# Why a Story at All?
# A Use for Fiction in Determining How to Live

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## A Little Girl Who Would Not Write

Every year that I have taught, at least one student resists the structures and customs of my classroom. Responding means radically reorganizing the ways in which learning is done and, in doing so, how I see the world. In my first year teaching first and second grade in a New York City public school, Flora's struggles with writing baffled me. Flora had no problem with the typical barriers: she could spell, handwriting came easily, sitting still and focusing posed no challenges, and she spoke with agility. Yet, Flora would not write.

The citywide curriculum was based almost exclusively on memoir. I would model elements of a story drawn from my life and the children were supposed to follow my format but fill in their own quotidian details. Where I might write about eating cheerios for breakfast, they could write about eating peanut butter and jelly for lunch. As a reader and writer, I found the curriculum dull and forced. The children's stories were mostly lackluster. Though I loosened up the curriculum so they were no longer largely imitating my examples, I lacked the clarity and confidence to rebel against the genre.

But Flora would not write memoir. Though she spoke extensively about her home life in informal contexts, she refused to put any of these experiences onto paper. It was only when, inspired by my own childhood fictional writing, I had her cut out magazine pictures and "make up" a story that Flora started writing countless pages. When I extended this option to the rest of the class, writing became an energized and inspired period.

Not only did working with Flora change my teaching but it also brought me back to graduate school with questions about what fiction does for the individual and about the interplay between fiction and truth. Yet, when I started studying narrative theory, Flora was far from my mind. In fact, it was only as I got to the end of my first draft of this particular essay that Flora popped back into my field of vision. With her entrance I discovered that this essay is just as much about and for a little girl who took fiction and ran with it as it is a frame for looking at the roles of fiction and philosophy. As such, though drawing primarily on texts, I hope that having planted Flora in the reader's mind, she will remain there — a constant reminder of the implications of theories on daily living.

## Fiction, Philosophy, and Determining How to Act

In Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* fictional novelist, Anna Wulf, reflects on her novel, "I am simply asking myself: Why a story at all — not that it was a bad story, or untrue, or that it debased anything. Why not, simply, the truth?"[1] For Wulf, truth refers to factual accounts — an attempt to capture reality. She also at times takes

a more Platonic look at truth as the essence of how things are. Despite her questions, as the novel unfolds through writing and rewriting, Wulf seeks but never captures either type of truth, factual or essential. Where she is more successful is in working out a way through fiction to respond to the world.

Along these lines, Frank Kermode writes in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, that it is "expected … of poets that they should help us make sense of our lives."[2] According to Kermode, poetry helps people figure out how to live. Thus fiction is defined in such a way that it corresponds with conceptions that philosophy helps one determine how to live. Aristotle claims that philosophy helps us to act in the right way. Specifically, for Aristotle the prudent person is one who knows how to apply philosophical conceptions of virtue to particular situations.[3] Yet, knowing how to apply philosophy to action is not always obvious. This essay will argue that fiction offers a bridge between philosophy and action that ultimately allows us to experiment with what a philosophy could look like prior to enacting it on the world.

## Fictions (Broadly Defined)

The term "fiction" has a broad range of meanings and its forms have changed over time. While different forms have implications for the particular role that fictions play, I draw more generally on Kermode's use of "fiction" to refer to a wide range of imaginative literary constructions that make no claim at retelling reality. Where mostly I use the term "fiction," at times poetry, mythology, and the novel are referenced when drawing from particular texts. I also interchange reading and writing fiction to highlight how both allow the individual an exploration of alternative worlds.

## When Fiction Dictates Action

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle claims that poetry can either be "true to fact" or "if the description … be neither true nor of thing as it ought to be, the answer must be then, that it is in accordance with opinion."[4] Where poetry is not an exact copy of reality, alterations are made to better represent the deeper truths that can be difficult to recognize in actual life. Fiction also offers what "ought to be" — a sense of how the world should be that comes from a higher law ascertained through philosophy.

The belief that people draw "what ought to be" from fiction has been a source of great anxiety throughout history. In Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Quixote follows chivalric tales as a guidebook, leading him to a skewed vision of reality that physically endangers Quixote and those around him. Blaming the books for Quixote's ill-fated adventures, his fellows throw his library out the window and burn it. As his housekeeper laments, books have "ruined the sharpest mind we had in all La Mancha."[5] Similarly, Quixote's niece exclaims that he could have been saved from the "foolish things" he did "by burning all these wicked books of which he has so many, because they deserve burning every bit as much as heretics do."[6] The books are entirely to blame — even the "sharpest" individual is unable to avoid their power. Lost in fiction, Quixote lacks the tools to engage effectively in the world.

In Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Emma Bovary finds that her life pales in comparison with literature. Books dictate her choice in clothes, furniture,

behavior, and ways of thinking. Influenced by the novels at her disposal, when her mother dies Bovary is "secretly pleased that she had reached at a first attempt the rare ideal of delicate lives, never attained by mediocre hearts."[7] Her imitation of literature prevents her from developing a more personal reaction to the loss. Further, books offer a reality that can never be lived up to — a reality that, as with Quixote, blinds Bovary and prevents her from responding productively to her life.

Just as Bovary tries to imitate the lives of fictional characters and thereby falls into dissipation, *Madame Bovary* allegedly posed the same danger to young French women.[8] Tried in court as a dangerous novel, the prosecution worried that women would read *Madame Bovary* and follow in Bovary's footsteps. The defense's argument was similarly grounded in the power of literature — suggesting that in viewing Bovary's fall, women would avoid the actions that led her to it. In this context, books are perceived as an influential guide for both positive and negative behavior.

In Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, fiction is used intentionally to meddle with reality. Responding to a flurry of suicides, the poet Ka is informed that, "it's because people like you are writing about them in the Istanbul papers that these girls are committing suicide in the first place."[9] When Ka resists this interpretation, suggesting that, "They're committing suicide because they're unhappy," he is told, "We're unhappy too, but we don't commit suicide."[10] As with Quixote, it is the fiction, not the person who reads it, who has the ultimate control over people's actions. This perspective implicates the writer as manipulating the reader. To protect the reader, the writer must be censored to prevent certain events.

In *Snow* this precaution is well founded as writers do intentionally write future events into being. Newspaper publisher, Serdar Bey, reports what will ultimately happen but has not yet occurred. When Ka questions him about this, Bey responds:

> There are those who despise us for writing the news before it happens. They fear us not because we are journalists but because we can predict the future; you should see how amazed they are when things turn out exactly as we've written them. And quite a few things do happen only because we've written them up first. This is what modern journalism is all about. I know you don't want to stand in the way of our being modern — you don't want to break our hearts — so that is why I am sure you will write a poem called "Snow" and then come to the theater to read it.[11]

The "modern journalist" uses fictions to dictate ultimate realities. Fiction here is particularly sinister, a means of effectively modeling the world on the writer's vision. This imposition of fictions on reality is not just the stuff of novels. As Kermode writes, "What is, in this sense, wrong and dangerous is the belief, gratefully learnt by fascism from the innocent pragmatists, that fictions are to be justified or verified by their practical effects. Thus the world is changed to conform to a fiction, as by the murder of Jews. The effect is to insult reality …" (*SE*, 109). In this particularly extreme example, Hitler used a fiction of how he wanted the world to look to concoct an action plan. He then motivated a nation to enact it by filling them with fictions of how he believed things ought to be. Fiction undermines the natural course of events through this interference and in doing so insults reality.

In each highlighted instance, the fiction influences action to the detriment of human beings. Yet, the danger is less that one could be manipulated to behave cruelly (though this is problematic in its own right) and more that one could be manipulated at all. The reoccurring threat of fiction is that people imbibe it, unmediated, as if it has a clear message for action. Quixote's "sharpest mind" is destroyed by fictions. Ka initially resists the newspaperman's prophecy but finds himself taken over by it and then follows it to the letter. For Plato, a great danger of poetry is that a muse deposits the poem in the poet; the poet then spews out this vision without reflection, and the visions are ultimately planted within other souls. Poetry is insidious because it seeps into the psyche. Its allure is so powerful that it bypasses reason and is followed without thought. People do not consciously imitate the poets but are unconsciously guided by them. The danger therefore is not so much the ideas that occur in fiction, problematic as they may be, but the ways that fiction infiltrates.

Additionally, in his notorious banning of the poets in *The Republic*, Socrates expresses deep anxiety over the fact that fiction imitates the world superficially but does not, as captured by the poets, speak to fundamental truth. As Socrates' interlocutor Glaucon says, as a poet, "I could make them appear, but I couldn't make the things themselves as they truly are."[12] Some poets, as Socrates sees it, might copy reality but do not delve deeper into the patterns that make up this reality. Fictional works offer mirror images of the world without speaking to any deeper understanding (*R*, 596d–e). In other words, fiction masquerades as truth.

For Plato, one option is to ban the poets from the ideal city. But corruption by fiction is not inevitable. Plato writes, poetry "is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug to counteract" (*R*, 595b). Unless armed against fiction, like a guardian armored in reason, one will automatically seek to imitate. Reason is the antidote.

Further, fiction is not the only discourse that Plato worries is swallowed whole. A great anxiety is the degree to which Athenians take in the Sophists' words without adequate exploration. Throughout the *Republic*, Socrates seeks knowledge of what really is through *elenchus*. Essentially, reasoned discourse attempts to get to the bottom of ideas to ensure that nothing is accepted without a proper exploration. Through this process what is ultimately taken in is believed to be closer to truth.

Thus, both fiction and philosophy require reasoned treatment to be assimilated properly. For the remainder of this essay, I will argue that this treatment comes when the two disciplines interrogate each other. Where Socrates' has already pointed out the ways in which philosophy supports fiction by providing a means to examine it rationally, fiction offers philosophy an equally powerful tool for deeper understanding and appropriate digestion.

## Fiction as Philosophy Illustrated

Throughout the Socratic dialogues, when the interlocutor is stumped and Socrates finds himself at a loss for words, he often turns to fiction — promising that he will "show" what he has been unable to theorize. The *Republic* begins with Socrates struggling to respond to Thracymachus' claim that justice lies in the will

of the strong. In response, Adeimantus twice urges Socrates, "don't merely give us a theoretical argument that justice is stronger than injustice but tell us what each itself does" (*R*, 367b, 367e). In other words, "show what effect each has because of itself on the person who has it — the one for good and the other for bad — whether it remains hidden from gods and human beings or not" (*R*, 376e). This injunction launches Socrates into an extensive fiction as he endeavors to create the imaginary cities that better allow his listeners to see his argument on justice. Later, as Glaucon works his way through Socrates' concept of understanding, opinion, and thinking, Socrates offers a range of explications that culminate in the allegory of the cave (*R*, 508d–519d). After spending the bulk of the *Republic* reasoning through how the just bring good upon themselves, Socrates illustrates this by recounting the Myth of Er (*R*, 614b). Throughout the *Republic*, fiction enters in moments of confusion and abstraction, and allows Socrates to do the work that philosophy alone cannot. Despite Socrates' anxiety around fiction and claims that it is an inferior form,[13] he depends upon it throughout the *Republic*.

Further Plato grounds his philosophy on the importance of dialogue by offering a narrative of Socrates' life work. As Mikhail M. Bakhtin notes, "We possess a remarkable document that reflects … a new artistic-prose model for the novel. These are the Socratic dialogues."[14] Unlike most subsequent works of philosophy, Plato employs character, action, and setting. As the dialogues transpire, the individual personalities of the interlocutors emerge. Plot occurs as ideas are debated and opinions change. Most dialogues begin in a specified location and among a specific community. For example, in the *Republic* we first encounter Socrates as he plans to journey to Piraeus with Glaucon and then follow him into the home of Cephalus. As a reader, brought into the setting and hearing each word in the scene, we join in as one of the audience. In fact, bringing the reader into the story — as if he or she, too, were an interlocutor — arguably saves Plato's work from being internalized thoughtlessly as he worries the work of the poet might be. We follow the argument as it unfolds, weighing each speaker's claim as an audience member.

## Fiction as a Space to Explore Ideas

In *The Thracian Maid: Arendt and Heidegger*, Jacques Taminiaux writes of Martin Heidegger that "as a consequence of his total devotedness to the thinking activity, the professional thinker is inclined to claim the right of regulating all other activities and, therefore, to confuse or amalgamate thought and action, or thought and will, or thought and judgment."[15] Taminiaux criticizes the philosopher for drawing up actions directly from a philosophy. A philosophy may hold up against arguments within the discipline but turn out to be catastrophic when enacted in the world. There must be space outside of philosophy to consider a given philosophy's potential implication on action.

Fiction offers just this space. Specifically, fiction can illustrate what a philosophy might look like if executed and, thus, offer a means of exploring a philosophy prior to enacting it. In this way, fiction allows the reader and writer to move from theory to a potential result without disrupting reality. As Kermode notes, St. Augustine "wrote about this moment, when one is confronted by the lost and won

of the future; a moment when the gap between desire and act is wide" (*SE*, 84). Fiction widens the gap between a desire and an act by giving the space to try out ideas. It slows us down.

Fiction allows for spatial adjustments. Plato offers the image of the city to better see into the workings of the individual (*R*, 368c–369a). As Aristotle writes, story both enlarges that which is so small that it cannot be seen and shrinks that which is too big to grasp.[16] A situation can be interrogated more closely as each detail is zoomed in on. Similarly, in fiction one can zoom out and see the particulars within a larger whole.

Where Plato and Aristotle write in terms of size, this adaptable lens also applies to time. In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* Gerard Genette discusses order, duration, and frequency to highlight the vast leaps through story time that can happen in only a few moments of reading time. Over the course of a few pages, years of history can be truncated and examined. Conversely, it takes many days for the reader to wade through a single day in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Fiction operates within a different temporal system entirely: a "time when the soul distends itself to include past and future."[17] One can view both what leads to an action and a vision of what that action will result in all within the safety of never actually acting. As Kermode writes of Macbeth, "[T]he great soliloquy begins by wishing away the perpetuity of the moment" and yet "to be and to end are, in time, antithetical; their identity belongs to eternity" (*SE*, 85). In life, one cannot know at the start what happens at the finish nor can one experience both within the same moment and then analyze the result. Fiction is the closest one comes to showing in one movement what an idea might look like.

Finally, one of the beauties of fiction is that it allows for a repetition that real time and space cannot support. Socrates' life work is based on Chaerephon's trip to the Oracle of Delphi where Chaerephon is famously told, "that no one was wiser" than Socrates.[18] Like a poet, the oracle has an idea planted within him and as with a poet's audience (according to Socrates), Chaerephon accepts this information as true. Yet, Socrates' response is definitively active. Given a philosophy — the claim that he is wiser — Socrates endeavors to prove whether this is a truth worthy of modeling his life after. After hearing Chaerephon's report, Socrates proceeds to examine through dialogue everyone he comes into contact with. As he says at the trial, "even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me — and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise."[19] Socrates engages in dialogue till the last moments of his life — embodying the search for knowledge. He investigates Chaerophon's story with reason instead of just absorbing it. In this way, he provides a model to address fiction: forever investigate with the understanding that at any point an idea could be proven false.

Yet, Socrates has a rare luxury. He can investigate Chaerophon's claim with minimal harm to others and he is willing to risk his life in the search. He also has the

time and ability to wander around interrogating people. He enacts the theory instead of trying it out first in fiction. In doing so, he ultimately sacrifices his own life.

Lacking Socrates' ability to try his ideas on the world, others have paper and pen with which to do so. Early in the *Golden Notebook*, the frustrated writer, Wulf bemoans, "Yet I am incapable of writing the only kind of novel which interests me: a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life. It is because I am too diffused."[20] As life itself is not orderly, a book that attempts to capture life cannot be either. As such, for over six hundred pages, *The Golden Notebook* essentially tells and retells the same story from different angles in an attempt to find the truth that Wulf seeks. In an endlessly complicated loop, the reader finds similar characters and themes revisited in various forms. In this way, Wulf experiments with one version of truth and then another while also living her life. Wulf's actions (depicted in her journals) and her fiction evolve in conjunction with each other, suggesting that she writes her way toward new actions.

Though no ultimate "truth" emerges, the fiction gives Wulf a "new way of looking at life." Therefore, literature here offers not imitations but alternative views of reality. As Kermode writes: "You remember the golden bird in Yeats' poem — it sang of what was past and passing and to come, and so interested a drowsy emperor. In order to do that, the bird had to be 'out of nature'; to speak humanly of becoming and knowing is the task of pure being, and this is humanly represented in the poem by an artificial bird" (*SE*, 3). In viewing the world from outside time and space, changing the speed and the focus, repeating at will, stories allow us to examine more closely our worlds and ways of acting within them.

Wulf claims that "one novel in five hundred or a thousand has the quality a novel should have to make it a novel — the quality of philosophy" (SE, 59). For Wulf, ultimately, this quality is not a search for a truth, but a way to find one's way forward in life. As for Socrates, this work is ongoing, a perpetual seeking. Fiction gives the opportunity to try out philosophies — to act on paper before we act in life. Fiction, as with philosophy, will not ensure that we do not act poorly. It does not prevent action. Real time and the nature of reality force us to act on the world. Instead, fiction gives us the creativity to think through actions good and bad — to imagine a given philosophy enacted and then to rearrange one's thinking to imagine again.

## Flora Revisited

In considering the power of fiction, we return to Flora — a little girl facing quite a few limits and challenges. In fiction, Flora created an eponymous wealthy adult character who adopts orphaned children. This "Flora" drives a fancy car, adopts children off the street, and takes them to the zoo. The theme of orphaned children persisted in Flora's writing, taking a range of forms and resolutions. My point in exploring these repetitions is not to analyze the details of Flora's home life nor even her psyche. Instead, I take them simply as themes that, likely for a variety of reasons, she needed to review. In the classroom, after exploring Flora's repetitions, I became

aware that most students wrote and rewrote a given motif. Where previously I might have corrected this, worried they were being redundant, I came to see this as the essential work of the writer — a space to try and try again. Kermode writes:

> [N]ovels, says Sartre, are not life, but they owe our power upon us, as upon himself as an infant, to the fact that they are somehow like life. In life, he once remarked, "all ways are barred and yet we must act. So we try to change the world; that is, to live *as if* the relations between things and their potentialities were governed not by deterministic process but by magic. (*SE*, 135)

In Flora's life many ways were barred and yet she had to go on. In fiction, she wrote herself forward, experimented with avenues that worked. The few times she wrote non-fiction, she highlighted and expanded upon moments of deep joy. She played with time and space — elongating an actual experience, changing herself to an adult, rarely choosing to write memoir and never to write directly about her struggles. In fiction, Flora got to rewrite life according to her visions, she got to write about people who could achieve the things she repeatedly struggled at. Where this may have little direct correlation on her immediate actions, fiction allowed her to explore.

Looking at fiction as something to imitate is at best quite limiting, and at worst dangerous when people directly imitate certain fictions. Further, pure imitation limits our minds to what is and what has already been. Philosophy is similarly dangerous when taken as a guide for action. Instead, fiction ought to be the space of experiment and of considering how philosophy might influence action. It is the space to work through life again and again as Socrates, Lessing, and Flora all demonstrate. It is the space to work through Aristotle's injunction to act in the right way. Finally, this work is not just the work of the philosopher or the novelist. It is the essential work of the child figuring out how she will grow into an adult, it is the work of the human being. We must have our fiction to find our way forward in the world.

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1. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1962), 61.

2. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1967), 3. This work will be cited as *SE* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 1141b15–17, 1152a13–14.

4. Aristotle, *Poetics,* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1460a31–36.

5. Miguel De Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Burton Raffel (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1999), 32.

6. Ibid.

7. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. Margaret Cohen (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 2005), 34.

8. Ibid., 313–388.

9. Orhan Pamuk, *Snow* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 62.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 28.

12. Plato, *Republic,* trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 596e. This work will be cited as *R* in the text for all subsequent references

13. William Proefriedt, *How Teachers Learn: Toward a More Liberal Teacher Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 60–61.

14. Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 24.

15. Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid: Arendt and Heidegger*, trans. Michael Gendre (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 21.

16. Aristotle, *Poetics,* 1450a–1451a.

17. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 84–85.

18. Plato, *Apology,* in *Plato: Complete Works,* eds. J.M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 20e–21a.

19. Ibid., 23b.

20. Lessing, *Golden Notebook*, 59.