

9. Lied the Raven, Evermore – Falsehood and Reality in Science, through Fiction

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Abstract: It is commonplace for authors of fiction to describe their work as “lying to say the truth”. In this paper, I shall delve deeper into this seemingly contradictory sentence to shed light into the complex interplay between truth, reality and fiction. Far from being a strictly literary problem, it has been convincingly argued by Vaihinger that fiction is widespread also in scientific contexts. Even more, it seems to be extraordinarily useful both to divulge scientific results and to pragmatically confront problems and calculations. An example of this is the billiard ball model of gases, which makes use of many incorrect assumptions regarding gases, and yet is still used thanks to its heuristic capabilities. This chance to create a somewhat false (or, in other cases, inaccurate) reality which then can in turn shed light on the ordinary one is arguably one of the most fascinating features of fiction. Such a formulation does however beg the question regarding its aptness to describe what goes on in said fictional scenarios. I take the answer to be not quite. Rather than creating a new (and, strictly speaking, false) reality, I take fiction to be a way to interact with the ordinary one, coating it with a symbolic layer and taking advantage of the possibility to exemplify (following Elgin) only the features which are required by the problem at hand. As such, fiction can be regarded as a localized world-building endeavour, aimed at eliciting specific responses from ordinary reality. The resulting fictional reality, then, is a mediation between the modelling requirements, the necessary falsehoods, and the symbolic filter we are choosing to interact with reality.

Keywords: Fiction, Cognitivism, Models, Exemplification, Thought Experiments

Introduction

It has become commonplace, especially for those authors which lean into more fantastic genres, to define their storytelling as “lying to say the truth”¹. Moving past the motto, what they mean seems to be something along the lines of “using a false (or otherwise inaccurate) framework in order to assert truths regarding the object of their narrative”. In other words, at least according to said authors, a structured set of false assertions in the form of a story should be able to express true statements not only regarding the fictional world it takes place in, but also about the real world outside the book. In other words, they hold that fiction is not only an instrument of storytelling, but also a way to interact with reality, albeit in a peculiar way. Such a thesis is no stranger to debates in literary critique and philosophy of fiction, where the discussion regarding the complex interplay between falsehood, reality and truth rages still².

So far, one could reasonably think of it as yet another specialistic debate regarding fictional scenarios and little else, entirely devoid of interest for any other field of study. And yet, as a growing formation of scholars starting (for what concerns the contemporary discussion) from Vaihinger³ maintains, this debate can and does have a bearing on quite common scientific practices. These scholars argue that fiction is no stranger to research contexts. On the contrary, it has been employed in scholarly practices for centuries without much ado. To name some examples, the continued employment of the billiard ball model of gases, with its evident simplifications of the actual dynamics involved, the construction of fictional hybridizations such as biological morphospaces, or even the employment of fictional entities in the context of thought experiments, like Maxwell’s demon.

These occurrences attest to the relevance of this problem for a wide range of disciplines that aim to describe the different aspects of reality. The widespread presence of fictional grafts in the scientific en-

¹ See Ursula Le Guin’s introduction to *The Left Hand in the Darkness* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2016), or Terry Pratchett in the first volume of *The Science of Discworld* (written with Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen, London: Ebury Publishing, 1999).

² See Noël Carroll & John Gibson, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature* (New York: Routledge 2016), 347-424 and Alison James, Akihiro Kubo & Francoise Lavocat, *The Routledge Handbook of Fiction and Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 13-138 for thematic overviews of the main issues involved.

³ Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As If’* (New York: Routledge Classics 2021).

deavour demands a more in-depth analysis of the theoretical dynamics involved, and the formulation of an account apt to describe how and why they can prove useful.

To accomplish this, firstly we will consider the three case studies just mentioned, allowing for an historically grounded analysis of different kinds of fictions in research contexts. Secondly, the main dynamics involved will be accounted for in the light of Elgin's theory of exemplification, offering a solid epistemological background to them. Lastly, a more general consideration of the theoretical use of fiction will be in order, allowing for the formulation of a wider account of fictional grafts in scientific practices.

Demons and Details – On the use of Fiction in Research Practices

To answer the question of why a scholar would feel the need to interpose a fictional layer between themselves and reality, some case studies can be a useful point of departure. Looking at how and why such a phenomenon occurred historically will furnish the necessary ground to frame the issue. First, we will consider the classical example of the billiard ball model of gases, then we will move on to Borges' influence on the development of biological morphospaces and, finally, we will confront Maxwell's demon. The increasing degree of fictionality of the examples, as well as their different areas of interest, will prove useful in reaching a more general conclusion by offering different perspectives on the issues at hand.

The billiard ball model of gases—more precisely, the ideal gas model—developed in the XIX century by a host of physical chemists, aims to describe the relationship between pressure, volume and temperature in a gas⁴. It takes its name from the idealization it employs: the atoms of the gas are conceptualized as perfect spheres which bounce against each other (and the edges of the container) with dynamic impacts, cutting short of all other interparticle interactions. While it may not capture the chosen relationship for all kinds of gases at all temperatures and pressures, it is still pragmatically useful for a wide range of them in ordinary conditions, offering a good approximation of the dynamics involved. Cutting short of every excessive complication (such as

⁴ Ildikó Rapp-Kindner, Katalin Ósz & Gábor Lente, “The Ideal Gas Law: Derivations and Intellectual Background”. *ChemTexts* no. 1 (2025).

the specific form of the atomic orbitals, or the friction between the atoms), it is able to exemplify the overall relationship between the gas molecules to a sufficient degree of precision. Despite the evident simplifications involved (or, rather, thanks to them), it offers a useful and easy-to-understand model to comprehend the behaviour of a gas in ordinary conditions. Of course, this is said assuming the perspective of a physical chemist, and not, for instance, that of a quantum physicist. On the latter case, the model would undoubtedly fall short of many salient details. In this respect, the situation is similar to that of the solar system model of atoms. Developed between 1911 and 1918 by Bohr and making full use of Rutherford's discovery of the nucleus⁵, it is, from a more contemporary standpoint, extremely inaccurate. Electrons do not, strictly speaking, orbit around the nucleus, orbitals have completely different shapes and so on. And yet, the model is still used in introductory lectures to depict an overall sketch of the relationship between the nucleus and the electrons which surround it, even if most of the assumptions regarding it are mistaken. It must be also stressed that this model was the first to consider the idea of quantized energy levels which order the electrons into a set of discrete states around the nucleus, paving the way to fully quantum models of the atom.

This first case study shows some interesting characteristics of fiction in research contexts. First and foremost, fictional grafts can *exemplify* various *features* of natural phenomena while cutting short of others. On this note, we can say that the operation is selective. Through this, scientists can create models which, while not entirely correct from a correspondentist perspective⁶, are pragmatically effective from specific theoretical standpoints and/or objectives. This also implies that the usefulness of said models is perspective-dependent: different ends call for different models. So, with the right contextualization, fiction can help strike a balance between complexity and correctness, exemplifying only the relevant features while shadowing the unnecessary ones. However, should the research necessities demand it, these can still be introduced back by modifying the degree of fictionality of the model. This

⁵ See Manjit Kumar, *Quantum* (New York – London: Norton & Company 2008), 93-116 for an historical contextualization.

⁶ For a primer on truth as correspondence and its alternative paradigms, see Umberto Eco, "Dire il contrario". In: *Menzogna e Simulazione*, edited by M.A. Bonfantini (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane), 33-43.

latter point also suggests that the degree and kind of fictionality of a model can be tinkered with, reshaping it in more useful representations according to the situation at hand.

With this, we can move to the second case study: the surprising influence that Borges' *The Library of Babel* had over biological studies in the latter half of the 20th century. After the publication of the short story in 1941, the idea of a complete combinatory space did not propagate only in the humanities (with results such as the famous OuLiPo), but also through the sciences, especially in the biological field⁷. There, several combinatory morphospaces⁸ begun to appear. These are collections of all the possible variations of specific biological phenomena with respect to their defining characteristics, such as shells, the corporeal forms of animals, or proteins⁹. The latter case, formulated by Maynard-Smith in 1970¹⁰, established the playing field for a special occurrence of these theoretical constructions (or, more precisely, a subset of it): Arnold's work on the so-called "library of enzymes". And yet, her studies were not limited to the bare definition of another total combinatory collection¹¹; they included a method to move within it. Much like Borges' librarians, Arnold found a way to employ the natural mechanisms which guide the evolution of enzymes to move through their morphospace, discovering new molecules as she went¹². This was thanks to a similarity and a fundamental difference from the original Borgesian conception, which emerged organically as the two combinatory spaces where compared. While the enzymes' morphospace, just like Borges' library, was created

⁷ Telmo Pievani, *Tutti i mondi possibili. Un'avventura nella grande biblioteca dell'evoluzione* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore 2024).

⁸ See Philipp Mitteroecker & Simon Huttegger "The Concept of Morphospaces in Evolutionary and Developmental Biology: Mathematics and Metaphors". *Biological Theory*, 4,1 (2009), 54-67 for an introduction to the concept of morphospace.

⁹ Respectively: David Raup, "Geometric Analysis of Shell Coiling: General Problems". *Journal of Paleontology*, Vol. 40, No. 15 (1966), 1178-1190. Bradley Deline, Jennifer Greenwood, James Clark *et al.*, "Evolution of Metazoan Morphological Disparity". *PNAS*, Vol. 115, No. 38 (2018), E8909-E8918. John Maynard-Smith, "Natural Selection and the concept of a Protein Space". *Nature*, Vol. 225, (1970), 563-564.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Frances Arnold, "The nature of chemical innovation: new enzymes by evolution". *Quarterly Review of Biophysics*, 48, 4 (2015), 404-410.

¹² For instance, an enzyme capable of creating carbon-silicon bonds (frequently used in paints) without the need for the much more expansive platinum.

combinatorially starting from precise construction rules, thus forming a total combinatorial space where all possible variations were housed, enzymes and books could not be arranged the same way. If the latter, in fact, can be arranged completely at random, with a full copy of *The Lord of the Rings* next to a book filled with random consonants, the biological mechanism of natural selection prevents enzymes (and proteins in general) from being lost to such chaos. For evolutionary constraints, each enzyme must have, next to itself, other enzymes varying only by one single amino acid. For instance, an AA enzyme must have an AB enzyme next (or AC and so on), while it cannot have a FZ one. In this sense, the morphospace is more similar to an endless game such as those where one has to move from “apple” to “earth” in a discrete set of moves rather than to a hopelessly random collection. This grants biologists an important edge over their literary counterparts: their wandering through the morphospace is guided by the light of a precise ordering rule. A rule which allowed Arnold to develop a methodology to artificially direct the evolution of enzymes through the very rules which guide it naturally. Using bacteria as vessels, she had enzymes evolve and modify themselves following their natural dynamics, but in a carefully controlled environment. She was thus able to direct their wandering in the library of possibilities, discovering new and potentially useful enzymes.

In this second case study, we can see the possible advantages of a hybrid mode of thinking, one that not only filters reality through fiction, but does also the converse. Through this double operation, Arnold was able to highlight a fundamental similarity and the specific difference between two different combinatory spaces, allowing her to devise a way to explore the morphospace of all possible enzymes through a combination of both. This opens up the possibility of developing comparative analyses of fictional and theoretical frameworks, using recurring and isolated features to highlight otherwise shadowed elements. Under this light, considering reality through the lens of fiction becomes a valid speculative alternative, at least for specific cases. Of course, scholars would still have to carefully consider such hybridizations, mostly because fiction is not primarily written for research purposes¹³. With this, we can move to our third and last example, which will offer a perspective over an even

¹³ While fiction might have also a more inquisitive and speculative side (see for example Calvino's *Cosmicomics*), it remains true that the first objectives of every story are to be enjoyable by its target audience and to be coherent with respect to itself.

greater degree of fictionality: Maxwell's demon.

Developed by James C. Maxwell over the course of his studies in statistical mechanics, this thought experiment was intended to offer further ground to Boltzmann's intuition that the second law of thermodynamics was just statistical. In other words, that entropy is not a necessary outcome of the development of our universe: rather, it is just a general tendency of the systems which compose it¹⁴. The experiment is fairly simple in its enactment: it requires a box filled with a gas at equilibrium, a barrier with a small door in it and a subatomic demon ready for action. Said demon is then instructed to send all the hot molecules on one side of the barrier and keep all the cold ones on the other. Leave them be for a while, and the result will be a box with a hotter side and a colder side, in an outright violation of entropy. This shows that—at least from a purely theoretical standpoint such as this— nothing prevents that the second law of thermodynamics could be reversed, decreasing the entropy in a closed system. A further question might be what energetic costs such a reversal would imply, but this is beyond the scope of both the experiment and this paper.

What lies within it, instead, are the epistemic possibilities laid by the thought experiment. The employment of a fictional device such as the demon was able to bring out the true nature of the second law of thermodynamics, once again cutting short any unnecessary inconvenience, and highlighting only the relevant phenomena. Of course, moving back the slider of fictionality as has been suggested above brings with itself many problems that are not confronted by Maxwell, but which are nonetheless bathed in a new light thanks to it. In addition, we have an empirical confirmation of the fact that even to a degree of fictionality such as this, we are still able to reach reality. Or maybe we once again ought to say *thanks* to the degree of fictionality reached through the thought experiment. We will get back to this point shortly.

Before we move on to the next section, however, one last observation is due. While the first case study was not totally explicit in this respect, the second and the third showcased another property of fiction:

¹⁴ Of course, such a claim has not gone uncriticized. For further information on this topic (and on Maxwell's Demon in general), see Kent Peacock, (2018), "Happiest thoughts: great thought experiments of modern physics". In *The Routledge Companion to Thought Experiments*, edited by M. Stuart, Y. Fehige & J. Brown (New York: Routledge 2018), 212-215.

the symbolic layer which fictional scenarios are often coated into. More specifically, the first delineation of morphospaces was as libraries of phenomena, while Maxwell's device has been described as a demon. Both descriptions are, of course, metaphorico-symbolical in nature, and are used to help us clarify what it is that we are talking about. In the first case, we are defining an ordered collection of biological elements, in the second, we underline that the nature of the mechanism is in some sense preternatural, or at least beyond our current (and foreseeable) capacities. And yet, as Lakoff and Johnson remark in their work on the epistemology of metaphors, these linguistic devices hide as much as they reveal¹⁵. The library of enzymes is not, in fact, an actual library, meaning that it is a fully catalogued collection we can browse in search of answers, but is a theoretical model filled with a host of hypothetical enzymes we do not know of yet. Maxwell's demon, on the other hand, cuts short of a great number of further physical complications by black boxing the required device in its demonic characterization. Even so, such layers are part of the reason we make use of fictional frameworks, employing metaphors to ease us into potentially unfamiliar environments, cutting through a wide range of difficulties. In this sense, it is not imprecise to say, as has been noted during the analysis above, that fiction can be speculatively useful precisely thanks to this symbolical black boxing, making full use of the epistemological capabilities of metaphors and storytelling to reach new insights on a variety of topics.

Reasons and Scholars – On why one should use Fiction

Over the previous paragraph it has been noted that a peculiar feature of fiction was shared by all the case studies, notwithstanding the different degree of fictionality or their specific purposes: the possibility to define a scenario capable of highlighting only the desired characteristics of a particular phenomenon, cutting short any unnecessary inconvenience, be it theoretical or practical. This feature has been already described (with respect to thought experiments) by Elgin, who accounted for its epistemological status with her theory of exemplification. In general, this is the relationship between a *sample* and the thing of which it is a sample, what-

¹⁵ George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980).

ever it may be¹⁶. Consider the sample of a colour in a paint shop¹⁷: it exemplifies the corresponding paint by showcasing a specific property, i.e. its pantone. As has already been showed, then, exemplification is selective. And similarly to what Lakoff and Johnson noticed with respect to metaphors¹⁸, exemplification too shadows some properties by highlighting others, all the while referring to both. For example, the type of cardboard which composes the colour sample, or its height and length. Despite the simplicity of its definition, the implications of this relationship, both in general and in the specific case of fiction, cannot be underestimated.

As has been introduced above, the main example considered by Elgin are thought experiments, i.e. fictional frameworks defined *ad hoc* to examine a specific phenomenon or problem or put a theory to the test. We already considered one with Maxwell's demon in the last section, but one might also think of other examples concerning general relativity or quantum mechanics, such as Einstein's elevator or Schrödinger's cat. In the first case, these scientific exemplifications helped Einstein in the development of general relativity, highlighting the seemingly more paradoxical elements in a clean, easy-to-access way¹⁹; in the second they showcased the critical points of the Copenhagen interpretation and of the quantum world in general²⁰. This shows the epistemic usefulness of exemplification: it allows us to account for and, in general, to define frameworks in which we can remove all the possible obstacles while highlighting only the relevant features of possibly any object or phenomena. Furthermore, while *samples* exemplify directly only specific characteristics, they can and do refer to many others²¹. In other words, they structurally leave room

¹⁶ Catherine Elgin, "Imaginative Investigations: Thought Experiments in Science, Philosophy and Literature". In *Literature as Thought Experiment? Perspectives from Philosophy and Literary Studies*, edited by F. Bornmüller, J. Franzen, & M. Lessau (Leiden: Brill 2019), 5. For an analysis that considers also the artistic dimension of fiction, see Nelson Goodman, "When is Art?". In *The Arts and Cognition*, edited by D. Perkins & B. Leonard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1977), 11-19.

¹⁷ Catherine Elgin, *True Enough* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2017), 187-188.

¹⁸ Lakoff & Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*.

¹⁹ See Peacock, "Happiest thoughts: great thought experiments of modern physics", 215 -222.

²⁰ See Kumar, *Quantum* for an historical contextualization.

²¹ Through the materials they are composed of, their shape, or the way in which they design a specific concept. Combining this with the abovementioned theories by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), we may add to this list the kind of metaphors used.

for different readings which can focus on other properties and aspects of the considered phenomena²². Scholars are always welcome to make use of an exemplifier in different and/or unorthodox ways (with respect to the intended one), ways that nonetheless remain available.

In such a context, then, the author/researcher stipulates a narrative framework that, even if it is not possible in a rigorous sense, must remain *plausible* to the target reader/colleague²³. Such a framework will be constructed *ad hoc* to highlight the desired *features* and themes and will also leave room to elaborate a series of divergent interpretations. As an example, one might think of the abovementioned criticism moved against Maxwell's demon. Stemming from the same premises, it clearly shows how a different perspective or a slightly different degree of fictionality can lead to different (and possibly contrasting) outcomes on the object there exemplified.

The verb "stipulate" is not used without reason. It recalls Saul Kripke's modal theses, developed in the context of his theory of rigid designation²⁴. In short, Kripke regards possible words as stipulations in which we define and develop possible world states through "rigid designators". These are fixed expressions which refer to one and the same individual through all possible worlds. The example brought forth by Kripke is that of a world in which Richard Nixon lost the elections for the thirty-seventh President of the United States of America²⁵. While in other accounts of modality the identification of this second Nixon is established through complex theories which define identity through different worlds²⁶, Kripke flips the situation with a rigid designation theory. In other words, it makes no sense to ask if this second Nixon is indeed the very same Nixon we know of,

²² In some cases, the author/researcher of the exemplifier might choose an imprecise one, or they may fail in highlighting the desired *feature*, offering further room for analysis.

²³ The reason for this is the enactment and preservation of the suspension of disbelief, building a fruitful collaboration between author and reader. While it might seem odd to speak of SoD in a research context, it has to be noted that if the framework of the thought experiments is incoherent with respect to the theoretical background of the issue or to itself, the target audience/colleagues will reject it purely on these structural reasons. In this sense, the two phenomena prove surprisingly close.

²⁴ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1980).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38-49.

²⁶ For instance, Lewis' counterpart theory. For further information, see David Lewis, "Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic". *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 65, No. 5, (1968), 113-126.

since the possible world does not exist on his own, but is stipulated as we define the counterfactual world state. Given this, the identity of the two Nixons becomes simply a consequence of our premises. This brief incursion in modal logic might appear out of place, and yet it brings curious implications to the table. Combining the theses we just discussed with the issues at hand, it allows us – at least in the range of cases we are discussing – as the stipulation of a framework designed to exemplify themes and/or problems within a specific narrative.

However, two further observations from the second and third case study must be added to this overall account. The first is the possibility to have a fictional scenario and a theoretical model interact with each other. In this sense (at least for specific sets of them) they are not irreducible to each other. Possibly, this is due to the similarity of the proceedings and assumptions involved, such as in Arnold and Borges' case, but further analysis is still required to prove this was not a specific characteristic of this case study. Nonetheless, this proves to be an extremely useful possibility, allowing scholars to frame differences and similitudes between the frameworks very easily. This cross-analysis can also offer a fair share of possible adjustments to the scenario's degree of fictionality, allowing for greater precision in its design. The second is the metaphórico-symbolical layer that fiction incorporates, and it has already been discussed at the end of the previous section.

Horizons and Borders – On the roads opening before us

With a stock of three case studies and Elgin's account for the exemplification there enacted, we can now move to some general observations regarding the use of fiction in research contexts. The most striking feature emerging from the analysis is arguably the fact that it can be used as a tool to interact with reality, rather than simply to escape it. Of course, this interaction is mediated, and some aspects of the actual situation involved are removed. Under this respect, then, we can say that we have indeed departed from the phenomena depicted. And yet, the goal of this operation is to focus on other specific features of that very same situation. As we saw in the first paragraph, this can be due to pragmatic needs (the gases' case), aimed to a purely theoretical speculation (Maxwell's case), or enacted through a combination of both (the morphospaces' case). Because of this, and of the differences between the situations involved, the gradient of fictionality of the specific scenario can also vary.

Then, we can conclude that (at least in a research context) it is indeed possible to “lie to say the truth”. Or, better said, to “lie to reach the truth”. Of course, one might say that we should throw away our ladder after using it, and yet it is undeniable that such a ladder has been the pathway to many theories and discoveries. For instance, one might consider not only the three case studies considered in the first section, but also the abovementioned fictional (or fictionalized) scenarios that helped develop both general relativity (Einstein’s elevator, the twins’ experiment or the ride on the photon) and quantum mechanics (Schrödinger’s cat, Wigner’s friend or the EPR box). An even further example might be the Turing machine, born as a thought experiment to inquire about the *Entscheidungsproblem* and ended up as the forebearer of the Bombe and, through it, of today’s computers²⁷.

And yet, confining this feature of fiction only to thought experiments and a variety of liminal cases concerning fictional (or partly fictionalized) scenarios would be reductive, other than unsatisfactory. On this note, it must be stressed that a wide group of fictions and stories are written also to investigate (or, more generally, to elaborate) on real phenomena. There’s speculative fiction, tinkering with language and cognition (*Stories of your life* by Ted Chiang) or the implications of biotechnology (the *MaddAddam* trilogy by Margaret Atwood). There’s horror, with its exploration and expansion of the dark corners of reality (consider authors such as H.P. Lovecraft or Shirley Jackson). Even the seemingly harmless genre of New Journalism grants real events a more organic (and partly fictional) frame of reference, giving structure and order to clouds of otherwise chaotic facts (*In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, or Emmanuel Carrère’s novelized biographies).

Finally, we might consider what should seem in all rights the furthest example of a fiction that could help us interact with the real: a young adult fantasy trilogy, i.e. *The Bartimeus Sequence* by Johnathan Stroud. As it is often the case in novels, the saga revolves around a main theme: slavery and exploitation. However, Stroud chooses to explore it without resorting to human beings. In the fictional world of the books the slave-owner dynamic is exemplified through the relationship between the mages of the British Empire, who rule most of the Earth, and

²⁷ Alan Turing, “On Computable Numbers, with an application to the *Entscheidungsproblem*”. *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society*, 58 (1936), 230-265.

a race of otherworldly demons. As doctor Faust in the various versions of his story, the sorcerers devised a way to summon these creatures in our continuum, binding them to their service and forcing them to assume a definite form. This narrative choice does not only enhance the alterity of the slave, but also amplifies the realization that, despite their *prima facie* alien appearance, the demons are also “human”, in a sense. They have feelings and desires of their own and wish nothing more than to return in their own dimension to exist in peace. They are not, in conclusion, evil beings to subjugate through some contract of sorts. This narrative dynamic also ends up lightened of most of the sociopolitical and historical implications of slavery, given that the enslaved beings are demons from another dimension and not human victims of European Imperialism. By cutting short of these aspects, Stroud allows the reader to focus only on the desired ones, without forcing too much detail onto the reader. In this sense, just as in the exemplification described by Elgin, the trilogy reconfigures the specific *features* of slavery, offering its readers a specific point of view to consider the issue. Of course, one might object that the relationship between the two kinds of slavery does not obtain, or that the fictional pruning of sociopolitical implications ends up preventing any meaningful way of linking them. And yet, given that the fictional condition of demons is in fact heavily rooted in historical slave practices²⁸ and that the different character arcs work to showcase ethical and humanitarian problems emerged while examining historical slavery, I maintain that both share a common theoretical ground which can open to a comparative analysis. Even in a case such as this, then, we may conclude that there is room for interaction with reality, albeit with a greater degree of fictionality.

²⁸ It must be noted that this is not an isolated characteristic of *The Bartimeus Sequence*, but a common worldbuilding good practice shared by many writers to make their worlds more believable to the respective audiences. Coating fictional elements in real-world facts and theories helps authors frame the various parts of their fictional worlds in a coherent and plausible way, thus allowing for a smooth enactment of the suspension of disbelief. Some examples might be Patrick Rothfuss’s use of thermodynamics as a starting point for the magic system of *The Name of the Wind* (New York: Daw Books, 2007), Catherine Lacy’s careful mixing of real-world, historical events and fictional intromissions by her main character in her *Biography of X* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), or Neal Stephenson’s transfiguration of actual philosophical positions and theories to design Arbre’s monk-scientists researches in *Anathem* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 2008).

Conclusion

Going back to our opening question, it appears that “lying to say the truth” is indeed a pretty accurate description of at least a specific set of fictions, grounded both in historical and contemporary research practices. This if we understand the phrase as “taking a step back from reality to fictionally cut short of any unnecessary complication, focusing only on the desired characteristics and bringing them into the spotlight”. Under this perspective, we can reasonably consider fiction as a workbench to stipulate a framework designed to exemplify themes and problems within a specific narrative, featuring a built-in metaphoric-symbolical layer able to black box theoretical and practical inconveniences. In addition, far from being a strictly scholarly advantage, this framing of fiction can in return open the door to new and epistemically interesting perspectives on novels and short stories, considering them not only as products of entertainment, but also as windows on problems and theories able to showcase new, perhaps underrepresented features. Of course, such a position needs not to hold for each and every story, but it does emerge in a significant set of them. Given this, we may do consider fiction as a way to interact with reality.