2016

A Procedural Definition of Truth in Fiction

David R Pendery, Dr.

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/david_pendery/40/
A PROCEDURAL DEFINITION OF TRUTH IN FICTION

By David Pendery

Fiction is a lie, and good fiction is the truth inside the lie.

Stephen King

Introduction

We approach literature for various reasons, and the literature we approach runs the gamut from coolly realistic literature bordering on non-fiction to wildly speculative tales that turn human beings into cockroaches. But no matter how we approach the range of
fiction we read we expect and depend on a measure of veracity, of believability, of genu
ineness in the way literature reflects, envisions, describes or speculates about humans and
the world. If we don’t have this “trust” in the literature we consume, then we are likely to
either never approach it in the first place, or to cast it aside during the process of reading,
as incredible, unbelievable, and largely useless. Such trust in the believability of literature
has as its source truth in literature.¹ We will examine this truth in this paper. In this intro-
duction we will first review some of the common reasons that we approach and consume
literature, an initial view of the concept of truth in fiction, the relationship linking truth
and belief, and a brief look at narrative as the underpinning of the fiction we will examine
in this paper. We will then provide an initial Procedural Definition of Truth In Fiction.
Following the introduction, section I, will present a more detailed overview of the varie-
ties of fictional truth. Section II will outline an original conception of the elements of
truth in fiction, as well as an original concept we term “fictional belief.” Section III will
present in detail our Procedural Definition of Truth in Fiction (PDTF) and certain neces-
sary conditions supporting our definition. We will conclude with a look back at notions
of fictional truth, and additional thoughts on its nature.

Approaching Literature

Why do we read literature? For most people, the initial response to the question
would be, “For entertainment, for the pleasure of a good read.” This pleasure may be a
combination of enjoyable and exciting “escape” provided by fiction, the thrill of learning

¹ Note that we will use the terms “truth in fiction” and “fictional truth” interchangeably in this
paper.
new things and seeing new places, or engaging in active intellectual exchange in the midst of an absorbing narrative.

For other readers the answer to this question is, “For aesthetic pleasure.” Different readers seek different aesthetic rewards in fiction (there’s no accounting for taste), but a good definition of the aesthetics of literature comes from Peter Lamarque, who wrote that “literary reading attends to such matters as: the congruence of structure and content, the aptness of the linguistic qualities as a vehicle for a thematic vision, [and] the way the parts cohere into an aesthetically satisfying whole.”¹² This is a fairly conservative definition, but we feel one that is a common view of aesthetic appeal.

Others read fiction for educative reasons. Literature for these readers is either a source of factual information—knowledge and categorical understanding about the real world—or, perhaps most profitably, a source of propositional and abstract understanding in psychological, emotional, moral and intellectual areas.

All of these approaches to fiction are dependent on a very important quality, already noted: the believability, the trustworthiness, in a word, the truthfulness (we will also refer to the “fidelity”) in fiction. If we don’t believe something (anything), we will not (ever, or at best exceedingly rarely) long give it credence, and this is an important attribute of how we approach the fiction we read. Because we believe in (the truth of) and trust the ideas, emotions and propositions (to say nothing of the characters, places and plots) in the fiction we read, we are able to respond to it in deeply authentic intellectual, cognitive, psychological and emotional ways.

Truth in Fiction

In spite of the above comments, we might still ask: Is there truth in fiction? On one count, there is indeed much truth in fiction—the accurate descriptions of real people, places and events that are frequently included in fiction. Fiction can provide us with accurate representations and descriptions and truths taken from the real world—that Nazi concentration camps were murderous, dehumanizing places, that three men in a life raft once survived for 76 days in the open ocean, that there is a pub called “Harry’s Bar and Grill” on McAllister Street in San Francisco. Even skeptics would not argue against this type of truth in fiction—but we know that this conception is not what we are really after in our search, for there is much more to truth in fiction than simply the accurate descriptions we refer to above. We will enlarge on this understanding of truth in fiction in section II of this paper.

At a more important level, our question above seems absurd. After all, the very definition of fiction indicates that it is “something invented or feigned,” “an assumption of a possibility as a fact irrespective of the question of its truth,” or “a useful illusion or pretense.” A skeptic would declare: “There is no truth in fiction; it’s a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. Hawthorne’s Goodman Brown is not true; Twain’s Connecticut Yankee is not true; Asimov’s robots are not true; Stephen King’s monsters are not true. Even realistic writers such as Hemingway don’t write true things in fiction—there was no Robert Jordan, there was no ‘old man on the sea.’”

We acknowledge this incredulity, for it points to an intuitive feeling that yes, of course fiction is not true. Yet we just as intuitively believe that fiction must be truthful at

---

some level, for we don’t routinely disbelieve what we read. As noted above, we respond to works of fiction in deeply authentic ways, and we know that these responses could not be based on something false. Truth is, after all, “being in accord with real things, events and facts” and “conformable to the essential reality.” Fiction seems to accord with these dimensions of truth.

Our skeptic might reply that fiction is fiction, it has its functions but it does not need to rely on “being true” in the way that an account of a traffic accident, historical event, or a person’s life needs to be reliably true. Such accounts of real people and events and things are and must be true, we depend on their accurately corresponding to reality, being genuinely referential and not merely verisimilar. We do not need fiction to be true in these ways. If the people and events and things described in works of fiction had the same truth value as the aforementioned “real” people and events and things, than our entire existence would be oddly out of focus and undependable in terms of how we could describe and apprehend truth and true things in the world we live in (or, alternatively, everything in our lives, including fiction, would simply be true—itself an oxymoron).

Again the skeptic has a valid point, but again fiction “slips beneath the wire,” for many readers depend on fiction for something very close to what our skeptic has described above: a reliably truthful view of the life in order to appraise past, present, and (very broadly), future events, understand human behavior, and make decisions. Only a few writers can long get by “telling lies”—outrageous, unbelievable, ludicrous, or silly fabrications. Rather, readers expect—they demand—a preponderance of truth, or suppositions based on truth, in fiction. And so fictional truth, while no doubt different in some

---

\[4\] Ibid.
ways from actual truth, appears to be inextricably linked to such truth, and in many ways is not particularly divergent from it at all. This concept we will enlarge on in section II of this paper.

**Truth and Belief**

Individual and group belief? Margaret Mandelbaum,

A necessary concomitant to our discussion of truth in fiction is “belief.” Belief is by definition closely linked to truth, for belief is “trust and confidence placed in a person or thing” (trust and truth have the same origin in the Old English *treowe*—faithful), and “conviction of the *truth of a statement* or the reality of some being or phenomenon, especially when based on examination or evidence”\(^5\) (note the use of “examination or evidence” in this definition, as it will become important later in this paper). The quote below, from Daniel Dennett’s “Intentional Systems,” will outline these conceptions, and lead to the following discussion:

For the concept of belief to find application, two conditions [...] must be met: (1) In general, normally, more often than not, if x believes p, p is true. (2) In general, normally, more often than not, if x avows that p, he believes p [and, by (1), p is true]. Were these conditions not met, we would not have rational, communicating systems; we would not have believers or belief-avowers. The norm for belief is

---

evidential well-foundedness (assuring truth in the long run), and the norm for avowal of belief is accuracy (which includes sincerity).  

Belief and truth are so closely intertwined, it is difficult to tell if one is a precondition of the other. Must there be truth before we can believe in something, or does what we believe become in some measure true? If I believe I am in danger, then, assuming I am of sound mind, I will act to protect myself—whether the danger is true or not. My belief is enough to validate the truthfulness, for me, of the situation, and I will act in accordance with the true conditions that I believe, and certainly not with anything I believe to not be true at the time. This conception can be applied to fiction. I must believe in (the truth of) the elements of the fiction I read in order to respond to them authentically, usefully, truthfully. There appears here to be a supervenient relationship between truth and belief, but we may find the supervenience at best weak or at least variable, for differing interpretations and diverse types of truth in fiction, as well as the conception of fictional belief (to be introduced later in this paper), intervene.

Human beings tend to believe what is true. At a basic, cognitive level, for humans to perceive any information as credible or plausible, worthy of genuinely serious consideration and authentic response, they cannot for long view it as patently false. Were it so, we would in the end dismiss it as either useless or invalid. Human beings simply don’t give false information the same weight as true information; the former is far less valuable than the latter (though the former may have it’s use, such as if we were impelled to tell a

---

falsehood in order to protect a person or a group; but this of course is another question). The same is true in fiction: what we deem to be patently false or unbelievable in fiction, we are likely to dismiss, by either refusing to read it in the first place, or by ceasing to read it after starting. Of course, one of the unique qualities of fiction is that readers are willing to suspend disbelief, to grant trust in an uncertain brand of truth to “unbelievable” fictional elements. One could argue that readers are generally willing to “believe” even the most wildly speculative and untrue ideas and descriptions. This would seem to devalue any idea of fictional truth (and possibly even truth in general), but we will take up this conception in section III of this paper, and expand our linkage of truth and belief.

**The Importance of Narrative**

Narrative underlies our search for truth in fiction, for we believe it is the essence of fiction, the ground and field of what fiction is and can be. Narrative underlies, however, much more than just fiction. It can also encompass “myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting…, stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news item[s], conversation.” This is quite a range of possibilities, but in this paper we will focus on literary fiction (novels, stories). In short, this is not a comprehensive overview, although we hope that our definitions and conclusions will be applicable in other areas.

All fictional narratives have in common the telling of tales about people, places and events in the past, present and future (we could take the analysis a step higher, and refer

---

to functions, *actants*, codes and the like, but this is unnecessary, for ours is a semantic, rather than a structural analysis). Narratives in this way are relatively “realistic” in that they convey stories about authentic human concerns, behavior, desires and experiences, and for the most part in realistic scenes and situations. Of course not all narrative can be called genuinely “realistic” in this way, but even the most wildly conjectural or experimental narrative tends to fall back on a well known stable of, characters and characterization, plot elements, and cognitive, emotional and psychological representation that stem from truth.

**An Abbreviated Definition of Truth in Fiction.**

Truth in fiction, is usually considered a sort of “commodity” by philosophers and authors, a “thing” that can be identified and labeled, even extracted from fiction and displayed “for all to see.” Given the slipperiness of any attempted definition of fictional truth, we can understand this urge to “nail down” truth in fiction. We will examine some of these approaches to a “commoditized” definition of fictional truth below, and see why they are inadequate. For the time being, we will outline a short definition of our own view of fictional truth.

Intuitively we feel that fictional truth is more than an independent commodity. It seems more likely that fictional truth (perhaps any truth, but this is a much broader notion), will be the result of a pragmatic process, a procedure. In this view, truth in fiction stems from the process of a reader’s involvement in and response to fiction—practices and processes we have discussed at length in this paper. It is only (for the most part, only) when readers engage in fiction (cognitively, psychologically and emotionally) that the
“truth” in fiction becomes manifest. Before the reader is consuming the fiction, there is no “truth in fiction.” After the reading process is under way, truth is created (or, perhaps, discovered) by readers, yielding authentic response. We shall examine these various parameters of fictional truth in section III of this paper.

I. Varieties of Fictional Truth

“Truth in fiction” is without question an evasive topic, and even the most sophisticated analysts may find their descriptions and/or theories inadequate in some respects. With this caveat in mind, in this section we will first describe some notable conceptions of the sources and contours of fictional truth. We will not thoroughly analyze each element, but describe them, with occasional comments, in order to “set the stage” for our own complete definitions, descriptions and theory. In the second part of this section, we will expand our analysis and describe original elements of fictional truth, which will in turn be essential to our PDTF.

What Truth?

Our “critic” has earlier shown that many people simply do not accept the possibility that truth is evident in fiction. “Truth in fiction” in this view is a contradiction in terms, an insoluble Gordian knot. Authors may be able to convey “the “permanence, the generality, and the freedom from contingency that we associate with truth,”8 but this “associa-

8 Michael Riffaterre quoted in “Michael Riffaterre on fictional truth,” p. 4, by Dr. Ian H. Munro, William Jewell College, Liberty, Missouri (date unknown). Italics added. From
tion” is not truth itself. In any case, our critic would argue (again) that we consume fiction for other reasons, not to obtain truth. We may want to be entertained or educated or distracted by the fiction we read—and fiction serves these functions well—but the elements of fiction that yield these results in no way require “truth.” In fact, our critic would continue, what makes fiction fiction—creative license and expression, intelligent construction, and the narrative components described above—should be viewed for what they are: fictional elements, unique in their own right, potent carriers of meaning, but not “truth.” In the worst case, our critic would view any conception of truth in fiction as incoherent. If we really are responding “truly” when we weep at a fictional character’s plight, or celebrate another’s triumphs, then we are not only distorting the very value of truth, we are responding in faulty ways—that is, responding “truthfully” to events and characters that are by definition not true.

A related (but nonetheless very different) variation of “no truth in fiction” is Michael Riffaterre’s conception of fictional truth, outlined in his Fictional Truth.⁹ According to Riffaterre, fictional truth is a triumph of “semiosis” over “mimesis.” Reference in fiction to actual things is “illusory,” truth in fiction rests on verisimilitude, and narrative is only a “record of mind’s perception of the world rather than a direct representation of external reality.”¹⁰ Narrative truth, writes Riffaterre, is an idea of truth created in accordance with

---


¹⁰ Riffaterre, quoted in Munro, op cit., p. 1, emphasis added. NO LONGER EXISTS
the rules of an “imagistic grammar” within a text.\textsuperscript{11} Riffaterre seems to endorse a view in which fictional truth results from the internal consistency of a text, deriving from the text’s “rhetorical power” and its “linguistic patterns of verisimilitude.”\textsuperscript{12}

We are uncomfortable with the notion of “no truth in fiction.” To say as much would be to devalue reader’s authentic responses to the truths they encounter when consuming fiction. True, where there can be truth, there can be untruth, and untruth can be found in fiction as it can be found in any other area of life. And errors can be made by readers in evaluating truth or untruth, and bestowing their belief on a fiction’s contents. But by no means could anyone claim that the entire range of fiction has succeeded in “fooling all of the readers all of the time” by conveying patently false information that has somehow been broadly accepted as trustworthy “based on examination and evidence.” Humans have something of a knack for appraising and understanding truth, and so given the widespread “belief” and “trust” in the plethora of different fictions, we must logically assume that \textit{there is truth in fiction}. We acknowledge that yet more explanation of fictional truth is required, and we will turn to this explanation in the remainder of this paper.

\textbf{Authorial Intent}

Another view of fictional truth is that of fictional or authorial “intent” and credibility. In this view, an author’s intent to create fiction imbues the fiction with fictional truth and

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.} Italics added.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Michael Riffaterre, quoted in “The Crafting of Truth,” by David Baguley, para. 1. From \textit{The Semiotic Review of Books}, Volume 2 (2). Located on the WWW at <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb/srb/truth.html>
\end{itemize}
“immunizes” fiction from claims of falsehood.\(^\text{13}\) In this view, writers “authorize” us to believe in the truth of their narratives, and such authorization and authorial authority (a mouthful, we concede) validly furnishes fiction with truth. David Davies writes that, “if we believe the author of...a narrative to be informed about the subject, truthful, reliable, and speaking literally in a language we understand, then we generally infer the truth of whatever is explicitly stated by a [narrator].”\(^\text{14}\) As for what is not “explicitly stated” in a text, we may assume this truth by imagining the “possible worlds” that a fiction’s characters would live in and their actions would take place in. That is, because we believe in the truthfulness of what is explicitly stated in a narrative, we can believe in the truthfulness of what is not explicitly stated (we grant that the author’s “reliability” and “truthfulness” extend into the realm of what is not explicitly stated in a narrative). A view related to this is that of the “fictional author” (mind you, this is not the “actual author”) who “is assumed to be completely trustworthy and completely knowledgeable about the narrated events in a fiction.”\(^\text{15}\) This fictional author is thus “telling the truth” in his or her fiction. The ultimate aim of these “reliable” authors is to provide “props” for readers to use in exercises in imagination or “make believe.” In this fictional, make-believe world readers seek “cognitively desirable changes in [their] emotional or perceptual dispositions,”\(^\text{16}\) us-


\(^{15}\) \textit{Ibid.} 267.

\(^{16}\) \textit{Ibid.} 271.
ing literature as an “aid to planning [of] cognitive and moral development.”\textsuperscript{17} This make-believe, writes Currie, “is rather like believing,”\textsuperscript{18} which we have linked to truth, above.\textsuperscript{19}

**These Greater Truths**

Another important conception of truth in fiction is that it is composed of various “greater truths” that can be learned or understood by consuming fiction. As Christopher Meeks, a professor and writer, has written “Great fiction, at heart…reveals truth in far greater detail and clarity than anything else.”\textsuperscript{20} This may perhaps be the most “traditional” view of truth in fiction, and in some senses it is inarguable, a long-held belief of read-


\textsuperscript{19} While we find that this conception points to toward truth in fiction, it cannot completely account for it. We assert that when readers respond to fiction, they are not “making believe,” they are *believing*. As Michael Clark points out, in Dostoevsky’s masterwork, “when we pity Anna Karenina, we don’t just feel in a pitying mood, we pity her” (63). When we are excited, moved or terrified by a work of fiction, these emotions are genuine, they are heartfelt, they are “true” and thus could not spring from false sources or “make believe.” (“The Paradox of Fiction” in *Paradoxes from A to Z* by Michael Clark. New York: Routledge, 2007, 62-64)

ers that reading fiction can teach us about people and the world in the same (and even better) ways that certain non-fiction works can (say, that being kind is good, that those who do not know their own history are doomed to repeat it, that hard work yields just rewards, etc.).

---

21 Religious works give rise to interesting contours in this respect. These works cannot always be classified as either “fiction” or “non-fiction.” For some (believers), religious treatises such as the Bible, Bhagavad Gita or Koran are vehicles of absolute truth—historical truth, biographical truth, propositional truth, etc. Readers in the opposite camp believe that religious treaties are anything but true. The more critical among them dismiss these books as at best fantastic, or, worse, as pure fabrication, fantastic dreams peopled with false apparitions, written by fanatic authors with rigid social, cultural and religious agendas, hardly interested in absolute truth unless it serves their purposes. Interestingly, however, we feel that even the most severe critics of religious treatises would not classify these works as “fiction.” In part as a result of cultural conditioning, but also because of the common understanding of the functions and constitution of fiction, the author of this paper feels that religious treatises are almost always viewed, if not as truthful accounts, as “philosophical/religious inquiries,” meaning they are essentially non-fictional. There is perhaps a small group of readers that would claim that these works are “only fictions,” but we feel this view is for the most part insignificant, and that religious treaties are more accurately understood as a type of non-fiction. For this reason, we will not examine such works in this paper, though we feel that future analysis of the “truths” in such works (outside of cultural and religious considerations) could be fruitful.
Precise Approaches

A fourth variety of fictional truth attempts to more narrowly (or precisely) delimit fictional truth. This approach appears to be an attempt by some authors to reduce truth in fiction to a readily identifiable, independent commodity. This approach may be aimed at simplifying concepts of truth in fiction by removing metaphysical explanations and more elaborate descriptions and definitions. Any concept of truth is, like other expansive philosophical issues (knowledge, motivation, intent, being, etc.), bound to be somewhat complex, and we have perhaps all been a bit mystified at one time or another by explanations and definitions of such issues. A little simplification can be an appealing antidote, and some analysts have attempted to simplify the concept of truth in fiction.

David Davies has made perhaps the boldest recent attempt to contain truth in fiction in a simple way when he proposed a formula to explain “the conditions under which something is true in a story or fiction.”22 His formula runs thusly: “it is fictionally true in a story N that p if and only if it is explicitly stated in the text T, in which N is narrated, that p: where it is ‘explicitly stated’ in a text that p if and only if the text contains, as a proper part, an expression of p. (The rider ‘as a proper part’ is necessary if the content of expressions occurring in direct or indirect quotation in a text is to be excluded from what is ‘explicitly stated [in a text]).”23 Ultimately, Davies’s formula seems one with the “authorial intent” variety of fiction outlined above. (We should note that he embeds this formula in a much more elaborate explanation of truth in fiction.)

22 Davies, op. cit., p. 266.

23 Davies, op. cit., p 267.
Michael Jubien, in his own attempt to tie up the notion of fictional truth with a “neat bow” proposes what we will term a “propositional theory of truth in fiction.” Jubien seizees on the fact that authors assert and describe many things in their fictions, and uses this conception as the basis of his theory. In short, Jubien teases out the various levels of “assertions” made by authors (or their fictional characters), and separates these into two categories in a functional or linked relationship. For Jubien, “truth in fiction” is a function of a relationship between true propositions that are “asserted,” and false propositions that are “expressed” in fiction. These parallel propositions are two sides of the same coin as it were, communicated simultaneously. Thus, if an author[‘s character] states that “David loves stinky tofu,” he is asserting something false: there is no David and that non-David does not (cannot) love stinky tofu. However, he is simultaneously expressing something true (about the character’s preferences, within the narrative). While appealingly (and vaguely artlessly) straightforward, we are in the end disappointed with Jubien’s analysis. Again it seems to rely on “authorial intent” for the basis of truth in fiction (not the worst choice, but neither an especially strong one), and worse, he ultimately makes the evasive claim that “yes there is truth in fictional assertions—and falsity too.” While for the most part soundly expressed, his propositional theory of truth in fiction equivocates, and is therefore unsatisfactory.24

---

24 Interestingly, Michael Riffaterre’s analysis, referred to above, is not dissimilar to Jubien’s. Riffaterre states that the paradox of fictional truth is that there is a “constant coincidence between textual features declaring the fictionality of a story [expressed false propositions, to borrow from Jubien] and a reassertion of the truth of that story [asserted true propositions, ditto].” Munro, op. cit., with author’s additions. NOT THERE anymore
Special Cases

A final understanding of fictional truth warrants only brief comment. This is that truth in fiction is existent, but its unique status can only be described as an anomaly, a “special case” of truth. We suspect there is a hint of truth to this view, for if there is “truth” in fiction (and readers are responding to it genuinely), then why don’t they run from the monster in the book, call the police when the fictional woman is being attacked, or send a sympathy note to Anna Karenina? This of course is the “paradox of fiction,” and it does seem to indicate a certain uniqueness about fictional truth, as compared to other conceptions of truth. We have already asked (and will again) in this paper the reader’s assent to aspects of this view (as noted, actual truth itself can have various and unique aspects), but we do not endorse it as an “explanation” of truth in fiction. We will endeavor to explain our PDTF completely and clearly, and not adopt any “short-hand” answers such this one to the issues we are examining. MICHAEL CLARK MIGHT EXPLAIN THIS “The Paradox of Fiction”

II. A New Conception of Truth in Fiction

We will now turn to our own descriptions and definitions of three kinds of truth in fiction: actual truth, possible truth, and assumed truth.25 These descriptions and defini-

25 For assistance with the development of these concepts and descriptions we are indebted to the members of the graduate seminar “Ethics, Evil and Fiction,” led by Professor Tim Lane at National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan in fall 2003.
tions are not an attempt to define the overall concept of fictional truth we seek, but they play important supporting roles. Consider them the scaffolding that we will use to construct our PDTF.

**Actual Truth**

*Actual truth* in fiction is composed in part of the “true truths” that were briefly described above: accurate descriptions in fiction that correspond to real cities and locations, real historical eras, real objects and products, scientific and natural beings, substances and procedures, and even real people (such as historical figures). Additionally, such actual truth can contain practical truths about human interaction and behavior, various truthful definitions or descriptions of categories, characters or events that writers have actually experienced, and propositional truths in areas such in philosophy, science, logic, law, etc. These cognitive truths must, of course, be “really true” to qualify as actual truth, and they point to the active evaluative role that readers must play when consuming fiction, which will be important in our PDTF. Davies notes that these varied truths in fiction can be seen as being governed by a “fidelity constraint.” He sees this constraint being applied primarily in non-fiction (of course if a work is *wholly* governed by the fidelity constraint, then it is classified as non-fiction), but many fictional works also adhere in many ways to this constraint (such as when Dickens accurately describes Victorian England, or when Hemingway authentically portrays marlin fishing from a small skiff). We can see that many, if not most, authors liberally make use of this “constraint,” in the name of realism and au-
thenticity in their work, as well as to see their way through to “some more general purpose in story-telling,” 26

A semiotician might argue that fiction can have no actual reference to the real world, because the language in fiction artificially signifies real things. All such signification is simply arbitrary, they would argue, and any such “actual representation” has been exposed as an illusion, and cannot therefore be called “true.”

Though of course important and influential, we reject this approach to no truth in fiction as ethereal and itself illusory. We admit that in our analysis we are working from a single signifying linguistic order (English), and that we must be wary of such an inherently limited view of the world and truth. But we are confident that the actual truth in fiction as described above is authentic enough to enable us to proceed. For readers of fiction, as in real life, trees truthfully evoke trees, automobiles truthfully evoke automobiles, cats truthfully evoke cats, Napoleon truthfully evokes Napoleon, and Bucharest truthfully evokes Bucharest. These evocations are granted truth by readers before, evaluated for truth during, and ultimately taken as truthful after consumption of fiction (or not granted, evaluated and taken as truth, but here we are getting ahead of ourselves, and we shall examine these concepts in Section III of this paper). In short, with this initial description and definition of actual truth in fiction, we feel we can safely proceed to additional descriptions of elements of truth in fiction, and from there to a fully comprehensive description and understanding of fictional truth.

Possible Truth

26 Data in this paragraph from Davies, op. cit., p. 266.
Possible truth in fiction covers a range of truth that does not absolutely correspond to reality as we know it (past, present or future), but that could be true. Possible truth is an essential element of fiction, for what is it that many authors do but convey people and events that “could be”? As Margaret Gilbert writes:

We can tell much that we need to know about concepts by telling science fiction tales and such. Some may find it irritating to try to understand anything without constant recourse to the world of flesh, bones, and stones. But nonexperimental, unempirical research can reveal conceptual structures. Once revealed their applicability to the world can be ascertained. Thus the imaginary, the bizarre, and even the silly can help us come to grips with what is real.27

This is no doubt a primary reason that many readers consume fiction, whether for aesthetic satisfaction, educative value or as an escape to possible worlds and outcomes. Some readers might want to learn what life was like (or even, approximately like) in a Nazi prison camp, or 19th-century London, or on the road from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression. Others may want to be prepared for the time when humans can conveniently fly to other planets, or if an earthquake 8.7 on the Richter scale strikes their city, or if a passionate love affair instigated by a mysterious message in a bottle blooms in their lives. Still other readers want to learn more about various scientific topics written about by certain writers (such as Michael Crichton, who is well known for heavi-

ly researching the various scientific, historic, legal, cultural parameters and themes of his work; when an author imagines a situation based on such research, it is conceivable to say such “possible truth” in fiction is a variation of “actual truth”). Possible truth is the intermediate step in our triad of fictional truths. It is one step (and sometimes two steps) removed from actual truth, but because it is possible and credible as written (and much of it has actually been experienced), it can be reasonably supposed and trusted by readers, and thus can be believed and responded to in authentic ways as truth.

Possible truth is so closely linked to actual truth in terms of credibility and believability that it cannot be dismissed or taken lightly. We can look at possible truth as contiguous to actual truth. Many if not most possible truths in fiction have already been experienced either by authors or readers, and thus they may be seen simply as variations on actual truth. An author may imagine, for example, a bank being robbed in Seattle. Now let the reader of this paper imagine all the possible derivations on this basic plot—the weapons used, the robbery plan, the customers in the bank, the bank security system, the unfolding action, the waiting getaway car, the weather that day, etc. The possible iterations are endless, but the vast majority as conceived and conveyed in most fiction have occurred in real life (or at worst, have all but occurred, that is, something so like them has occurred in real life, that the fictional variation differs from these experiences in only insignificant ways). Think about a given story by a realistic writer of fiction, a writer who (for the most part) portrays life and events and behavior through recognizable characters in recognizable settings, interacting and experiencing in recognizable ways. Virtually everything in these types of fictions is not only possible, but much of it many readers may have actually experienced (or all but experienced). It would be hard to discern many
elements of a given fiction that are wholly fictional (in no way based on real life and experience). What “fictional” elements there are in fiction are most likely simply iterations of actual or possible truth. In this respect, Linda Hutcheon has written that, “the novel is, in fact, related to life experience in a very real way […] the novel is a continuation of that ordering, decoding, naming, fiction making process that is part of the reader’s normal coming-to-terms with experience in the real world.”

Another aspect of possible truth is not so concrete as what we have described. Much in science fiction frequently comprises this aspect of possible truth. Actions such as space travel, travel through wormholes, transport of deconstructed matter across space, etc. seem very possible, very plausible to many sophisticated readers, but to be sure no readers have experienced such events. Still, the plausibility of much science fiction is such that it could be viewed as simply one step removed (or two) from our initial description of possible truth, intimately connected as it is to actual truth. So, while this is a different and less distinct brand of possible truth, such plausible-though-more-farfetched events as those in much science fiction can also not easily be dismissed as “just fiction.”

**Assumed Truth**

---

A third step removed from our version of possible truth are the truths in even more fantastic science fiction, magical realist narratives, fantasy, horror and wildly experimental fiction. We term this element of fictional truth assumed truth, and it may be the most challenging proposition in our outline of the elements of fictional truth. In section III, we will (re)introduce the conception of “assuming the truth” of a fiction, which is closely interconnected with assumed truth.

Webster’s tells us that ‘to assume’ is: “to take as granted or true, SUPPOSE.” Under ‘suppose’ we find the following definition: “to hold as an opinion : BELIEVE…to think probably or in keeping with the facts.” Note the key terms in these definitions that accord with our examination of truth and fictional truth: “true,” “believe,” “in keeping with the facts.” It is this strong emphasis on “believing true things that are in keeping with the facts” that impels us to choose the term “assumed truth.”

The first two elements of fictional truth in this section included: 1) actual truth, which comprises things in fiction that have been seen and experienced by people, are common knowledge, or are in some other way governed by the fidelity constraint; and 2) possible truth, which are those characters, events and actions in fiction that could be true, based on reasonable supposition and contiguity with actual truth. And yet we know that there are classes of characters, events and actions in fiction that don’t fit neatly into either of these two conceptions, as noted above. Indeed, “whole genres of fiction are predicated on the assumption...that the world of the story differs fundamentally from the actual world.”^29

---

^29 Davies, *op cit.*, p. 268
In spite of the difficulty and “unbelievability” of many of the elements in works such as these, virtually all of them conceive of and describe characters, events and actions in consistent ways that very much reflect the actual truth of reader’s lives, thereby tapping into “belief” and “truth” as reader’s know them. These elements thus become assumed truth in fiction (the term will be steadily expanded upon in the upcoming explanations). Though the path to finding this belief and truth can be difficult in more challenging fictional works, readers who do see their way to meaning unerringly find that authors were, for the most part, simply dressing up in fancy new packaging many time-honored and truthful human behaviors, actions, feelings, desires, motives and urges. No author, no matter how experimental or ingenious, has ever “created a new human emotion.” In this respect, even the most daring fictional work taps into actual truth. This is important to keep in mind when considering assumed truth in fiction.

Although assumed truth in fiction comprises elements of truth that are not clearly actual or possible truth (they are often far from these types of truth), readers believe in the veracity and credibility of assumed truth for two reasons:

1) It contains truths (propositional, experiential, emotional, cognitive, etc.) that can, for the reasons listed above, readily be accepted as believable, credible and true by responsible readers.

2) Because readers know that assumed truth in fiction may deviate from actual and possible truth in significant ways, assumed truth is granted the status of truth by readers (this concept will be explained in more detail in section III of this paper).
We suspect that some readers of this paper might want us to fold into the above explanation conceptions of a (real) author’s “fictional intent” and a (fictional) author’s “authority,” with the combined elements ensuring that assumed truth in fiction is fully plausible and believable, and thus on equal footing with actual and possible truth. In this view, fictional truth is a sort of unique, self-contained system of truth, “true” to itself, constituting its own truth (assumed, or fictional) outside of the “truth” of reality. Here we find ourselves again squaring off with the semioticians, who assert that language (and by connection, fiction) is a self-contained system which obtains value and meaning when it is composed into (and comprehended as) relations among otherwise arbitrary constituents. Although there is credibility in this point of view, and fictional truth, composed of the three truths we have outlined in this section, could be viewed through a semiotic lens, this is not, we feel, the conception we have sketched. Rather, we have pursued the idea and understanding of truth as readers understand it: as a non-arbitrary, real-world value based on belief, experience, common knowledge, and a measure of fidelity to the real world. Even assumed truth in fiction, with its sometimes incredible, sometimes “unbelievable” contours and assertions, meets these requirements.

The above said, we need to acknowledge that there are characters and situations in some fiction that—even though they adhere at differing levels to the above descriptions and definitions—are yet composed of elements that will not be viewed as particularly “true” or “believable.” Flesh-eating zombies from Venus? The vice president of the United States as a belly-dancing transvestite with two heads? The day that a huge earthquake separates California from the rest of the United States, after which it floats into the Western Pacific and California raisin growers seize control and annex New Guinea? While
there may be substantial portions of the fictional truth described in this paper in fictions that contain such wild speculation and imaginative license, a line would no doubt come that few readers would cross, and they would announce, “this is unbelievable, and not true in any way” (and even more restrained speculation than the fragments above could just as easily be beyond that line for some readers). What this indicates is simply that there is such a thing as untruthfulness in fiction, ranging from tall tales, to unsound conjecture, to outright lies. But we ask: So what? As we have noted, truth in fiction, like any truth, must be open to differing conceptions and estimations of its value. Fiction in this way is the same as many another human communicative endeavor, where we are likely to find truth, and likely to find lies, and likely to find a lot of other things in-between. In short, although we will find untruth in fiction—maybe quite a lot of untruth—that should not lead us to deem fiction as inherently untrue, and ultimately what we will find is that the majority of fiction contains a majority of truth. To this claim we shall now return.

Fictional truth as we have framed it, with its unique ability to engender authentic emotional, psychological and cognitive responses from readers, is based on a combination of actual truth, possible truth, and assumed truth. None is necessarily more important than another, although assumed truth has a powerful role in fictional truth. Keeping the interaction of these three truths in mind, we will turn to our PDTF. But before we do, we want to briefly revisit an issue that was introduced earlier in this essay.

**Fictional Belief**

Based on our triad conception of the truths in fiction (as well as aspects of the other varieties of fictional truth we have reviewed), why is it that readers’ responses to fictional
truth differ in some ways (but not all ways) from their responses to actual truth in the real world? That is, as noted above, why don’t readers call the police, run from the room, send a card when they are experiencing concern, fear or pity when they read fiction? We suggest the following term as a concomitant to fictional truth, which may help explain this aspect of reader response to fictional truth: *fictional belief*.

Fictional belief is a category of belief coinciding with belief in fictional truth, which does not require an identical response to other actual truths in the real world. This is not intended to be evasive. We assert that the responses readers have to fictional truth are in a category of *culturally agreed-upon acceptable responses*. The “culture” we refer to may be either a “macro-culture”—the sociopolitical culture at large in which a given reader functions—or a subculture of readers who have their own expectations about their understanding of and response to the fiction they read, some which are unique to individual readers, others which are common to the entire reading culture. These culturally agreed-upon acceptable responses may in turn be conditioned by readers’ personal expectations and experiences, and in this respect, truth in fiction and fictional belief are highly normative concepts, embedded in culture and social mores and norms (just as actual truth, in its way and for its reasons is). When a person does not respond when a woman is actually being raped in the street, that response has certain repercussions (and no doubt violates certain cultural norms and expectations). When a reader does not respond to a woman being raped in a fiction, there are also repercussions (the reader “has failed to exercise a properly responsible attitude toward the work”\(^{30}\)). However, given that these repercussions are a function of a response to *fictional truth*, they are different from responses to

\(^{30}\) Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 269.
actual truth in the real world, and can be dealt with in certain agreed-upon ways. If a reader has a faulty response to the fictional rape scene, he or she may suffer some psychological or emotional turbulence, or be confronted by others for his or her inadequate response. However, most readers do have proper and even constructive responses to the scene—of empathy, fear, anger or helplessness, or, above and beyond these cognitive and emotional responses, by reconsidering his or her conceptions of women and violence, or even by volunteering at a rape crisis center or some other tangible response. Of course not all reader responses to fictional truth will engender responses outside the typical, agreed-upon, internal (emotional, psychological or cognitive) responses to fiction. But this too is no different from actual truth in life. Many events in real life engender a variety of possible responses, or even no notable response at all.

These agreed-upon responses to truth in fiction, based on fictional belief, may stem from the culture at large, or the more limited reading subculture—both cultures will have their expectations, some unique, some overlapping. To call the police during the fictional rape scene would be an inappropriate response to fictional truth (and this is agreed upon and acknowledged by most, if not all, readers), just as to fail to respond (by not calling the police) to a rape on the street is deemed an inappropriate response to actual truth. Fictional belief in fictional truth engenders both correct and incorrect responses, but to dismiss them as “not valid,” “quasi-responses,” or “incoherent” is incorrect.

III. A Procedural Definition of Truth in Fiction
Based on the foregoing, we propose the following Procedural Definition of Truth in Fiction:

Truth in fiction is a function of the consumption of fiction. It comprises three truth elements: actual, possible and assumed truth, which can be identified as discrete elements in fiction. These elements are granted truth by readers prior to consumption of fiction, appraised in terms of their truthfulness during consumption, and ultimately believed as truth by readers during and after consumption.

In earlier sections of this paper we examined various conceptions of truth in fiction, including authorial intent, the “fictional author,” fictional truth as “make-believe,” self-contained systems of fictional truth, and propositional theories of truth in fiction. To be sure many of these are illuminating, helpful and at least partly accurate conceptions and definitions of truth in fiction. Yet their fundamental flaw is that they either view truth in fiction as a static commodity, a “thing” that can be extracted from the fiction and the processes of the consumption of fiction; or the processes that they propose that yield truth in fiction are misplaced, contorted or intangible (such as somewhat artificial “a = b if c” types of formulae, which deplete narrative of its complexity and contours). To date, truth in fiction has largely been viewed by analysts as an authorial function. While the authors of fiction no doubt play an important role in truth in fiction, the ultimate sources of this truth are readers, through the process of consumption of fiction. Based on the above definition and explanation, the following steps in this process can be constructed:
1. Grant the fiction’s truth (assume)
2. Pursue the fiction’s truth (appraise)
3. Respond to the fiction’s truth (believe)

The above process looks, and is, rather simple. Much of the constitution of this process has been explained in this paper, and the constituents can be “plugged” into the procedure as outlined. The PDTF requires readers to first “grant the fiction’s truth” by way of “assumption.” Riffaterre aptly refers to this as the way fictional elements, “reassert [a story’s] truth […] always assuming that the reader believes in the posited truth of the story,” while Wayne C. Booth writes that “The first essential step [in criticizing and understanding a work of fiction] […] can only be that primary act of assent that occurs when we surrender to a story and follow it through to its conclusion” (32, emphasis in original). The assumption referred to here is not identical to the assumption of assumed truth, but it is closely related. We have seen that ‘to assume’ is “to take as granted or true.” Such an assumption is indeed central to the entire enterprise of consuming fiction. As a very first step in approaching fiction, readers assume the fiction will have credibility, veracity, meaning and coherence. Readers must make this assumption before they open a fiction. If a reader does not grant the truth of a fiction before reading than in all


likelihood the reader simply will not bother with the fiction (we have asserted that readers won’t often read what they won’t or don’t believe). In this respect, as noted above, there is no truth in fiction before this step. This idea needs further explication, which we shall do in a simple manner below, in a metaphor that will illustrate the entire PDTF. For the time being, let us proceed to the second step of the PDTF.

The second step of our process is to pursue (appraise) fictional truth. This conception was referred to first in this paper when we defined “belief.” Belief, recall, is the “conviction of the truth of a statement or the reality of some being or phenomenon, especially when based on examination or evidence” (italics added.). We drew the reader’s attention to this definition, for it is here in our procedure that we can see the importance, the link between the “pursuit (appraisal, examination) of fictional truth” and “believing in fictional truth” in our PDTF. This too is a critical step in consuming fiction, for it is only here that truth in fiction is actually unearthed and understood by readers. This is the active, engaged, reading process, the very pith of what reading a fiction is about: to peruse, evaluate and understand. We like the adjective emergent as one indicator of this facet of truth in fiction (perhaps this process is obliquely connected to the way authors discover and create truth in fiction during writing, which seems fitting.). This step too, we will illustrate in the descriptive metaphor at the end of this section. Let us now, however, look at the third and final step in the PDTF.

The third step in the PDTF is to respond to a reading, that is, to believe in what has been read and to respond further, given the personal and cultural expectations that are related to the particular fictional truth. If a reader never reaches this point, by abandoning a fiction during reading because the text was not seen as credible, valid, applicable or
genuinely emerging from experience and truth in the real world, then the truthfulness of
the fiction is never accepted by the reader, and therefore does not exist for that reader.33
Truth in fiction is not understandable or believed by all readers at all times. It is very
much the end result of an intricate process, instigated by authors but completed by read-
ers.34 We can see here that it is not a discrete commodity that can be detached from fic-
tion, the same thing to all readers at all times. Here we admit is an area where fictional
truth becomes “slippery.” We may find that one fictional work is given a “truth rating” of
50 percent by its total number of readers, while another is rated 100 percent and another
ten percent. Yet if we were to ask those same readers about the “truth rating” of the exist-
ence of Abraham Lincoln, the discovery of x-rays or the delivery of Ronald Reagan’s last
presidential address, then all of these personages and events would no doubt get 100 per-
cent ratings (or very close to that). Yes, in this respect fictional truth does appear to vary
from actual truth as we know it in the preponderance of our experience in the real
world—but this does not diminish its value as truth. For the sometimes uncertain or di-

33 We should note that some readers may exit a fiction before completing it because of their belief
(not their lack of belief) in the truth in the fiction. For some readers, the truth in a fiction may be
“too true,” such as a realistic description of a death in a family that too closely resembles the
reader’s experience, and is thus emotionally overpowering, causing a reader to retreat from the
fiction.

34 In fact, some might view the author, in addition his or her obvious authorial role, as a “first
reader,” and thus the origin of fictional truth. While this would be in accord with our definition of
the PDTF, we feel that this would be an unduly limited conception of truth in fiction, and that any
conception of the processes, purposes and outcomes of fiction should fully encompass readers
and reading.
vided view of fictional truth is, as we have noted more than once in this paper, identical to that of actual truth, and even the small percentage of varying views on the truthful existence of Ronald Reagan’s farewell address indicates this (the differing views on the truthful content of the address would splinter the view of this “truth” even more). Related to this point is the perishable quality of fictional truth. Readers have since time immemorial been profoundly moved and influenced by the fiction they have consumed. Some of these truths may be virtually permanent, never diminishing in a reader’s mind. This writer, for example, is to this day influenced by the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, feverishly consumed over a few days long ago in high school. Such feelings for the truth discovered in a given fiction are, of course, not uncommon. However, many other truths readers discover in fiction may fade over time (sometimes after only a short time) and are thus perishable. Using this writer’s same experience, while he is still moved by *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the novel does not have quite the same strength and immediacy that it did when he first read it. Fiction with an even shorter shelf life is not at all uncommon. Overexposure may a play role, or changing beliefs and attitudes, or analysis that uncovers flaws, hidden agendas and even out-and-out lies in fictions. Over time, work that was once viewed as truthful by many readers may see its “truth rating” and impact reduced.

**A Metaphor Illustrating the Procedural Definition of Truth in Fiction**

Earlier we pondered whether fictional truth is “created” or “discovered” by readers. The following metaphor will show that both processes take place in the PDTF, and will also illustrate the steps in the procedure.
Truth in fiction—actual, possible and assumed—is something like a vein of gold that lies beneath the earth. If no miner discovers the gold, then for all intents and purposes, there is no gold (for the miner). By assuming there is gold beneath the earth, mining for the gold, discovering it, and finally processing it into finished product, the miner brings the gold into reality, ascertaining its “truth” as it were. We may use this metaphor to describe our PDTF, and see that readers first grant the existence of truth in fiction, then “discover” the truth in fiction by way of mining (reading) the fiction, and then have a hand in “creating” the truth by way of their processing (appraising) of the truth into fictional belief.

Not all miners approach their work the same way, each miner seeks different types of ores and mineral products. Similarly readers bring their own sets of beliefs and expectations to their consumption of fiction, and react differently to the truth they unearth during this process. In this way, each reader ultimately mines his own version of truth in fiction.

Necessary Conditions

As the final piece of our PDTF, we will outline several truth conditions that can ultimately determine, based on our definitions and explanations, whether a given fiction has fictional truth or not:

The Procedural Definition of Truth in Fiction is true if:

• Actual and/or Possible and/or Assumed truth within the fiction is intelligible, essentially non-contradictory and systematically related to the real world, Not

---

35 For simplicity, we will refer to each miner and each reader as separate, though of course certain groups of miners and certain groups of readers could have similar aims, and seek the same things in their explorations.
only is this a result of the intelligibility of the text, it is also a function of the reader exercising the proper inquiry into the text’s meaning and truth, and,

• readers’ experiences and cognitive and/or psychological and/or emotional states, or understanding of other’s experiences and cognitive and/or psychological and/or emotional states are intelligibly and believably conveyed in the fiction,

and,

• reader’s cognitive, psychological and emotional constitutions are capable of interpreting, understanding and accepting the fiction, which may also, but not necessarily, be a function of the reader exercising the proper inquiry into the text’s meaning and truth,

and,

• the fiction is not fully governed by the fidelity constraint and a simple referential function,

then

• the fiction itself is true to at least one person.

IV. Conclusion

Perhaps only poets and novelists will fully accept our outline of truth in fiction, with its multiple elements, and emphasis on the roles of readers. Allow us to quote novelist and critic Paul Auster for an illuminating, if authorial point of view. Auster wrote in his “Augie Wren’s Christmas Story,”36

---

As long as there’s one person to believe it, there’s no story that can’t be true.

Some will question our linkage of truth and belief as a key component of the truth that resides in the PDTF. One side will say that at some level truth must be there first, and that truth cannot depend on belief in any way. The sky is blue, the sun rises in the east, Kessai Note is the president of the Marshall Islands in January 2004, Mt. Everest is 29,028 feet in elevation. Whether you believe these things or not makes no difference in their truthfulness, and that lack of connection extends into fictions. But such a claim seems facile, for the fact is we do believe these truths, and when such belief in truth is extended into fiction, then it remains exactly that: a belief in truth.

Others will say that the very notion of “truth” in language (fiction) is all but a dead concept—beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure, we have learned that “the word ‘dog’ [or perro, or gou, or chien] exists, and functions within the structure of…language, without reference to any four-legged barking creature’s real existence.”37 True enough in its way, and a fruitful point of view—but as we have said, somewhat gossamer. In any case, if the truth of the dog exists within the structure of the language, well then in some ways that could be seen as the ultimate arbiter of truth in fiction. And if we all believe in the truth of that dog over there drinking from that bowl of water (and we do), then that’s enough truth to build meaning and truth in fiction on, even if that meaning and truth are sometimes mediated by other linguistic or epistemological factors. Language in this respect may be a sometimes-unreliable carrier of truth, but by no means it is it completely unreliable, and those varieties of truth that stem from the varied perceptions and concep-

tions of the world around us do not alter a dependable understanding that *there is truth in the world that can be truthfully conveyed in fiction*. This “truth built on truth” is the very essence of truth in fiction, although we will always be snared in our concept’s contradictory terms. In the end, however, “fiction” is simply a term for a particular human communicative endeavor, and if fiction is “to shape, to fashion”,\(^\text{38}\) then that is no different from the “shaping and fashioning” that is an important element of all human communication. To a very large extent, what is fashioned and shaped stems from truth, becomes truth, and is, finally, truth.

\[^{38}\text{Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition,}^\text{,” 1998.}\]
DAMN the man below for never responding even one iota to this heartfelt address.

Professor Lane,

Well, here it is, in all its glory. I hope overall it is in good order. I’ve worked hard on it, gone over the suggestions that were made in class (Charles’s suggestions about “hidden authorial agendas” is referred to only obliquely; but god love him, he’s a good man and was a great help this semester), and had a lot of fun and some good discussions with my wife about it. I’m kind of proud of it, though I suspect there are some holes in the logic that might be a bit embarrassing. As I said once, “getting” these philosophical concepts is not always easy (sometimes I’m not entirely convinced that the philosophers “get it,” for they seem to cloak some of the concepts in the most dense, unintelligible language). Organizing, explaining and linking everything has been challenging, very hard to cover every single detail. As for that (supervenient) “link” between truth and belief was a bear (and included somewhat late in the process, though I had thought about calling it supervenience some time ago; speaking of which, my attempt to address “untruth in fiction” also came a bit later in the process than it should have, and you find some weakness here).

Still, I’ve fought pretty mightily to try and make it all make sense. Any way you can help or advice you can offer would be welcome. There is a chance I could submit this paper as a sample if I apply for the Chengchi program. Do you think it would be acceptable? I also have the paper I wrote for Chairman Chen’s class: “Transformation in Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451: A Close Reading and Narratological Analysis.” I dived into that paper too, and I think I uncovered some interesting contours, though I began to lose interest in it as time wore on. Part of this is that structural analysis, while interesting and enjoyable in the way it lays bare a narrative, begins to taste a little chalky after a time.

I once joked in class that I will always have a small regret that I didn’t have a chance to major in philosophy when I was 18, during my first attempt at college at the University of New Mexico. It was no joke actually, but unfortunately, I was not ready for much of anything at that time, and I dropped out after only one semester (one of my other big regrets). As the years wore on, I adopted more and more of a pragmatic approach, and philosophy faded into the background and a “practical, job-oriented” degree in journalism came to the fore (after my very philosophically oriented B.A. degree in International Relations at S.F. State University). But the truth is, Philosophy is probably where I should have gone (I bet my mom would say as much). As I once wrote to an ex-girlfriend when I was revisiting philosophy one last time in a class I took in San Francisco in the mid 1990s: “Philosophy—impractical, cerebral and deeply concerned with ethics and conduct. Sounds just like me!”

I hope we can meet up next semester. I’ll be auditing two classes again (this is one prong of my strategy to try and get into this program). I’ll be in Modernist Fiction and Middle English Literature. Charles and Louis advised I go into these classes, and also my teaching schedule at Shih Hsin dictates my choices.

Thanks again for an enjoyable semester. Best to you.