleasurable. I draw an analogy between Eco's portrait of reading impossible fiction and solving a puzzle. In both cases, the reader builds up frustration as she struggles to find a solution. For the puzzle, this solution is the answer to the puzzle. For Eco's account of impossible fiction, the solution is the realisation of why the fiction eludes intuitive understanding. In puzzles, the discovery of a solution brings a sense of cathartic pleasure. Perhaps a similar cathartic pleasure is available for Eco's reader. I characterise this cathartic pleasure, but argue that, like Eco's first-level reading of impossible fiction, it is not widely experienced by real readers.

The process of reading impossible fiction which Eco describes is extremely similar to existing accounts of puzzle-solving. When discussing impossible fiction, Eco describes a 'linear and temporally ordered... scanning' which is part of the process of making a 'global analysis... that requires an interplay of long- and short-term memory (1994: 78).' This description of the reader's actions is similar to the description of the actions of puzzle-solvers. In their psychological description of problem solving, David Hambrick & Randall Engle describe the Tower of Hanoi, a classic example of a puzzle. They claim that:

Discovery of a solution [to the Tower of Hanoi] may depend on the ability to activate information from multiple, unsuccessful solution attempts, and to maintain that activation until the information is integrated... working memory is a fundamental determinant of proficiency in a wide range of tasks (Hambrick and Engle 2003: 179–180).

To solve the Tower of Hanoi the solver must use her memory to synthesise information gained from failed attempts to solve the puzzle. This information guides her future attempts by helping her avoid making the mistakes which led to failure.

As Eco describes impossible fictions, they also have a 'solution'—the identification of which aspect makes them absolutely impossible. For the Penrose triangle, this is the combination of angles in the corners of the triangle. For *Back to the Future* and *Looper*, it is the paradoxes included in the story. In both Eco's account of impossible fiction and Hambrick & Engle's account of puzzles, solutions are discovered through the faculty of memory. If both the puzzler and the reader are drawing on the same faculty when engaging with their respective media, investigating the experience of the puzzler may shed some light on the experience of the reader. This is why the comparison to the process of solving puzzles is helpful for the discussion of impossible fiction.

Both attempting to solve a puzzle and attempting to normalise an impossible fiction can be frustrating. Marcel Danesi describes a build-up of suspense in the process of solving a puzzle (2002: 226–227). The same goes for the reader, who must draw on her memory and interpretive skills to try and make sense of the fiction she is reading. Just as a puzzle-solver does not embark on a puzzle which she knows has no solution, a reader does not try to make sense of a fiction unless she thinks there is a sensible interpretation available. Correspondingly, just as the puzzler's frustration is based on the thought that she *could* solve the puzzle but has failed to do so, the reader's frustration is born of an *expectation* that the text can be successfully interpreted which is not met.

Eco agrees with this overall picture of the reader's defeat. He claims that the reader's objective is to find the meaning of the text (Eco 1994: 77). To Eco, this is a process of interpreting the text in such a way that the reader can understand it. To other theorists, this may be seen as a different process, such as recovering the intentions of the author. In either case, the goal is a specific interpretation of the text—usually one which is rational and consistent. The obstacle to this process is the fact that the text is impossible: there is no easy way of interpreting the impossible elements. This prevents the reader from interpreting the text in the way she normally would.

The reader therefore develops a feeling of suspense and frustration. Typically, frustration is replaced by pleasure when the source of frustration is finally overcome. This is the pleasure associated with puzzles. Danesi describes how puzzles cause a feeling of suspense and anxiety in their audience (2002: 2). This feeling of suspense grows as the reader attempts to solve the puzzle. It is only when the puzzle is solved that the reader achieves a 'mental catharsis', and with it relief from the suspense (Danesi 2002: 2). To

Danesi, this suspense is a key part of a puzzle's appeal (2002: 226–227). A good puzzle is one which builds up anxiety and, presumably, though Danesi does not specify this, releases this anxiety when the reader finds a solution. A puzzle is too easy if we manage to solve it before any frustration builds up. A puzzle is too hard if we are unable to find a solution which allows the frustration to be released.

A reader who successfully normalises an impossible fiction feels a similar moment of catharsis to the puzzle-solver: a moment where the information they have been collating finally makes sense. This catharsis is the result of the reader feeling that she finally understands the fiction. In the case of *Maison*, the reader who draws on a functional normalisation like those of Eco and Doležel may feel as though she has finally put her finger on why exactly the unusual elements of the fiction are present. This achieves her goal—making sense of the fiction—in a manner which cathartically dispels her frustration with the confusing narrative of *Maison*. I argue that this catharsis can be an enjoyable aspect of successfully normalising an impossible fiction, just as it is for solving a puzzle. This catharsis is a result of the building frustration which accompanies the efforts to engage with an impossible fiction like *Maison*. It is not an Aristotelian catharsis—the exorcism of pity and fear. It is a less technical sense of the term: the purgation of negative emotions in general.

This corresponds with Eco's notion of the pleasure of logical and perceptual defeat. When the reader accepts that she cannot conceive of the fiction in the standard way, she admits defeat in her original objective. Accepting our defeat in the effort to grok the fiction and instead adopting a principle of normalisation can be cathartically pleasurable. Danesi claims that a pleasurable, cathartic release is created by the discovery of a solution to a puzzle. I argue that this release is analogous to the discovery of a method for reading the impossible fiction which makes that fiction seem coherent. This model also shows why failing to normalise fiction can result in a frustrating reading experience. A reader who cannot normalise *Maison* is doomed to simply fail in her effort to grok the fiction. There is no moment of cathartic release, and so this reader's experience is likely to be strongly negative.

I argue that the logical and perceptual defeat to which Eco refers is best understood as the reader's inability to conceive of the fiction as she would normally. This can be pleasurable, as the cathartic sense of release from frustration has been earned by the hard work of repeatedly failing to grok the text. Eco takes a stronger position and claims that the reader cannot conceive of the world of *Maison* at all, but this is still compatible with the model of catharsis which I have described in this section.

This sense of cathartic release is not available to every reader of impossible fiction. It is only available to those who recognise or strongly suspect that a fiction is impossible but cannot place the exact reason for this impossibility. As I previously explained in my criticism of Eco, I do not think that many readers have this experience. Readers are often aware prior to or early on in reading a fiction that it is impossible. Consequently, while I agree that some readers may gain this sense of catharsis, a great many will not. This does not mean that these other readers are doomed to a negative experience. In the following section I argue that there are other reasons why a reader can find her logical and perceptual defeat pleasurable.

4.8 The pleasure and frustration of defeat

In the previous section, I argue that there is a sense of catharsis available to readers who are frustrated and ultimately defeated by impossible fictions. However, I do not think that catharsis is the only reason why defeat can enrich the reader's experience of a fiction. *Maison* and fictions like it are frustrating because they challenge the reader's typical ways of engaging with fiction. One tactic for identifying the pleasurable elements of frustration is therefore to seek other instances where typical reader behaviour is challenged, and to note which features of these sponsor aesthetic enjoyment. In this section, I propose two other reasons why being defeated may enhance the reader's experience. The first is the fact that readers, when challenged by a fiction, may respond by taking greater care in their reading. I show how this proceeds in cases of non-impossible fiction, and I argue that impossible fictions fulfil the same conditions. I also show how certain fictions require their reader to recognise her inability to fully access their content, and why this can enhance that reader's enjoyment of the fiction.

One way in which fiction commonly challenges typical reader behaviour is when it does not contain a definitive answer to a major question raised by the plot. This expectation is played with in fictions which contain pivotal indeterminacies. While every fiction contains indeterminacies to some extent (every statement which is not confirmed or denied by the fiction can be considered indeterminate), some works of fiction contain indeterminacies which are central to the plot. Take, for example, Akira Kurosawa's 1950 *Rashomon*. In this film, the murder of a samurai is recounted by four different witnesses in four different ways. None of the four stories are given weight over another, and each witness is motivated to tell the story in such a way that their own part in the murder is diminished. As a result, the

reader is unable to definitively state what the fictional truth of the story is. The reader must accept that there is no knowable answer. Yet despite this, readers of indeterminate fiction can derive enjoyment. I claim that this enjoyment can stem from a consequence of the fictional indeterminacy: close attention to the fiction.

Works of fiction which contain indeterminacies are often best when read closely. As readers, we expect answers—if they are not forthcoming, we search for them. Readers who are confused by impossible fictions like *Maison* search for a cure for their unease, just as readers of indeterminate fiction search for clues as to which of the potential interpretations is most appropriate. Searching for answers is, in both cases, performed by closely analysing the text. The reader looks for clues which may have otherwise passed her by, taking increased time and using increased concentration when reading the text. She may make more of an effort to vividly imagine the contents of the text, or she may deploy her critical faculties in a more directed manner—testing out whether a particular interpretation is consistent with the rest of the text, for example. This investigation has a side effect: the reader develops a closer engagement with the text. She dedicates her attention to it, giving her a deeper, richer experience. Provided that the text itself is high-quality enough to withstand this level of analysis, the reader may find that she enjoys it more by virtue of having paid it such close attention. She may notice turns of phrase, beautiful imagery or a pattern of themes which would otherwise have gone unnoticed. She therefore gains more pleasure as a result of the close engagement which the indeterminacy or impossibility forced her to undergo. This is one way in which frustration with a text may transform into enjoyment—a prolonged, more intense exposure to the text may result in a more nuanced, and hence more pleasurable experience.⁴⁶

Another reason why the reader may enjoy her defeat is found in work on epistemic inaccessibility. Guy Sircello, in his analysis of the sublime, discusses the notion of epistemic transcendence (1993: 542–543). This refers to the reader's realisation that she is unable to access the true nature of what is depicted, despite her drive to do so. In the case of the sublime, the reader has no epistemic access to the overwhelming power or majesty of the sublime phenomenon. Perhaps something similar could be said for absolute impossibilities: we are struck by their sheer oddity and our inability to comprehend their true nature. However, there is a more intuitive reason why the epistemic inaccessibility of impossible fiction can be aesthetically pleasing. Impossible fictions can toy not only with the fact that

⁴⁶ To be absolutely clear, this kind of enjoyment is only possible if the text itself is worth engaging with closely in the first place. Artistically poor works of fiction will not offer such a pleasant experience during close engagement.

the reader cannot epistemically access the content of the fiction, but also with the possibility that the reader *recognises* this inability.

One effect that this can achieve is easily demonstrated: humour. Take Charles Addams's cartoon 'The Skier' (illus. 4). The tracks left by the disappearing skier suggest a route passing straight through the tree, but the reader recognises that this cannot be what has happened. The cartoon is funny because the reader recognises that, no matter how she reasons, she will never be able to come up with a satisfying explanation of how the skier's tracks skirt the tree. Arthur Danto agrees. In his analysis of the cartoon, he observes that the reader's recognition of the cartoon's impossibility is an essential aspect of her enjoyment of the cartoon (Danto 1989: 334).⁴⁷ The cartoon is not funny if she does not realise that there is no explanation available to her. Instead, it is mystifying.



Illus. 4: The Skier (Addams 1940)

Frustration is compounded if the reader does not realise the futility of trying to access the fiction. A real-world example of this is also found in cartoons. Gary Larson's *The Far Side* cartoon 'Cow Tools' generated perplexed fan mail when readers attempted to decipher

⁴⁷ While Danto thinks that Addams's cartoon is impossible, he appears to mean the term in a weaker sense than I use in this thesis. A variety of circumstances would render the cartoon possible—that the tree or skier is a hologram, or that the skier is playing a trick on the other man. I do not consider Addams's cartoon an impossible fiction, but rather a useful example of the kind of pleasure to which I refer.

its meaning. Larson had intended the cartoon as simply ridiculous—a cow proudly displaying a collection of random tools—but readers were convinced that they were missing the punchline (Larson 1992: 156–157). They were defeated in their attempts to grok ‘Cow Tools’, but they were not able to gain any pleasure from this defeat. This is because, unlike readers of ‘The Skier’, readers of ‘Cow Tools’ did not recognise that the cartoon was deliberately inaccessible.

This section has suggested two further ways in which the inability to grok a fiction may contribute to a pleasurable aesthetic experience rather than detracting from it. These suggestions are not exhaustive, and there are likely many reasons why impossible fictions are enjoyable despite their inaccessibility. However, these two are sufficient to demonstrate my original point: despite the technical knowledge needed to normalise *Maison* and fictions like it by the genetic and generic principles, there are still ways in which a typical reader can normalise the fiction. Recognising the functional role of impossible elements is perhaps the most significant way of doing so. Even if this is not done, the fiction’s inaccessibility can prompt the reader to read more carefully and thoroughly. In this case, though the reader does not normalise the impossible fiction, it is still possible for her to enjoy the craft of the author.

4.9 Conclusion

Maison can provide an aesthetically pleasurable experience, and part of what gives it this quality is its frequent use of impossibility. It uses impossibility to challenge the reader, demanding that she abandon traditional methods of interpretation in favour of embracing its unnatural ordering. It uses impossibility to mystify the reader, escaping the bounds of the murder mystery genre by forsaking the limitations of logical possibility. I have described in this section how the reader responds to the impossibilities that *Maison* includes. The list of positive influences that impossibility can have on aesthetic enjoyment that I present here may not be exhaustive. Individual readers may take pleasure from unexpected or unusual aspects of the impossible narrative. What I do claim to have definitively shown is that Eco’s notion of pleasure stemming from logical and perceptual defeat is feasible. Despite the potential to become frustrated, our inability to understand impossible fictions can be a source of pleasure rather than an obstacle to it.

Eco’s writing on impossible fiction contains important arguments about aesthetic pleasure, though these require careful interpretation. The way in which I have interpreted Eco shows what happens when we are incapable of normalising a text. Unpacking Eco’s

argument gives us the following: if the reader recognises the strangeness of the text (which requires attention and sensitivity to inconsistencies), she is frustrated. This frustration lasts until she realises that she must engage with the text in a critical way rather than a naive way. This realisation alone can be cathartically pleasurable, but it also allows the reader to conduct a more suitable second-level reading of the fiction. I have also built upon Eco's arguments by showing how the inaccessibility of impossible fiction may positively affect the reader's experience in other ways: focussing their appreciation of the fiction's craft, and humorously playing on the expectation that fiction should be accessible.

This chapter has explained and demonstrated several reader responses to feeling unable to normalise an impossible fiction. It transpires that, even when it seems difficult to normalise a fiction, there may be a principle available with which to do so. Even if that principle is not followed, the inability to normalise a fiction does not imply that the experience of reading the fiction is unpleasant. The following chapter is concerned with another feasible response to challenging cases of impossible fiction—that of imaginatively alienating oneself from the text and ceasing to play the game of fiction-reading entirely.

5. Imaginative Engagement

When I read a book, I put in all the imagination I can, so that it's almost like writing the book as well as reading it—or rather, it is like living it. It makes reading so much more exciting, but I don't suppose many people try to do it.

- Dodie Smith, *I Capture the Castle*

5.1 Introduction

I have shown in Chapter 3 how readers can interpret impossible fictions as unreliable. I have shown in Chapter 4 how readers of impossible fiction obtain pleasure from reflecting on their own experience of impossible fiction. It still remains to be discussed how readers directly engage with impossible fiction. In this final chapter, I investigate how readers imagine and are imaginatively alienated from impossible fiction. In the process, I outline and weigh in on the debate over whether or not readers can imagine the content of impossible fiction. This debate causes a particular tension: proper engagement with fictions is usually seen as imaginative, but impossibilities are widely regarded as unimaginable. Given this, it is unclear how readers can successfully engage with impossible fiction. I resolve this tension by addressing each aspect.

First, I show that impossible fiction is imaginable, which dissolves the tension by eliminating one of its premises. This requires a convincing case of imaginable impossible fiction. I investigate Gendler's proposed case, 'The Tower of Goldbach', which she claims illustrates a logical impossibility which is nevertheless imaginable (Gendler 2000). While I am sceptical about Gendler's arguments, I also discuss Stock's recent claims about the imaginability of impossible fiction. I agree with Stock that there is a non-imagistic sense in which impossibilities can be imagined.

Second, I show that even if impossibilities are unimaginable, readers can frequently engage with impossible fiction normally. This attacks the second premise of the tension-causing argument. This requires explanation of why readers are able to engage with the fiction despite not imagining its content. I argue that impossibilities can be treated as hyperbolic modifiers to the rest of the fiction. This is backed up by Stock in her 2003 discussion of Gendler and impossible fiction, and by Bourne and Caddick Bourne's

suggestions as to how readers treat impossible propositions in fiction (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016; Stock 2003).

The final step is to show that readers can engage with some impossible fictions in the same way that they engage with standard fictions. This dissolves the tension by showing how engagement with fiction is more flexible than philosophers often give it credit for. This requires systematic analysis of how the experience of engaging with impossible fiction can differ from that of engaging with possible fiction. I provide this by investigating the practice of indeterminate imagining. I show that certain impossible fictions—those which describe impossibilities in vague terms—can be and are indeterminately imagined in the same way as standard, possible fictions.

These three points show there is no problem concerning imaginative engagement with impossible fiction. I agree with Gendler and Stock that notions of imaginative engagement are unnecessarily restrictive, and that we can imagine impossible fiction *in some sense*. I also agree that readers often successfully engage with impossible fiction as if it were possible, since readers frequently do not notice impossible elements in the fictions they read. It is empirically obvious that readers *can* engage with impossible fictions, but over the course of this chapter I show exactly *how* this can occur.

5.2 Imaginability, possibility and fiction

This section describes the tension in imaginative engagement with impossible fiction. I establish the wide philosophical consensus that proper engagement with fiction requires the reader to use her imagination. I also show that there is a popular notion that absolute impossibilities cannot be imagined. Given these two notions, there is a problem for impossible fiction: its impossible content prevents the reader from imagining it, and hence prevents her from properly engaging with it. First, however, I take a moment to explain exactly what I mean by the phrase ‘imaginative engagement’.

Imaginative engagement with fiction is closely related to the idea of narrative engagement. Narrative engagement, Shen-yi Liao helpfully articulates, is ‘the mental project we undertake when we recruit imagination for the sake of gaining aesthetic pleasure from imaginative prompts such as fictional narrative (2016: 465).’ The imagining we do during this project, Liao clarifies, has a normative component which is provided by the fictional narrative itself (2016: 466). He summarises: ‘during narrative engagement, one *aims* one’s imaginings at fictionality (Liao 2016: 466, Liao’s italics).’ Imaginative engagement may be

thought of in similar terms. I see it the use of one's imagination to explore the content of a fictional narrative. The normative standards for these imaginings are set by that content.

Generally, philosophers see this kind of imaginative activity as essential to the minimally appropriate reading of fiction (and indeed for a proposition to count as fictional to begin with).⁴⁸ When reading an excerpt from a fiction in the form of a proposition p , the appropriate response is usually considered to be imagining p , and doing so is typically regarded as necessary for successful narrative engagement (Stock 2013: 887). How exactly imagining p constitutes narrative engagement is less widely agreed upon. It may be due to a Gricean relation where an author intends for a reader to imagine the propositions contained in the fiction, as is notably the case for Currie (Currie 1990). It may be that imagining as prompted is by itself sufficient for narrative engagement, as Liao argues, provided that this is done in order to derive enjoyment (2016: 462). It may instead be the case that appropriate engagement with fiction takes the form of a game of make-believe, as is Walton's approach (Walton, 1990). Even in the most prominent case of a philosopher challenging the link between fiction and imagination, in Matravers's *Fiction and Narrative*, the imagination is still an essential component in engaging with fictional narratives (it is simply not the *defining* component) (2014: 57). There is a consensus in philosophy of fiction that the imagination is a major or even constitutive factor in how we successfully engage with narratives.

There is also a tradition, if not a consensus, in Western philosophy which states that the conceivable is possible (and, by implication, that one cannot conceive of something absolutely impossible). This has been used to draw conclusions about the separability of, for example, cause and effect, mind and body, and knowledge and true belief (Chalmers 2002). If the impossible is not conceivable, it may also be the case that it is not imaginable. While conceiving of p and imagining p are different activities, it is not a stretch to claim that the two are related. Yablo and Chalmers define the act of conceiving in terms of the imagination, and Yablo suggests a strong link between imaginability and possibility (Chalmers 2002; Yablo 1993). Gendler & Hawthorne distinguish between the two as sensory and/or imagistic (in the case of imagining) and non-imagistic (in the case of conceiving), but they are agnostic about whether this difference means that one can imagine something absolutely impossible (2002: 9). These discussions have a major ramification for impossible fiction: if the absolutely impossible cannot be imagined, then

⁴⁸ See, among many others, Feagin (1988), Currie (1990) and Stock (2013; 2017). Matravers offers a helpful overview of the links drawn between fiction and imagination (as well as challenging the explanatory power of this link) in the second chapter of his *Fiction and Narrative* (2014).

readers cannot imagine the content of impossible fiction. If readers cannot imagine the content of impossible fiction, then they cannot engage with impossible fictions in the way readers normally engage with fiction.

Given this issue, it is worth investigating the argument that the impossible is unimaginable more thoroughly. The position is best shown by Yablo, who claims that to imagine p is to entertain the appearance that p could obtain. To conceive of p is to imagine a world where p is verified, and it is by doing so that Yablo thinks the possibility of p is made apparent to us (1993: 30). This means that absolute impossibilities are not imaginable, as there is no world to be imagined where they are verified. Yablo writes that:

Tigers with round-square striping are not imaginable; neither can we imagine tigers that lick all and only tigers that do not lick themselves, or tigers with more salt in their stomachs than sodium chloride, or indeed any tigers that do not strike us as capable of existing (1993: 30).

By claiming these logically impossible objects are not imaginable, Yablo inadvertently lays down a major challenge to impossible fiction. His position creates a tension between the unimaginability of impossible fictional content and the requirement that the reader imagine that content as part of standard narrative engagement. If impossible fictions cannot be imagined, then readers cannot engage with them appropriately.

Even if Yablo is not correct, his claims show that I cannot simply assume that impossible fiction is imaginable. There is a live possibility of tension between the unimaginability of impossible fiction and the fact that imagining the content of fiction is a major aspect of engaging with that fiction. I offer three responses in order to dissolve this tension. These are as follows: first, reject Yablo's claim and argue that absolute impossibilities can be imagined; second, reject the claim that imagination is an essential aspect of standard narrative engagement; third, give an example of how readers engage with impossible fiction in the same way as they do a standard fiction. Each section remaining in this chapter addresses one of these responses. I address the first in the following section.

5.3 Imagining absolute impossibilities

This section investigates objections to the idea that readers cannot imagine fictional impossibilities. First, I look to the work of Gendler on imagining conceptually impossible fictions. I am unsatisfied with Gendler's argument. Instead, I return to Stock's notion of F-imagining, first mentioned in Chapter 2, to show that the notion 'the impossible is unimaginable' is poorly formed. The act of imagining has more permutations than Yablo

gives it credit for, and there are several different ways in which the imagination can be employed. One of these ways, propositional imagining, is a convincing way of imagining impossible fiction.

Gendler discusses impossibilities in fiction, and ultimately claims that these impossibilities are imaginable (explained further in Appendix A, pp. 155–156). She uses an example to show that this is the case. This is a short story which contains a logical impossibility: 'The Tower of Goldbach'. It describes an unusual punishment from God after a conclave of mathematicians prove Goldbach's Conjecture: the number twelve ceases to be the sum of two primes. God promises that he will lift this punishment if the mathematicians can find twelve righteous souls. However, the conclave can only find five and seven rational souls—two prime numbers which no longer total twelve. Solomon must decide how to proceed after God comes close to relenting. Solomon's ultimate verdict is logically impossible:

So with great fanfare, the celebrated judge announced his resolution of the dispute: From that day on, twelve both was and was not the sum of five and seven. And the heavens were glad, and the mountains rang with joy. And the voices of five and seven righteous souls rose towards heaven, a chorus twelve and not-twelve, singing in harmonious unity the praises of the Lord. The end (Gendler 2000: 67).

This is a contradiction just as clear as the titular box of 'Sylvan's Box'. Twelve both is and is not the sum of five and seven, making this a logically impossible story. According to Yablo, one cannot imagine the proposition q : 'twelve is and is not the sum of five and seven.' However, according to Gendler, one can. She argues that it is imaginable because the story has directed our attention towards particular aspects of q at different times (Gendler 2000: 67). We are prompted to consider twelve as 'the number of righteous souls needed'. By imagining this property of the number twelve, we pay less attention to its property 'is the sum of five and seven'. As a result, we are able to imagine that the conclave has not found the right number of righteous souls even though we also imagine that they have found twelve souls. Accordingly, Gendler thinks that the logical impossibility in 'The Tower of Goldbach' does not prevent us from imagining the story. She generalises this point: readers can imagine impossible fictions, provided that the impossibilities they contain are sufficiently disguised (2000: 69). Impossibilities can be disguised by deft narrative which keeps the reader's attention on specific aspects of the impossible content, preventing them from attempting to imagine it in full.

I agree with Gendler that certain fictions do disguise their impossible elements. Fictions which feature inconsistent depictions of time travel regularly disguise their

impossible elements, whether by design or by accident. Ray Bradbury's 'A Sound of Thunder' is one such fiction. A botched time-travelling hunting trip results in several major changes to the characters' present—a temporal paradox which the short story sweeps under the rug (Bradbury 2005). By focusing on the *consequences* of changing the past, rather than the fact that human history has shifted without the time travellers undergoing any changes, Bradbury's story enables readers to imagine a logically impossible scenario. The same goes for *Back to the Future*, *Timecop 2* and a host of other fictions which depict paradoxical time travel. The fact that flashy consequences are emphasised over paradoxical implications prevents readers from being distracted by the logical impossibilities they are presented with.

My problem with Gendler's approach is that it does not seem to demonstrate a reader imagining an absolute impossibility. Rather, it demonstrates a reader imagining *part* of an absolute impossibility. On its own, this part may not be impossible—the two sides of an inconsistent conjunction are, individually, unproblematic. It is only their conjunction which makes them inconsistent. In the case of 'The Tower of Goldbach', I am suspicious that, on Gendler's assessment, the reader is not really imagining the conceptual impossibility which lies at the heart of the story. The reader is merely imagining one unproblematic circumstance (that the conclave has found five and seven righteous souls), and then later imagining a different unproblematic circumstance (that twelve is the sum of five and seven). I am not convinced that this equates to imagining a single impossible circumstance. It would be similar to reading 'Sylvan's Box' and imagining first an empty box, and then a box with something in it. I think Gendler is right that different aspects of a fictional situation can be accentuated, pushing other aspects into the background. However, I do not see why the end result of this accentuation is the reader imagining an impossible proposition. Under Gendler's account the reader only ever imagines part of an impossible proposition, and never a full impossible proposition.⁴⁹

I am not the only person who is unconvinced by Gendler's analysis. Stock provides an in-depth analysis of the imaginability of impossible fiction. Stock argues for two slightly different positions on two different occasions. The first, laid out in Stock's 2003 'The tower of Goldbach and other impossible tales', claims that impossible fictions are not imaginable in the way Gendler describes. The second, provided in Stock's 2017 book *Only Imagine*, argues that there is a sense in which impossible fictions can be imagined. To avoid

⁴⁹ As I discuss in §5.5 of this chapter, I still consider Gendler to have described a reader imaginatively engaging with an impossible fiction. However, this is not the same thing as imagining an absolute impossibility.

confusion between these two positions, I refer to the earlier and later Stock respectively. The relevant argument with respect to Gendler is from the earlier Stock.

The earlier Stock's argument is in response to Gendler's claim that focused attention allows us to imagine conceptual impossibilities. Stock has several broad issues with Gendler's account of imagining, arguing that it is incompatible with most accepted theories of concepts and therefore an unrealistic depiction of how people imagine (Stock 2003: 109–113). However, Stock further claims that we are worse judges of our own imagination than we might think. When a reader considers herself to be imagining an absolute impossibility (such as that twelve both is and is not the sum of five and seven), she may in fact be imagining something consistent with a different, possible state of affairs (Stock 2003: 119–120). When imagining 'The Tower of Goldbach', Stock suggests that a reader may in fact be imagining that Solomon has *declared* twelve to be both the sum and not the sum of five and seven, or that the majority of people *believe* it to be the case that twelve both is and is not the sum of five and seven (2003: 119). These alternate imaginings serve as defeaters for the notion that we are imagining something absolutely impossible when reading impossible fiction. There is not sufficient reason to believe that the reader imagines the absolute impossibility rather than the consistent defeater.

I consider Stock's arguments a major problem for Gendler. In particular, I agree with Stock's assertion that it is incredibly difficult to imagine something in a way which deliberately excludes certain features (Stock 2003: 109). Doing so would be like imagining an elephant, but deliberately avoiding imagining the elephant's ears. We cannot simply choose to create an injunction against imagining certain aspects of something. This does not prohibit the idea that a reader can imagine 'The Tower of Goldbach' in the way Gendler describes, only the idea that the reader can do so deliberately. Therefore, even if a reader is able to imagine something logically impossible in the style that Gendler describes, doing so consciously will be extremely difficult.

This difficulty would not be such an issue if absolute impossibilities frequently flew beneath the reader's radar, but Stock does not consider this to be the case. She claims that readers are 'unlikely to remain ignorant' of anything which 'counts to [the reader] as a conceptual impossibility' in a fiction (Stock 2003: 108). If readers are usually alert to contradictory propositions when they occur, and were disposed to selectively imagine these impossible events as Gendler describes, then reading impossible fiction would be extremely laborious. This is further reason for Stock to reject Gendler's claim that readers can imagine the content of impossible fiction.

In practice, I consider Stock wrong to claim the norm is that the reader notices contradictions when they arise. The examples above, 'A Sound of Thunder' and *Back to the Future*, are representative impossible fictions where the typical reader is unaware of any contradictions. Unless the impossible elements are explicit or otherwise obvious, most escape the reader's notice. Stock may, however, consider her 'counts to me as' clause to account for these cases. If the reader does not recognise the absolute impossibilities in these fictions, then they do not count to the reader as impossibilities to begin with. For something to count to the reader as an absolute impossibility, that reader must recognise the impossibility in the first place. If this is the case, then Stock has provided an account of why impossible fictions cannot be imagined if recognised, and why they seem to be imaginable if the reader does not notice any impossibilities.

As a result of this debate, I am unconvinced by Gendler's claim that the impossible is imaginable. Not only am I sceptical that what Gendler describes can be considered imagining an impossibility, the early Stock's counterarguments are convincing. If there is a way of dissolving the tension between the unimaginability of impossible fiction and the role of imagination in standard engagement, I have not found it by analysing Gendler's arguments. However, there is another approach to demonstrating that absolute impossibilities are imaginable. This is the approach adopted by the later Stock: F-imagining.

F-imagining, discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 52–53) is Stock's term for the manner in which readers imaginatively respond to works of fiction. F-imagining is the minimal level of imagination required for successful engagement, and it is built heavily into Stock's intentionalist account of fictional truth (Stock 2017: 20). I will not address the relationship between F-imagining and fictional truth here. However, F-imagining is relevant to the discussion of imagining impossible fictions, as the later Stock argues that readers can F-imagine absolute impossibilities. I finish this section by re-establishing what F-imagining is, and why it leads Stock to partially recant her earlier position against the imaginability of absolute impossibilities.

F-imagining takes only propositions as its content (Stock 2017: 21). Stock contrasts this with objectual imagining—the having of mental images or sensory imaginings. She also contrasts F-imagining with counterfactual imagining: imagining how situations would proceed if they were true (2017: 124). To F-imagine a proposition p , it is necessary to think that p , where 'think that' is not synonymous with belief or desire. This is not to say that any non-belief and non-desire thought is an F-imagining—Stock distinguishes F-imagining from other mental activities such as accepting that p and considering that p (2017: 22). 'Thinking that p ' is a broad church of different mental activities; one of them is F-imagining that p .

Given the minimal requirements for F-imagining, the later Stock goes back on the comments made by the earlier Stock concerning the imaginability of impossible fiction. The later Stock argues that there *is* an important respect in which impossible fictions can be imagined: they can be F-imagined. In order to F-imagine an impossibility *q*, Stock claims, a reader propositionally imagines *q* and, additionally, propositionally imagines that there is some good explanation for why it is that *q* obtains (2017: 141). This explanation does not need to be detailed or convincing; the reader need only imagine that a good explanation is available. If these conditions are in place, Stock argues, then we can consider the reader to have F-imagined an impossibility.

Stock suggests that 'even when we are fairly certain of a fact, we can imagine that circumstances obtain such that we might also be wrong about it (2017: 141). This is why it is important to F-imagine that there is some good explanation of why *q* obtains in addition to F-imagining that *q*. Just as we can imagine discovering something which forced us to revise our beliefs about the world, we can imagine some fact obtaining which explains why it is that an absolute impossibility occurs. I am completely convinced that the sky is blue, but I can imagine that some fact could exist which causes me to change this belief. When I F-imagine that Sylvan's box is both empty and full, a situation which I am convinced cannot occur, I also F-imagine that there is some explanation for why the box is like this. This is how readers can F-imagine the absolutely impossible despite having intuitive convictions that absolutely impossible things cannot exist.

This is not the only reason that F-imagining an explanation for absolute impossibilities is helpful. By including this feature of F-imagining the impossible, Stock pre-empts criticism like that of Amy Kind. Kind, in her review of *Only Imagine*, suggests that more is required than merely 'processing a sentence' in order to consider that sentence to have been imagined (2019: 607). By establishing that F-imagining an impossibility requires F-imagining that some explanation for that impossibility is available, Stock offers a richer account of F-imagining the impossible than mere language-processing. This fits with Stock's response to Kind, which highlights how 'reading and processing' does not exhaust the nature of F-imagination (Stock 2019: 224).

The important aspect of Stock's argument for this chapter is the claim that we can, to an extent, imagine absolute impossibilities. The standard rejections of this ability are, Stock suggests, based in misunderstandings concerning the imaginative project which the reader should undertake (2017: 143). The reader may attempt, fruitlessly, to counterfactually or objectually imagine *q*. With no set of circumstances available which corresponds to *q*, this kind of imagining cannot be performed. However, the reader can still

F-imagine q , and F-imagining q is the minimal level of appropriate imaginative engagement with the impossible fiction. In other words, readers can imagine impossible fiction to the same minimal standard as possible fiction. It is only when readers attempt to objectually or counterfactually imagine impossible fiction (and this attempt is supererogatory to appropriate imaginative engagement) that they find themselves unable to do so. Given that readers often do attempt to objectually or counterfactually imagine the fictions they read, it is unsurprising that the popular opinion of impossible fiction is that it is unimaginable.

Settling the question of whether the impossible is imaginable is a weighty topic in its own right, and I do not attempt a definitive answer here. However, what I take Stock to successfully show is that there is some sense in which one can imagine an absolute impossibility: F-imagining. This sense may be too weak for Yablo and others like him, but it is a toe in the door for impossible fiction. I am also inclined to agree with Stock that F-imagining satisfies minimal imaginative engagement with fiction. Imaginative responses to fiction are often sparse; requiring a phenomenally rich imaginative experience for every reader of every fiction is unrealistically demanding. Stock admits that readers frequently do see fictions as something to be phenomenally imagined (else there would be no misunderstanding about the way readers are supposed to imagine impossible fictions) (2017: 143). However, this indicates that the experience of reading impossible fiction may be jarring and unsettling, not completely devoid of imaginative engagement.

With this in mind, I am satisfied that the tension between the apparent unimaginability of impossible fiction and the imaginative nature of narrative engagement is partially dissolved. Imagining impossible fiction may differ from *typical* imaginative engagement with fiction, but not from *minimal* imaginative engagement. With this established, the next section addresses the second aspect of the tension—whether imagining the impossible content of a fiction is required for successful narrative engagement.

5.4 Engaging without imagining

This section argues that readers can narratively engage with impossible fictions even if they do not imagine impossible fictional content. This is because the impossible content of some fictions is accepted as part of the story, but not seen as something which it is necessary to imagine. The earlier Stock hints at this in her discussion of impossible fiction (2003). A more explicit analysis is offered by Bourne and Caddick Bourne (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016). I relate these approaches to Yacobi's functional principle from Chapter 3. I claim that

imaginative engagement with fiction is not an all-or-nothing game, and these approaches demonstrate that readers can successfully engage with impossible fiction even if they do not imagine its every feature.

A fresh example is needed in order to illustrate these points. It is easiest to do so with a fiction which clearly and unambiguously states an absolute impossibility. Very few fictions plainly state something impossible. Most impossible fictions are more subtle in their delivery of absolute impossibilities. Some rare fictions do, however, commit directly to establishing absolute impossibilities as something to be imagined as part of the story. The following extract is from H.P. Lovecraft's short story 'The Call of Cthulhu':

The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force and cosmic order. A mountain walked or stumbled. God! What wonder that across the earth a great architect went mad, and poor Wilcox raved with fever in that telepathic instant?.. Parker slipped... and Johansen swears he was swallowed up by an angle of masonry which shouldn't have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse. So only Briden and Johansen reached the boat... Slowly, amidst the distorted horrors of that indescribable scene, she began to churn the lethal waters; whilst on the masonry of that charnel shore that was not of earth the titan Thing from the stars slavered and gibbered like Polypheme cursing the fleeing ship of Odysseus (Lovecraft 2019: 46).

There are at least two absolute impossibilities described in this scene—one definite, one suggested. The description of 'eldritch contradictions of all matter, force and cosmic order' is a definite impossibility. This is a vague description, but if it is taken at all seriously then it inarguably represents an absolute impossibility. The line 'Johansen swears he [Parker] was swallowed up by an angle of masonry which shouldn't have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse' is the second, suggested impossibility. This fictional object, the masonry, has a contradictory property: it is acute, but acts obtuse. This is a fictional report, and hence particularly susceptible to normalisation via the perspectival principle (i.e., the impression that an impossibility has been reported, but has not fictionally occurred). However, given the typical content and themes of Lovecraft's work, considering this line to represent an impossibility is also a valid interpretation. While both lines are fairly blatantly impossible, the former is less ambiguous. It makes a better example with which to investigate the responses to impossible fictions which Stock and Bourne and Caddick Bourne describe.

The earlier Stock argues that, unlike typical propositions in fictions, unambiguous impossibilities are not invitations to imagine something. Instead she writes that, typically, 'in

this sort of case the author is playfully drawing the reader's attention to the unimaginability of such propositions, rather than seriously asking her to entertain them (2003: 121).' There is no *serious* pressure on the reader to imagine something logically impossible, according to the earlier Stock. Rather, the intention is that the reader will recognise the unimaginability of the proposition.

Bourne and Caddick Bourne make a similar claim about the value of an impossible proposition in a work of fiction. While the earlier Stock is agnostic about whether logical impossibilities can be fictionally true, Bourne and Caddick Bourne are absolutely certain that they cannot (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016: 107; Stock 2003: 89–90).⁵⁰ However, Bourne and Caddick Bourne do think that impossible features can play an important role in the reader's appreciation of the story, and use Dahl's *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* to demonstrate this:

On our view, [*Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*] is funny not because it does represent an impossible world, but because we recognize that it does not represent any one possible world. We say that it is the attempt to do something impossible—namely, represent a fictional world using that description—which is amusing... Part of the amusement is in considering how somebody could fall into the trap of attempting to represent a world in which Charlie's grandmother becomes minus two years old... part of what is amusing... is that it arises through a misapplication of perfectly sensible reasoning (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016: 90).

This approach is similar to Stock's: Bourne and Caddick Bourne claim that the reader does not attempt to imagine the impossible proposition. However, the reader recognises the impossibility of the proposition, and its impossibility makes a contribution to the aesthetic properties of the fiction. In this case, Bourne and Caddick Bourne claim that it is *funny*. The appropriate response to the straight-faced ridiculousness of Dahl's assertion that Grandma Georgina is aged minus two is laughter. The effect of the hyperbole in *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* is a sense of absurdity.

Unlike Stock, Bourne and Caddick Bourne do not clarify whether readers can or are supposed to imagine this impossibility. Their account of truth to a story is that certain impossible propositions should form part of the reader's impressions even if they are not fictionally true (see p. 46-47). This seems to indicate that the reader should be attempting to imagine that Georgina is minus two, since this is the impression we gain from the fiction (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2016: 196). This also suggests that Bourne and Caddick

⁵⁰ The later Stock is in favour of impossible fictional truths, since authors can reasonably intend readers to propositionally image absolute impossibilities (2017: 142–143).

Bourne consider it true to the story that Grandma Georgina is minus two, even if Dahl has not made this *fictionally* true. Bourne and Caddick Bourne focus on the attempt to make an absolute impossibility fictionally true rather than on the reader's attempt to imagine this impossibility. Whether or not the minus-two-year-old Grandma Georgina is imaginable, she contributes to the comedy of *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*. She does so because readers recognise that the situation is too extreme to ever take place—the description is an over-exaggeration rather than an attempt to make something fictionally true. Despite the theoretical differences between Stock and Bourne and Caddick Bourne, then, it neither consider these blatant impossibilities to be something the reader actually imagines.

This is why I refer to this aesthetic effect as *hyperbole*. The proposition is too outlandish to be imagined, and instead should be interpreted as *emphasising* something else. In the case of Lovecraft, the hyperbolic reading of the impossible proposition is intended to communicate the eldritch horror of Cthulhu (the monstrous Thing which Lovecraft describes) rather than provide any serious grist to the reader's imagination. Rather than attempting to imagine eldritch contradictions of matter, the reader recognises the unimaginability of the proposition and does not attempt to imagine it as part of the fiction.

The use of impossible propositions as hyperbole is found in many other fictions. Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker* series uses it for comedic effect, perhaps most notably in *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, where a bubble keeps a restaurant permanently suspended at the end of time. 'If you've done six impossible things this morning,' the restaurant's slogan runs, 'why not round it off with breakfast at Milliways (Adams 2017: 196)?' Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, on the other hand, builds a creeping sense of uncanny horror with its descriptions of a geometrically impossible house. In Robert A. Heinlein's "'—And He Built a Crooked House—'", four-dimensional geometry is impossibly rendered in three dimensions when an architect accidentally builds a house in the shape of a tesseract. As a result, Carl Sagan labelled the short story 'for many readers, the first introduction to four-dimensional geometry that held any promise of comprehensibility (Sagan 1978).' In all of these cases, impossibilities accentuate the story. A particular theme, emotion or lesson is highlighted with the use of an obvious impossibility. In this way, impossible fiction can prioritise emphasis of a theme over imaginability of the story.

Hyperbole must be differentiated from a similar technique whereby impossible elements of a story are not imagined. This is the technique by which non-sequiturs are not considered to actually occur as part of the story. I have already mentioned how contra-genre moments in fiction can prompt this reaction using Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (p. 89). The instance of Charles spotting a sea monster is so out of tune with the rest of the

novel that it is naturally read as allegorical rather than a literal sighting (Murdoch 1999: 20). Even in introspective, psychological works like Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, readers tend to naturally categorise particular parts of the story as allegorical rather than literal occurrences. In *Steppenwolf's* dreamlike denouement, Mozart enters the room to chastise protagonist Harry for behaving too seriously (Hesse 2011: 245). I doubt many readers form the impression that Mozart is really present in the story; they are able to naturally interpret his inclusion as symbolic rather than literal. This is the key difference between these allegorical non-sequiturs and true hyperbole. When a reader interprets part of a fiction as an allegorical non-sequitur, she forms the impression that the events do not *really* occur in the fiction. The reader of hyperbole, on the other hand, *does* form the impression that the event occurs. However, rather than attempting to imaginatively engage with this event, she reads it as a hyper-exaggeration of the fiction's themes, emotions or lessons.

This approach is, in the terms I describe in Chapter 3, an adoption of the functional principle of normalisation. The functional principle demands that, in order that they are made to seem in tune with the rest of the fiction, the reader interprets deviant elements as in some way crucial to the tone, theme or realisation of the fiction. This is precisely what happens when impossibilities are treated as hyperbole. The exaggeratedly outlandish description of the Thing in 'The Call of Cthulhu' plays the function of establishing the otherworldliness of the monster. The portrayal of Grandma Georgina as minus two plays the function of adding to the humour of *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*. These impossibilities can fulfil their functions even if the reader does not imagine them. By drawing on the functional principle, then, readers can engage with an impossible fiction without imagining its impossible elements.

This further dissolves the tension I have been discussing. It challenges the idea that failure to imagine elements of a fiction entails failure to appropriately engage with that fiction. Even if absolute impossibilities cannot be imagined at all, readers can still engage with impossible fictions. The functional principle cannot necessarily be deployed in every instance, but nevertheless shows that readers are not prevented from engaging with a fiction simply because they do not imagine its impossible elements. This further shows that narrative engagement is more flexible than it may have originally appeared.

5.5 Indeterminate imagining

The previous section showed how readers can selectively avoid imagining the impossible elements of fiction without any adverse effect on their level of engagement. This section

discusses how and in what sense readers *do* imagine these impossible elements. In this section, I discuss what Stock calls ‘objectual’ imagining: the forming of mental images and other *sensory* imaginings. I argue that certain impossible fictions are imagined in the same way as possible fictions, whether or not absolute impossibilities themselves are taken to be imaginable. This claim is based on the notion that, typically, readers imagine the content of fiction in an indeterminate way. That is to say, readers imagine that there are determinate features of a fiction without necessarily imagining what these features are like. I investigate work on indeterminate imagining in order to show this. I argue that indeterminate imagining operates within certain parameters which are set by the fiction. In some cases of impossible fiction, readers can use this method to avoid having to imagine absolute impossibilities in detail. In other cases, ones where the nature of the impossibility is made explicit, readers recognise that no determinate feature fits within these parameters. Due to this, readers can imagine some impossible fictions in the same way they imagine possible fictions, while other impossible fictions resist this approach.

One characteristic of fictions is their logical incompleteness. There is no fiction for which we can definitively say for any proposition that, within the fiction, it is true or false. Lewis establishes in his ‘Truth in Fiction’ that there are many incomplete aspects to any fiction, be it unestablished personal details about the characters (is Carmela Soprano a good rugby player?) or features of the surrounding world (how many sisters, cousins and aunts surround Sir Joseph Porter in *H.M.S. Pinafore*?) (1983c: 261–262). However, readers imagine that there is an answer to these questions even if they believe there is not. They imagine that Carmela Soprano either is or is not good at rugby. They also imagine that some number of family members surrounds Sir Joseph, even if nobody can definitively say how many. Perhaps a similar approach can be taken with Lovecraft’s impossible monster, or Grandma Georgina’s impossible age. We know that the monster is indescribable, but that does not put pressure on the reader to imagine exactly how it looks or how it behaves. We know that Grandma Georgina is minus two, but we need not imagine what this means or how it comes about too closely. When engaging with a story, readers may imagine these things in a similar way to Sir Joseph’s relatives: imagining that there is a specific answer without actually imagining what that answer is.

The notion of indeterminate imagining is well-discussed in the philosophy of mind. In order to show that sometimes we imagine objects in an indeterminate manner, Daniel Dennett uses the image of a striped tiger while Colin McGinn uses a speckled hen (Dennett 1969: 136-137; McGinn 2006: 25). I consider the issue best summarised by Yablo. His discussion is applied to the general principle of imagining, rather than specifically to

imagining fiction. Yablo establishes that we are capable of imagining objects and situations without being particularly precise and exact. He describes imagining a tiger:

When I imagine a tiger I imagine it as possessed of some determinate striping—what else?—but there need be no determinate striping such that I imagine my tiger as striped like *that*; the content of my imagining is satisfied by *variously* striped tigers, but not by tigers of *no* determinate striping (Yablo 1993: 27).

Yablo's point is that we imagine something which is determinate, but we do not determinately imagine something. We *imagine* a tiger with an indeterminate number of stripes, but we *imagine that* the tiger has a determinate number of stripes. Just the same goes for Sir Joseph's family members. We imagine that there is a determinate number of them surrounding him, but we do not need to imagine a particular number. This is indeterminate imagining.

This type of imagining has limits and parameters, even if it is indeterminate. We may decide that the tiger's stripes are definitely black. This adds a determinate detail to our indeterminate imagining. We may think that eight family members is certainly too few, but eighty is too many. The way we imagine the chorus of relatives is indeterminate within these fixed parameters. These parameters are set by the available information about the object of indeterminate imagination. There is a chorus of relatives surrounding Sir Joseph, and somewhere between eight and eighty members is an appropriate size for a chorus. The tiger must be striped, and presumably striped in a way fairly typical for tigers. These details establish general parameters within which we indeterminately imagine. In this way, readers can imagine the content of fiction as determinate without actually determinately imagining every specific detail. Instead, she determinately imagines certain details and indeterminately imagines others.

What a reader determinately imagines is set, in part, by her impressions of the fiction she reads. If the fiction gives her the impression of a tiger, she will determinately imagine that there is a tiger present and indeterminately imagine several details about that tiger (e.g., the number, size and shape of its stripes, how long the tiger's whiskers are, how old the tiger is, and so on). Predominantly, this determinate information is provided by the fiction itself. However, there may be other determinate features of our imaginings that are not based on the explicit word of the fiction. Our imaginings may have determinate details based on our own whims. For example, it would be unusual to imagine Sir Joseph with any other

number of ears than two, despite the script of *H.M.S. Pinafore* omitting this detail.⁵¹ A reader may imaginatively embellish on the fiction, and can choose to imagine that Holmes has a chipped tooth, or that Heathcliff resembles a friend, or that a background house is owned by a baker. Provided that these additional pieces of information do not disrupt the narrative (i.e., that all the appropriate determinate features are imagined as the fiction demands), readers are free to imaginatively embellish scenes to their own satisfaction. My list of determinate imaginings about Nancy Drew may include her age and the details of her current case (as set by the fiction itself) but also her favourite food and her eye colour (as added according to my own whim).⁵² The list of indeterminate imaginings I have about Nancy Drew include the length of her hair, whether or not she enjoys the Andrews Sisters, and many other details. In this way, readers can determinately imagine specific details, while other details are imagined to be determinate but are indeterminately imagined.

The fact that readers can objectually imagine fictions without including determinate detail gives some hope to the notion that we can objectually imagine impossible fictions.⁵³ If we need not imagine a scene in exact detail, perhaps we can omit the precise details of the impossible elements. This approach works in some cases, but not in others. It works in cases where the description is vague enough that the reader can imagine the impossible element while including very little determinate detail. Take the extract from Lovecraft above (p. 138), specifically the line ‘the distorted horrors of that indescribable scene.’ The reader is given a lot of leeway for imagining this, as very few details are specified either in this sentence or in preceding sentences of the scene. The parameters within which the reader indeterminately imagines the scene are extremely wide. The reader is therefore able to imagine that the scene is indescribable without committing to a particular vision of how the scene unfolds. The reader may still imagine some details determinately—perhaps a rocky island, an enormous portal, or even the popular depiction of Cthulhu as a tentacled, humanoid dragon. What is important is that the reader can imagine that the scene is impossible without imagining in full detail precisely how that impossibility manifests.

⁵¹ Perhaps this is accounted for by something similar to Walton’s Reality Principle (Walton 1990). Readers tend to imagine what they would see if the fiction were actualised.

⁵² I think that readers can distinguish between what they imagine and what is true to the story. I cannot help but imagine Horza from Iain M. Banks’s *Consider Phlebas* as Nish Kumar, but do not for a moment think that it is true to the story (or indeed fictionally true) in *Consider Phlebas* that Horza resembles Kumar. My impression here is inappropriate, but not in a way which damages my understanding of *Consider Phlebas*.

⁵³ This is not to suggest that indeterminate detail in fiction is linked to absolute impossibilities. All fictions are logically incomplete, and therefore contain indeterminate details to some extent. Furthermore, it is not obvious that there are no *actual* indeterminacies (see Parsons 2000).

Similarly, the causal story we are given of Grandma Georgina's negative age (that she overdoses on de-aging drug Wonkavite) need not be imagined in any greater detail than we imagine how genius Shuri builds gadgets in *Black Panther*. Readers tend to imaginatively gloss over detailed explanations and tedious or confusing details. If this behaviour is permissible for possible fiction, it should be permissible for impossible fiction as well.

This implies that we can imagine impossible fictions like 'The Call of Cthulhu' without adopting any imaginative practice which we do not already do as a matter of course while reading fiction. Given that all fictions are incomplete, it is standard practice to imagine fictions indeterminately. It is a viable and appropriate response to 'The Call of Cthulhu' to imagine that the monster is impossible without considering exactly how, just as one can imagine that a tiger is striped without imagining precisely how it is striped. The difference between the two cases is that one image (the tiger) can be closely finessed while the other (the impossible monster) cannot. I suspect that this difference does not come into play during standard cases of imaginative engagement. Readers are never required to imagine fictions in any close and determinate detail. There is therefore no significant difference therefore between how a reader typically engages with *Black Panther*, and how that same reader typically engages with 'The Call of Cthulhu' or *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*.

The difference (and difficulty) returns, however, when we consider fictions with much more specific impossibilities. 'The Call of Cthulhu' is vague, allowing the reader to indeterminately imagine the monster without ignoring any specific aspect of its description. 'Sylvan's Box', on the other hand, specifies that the titular box is empty and also has something in it. This level of detail leaves very little room for the reader to indeterminately imagine the box. The parameters set by the fiction are extremely narrow. Compare the box with the chorus from *H.M.S. Pinafore*. In the case of the chorus, there is some number between eight and eighty which describes how large the chorus is. The reader is not required to commit to one number, but she does realise that the chorus should be determinately large. In the case of 'Sylvan's Box', the reader is not able to leave the status of the box indeterminate. The box is explicitly stated to be both empty and containing something. Imagining the box as empty falls outside the parameters, as does imagining the box to be containing something. These narrow parameters force the reader to confront the logical impossibility depicted in the narrative. While many impossible fictions, including 'The Call of Cthulhu', feature impossibilities which the reader can indeterminately imagine, certain others do not offer the reader this luxury. These others are all fictions which explicitly describe the manner in which their impossible content is impossible, such as 'Sylvan's Box' and 'The Tower of Goldbach'—fictions with clearly defined impossibilities. These fictions do not leave enough scope for the reader to imagine their impossibilities indeterminately.

Most fictions set wide imaginative parameters within which fall a range of different scenarios which would satisfy the description given in the fiction. With explicit, specific impossible fictions, suitably engaged readers should recognise that there are no scenarios which could satisfy the parameters set. The following demonstration of explicit impossibility is from an example used in Chapter 1: Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Some kind of magical parasite is being drawn from the protagonist's foot:

I watched, amazed, as something that glistened—it seemed black, at first, then translucent, then reflective like mercury—was pulled out from the sole of my foot, on the end of the needle... I watched Old Mrs Hempstock reel the thing in, and I was still unable, somehow, to entirely make sense of what I was seeing. It was *a hole with nothing around it*, over two feet long, thinner than an earthworm, like the shed skin of a translucent snake (2013: 136).

Gaiman's description of the strange creature moves through several stages. Each one sequentially limits the parameters of how the reader can indeterminately imagine the object. At first, this is only restricted to its colour, which is apparently shifting ('it seemed black, at first, then translucent, then reflective'), and its size (it must be pulled with a needle from a hole in the protagonist's foot, which gives some parameters for its size). At this point the reader has fairly broad parameters—there are all sorts of things which would fit within the parameters, so she may easily imagine the creature indeterminately. This is the standard mode of narrative engagement. The difference comes when Gaiman describes what I take to be an absolute impossibility: the creature is 'a hole with nothing around it.' This immediately and significantly alters the parameters within which the reader can indeterminately imagine. This sudden change is not itself unusual; if Gaiman had described the creature as 'rat-like' then there would have been a similarly significant collapse in parameters. The unusual feature of this change is that there is now no object which fits into the parameters. A reader who understands the significance of 'a hole with nothing around it' will realise this. The reader can no longer indeterminately imagine the creature, since there is no range of appropriate, indeterminate imaginings available within the parameters. This means that the imaginative engagement the reader has with *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is different to the imaginative engagement she has with a standard, possible fiction.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The description above only applies to engaged and attentive readers. Engaged readers will recognise the difference in how they can imagine standard, possible fictions as opposed to how they can imagine explicit impossible fictions. However, inattentive readers will not recognise this difference. This is not remarkable, since these readers are already failing to engage with the fiction in the appropriate manner. Their experience is not relevant to my portrayal of indeterminate imagining, as they are not imagining in the way the fiction prescribes in the first place.

The reader's inability to objectually imagine the absolutely impossible does not mean that she imagines *nothing*. Exactly what she does imagine while reading *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, though, is heavily dependent on the reader herself. I myself selectively ignore the impossible features, and imagine something long, thin, and roughly like a snakeskin—the features which Gaiman describes the parasite as having. However, the reader might attempt to imagine the impossible aspect of the creature as far as possible, perhaps by imagining one part of its impossible description (that it is a hole, or that it has nothing around it). She may give up and leave that part of her mental image hazy and ill-defined. Similarly, the reader of 'Sylvan's Box' may imagine an empty box, a full box, alternately imagine an empty and a full box, or imagine a box with vague contents. I am reluctant to limit exactly how the reader could imaginatively respond to the instruction to imagine an absolute impossibility, as readers will respond to these impossible descriptions in varied and idiosyncratic ways.⁵⁵ Besides, the argument I make here is that there are some kinds of impossible fiction which are imagined in the same way as standard, possible fiction, and some kinds of impossible fiction which are not. The former kind of vague impossibilities, the latter kind are explicit, direct impossibilities.

Readers might engage imaginatively with explicitly impossible elements in other ways, as discussed in §5.3 of this chapter. I certainly do not think that the reader's imaginative project ends once she realises that she does not have suitable parameters within which she may indeterminately imagine. Fictional entities, even impossible ones, are imagined in a mixture of determinate and indeterminate ways, and Gaiman gives several non-impossible details about the parasitic creature in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Just as one can indeterminately or determinately imagine how many stripes are on a tiger without imagining the entire animal, there are details about the parasite which the reader is able to imagine even if she cannot imagine the entire thing.

So much for what the reader *does* imagine. A question which philosophers are better posed to answer is what is *appropriate* for her to imagine. I argue that her imagining is appropriate if it does not stray too far from the description which is given by the fiction. This leaves a substantial amount of leeway, but this is as it should be. Readers regularly fail to imagine certain details of fictions correctly (or at all) without suffering accusations of failure to appropriately engage. How many readers imagine that Mr Hyde is taller than Dr Jekyll? How many avid *Harry Potter* film fans imagine Emma Watson instead of bushy-haired, buck-

⁵⁵ They are not necessarily instructed to *objectually* imagine an absolute impossibility to begin with. However, as Stock points out, the descriptions provided by works of fiction are often taken to prescribe forming mental images (2017: 143).

toothed Hermione when they read Rowling's novels? We might not consider these readers to have optimally appropriate imaginings, but I doubt we would accuse them of failing to imaginatively engage with the fiction. If we are lenient on these readers, we should be lenient on the reader of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. A reader can engage appropriately with impossible fiction even if she does not imagine its impossible elements in detail, and even if her imaginings do not correspond exactly with the description in the text.

This section has shown two things. First, it has shown that impossible fictions are frequently objectually imagined to the same standards as possible fiction. This goes some way to explaining why there is no tension between the unimaginability of absolute impossibilities and successful engagement with fiction. Second, it has identified the kind of impossible fiction which cannot be objectually imagined to the same standard as possible fiction.⁵⁶ I have already shown in this chapter that the inability to objectually imagine an absolute impossibility is not a substantial threat to successful imaginative engagement with impossible fictions. However, this section has shown that there is no reason to think that readers find it difficult to engage with many works of impossible fiction even if objectual imagination is considered important for successful imaginative engagement.

5.6 Conclusion

I began this chapter by describing a particular tension: that absolute impossibilities cannot be imagined, that fictions require imaginative engagement, and that readers are therefore unable to properly engage with impossible fictions. I have dissolved each of these notions. The first was dissolved through appeal to Stock's notion of F-imagining. By dividing the notion of imagining into its propositional and objectual senses, Stock shows that there is a sense in which even absolute impossibilities can be imagined. The second is dissolved with reference to Bourne and Caddick Bourne and to Stock. Readers frequently engage appropriately with fictions even if they do not imagine impossible elements. This is because the functional principle of normalisation allows readers to treat impossible elements as hyperbolic emphasis of a particular theme or tone of the fiction. Finally, analysis of indeterminate imagining shows that readers imagine many impossible fictions in just the same way they do possible fictions. I conclude that there is no tension between impossible

⁵⁶ This sort of explicitly impossible fiction is the most likely to cause the sense of defeat discussed in §4.6.

fictions and standard accounts of imaginative engagement with fiction. While there is always a risk that readers will fail to narratively and imaginatively engage with a text (they might be distracted or ill-disciplined), absolute impossibilities do not in and of themselves increase this risk.

Conclusion

The central goal of this thesis has been to articulate how reading impossible fiction is different from reading standard, possible fiction. This has required a focus on the aesthetic elements of impossible fiction, rather than its more regularly discussed metaphysical and ontological features. I have drawn on available work in the aesthetics of impossible fiction, and I have supplemented this with relevant work in narratology and literary studies. Doing so has shown that reading impossible fiction draws on interesting and important reader abilities.

First among these abilities is normalisation. The capacity to normalise is one reason why readers are capable of incredible flexibility when interpreting fiction. When readers normalise, they adopt principles which allow them to engage with impossible fictions despite the diversely deviant phenomena these fictions contain. I claim that my account of normalisation, informed by Culler and Yacobi, captures and formalises intuitions from philosophers like Nolan, Hanley and Matravers about how readers approach impossible fictions.

Another reader ability exposed by my investigation is the capacity readers have to modify the kind of imaginative engagement they have with a fiction. Readers are naturally able to engage with fiction in a variety of ways, with more or less imaginative activity. We are able to recognise where impossible features are no more than hyperbole, and where they are a key part of the story. We are able to withdraw and imaginatively alienate ourselves from certain parts of a fiction and engage fully with others. This is done even when we have very little working knowledge of the author and her goals.

I emphasise the fact that, despite the range of effects they engender, impossible fictions do not have any effects on readers which are unique to impossible fictions. There are so many kinds of fiction, so many different levels of abstraction and unnaturalness that it would be surprising if we were able to carve responses to fictions finely at the joints. As Walton observes, 'writers of fiction are a clever and cantankerous lot who usually manage to do whatever anyone suggests can't be done, and philosophers are quick with counterexamples (1994: 38).' Attempting to find an aesthetic effect unique to impossible fiction is an unappealing endeavour, since if there is not already a non-impossible fiction which engenders that effect, one might be written any minute. What is worse, readers are

just as difficult to pigeonhole as authors. No aesthetic effect will be felt consistently across all readers of a particular text or genre. This goes for impossible fiction as well.

This is not to say that the study of impossible fictions is aimless or unhelpful. In fact, the study I have undertaken in this thesis reveals interesting information about reading all kinds of fiction. Impossible fiction serves as an extreme stress test for ideas about how readers engage with fiction: these ideas may operate under ideal conditions, but they fail to capture real reader experiences when exposed to the avant-garde, the postmodern and the experimental fictions available. This is why many major accounts of the nature of fiction deal with impossible fictions in the course of establishing their theory. By paying specific attention to impossible fiction, I have brought several under-analysed reader techniques to the forefront, and in doing so shown how flexible and adaptable readers truly are. By combining the lessons of literary theory and narratology with the rigour of philosophy, I have shown not only how readers engage with impossible fictions but also set out a robust blueprint for how readers engage with challenging fictions of all kinds.

Appendix A: Existing notions of impossible fiction

A.1 Introduction

This appendix continues Chapter 1 by discussing existing philosophical work on impossible fiction. I consider how my revised definition (impossible fiction is fiction which represents at least one absolute impossibility which is not an empty reference) compliments, contradicts or resembles how previous philosophers have defined impossible fiction. I show how, generally, discussion has focussed on how fiction depicts absolutely impossible circumstances. Philosophers frequently assume that this involves strictly logical necessity. However, some philosophers have claimed that other kinds of necessity are absolute, including metaphysical, conceptual and analytic necessity. I make brief reports on the accounts of David Lewis, Kendall Walton, Derek Matravers, Daniel Nolan, Tamar Gendler and Kathleen Stock in order to show the history and variety of philosophical interest in impossible fiction. I make an aside about the debate on conceptual impossibility which arises between the accounts of Gendler, Stock and Matravers. Finally, I argue that only Matravers's definition is incompatible with my revised definition, and even then, there are reasons to believe this can be resolved.

A.2 David Lewis

One early contributor to the field of impossible fiction is Lewis. Lewis directly addresses the topic, giving an unambiguous definition: a fiction is impossible if there is no possible world where the story is told as known fact (1983b: 274). This means that an impossible fiction is one of two kinds of fiction. The first is a fiction which depicts things which could not occur in any possible world. The second is a fiction which could not have been told as fact (such as a story where nobody could have known that the events occurred). This latter type, Lewis establishes, is impossible because it is contradictory: stories must have tellers, and those tellers must be able to tell the story (Lewis 1983b: 274). It is impossible for a storyteller to know a fact F which states that F cannot be known.

In his postscript to 'Truth in Fiction', Lewis makes a slight shift in his treatment of impossible fictions (1983b). While he uses the term 'impossible fiction' as a section header, his discussion is entirely concerned with 'inconsistent fiction'. His use of the term 'inconsistent' implies that he deals with logically impossible fictions. The same subtle shift

is also made by Richard Hanley in his defence of Lewis's work on fiction (Hanley 2004: 113–114). This is a departure from Lewis's original definition, which does not imply that impossible fictions must contain logical impossibilities. I interpret this shift in focus from impossible to inconsistent as Lewis marking out a subsection of impossible fiction. I interpret Lewis not as claiming that only inconsistent fictions are impossible, but rather that inconsistent fictions are the type of impossible fiction he focusses on in that paper. He focusses on this kind of impossible fiction in order to provide conditions for non-vacuous fictional truth in inconsistent fictions. Other types of impossible fiction still exist but, by implication, contain only vacuous fictional truths. Lewis's definition of impossible fiction can therefore still accommodate absolute impossibilities of all kinds despite his later switch in focus to inconsistent fiction.

A.3 Kendall Walton

Unlike Lewis, Walton's account of fiction does not deal with possible worlds. In fact, one reason he discusses impossible fiction (or, more specifically, impossible fictional worlds) is as a reason to deny that fictional worlds are possible worlds (1990: 64). Walton claims that possible worlds and fictional worlds are not the same things since fictions can contain propositions which, taken together, cannot all be true. In other words, impossible fictions exist, and should be taken seriously enough to influence which account of fiction we subscribe to. However, Walton is similar to Lewis in noting that the significant aspect of these fictions is that they are not counterfactually possible. There is no way that our world could have been like the worlds of impossible fiction. This makes his implicit definition of impossible fiction similar to that of Lewis. This definition can be extracted from the examples of impossible fictional worlds that Walton uses. These include inconsistent fictions such as William Hogarth's *False Perspective* and H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. If these inconsistent fictions are impossible fictions, then it stands to reason that Walton sees inconsistency as a marker of impossible fiction.

To Walton, inconsistent fiction is not the only kind of impossible fiction. He identifies metaphysical impossibilities by name when discussing impossible fictions. His examples of metaphysically impossible fictions are Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and various fairy tales where people turn into animals or objects. These are also mentioned in Walton's argument as to why fictional worlds cannot be possible worlds. It is clear that Walton thinks that metaphysical impossibilities of this kind cannot manifest in any possible world, otherwise they would not differentiate possible worlds from fictional worlds. Walton's definition of an

impossible fiction can be extracted from this work. I interpret his claim that impossible fictions separate fictional worlds from possible worlds as implying that impossible fictions are those which could not represent possible worlds. This end definition is, effectively, the same as my own revised definition, and coextensive with that of Lewis.

A.4 Daniel Nolan

Nolan focusses exclusively on logical impossibilities in his early discussion of impossible fiction (Nolan 2007: 667). He later specifies that impossible fictions are those which 'represents something as true according to it which is metaphysically or logically impossible (2015: 57).' What Nolan also offers the account of impossible fiction is a thorough investigation of metaphysical necessity in his 2011 'The Extent of Metaphysical Necessity'. This investigation hints at why metaphysical impossibilities are absent from Nolan's work on impossible fiction: he sees metaphysical necessity as less restricted than logical necessity. According to Nolan there are some absolute metaphysical necessities: logical, conceptual and analytic necessities (2011: 325). The exact content of these necessities is not described, but this does indicate that Nolan sees absolute necessity as a wide category.

A.5 Derek Matravers

Matravers refers only to fictional narratives which describe logically impossible states of affairs in his discussion of impossible fiction (2014: 128). This exclusion of metaphysical impossibilities could be due to one of three things: omission for the sake of brevity, omission for the sake of theory, and omission for the reason of redundancy.

First, and most likely, Matravers may have overlooked metaphysical impossibilities. This oversight could be made deliberately or inadvertently. His comments on impossible fiction are fairly brief, and do not represent an exhaustive definition of the kind I make. Logically impossible fictions are a more intuitive and easily demonstrated type of impossible fiction than metaphysically impossible fictions. Focussing on logically impossible fiction alone allows Matravers to relate impossible fiction to his overall thesis in a more concise way, making the omission of metaphysical impossibilities a benefit rather than a flaw.

Second, Matravers may genuinely think that all and only logically impossible fictions are impossible fictions. Concluding this is presumptuous, since most other treatments of impossible fiction include metaphysically impossible fictions. I include it here for

completeness, and do not consider it a likely explanation for the absence of metaphysical impossibilities.

Third, Matravers may think that metaphysical and logical necessity are co-extensive. He would not be alone in doing so. Phillip Bricker, for example, equates both kinds of necessity under the broader term 'absolute necessity' (2008: 8). This is also a substantial assumption to make of Matravers, however. Given the relative weight of each of these three options, the safest assumption is my first: that Matravers's definition of impossible fiction neither affirms nor denies that fictional metaphysical impossibilities are sufficient for impossible fiction.

A.6 Tamar Gendler

Gendler does not offer a general description of impossible fiction which I can compare to my own. Instead, her discussion of impossible fiction is conducted as part of her wider arguments about imaginative resistance (Gendler 2000). This discussion focuses on how certain fictions depict conceptual impossibilities, and whether readers are able to imagine those fictions (Gendler 2000: 66–70). The concern which leads her to this subject is whether conceptual impossibility can answer certain questions about the imaginability of fictions which prompt imaginative resistance.

Gendler does not explicitly state what she takes conceptual impossibilities to be, but she does offer examples. Her main example of a conceptually impossible story is 'The Tower of Goldbach', recounted in Chapter 5 (p. 132). A brief recap: after hubristic mathematicians prove Goldbach's conjecture, God's punishment means that the number twelve ceases to be the sum of five and seven. The story is clearly both logically and analytically impossible. In other examples of impossible fictions, Gendler argues that the concepts of rabbit, playing card and snowman are incompatible with the actions performed by Peter Rabbit, the knave of hearts (of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) and Frosty the Snowman (2000: 70–71). This suggests that to Gendler, conceptually impossible fictions are those which ascribe actions and properties to a concept which that concept cannot hold.

Gendler can be illuminatingly contrasted with Matravers. Matravers calls on similar examples to Gendler but does not consider them to be conceptual impossibilities. His claim is stronger: these are *logical* impossibilities. He cites *The Wind in the Willows* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (Matravers 2014: 130). The former example includes the notion that a toad drives a motorcar, and that a water rat carries a picnic

hamper with various cold meats inside. The latter describes a Bread-and-butter-fly: a fly made of bread, butter and sugar. Matravers thinks that both instances are logically impossible, and that 'most' philosophers would agree (2014: 130). The properties ascribed to these creatures by the fiction are incompatible with their classes. Toads do not drive cars. Flies cannot be made of bread. For the same reason, it seems likely that Matravers would group Peter Rabbit and Frosty the Snowman in with these purported logical impossibilities. Gendler does not establish whether she takes Peter Rabbit and Frosty to be logically impossible fictions, but Matravers's arguments suggest that this would be a short leap to make.

A.7 Kathleen Stock

The debate on conceptually impossible fiction continues with Stock, who responds directly to Gendler's arguments. Like Gendler, Stock offers an insight into conceptually impossible fiction rather than a hard definition of impossible fiction. She accepts the existence of conceptually impossible fiction, including Gendler's 'The Tower of Goldbach' (Stock 2003: 121). However, Stock is unconvinced by the claim that Frosty the Snowman represents a conceptual impossibility (2003: 121). She argues that a singing snowman is physically impossible but conceptually possible. Her test for conceptual possibility here is significant. She claims that there is no *inconsistency* between the propositions 'Frosty sings' and 'Frosty is made of snow'. It is this consistency which guarantees the conceptual possibility of Frosty the Snowman.

Stock's talk of consistency implies that Matravers is right to think of these issues in terms of logical possibility. If 'drives a motorcar' is a property inconsistent with the classification 'toad', then it is logically impossible for a toad to drive a motorcar. This would make *The Wind in the Willows* a logically impossible fiction. However, Stock would deny the antecedent to this conditional. If Frosty the Snowman does not manifest any contradiction to Stock, it is unlikely that she would consider Toad to be any different. This point is developed in the following section.

A.8 Conceptual and logical impossibility

The debate remains open on whether Frosty the Snowman and *The Wind in the Willows* are impossible fictions. The answer to this question does not impact on my definition of

impossible fiction. However, the way in which an answer is given demonstrates how substantive disagreement about classification as impossible fiction can proceed under my revised definition. I am persuaded by Stock that Frosty the Snowman is not impossible, and I extend the same arguments to *The Wind in the Willows*. There are no absolute impossibilities to be found in this work of fiction. I demonstrate this by rejecting Matravers's list of properties which are supposedly inconsistent with the classification 'toad':

- (1) *Wears goggles, a cap, gaiters and an enormous overcoat.* This is logically possible. In fact, it is something any one of us would be capable of bringing about given some custom-made clothes and a patient toad.
- (2) *Speaks English.* This is not biologically or physically possible given the structure of the larynx in known toads. However, the discovery of a new species, toad-like in every respect except for the ability to mimic spoken language, is entirely possible. Plenty of animals are capable of mimicking language, and this has never interfered with their species classifications.⁵⁷
- (3) *Owens a stately home.* The Jackson Oak in Athens, Georgia, is a tree which owns itself. Michael Jackson's chimpanzee, Bubbles, inherited two million dollars upon Jackson's death. The only thing preventing a toad from owning a stately home is the lack of willing donors.
- (4) *Prone to passing fits of enthusiasm about vehicular transport.* This issue is the most potent, as it requires the toad to have certain higher brain functions not typically associated with toads. It requires intention and emotion to be enthusiastic about vehicles. However, we may run the same test here which Stock applies to Frosty the Snowman: it is not clear that any property seen as necessary to the concept (in this case, 'toad') is inconsistent with the property in question ('prone to passing fits of enthusiasm about vehicular transport') (Stock 2003: 121). Toads are not defined by their *lack* of enthusiasm about vehicular transport. A toad which could express such enthusiasm would be seen as a particularly intelligent toad, rather than a different kind of creature altogether. The concept 'toad' and the concept 'enthusiastic about vehicles' can be entertained together.

Matravers claims that 'one does not have to be too essentialist' to think that any of these properties are logically inconsistent with classifying something as a toad (2014: 130). I argue the exact opposite: one must be extremely essentialist about toads to think that the

⁵⁷ Mimicry is all that is required to explain Toad's capacity for English. In the event that Matravers thinks the speaking of English involves an intentional activity which communicates meaning, the property is dealt with in property 4.

character Toad is logically impossible. It would require an extensive list of properties necessary to the classification of a toad. I therefore disagree that *The Wind in the Willows* is a work of impossible fiction. In doing so, I have demonstrated that there is still scope for meaningful disagreement about whether a work is an impossible fiction under my definition of the term.

A.9 Conclusion

The type of necessity under discussion in these accounts of impossible fiction is necessity in the widest sense—a necessity which holds in every possible world or set of circumstances. For this reason, many accounts of impossible fiction refer to logical impossibility as a sufficient criterion for an impossible fiction. It is for the same reason that conceptual, analytic and metaphysical impossibilities are frequently brought up in relation to impossible fiction. These types of necessity are also taken to be impossible under all circumstances and in all possible worlds.

This means that most positive accounts of impossible fiction support the revised definition I have defended. Lewis, Walton and Nolan all explicitly agree with the notion that impossible fiction is fiction which could not have taken place in any possible world. Stock and Gendler's arguments on conceptual necessity do not directly endorse my definition, but both are compatible with it. The only definition which outright contradicts my own is Matravers's account, as it allows for logical impossibilities and nothing else. If this is indeed the correct interpretation of Matravers, then he and I are at odds. However, I have also shown why Matravers might not endorse this reading of his account, and why he might allow other types of necessity to feature in a definition of impossible fiction. In either case, I am satisfied that the counterfactual definition does not need revision in response to any of the accounts of impossible fiction I have discussed in this section.

Appendix B: Impressions and existing accounts of fiction

B.1 Introduction

This appendix follows up on my assertion in Chapter 2 that reader impressions are compatible with other accounts of fiction. I sketch out two major players in the debate on fictional truth: make-believe and intentionalism. I show that reader impressions are not only compatible with these accounts, but they even contribute to a reasonable analysis of certain works of fiction. I show how the varied reader interpretations of *2001: A Space Odyssey* are explained by impressions under Walton's make-believe account. I also show how reader impressions explain reader responses to fringe cases of intentionalism: queer readings of *Batman* and *Harry Potter*. Since reader impressions are not only compatible with these accounts, but actually offer some explanatory power for reader behaviour, I conclude that reader impressions are theory-neutral.

B.2 Make-believe

Impressions complement theories of truth in fiction which involve make-believe. The make-believe account of fictional truth is best exemplified in Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. To Walton, engaging with fiction is an attitude analogous to a child's game of make-believe (1990: 11). To say something is fictionally true is to say that some prop (for example, a novel) has prescribed that it be imagined as part of playing the game of make-believe associated with that prop (Walton 1990: 61). This theory of fictional truth is compatible with the notion of impressions as I have described them. To a make-belief theorist, an impression is part of the way we translate from a text to a prescription for imagining something. The impression is what the reader considers herself to have been prescribed by the text to imagine. However, the make-belief theorist would draw a sharp distinction between impressions and fictional truth. To see why, I refer to Kubrick's 1968 *2001: A Space Odyssey* and its notorious ending.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ While a case might be made that *2001: A Space Odyssey* is an impossible fiction, I use it here only as an example of indeterminate fictional truths.

The final ten minutes of Kubrick's film features a psychedelic sequence filmed using the 'slit scan' technique, using long exposure to create vivid, patterned colours. This is followed by an old man, presumably the film's protagonist now aged by several decades, waking up in bed in a clean, brightly lit room. The camera shows the monolith, the alien artefact which catalyses the film's plot, in the room at the foot of the bed. When the shot returns to the bed, the protagonist has been replaced with a glowing fetus, suspended in an amniotic sac-like bubble. The scene cuts to a shot of Earth from space, and the fetus looms over it, eyes wide open.

The ambiguity of this ending is noted by critics, and by Kubrick himself (Palmer 2006: 22; Pezzotta 2013: 55). Given this, a Waltonian might have a difficult job of deciding exactly what is the fictional truth at stake in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Walton himself acknowledges that in particularly difficult cases, it may be the case that no definite answer is available (1990: 146). This is not problematic for accounts of fiction. Many fictions (arguably *all* fictions) contain elements of indeterminacy. All that Walton takes this to mean is that the fiction truth is either beyond the reach of 'any ordinary examination of the work', or in fact non-existent (1990: 146). Despite this, some viewers have clear ideas about what happens at the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. These ideas are based on the impressions they form of the film.

It is possible for viewers to form impressions of the film's ending which are unambiguous (that the protagonist has been kidnapped by aliens; that he is hallucinating as he dies of oxygen deprivation). These impressions can develop in wildly different directions according to the individual reader, but this is to be expected of a piece of cinema which is, on the surface, so ambiguous. As shown earlier, the mere fact that readers can form different impressions does not suggest that only one reader has an appropriate impression. We have good reason to reserve judgement on what the fictional truth is in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, despite the fact that we do still form impressions. However, impressions account for the fact that readers form judgements about what fictionally happens despite the fact that the fictional truth itself is indeterminate under the make-believe theory.

B.3 Intentionalism

Although I called upon Stock's account of F-imagining earlier, I have not said much about her preferred account of fictional truth: intentionalism. It is informative to compare impressions of homosexuality in the *Harry Potter* and *Batman* franchises with intentionalist

accounts of fiction. Doing so shows how reader impressions are an important and impactful feature of how fiction is read and interpreted. I first outline accounts of intentionalism, then turn to my case studies in order to demonstrate the role impressions play in the reading and discussion of works of fiction alongside an intentionalist model of fictional truth.

In general, intentionalism is the notion that the author's intentions are relevant when it comes to judging what is fictionally true. The intentionalist agrees that this intention has some authority when it comes to determining fictional truth. One recent defender of intentionalism, Stock, takes this intention to be Gricean (Stock 2017: 9). Take *2001: A Space Odyssey* again. A reasonable response to the ambiguous ending is to seek out Arthur C. Clarke's intention—what he *meant* when he wrote the fiction. This is a Gricean intention in that Clarke intends the reader to recognise his intention that she imagine something, and that her imagining that thing is based on this recognition of intent. Different strands of intentionalism place different emphases on the source and the authority of these intentions. Moderate, or modest intentionalists suggest that author intention is informative, but it can be overridden by salient features of the text. Extreme intentionalists argue that fictional truth is determined by the author's intention. Hypothetical intentionalists claim that it is the best available information about the author's intentions which informs fictional truths rather than the author herself.

An issue for intentionalist accounts is that the known intentions of the author are ignored in a large number of readers' interpretations of some works of fiction. Differentiating between impressions and fictional truth can help the intentionalist account for these instances. To demonstrate this, it is helpful to consider two similar cases of specific impressions, one of which was 'confirmed' by the author, the other not. The cases I refer to are readings of homosexuality in the *Harry Potter* series and in various incarnations of Batman. First, *Harry Potter*.

Before 2007, the sexuality of the character Albus Dumbledore had been the subject of reader speculation. A minority but respected interpretation was that, in the *Harry Potter* franchise, Dumbledore is gay. In terms of impressions, this implies that some readers formed the impression, based on the fiction, that Dumbledore is gay. That year, author J.K. Rowling announced during a book tour that this was intentional; she had intended for it to be fictionally true that Dumbledore is gay ('JK Rowling outs Dumbledore as gay' 2007). In this instance, the impressions of some readers coincided with the intention of the author. However, it is doubtful that these readers formed this impression on the basis that Dumbledore's homosexuality was Rowling's intention, or even the most likely interpretation

of Rowling's intention.⁵⁹ Rather, to these readers, this seemed the most natural interpretation of the character. By contrast, some readers found Rowling's declaration controversial because they had *not* formed the same impression. In both cases, the impression (of Dumbledore being gay or straight) was formed prior to the confirmation of authorial intention, and in many cases lasted past the confirmation. Later readers may have formed the same impressions based on Rowling's declaration rather than any features of the text itself, or even based on the reported impressions of other readers. Neither of these scenarios affect the take-home message of this point: reader impressions can be formed independently of author intentions, and they may or may not accurately reflect those intentions.

This can be compared with queer readings of Batman, which have been popular since, at the latest, 1954, when psychologist Fredric Wertham declared his research had confirmed the franchise 'psychologically homosexual (1955: 189).' That various incarnations of Batman give the impression that the protagonist is gay is a fact exaggerated by the camp 1960s-era Batman television show. However, readers have formed the impression despite active attempts at dissuasion by authors and other creative directors at DC, owners of the intellectual property (Brooker 2000: 226). This demonstrates that author intention need not influence reader impressions, even though it may in some cases vindicate them. Indeed, many readers with the impression of Bruce Wayne's homosexuality are likely aware that these impressions are in no way intended by the author. Despite awareness of the author's *lack* of intention, readers can nevertheless form specific impressions.⁶⁰ The key point is this: to the intentionalist, impressions are formed in a different way to fictional truths. Impressions explain why readers have particular beliefs, theories and headcanons (something they take to be the case in the story without expecting that others should) about what fictionally happens, despite full awareness that these beliefs do not coincide with the author's intention.

B.4 Conclusion

Any theorist, no matter what their conception of fictional truth is, can accept that readers form impressions of fictions. The only difference between theorists is to what extent these

⁵⁹ Stock argues that it is an open question as to whether Rowling seriously intended this reading (2017: 88). This means that, to Stock, Dumbledore's sexuality is indeterminate in the Harry Potter series.

⁶⁰ See Currie (1991: 103) for further discussion of lack of intention.

impressions should influence our idea of what is fictionally true. This can be seen even more clearly when we consider a philosopher who opposes the account of Bourne and Caddick Bourne: Graham Priest. Given an impossible fiction, Bourne and Caddick Bourne conclude that the Lewisian account is sufficiently strong that we should prioritise it—our impressions are mistaken, and do not point to fictional truth. Priest, on the other hand, draws the opposite conclusion. From the impression that something impossible happens in a story, he argues that we can draw the conclusion that fictional worlds are not consistent (1997: 580–581). There is nothing about impressions themselves which forces us to choose between Bourne and Caddick Bourne and Priest on fictional truth.

An impression is an understanding of what is going on in a story, and one which does not necessarily take theories of fictional truth into account. Unlike fictional truths, impressions are not related to any attempt at pinpointing the nature of a fictional world. They are not based on any metaphysical claim about the nature of fictional truth. They are simply the beliefs and imaginings that a reader forms as she engages with a story. She does not need an account of fictional truth to do so, although possessing one may influence the impressions she forms (a dedicated narrow intentionalist may have quite different impressions while reading a historical text when compared to a layperson, for example). We form impressions every time we engage with fiction, and the process is largely automatic. In this way, it is akin to parsing language—we form impressions of fictions without conscious effort, and the only way to prevent even a rudimentary impression from being formed is to turn away.

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