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VITTORIO KLOSTERMANN

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Exploring Fictional Truth

Content, Interpretation, and Narration

VITTORIO KLOSTERMANN

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Abstract

There are horcruxes. They store part of a person's soul protecting him or her from death. Any object can be used as a horcrux, even living organisms. Horcruxes made from inanimate objects cannot be destroyed by any ordinary means. However, to create them via dark magic one is required to commit murder. As is well known, He Who Must Not Be Named does not shy away from such deeds…

All of this is true – in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels, where horcruxes play a central role in the storyline. Since these statements are fictional, or fictionally true, or true in a fiction, philosophers like to call them *fictional truths*. Also, this label sounds intriguing and somewhat paradoxical. For, truth and fiction are often thought of as antagonists, antipodes, and diametrically opposed. This is a common misconception, however, ignoring many interesting connections between the two concepts. In particular, fictional truth is a perfectly ordinary, widespread and familiar thing, as we have just seen. But it is also the source of sophisticated and challenging problems, puzzles and questions which are not altogether easy to solve and answer.

As its title suggests, this book is a philosophical exploration of fictional truth. Its main purpose is to shed some new light on the nature of fictional truth by analyzing its *conceptual structure* and by unfolding some of the *conceptual connections* to other important notions in its vicinity. It is an exploration rather than a complete study because I do not provide a comprehensive theory of the matter. Instead, I first aim to identify the main structural elements that any theory of fictional truth must accommodate. Based on this conceptual skeleton I then examine several intricate and pressing issues concerning fictional truth. In particular, I am interested in fictional content and its relation to interpretation and narration, hence the subtitle. Also, as is typical for explorations, my investigation takes me into new and diverse territories. Cutting across disciplines I thereby make contributions to philosophical aesthetics, philosophy of language, metaphysics, philosophy of science, and literary theory.

The book consists of an introduction and five interrelated chapters. The introduction, well, introduces the most important concepts, ideas and theories that form the background and the basis for the following chapters. The first two chapters concern fictional truth proper, the next two deal with

interpretation and its relation to fictional content, and the last chapter concerns the interplay of fictional truth and narration.

First, I address the fundamental question whether there are any fictional truths at all. Nihilists answer in the negative. If they are right, the whole project of investigating the concept of fictional truth seems mistaken. I meet their challenge by refuting their most promising arguments. Moreover, I also rebut the view that fictional content is restricted to what is explicit in a work of fiction. Instead, there are many more fictional truths than meets the eye.

Second, I attend to the limits of fictional content. I examine whether, in principle, anything can be true in a fiction, an idea often referred to as poetic license. The so-called fictionality puzzle calls this idea into question. I review and dismiss recent accounts of the puzzle and develop a novel solution explaining the puzzling experience in terms of genre expectations. Consequently, I argue that anything can indeed be fictional, yet not in any genre of fiction, and that this result is not puzzling at all.

In the third chapter I investigate the relation between fictional truth and interpretation. Does fictional content depend on interpretation or the other way around? Which comes first? I argue that correct interpretations are metaphysically grounded in fictional truth but that the former give us epistemic access to the latter. So, there is a kind of interdependency between the two.

The fourth chapter concerns the charming idea that interpretations of literary fictions proceed by the hypothetico-deductive method, thereby reuniting natural science and literary studies in methodology. I argue that the view runs into a dilemma: either it is empirically untenable, or it falls short of its goal to render interpretation scientifically respectable. I conclude that it is still a desideratum of literary theory to come up with a convincing methodology of interpretation.

Fifth and last, I explore the role of non-fictional objects in narrative fiction. I argue that non-fictional objects – like you and me, this book, and the number 28, among other things – can be part of fictions in the sense that it is fictionally true that they exist. Building on that idea I show that non-fictional objects can act as characters and even narrators, thereby refuting some popular tenets of narratology. Most controversially, I conclude that author and narrator of a narrative fiction can indeed be identical.

Papers based on the last three chapters have previously been published in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, see my (2015) and (2017), and in the *Journal of Literary Theory*, see my (2016).

While writing this book I have also engaged in joint work with Nathan Wildman and co-authored several papers concerning fictional truth with him. None of this collaborative work, however, is included here. Since our papers complement and deepen the views I develop in this book, I briefly list them. In *Fiction Unlimited*, published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in 2017, we give a recipe for universal fictions, i.e. fictions where literally everything is true, and defend it against possible objections. In Wildman & Folde (2020) we respond to a reply to our original paper in the discussion section of the same journal. In *No Trouble with Poetic Licence*, published in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* in 2018, we defend the principle of poetic licence against recent objections. Finally, in *A Puzzle about Fictional 'I's"*, forthcoming in the collection *Fictionality, Factuality, Reflexivity*, we introduce and discuss a novel puzzle about reflexive indexical pronouns like *I*, *now*, and *here* in narrative fictions.

Acknowledgements

Writing on fictional truth is great. Whenever you can't focus and you somehow find yourself watching an episode of *Game of Thrones*, *True Detective* or *Veep* you have an excuse: field study. Unfortunately, this excuse wears down quickly and it doesn't necessarily work for online news and YouTube. Or does it? Anyway, it's not these distractions that ultimately pose a threat to such a long-term and intellectually demanding project such as writing a PhD thesis in philosophy. The real challenges are seeing a purpose in your work (Why do it? Why continue? Who cares?), staying with it for better and for worse (Why not do something else?), managing 'side' projects like getting a master's degree in education and coping with life in general, in my case starting a family. Beginning a PhD is easy, finishing it is not. I submitted my thesis, which this book is based upon, to Hamburg University in 2018. But I certainly wouldn't have made it without the help of many other people. And I would like to thank them here.

First of all, I dearly thank my main supervisor Benjamin Schnieder for his continuous support and criticism, for applying his incredibly sharp mind to my questions and problems, for his assistance in applications for grants, for being very understanding and generous in many ways, for agreeing to the idea of a cumulative PhD, which was a premiere at Hamburg University's philosophy department, and for always being available to discuss my papers even in sickness and on Christmas Eve.

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Over the course of my PhD, I have productively collaborated with literary scholars working on similar issues. Together with Janina Jacke and Tilmann Köppe I have started an interdisciplinary workshop series called *Philosophy Meets Literary Studies* where philosophers and literary scholars come together. It has been a pleasure to host these stimulating and entertaining events. I thank Janina and Tilmann for their effort and input, and everyone involved for their excellent contributions.

I would like to express my gratitude towards several institutions that have financially supported my PhD and thereby made my life much easier: Hamburg University, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, and the DAAD. Also, I am very grateful for the assistance and generosity of my editor and publisher.

My final thanks go to my family and friends. In particular, I would like to thank my mom for her unconditional support, and Philipp Scherler for his invaluable advice concerning almost all aspects of my PhD and beyond. Above all, I thank you, Ela, for your patience, for our wonderful daughters Clara and Ella, and for everything you did and didn't do so that I can realize this project.

Contents

There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears.
He had no hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily.

He couldn't speak because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either.
He didn't have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine,
and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing!

So, we don't even know who we're talking about.
We'd better not to talk about him any more.

Daniil Kharms, *Blue Notebook #10*[1]

[1] See Kharms (2009, 45). Special thanks to Matvei Yankelevich for generously allowing me to reprint his translation of Kharms here.

Introduction

Abstract. In this chapter I explain what this book is about. I also introduce the most important concepts, ideas and theories that form the background and the basis for the following investigations. Finally, I give an overview of my main results and the methodology used.

0.1. What I Do and Why It Matters

Have you seen *The Big Lebowski*? What a great movie! Admittedly, the plot kind of gets lost along the way. A rug is peed upon, people bowl, Walter enjoys his coffee, Donny dies, and the Dude abides. Among other things, it's also part of the film that Bush senior is president of the US, that nihilists live in LA, and that wales can sing. It is not true in the fiction, however, that there are smartphones, that Walter is a Hobbit, or that the US is invaded by aliens. Sure, some things are controversial and subject of debate (e.g. whether there ever was a ransom in the suitcase) and many things are left open (e.g. the gender of the little Lebowski Maude carries, the fate of Larry, Bunny and Jackie Treehorn, and the reason Donny's bowling shirts have different names imprinted on them but never his). Nevertheless, it's clear that the movie has what we may call a *content* and that we have a pretty good grip on it after all. In general, every work of fiction seems to come with a content, no matter if it is an independent film, a Netflix series, a theater play, a classic novel, a political poem, a comic strip, a video game, a painting, a shadow play, a children's role-playing game, or what have you. It is this phenomenon – that fictions have content, that certain things and not others are true *in* them – which lies at the heart of this book.

Of course, the content of a fiction can be rather strange at times and hard to figure out. For instance, the story by Daniil Kharms used as epigraph to this introduction is quite unusual leaving many readers perplex and confused about its content. This feature is shared by a wealth of other examples such

as David Lynch's *Mullholland Drive* and Samuel Becket's *Comment C'est*, to name but two. In such cases our pre-theoretic, everyday concept of fictional truth is challenged and reaches its limits. We thus find ourselves in a situation of conceptual uncertainty – a typical starting point for philosophical inquiry promising conceptual clarity. The fundamental issue we are dealing with is whether we can come up with a general *theory* of fictional truth that settles what is true in *any* fiction. Woodward (2011, 158) puts the challenge thus:

> [W]e do not think that our judgements about what is fictional are based on guesswork. We have a folk theory of fictional truth, in the sense that we have a relatively stable framework upon which we rely when we engage with fiction, and we face the challenge of characterizing that theory systematically.

Fictional truth invites a wide range of questions. What exactly is the content of a fiction? How is it generated? How is it structured? Are there any principled ways of determining fictional truths or is the notion hopelessly unclear? Is there a logic to it? Can anything be true in a fiction or are there limits? Is fictional content entirely fictional? Can non-fictional objects be part of fictions? Does fictional truth depend on interpretation or the other way around? Does fictional content go beyond what is explicit in a work? Do fictional narratives have special contents such as fictional narrators? Et cetera. These are merely some of the questions a *comprehensive theory* of fictional truth should answer. This book is contribution to some of these questions and therefore to the nature of fictional truth. But I do *not* provide a comprehensive theory, nor am I able to. For, as can already be seen from the range of questions just outlined, fictional truth is a complex phenomenon branching over many areas of philosophy (e.g. aesthetics, metaphysics, logic, philosophy of language) and beyond (e.g. literary and media studies). What I do, however, is identify structural elements that any fleshed-out theory of fictional truth must accommodate. In particular, I believe that fictional content is a structured collection of propositions stemming from many different sources.

Based on this conceptual skeleton I explore several intricate issues concerning fictional truth. Specifically, I provide five self-contained research chapters each of which tackles such an issue. Even though these chapters are independent of one another and can therefore be read in any order, they are nevertheless connected in many ways and I have arranged them as I thought is most natural. The first two concern *fictional truth* proper, its very existence

and its limits. The first chapter is about the fundamental question whether there are fictional truths at all. I defend an affirmative answer. Thus, the concept is not incoherent. With that settled, it is natural to ask about the limits of fictional truth. In the second chapter I argue that fictional content is constrained only by genre restrictions and that anything can, in principle, be fictionalized. Based on this liberal view I present a novel solution to what is known in the literature as the fictionality puzzle. Hereafter I turn to *interpretation* and its connections with fictional truth. The third chapter concerns the interdependency of interpretation and fictional truth. I show that interpretation metaphysically depends upon fictional truth, whereas fictional truth epistemically depends upon interpretation. In the fourth chapter I investigate the methodology of interpretation and argue that interpretations of literary fictions are not generally hypothetico-deductive. Finally, I look at the relation between fictional truth and *narration*. In the fifth chapter I show that non-fictional objects can enter the contents of fictions. Because of that several popular tenets concerning fictional narratives should be rejected. Most controversially, it turns out that author and narrator can be identical.

The program just outlined may sound theoretically interesting, particularly to someone already familiar with the field. But why should anyone care about fictional truth in the first place? Why does the concept and its exploration matter? Engaging in a philosophical enterprise such as this, though rewarding in itself, is much more pressing if something is at stake. And I don't just mean the beer you owe me should I be right that Tyrion Lannister ends up on the Iron Throne.[1] Though, admittedly, that is a good reason to care about fictional content. Here are four more general reasons to do so:

First, investigating fictional truth has *anthropological* value because the concept is integral to our ordinary and professional lives. It is an empirical fact that we are, by and large, able to tell what is and what isn't true in a familiar fiction, and to separate that from what is controversial or unspecified – as anyone who ever had to take a reading comprehension test in school can testify. This ordinary ability shows that we make use of the notion of fictional truth, even if we have no common label for it. And it shows that we have a

[1] Spoiler alert: As it turns out, I owe you. At least according to the film version of *Game of Thrones*. Tyrion did, however, end up being the hand of the king (again). And he makes a good point: there is nothing more powerful in the world than a good story. Though I doubt that it is Bran's.

basic level of mastery of that concept which can, of course, be enhanced and professionalized. In general, fictional content plays an important role in our daily lives. We enjoy and get upset about fictional content. It triggers immersion and evaluative judgements. We chat, read and debate about it. Familiarity with and knowledge of fictional content enables cultural participation. Studies show that we learn from fictional content in many ways, which is why engaging with fictions via play is so crucial in child development: we learn about morality, empathy, society, history, science etc.; we learn how to think counterfactually and causally; and we enhance our theory of mind and our creativity.[2] Fictional content can affect human beings so much that they sue an author (as has happened, for instance, to Thomas Bernhard a lot) or even commit suicide (a prominent example is Goethe's *Werther* which caused the first wave of copycat suicides). Apart from everyday contexts fictional content also figures in professional practices such as newspaper reviews, screenplay writing seminars, interpretation articles in scientific journals, book conventions, film festivals and author symposia. Thus, unlike many other concepts investigated in philosophy, fictional truth is not merely a philosopher's notion, remote and inaccessible to the layman. Rather, fictional truth is deep-seated in our lives, ubiquitous and impossible to miss. Thus, understanding it better promises insight into the human condition.

Second, exploring fictional truth has *systematic* value for philosophy. Not only is the concept central to our understanding of fiction but, since it is intimately tied to other important notions, illuminating fictional truth also contributes to their understanding. Among the latter are first and foremost aesthetic concepts such as interpretation and narration, but also semantic notions like meaning and propositional content, as well as metaphysical concepts such as the creation and identity of fictions and fictional objects. Further, investigating fictional truth might help to make progress in solving intricate puzzles relating to fiction. For example, the paradox of fiction asks how we can have emotional reactions to fictional content given that genuine emotions are only exhibited in response to what is real.

Third, the study of fictional truth also has *methodological* value for philosophy. Some of the most important instruments in a philosopher's toolbox are thought experiments.[3] *Prima facie*, these are little narrative fictions

2 See e.g. Pinker (1997), Gopnik et al. (1999), Pinker (2002), and Gopnik (2009).
3 For a classic treatment see Sorensen (1992).

we tell for argumentative purposes.[4] However, even though good thought experiments are entertaining, engaging, and powerful, they are usually debatable precisely because their content is not so easy to determine. A better understanding of fictional truth would certainly help us to improve this important tool.

Fourth, examining fictional truth has *interdisciplinary* value for science. The concept figures in several academic disciplines, most prominently in literary, art and media studies. But, arguably, it also plays an interesting role in natural sciences. On the one hand, thought experiments are ubiquitous in theoretical physics. On the other hand, scientific models and even theories can usefully be thought of as fictions whose content is often under debate.[5] In other words, investigating and working with fictional truth is a truly interdisciplinary venture. Thus, the concept matters to science far beyond a secluded philosophical realm. Since my investigation contributes to this enterprise it is of potential value across academic fields. In particular, my results concerning the connection of fictional truth with the notions of interpretation and narration have direct bearing for literary theory.

The nature of fictional truth has been a topic of interest in modern philosophy for roughly 40 years since the seminal *Truth in Fiction* by David Lewis appeared in 1978. This paper was followed by several major publications, most importantly Kendall Walton's epoch-making *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990) which has shaped the debate until today. Of course, as with many concepts, fictional truth has played a philosophical role long before and can be traced back at least to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Likewise, it is a topic ubiquitous in the history of literary theory. But before Lewis got the ball rolling fictional truth was never investigated with the scrutiny, methodological tools and precision of analytic philosophy.[6]

A quick note on terminology: in philosophy the matter I am concerned with is treated under different labels, among them *truth in fiction*, *fictional truth*, *fictional content* and *fictionality*. Such a wealth of expressions is advantageous from a stylistic point of view but potentially problematic if we're not talking about the same thing. For instance, the term *fictionality* has a reading where it refers to a property of works, viz. being fictional, rather than a property of

4 See Davies (2007) and especially Ichikawa & Jarvis (2009).

5 See Frigg (2010).

6 But see Woods (1974) for an even earlier analytic investigation into the logic of fiction, broadly conceived.

propositions, viz. being true in a fiction. Also, the expression *truth in fiction* is sometimes used to capture truths one can get at or learn from, via or through fiction. For instance, *prima facie* we can learn a lot about 15th century Paris by reading *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Thus, there is a lot of truth *in* it. Obviously, this is not the intended meaning of the phrase 'truth in fiction' as used in the debate about fictional content.[7] For these reasons I prefer to speak of fictional content and of propositions belonging to that content, but I also find it useful to have a label for the propositions themselves and calling them *fictional truths* is both established and fitting.

Having given a rough description of what this book is about, it might be useful to say what I will *not* do. Most importantly, I will not explore specific fictional truths. In particular, I am not concerned with finding or arguing for (controversial) fictional truths of a certain fiction – as one might expect if this were a contribution in applied literary or media studies. Neither will I interpret any specific fiction, nor rebut any given interpretations of a fiction. Particular fictions and interpretations merely serve as examples or illustrations for general points. Furthermore, I will not give a history of the concept of fictional truth. Nor will I thoroughly reconstruct any specific fleshed-out theory of fictional truth, weigh its pros and cons, or compare it someone else's theory. And, as mentioned already, I will not provide a comprehensive theory of my own. Rather, I focus on finding convincing answers to specific issues concerning our everyday notion of fictional content.

Before going into these, we need some more background. The remainder of this introduction is meant to provide it. First, I briefly cover some fundamental concepts that enter the debate on fictional truth in many ways: *fiction*, *(meta)fictional discourse*, and *fictional object* (§2). Second, I sketch the most influential views on fictional truth and outline what I take to be the basic structure of the concept (§3). Third, I give a very short introduction to the notions of interpretation and narration (§4). Finally, I summarize my main results and briefly remark on my methodology (§5).

[7] Presumably, the label *truth in fiction* derives from philosophical jargon about possible worlds where it is common to say that certain things are true *in* or *at* some possible world. Lewis (1978) was one of the first to use that label and he gave a possible worlds analysis of fictional truth.

0.2. Fundamentals

In this section I briefly introduce three fundamental concepts. First, I give an overview of recent theories of fiction. Subsequently, I cover (meta)fictional discourse and the notion of a fictional object.

0.2.1. Fiction

Exploring fictional truth requires having some grip on what a *fiction* is. For, how else would we know where to look for fictional truths in the first place? Examples for fictions are ubiquitous, of course. They range from language-based fictions like novels and radio plays, to visual fictions like movies and comic strips, to performance-based fictions like theater plays and role-playing games, to interactive fictions like video games. But it is not easy to say what exactly a fiction is and how fictions differ from typical nonfictions like textbooks, manuals, newspaper articles, autobiographies, travel guidebooks, documentaries, portraits, photographs etc.[8] As Carroll (2016a, 359) puts it "though we may seem to be able almost effortlessly to sort the fictions from the nonfictions, rigorously spelling out the way to tell them apart ontologically has proven philosophically daunting". Fortunately, for my exploration into fictional truth I do not need to rely on a specific *theory* of fiction. But it is certainly beneficial to provide an elucidation of this foundational concept. Therefore, I would like to sketch some of the most important developments and positions. My presentation roughly follows Carroll (2016a).

Philosophical discussion has very much focused on language-based fictions, in particular on literary texts. An initial criterion to distinguish fictional from nonfictional text are their *formal features*. Free indirect discourse, elaborate dialogues, figurative speech, narrative structures etc. are typical for fictions. However, these features are not specific to fictions but can equally appear in nonfictions as was highlighted, for instance, by the school of New Journalism in the 1960s. Likewise, typical formal features of nonfictional texts like footnotes can be found in fictional texts, for example in *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace.

A popular alternative idea is to distinguish fictions from nonfictions by what they are *about*. Nonfictions are about the real world, real people, and things. Fictions, in contrast, concern merely possible worlds, merely possible

[8] I do not mean to suggest that *all* tourist guides, documentaries, portraits etc. are nonfictions.

people and things. Possible worlds, as they are usually construed in philosophy, are consistent and complete. Fictions, however, must be neither. They can contain contradictions as is evidenced by many time travel stories, and they are typically incomplete because many states of affairs are not settled in them. For instance, it is left open in *The Grapes of Wrath* whether Tom Joad is right or left-handed, and what blood-type he has. Further, fictions often do seem to concern real people and things. For instance, Tolstoi's historic novel *War and Peace* seems to be about Napoleon, the French Invasion of Russia in 1812 and Moscow. Still, one might be tempted to say that nonfictions are directed at the truth, whereas fictions contain deliberate falsehoods, even deception and lies. The idea that fiction is connected to falsity and lies is supported by the deprecatory use of the word in ordinary language. It is also one of the reasons that Plato deemed fictions to be dangerous and banished their makers from his ideal state. However, it seems that we can learn a lot about the real world from fictions. For instance, *Moby Dick* provides us with many facts about whales, and *Waverly* teaches us about the Jacobite uprising of 1745. Moreover, as Carroll (2016a, 360) points out, fiction makers would be peculiar liars given that they usually label what they do as fiction, thereby defeating their alleged intent to deceive. But if they are not lying what are they doing?

Focus on what authors do has led to *speech-act theories* of fiction. Such theories take something to be a fiction if and only if it was essentially produced by the right kind of speech act characterized by a certain intentional profile. According to Searle (1975) fiction is parasitic in that it essentially involves the pretense of other speech-acts. On the view advanced by Currie (1990) there is a unique act of fiction-making which is constitutive of fiction. Disregarding specific problems of these and other accounts, speech-act theories, in general, have the disadvantage of being applicable only to fictions that involve language.

An alternative conception, which is not limited in this way, was developed by Walton (1990). According to his influential theory an object is a fiction if and only if it is used as a prop in a *game of make-believe*. Walton's starting point are children's games of make-believe. For instance, a game of knights may involve sticks as swords, a creek as a moat, and a rock formation as a castle. These are props in the game. Likewise, a novel or a movie is a prop in a game that we play with them. Unlike the children's game, however, the novel and the movie have the function to be so used. Because of that they mandate