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Introduction: Impossible Fictions

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From its emergence, the concept of fiction seems to have been paired with that of possibility. According to Aristotle, history recounts the particular fact—what has happened—while poetry deals with the general, with such things as "might happen" according to what is probable or necessary in the unfolding of the plot (Poetics 1451b).[1] However, in Aristotle's view, the impossible is not completely excluded: the philosopher considers that "in reference to poetic effect, a convincing impossibility (*pithanon adunaton*) is preferable to that which, though possible, is unconvincing (*apithanon dunaton*)" (Aristotle, 1461 b9). Nevertheless, from the Renaissance onwards, neo-Aristotelian theorists (such as Lodovico Castelvetro, 1570, ch. 25) radically marginalized the impossible (as indicated by omissions or erroneous translations of this passage from Aristotle) (Sozzi, 1991; Lavocat, 2010). By contrast, neo-Platonists were much more receptive to paradoxes (notably Francesco Patrizzi, 1586), resulting in an abundance of monsters, allegories, and *impossibilia* of all kinds in sixteenth-century fiction, exemplified by the extravagant work of Barthélémy Aneau.[2] From that point on, the acceptance and even the promotion of fiction were conditioned by its subordination to possibility, which was soon redefined as verisimilitude: for seventeenth-century theorists, as we know, verisimilitude is defined as much by physical impossibilities and logical contradictions as by breaches of moral and political decorum, in accordance with public opinion. The Abbé d'Aubignac, for instance, considered the representation of an unjust and tyrannical king to be impossible ([1669] 2011)![3] Credible fiction was endorsed, provided it was distinguished from the "fable" which became the focus of both opprobrium and impossibilities: libertine gods with goats' feet, fairies, talking animals (Huet, [1678] 2004). This evolution may be viewed as an advance in

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2 Especially his novel *Alector, histoire fabuleuse*, which teems with allegorical monsters. Regarding this text, the introduction and edition by Marie-Madeleine Fontaine are well worth consulting (Aneau [1560] 1996).

3 "If the subject is not in keeping with the customs and feelings of the audience, it will never succeed [...] among us, the respect and love that we have for our princes do not allow us to present to the public these horror-filled spectacles; we do not want to believe that kings can be evil, nor can we endure that their subjects, however apparently mistreated, should harm their sacred Persons, or rebel against their power, not even in painting" (Aubignac, [1669] 2011, volume 1, book 2, chapter 1, "On the Subject", p. 120 [our translation]).

rationality (Duprat, 2009) or as the result of the stranglehold of censorship (Garnier, 1976; Zanin, 2018). This privileging of the possible became enduring and rooted in Western culture: as Margaret Cohen (1999) notes of the nineteenth-century novel, we are led to value realistic novels, usually written by men, over the whimsical and sentimental fictions characteristic of women's novelistic production.

Yet the impossible persists. There have always been genres such as opera that cultivate it, as well as genres aimed at women and children, like fairy tales, or forms of popular entertainment, like machine theater. Today, the dominance of fantasy looks very much like the revenge of the impossible. From television series and video games inspired by the universes of Tolkien or Lovecraft, to the multiverses of the Marvel franchise, we see the assertion of a renewed taste for impossible worlds. The reign of the verisimilar novel, which was never absolute, lasted just over three centuries, from the end of the seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

The relationship of fiction to the impossible, far from being circumstantial, may be more fundamental than it seems. Even the most mimetic realist fictions transgress the rules of verisimilitude. How could the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* report Swann's love or Bergotte's consciousness at the moment of his death, to which he had no access (Genette 1972)? The third-person narrator has no difficulty entering the psyche of characters and delivering up their most secret thoughts and intentions. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a shift in linguistic subjectivity, which does not reside in the "I" of the narrator but in the "he" or "she" of the characters – and hence as an extraordinary artifice that characterizes the essence of fictional discourse (Hamburger, [1957] 1986; Banfield, 1982; Cohn, 1999). Impossibility thus seems to lie at the heart of the modern Western novel.

However, this type of impossibility generally goes unnoticed, as the reader regards it as a convention specific to fictional narrative. For a long time, embedded stories were told by fictional witnesses with such prodigious memories that they could reproduce word-for-word their protagonists' letters, conversations, and poems; it is unclear why, at a certain point in the history of the novel, just before the emergence of the realist novel, this convention was no longer accepted. Readers and viewers can be tolerant of the most basic implausibility as well as nitpicky, even obsessive, in noting impossibilities. Many are devoted to tracking and recording "goofs" (i.e., incongruities, continuity errors, anachronisms, etc.) in written or filmic fictions (Hamus-Vallée and Caïra, 2020). Anomalies in fictions fascinate us; they can also give rise to intense hermeneutic activity.

This ambivalence in reception may be correlated with the unstable status of the impossible. This matter has been much debated. While some fiction theorists consider that fictions may be defined as "possible impossible worlds" (Lavocat, 2016), most argue that contradictions weaken or even ruin the construction of the

fictional world (Pavel, 1988; Doležel, 1998). The "principle of minimal departure," according to Marie-Laure Ryan, assumes that we reconstruct the world of a fiction or a counterfactual statement as being as close as possible to the reality we know (Ryan 1980, p. 406); consequently, we adopt reading strategies to reduce paradoxes and rationalize impossibilities (Ryan, 2010, p. 77-80). However, the current of so-called "unnatural" narratology has revived narratologists' interest in non-realistic fictions (Richardson, 2015; Alber, 2016).

As we have seen with the Abbé d'Aubignac, the definition of the impossible oscillates between the realm of physical or logical impossibility and the domain of ethics. Can we indulge in fiction that provokes moral aversion? David Hume noted the impossibility of taking pleasure in works that describe moral perversion ([1757] 1965). Referring to this text, Kendall Walton (1990) asserts that we refuse to take part in acts of imagination whose ethical presuppositions we cannot accept. Why should there be such resistance when we are well aware of the fictionality of the works in question (Weatherson, 2004)? Furthermore, is it legitimate to judge fictional characters as if they were real people? Should we worry about the dangers of identifying with these characters, or about the transmission of the implied author's values (see Booth, 1988, p. 41)? The question of the nature and legitimacy of axiological judgments about fictions is a pressing one today, as it involves decisions about what is or is not readable, or what can or cannot be taught (Tortonèse, 2023 and Delale et al., 2023).[4] The stakes of these questions are not only philosophical and theoretical, but also pragmatic and political. Moreover, we are arguably witnessing a resurgence of generalized mistrust or even hatred towards fiction, whether it is found in nonfiction, in the name of "reality hunger" (Shields, 2010), or, paradoxically, within fiction itself.

The articles collected here offer historical and theoretical perspectives on the question of impossibilities in and of fiction from three major angles. 1) An analysis of borderline cases – narratives and impossible worlds – clarifies the paradoxes and contradictions that have been judged to be incompatible with the construction of a fictional universe. 2) The acceptance and rejection of contradictions and of physical, logical, psychological, or other impossibilities vary according to historical periods and cultural traditions. We propose to explore these varying and fluctuating degrees of tolerance towards the impossibilities of fiction. 3) Fictions are sometimes considered impossible in themselves, for political, religious, or ethical reasons, or because of a supposed exhaustion of fictional forms and motifs. The most well-known version of this debate concerns the non-representability of certain subjects, notably historical atrocities and trauma. Within this conceptual framework, the

4 These two recent contributions are in direct disagreement. This demonstrates the relevance and liveliness of the current debate, to which a symposium organized by Enrica Zanin has also contributed (Zanin, forthcoming).

articles offer a range of both disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives (literary history and theory, narratology, philosophy, philosophy of law, cinema, and media studies). The authors deal with different historical periods and cultural traditions, and study fictional works in various media (including video games, cinema, comics, and television series).

The first part, “Impossible Narrators,” focuses on impossible narrative situations where the narrator recounts what s/he logically could not know or tell; the examples reveal an increasing degree of impossibility. Camille Brun examines the duplicity of the preface discourse in two texts that Balzac published under the pseudonym Saint-Aubin: the lies of the impossible prefacer, who both asserts and denies authorship of the works, become a *mise en abyme* of fiction. The issue of lying reappears in Maxime Decout’s article on a contemporary text, Pierre Senge’s *Veuves au maquillage*, in which an unreliable narrator recounts his own dismemberment. The impossibility of this enunciative situation is nevertheless mitigated by multiple uncertainties about the status of the narration, thus prompting questions about the ways we validate discourse and inviting us to reflect on the nature of fiction and its relationship to imposture. With Lolita Felgueiras’s study, we move from the dismembered narrator to the dead narrator: in Boris Vian’s *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, the narrator Lee Anderson recounts a story that includes his own death, within a narrative context that initially appeared realistic. This unacknowledged enunciative impossibility generates uncertainty both about the genesis of the novel and its generic status.

In the second part, two articles study the specific affordances offered by the cinematic medium when it comes to staging narrative impossibilities. In her study of Greta Gerwig’s film Little Women, Caroline Bem shows how Gerwig mobilizes the medial and narrative form of the diptych to create an impossible space, not only at the level of the plot's conclusion (Jo March’s marriage both does and does not occur), but also in the medial in-betweenness that suspends the opposition between past and present, heterosexuality and homosexuality, the book and the film, the fictional adaptation of a fiction and the fictionalization of history. By contrast, Rami Gabriel highlights the limits of cinematographic reflexivity in Orson Welles’s *The Other Side of the Wind*; in this case, the filmmaker’s metaleptic approach produces a narrative incoherence that leads to the collapse of diegetic frames and the failure of the autofictional project.

The articles in the third section both defend and contest the notion of fiction as possible world, which heavily conditions the status of logical impossibility. Marie-Laure Ryan, starting from the premise that a possible world cannot contain contradictions and that these cannot be imagined, describes the strategies adopted by the reader to isolate, ignore, or neutralize the impossibilities encountered.

Revisiting Aristotelian conceptions of the possible, the plausible, and the necessary from the standpoint of plot, Claude Calame, while rejecting a definition of fiction as a possible world in favor of a pragmatic conception of fiction, analyzes Greek narrative poetics and how it renders the impossible plausible. Monique Villen, building on Marie-Laure Ryan's work, nonetheless supports the possibility of imagining the impossible, via the example of science fiction (specifically a novel by Ursula Le Guin). Finally, Fuhito Tachibana, on the basis of the example of Mallarmé, raises the question of metaphor and poetry in relation to the opposition between fiction and nonfiction. He argues for a conception of fiction that does not rest on the idea of the presence of a fictional world.

The fourth part, “Narrative Anomalies and Impossible Genres,” focuses on non-conformities and non-conformisms in different media. Alexis Hassler proposes a transmedial study of narration by comparing the recalcitrant narrator of the novel, as in Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*, with the deliberate “glitch” in video games that mimics computer malfunction: by preventing players from following the correct narrative flow, this device invites them, through interactive play, to participate in diegetic creation. Annick Louis, for her part, examines “goofs” and inconsistencies in films and television series. According to Louis, who examines an episode of *The Big Bang Theory* about a narrative inconsistency in *Indiana Jones*, defects in plausibility do not necessarily impair fictional immersion or, as a result, the pleasure of fiction, unless they concern the laws of particular genres. The question of genres is also important in the following two articles that focus on literary modernity. Analyzing “On the Pure Novel,” a theoretical text by Riichi Yokomitsu, Kohei Takahashi shows that improbability constitutes both an aesthetic and epistemic issue for this Japanese novelist who aimed to establish a new realism in the 1930s. Jeppe Barnwell’s article questions the realism of Western literature through a study of the works of Peter Seeberg. The “fictional documentarism” practiced by this Danish novelist illustrates a paradox of pseudo-factuality: to become a literary work, this type of text that is characterized by formal mimesis resorts to inventiveness, which sometimes comes from impossibility.

The fifth part, “Versions and Narrative Virtualities,” highlights the possibilities of impossible fictions. John Pier's article on “Mobius the Stripper” by Gabriel Josipovici explores the interpretive richness of this text, which prevents linear reading via a device that splits the pages in two. According to Pier, this experimental work produces paradoxes that are not only (onto)logical and narratological, but also medial, in order to question the process of reading. Brian Richardson focuses on multiversion narratives, with a view to analyzing the reception strategies of both cinematographic and literary narrations. Establishing a typology of multiversion narratives with examples such as *Lola rennt* (Tom Tykwer), *Groundhog Day* (Harold

Ramis) and Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie*, Richardson highlights the anti-mimetic nature and cognitive effects – especially irony – of these narratives that repeat themselves with variations. For Jean-Bernard Cheymol, who analyzes 3" by Marc-Antoine Mathieu, impossibility lies less in ontology than in perception. Relying on Bergson's philosophy, Cheymol emphasizes that this digital comic book confronts us with what he calls the "hyper-presence" of the real, close to the poetics of simultaneity, thus rendering us sensitive to the passage from the virtual to the actual. Returning to literature, Martin Riedelsheimer invites us to reflect on narrative infinity as opposed to textual finitude. Since the infinite is a conceptual metaphor, according to the theory of George Lakoff and Rafael Núñez, it is figures such as the *mise en abyme* or repetition that give rise to literary infinity. Examining from this perspective figures of the infinite in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and Colum McCann's *Apeirogon*, Riedelsheimer observes that they testify to the ethical concerns of contemporary literature.

The sixth set of articles shifts the question of impossibility to the moral field, starting with the extreme case of the representation of rape and sexual violence more generally in fiction and especially on the stage. Véronique Lochert delves into the debates that emerge in the seventeenth century as well as in the contemporary moment on the representation of sexual violence. The latter is a paradoxical object that tests the limits of imagination, narrative, and staging, both in terms of the modes of its representation and in terms of its reception. What emotions does the fictionalization of rape evoke, and to what audience are these fictions addressed? Zoé Schweitzer, for her part, considers the extreme case of a ferocious mythical story, that of the rape and mutilation of Philomela, a crime followed by an equally hyperbolic revenge. Whether they water down violence or make it invisible in the name of decency, or else aim to represent it through original means of figuration, the tragedies studied here highlight the heuristic power of fiction to make violence comprehensible. Finally, Enrica Zanin addresses the question of the historical evolution of representations of sex, analyzing the case of novellas or short stories from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While the emergence of censorship in Europe and the influence of a new conception of mimesis led to the disappearance of explicit erotic scenes, rape nevertheless remained present in fictions due to its symbolic and exemplary possibilities. It gives rise to narrative strategies that aim to circumvent the moral difficulties of its representation.

In the seventh and final group of texts, the authors focus on moral impossibilities *in* and *of* fiction. Carola Barbero and Alberto Voltolini, who define themselves as "moderate moralists," analyze the phenomenon of moral imaginative resistance, including in humorous texts or jokes that violate moral principles, to show that even in this case, imaginative participation is impossible. Next, Christine Baron evokes

“jurifictions,” or fictional narratives related to law, which highlight the inadequacy between legal texts and human realities and emphasize ethical impossibilities. Otto Pfersmann distinguishes prescriptive statements demanding impossible actions from the use of such statements in fictions, as well as the case of statements that present themselves as normative but do not fulfill the semantic conditions of intelligibility. The constraints of intra-fictional credibility open a cognitive space of entertainment, while the demands of intelligibility and realizability limit the domain of normativity. Lena Seauve examines cases of contemporary “impossible narrations” that represent violence from the point of view of the perpetrator, which obstructs the reader's identification. Finally, in her study of works based on the Rwandan genocide, Mathilde Zbaeren questions the legitimacy of using fiction based on real testimonies to account for genocide.

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