Petr Koťátko
Martin Pokorný
Marcelo Sabatés
(editors)

Fictionality –
Possibility – Reality

Noema book series

aleph
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Preface

What place does fictionality occupy in our thinking and communication? How are we to delineate its relationship to acts such as considering possible yet unrealized states of affairs, imagining such states, and talking about them? Under what conditions are we to say that such acts substantively include a constitution of fictional worlds? Is it possible to describe fictional worlds by the apparatus of possible worlds, taken over (perhaps with modifications) from modal logic? And if so, are there any specific features that, among all possible worlds, set the class of fictional worlds apart? Is it possible for fictional worlds to share entities with the actual world – so that expressions of natural language can maintain their referential functions even when used in fictional texts? What happens then with other functions of linguistic expressions, such as expressing propositional contents and indicating illocutionary force? What is the relationship between literariness and fictionality, and in particular, must the creation and reception of texts possessing literary aspirations necessarily exhibit a fictional dimension?

The overarching ambition of the present volume is to present the phenomenon of fictionality within the network of the above-mentioned and other links and contrasts, and to do so from the perspectives of various disciplines: philosophy (of both the Continental and the Analytic variety), aesthetics, and theory of literature. Our examination of the phenomenon of fictionality thus pursues broader aims than exclusively to contribute towards an understanding of the nature of literary works and literary texts – even though the majority of papers acknowledges this motivation. The analysis of fictionality is simultaneously intended as a contribution towards an understanding of mind and language: all
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The Real and the Imaginary
in the Soldier’s Experience

Josep E. Corbi

No, it’s not a bad thing it ended
the way it did, in defeat.
It opened our eyes.
(Alexievich 1992, 36)

1 An Initial Approximation

A soldier’s experience is divided into three stages, namely: the depar­
ture, the battlefield, and the homecoming; they are arranged along the
arrow of time and split like the real and the imaginary. As the soldier
enters the battlefield, he (I will, in this paper, use he as the neutral

1 With some minor revisions, this paper will be published as chapter 3 in Mor­
nality, Self-Knowledge, and Human Suffering: An Essay on the Loss of Confidence
in the World (New York and London, Routledge, forthcoming). Credit is due
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Jean Améry's notion of sound strike the soldier as so strange that his mind interprets it as an event within a dream; but why should this sound strike the soldier as so strange? Couldn't it have been anticipated? Hadn't he, after all, heard that noise in movies, read about it in novels? In the pages to come, I will examine the nature of this strangeness and Jean Améry's notion of confidence in the world will play a central role in that process. This confidence is constituted by two crucial expectations: firstly, that no one will hurt me and, secondly, that, if someone were to hurt me (or I were in a state of need), someone else would come and help me. We may thus describe as human any given world were such expectations are actually honored and preserved. When the soldier enters for the first time the battlefield his sense of reality is still shaped by these two expectations. The bullet hitting a comrade's body seems so strange because such a fact is excluded from the expectations of the homely world he has just abandoned and such that still permeates his experience:

When a bullet hits a person you hear it. It's an unmistakable sound you never forget, like a kind of wet slap. Your mate next to you falls face down in the sand, and that taste bitter as ash. You turn him over on his back. The cigarette you just gave him is stuck between his teeth, and it's still slight. The first time it happens you react like in a dream. You run, you drag him, and you shoot, and afterwards you can't remember a thing about it and can't tell anyone anyway. It's like a nightmare you watch happening behind a sheet of glass. You wake up scared, and don't know why. (Alexievich 1992, 16)

At the outset, the soldier experiences the bullet's sound and his comrade's dead body as a nightmare, as alien to his conception of what may be a fact. Yet, he soon realizes that it is really a fact, though of a rather different world. He thereby perceives his life as divided into two worlds: home and the battlefield. Some may reply that after all there is only one world and, therefore, that home and the battlefield should rather be conceived as two aspects (or, perhaps, regions) of a single world; whereby an appropriate description of such a unity ought to show how these two aspects or regions actually relate to each other. The soldier's experience is in need of explanation precisely because it seems to neglect that obvious metaphysical truth. What happens in the battlefield is so strange that he cannot experience it as real, as an aspect of the world he inhabited before his departure; but how can we, then, make sense of his experience?

It is true that those who stay at home, away from bullets, know that in the battlefield people are systematically injured and killed, and also that bullets make a specific noise as they hit a human body; but there must be another sense in which they do not really know, in which they are not fully aware of what may actually occur in such places, in which they do not entirely apprehend that the armed confrontations the news talk about are not just fictions, stories invented to entertain, but facts that involve actual injuries and deaths. For, otherwise, the soldier would not have experienced the bullet's sound as part of a nightmare, that is, as being so strange that it could not belong to his world. We thus conclude that those who feel away from the battlefield know that in such places people kill and die; nevertheless, there is a relevant sense in which what happens there comes to their minds as if such deaths had not really occurred. So, it seems that something like a distinction between merely knowing that such and such is fact and being sensitive to that fact may be required to understand the soldier's experience. We may, correspondingly, distinguish between a mere declarative awareness of certain facts and an expressive awareness of them, so that the former kind of awareness should be consistent with an experience of those facts as merely imaginary, that is, as failing to appropriately shape one's conduct and emotional attitudes; whereas an expressive awareness of such facts would comprise of a suitable transformation of one's conduct and attitudes.

It does not take much time before the soldier concedes that the battlefield is not a dream and, thereby, that bullets really hurt and dead bodies are actually heavy to drag:

The fact is, in order to experience the horror you have to remember it and get used to it. Within two or three weeks there's nothing left of the old you can't experience it as real, as an aspect of the world he inhabited before his departure; but how can we, then, make sense of his experience?

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2 This is not to deny that declarative awareness of some facts may eventually contribute to increasing an agent's expressive awareness of them. Yet, I will argue that the specific ways in which such a contribution may take place are severely conditioned by factors in the agent's psychology that go beyond her capacity to become declaratively aware of any given facts. Moreover, one should not expect that the kind of transformation that expressive awareness involves, would always go in the direction of morality. Certain kinds of perversions may require that the agent be sensitive to the harm she is inflicting upon her victim. This is, though, too complex an issue to be dealt with in this paper.
except your name. You've become someone else. This someone else isn't frightened of a corpse, but calmly (and a bit pissed off, too) wonders how he's going to drag it down the rocks and carry it for several kilometres in that heat.

This new person doesn't have to imagine: he knows the smell of a man's guts hanging out, the smell of human excrement mixed with blood. He's seen scorched skulls grinning out of a puddle of molten metal, as though they'd been laughing, not screaming, as they died only a few hours before. (Alexievich 1992, 16)

This ability to perceive the battlefield as real comes with a transformation, which the soldier will only later on acknowledge, namely: his old self has vanished and a new, but damaged one has emerged and replaced it. How are we supposed to make sense of this experience, though? The moral nature of the divide between the homely world and the battlefield may be of some avail in this respect. More specifically, I will argue that the confidence in the world forms a part of our identity as human agents to the effect that, whenever we may be forced to lose it, we are bound to regard our life as severely damaged or even extinguished. In order words, we could say that the expectations of a human world are so deeply ingrained within our identity that, in order to perceive their denial as real, one must become a different self:

After I got back I couldn't bear to wear my pre-war jeans and shirts. They belonged to someone else, although they still smelt of me, as my mother assured me. That stranger no longer exists. His place had been taken by someone else with the same surname - which I'd rather you didn't mention.

I rather liked that other person. (Alexievich 1992, 38)

As soon as the soldier comes back to what he still regards as home, he perceives that he has been transformed. His life seems to have changed for ever; a deep divide between him and those who did not depart has emerged: people at home can't really understand his experience in the battlefield; there is no way in which they would share a common, homely world. The world of the soldier who returns is neither the battlefield, since war is not a place to stay, nor his old home, since his previous confidence in the world is lost, but a world poisoned by an endless (and fruitless) struggle to come back home:

You try and live a normal life, the way you lived before. But you can't. I didn't give a damn about myself or life in general. I just felt my life was over. (Alexievich 1992, 26)

Back to the point of departure, the soldier regards his new life as both more lucid and more damaged than his previous one. It is the more lucid because he is, finally, aware of how stupidly he allowed himself to be deceived by vague, epic, proclamations and also how people around him are still deceived in a similar manner. And even more damaged because what remains within him is a longing for home, for the sort of innocence that was lost in the battlefield.

In this paper, I intend to shed a unifying light on the three phenomena that have so far been mentioned, namely: (a) the strangeness of the bullet hitting the body of the soldier's comrade; (b) the fact that, in order to perceive the battlefield as real, the soldier must alienate himself from his old identity, and (c) the impossibility of homecoming. To this purpose, I will firstly introduce in some detail the sorts of expectations that, according to Améry, constitute our confidence in the world; secondly, I will return to the soldier's experience and examine each of its three stages in the light of such expectations and their role in the identity of the self.

2 Torture and the Loss of Confidence in the World

Jean Améry regards the loss of confidence in the world as a crucial aspect of the harm inflicted upon him by the torturer:

Yet I am certain that with the very first blow that descends on him he loses something we will perhaps temporarily call 'trust in the world'. Trust in the world includes all sorts of things: the irrational and logically unjustifiable belief in absolute causality perhaps, or the like wise blind belief in the validity of the inductive inference. But more important as an element of trust in the world, and in our context what is solely relevant, is the certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person will spare me - more precisely stated, that he will respect my physical, and with it my metaphysical being. The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I want to feel. (Améry 1977, 26)

The concept of human dignity is found to be of no avail to understanding the psychological impact of the first blow, which Améry finally characterizes as the loss of certain expectations. He did not expect, to begin with, his skin to be touched unless he wished; he trusted his neighbors...
to that extent. But suddenly his body was intentionally hurt by another human being and, as a result, his initial expectation, an expectation that permeated his way of being in the world, was suddenly betrayed.

So far, we have two poles: the victim and the torturer. Third agents may feel tempted to represent themselves as mere spectators of that harm, but this temptation goes against a second component in our confidence in the world. We expect that nobody will touch our skin unless we allow them to, but we also expect that, if this primary expectation failed, if someone hurt me (or I were in a state of need), someone else would come and help me. When a person is injured in a traffic accident, she assumes that someone will take care of her and call an ambulance, which will speedily arrive and provide medical aid. Even under war conditions, the Red Cross is supposed to rescue the wounded and bring them to hospital. It seems then that a response on the side of third agents is constitutive of the expectations that the victim (or those in state of need) do have insofar as she may still trust the world and, therefore, regard it as a hospitable place to dwell in. The victim does not look upon third agents as mere spectators, but as people from whom a certain response is to be expected. Only on the assumption that such a response would take place, can the victim retain her confidence in the world, once the primary expectation has failed. We may, as a result, call human a world where the following expectations are satisfied:

**Primary Expectation:** Nobody will hurt me.

**Secondary Expectation:** If someone hurts me (or I am in a state of need), someone else will come to help and protect me.

3 Needless to say, the victim would only be dispossessed of this expectation inasmuch as she may regard the pain inflicted upon her body as undeserved or illegitimate.

4 The expectation of help, the certainty of help, is indeed one of the fundamental experiences of human beings, and probably also of animals... The expectation of help is as much a constitutional psychic element as is the struggle for existence. Just a moment, the mother says to her child who is moaning from pain, a hot-water bottle, a cup of tea is coming right away, we won't let you suffer so! I'll prescribe you a medicine, the doctor assures, it will help you. Even on the battlefield, the Red Cross ambulances find their way to the wounded man. In almost all situations in life where there is bodily injury there is also the expectation of help; the former is compensated by the latter. But with the first blow from a policeman's fist, against which there can be no defense and which no helping hand

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This secondary expectation implies that third agents cannot coherently conceive of themselves as mere spectators and preserve their confidence in the world. The mere fact that they conceived of their position with regard to harm in that way, would undermine the conditions under which they could legitimately trust the world. There are, however, some robust motivations that impel third agents to distance themselves from the victim and undertake the narrative that the torturer may eventually sketch to legitimize her action and, in this respect, interrogation itself may play an essential role. I will single out, in this paper, some of obstacles that third agents must overcome if they are to articulate the kind of response that the victim (and everyone who trusts the world) expects. The existence and weight of such obstacles makes it quite difficult to achieve the conditions under which third agents may actually cooperate to prevent torture and, consequently, provide the conditions under which the victim might preserve (or recover) her confidence in the world. Let us now see how the concept of a human world may shed some light on the soldier's experience and the divide between the real and the imaginary.

3 **The Departure**

The soldier is recruited by the Government to fight on the battlefield; the reasons that motivate the call appear to his mind as inescapable. They take root in the inanity of his daily life, and shroud the battlefield in an epic aura that invites the youth to a life of risk and adventure:

I volunteered. I wanted to find out what I was capable of. I'm very ambitious. I went to university but you can't show - or know what your made of in a place like that. I dropped out in my second year. I wanted to be a hero and looked for a chance to be one. They say it was a man's war but the truth is, it was a boy's one. (Alexievich 1992, 70)

Before the departure, the soldier may concentrate on the battlefield, he may be interested in every detail of combat, but the reality of the battlefield will still strike him as alien. The youth *know that* in war people kill and die, and also that the limbs of many soldiers are amputated, but

will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived" (Améry 1977, 29).
they lack another kind of awareness of such facts, namely: the kind of awareness they could hardly skip as they enter the battlefield. To put it another way, we may say that they are, declaratively aware of such facts, but there is a relevant sense in which they regard them as imaginary, since a few heroic remarks suffice to dismiss the hardship of war as trivial and irrelevant to decide whether to stay or to depart.

The lure of adventure is only one among the many other factors that may encourage a young person to enlist. The most robust motivation seems to come, however, from a certain view about what the role of that war in the protection of their beloved and, after all, of the homely space he is about leave. Such a view is encouraged by the authorities who demand the sacrifice of his life for their homeland, if not for mankind itself:

I accepted the official line so completely that even now, after all I've read and heard, I still have a minute hope that our lives weren't entirely wasted.... The political officer gave this lecture about the international situation: he told us that Soviet forces had forestalled the American Green Berets airborne invasion of Afghanistan by just one hour. It was so incessantly drummed into us that this was a sacred 'international duty' that eventually we believed it. (Alexievich 1992, 44)

Soviet citizens were not raised to challenge the voice of political officers; they had been brought up to blindly trust what they were told and, thereby, it was excluded from their minds the possibility of calling into question what the authorities might decide or the kind of motivation that they might emphatically proclaim:

Now we're told that to obey a criminal command is itself a crime. But I trusted the people giving orders - and now they're blaming us. Now we're told that to obey a criminal command is itself a crime. But I trusted the people giving orders. As far back as I can remember I've been taught to have faith in authority. No one ever told me to judge for myself whether or not to trust the authorities, whether or not to shoot. The message was hammered into us over and over again: have faith, trust us.¹

By accepting the dictates of the authorities to the point of confronting injury and death, the soldier feels for a while seamlessly bonded to the rest of his people and, even more tightly, to his comrades, in whose

company he plans to defend their homeland at peril. He thus conceives of himself as a member of a large and united family:

I volunteered to go to Afghanistan. I longed to go. I thought it would be interesting. I used to go to bed and imagine what it was like out there. I wanted to know what it was like to have one apple and two friends; you're hungry and they're hungry, so you give them the apple. I thought it would be one big happy family. That's the reason I went. (Alexievich 1992, 57-58)

There is a scenario which paradigmatically symbolizes the departure. The troops marching in the ample avenue, displaying their weaponry and their impeccably clean uniforms, flags waving in the wind; and the folks applauding from the sidewalks, admiring the power, their beauty, their enthusiasm; and, finally, the authorities, high on their platform, contemplating the parade from above and ostensibly approving of it. The parade is a farewell and, nevertheless, the war is still sensed as unreal; an atmosphere of seamless unity pervades. The soldier does not yet perceive himself as either a victim or an executioner; the folks who applaud from the sidewalks do not seem to be aware that he will soon confront injury and death; and the authorities, on their high platform, are pleased to regard themselves as powerful and applauded, as if in the offering of victory. The moments of enthusiastic unity are only possible because the reality of war is kept away; they see in the troops and their weaponry the power of their common homeland, not the corpses and the injured bodies that would soon return. The parade is a rather exhilarating activity, still performed within the homely world, even though it marks the departure of the soldier from that cherished world to which he may not be able to return.

The mystification of the parade may eventually survive the experience in the battlefield, but it often sinks as the soldier tries to come back home. At this later stage, when the soldier examines the reasons that might have led him to enlist, he feels ashamed:

'Sasha', I say to him at the cemetery. 'I'm ashamed that in my finals I got an A' in Scientific Communism for my critique of bourgeois pluralism. I'm ashamed that after the Congress of People's Deputies pronounced this war a disgrace we were given 'Internationalist Fighters' badges and a Certificate from the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. (Alexievich 1992, 52)

The soldier feels deceived by the authorities he had been brought up to trust. The mother of a certain soldier, who encouraged in her child

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¹ Alexievich (1992, 69); see Alexievich (1992, 36, 37, 45) and Milgram (1973) as well.
an idealized view of their homeland, now feels guilty at her ingenuousness:

Once I gave a talk at the Polytechnic and afterwards a student came up to me. If you'd stuffed less patriotism into him he'd be alive today', she told me. When I heard that I felt ill and faint....

Now they say it was all a dreadful mistake – for us and for the Afghan people. I used to hate Sasha’s killers... now I hate the State which sent him there. Don’t mention my son’s name. He belongs to us now. I won't give him, even his name, to anyone. (Alexievich 1992, 66)

After the loss of her son, this mother understood how misleading were the reasons behind her attitude. She now sees how much she had idealized her homeland when she was abroad and how wrongly she confused patriotism with submission to the authorities. She naively believed the latter as they emphatically proclaimed that their homeland was in danger, and called everyone to contribute to their defense. She now can't but acknowledge that she had irresponsibly renounced her own judgment about what could be true or false, and allowed her mind to be infected with ideals and epic words which she never even tried to check. The need to dwell in a human world may easily lead us to assume that the authorities are there to protect us, no matter how clearly their behavior might suggest otherwise. The more abstract and empty the legitimizing discourse the authorities may produce, the more effectively it may colonize people’s imagination, the easier to take root in people’s most atavistic fears and make them feel that their homely world is in danger and immediate action required (see Weil 1968 on this matter).

We may thus conclude that, at the departure (and, paradigmatically, during the parade), the real and the imaginary are equally distributed among the troops, the people, and the authorities; they all form a seamless unity and, therefore, have a common view about what is real and what is not. At this stage, the power of their troops is perceived as irresistible and real; whereas death, the stinking bodies, and the amputation of limbs, are displaced to the realm of the imaginary. Similarly, the reasons alleged by the authorities to justify the war are, despite their vagueness, perceived as real and inescapable; whereas the voices who challenge those reasons are regarded with suspicion, as threats to the homely world; they emerge, at best, as blind to the manifest dangers to which war emerges as the only feasible response.

After the return, this perception is severely transformed; what at the time of departure appeared as real, now becomes part of the imaginary; what belonged to the onctic emerges now as undeniably real. The parade that was initially experienced as exhilarating, is now remembered in shame; where the soldier used to see the power of their troops and weaponry, now he sees the path of death and destruction; what used to count as a serious reason for war, now strikes him as empty and deceptive words; what used to be applauded as a legitimate maneuver of self-defense, is now viewed as the real threat to the human world:

Father, the godly asks his former mentor, Montanelli, is your God satisfied now? I'd like to throw these words like a grenade – but at who? (Alexievich 1992, 38)

Some may regard all these phenomena as cognitive distortions that two factors may easily explain: (a) certain needs that people (and especially the youth) have, like the need of adventure, heroism and belongingness; (b) lack of knowledge of some fundamental facts concerning war. The combination of these two factors may shroud war in such epic aura that young minds may be easily induced to regard the battlefield as the most appropriate object for the satisfaction of such needs. In the light of this, some may claim that, bad the youth know the facts of war in more detail, they would not have been so easily seduced by the empty words of patriotism and class struggle and, as a result, they may have tried to satisfy their needs in quite a different manner. This line of reasoning assumes that mere knowledge of some facts will have quite a significant motivational impact, namely, it will induce the agent to act in ways that are instrumentally consistent with those facts. To put it another way, it is assumed that, if the agent has certain desires, like those whose content may coincide with the needs specified above, and knows that they could not be fulfilled by means of enlisting in the Soviet army, then he will not be motivated to do so, at least inssofar as such desires are concerned. Such confidence in the motivational power of mere knowledge of some facts, is challenged, in my view, by the way the real and the imaginary are actually split in the soldier’s experience, and in other experiences of harm.

The soldier knows that bullets kill people when they tear their flesh and also that dead bodies weigh a lot and are hard to drag. But, nevertheless, when a bullet hits his comrade and his body falls face down in the sand, the soldier experiences this fact as a nightmare, as something...
that cannot belong to the realm of the real. Why what was known to him to be real (i.e., that bullets kill people), now appear as part of the imaginary? It is hard to see how this phenomenon could be explained by the soldier getting to know some further details about the battlefield; at least inasmuch as such facts should be, as my interlocutor presupposes, facts that he could have known in a detached manner, independently of any experience in the battlefield. For the relevant facts were already known to him in that manner: the soldier was trivially familiar with the fact that bullets kill people and also that, in the battlefield, one can easily be hit by them. And, nevertheless, what was already known is experienced as unreal as it comes across. It will soon become real, though; but only after some deep transformation on the agent's side. All this suggests that, when the soldier was still rocking himself in the arms of normality, his knowledge of the battlefield was inadvertently displaced to the imaginary; for his previous beliefs on the matter are not confirmed by direct contact with the facts that match their content, but, on the contrary, such a contact makes him disclaim them as unreal. It sounds, then, that it was not facts what he was contemplating after all; he certainly had a declarative awareness of some details concerning war and the battlefield, but such an awareness was somehow idle, unable to transform his life proportionally and, in this respect, we may conclude that they were experienced as merely imaginary situations.

This raises the question as to how this gap might be attenuated or bridged. And it seems that we should go beyond declarative awareness of some facts if we wished to advance in that direction. A certain kind of exposure to the nuances and details of the battlefield (and, in general, of harm) appears to be required. Mere knowledge of such facts provides some such exposure, but, insofar as one might insist that our emotions should be kept apart, then it is hard to see how they might increase our sensitivity. Shouldn't we look at it from the obverse perspective? Instead of regarding knowledge as enhanced by keeping one's emotions and attachments at bay, shouldn't the search of knowledge, even mere knowledge of some facts, be perceived as part of an attempt to increase our sensitivity to such facts, so that one might, in the end, be able to proportionally respond to them? Such exposure would surely fall short of bringing those facts to reality to the point that our lives were appropriately disfigured by them, but our confidence might, for a while, be suspended and this may bring our experience closer to that of the soldier who tries to return and, in a similar vein, diminish our temptation to blindly endorse the authorities' discourse on occasions to come.\footnote{To perceive the depth of such gap, let us recall that, even people like Améry who were fighting against the Nazis and had detailed knowledge of their practices, discovers, once imprisoned, how imaginary his conception of them was: "Nothing really happens as we hope it will, nor as we fear it will. But not because the occurrence, as one says, perhaps 'goes beyond the imagination' (it is not a quantitative question), but because it is reality and not phantasy... Everything is self-evident, and nothing is self-evident as soon as we thrust into a reality whose light blinds us and burns us to the bone. What one tends to call 'normal life' may coincide with anticipatory imagination and trivial statement. I buy a newspaper and am a man who buys a newspaper. The act does not differ from the image through which I anticipated it, and I hardly differentiate myself personally from the millions who performed it before me. Because my imagination did not suffice to entirely capture such an event? No, rather because even in direct experience every day reality is nothing but codified abstraction. Only in the rare moments of life do we truly stand face to face with the event and, with it, reality" (Améry 1977, 23-6).}

4 The Battlefield

4.1 The Soldier as a Victim

As he enters the battlefield, he experiences the impact of a bullet upon his comrade's flesh as part of a dream, even though he would certainly grant that it is a fact that a bullet killed his comrade and his body is actually heavy to drag. In order to experience the battlefield as real, a severe transformation must take place; he must be dispossessed of his old identity and acquire a new, though damaged one. At home, the soldier took for granted certain expectations, and they were so ingrained within him that he cannot conceive of himself as still being the same person after their loss and, thereby, he cannot sense the battlefield as real until a sort of death is experienced. But what kind of death is this? And how is it that death can be experienced? In The Needs of the Soul, Simone Weil grounds the obligations that we may have to each other in the needs of human life. She emphasizes that there are specific needs of the soul to be distinguished from our physical needs. Both sorts of needs are, in any case, defined by the kind of death that the lack of...
fulfillment may finally bring about. Starvation and cold will transform someone's body into a corpse, but there are other needs whose neglect may leave our body alive but, nevertheless, extinguish our capacity to lead a human life. One becomes as a result not a corpse, but a mere living thing:

Consequently, the list of obligations towards the human being should correspond to the list of such human needs as are vital, analogous to hunger.

Among such needs, there are some which are physical like hunger itself. They are fairly easy to enumerate. They are concerned with protection against violence, housing, clothing, heating, hygiene and medical attention in case of illness. There are others which have no connection with the physical side of life, but are concerned with its moral side... They form, like our physical needs, a necessary condition of our life on this earth. Which means to say that if they are not satisfied, we fall little by little into a state more or less resembling death, more or less akin to a purely vegetative existence.

Everyone knows that there are forms of cruelty which can injure a man's life without injuring his body. They are such as deprive him of a certain form of food necessary to the life of the soul. 

Yet, let us leave aside the particular list of needs of the soul that Weil so carefully enumerates and examines in her book, and focus on the concept itself of the needs of the soul and see whether it sheds some light on the soldier's experience.

The loss of confidence in the world is, according to Améry, the most serious impact that torture may have on the victim who survives. The incapacity to look forward to a human future, which is constitutive of such a loss, could only be recovered if third agents (and, preferably, torturers as well) may return to the criminal act and let themselves be affected by its moral significance, so that they allow their lives to be affected (or even disfigured) by such kind of awareness. Only in these circumstances, may the victim feel reconciled with the world, since, otherwise, her life would be experienced as severely deformed by her incapacity to trust her neighbors, that is, by her incapacity to experience the world around her as properly human. And it is in this respect that we may regard the confidence in the world as a need of the soul, that is, as a need whose lack of fulfillment poisons and deforms the life of a person.

One might dispute this claim insofar as the needs of the soul have been so far associated with a kind of death, and not with mere damage or deformation. It is uncertain to me how much hangs on this qualification; the important point is that we are confronted here with a kind of transformation that is experienced as a deep kind of disfigurement or deformation, so deep that blocks the agent's capacity to orientate her life towards the future and, in this respect, comes very close to the idea of a living thing or the death of a soul. In fact, Soviet soldiers describe their damage or disfigurement as involving the death of their old self; and to justify their claims they appeal to reasons quite similar to those that led Améry to lose his confidence in the world. The soldier hears the bullet hitting his comrade's flesh, but interprets this fact as imaginary because it conflicts with a fundamental expectation of his, so deeply ingrained in his life that it determines the boundaries of what can be sensed as real: 'No body will hurt me' (and, complementarily, 'I will hurt no one'). The person who holds this expectation has to die, as they put it, if failure of such an expectation is to be experienced as a fact. This death is not physical, though; the soldier's body keeps breathing and moving. It must be something else what dies, namely, his soul, the soul that still trusts. It is true, however, that Améry does not characterize his experience in terms of a certain kind of death; he just regards its identity as being disfigured or deformed. This discrepancy may be partly connected to the fact that Améry regards himself merely as a victim, whereas the sense of departure from a human world may be stronger in the Soviet soldier insofar as the latter construes himself as both a victim and an executioner. This is why he may feel inclined to describe his transformation as more radical than just a deformation, namely: as a kind of death. All this suggests that an agent's identity is partly constituted by the world she assumes to be dwelling in, that is, by a narrative that identifes the key features of such a world and the possibilities that are open and closed to her within it.

Weil stresses that the death of the soul does not require that one is actually hurt. It may suffice that one's life is actually threatened by someone else:

Here we see force in its grossest and most summary form - the force that kills. How much more varied in its processes, how much more surprising in its effects is the other force, the force that does not kill, i.e., that does not kill just yet. It will surely kill, it will possibly kill, or perhaps it merely hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature it can kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment. In whatever aspect, its effect is the same: it turns a man into a stone. From its first property (the ability to turn a human...
being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own way, the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive. He is alive; he has a soul; and yet — he is a thing. (Weil 1986, 165)

The soul of a person may be damaged before the weapon may even touch her skin. This experience seems to confirm Améry's idea that the human world is constituted by some fundamental expectations; for it is enough that our life is threatened by someone else for us to feel on the verge of inhumanity. After all, a threat already constitutes a challenge to our primary expectation, namely; 'No body will hurt me'.

The secondary expectation (i.e., 'if I am hurt (or in state of need), someone else will come and help me') is also involved in the soldier's experience as a victim: he feels neglected by the authorities who sent him to fight in the first place. The soldier assumed that, even though no one could protect him from the dangers and risks of the battlefield, at least the authorities would provide food, clothes, shelter, and appropriate weaponry. Yet, the Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan soon realized that such expectations, which constituted their only link with the human world, were persistently challenged by the facts. The homely world was too far away for the authorities (and the people) to really care about their fate. The scarce supplies that might eventually arrive to the barracks were stolen by their superiors for their own benefit. The united family that was so clearly perceived during the parade that announced the departure, dilutes day after day. The soldier not only has to confront the perils and hardships of the battlefield, but, in the middle of it all, he is forced to recognize that people at home are oblivious of him and their obligation to provide for his most basic needs. The soldier battles in defense of a human world from which he feels expelled, since no one, back home, is really looking after him. There is, however, a third sense in which the soldier feels alienated from the human world. He soon begins to see himself as an executioner and, thereby, as contributing to destroying the world he came here to protect.

4.2 The Soldier as an Executioner

The soldier hates those who are battling against him, but also the villagers, who may, at any time, attack him with a bomb or a gun. He hates them all because they kill his comrades and friends:

Where does all the hatred come from? 'There's a simple answer to that. They killed your mate. You'd share a bowl of chow, and there he was, lying next to you, burnt to a cinder. (Alexievich 1992, 40)

Hate blinds the soldier who may act quite wildly, burning villages and killing ruthlessly:

Our company was combing through a village. I was patrolling with another lad. He pushed open a hut door with his leg and was shot point-blank with a machine-gun. Nine rounds. In that situation hatred takes over. We shoot everything, right down to the domestic animals. In fact, shooting animals is the worst. I was sorry for them. I wouldn't let the donkeys he shot — they'd done nothing wrong, had they? They had amulets hanging from their necks, exactly that same as the children. It really upset me, setting fire to the wheat-field — I'm a country boy myself. (Alexievich 1992, 76)

Quite often, the soldier does not become immediately aware of how monstrous his actions are, but only much later, as he may return and approach his old homely world. He then notices how far away from such a world he has placed himself by acting as a pitiless executioner:

We probably survived by hating, but I felt full of guilt when I got back home and looked back on it all. Sometimes we massacred a whole village in revenge for one of our boys. Over there it seemed right, here it horrifies me. I remember one little girl lying in the dust like a broken doll with no arms or legs. (Alexievich 1992, 23)

The soldier will often abuse the village's sense of hospitality. He may ask them for food or shelter even if he knows that they will be beaten to death by other villagers after they leave:

I remember once in Afghanistan, near Bagram it was, we came to a village and asked for something to eat. According to their law it is forbidden to refuse warm food to a person who comes to the door hungry. The women sat us down and fed us. After we left the other villagers beat them and their children to death with sticks and stones. They knew they'd be killed but they didn't send us away. We tried to force our laws on to them, we entered their mosques with our army caps on. (Alexievich 1992, 37)

Stealing a sweet from a friend acquires a deep significance in the context of war. The soldier perceives in such an action his own dehumanization. He ruthlessly kills villagers to release his anger for the death of his comrades, and now he is unable to respect the humanity of his own friends and comrades:
Once, two soldiers brought in a wounded man, handed him over but wouldn't leave. We don't need anything, girls, can we just sit by you for a bit? Here, back home, they've got their mums and sisters and wives. They don't need us now — but over there they told us things you wouldn't normally tell anybody. For example, if you stole a sweet from a friend — well that's meaningless here, but over there it was a dreadful act — something that created an intense disillusion with yourself. (Alexievich 1992, 24)

Such tiny acts of unkindness make the soldier suddenly aware of how much he has departed from the person who once left the homeland. He becomes aware, through such tiny gestures, of how deeply he has been transformed and how little is left of his ancient confidence in the world. He may have been unable to trust his neighbors after experiencing himself as a victim and also as an executioner of innocent people, but now he steals a sweet from his friend. No one can trust him any more, he has become fully alien to the human world.

And, nevertheless, the soldier still hopes to return and find his old place in the homely world. This hope is at all possible because in the battlefield he is not yet fully aware of his own transformation. Only as he may come back, may he realize how alien he has become to the expectations of a human world, which once were so natural to him.

5 The Homecoming

In the battlefield, the soldier hears from time to time news from home, but a sense of unreality pervades:

We watched TV programmes by satellite showing life at home going on as normal, but it was irrelevant to us somehow... (Alexievich 1992, 77)

The homely world sounds unreal, but the soldier is eager to come back to it. The battlefield is not a place where one would like to stay, it can only be endured as a transient space. No matter how unreal the news from home may appear, a strong desire persists that such news should again form a part of one's reality. The soldier lives under the spell of a certain image of that experience:

7 Primo Levi reports a similar experience (see Levi 1986, 60-61).

Nevertheless, the actual experience of his return extinguishes that cherished image... then we discovered that people couldn't care less whether we'd survived or not. In the courtyard of our block of flats I met up with the kids I'd known before. Oh, you're back — that's good', they said, and went off to school. (Alexievich 1992, 77)

The soldier soon understands that home, what he most dreamed of, has ceased to exist for him and will never be recovered:

We all think of home but don't talk about it much. We're superstitious. I'm longing to go home, but where is home? We don't talk much about that, either. (Alexievich 1992, 75)

But, what renders his homecoming impossible? The soldier is not the same person who departed; this is something that he notices as he tries to return. He feels a stranger among those who he used to regard as his kin. Even the smell of the old house, the clothes that hang in his old closet, are now strange, alien, to him; he cannot communicate his experience to those who never abandoned the warmth of home: there is not a common world that he could share with them. The Soviet soldier may describe in some detail what happened in the battlefield and how he felt in those circumstances, his neighbors may listen to him for a while; they may become declaratively aware of what happened there and how horrendous it was. But they will systematically fall short of allowing their lives to be genuinely affected by such facts; they will not inquire about their own contribution to that war and to the abandonment of the soldiers in the battlefield. They will insist, on the contrary, on regarding what happened as part of the past, they may almost forget that it existed at all. And the soldier will surely feel appalled by so much neglect and indifference:

Don't confuse the man I am today with the man I was in 1979. Then I believed in it. But in 1983 I went to Moscow, where life seemed to be going on as usual, as though we didn't exist. There was no war in Moscow. I walked along the Arbat, stopped people and asked them: 'How long's the war in Afghanistan being going on?'
I don’t know. How long is the war......? I don’t know. Why d’you ask? Or, ’Two years, I think’. Or even ’Is there a war there? Really?’ (Alexievich 1992, 34)

He may even be confronted with some serious accusations raised by people who never left the homely space:

I wasn’t going to call you again, but I got on a bus and heard two women talking: ’Fine heroes they were! Murdering women and children over there. They’re sick. And just think, they get invited to speak at schools! They even get special privileges....’ I jumped off at the next stop and stood there crying. We were soldiers obeying orders. In wartime you can be shot for disobedience, and we were at war. (Alexievich 1992, 69)

As some testimonies highlight, people may be more ready to listen to the victim of a car accident than to the disabled veteran, even though the latter had been sent to the battlefield in order to defend the homely world that these people now enjoy and to which the soldier, due precisely to their dismissive attitude, can no longer return. But, how is it that people could be so ungrateful? What kind of motivation lie behind their dismissive attitude, that is, behind their need to brush aside the soldier’s story as a mere matter of the past? This is just a variation of the question we have already addressed. It is clear that, if people acquired a certain kind of awareness (namely, the kind of awareness I referred to as expressive) of the hardships of war, then they would find themselves in a position that is emotionally closer to that of the soldier than they might wish. These people may now walk peacefully to their jobs, but, if they listened too intently to the soldier’s story, they might become (expressively) aware of the fact that they actually contributed to the crimes that apparently took place so far away and also that each of them could easily have committed in such circumstances the same atrocities that soldiers are presently reporting; besides, a certain discomfort might arise in them about how to deal with the stories of the soldiers.

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9 “If a stranger asks me how I lost my arm I tell him I was drunk and fell under a train and he’ll fall of understanding and sympathy. Recently I read a novel by a man who served with Valentin Pilotski shut an officer in the Imperial Russian Army during the war with Japan: ’...Severely wounded cripples arouse no sympathy. A legless beggar will earn more if he tells people that he lost his leg under a train in Novsky Prospect than if he mentions Mukden or Lyagolyu.’” (Alexievich 1992, 78).

10 “We don’t need anything. Just listen to us and try to understand. Society is good at doing things, giving medical help, pensions, flats. But all this so-called giving has been paid for in very expensive currency. Our blood. We come to you now, to make our confession. We want to confess, and don’t forget the secrecy of the confessional.” (Alexievich 1992, 36)

11 See Améry (1977, 68-81) for a description of the conditions under which a victim may feel reconciled with the world.

12 “You try and live a normal life, the way you lived before. But you can’t. I didn’t give a damn about myself or life in general. I just felt my life was over...” Nowa...
lives can no longer be recognized as human. They are dead to all relevant purposes and this death did not take place strictly speaking in the battlefield, but instead when they were confronted with the difficulties to share their experience with who those stayed at home. If the soldier could not experience as real the battlefield at the military parade, how could he now expect that those who applauded them could now perceive the battlefield as real? The same factors that mystified the soldier in his departure are still present in his homecoming, only that now he is no longer under the spell of that illusion. Within the homely world, the manifestly inhuman can only be experienced as imaginary, since, otherwise, our confidence in the world would be challenged by the fact that the world, our world, is actually tinged with the blood shed on the battlefield.

References

In a Hole in the Ground There Lived a Hobbit; or, a Few Comments on Fictional Space of Narrative and Mental Imagery

Alice Jedličková

Apart from the suggestions made by the editors of the current volume, which allowed also for employing some aspects of cognitive approach for inquiring into the relation of fictional worlds and our mind, there is a particular incentive for my inquiry that does not stem from my research interest but from traditional teaching of literature. Though the situation may be changing slowly, the answer of a Czech pupil asked the question what literature is good for remains predictable: "Literature is supposed to develop our imagination - and our vocabulary." Apparently, it implies also the primary school concept of *literariness*: imaginative writing as means of education + poetic language surpassing our everyday communication practice.

Unfortunately, the pupil usually receives her straight A for the answer we have already got acquainted with, and is hardly asked the next question, which would be "Does literature stimulate our imagination by telling us so much?" - or - "does it stimulate our imagination because it does not tell us enough?" In other words, does employing our imagination in the interaction with fiction mean constituting a mental possible world and eventually, "picturing what we have been told?" Or does mental imagery function especially as a compensatory strategy? In