Pretence and Paraphrase

PETER VAN INWAGEN / *SYRACUSE, U.S.A.*

I want to discuss here some issues in the philosophy of fiction, by which I mean the philosophical study of fiction as a general phenomenon (the philosopher of fiction is interested in what is common to all fiction) exclusive of questions of literary merit. The questions of the philosophy of fiction are divorced from problems of literary merit in the sense that these questions would be just as interesting in a world in which there were no works of greater literary merit than, say, the novels of Zane Grey. This is, of course, no substantive point, but only a stipulation to the effect that the words "philosophy of fiction" are to be used in a certain way. Nevertheless, the boundaries I have drawn around "the philosophy of fiction" are not arbitrary. There is an interesting set of interconnected philosophical questions about fiction that can be examined in isolation from questions of literary merit. Philosophical questions about literary merit we may assign (another stipulation) to the "philosophy of literature." I choose this term because to call something literature is both to praise it and to describe it, while to call something fiction is merely to describe it. (I wish there were a word that had the same evaluative overtones as "literature" and the same extension as "fiction.")

Philosophers come to the philosophy of fiction by two roads. One road has its origin in the philosophy of literature: the philosopher of literature comes to see certain questions about the nature of fiction as prior to the questions he has been trying to answer. The other road has its origin in the most abstract areas of philosophy, in logic and metaphysics. The philosopher who comes to the study of fiction by this road has, in every case I know of, made the journey because some aspect of fiction has interrupted his metaphysical or logical theorizing. He has, perhaps, advanced some general logico-metaphysical thesis—that everything exists, say, or that every thought has an object—and a critic has said to him "But what about Mr. Pickwick; *he* doesn't exist," or "Yesterday I thought about the Cheshire Cat, but there is no such thing as the Cheshire Cat, and so my thought was without an object." Confronted with such cases, our philosopher begins to think seriously about fiction.

The philosophy of fiction, as it is actually practised (which is not to deny the possibility of other major areas of study), can be divided into two

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parts, which I shall call "action theory" and "ontology." Action theory is the study of acts that essentially involve works of fiction or texts (if there is a distinction between work and text): story-telling, composition, reading, criticizing, interpreting, summarizing, quoting, alluding to, and comparing, to mention only a few examples. Ontology is the attempt to answer the question Given the fact that there is such a thing as fiction, what objects—in that very general sense of "object" that logicians and metaphysicians use—does this fact involve?

Most philosophers of fiction have stressed one of these two divisions of the philosophy of fiction, and have treated the other in a very perfunctory manner. The following two imaginary quotations represent extremes that are rarely reached though usually approached: "Once I have provided a clear view of the actions people perform with respect to fiction, what there is to say about the objects that fiction involves will be trivial and obvious." Or, "Once I have shown what objects are involved in fiction, it will be a simple matter to understand and describe the acts we perform with respect to fiction." There is, I think, an understandable tendency for philosophers who have come to the philosophy of fiction from the philosophy of literature to stress action theory and slight ontology, and a corresponding and equally understandable tendency for philosophers who have come to the philosophy of fiction from logic and metaphysics to stress ontology and slight action theory. Nicholas Wolterstorff is the only philosopher of fiction I know of who has treated action theory and ontology as deserving of equally careful attention.[1] (Perhaps this is because Wolterstorff cannot be said to have come to the philosophy of fiction from either the philosophy of literature or from metaphysics: he is both a leading aesthetician and a leading expert on the problem of universals.)[2]

Kendall Walton and I are of the usual type. Walton is more interested in actions than in objects, and I am more interested in objects than in actions. I have never written about action theory, owing partly to a lack of interest and partly to what I now recognize as an unexamined conviction that any competent metaphysician could straighten "all that" out on a rainy Saturday—if it were worth doing at all. The writings of my co-symposiasts, however, have led me first to examine, and soon thereafter to reject, that conviction. There are fascinating, intricate, sophisticated, and, above all, illuminating theories of action. There are, moreover, incompatible ones. If I had not read Wolterstorff and Walton, I should not have divided the philosophy of fiction as I do. I should have taken the philosophy of fiction to be almost entirely ontology.

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1980.
2. Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *On Universals: An Essay in Ontology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970.

I am particularly attracted to Walton's theory of action. I find it an unobvious, but, on reflection, compelling development of certain undeniably correct observations on fiction and games of pretence. I find it illuminating: I think I understand the three-way relation between the composer of a work of fiction, the work, and the one who uses the work (in any of a variety of ways) better than I did before I read Walton.

But, though I admire Walton's theory of action, my philosophical interest in fiction is still heavily weighted toward the ontological. In the body of this paper, I want to examine a certain ontological claim that Walton makes in passing. (Although my discussion will be directed at Walton, I think it is of quite general application.) Walton, in effect, claims to be able to paraphrase all sentences that seem to be "about" fictional entities in such a way that his paraphrases "do not threaten to force fictional entities upon us"—that is, as existing entities. (I take "fictional entities" to be a term that covers fictional characters as well as those items in a fictional world that stand to its characters as the furniture of earth and the choir of Heaven stand to human beings in the real world. Fictional entities that are not characters would be such items as the referents of the names "Dotheboys Hall," "Barchester," and "Excalibur"—if, that is, these names indeed *have* referents.) I say that Walton claims to be able so to paraphrase *all* sentences that seem to be "about" fictional entities; at the very least, he claims to be able so to paraphrase all sentences of the kinds he considers. But his attitude toward what he is doing strongly suggests that he believes that the sentences he considers exemplify all the important kinds of sentence about fictional entities that there are.

Let us try to understand his claim. Here are four sentences that seem to be "about" fictional entities.

> Don Quixote mistook sheep for armies.
>
> Don Quixote was created by Cervantes.
>
> Brobdingnagians are nearly three million times the size of Lilliputians.
>
> Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians were created as vehicles for Swift's disgust with, respectively, the religious controversies of his time and the physical makeup of his species.

The first two sentences contain a proper name, which, if it denotes anything, denotes a fictional entity. The second two sentences contain general terms, which, if they have extensions, have extensions that comprise fictional entities. The first and third sentences advance theses about states of affairs that are, in some sense, "internal" to the worlds of *Don Quixote* and *Gulliver's Travels*. The second and fourth sentences advance theses about the relations that hold between fictional and non-fictional objects: *in* the world of *Don Quixote*, Don Quixote was created not by Cervantes but by God. It is certainly

not entirely obscure what we mean when we say of, for instance, the first two sentences that they are, or at least seem to be, "about Don Quixote": if a lecture consisted largely of sentences like these two, it would be very natural to say that the lecturer had "been talking about Don Quixote." Let us assume that each of these sentences expresses a truth—that is, that if a speaker were to utter any of these sentences in any straightforward situation, what he said would be true. (A non-straightforward situation: you have a dog called "Don Quixote" and . . . .) In claiming to be able to paraphrase sentences like these in such a way that the paraphrases do not threaten to force fictional entities upon us, Walton is claiming that, for each sentence *x* that seems to be about fictional entities, he can show how to construct a sentence that (*1*) seems, on reflection, to describe the same state of affairs that *x* describes, and (*2*) does not even seem to be about fictional entities.

What is the point of doing this thing that Walton claims to be able to do? I think it has a point only if both the following conditions are satisfied: (*a*) it is better not to believe that there are fictional entities, if that end can be achieved without prohibitive sacrifice, and (*b*) simply to deny that any of the sentences of ordinary English that seem to be about fictional entities expresses a truth would be a "prohibitive sacrifice." By way of analogy, we might consider a case involving motion rather than being. Certain sentences seem to imply that the sun revolves around the earth: "The sun rose at 6:25 this morning," for example. Someone claims that for each sentence *x* that seems to imply that the sun revolves around the earth, he can show how to construct a sentence that (*1*) seems, on reflection, to describe the same state of affairs that *x* describes, and (*2*) does not even seem to imply that the sun revolves around the earth. (This method of construction might pair with "The sun rose at 6:25 this morning" the sentence "The sun became visible at 6:25 this morning.") This exercise, it would appear, has a point only if (*a*) it is better not to believe that the sun revolves around the earth, if that can be achieved without prohibitive sacrifice, and (*b*) simply to deny that any of the sentences of ordinary English that seems to imply that the sun revolves around the earth expresses a truth would be a prohibitive sacrifice.

Both of these conditions seem to me to be satisfied: it is certainly better not to believe that the sun revolves around the earth; but we should not want our rejection of geocentrism to commit us to the thesis that the sun did not rise this morning. Accordingly, we say that "all someone is saying" when he says that the sun rose at 6:25 this morning is that the motions of the earth and the sun were such that the sun first became visible (here) at 6:25. This "paraphrase" of the ordinary assertion about sunrise is a description of the state of affairs that the ordinary assertion refers to that would be acceptable to both Ptolemy and Copernicus.

What about the case of fictional entities? Certainly any philosophy of fiction that had the consequence that such ordinary assertions as "Cervantes created Don Quixote" or "Anna Karenina committed suicide" expressed falsehoods would be utterly unacceptable. Condition (*b*), therefore, may be presumed to be satisfied. But what about (*a*)? Is it indeed better not to believe in fictional entities? Walton seems to think so, though he doesn't give any reasons to support this view. There would appear to be two kinds of reason someone *might* have for thinking it better not to believe in fictional entities. First, someone might think that the very idea of a fictional entity was obviously, or at least demonstrably, incoherent. Secondly, someone might take as his major premise the maxim *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, supplementing it with a minor premise to the effect that (since it is possible, as our technique of paraphrasis proves, to do without seeming reference to fictional entities) to posit fictional entities *is* to multiply entities beyond necessity.

I will not discuss the question whether "fictional entity" is an incoherent idea, which I have attempted to answer elsewhere.[3] As for Occamist scruples, let us raise the question What reasons are there for thinking that there are fictional entities? (If there are good and unanswerable reasons, then to posit fictional entities is not to multiply entities beyond necessity.) One reason, of course, is that there are sentences that seem to express truths, and that contain names denoting fictional entities—if they denote anything—and general terms whose extensions comprise fictional entities—if these terms have extensions at all. But this is a very weak reason: the support it gives to the thesis that "Don Quixote" is a name of something is no stronger than the support it gives to the thesis that "the average sixteenth-century Spaniard" and "the equator" are names of things. (After all, we have such sentences as "The average sixteenth-century Spaniard lived to be thirty-nine" and "The equator passes through only two Spanish-speaking countries.") A much stronger reason is this: when we are not thinking about the philosophy of fiction, but thinking simply about fiction (when we are reviewing works of fiction, say, or disputing seriously their merits with our friends), we often *say* that there are fictional entities. Or at least this is true in whatever sense it is true that in the ordinary business of life we often say that there are physical objects. In the ordinary business of life, we say things like "Some of her chairs are very good nineteenth-century copies of Chippendales" and to say this, I take it, is to say *inter alia* that there are physical objects. But if we say

Some of the characters in Updike's new novel are witches,

3. In "Creatures of Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, October 1977, and "Fiction and Metaphysics," *Philosophy and Literature* 7, 1983.

then don't we say, *inter alia*, that there are fictional characters (and hence that there are fictional entities, characters being a type of fictional entity)? This sentence certainly expresses a truth. And it appears to be a "real" and not a merely idiomatic existential quantification. (Some might say that there are sentences that have the appearance of existential quantifications, but which are not really existential quantifications—"There was a note of eager anticipation in his voice," perhaps.) If an argument is wanted for this thesis, we may note that from the above sentence plus "All of Updike's characters are loquacious" we can deduce "Some of the characters in Updike's new novel are loquacious witches." This argument is obviously valid; but it is hard to account for its validity if its premises and its conclusion do not have the quantificational structure they appear to have. However, if the first premise and the conclusion of this argument are existential quantifications, then (since all the characters in Updike's new novel are fictional entities) it follows that there are fictional entities.

This form of argument is common enough in philosophy: there are numbers that can be expressed in more than one way as the sum of two cubes; therefore, there are numbers—and so on. I would suppose that few of the people who offer such arguments think of them as proofs. I would suppose that to present one's opponent with arguments of this sort is to throw down a dialectical gauntlet. "There! What do you say to *that*?" one asks.

Most philosophers, faced with this challenge, would claim to be able to paraphrase sentences like "Some of the characters in Updike's new novel are witches" in such a way that the paraphrase was either not an existential quantification (for example, "If Updike's novel were a true record of events, there would be witches") or was an existential qualification over objects that are not fictional entities—sets of sentences, say, or sections of text.

What will Walton do about this sentence? Can his techniques of paraphrasis be extended to "handle" existential quantifications? It might be thought that an extension of his methods to such sentences would be no very profound exercise. Take our "witches" sentence, for example. Suppose that someone, speaking of *The Witches of Eastwick*, says "There is a village called Eastwick that is not very remarkable, except that some of its inhabitants are witches"—or even just, "There are witches." He thereby engages in a kind of pretence, a kind authorized by *The Witches of Eastwick*. Let us give the proper name "Kappa" to this kind of pretence. ("Kind" is to be understood so narrowly that someone else could engage in Kappa only by speaking words with the same meaning in relation to *The Witches of Eastwick*.) Then the Walton-style paraphrase of "Some of the characters in Updike's new novel are witches" that we are looking for might be thought to be:

To engage in Kappa is fictionally to speak the truth.

But this is not right. This sentence is a paraphrase not of "Some of the characters in Updike's new novel are witches" but only of "It is Updike's-new-novel-fictional that there are witches" or "It is true in Updike's new novel that there are witches." To grasp the distinction I am making, one need only note that it is true in *The Old Man and the Sea* that there are professional baseball players, though none of the characters is one.

I do not say that it would be impossible for Walton to solve this problem. Rather than speculate about how he might do it, however, let us in the space remaining look at some cases that it would be even harder to treat by Walton's methods. What are the *most* difficult cases that confront Walton? I suggest that they will be the most difficult cases that confront anyone who wishes to exclude fictional entities from his ontology. I suggest that they will be sentences having the following features: (*i*) they will be existential quantifications, or at least look as if they were; (*ii*) they will have complex quantificational structures (e.g., "did")—or will look as if they did; (*iii*) the inferences from these sentences that standard quantifier logic endorses for sentences that have the quantificational structures these sentences *appear* to have are valid—or at least appear to be; (*iv*) they will contain not only predicates such as you and I and our friends might satisfy (predicates like "is fat," "is thin," "is bald," "is the mother of") but also literary-structural predicates like "is a character," "first appears in chapter 6," "provides comic relief," "is partly modelled on," "is described by means of the same narrative device the author earlier used in her more successful depiction of," and so on. Perhaps an example will help us to understand better the features I am trying to describe. Consider the sentence

> There is a fictional character who, for every novel, either appears in that novel or is a model for a character who does.

(This sentence would express a truth if, for example, Sancho Panza served as a model for at least one character in every novel but *Don Quixote* itself.) This sentence is (*i*) an apparent existential quantification; (*ii*) complex in its apparent quantificational structure; (*iv*) contains literary-structural predicates: "is a fictional character," "appears in," and "is a model for." Moreover, (*iii*) it certainly appears that the inferences licensed by quantifier logic for sentences with the apparent quantificational structure of the above sentence are valid. It appears, for example, that we can validly deduce from the above sentence the sentence

> If no character appears in every novel, then some character is modelled on another character.

I would ask Walton three questions. First, how would he paraphrase these two sentences? Secondly, does his paraphrase of the former allow the deduction of the latter by quantifier logic alone—or, at any rate, by quantifier

logic plus a few intuitive rules governing the logic of his special operators? Thirdly, if his paraphrase of the former sentence does not allow the formal deduction of the latter, how will he explain this?

In short, I am asking Walton for a way of paraphrasing complex existential quantifications that appear to assert that there are fictional characters, and I am asking that either his method of paraphrasis be "valid-inference-preserving," or else that he tell us why it is all right for it not to be valid-inference-preserving.

I do not by any means want to contend that Walton cannot meet this challenge. But until he has met it, I shall not be terribly impressed by his statement that the paraphrases he has constructed "do not threaten to force fictional characters upon us." I shall not be impressed because there are sentences of ordinary English that threaten to force fictional entities upon us: sentences that seem to express truths and seem to say that there are fictional entities.

If Walton were unable to produce the paraphrases I ask for, this should, I think, move him to withdraw his ontological claim, but it would not even tend to show that there was any defect in his theory of action. Let me briefly sketch what I could conceive to be the relation between fictional entities (assuming there are some) and Walton's theory of action (assuming it to be true). A work of fiction, if Walton is right, has a certain feature or set of features we may call its "pretence-potential." Its pretence-potential is its capacity to serve as a prop in certain games of pretence. A complete description of the pretence-potential of a work would list all the games of pretence it authorizes its users to employ it as a prop in, and would perhaps somehow delimit all the unofficial games of pretence in which it could figure. Obviously no two works have exactly the same pretence-potential. (I think we could even imagine works that have the same "world," in Wolterstorff's sense, but that have quite different pretence-potentials.)

What gives a work its own peculiar pretence-potential? Surely the answer is: certain intrinsic, structural, non-dispositional features of the work—its plot, its character, its narrative structure (e.g., the use of "flashbacks" vs. the steady progression of narrative time), and the various literary devices its author uses (e.g., omniscient third-person narrator vs. first-person narrator). It is my belief, not a very firm one, that it is impossible fully to describe the structure of a single work—much less to describe the structural relations that obtain between various works—without irreducible quantification over characters and other fictional objects. I suspect that Walton would like to be able to do the following: to paraphrase any "structural" statement as a statement about pretence-potential. I doubt whether this is possible. (To see whether it is, we might begin with the sentence I have invited him to paraphrase.) But even if it were possible to pair each "structural" sentence with

a "pretence-potential" sentence that necessarily had the same truth-value, I don't think it could be correct to say that the paired sentences had the same meaning. If every sentence seemingly about the characters, plot, or narrative structure of a work *means no more* than a certain sentence that is explicitly about nothing but the pretence-potential of that work, then it is hard to see how facts about structure could explain facts about pretence-potential. It is a fact about *Don Quixote* that it authorizes a game of pretence in which it is itself a prop and in which someone who says "Don Quixote mistook sheep for armies" fictionally speaks truly. This is a fact about *Don Quixote*, I would suggest, *because* there is a character in *Don Quixote* called "Don Quixote" who mistook sheep for armies.

The Language of Fiction

JOHN HEINTZ / *CALGARY, CANADA*

Stories are told in everyday language. The words are the same and they are used in the same way. Sometimes we don't know whether what we are being told is the truth or a story. Aristotle said that

> the distinction between historian and poet consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. . . . Hence [poetry's] . . . statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.[1]

You couldn't tell this from the listening, or we wouldn't have so much trouble telling, of some ancient epics, whether they are meant as history or fiction. Francis Sparshott puts it this way:

> Let us suppose that I am listening to people talking about someone unknown to me. In the first place, I can make sense of what they say only insofar as their talk generates in me the notion of a person about whom they are talking—a notion that goes beyond the content of what they say partly by supplementing it with general knowledge of what is true of persons generally, partly by conjecture as to what a person so described must be (or would probably be) like. That is, their discourse generates a description that projects a person, the person about whom they would be talking if their talk was veridical. But, in the second place, it is not possible that anything in what they say could determine whether the person under discussion existed or not. Even if they spoke a language that employed different linguistic forms for fiction, no linguistic convention could prevent the misuse of such a convention: if language is possible, lying is possible. But also, in the third place, we cannot say that the person projected is simply the suppositious correlate of the sum of everything that is said about "him" or of any determinate part of that, because it is not only possible but highly likely that the sum of what is said of him will be not only vague but self-contradictory. On the basis of partial, partly erroneous, frequently conflicting reports, we form all those notions of the world we live in that do not depend on our personal direct observation. There not only is not, there cannot be, any feature of discourse itself that differentiates fictional projection from purported reference, any more than there can be any feature that differentiates truth from lies.
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> If I am to join in the conversation about the stranger, I must be able to talk about the person they are talking about, at least enough to ask intelligent questions

1. Cited in Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Characters and Their Names," *Poetics* 8, 1979, 121.

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