

Some questions concerning *The Rise of Novelistic Fictionality*

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For more than two decades, Catherine Gallagher has been analysing the intricate relations between the rise of the novel, the concept of fictionality, and the status of the body – someone's body or just nobody at all.¹ In this new lecture, she adds to the already impressive body of knowledge her research has delivered.

Simplifying matters to the extreme, one might say that Gallagher contends that novelistic fiction entails plausible narratives (as opposed to non-plausible forms of storytelling prevailing e.g. in 'the scandalous libel and the allegorical romance') and imaginary characters that belong to nobody and that thereby invite the reader to enter into a play of identification and distancing. This play is supposed to be a form of schooling in that it helps readers (especially female readers) to combine sympathy (cf. identification) with moral judgement (cf. distancing). Taking her cue from David Hume's philosophy of sympathy, Gallagher says that this play is easier when no real persons are involved: fictional nobodies are easier to sympathize with, since they are easier to appropriate. Paradoxically, sympathy turns the other into the self and can thus be regarded as a form of egoism. To counter this self-absorption and thereby to facilitate the schooling process, the novel uses various distancing devices, including parody, satire and metafiction exposing the fictionality of the story. Gallagher shows that we are mistaken when we think that the early and realistic novels hide their fictionality. Among many other important contributions to our knowledge of the novel, she has done away with the cliché of the naïve realistic novel.

While this is not the place to propose an extensive appreciation of Gallagher's main ideas, a few questions might be in order. The first has to do with the somewhat vague notion of 'the discovery of fiction'. In the recent study on *The Novel* (edited by Francesco Menotti) to which Gallagher refers in her talk, she published an important essay called 'The Rise of Fictionality'. This intends to show that 'the novel discovered fiction', and that fiction,

¹ See e.g. Catherine Gallagher, *The Making of the Modern Body. Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. and intro. with Thomas Laqueur. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987; *Nobody's Story. The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994; *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel*. Princeton UP 2005.

consequently, is not a ‘transhistorical constant’.² In the introduction to her lecture, she talks about her claim that ‘the novel, specifically, uncovered fictionality and required the articulation of its concept in the eighteenth century.’ The next paragraph says: ‘Fiction was thus discovered as a discursive mode’. The semantic difference between uncovering and discovering may be small, but it raises the question as to what extent the novel discovers something that was already there, waiting to be unveiled. Would it be wrong to say that the novel did not unveil a fiction in waiting, but that it constructed and invented some new form of fiction? Did it, perhaps, transform a concept that had been transformed continually ever since the Greek stories and novels? And if so, why would one be tempted to speak of a discovery? The notion of a discovery seems to cast aside the study of the process of continual transformation, and in so doing it may cause the notion of fiction to remain floating in the air. If, indeed, fiction is not a transhistorical constant, would it be possible to study it as a historical transformation rather than as a discovery?

My second question concerns the role of the reader. We see very little of the real reader in this lecture. He or she is approached as someone who has more or less the same ideas on sympathy as David Hume. Is it correct to use philosophical theories as a means to access the reactions of the readers? Are we to believe that Hume’s view is an accurate reflection of readerly dispositions and tendencies? On a philosophical level, one might just as well argue that nobodies make it difficult – rather than easy – to sympathize with them, since they have no clear form or character that might trigger sympathy. To get away from the abstract, philosophical level, one would have to look at concrete readerly reactions and testimonies.

This would surely be a welcome addition to the speculative view on the reader propounded not just in the talk, but also in the ‘The Rise of Fictionality’. In the essay, Gallagher links the readerly attitude to the rise of modernity, saying e.g. that modernity ‘encourages disbelief, speculation, and credit’.³ Still, most of the evidence on offer comes from metafictional statements in novels and from authorial comments. Gallagher even focuses on ‘the author’s intention to produce characters’, and she makes use of the ‘implied author’.⁴ To me, both authorial intention and implied authors are highly debatable issues and not really arguments to bolster one’s case. Metafictional statements and authorial intrusions in fiction should not be taken at face value, and are no faithful reflection (or anticipation) of the readers’ reactions. A contextualized reception study might be in order here. This might complement

² Catherine Gallagher, ‘The Rise of Fictionality,’ in: *The Novel, Volume I: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 336-364 (quotation p. 340).

³ Catherine Gallagher, ‘The Rise of Fictionality’, p. 345.

⁴ Catherine Gallagher, ‘The Rise of Fictionality’, p. 357.

the view on female readers, which, in this lecture, is distilled only from textual clues and from contemporary philosophy. It may be true that these two textual sources give the impression that ‘the marriageable woman must practice putting the sympathetic machinery, as Hume described it, into reverse’, but it would be nice to see some substantiation for this claim coming from actual readers’ reactions.

Perhaps this study of the actual reader might find some room for cognitive studies and for the Theory of Mind that have become increasingly important in the present-day study of fiction. It would be interesting to see how Gallagher’s ideas link up with these approaches. For instance, to Gallagher fiction implies the ‘imaginative appropriation of another’s point of view’. Can that be compared to the Theory of Mind, which states that we read fiction because it allows us to exercise one of our key capacities, namely our inclination to attribute mental activity, ‘mind’ to others.⁵ Reading fiction would be like exercises in reading minds. Is Gallagher’s suggestion a sort of experiential complement to that theory, focusing especially on emotions and moral sentiments, rather than on the whole cognitive world of a character? And if so, would this imply that emotional engagement with nobodies is part of a general attitude that is not restricted to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Is the play of identification and distancing something which, like fiction, has always been around – and thus is not really discovered – but which, again like fiction, has continually been transformed?

In the end, my two main questions come down to the same: they ask for a broader historical evolution and for a more particularized form of contextual embedding. It is certainly not my suggestion that these are absent from the work of Catherine Gallagher. Quite on the contrary, as her previous studies can testify. Still, I think that the abstract conceptualizing and the philosophical analysis of emotions must at any moment be complemented (or indeed: countered) by actual studies of readerly reactions and by historical studies of what came before and after. Otherwise we might end up with the illusion that we have discovered something new, whereas in fact we have covered the old and its manifold transformations.

⁵ Lisa Zunshine, *Why we read fiction : theory of mind and the novel*. Columbus, Ohio State UP, 2006.