

THE PROBLEM OF THE FICTIVE STANCE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Briefly sketched, I argue for four interrelated claims:

(a) Works of fiction can be based upon non-fictional content and can therefore relate directly to the world and portray truth even when the author explicitly intends to portray the content as fiction.

(b) The nature of truth is such that an event is true or not irrespective of the content it is expressed or engaged in. Thus if something is true this is so regardless of whether the author intended it, or whether the reader encounters it, fictively or not.

(c) The truth-value of claims encountered in fiction can be, and often is, relevant to interpretation of that fiction qua fiction. (Two observations are relevant here: (i) Most authors of fiction intend to make truth claims in their works to be recognised as true by their readers. (ii) Truth claims encountered in fiction can be relevant for the development of the fictive story line and fictive characters encountered.)

(d) By mixing fiction and truth, the authors demand that the reader adopt multiple stances and therefore the idea that the reader must decide whether to read a piece of literature as fiction or truth, is implausible.

II. (A) THE PROBLEM OF NON-FICTIONAL CONTENT

Lamarque and Olsen's (hereafter L&O) monumental book *Truth, Fiction and Literature* aims to provide "...a theory of fiction and a theory of literary aesthetics"¹ which is a 'no-truth' theory of literature. It is a 'no-truth' theory of literature because it claims that truth is irrelevant to fiction. L&O give examples of content being interpreted incorrectly which lead them to the conclusion that, while fictional works can contain truth bearing content, the way they ought to be interpreted is without regard to the truth:

...someone might recount the events of the Entebbe Raid believing them to be pure fiction; here the content is non-fiction, while the telling is in the fictive mode.²

A person might retell the story of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* firmly believing it to be historically accurate; the content is fictional, but not the telling.³

If the content of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* were written within the fictive role, with the intention of being fictive, how could it nevertheless be interpreted as historically accurate? To be interpreted as historically accurate surely implies that the content was not perceived fictionally, despite meeting all of the requirements that L&O regard to be constitutive of fiction (i.e. conforming to the fictive roles, the author partaking in the fictive stance and using fictive utterances). L&O would conclude that content intentionally portrayed as fiction could be interpreted otherwise, but that it would be incorrect to do so.⁴

L&O have implied that if a work is made as fiction, this entails that the content is fictional:

Content is fictional, so we earlier suggested, if it originates in a fictive utterance.⁵

¹ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. v.

² Lamarque & Olsen (1994). p. 17.

³ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 17.

⁴ I agree that it would be incorrect to interpret the content of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* as a record of historical events, but for a different reason: that it simply is not true.

⁵ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 51.

And again:

Fictional content is such that *how things are (in the fiction) is determined by how they are described to be in fictive utterance*.⁶

L&O argue that the fictional stance necessitates the reader to adopt the fictive role, in which he/she sees fictive utterances made with fictive intent, and ignores judgement of the truth temporarily so that he/she may engage the fiction wholly imaginatively. They acknowledge that this same content could be interpreted in other ways, for example historically, which allows for content within a piece of fiction to be truth-apt; but they maintain that fiction *qua* fiction, that is fiction properly understood and perceived as fiction, is not truth-apt.

III. (B) THE NATURE OF TRUTH

While L&O begin by using Aristotle's dictum of truth, that truth is "...to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true"⁷ and later characterise truth as something "...not determined by any kind of utterance";⁸ elsewhere they suggest that "...the textual characteristics of... a true or false account of actual historical events is dependent upon construing the text as fact-stating discourse"⁹ and that "...the distinction between fictional discourse and fact-stating discourse is a distinction between language functions (modes of utterance)".¹⁰ What I suggest, however, is that truth is independent of the context, roles, stances, utterers or intentions. As with the example of the Entebbe Raid, if it is said that the raid started in the night of July 3rd 1976, then whether someone states this with fictive intent or not or even acknowledges the statement as fictive, it is nevertheless true. Indeed we would say that the person who thought the Entebbe Raid fictional was wrong to think it fictional, but (nevertheless) right to say that the raid started in the night of July 3rd 1976.

If a fictive portrayal of a true happening (for example the Napoleonic War in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*) contains some actual elements of truth, then factors like the *intentions* and *context* the truth is told in, are simply irrelevant to truth *qua* truth.

⁶ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 51.

⁷ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 6.

⁸ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 51.

⁹ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 280.

¹⁰ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 277.

IV. (C) THE RELEVANCE OF TRUTH TO FICTION *QUA* FICTION

Writers of fiction have often shown their intention to present the truth.¹¹ In such cases, given that the writer intends to state truth, and that the reader recognises this portrayal of truth, should it not be that the work of fiction, understood as fiction, therefore contains some elements of truth? Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for example, may dedicate one chapter for the stating of historical data, to be used as a backdrop for the next chapter to describe purely fictive events. Indeed this happens all the time: real towns, with all their technological developments, or fashionable trends, are described (accurately or inaccurately) relative to their times.

Concerning the role of truth in fictive texts, L&O say:

We might summarize this fictive stance towards propositional content, in the most general terms, by saying that a reader is invited to *entertain* sense and *make-believe* truth and reference.¹²

Intuitively, we do not accept all statements that a piece of fiction offers us, merely imagining that they are true. Indeed, recognising what is true and what is false is often integral to a fiction's storyline and to character development. Thus when in J. B. Priestly's *An Inspector Calls*, Arthur Birling boasts that the Titanic is unsinkable, or that (the play being set in 1912) there would be a peaceful resolution to the current feuding (which with hindsight we know built up to the first world war) we recognise that the things he says are false. The falsehoods were intentionally added to highlight the fact that Arthur Birling expresses (historically) false views so that J. B. Priestly could highlight that 'ignorance' is one of Arthur Birling's fictitious character traits and so that the reader later wonders whether his pro-capitalist views may too be incorrect. Recognising when characters commit actual falsehoods or lies from

¹¹ Lamarque & Olsen mention that Dickens (p. 289), Defoe (p. 268), James (p. 270) and Woolf (p. 271) do. Rowe (1997) gives examples of fictions which have evolved from essays such as "Arnold's Arminius [which] grew out of his essay 'My Countrymen'", (p. 329). Similarly when the factual truth of philosophic writers such as Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Huxley and Orwell are written down in 'fiction' form the authors surely maintain their desire to be portraying accurately the truth.

¹² Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 77 (italics in original).

deviating from the truth is paramount in the development and understanding of a fictional character.¹³

When Dickens describes the place in London where somebody lives, we know from the location what type of fictional character is being represented.¹⁴ It is an integral feature of fiction that they address the truth and make truth-claims about the real world to aid the fictional story.

L&O could argue that the “‘Brighton’ of Brighton Rock is a ‘fictional city’”.¹⁵ But arguably the author of Brighton Rock attempts to portray the real Brighton, just as Dickens intends to portray the reality of London. Fagin's den of thieves for example, in *Oliver Twist*, is located at Saffron Hill in Holborn, which was a notorious criminal district. Obviously the real location is used to portray something about the fictional characters. The reader is supposed to recognise immediately, by relying upon information which is not instantly explicitly mentioned in the text, that the characters hanging around this location are most likely shady ones. The reader can therefore attain additional information about the traits of these fictional characters, by drawing upon his/her knowledge of real world affairs.

Many authors (especially of satire) specifically target real world people or institutions. Orwell's *Animal Farm* for example is not merely a fiction about animals. It could be read fictively this way and L&O may suggest it to be read this way, but it would be a rather terrible book if this was all the reader were to make of it. Orwell's intentions were to characterize certain real world people as animals, and, in portraying the animals' behaviours and speeches, make statements about real world people and

¹³ As Rowe (1997) argues, falsehoods can also serve as irony or sarcasm, which are plausible only by examining other factors outside of the text such as life experience: “These kinds of rhetorical strategies do not undermine or neutralize the role of truth in fiction, they are inconceivable without it” (Rowe, 1997, 326). When talking about a satirical play, L&O admit themselves that it asks the reader to recognize the truth: “on the contrary, as effective satire the reader recognizes its essential truth to the actual phenomenon it satirizes” (p. 429). Currie (1995) notes responding to this quote that therefore: “...truth is partly constitutive of its [the novel's] effectiveness as satire” (p.912).

¹⁴ L&O argue that when in *Bleak House* Dickens talks about London, it cannot be the real London but that the London of *Bleak house* is merely “London *under certain aspects*” (81). They defend this argument by saying that the London of *Bleak House* and the London of Fielding's *Tom Jones* are different Londons (82). But this argument is flawed. The authors are describing the same London, only at different times, roughly 1850 and 1750 respectively.

¹⁵ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 293.

their affairs.¹⁶ Though it starts off appearing to be a fiction, the reader soon becomes aware that the fictive events mirror real events. *Animal Farm* is a fictive representation of the real Russian Revolution. That it addresses real political issues is demonstrated by the fact that it was denied publication in 1945 until 1949 because of Russia's allegiance to England in the Second World War. We know that Napoleon represents Stalin, though it was never explicitly stated in the fiction. How could the reader realise this, how could such a change in perspective occur, if the reader was entertaining all of the events as fictive events bearing no relation to the real world?

The fact that *Animal Farm* is recognised as a representation of a true event demonstrates that, contra L&O, the reader has related each of the sentences that occur in the fictional storyline to its bearing on the status of real world (truth-apt) circumstances. This means that the reader is not engaged in a wholly imaginative activity or simply reading the work as fiction which needs not bear any resemblance at all to real world affairs. Quite the opposite: I believe it shows that as the fiction is read, it is constantly being related to real world affairs so that the reader finally recognises a certain degree of similarity between the fictional happenings of the animals in *Animal Farm* and the real world happenings of the Russian Revolution. So much similarity is recognised that eventually one concludes that Napoleon represents Stalin. After this, it is quite plausible that the reader begins to gain new truth-apt beliefs about the Russian Revolution.

It could not be that the reader changed 'stances' for example into a 'historical stance' to better understand the Russian Revolution, because the novel presented itself from the outset as fictitious before it ever seemed to be historical, as from the opening pages it portrayed animals talking. According to L&O's theory, then, the reader would have recognised the fictive element of animals talking and engaged in reading the work as a work of fiction and therefore neglected historical resemblance altogether and with that, any claim that 'Napoleon represents Stalin'.

¹⁶ In his preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*, Orwell states: "I do not wish to comment on the work; if it does not speak for itself, it is a failure. But I should like to emphasise two points: first, that although the various episodes are taken from the actual history of the Russian Revolution, they are dealt with schematically and their chronological order is changed; this was necessary for the symmetry of the story." Not only is the book intended to be based upon the *real* events of the Russian Revolution, but Orwell even implies that he intends this to be obvious and would feel the book a *failure* if this was not recognised.

V. (D) THE PROBLEM OF A SINGLE STANCE APPROACH

L&O use Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to highlight their point that one can only read a text in one 'stance':

If *Julius Caesar* were read as a piece of reportive or fact-stating discourse, then this episode [of a speech Marullus gives to a crowd] would be included in the text to establish certain propositions as true in the mind of the reader... However, if *Julius Caesar* is read as a literary work, then this episode must be construed differently and thus becomes a different rhetorical feature altogether.¹⁷

Having many different 'stances' (fictive, literary, moral, historical, philosophical, critical etc.), they argue, becomes very problematic, not least when a single piece of text could be seen to include many of these roles or functions. Attacking Searle L&O say:

...Searle's position that works oscillate between fiction and non-fiction is unsatisfactory since it means the reader of a literary work has to be seen as involved in a constant change of perspective, implying a constant change in the premises of the literary appreciation of the work.¹⁸

However, it may be argued, against this, that one does not adopt a stringent stance to a conversation, despite the fact that the conversation may flutter between truth statements, lies or fictions, historical recordings and so on. When engaged in conversation we constantly address each statement, wondering why it was said, whether it intends to state a truth or to deceive us and so on. Similarly a typical reader finds no trouble with recognizing truth and fiction from a piece of text while he/she reads. That is that he/she adopts a 'reading stance', the same stance to everything that is read (or told to him/her) which is a continual awareness of what is read/said and identification of what is true and what is fictive. In fact, one only has to oscillate in such a view if one agrees with L&O that there is a fictive stance, a historical stance and so on. This idea must be implausible because it would seem to entail that we must first have read a significant portion of a book before we can discover what it is the author intends to tell us, and therefore what stance we are to engage it in. A piece

¹⁷ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 280.

¹⁸ Lamarque & Olsen (1994), p. 285.

of fiction gives information that could give insights into moral, philosophical and historical areas. What one intuitively does not do, however, is adopt one stance and stick to it blindly. This would be foolish, especially since a book may require readers to change their perspective as they read through it.¹⁹

The more flexible view I suggest allows that a person may praise a book's philosophical insight, *whilst* giving it acclaim for its aesthetically pleasing structure: one may *simultaneously* disagree with the main moral argument but nevertheless value it as thought-provoking and for increasing their factual knowledge of a historical period.²⁰ Some may enjoy Kostova's *The Historian* for her anthropological insight into the evolving views of vampires while *at the same time*, enjoying it for its thrilling story. To claim that a reader must only read a piece of fiction solely as historical *or* fictional, is to make a claim that most of us can refute by our own experiences of reading.²¹

Moreover, such works are not to be thought as merely "special cases". Of the numerous examples of fiction used to make arguments about the true state of affairs we can include Huxley's 'Fordism' in *Brave New World* which addresses the economic procedures that the car company 'Ford' made famous at the time, or Swift's 'Laputa', the flying island, in part 3 of *Gulliver's Travels* as a representation of the government of George I. Others include books by Waugh, Twain, Lewis, Dryden, Shaw and Pope. If we include writers who wished to represent their societies, the list becomes uncountable. Many authors of fiction use real world settings for their stories and intend to make some statement about them. An author using a real setting to make a statement about that setting is even *required* to make the portrayal of the real world setting as accurate as possible. If not, they risk making their intended statements or criticisms susceptible to being refuted on the grounds that the author simply gave a *false* representation of a scenario to draw *false* conclusions.

¹⁹ Examples include Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Gaarder's *Sophie's World*, which changes dramatically from an imaginative pretence for a series of philosophical talks to suddenly becoming a fiction based in a strange surreal world.

²⁰ Here it could be argued that I hold that a fiction may propose arguments which are in fact *untrue*, but yet still be good fiction and therefore that truth is irrelevant to fiction. However, I argue that having truth in a novel will always be beneficial, only that one may enjoy other aspects of a story (for example enjoy aesthetically its imagery) to such an extent that they come to like the fiction even if it has untrue statements.

²¹ I have only read *Sophie's World* once but can clearly recall both the fictional story lines, and the anthropological and philosophical insight I gained, without recalling any evidence whatsoever of tiresome oscillation between the two stances.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

By arguing against what I found to be the main proponents of non-cognitivism, I have been developing a cognitivist theory of fiction. I hope to have shown that a piece of text may be interpreted in any way the reader wishes (a point with which I do not think L&O will disagree) and that fiction may therefore be evaluated on its truth-apt statements. When determining the truth of stated facts the context (whether it be intentionally fictional or historical) is not a relevant factor, and so if fiction contains a statement which is in fact true, then that fiction contains a truth.

However the main claim I wish to have established is that these truths can be *relevant* to fiction. I note that the reader may often be required to draw on his/her truth-apt knowledge of real world affairs, for example of real world locations (eg. London) or historical happenings (eg. the Bolshevik revolution or sinking of the Titanic), to help explain the fiction's storyline and characters. Many authors of fiction, rather than arduously painting elaborate backgrounds of fictional towns (including all the data of fashions, technological advancements and so forth) which represent as best they can real ones, simply state the real world location they wish to set their fiction in and rely on the reader's inherent knowledge of that town to enable them to understand the fictive events that happen there. This implies that readers, rather than engaging with every statement wholly imaginatively, relate real world affairs to fictional ones, and therefore are aware of truths or falsehoods in fiction, often as an integral part of their engagement with the fiction *as* fiction.

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