



Imagining the Author: Historical Understanding and the Cognitive Value of Art

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1 Introduction

Chapter 2 of Jukka Mikkonen’s *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition* (2021) examines the role played by the imagination in “the reader’s supplementation of a work’s content and her reflection on that content” (9)¹ and the imagination’s importance for the cognitive value of literature conceived in terms of understanding rather than knowledge. In this chapter he proposes an alternative account of “literary imagination” to those found in recent analytic aesthetics, which typically conceive of imagination as a mental state and in terms of “make believe.” Instead, Mikkonen favours a conception of imagination that takes it to be an activity or process that readers engage in rather than a mental state that a reader can be in, and one that is not essentially connected with making-believe that some fictional content is true. Specifically, he argues that, while the make-believe model, and the associated distinction between imagination and fantasy, might be suitable for investigating the nature of *fiction*, if our concern is to understand a reader’s engagement with a fictional text “as a *literary* work of art” and “in terms of aesthetic experience,” and also to understand the cognitive value of this engagement, we need a new model, since “the role of imagination [here] seems different” (Ibid., original emphasis).

While I broadly agree with Mikkonen’s stance on the shortcomings of currently popular models of imagination in analytic philosophy of art, and with his shift of focus from knowledge to understanding as being central to art’s cognitive value, there is a further role that imagination plays in an audience member’s (e.g., a reader’s, spectator’s, listener’s, etc.) engagement with a work of art which Mikkonen overlooks, one that is arguably central to our engagement with an object (e.g., a text)

¹ Points or quotes from Mikkonen, 2021 will be referred to by page number using in-text citations. References to other works will be given in footnotes.

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as an artwork and so is important for realizing art's cognitive value. This is the place of the imagination in an audience member's engagement with the artist or author of a work, with this engagement being mediated by or taking place "through" the work, where this engagement is necessary to understand and appreciate the work as not just an object but an artwork. Moreover, this kind of understanding—which I call "historical understanding," following art historian Michael Baxandall who is himself following R.G. Collingwood²—is, I will argue, an important part of imaginatively engaging with, and realizing the cognitive value of, a work *qua* art.

I will proceed by, first, summarizing Mikkonen's discussion of existing accounts of imagination and how imagination features in a reader's engagement with literature—that is, with narrative texts that are often, but not always, fictional—highlighting where he sees these accounts as lacking and noting the alternative that he prefers. Second, I will focus on the aforementioned dimension of imaginative engagement with literature that Mikkonen does not discuss, arguing that it should be included in the alternative account of literary imagination that Mikkonen wants to develop, and explaining its connection to art's cognitive value.

2 Mikkonen on Literary Imagination

In Mikkonen's survey of existing views of imagination and its role in literary or artistic engagement, he considers popular accounts such as what has come to be called the "fictive stance," according to which a reader's engagement with literary fiction involves their pretending that the contents of a text are true and hence that the text is a true account of the events described therein, where this obviously employs the reader's imagination insofar as it has them making-believe something about the text and its contents.³ This relies on a make-believe model of imagination according to which reading fiction involves playing a "game of make-believe" with the text,⁴ where this "game" is typically understood in terms of the reader being in the mental state of making-believe some part of the contents of the work, where this in turn is commonly understood in terms of that state's propositional content—e.g., making-believe *that P*—with said propositional content being guided or "mandated" by the work and its properties.⁵ Mikkonen finds this account too limiting as a view of the role played by imagination in the experience of reading literature, where he takes literary experience to involve a greater range of imaginative activities than merely imagining the things and events that comprise a work's content.

Mikkonen is more favourable to views that take into account the fact that engagement with a literary work involves the reader engaging both with the work's content—e.g., the fictional world and events it describes—and with the work as an artefact in our own world. Examples of such views include Kendall Walton's idea that the liter-

² See Baxandall, 1986; Collingwood, 1939, especially chapters V–VIII.

³ On the "fictive stance," see Wolterstorff, 1980, 233; views of fiction as involving this sort of pretense are also found in Austin, 1975 and Searle, 1975.

⁴ See, e.g., Currie, 1990; Walton, 1990.

⁵ Walton, 1990, 37–39.

ary reader occupies a “dual standpoint” on a work, on the one hand making-believe they are inside the work’s fictional world while, on the other, analysing and interpreting the work as a text,⁶ and Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen’s distinction between “fictive” and “literary” stances in literary experience, where adopting the fictive stance in one’s reading involves focusing on a text’s content and imagining what is described therein, whereas adopting the literary stance involves focusing on *how* the text presents its contents: for instance, by attending to and analyzing the literary devices used in the work, or by “recognizing and appreciating the aesthetic value of the work’s development of its themes” (25).⁷ Lamarque and Olsen also recognize that a reader’s engagement with a work can involve their taking both “internal” and “external” perspectives on it, where an internal perspective involves an immersive imaginative engagement with the work itself, and where an external perspective involves relating the work or some of its elements to reality beyond the work, which could include reflecting on what real-world objects, events, or types of phenomena the contents of a work might refer to, or assessing whether what is true in the fiction also holds true in the real world.⁸

While Mikkonen is sympathetic to Lamarque and Olsen’s notion of the literary stance and their focus on readers’ engagements with *how* a work presents its contents, e.g., through literary techniques and conventions that prompt their imaginings,⁹ he questions the rationale for limiting “literary imagination to the imaginative responses prompted by a work’s fictional descriptions” and for “draw[ing] a sharp line between prompted response and reflective supplementation of the content” (24). That is, Mikkonen finds that even Lamarque and Olsen consider imagination only with respect to how it operates within what they call the fictive stance and the internal perspective, but do not see the dimensions of literary experience that belong to the literary stance, which involve taking an external perspective on a work’s content, as involving the reader’s imagination. This—i.e., that they consider imagination only or primarily with respect to a work’s content—is one point in Mikkonen’s critique of the common (or paradigmatic) views on the place of imagination in literary experience. Another point in his criticism is that these views, he argues, are more relevant to the nature of fiction and to readers’ engagements with narratives of all kinds, both fictional and non-fictional, than they are to readers’ experiences and engagements with literary fictions or narratives *qua* literary.¹⁰ Since the field of literature includes works of both fiction and non-fiction,¹¹ and since not all narratives are literary, accounts of how imagination features in our engagements with fictions—e.g., make-believe or

⁶ Walton, 1978, 21; Walton, 1990, 49–50.

⁷ This is Mikkonen’s paraphrase of Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, 408–9.

⁸ See Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, Chap. 6.

⁹ See also Lamarque, 2009, 243–44; Lamarque, 2014, 166.

¹⁰ Mikkonen cites Friend, 2008, and Matravers, 2014, as two authors who have argued that imaginative engagement is better understood as a feature of our response to narratives, rather than to fiction per se.

¹¹ Examples of *literary* non-fiction include Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966), Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1969), and David Foster Wallace’s long-form essay “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” (1998). There is no obvious reason to think that claims about literature’s cognitive value will only apply to literary fictions and not to works such as these.

pretense accounts—or that place their focus on fictionality or narrativity will not necessarily illuminate what is distinctive about *literary* experience, or any cognitive value that literature might have *qua* literature.

The third point of criticism that Mikkonen makes of existing views of imagination's place in literary experience is that these views put too many limits on the reader's imagination, taking it to be guided or even determined by the work, more or less passively following the work's prompts as to what readers are to imagine. Instead, Mikkonen argues that readers' imaginative engagements with literary works are active, participatory, and even creative: one example of this is the reader's filling-in of "gaps" or ambiguities in a text, where such "places of indeterminacy" are more common in, and may even be standard features of, literary as opposed to non-literary narratives.¹² This active and participatory dimension of a reader's imaginative engagement with a work becomes more apparent if, in line with the first point of Mikkonen's critique discussed above, we do not restrict it to the internal perspective but acknowledge that the imagination is also involved in readers' "external" reflections on texts. As Mikkonen argues, "imaginative engagement with a work of literary fiction commonly involves, and sometimes arguably necessitates, readers reflecting on the fictional content in different ways in relation to reality" (33)—or, we might add, with a work's non-fictional content in relation to other parts of reality "outside" the text.

This brings us to Mikkonen's preferred view of literary imagination, which is not a fully laid-out account so much as an acknowledgement of the ways in which imagination is a crucial part of both "internal" and "external" perspectives, and of the many diverse kinds of imaginative activities that can feature in literary engagement beyond mentally picturing the things and events described in a text. Here Mikkonen's view is closest to Peter Kivy's, whom he cites on the point that "external" considerations, such as reflecting on how a certain type of behaviour or way of thinking exemplified by a fictional character might have instances in history, current public affairs, or the reader's personal life can illuminate our understanding of both the fictional and real-world cases, and should be considered as part of the reader's encounter and engagement with *the work* despite not strictly being part of the reader's imagining *the story* (38).¹³ Mikkonen goes on to note that imaginative engagement with a work of literature, rather than merely with the events of a story, can also occur outside of the time one spends actually reading the work, with the reader's memories of what they have read and their ideas about it influencing how they experience and understand the world around them: as he puts it, the literary works we read often "live with us," such that "[w]hen one is impressed by a work, one may temporarily adopt the author's perspective towards the world and see how it fits" (38–39).

Including these kinds of external considerations in the experience of and engagement with literary works has implications for the ways in which engaging with literature can be cognitively valuable. Where the common or paradigmatic view has tended to regard literature's potential cognitive value mainly or solely in terms of knowledge, and where the typical view that imagining something is being in a mental

¹² Here Mikkonen draws on Ingarden, 1979, and Iser, 1980.

¹³ Cf. Kivy, 2011, 81.

state with propositional content (e.g., ‘making-believe *that P*’) leads to a focus on the truth-status of its contents and therewith of the propositions that a work prescribes the reader to imagine, Mikkonen observes that “external considerations seem to come with different propositional attitudes and might involve different mental processes from supposing a proposition via determining its truth-conditions to ultimately assessing its truth-value” (37). Instead of the traditional concern with the knowledge that a reader can gain from engaging with literature, this shifts the focus to how this engagement can add to the reader’s understanding of the world or of certain types of phenomena within it.

Mikkonen notes a possible worry that comes from giving external considerations a greater role in literature’s cognitive value: there seems to be a risk of “abandon[ing] the cognitive distance of the fictive stance” and losing sight of what might be distinctly *literary* (36).¹⁴ In other words, if the reader’s imaginative reflection is too much on the side of the external perspective and gets away from a focus on the work itself, the source of whatever cognitive benefits this reflection might have might not be strictly *literary*. That is, even if it is prompted by a work’s contents, can the reader’s imaginative reflection still be said to be an engagement with *the work* rather than with the world at large? For instance, a reader who “reads for life,” with the primary intention of coming to know or understand something about the world (e.g., human psychology, history, etc.), seems to be using the work as an occasion to learn things about subjects beyond the work itself, rather than relating to it, engaging with it, and appreciating it *qua* literature (35).¹⁵

I do not know that Mikkonen manages to overcome this worry, which arises from both (i) allowing that an audience member’s reflections on how a work or its contents/parts relate(s) to some aspect of reality beyond the work itself can be a source of its cognitive value, and (ii) holding that the distinctly *literary* cognitive value of a work must come from engaging with it *qua* work of literature. This problem can be solved by supplementing Mikkonen’s otherwise broad view of literary imagination with a further dimension of readers’ imaginative engagements with literary narratives that he overlooks.

3 Imaginatively Apprehending a Work as an Author’s Doing

The dimension of engaging with literary narratives (as well as works in other art-forms) that employs the reader’s imagination and is plausibly part of realizing the distinctive cognitive value of literature (or of art in other forms), but which Mikkonen does not discuss, involves a kind of imaginative engagement on the part of the reader with the work’s author. This is a matter of the reader’s imaginative reflection on the creative choices and actions that the author performed when writing the work, in addition to imagining the work’s content (e.g., the events of the narrative) and attend-

¹⁴ Here Mikkonen quotes Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, 148.

¹⁵ Analogously, someone who watches a film for the purpose of studying the fashions in clothing of the decade and culture in which it was made might gain knowledge from the film, but this will not be part of whatever cognitive value the film might have *qua* cinematic work of art.

ing to and reflecting on the work's form (e.g., literary techniques or conventions). In other words, it is a matter of reflecting not only on *what* the work is about and *how* it is about it, but *why* what it is about is arranged and presented in the way that it is.

This reflection is part of a reader's *imaginative* engagement with a work because it involves positing, or hypothesizing, something that is not present to the reader and so is not available for direct observation but must be imagined, in the same way in which a historian's imagination is actively employed in positing past events and their causes, historical agents' reasons for acting, etc. Apprehending and understanding an artwork in terms of the creative actions and choices of its maker—e.g., as what David Davies calls a “performance”¹⁶—is similarly “historical,” not in the sense of situating the work within the history of art or in relation to world-historical events (political, economic, etc.), but in the sense of reflecting on and endeavouring to understand something from the past—viz., the process of making by which the work came into being, and the “doings” of the person or people who made it—by taking something in the present, the work itself, to be evidence of these past events. The sense of imagination here is, of course, broader than just making-believe or quasi-perceptual “picturing” (e.g., visualizing a character, object, or event), and is closer to the sense we find in Aristotle's account of *phantasia* and, later, in Collingwood's writings on imagination: one that is neutral as to truth or falsehood, and so one that applies to both veridical imagining and mere “fantasy.”¹⁷

This kind of activity is commonplace in the ways we engage with artworks as audience members: it occurs whenever we ask questions about, for instance, why a novel begins or ends with certain events rather than others, where asking this question is a matter of thinking about what the author was doing, and what they meant by it, in their writing of the book, and trying to answer it involves coming up with one or more hypotheses, or imagined possible scenarios, which are “tested” for their coherence against other “evidence.” Such evidence can include other parts of the work (e.g., does our hypothesis that the writer began chapter one with a particular event in order to highlight its thematic or causal importance for the narrative “pay off” by this event turning out to have this importance in the context of the whole story?), other works by the same artist (e.g., does the writer have a history of portraying characters of a certain kind sympathetically? Is the writer known for her dark humour?), and, when available, explicit statements of intention by the artist (e.g., interviews or prefaces).¹⁸ This last source of potential evidence against which to test our hypotheses is arguably more problematic, since treating the artist's own statements about their choices and intentions as evidence assumes that they are both honest and reliable; however, artists can have reasons for being revisionist about the history of their own making of a work (e.g., to foster a persona as a creative “genius”), and, moreover, are not always fully aware of their own processes of working and the motivations for their

¹⁶ See Davies, 2004.

¹⁷ See Aristotle, 1957, book III; Collingwood, 1938, chapters VII–X.

¹⁸ It might be thought that genre conventions can also count as evidence of what an artist was doing in making a work turn out a certain way, but to count for the kind of historical understanding that I am concerned with here, there would have to be some further evidence that (i) the author was aware of the conventions in question and (ii) could be reasonably expected to be influenced by these conventions in their work.

creative choices: as D.H. Lawrence famously warned, “[n]ever trust the teller, trust the tale.”¹⁹

Some might say that what I am describing is a matter of the *interpretation* of a work, and that this is distinct from, and additional to, an audience member’s basic imaginative engagement with the work. However, while it is true that one can imaginatively engage with a work without reflecting on the artist’s activities and creative choices in their making of that work, I would argue that this reflection *is* a necessary part of engaging with and apprehending something *as a work of art*. As Baxandall notes, works of art, like other artifacts but unlike natural objects, are rightly and perhaps “unavoidabl[y]” encountered and thought of “as products of purposeful activity”—that is, as somebody’s “doing”—and “therefore [as] caused,”²⁰ where inquiring into the causes that led to a work being as it is is part of what Baxandall calls the historical *explanation* of the work.²¹ Without attending to a work as the result of someone’s intentional and voluntary “doing,” but attending to it only as, say, a perceptible object in the case of a painting or sculpture, or for its narrative contents and literary form in the case of a novel, one is not fully engaging with it as the kind of thing it is, but in a way that is not much different from how we might attend to or engage with a naturally occurring object or event. This might involve attending to, appreciating, and evaluating the work’s *aesthetic* properties, in the sense of how the work or its parts might be qualitatively valuable or disvaluable to experience (e.g., whether a painting is pleasant or interesting to look at, whether the story told in a novel is fun to imagine, etc.), but it will miss many of the work’s *artistic* properties and so will overlook an essential part of what makes the work *an artwork*.

This kind of imaginative engagement with the author is not only a common part of many people’s literary experiences²²—for instance, many will be familiar with this way of engaging with fictional narratives from their secondary school literature classes—but is in line with, or even implicit in, many of the points that Mikkonen makes and the examples he appeals to in his discussion of literary imagination. For instance, the two critical reviews of Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* (2010) that Mikkonen quotes both focus on what Littell is *doing* in the novel, in particular with his portrayal of one of its characters, and what Littell’s point is in doing it (29–30). It is also implied by the observation that Mikkonen quotes from critic Georges Poulet that, in reading, one is in some sense “adopting another’s mind” (15), where the other whose mind Poulet talks of adopting, and whose thoughts the reader thinks, is the author of the work rather than one or more of its characters: even when we might speak of getting inside a character’s head or thinking their thoughts, it is always ulti-

¹⁹ Lawrence, 1923, 4.

²⁰ Baxandall, 1986, vi.

²¹ Due to limited space I will bracket concerns about the place of an artist’s or author’s intentions in the interpretation of their work. Baxandall, 1986 is worth reading in its entirety on this issue.

²² This is compatible, of course, with this kind of engagement *not* being part of many *other* people’s experiences of reading literary works. Not every reader, or even every frequent and avid reader, necessarily engages with what they read reflectively, *qua* literature: some people just enjoy a good story. I would not want to claim that this is “wrong,” per se, but I would say that it is a comparatively “thinner” or “poorer” sort of reading that does not fully realize the value that engaging reflectively with literature or works in other forms *qua* art can have, including cognitive value.

mately the author's thoughts that we encounter—i.e., what the author thinks a certain kind of person would think, how they would react, what they would do, etc., in a given situation—since fictional characters do not literally have minds or think but are only described by the author as thinking.

Although an imaginative engagement with the author is not as overtly implicit in some of the aspects of literary experience that Mikkonen discusses, it is nevertheless there. For instance, he writes that in engaging with literary works we often “evaluate the narrator and make inferences about her, doubting her account in cases where she (or the whole narrative) seems unreliable” (21), but in evaluating the narrator in this way a reader is effectively reflecting on, and hypothesizing about, what the author is doing with the narrator as a character (e.g., Why did the author make her unreliable? How does this mark the narrator out as similar or different to the other characters?), where even the judgment that the narrator is unreliable involves a hypothesis about which points of view and which descriptions the author means us to accept as reliable or not. Similarly, the talk common among analytic philosophers of art about a work “prescribing” us to imagine something or to adopt a certain perspective is, I think, best understood as an indirect way of talking about how the author intended readers to respond to the text: after all, works of art are not the sorts of thing that can literally perform actions such as prescribing, but authors can prescribe through their works. Likewise, Mikkonen's talk of literary engagement involving the reader “enter[ing] into a dialogue with the work” is, I think, better understood as a matter of entering into a dialogue with the author “through” the work, with any dialogue here necessarily being imagined by the reader since the actual author is not usually available to respond or answer back. A final example that Mikkonen cites, and approves of, that is worth mentioning in this regard is Umberto Eco's comparison of “a work of fiction to a forest and the reader to a wanderer” (21), where the comparison of an artwork to a naturally occurring object such as a forest is less apt than would be a comparison of an artwork to something that is designed—in this case, a garden rather than a forest, where it makes sense for a wanderer in a garden to imagine and reflect on what the designer of the garden was up to in laying it out the way it is.

4 Historical Understanding and the Cognitive Value of Art

This kind of imaginative engagement with an artist “through” their work, may be part of understanding it *as* an artwork, but, we might wonder, how is it part of realizing the work's cognitive value? When cognitive value is conceived primarily in terms of understanding rather than propositional knowledge, as Mikkonen does, the question becomes: how does this way of engaging with a work give us a new or better understanding of some part of the world external to the work's narrative, or enhance our capacities for understanding this world?

For one thing, habitually engaging with literary works (or other artworks) in this way and asking why they are the way they are, rather than taking the way they are for granted and considering only what their content is about, how they look or sound, etc., can dispose us to be generally open-minded and inquisitive, and to be aware of multiple possible meanings or explanations for things in our experience rather than

accepting things at “face value” or as “given,” where this can extend beyond our engagements with art, where such dispositions are plausibly epistemic (or hermeneutic) virtues, and where they enhance our capacities for understanding the world *well*. For another thing, actively forming and testing hypotheses about what the artist is doing during our engagement with a work, in order to understand why the work is as it is, gives us practice in abductive reasoning, where this practice can make us better able to form fruitful hypotheses in other situations by giving us a sense, learned through trial and error, of which hypotheses are more plausible and more likely to be true given the evidence at our disposal. Just as scientists, historians, and criminal investigators can become better with experience at judging the explanation to which some set of evidence points, we can become better readers from experience reading in this way—better in the sense of being better at grasping how a literary work should be understood and evaluated, and more likely to be aware of nuances in the work, as well as the relevance of more of the work’s aspects. This does not yet get us to an understanding of (parts of) the world beyond the work, but I think it does go further, and that we can not only become better readers of literature but become better at “reading”—i.e., attending to and understanding—human thinking and behaviour, social interactions, etc., in the real world, including our own thinking and motivations, since these phenomena are the kinds of subject matter that are prominent in, and are particularly suited to being explored through, literature.

It might be objected that we could get the same practice in abductive reasoning from forming and testing hypotheses about any artifact, asking why its designer made it the way they did, and so there is nothing about this particular kind of cognitive value that is distinctive or unique to the domain of art. Fully responding to this objection would require answering the broader question of what is special about the value of artworks and our engagements with them, as distinct from non-art artifacts or natural objects—where this question may need to be answered differently for different artforms—and so would require more space than I have here. Briefly, and with respect to literature, I think it is significant that works of literature, unlike other designed artifacts, both deal with human psychology as their subject matter—including thoughts, feelings, actions and their motivations, our responses to and perspectives on our experiences of the world, etc.—and are themselves instances of human psychology insofar as they are the results, and the expressions, of their authors’ thoughts, feelings, actions, perspectives, etc. Thus, they are particularly well-positioned to allow us to reflect on and, through hypothesizing about them, come to better understand this dimension of the world and our experience of it, which might broadly be called “the human condition.”

It might also be objected that we could get the same benefits from reflectively engaging only with the characters in a literary work, with nothing further to gain from engaging with the work’s author in the way described above. Here, I would reiterate that what a fictional character thinks and does is ultimately a product not of that character’s mind or agency but of the mind and agency of the author who wrote them, and so hypothesizing about what a character means by something she says or does, or about what she will do in later parts of the narrative and why, is in fact part

of hypothesizing about *the author's* choices and “doings.”²³ When we read a work of literature, we are not only imagining the actions, thoughts, perspectives, etc. of one or more characters, based on the author's descriptions of them, whether these are fictional characters or the author's descriptions of real people in works of literary non-fiction; we are also encountering the actions, thoughts, and perspectives of an actual person—viz., the author—as embodied in the work. Thus, literature is well—if not uniquely—positioned to give us access to an actual (vs. merely fictional) other person's perspectives on, and understandings of, or mental, social, and agential lives *qua* human, and their meaningfulness, “from the inside,” as it were—or as close to this as we can get.

These considerations lead to a view of works of literature—and, with some modification as to what parts of our experience they deal with or express, works in other artforms—as occasions for what we can call “perspectival sharing,” i.e., coming to understand, by imaginatively entertaining “from the inside” a certain way of “taking” the world or some part of it: that is, of perceiving, feeling, thinking about and understanding, or otherwise experiencing it. Importantly, this is not a matter of coming to understand or adopt the perspective of a character within the narrative, including the narrator, or even necessarily of apprehending the author's explicitly stated perspective on the contents of the narrative (including his or her perspective on the character's perspectives within the narrative). Rather, it is a matter of apprehending the perspective on, or way of taking, both the work's content and its form—e.g., how the medium is used to present the content—that is implicit, or “embodied,” in the author's creative choices and doings that have resulted in both the content and form of the work being as they are. And sharing in this perspective through engaging with the work—not necessarily by adopting or endorsing it oneself, but by imaginatively entertaining it so that one comes to know, from the inside, what it would be like to experience or “take” things in that way—is itself cognitively valuable, insofar as it expands one's awareness of how at least one among one's fellow humans—viz., the author—has felt, understood, or otherwise “taken” some part of the world, at least in their imagination and in their making of the work. It is also cognitively valuable insofar as this is also an expansion of one's own capacities for experiencing and understanding things in different ways.

5 Conclusion

I began by summarizing Mikkonen's discussion of some currently popular accounts of how imagination plays a role in our experience of literary works, including his criticisms of the limitations of these accounts and his expansion to a broader view of literary imagination, before arguing that there is another dimension to a reader's imaginative engagement with literary works that Mikkonen does not consider, and, in keeping with Mikkonen's main concern, that this form of imaginative engagement

²³ I want to bracket the kind of claim we hear from authors about characters sometimes “writing themselves”; I think such claims should be taken metaphorically rather than literally, so I don't think they are likely to pose a problem for anything I am saying here.

realizes a cognitive value that is distinctive of literature *qua* literature—or, if we go beyond Mikkonen’s own focus, of art *qua* art.

Taking into account this imaginative engagement of the reader with the literary work as the author’s “doing”—i.e., as the product of, and as embodying, the author’s creative choices and actions—and the cognitive value this engagement can have, avoids a problem that Mikkonen notes but does not himself fully solve. This is the problem of how the reader’s imaginative engagement with the work can include considerations that are “external” to the contents and the literary form of the narrative so as to give us knowledge or understanding of the actual world beyond the narrative, and thereby be cognitively valuable, *and* how this cognitive value can be distinctly *literary*, i.e., primarily coming from the reader’s engagement with the work itself *qua* literature, and not from considerations that are external to the work itself. This problem is avoided by my suggestion because the kind of imaginative engagement that I discuss is with something that is external to the content and form of a work—i.e., *what* it is about, and *how* it is about it—but is nevertheless part of the work itself: *viz.*, *why* the work is about what it is in the way that it is. Thus, this gives us an understanding of some part of the actual world—what the author did in the course of making the work, and why, as well as the author’s perspective on what the work is about—while still being an engagement with the work itself *qua* art.

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