

Who Is Who in the Fictional World

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In the Glossary to his *Heterocosmica*, Lubomír Doležel defines the fictional world as "a possible world constructed by a fictional text or other performative semiotic medium" (Doležel 1998, 280). And in the text proper he says: "All possible worlds are constructs of human productive abilities; fictional worlds of literature are products of textual poesis. By composing a written or oral text, the author creates a fictional world that was not available prior to this act." And then there is a correlative claim about the referential role of expressions used in fiction: "Whereas for imaging texts the domain of reference is given, fictional texts stipulate their referential domain by creating a possible world" (Doležel 1998, 23 and 26).

The question then arises whether any world that is described in fiction is necessarily a "fictional world" in this sense and whether this kind of reference is the only one possible in a literary text. I will try to demonstrate that neither claim is true: rather, I argue, any fragment of the actual world may quite naturally appear in the position of a literary work's world, without thus losing its original status; and correlatively, singular terms used in texts of fiction may even there fulfill the referential functions they have acquired in "ordinary" communication.

I. The fictional world, the possible world, the actual world

To begin with, let us consider the actual world, two individual persons in it – let them be Caesar and Brutus – and two relations that may obtain: x loved y ; x killed y . As we know from Brutus' brilliant speech in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and from examples popular in logic, the manner in which these two persons are engaged in the two relations is the following:

(w_1) : B loved C . C loved B . B killed C . C did not kill B .

It is perfectly easy to imagine alternative scenarios, with the very same real persons but with things going differently, for example this way:

(w_2) : B loved C . C loved B . B did not kill C . C killed B .

Or again this way:

(w_3) : B did not love C . C did not love B . B did not kill C . C did not kill B .

And so on.

If we calculate the combinations, there are $2^4 = 16$ of them (including those in which B and C killed one another). Plainly, the relevant fragment of the actual world – which can be taken as an actualized tiny world w_1 – is not a product of my creative activity, nor is it a linguistic construct. My own role consists simply in the focusing of my own

attention on — and then drawing your attention to) this fragment of the actual world. The role of the English language is exhausted by the mere fact that I employ English sentences in the description of this fragment.¹ Similarly, neither myself nor the English language bear responsibility for the remaining fifteen alternatives: their listing is determined combinatorically and the only thing I have done for them is that I have described some of them (and collectively referred to the rest). The role of the English language is, once again, exhausted by its providing suitable sentences for this purpose.

Now, the question is: what changes when, in describing any of these pocket-worlds, I do so with literary aspirations, and thus create a (somewhat simple-minded) literary work. For example:

W₁

*By Brutus Caesar, oh, was loved,
and Caesar loved his Brutus too.
Yet woe, Brutus did Caesar in;
by Caesar Brutus killed was not.*

Then again, it is obvious that I can describe any of the fifteen remaining alternatives with the same – i.e. literary – aspirations, for instance the least interesting one, in which nobody loves anybody and nobody killed anybody:

W₃

*No love Caesar for Brutus had;
'tis true, mutual was this lack.
Yet lo, one th'other killèd not
nor killed was by the other's hand.*

What possible reasons could we have for supposing that anything relevant concerning the status of these worlds and their inhabitants has changed in virtue of the fact that I have decided to try and occupy the arena of epic poetry?² I have succeeded in descriptively identifying two small possible worlds, the first of which is, as before, a fragment of the actual world (or in other words: despite all its bathos,

¹ Could one still face an objection to the effect that anything we speak about in any type of discourse is a linguistic construct? The notion of language working in such a way that it construes all the entities spoken about is an idea I find plainly self-destructive: I have attempted to show elsewhere that it leaves no space either for a coherent notion of language or of language users or of the use of language in the presentation of the theory itself. Cf. Kofátko (2006), Ch. A.I. For standard arguments against linguistic constructivism cf. e.g. Putnam (1994); Searle (1995), Ch. 7, 8, 9; Davidson (1997).

² Actually, the author of these enchanting poems is my colleague and friend Martin Pokorný, whom I also thank for improving the English of this paper as well as for inspiring discussions on related topics in philosophy of literature.

the literary description of this first world tells us exactly what actually happened). The two small worlds are identical with the worlds w_1 and w_2 I have previously described *without* literary aspirations. Neither of them has turned in virtue of my adopting these aspirations into a linguistic construct: as before, the English language has served merely for my picking them out and drawing your attention to them (this time with all the poetic power I could muster).

Let us now turn from my personal aspirations to the status of the text. Suppose that I have publicly *presented* my descriptions as literary texts, i.e. as texts to which literary aspirations should be ascribed, and that they have been awarded this status. What changes does this bring about? If neither the change in the speaker's or author's aspirations, nor the change in the status of the text, turns, in and by itself, the world that is described in it into an intellectual or linguistic construct, then there is just one candidate for a possible shift that comes to my mind: To present a possible world w as the world of a literary work amounts to introducing it into communication in a special way which neutralizes the distinction between w 's being and not being actual. But I do not know of any argument that could support the *general* claim that the literary functions of a literary text are always in all their parameters indifferent to whether the situations and events described are (taken as) real or fictitious. In other words, I do not know why our awareness of the fact that the things described in the text actually happened, should be in principle ineffective in literary reception, or even counter-productive for it, i.e. block the literary functions of the text. Quite on the contrary, I believe that this awareness may often expand the literary effect of the text in a way that cannot be achieved by any kind of pretense (i.e. by presuming or accepting in the as-if mode that such-and-such actually happened),³ and what is more, such awareness may even be required by the literary functions of the texts (cf. below, section II).

Correlatively, an equally productive factor of literary reception may be our being aware of the fact that the text describes certain historical events in a way that deviates from what we learned at school. Both the experience of agreement and the experience of contrast equally activate our picture of the actual world: and each, in an equal measure, may provide a substantial constituent of the literary effect to which the construction of the work aspires.

To sum up:

(a) There is no conflict between ascribing literary aspirations to a text and accepting the very same text as a description of real situations and events. The literary status concerns the text's aspirations (to wit, the text aspires to certain literary qualities) rather than the world described in it.

(b) Moreover, the specific literary aspirations of the text (and hence also the literary

³ This opinion appears to be shared for instance by the authors of the various explanatory notes to Joyce's *Ulysses* (as a considerable part of these annotations identifies historical events, persons etc. referred to, according to the annotators, in Joyce's text) as well as by those readers of Joyce who pay attention to these notes not just out of sheer curiosity but rather out of the belief that this may help them make better sense of *Ulysses* as a piece of literature.

functions the text fulfils in virtue of its being ascribed such and such literary aspirations) may be based on the presumption that the world described in it is real; and the reader may be supposed to make this presumption "straightforwardly", i.e. not in the as-if mode.

(c) The present considerations do not imply that it is inherently *incoherent* to classify the worlds of literary works as products of our intellectual or linguistic creativity: they merely show that in some cases it is *wrong*. It is so in cases where we do not start with construing fictitious entities but rather with actual entities (e.g. historical individuals) and describe possible states of affairs or events in which they participate - independently of whether we take these possible scenarios as materialized in the actual history of our world or as counterfactual. Neither of these attitudes is incompatible with attributing literary aspirations and literary status to a text.

II. Singular reference in a literary text

The very fact that a description of some possible world w acquires literary status does not block or shift the previous referential functions of the singular terms used in that description – just like the status of w does not change either. For instance, the world w_1 (as defined above) is incompatible with the world w_3 precisely because B and C stand in w_1 in certain particular relations, whereas in w_3 the *very* same individuals do not stand in those particular relations. If w_1 is actual (as I suppose it is), then the singular terms used in its description refer to actually existing individuals. And the same must hold for the use of these terms in the description of w_3 , since, as we have just remarked, the incompatibility of w_1 and w_3 is based on the fact that the couple of individuals spoken about is the same in both descriptions (i.e. that the name " B " refers to the very same individual in the description of w_1 and in the description of w_3 , and the same for " C "). Nothing changes here in virtue of the fact that the descriptions of w_1 and w_3 acquire literary status, as it happens in the "poems" W_1 a W_3 .

In other words, proper names remain *rigid designators* in Kripke's sense (cf. Kripke 1972, esp. 48). even if transferred from "everyday" communication to literary texts. A name that, in its ordinary use, refers to a person P , refers to it with respect to all the possible worlds in which P exists, including those in which P does not keep the (non-essential) properties it possesses in the actual world. A good example is the world w_2 , i.e. the world where Brutus did not kill Caesar but rather the other way round – and there is no reason to suppose that this remains true only as long as we do *not* decide to speak about w_2 with literary aspirations.

According to Kripke's theory, a name acquires its referential function typically in the act of baptism whereby it is assigned to an independently (usually ostensively) identified individual. This assignment is then reproduced in a communicative chain, in which other and yet other users adopt the name with the intention to preserve its referential function. The thus grounded and reproduced link between a name and its referent is then preserved even in statements about counterfactual states of affairs – and I do not see why should it be any different in the case of utterances made within

literary texts. Is it all right to say or not that Stendhal in *La Chartreuse de Parme* continues the chain of the uses of the name "Napoleon" that includes the statements of Stendhal's contemporaries about the 1798 invasion in Egypt, the battle at Wagram etc.? If our previous argument is correct, then this is precisely what Stendhal does, although not quite straightforwardly: he construes his *narrator* as a person using the name "Napoleon" in statements about the very same man to whom Stendhal's actual contemporaries referred in using that name. The same concerns the characters of the novel: it is true that Fabrizio del Dongo is not involved in any real chain of uses of the name "Napoleon" simply because he and his utterances are a literary construct, nevertheless Fabrizio is (among other things) construed and presented as a speaker participating in this chain.

It is a perfectly good question to ask whether the uses of the name "Napoleon" in *La Chartreuse* – performed by the narrator, Fabrizio, or any other character – refer to Napoleon I. or Napoleon III., and this despite the fact that neither the name "Napoleon I." nor "Napoleon III." appear in *La Chartreuse*. Our reply should be based on our acquaintance with Stendhal's text, which contains mentions of the 1797 Italian campaign, the return from Elba and the battle of Waterloo, and on our knowledge of the historical fact that these events are connected with Napoleon I. rather than Napoleon III. Just as meaningful is the following question: Is the man referred to in *La Chartreuse* as "Napoleon" the same person who defended Toulon against the English invasion, suppressed the royalist rebellion against the Directorium etc. - or is it rather that the individual who did these things is a person different from the Napoleon of *La Chartreuse*, one bearing a phonologically identical name? The best thing to do then is to look into a textbook of history in order to learn whether the man who did these things (which are not mentioned in Stendhal's novel) is identical with the man who won at Marengo and lost at Waterloo (events spoken about in the novel). Similarly, when Tolstoy's narrator in *War and Peace* meditates about the limits of genius of a man referred by him to as "Napoleon", it certainly makes good sense to confront the narrator's conclusions with the historians' statements about Napoleon I. As a reader of *The Count of Monte Christo* or of *Lost Illusions*, I am confronted with a series of terms like "The Emperor", "Napoleon", "Bonaparte", "The Corsican" or "The Usurper": then the *literary* construction of the text invites me to activate my *historical* knowledge and on its basis interpret these terms, as used in given contexts, as coreferential. In any case, this is much more effective than to analyze the relations between statements that contain these words within the exclusive boundaries of what is explicitly said, implied or implicated in the text. When I read in *Le Rouge et le Noir* that Julian Sorel hid a portrait of "the Emperor" in his pallet, I take it as an occasion to exploit – in the service of the *literary* functions of the text – my sketchy knowledge about Napoleon I. and try to imagine what appeal the career of this *historical* person might have had in the imagination of ambitious young men of the Restoration epoch.⁴

⁴ And my (very limited and superficial) historical knowledge about the situation in France during the

In such cases the real Napoleon I. seems to stand in focus of various considerations which are either straightforwardly required by the literary interpretation of the text or at least can play an efficient role in it. The most natural way of doing justice to this observation is to admit the real Napoleon I. as the referent of the utterances of the word "Napoleon" (or "Bonaparte", "The Usurper" etc.) in the literary text. The world of *War and Peace* is then one of those possible worlds which include Napoleon I. (that real person who acquired this name in the coronation act in the actual world, who won at Wagram and was defeated at Waterloo in the actual world etc.). In this possible world this person did many things which he (most probably) did not do in the actual world. In addition, he did here everything he did (as far as we know) in the actual world - provided that it is compatible with what is explicitly said or implied or implicated in the text of the novel. This sphere of his activities provides us with a stock of dates which can be used in filling in narrative gaps, working out implicatures, making sense of some actions and statements of the characters etc.

III. The counterfactual dimension of causal relations

To describe w as a world in which x killed y is to describe it as a world in which y would have, *ceteris paribus*, lived longer had x not acted the way he or she did in fact act. This is quite independent from w 's being or not being (presented as) actual, as well as from the status of its description: hence it holds both for our introductory descriptions of the worlds w_1 and w_3 and for their literary descriptions in the "poems" W_1 and W_3 . It is a counterfactual dimension included in any instantiation of the relation x killed y , no matter whether the instantiation in question is (presented as) actual or counterfactual and in what type of discourse it is being described.

This can be generalized as follows: If the description of w contains specification of some causal relation, then it also contains reference to a possibility not materialized in w , or in other words, reference to a possible world w' that is identical with w except that it does not contain the event that has played the role of the relevant efficient cause in w .⁵ This is perfectly indifferent to the status of w as well as to the functions and aspirations of its description. Hence it makes good sense not only to claim that had Napoleon not lost at Waterloo, the well-known financial speculation of the Rothschilds would have failed, but also to claim that had Schmucke not mentioned Fritz Brunner's story to his old friend Pons, Pons would not have been expelled in a most degrading way from de Marville's house. A failure to acknowledge that this counterfactual statement is true in the world of *Le Cousin Pons* amounts to a failure to grasp a considerable part of what is going on in Chapters 9 through 11.

Restoration period helps me to understand what happens, in the world of the novel, when the hideout is detected.

⁵ On the counterfactual implications of statements about causal relations cf. Wright (1974).

IV. On the alleged incompleteness of fictional entities

Did abbé Herrera (alias Vautrin alias Jacques Collin) have any aunts from his father's side? Was Mme d'Espard's gall bladder (at the time when she was spinning her plots against Lucien de Rubempré) in good condition? These are some fairly typical examples of questions that, unless I have overlooked something, are never answered in the text of *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* and yet they do not mark any gaps that are required to be filled in, given the literary functions of the novel. This certainly does not imply, however, that Vautrin is construed as a creature whose family relations are fundamentally indeterminate and that Mme d'Espard is construed as a creature whose gall bladder is such that in principle it cannot be diagnosed (or as a creature without gall bladder, or as a creature such that it neither possesses nor lacks a gall bladder). A novel whose world would be inhabited by such bizarre creatures ought to aspire to some genre rather different from "scenes from Parisian life".

For the same reason one can hardly deny that in the world of the *Splendeurs* the following conditional holds: "If Mme d'Espard was ever thoroughly examined by the legendary Dr Bianchon (not to mention Dr Desplain!), it is reasonable to suppose that he diagnosed the state of her gall bladder." Moreover, another counterfactual statement that holds for all of us holds for her too: "Had Mme d'Espard been thoroughly examined by any of the doctors who had not in fact examined her, he would most probably discover the state of her gall bladder." I do not see any reason to transform such statements about Mme d'Espard and her gall bladder into counterfactual statements about the text, such as: "Had the text of the novel included a passage about an examination of Mme d'Espard's gall bladder, we would have learned from it that...". The characters of the *Splendeurs* are not construed as two-dimensional beings possessing just the side that is described, i.e. identifiable from the text or its implications — just like a realistic portrait painting does not construe the portrayed head as an object composed only of its visible parts.

Let us turn, for the sake of comparison, to statements about the past. The actual world's past contains all sorts of things that are cognitively inaccessible to us. For instance, there is no procedure of verifying the claim: "The number of hairs of Attila's beard at the end of the last one among those days during which nobody counted the hairs of his beard is odd." Should somebody conclude from this that the past is itself incomplete in this respect, we could object that the following counterfactual statement still holds: "Had we been in a cognitively suitable position at the relevant time, we would have been able to decide about the truth-value of the proposed claim." This statement is based on the construction of a possible world that matches the actual one except that somebody, e.g. myself, is in the proper position at the relevant time. And the same stratagem suggests itself in the case of statements that concern the inhabitants of the worlds of literary works. Let us consider the following statement: "The number of Ester Gobseck's hairs at the moment when baron de Nucingen met her for the first time was odd." Plainly, this claim cannot be verified. Nevertheless, I may quite coherently consider a possible world that is identical with

the world of the *Splendeurs* except that I exist there and occupy a cognitively suitable position, such that at the relevant time I find myself in the relevant place (i.e., in the Bois de Boulogne) and am allowed to count the hairs of Ester Gobseck.⁶ Should I be assuming that the result of my effort would be a number exhibiting the remarkable property of being neither odd nor even? Will anybody want to claim that Balzac chose or construed for his "scenes of Parisian life" a world inhabited by creatures with such a mysterious head growth? If it was intentional, then what was his aspiration? And if it happened against his will, how could he ever lose control over his literary enterprise in such an embarrassing way?

The moral to be drawn is that we should be very careful when speaking about the fundamental incompleteness of fictional worlds or their inhabitants:⁷ the cost to pay may be counterintuitive consequences and producing monsters. It is certainly true that there is nothing in the world of the *Splendeurs* that would make claims such as "Mme d'Espard's gall bladder was fit as a fiddle" either true or false. This means that we cannot justifiably commit ourselves either to the truth of this claim or to the truth of its negation. However, the world of the *Splendeurs* is just as free of anything whatsoever that could justify the claim that Mme d'Espard is fundamentally incomplete in the relevant respect. In order to introduce a being as a standard example of its kind, and hence as determinate in all the parameters essentially belonging to that kind, it is plainly not required that we actually fix all these parameters, as we cannot do anything more but fix some of them and count with a reader who will take as granted that the rest is equally determinate. It is then right to say that our *construction* of the character is incomplete — but the incomplete construction of a character is something very different from the construction of an incomplete character.

Every and each character of the *Splendeurs* did say and do much more in the world of this novel than we find described in the text. The life of Balzac's characters is not a discrete series of appearances of marionettes, resuscitated for a moment by the spotlight; even when they find themselves outside of the focus of narration they maintain their contours and their vitality. To give up this assumption means to start reading the *Splendeurs* as one of the novels of Beckett's Trilogy.⁸ Between any two appearances of baron de Nucingen, separated by dozens of pages and several days of narrated time, there always took place everything that belonged to the everyday life

⁶ In Lubomír Doležel's theory (cf. e.g. Doležel 1998, 181-184) there is no room for any intersections whatsoever between fictional worlds and the actual world. My position is different. Yet in the present case, there is no invasion of an inhabitant of the actual world into the world of the *Splendeurs*, as neither of these worlds take part in our construction. What we do consider is yet another possible world, one that includes myself but except for this detail and its implications perfectly matches the world of the *Splendeurs*.

⁷ Cf. e.g.: "Obviously, denying incompleteness to fictional entities is tantamount to treating them as real entities." (Doležel 1998, 23).

⁸ That would be another case of the "new art of reading", mentioned at the end of Borges's famous story *The Author of Quixote Pierre Menard*. Cf. Kofátko (forthcoming).

of a banker during the Restoration period. Similarly, there should be no doubt that the baron had a mother who had a mother who had a mother etc. — since the life of any character of the *Splendeurs* is anchored in its world precisely in this way. If you ask me how I know all this, I reply that "knowing" is not the right word here. Rather, I take it for granted, I *accept it*,⁹ I understand that this is how things go in the world of *La Comédie humaine*. I do not attempt to peek behind the margins of the pages and I do not pretend that I can actually see there something in the way I can see the little parts of my desk. What I do, however, is that I keep conform to the principles ruling the world of the novel and let them work even behind the boundaries of what is described in the book — precisely the way it is required from me as a reader.

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⁹ This is one of the contexts where the distinction between "belief" and "acceptance" finds natural application; cf. Cohen (1992).

