Fictionality as Density

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Introduction

My goal in this paper is to test the following hypothesis:
(H) The fictionality of a text is directly proportional to its length.
By *testing* (H) I mean, in this particular case, that I will attempt to take the crucial terms of (H) - i.e. fictionality, text, its length - as having a content such that (H) appears valid, or at the very least, highly plausible.

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To begin with, let me list several concepts that are often handled as equivalent with fictionality, even though, once we consider them one by one, it is not difficult to see that they are distinct from fictionality and fully independent from it.

a) Fictionality does not equal narrativity. A narrative may present itself as either factual or as deviating from facts, without any impact whatsoever on its narrativity. On the other hand, a fictional text may easily lack the characteristics of a narrative. For instance, it may fully dispense with the temporal dimension: such would be the case with fictional city-guides or fictional lexicons.[1]

b) Fictionality does not equal linguistic estrangement or linguistic particularity, such as ornamentality, figurativity, rhetoricity, poeticality or literariness. The way modern prose and modern poetry have been developing makes us aware that fictionality need not clash with flatness, descriptivity, rejection of the rhetorical, rejection of the poetic — which is sufficient for allowing us to claim that the two features do not delineate quite the same area.

c) Fictionality does not equal simple un-truth (falsity), mendacity (i.e. intentional covert falsity) or intentionally exhibited falsity (i.e. exhibited fabulation). A fictional text may contain, and as a matter of fact often does contain, a number of statements that, if asserted, would be true; and this finding is, by itself, sufficient for refuting and rejecting the apparent identity between fictionality and un-truth. Let me add here that I find good reasons to believe — even though I do not intend to spend more time on the issue here — that statements included in a fictional text

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[1] Which is not unequivocally identical with saying "guides to fictional cities" or "lexicons of fictional languages". Just as I possess a genuine guide to the city of London, I may possess a fictional guide to the city of London. Whether the latter one necessarily equals a guide to fictional London, is a separate issue, one that I do not intend to tackle here. For some hints (but no more than that) on this point cf. below, §2.

stand beyond the polarity of true and untrue; statements included in a fictional text are, I believe, presented or exhibited rather than asserted.

d) Fictionality does not equal fantasy, the fictional does not equal the fantastic. Fictionality is compatible with sobriety, plainness, the everyday.

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The following three introductory comments may prove helpful at this point in my argument:

- Fictionality can be and often is attributed to entities other than texts (such as worlds, objects, or conscious individuals). My topic here is the fictionality of texts; whenever I say "fictionality", I mean "fictionality of texts"; when I say "fictional texts", it is important to distribute the emphasis equally and to be aware that in this phrase, the adjective is made more specific by the substantive, just as the substantive is made more specific by the adjective. Within our present argument, the issue of functional, ontological or other priority between fictional texts and fictional entities of other types is suspended.

- While there are good reasons to see the above outlined contrasts as generally valid, it is certainly also true that they are made far more visible, prominent and relevant by the directions that modern and present-day literature has taken. The demolishing of established genres, as it can be observed on many sides in contemporary writing, often carries with it the real - and not merely conceptual - breakdown of the traditional links between fictionality on the one hand and narrativity, estrangement, and being untrue on the other.

- The decisive majority of competent users of the term "fictional" would (I trust) recognize the outlined contrasts in some form, if presented with them one-by-one. The stratagem that I perform is that I try to hold onto the four distinctions simultaneously, to maintain them all at once. This is the reason why I follow the current usage as well as break with it. Each distinction, by itself, is rather common-sensical. However, I clearly abandon the ground of shared consensus as soon as I try to combine the four contrasts and systematize them. Thus, I surely cannot - and I do not intend to - claim that all I do is that I make explicit our shared assumptions. Yet it is also important to realize that I do not simply introduce my own idiosyncratic meaning with no links to the way we normally speak. I employ the common usage as an effective hint for pursuing my argument; and I can claim to speak about fictionality insofar as both my starting points and my motivation stem from what we normally or most of the time think about fictionality, even though I combine the elements differently, which is to say: more tightly and more rigidly than usual.

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Let us now turn to the notion of text and to the issue of measuring its length. It is quite obvious that with a naive understanding of text, one that accepts as text any given continuous series of linguistic signs, (H) would stand no chance of effective defense: in such a case, the most fictional text in Czech and in good many other languages would be the Penal Code. In considering textual length, we have to consider the criteria of its unity, too - and these criteria admit of specific formulations only if we take into account the "thickness", the density or inner consistency of a text.

The inner consistency of a text, or in other words, the density of the inner textual interaction can be described by means of the apparatus provided by Franfois Rastier, the prominent French textologist.[2] A summary of the key elements of his general concept can run as follows:

a) *Thematics* is the level comprising the occurences of the basic units of sense, the so-called semes, and their aggregation into (linguistically non-fixed) clusters: Rastier talks here of "semic molecules". Rastier (1997, 34) points out that the theme of a particular text may lack a name in any available language. A text establishes its theme by varying and combining the semes available, directly or indirectly, in standard vocabulary - and with more complex texts the typical case is that the final result is, in itself, *not* part of the vocabulary. In the verse "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow", the semes invoked will, under any analysis, include 'future', 'day' and 'conjunction'; however, in the full context of *Macbeth,* the verse helps constitute[3] a semic molecule (comprising hesitation, frustration, helplessness and other semes) that need not have a name in any language.

b) *Dialectics* is the level of, first, the so-called actants (i.e. the - often non-anthropomorphic - originators and participants of actions), and second, processes. For instance, in cooking recipes, the level of dialectics comprises the stereotypized sequence "ingredients - preparation - spices and sauces - manner of presentation" (as complexes of typified actants and processes). The verse "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" participates in constituting actants such as Macbeth and, by contrast, Lady Macbeth; and it participates in constituting certain particular processes in *Macbeth*, such as Macbeth's hesitation.

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2 In the following I will refer primarily to Rastier (1997), which is the English translation of Rastier (1989). The English translation, it needs to be stressed, is sub-standard: reliable only insofar as it lets you easily guess the underlying French. For a large number of other works see <http://www.revue-texto. net/>, within the present context especially the essay "La sémantique des textes: concepts et applications" (originally Rastier 1996), <http://www.revue-texto. net/1996-2007/Inedits/Rastier/Rastier_Concepts.html>.

3 Let me emphasize the formulation: "helps constitute", not "constitutes".

c) *Dialogics* is the level of semiotic modalities. Rastier recognizes the following modalities: ontic, alethic, deontic, boulestic and evaluating. The verse "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" participates in constituting some - primarily alethic and boulestic - modalities in Macbeth's universe.

d) *Tactics* is the level comprising the "linear ordering of semantic units" and the connected processes of semantic actualization and inference. The verse "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" is particular exactly by virtue of ordering identical sememes in close juxtaposition.

However, now it is crucial to add: while these levels do maintain a relative autonomy of function they also interact - in pairs as well as in triads. For instance, it is easily apparent that the constitution of characters, as highly complex actants (thus belonging to dialectics), is correlated with an appropriate increase of complexity at the levels of dialogics, tactics, and often thematics as well. In developing the interpretation of "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow", especially if we do so - as we must - within the broader context of the play, we have to switch again and again from one level to another: tactics impacts thematics, thematics impacts dialectics, and so on. Or to give a very brief example of a different kind (Rastier 1997, 70): the phrase "ex-president" functions at the levels of thematics (i.e. the occurence of sememes), tactics (i.e. the sequential ordering of sememes), and also dialogics (the constitution of an actant and the establishment of a time-interval).

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In theory,[4] Rastier's apparatus allows us to construe for every text a diagram of its inner interactions, starting with its simplest units and ending with the most complex ones.[5] Let us hypothetically assume that this effort has really been expended, and that as a result, we do possess for every text[6] a complete list of all its inner interactions. In such a case, we are free to try and quantify these interactions.

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4 Given the limitations of effort, time, and funding.

5 In actual practice, to provide a 100% complete description of even a single sentence would be, to put it very mildly, a non-trivial undertaking. I understand that the reader will feel hungry for a more substantial summary and some more substantial examples. However, given the relatively easy availability of Rastier's work and its first-order significance, and also given the fact that such summaries and such examples would require disproportionate space with respect to the rest of the essay and that they would add nothing beyond what can be found in Rastier, I feel that on balance I have good reasons to rest my case with the simple summary that I do provide and that, I hope, gives a basic idea of the approach, and to refer the reader for details to Rastier's own work.

6 Understood against the ternary model of C. S. Peirce — i.e. "interpreted texts" rather than "pure texts". This is a distinction that would require a long substantive analysis. For our present purposes it suffices to emphasize that in what follows (and especially in the next footnote) I distinguish verbally between sign-sequences and texts. It would be more precise to speak of texts interpreted in a manner that is limited by grammar (as institutionalized in our culture) and of texts interpreted "broadly", without any pre-established limitation. However, this would introduce new issues, new complications, and new subtle distinctions

Now let us imagine two sign-sequences: a shorter one (S) and a longer one (L) that contains the shorter one. (The difference between them is the rest — R.) And let us ask the question: Is there a precise way of telling which of the two is more unified? Yes there is — given our argument so far.[7] Simply put: If, by adding the rest R to the shorter sequence

S, the resulting text exhibits *on average* denser inner interaction than the shorter text established by the sequence S, then the resultant longer text, established by the longer sequence L, is more unified. An example will make the principle more vivid and also demonstrate that our proposal here follows certain commonly shared criteria. Let us assume that the *Oedipus Rex* has come down to us in an incomplete version, and that then we find a papyrus with what seems like an ending of the play. Should we attach it to what we have, or should we not? We would normally decide a case of this kind by looking at the interaction between the extant text and the new finding and measure it up against the overall inner interaction of the extant text as such. If the new discovery links up well with the extant version - and this linking may include stylometric analysis, poetic norms, dramatic dénouement and many other sub-areas of interest - then we blend the two and declare the new whole to be the new unified *Oedipus Rex*. If, on the other hand, the interaction between the new fragment and the extant version lags far behind the standard average of the inner interaction of the extant text, then we refuse to blend the two into a new unity.

This, I suggest, is what we often do, although only implicitly and on the basis of an overall impression, not a complete survey. And this kind of procedure does point to a principle that I want to formalize. Again, the formalization goes beyond what we ever do or could do in practice. Yet it is important exactly in that it demonstrates the principle that we tacitly follow.[8]

– all of them quite significant in their own right but rather extraneous to our present effort.

7   Formally, the fully spelled-out criterion would run as follows:

– if the inner interactivity of the text grounded in the sign-sequence S is a, and

– if the inner interactivity of the text grounded in the rest R, needed to add to S in order to attain the longer sign-sequence L, is /3, and

- if the *external* interaction between the texts grounded in the shorter sign- sequence S and the rest R, these two sign-sequences being juxtaposed, is y, then: (a) if y is greater than or equal to a or if y is greater than or equal to /3, we hold the text grounded in L to be a unified text, whereas the texts grounded in S and R are mere sub-texts; (b) if y is smaller than a or if y is smaller than /3, we hold the texts grounded in S and R to be unified texts, whereas the text grounded in L is a mere aggregate.

8 An analogy with comparative measuring may help. In everyday life, we often do comparative measuring, i.e. measuring done merely in terms of "longer" and "shorter", "bigger" and "smaller" - imprecisely and vaguely. Yet the principle of comparative measuring runs as follows: whenever *anything* is added to a dimension, the object with that new dimension is longer, bigger etc. The general formulation "for every x, if x is added to a length L, then the resultant length L + x is comparatively longer than the original length L" is not *jully* confirmed by our practice insofar as that practice is often negligent about small differences. This much being admitted, the principle still remains a useful and valid generalization of what we normally do.

One more example may help. Let's imagine we are reading a novel and there is a footnote attached to a word. Let us further assume that it is unmarked whether the footnote is editorial, or again that we are not sure whether it's mock-editorial or genuinely editorial. What is it that guides us in deciding how to proceed? I submit that this is what we do: If the particular formulation of the footnote interacts highly and in a number of details with the remaining text, we attach it, as belonging to the novel. If the only element that interacts is the information provided by the footnote, then we only use the information to enrich the main text, and leave the footnote, in its particular formulation, completely aside as something textually extraneous.

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Here is the point where I ought to admit that my argument contains a slight element of sophistry. However, it is merely a motivating trick, not a substantial sleight-of-hand; the stratagem does not harm the validity of the argument. It consists in this: I presented (H) as saying that the longer the text, the more fictional it is. (H) is provocative in suggesting the apparently absurd conclusion that we could take any two books, look at the number of pages or letters, and on the basis of this data simply decide which text is more fictional. However, I did point out from the very beginning that in order to make (H) plausible, our understanding of text, its length, and its unity will have to shift: while remaining linked to our normal use it will have to be sharpened, thus forcing us to abandon some of its current features. (In particular, "text" stops signifying just whichever sequence comes our way, and becomes subject to criteria of unity.)[9] This is what has happened, with the conse-quence that (H) shifts from an absolute proposition to a relative one. In saying "The fictionality of a text is directly proportional to its length",

I mean this: if and whenever we succeed in prolonging a text in the manner suggested above, i.e. in a manner enhancing or at least maintaining its degree of unity (or density, or inner coherence), we perform a step in the direction of increased fictionality.

Clearly, for our purposes, fictionality has become identical with inner coherence as such. This manner of understanding fictionality has two interesting consequences:

(Cons1) For every text T that is short and rather simple in its inner interaction, it is, in actual practice, almost certainly possible to find another text L such that the sign-sequence relative to T is contained in the sign-sequence relative to L and that L is more fictional than T. *Thus, in principle, every text that is*

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9 Once again, this is not as unusual as it might seem. It may seem strange at first if we put on one side the name of the author as one text and then the text of a book as another. Yet whenever we talk about fictional texts, such as novels or poems, in this actual practice we often do separate the text from its paratexts, such as the attribution to its author, the date of publication etc.

almost purely non-fictional can in principle turn into a part of another, this time highly fictional text.

(Cons2) *No text is completely bare of fictionality.*

We can grasp the significance of these consequences better once we consider the possible use of texts in make-believe playing, the area of fictionality as analysed by Kendall Walton (1990).[10] According to Walton, fictional texts serve as a prop in a game of make-believe. In my own argument as presented here, the limitation to fictional texts is dropped, as all texts (the way I have defined them) are to a degree fictional. (Presumably, such a step would not be completely foreign to Walton either.)[11]Having framed the issue in this way, we can ask to what degree a particular text *lends itself* to the possibilities of playing games, to what degree it *occasions* playing and *induces* us to play. The statement that no text is purely non-fictional then means that every text lends itself to playing to some degree, even though it may remain marginal in many cases.

It is another consequence of our present argument that fictionality and factuality no longer appear as exclusive opposites. We will remain conform to current use if we call *factual* (without reservations) any text or subtext that is either (a) true (veridical, conform to reality), or (b) verifiable (testable, realistic), or (c) realizable (satisfiable). It is then possible to quantify the relative degree of factuality of any autonomous (i.e. unified) text by the percentage of (maximally extended) subtexts that are factual without reservations (in the first, second, or third sense listed above).[12]

A high degree of fictionality, as described here, is in no way incompatible with a high degree of factuality, as described here. In other words, readiness to be employed in the "as if" modality is in no way essentially incompatible with readiness to be employed in the "really" modality — even though the former readiness differs from the latter and even though the two employments produce different effects.[13]

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10 Let me stress, however, that the concept of fictionality that I am developing here is no replica of the one proposed and utilized by Walton. The main difference is that I focus exclusively on the fictionality of texts whereas Walton does nothing of the kind. To bridge the differences and compound the two concepts would be a separate (though profitable) project. Cf. above, §2.

11 Cf. Walton (1990, 71): "Of course it is possible to *read* histories or biographies or treatises or committee reports as novels. ... One [then] plays a game of make-believe in which [e.g.] the biography is a prop of the kind novels usually are."

12 The standards of factuality — in all three senses listed — need to be understood as anchored in a culture. The criteria of veridicity, verifiability and realizability that Dante had are different from those of a present-day European.

13 If we consent to view fictionality as the modality of *demonstrative showing* and factuality as the modality of *asserting* or other *direct communication,* our entire argument could then be modified into an analysis of two mutually independent functions of speech: the articulative function on the one hand, the constative, or more generally: communicative, function on the other. To consider the

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We are now in a position to clarify further the relationship between our "new" concept of fictionality and the standard "concept" of fictionality. The scare quotes are where they are in order to point out what has actually happened: we took up a cluster of associations that did not constitute a concept — and have turned it into a concept that has necessarily weakened some of the established associations. Yet again, the concept is not a novel and idiosyncratic one, for it maintains its origin in the current usage and it allows us to articulate an explanation for the associations that were before only implicitly assumed.

As for the blending of fictionality and untruth, it occurs for the simple reason that truth and untruth or non-truth are not symmetrical: for any true fact, there are numberless untrue variations of it. As we have shown, a text can be both fictional and factual: in principle it is certainly possible to satisfy both claims. But just like with any two distinct claims, to satisfy them simultaneously - and to do so to a perceptible degree - is difficult, exponentially more difficult than to satisfy only one of them. It is therefore to be expected that whenever fictionality is being pursued, this is happening by default at the cost of factuality: not because the two are opposite but rather because the two are sharply distinct. The same argument eventually suggests the reason for the sometimes assumed identification of fictionality and the fantastic: the fantastic is an eminent example of a consistently developed untruth; the fictional inherently tends towards consistency; and indirectly, even though not inherently, it tends towards the non-true - thus indirectly tending towards the fantastic.

As for the blending of fictionality with narrativity or literariness, it is motivated by the fact that both narrativity and literariness are eminent - but not necessary - vehicles for increasing the fictionality of a text. Narrativity is a very effective instrument for activating both dialectics and dialogics, and by extension for drawing them into an interaction of all four textual levels. Literariness is an effective instrument for activating both thematics and tactics, and by extension for drawing them into an interaction of all four textual levels. A narrative that prominently exhibits its literariness is a sense-making machine that combines the two just mentioned fictionality-producing vehicles. Yet again we have to repeat: neither is strictly necessary for achieving (a perceptible degree of) fictionality, and quite certainly neither of the two means (narrativity, literariness) equals the potential effect (fictionality).[14]

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mutual links between possibilities and actualities would then mean to simultane- ously consider the mutual and two-directional links between the articulative and communicative functions. Rephrasing Aristotle, we could say that articulation (possibility) can be known only via communication (actuality), while on the other hand, communication (actuality) is constituted only out of articulation (possibility).

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