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Fictional Realism, or On Ontological Generosity

Abstract: This study argues that the doctrinal value of fictional realism lies in its capacity to function as a conceptual framework for understanding how fiction operates, particularly with respect to fictional objects, truth-attributions, and norms of interpretation. Beginning with Meinong's expansion of the domain of intentional objects beyond existence, the analysis traces a sequence of influential realist models—Parsons's nuclear/extranuclear distinction, Zalta's theory of abstract objects, Wolterstorff's account of representation as world-projection, Lewis's modal realism, Currie's role-based realism, Deutsch's conception of story-making, and Thomasson's artifactualism. Considered together, these approaches show that fictional realism plays a central role in articulating how fiction can be understood as a rule-governed, interpretively complex, and culturally consequential domain.

Keywords: fictional realism, ontology, (in)existence, abstract object, possible worlds, truth in fiction, fictional characters, interpretive normativity.

Fiction belongs, in an essential sense, to the anthropological endowment of humanity. The capacity to construct non-existent scenarios, to imagine counterfactual situations, and to attribute intentions, desires, and traits to agents in the absence of empirical anchoring constitutes one of the structuring competencies of human mental life: it emerges early, is exercised spontaneously, and is institutionally cultivated in its artistic, narrative, and symbolic forms. From childhood play to myth, literature, art, cinema, or transmedial experiences, fiction functions as a cognitive experiment in which the world is reconfigured, tested, simplified, or radicalised, without thereby being confused with life as it is lived “in the flesh”.

Yet paradoxically, it is precisely this practical familiarity and cultural omnipresence that have contributed to the superficial treatment of the concept of fiction in ordinary discourse. Fiction thus all too often appears as a taken-for-granted notion—frequently burdened with a pejorative reputation, associated with lying, illusion, deception, or cognitive fraud. We invoke the term without interrogating its pragma-semantic identity, because it seems to designate transparently a different regime of reality: a suspended, “as-if” one, distinct from the order of actual existence. In common usage, fiction names a space of ontological non-commitment, a domain of

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controlled unreality, of invention without ontic consequences; and this functional understanding proves sufficient for most everyday practices. We are emotionally moved when reading novels or watching films without relinquishing our ordinary lives; we speak about Sherlock Holmes without attempting to locate his real address. Precisely because we distinguish the regime of real existence from that of imagination, we rarely suspect the fragility of the definitions of fiction with which we operate, since what we (believe we) know suffices for its immediate uses.

This indifferent treatment is, of course, not specific to fiction. It applies more generally to the major categories of common knowledge, whose definitions are contracted—out of cognitive and communicative efficiency—into minimal, easily metabolised informational cores. Just as “time”, “cause”, or “truth” function in everyday contexts without requiring explicit ontological or semantic clarification, fiction operates as a practical competence before it becomes a theoretical object. The decisive difference, however, is that in the case of fiction this apparent transparency conceals major conceptual tensions, which concern not only its own status but also the broader architecture of the relations between language, reality, truth, and existence.

It therefore falls to philosophers, logicians, and theorists of art and literature to suspend this practical obviousness and to problematise the concept of fiction: to map the often counter-intuitive meanings it has accumulated and to defuse the theoretical conflicts it has generated.

The present study aims to approach fiction as a complex theoretical problem, whose resolution calls for a genuinely multidisciplinary framework. A survey of the secondary literature on fiction reveals that a considerable number of scholars have yielded to the temptation to assess fiction through exclusive labels—fiction as authorial invention, or as pretence, or as make-believe, or as a contract of suspended disbelief, and so forth. Each of these labels indexes an intuitive way of explaining how fiction operates. Emphasis on authorial invention privileges the genetic dimension of the work, foregrounding the creative agency of the author; emphasis on pretence targets the pragmatic and illocutionary status of fictional discourse, in which the author adopts a role and produces pseudo-assertions; emphasis on make-believe shifts the analysis to the level of reception, describing the type of mental and normative commitment assumed by audiences who enter a controlled regime of imagining.

The fundamental problem, however, is that these distinctions do not delineate mutually exclusive theoretical classes, but rather carve out different levels of a single, complex phenomenon: a genetic level, a pragmatic–communicative level, and a psychological–normative level. When treated as exclusive taxonomic principles, these labels generate misleading conceptual maps. A theory of fiction may be simultaneously intentionalist, pragmatic, and compatible with a make-believe model, without any internal

tension among these commitments. Far from excluding one another, they operate at different explanatory levels and are frequently mobilised together by the same theorists. To treat authorial invention, pretence, or make-believe as ultimate taxonomic criteria is therefore to conflate levels of analysis and to project onto theories a univocity they do not claim. None of these labels can function as an exclusive principle of classification, for the simple reason that they describe complementary dimensions of fictional practice.

In the present research, fictional realism is adopted as a doctrinal framework capable of structuring explanatory models sufficiently complex to account for the nature of fiction and its effective modes of operation. The central aim is to reconfigure the analytical framework at a meta-explanatory level, where conceptual overlaps, transfers of notions, and theoretical convergences are treated as symptoms of conceptual complexity rather than as defects requiring elimination. Fictional realism constitutes a field of theoretical solutions grounded in the recognition that fictional discourse is a committed form: it operates with reference, sustains internal truths, generates conditions of correctness, and licenses valid inferences. To discuss fictional realism is thus to begin from the acknowledgement that, when we speak about fictional characters, events, or properties, we are not speaking into a void, but about something that is theoretically determinate, even if that something does not qualify as an empirical existent. The differences among realist positions—whether they posit nonexistent objects, abstract artefacts dependent on cultural practices, possible entities, or abstract objects with specific modes of property instantiation—do not articulate this basic intuition in distinct ontological registers.

The interest of fictional realism is therefore heuristic: it offers a privileged route towards a more general understanding of symbolic practices as such, and of fiction in particular.

Paradigmatic Realism: Alexius Meinong

Alexius Meinong's contribution becomes a decisive turning point in the conceptual histories of fiction precisely because it produces a methodological and ontological displacement of a persistent theoretical reflex: the tendency to conflate what exists with everything that can be an object of thought and knowledge. In *The Theory of Objects*, Meinong formulates this rupture explicitly, arguing that the traditional universality of metaphysics—understood as the science of the real or of the existent—is insufficient to cover the proper domain of objectuality, namely the domain of what is given to our intentional acts, whether these take the form of representations, judgements, assumptions, or fictions. The stake here is explicitly anti-reductionist: if metaphysics remains, by definition, bound to what exists, it misses precisely the constitutive phenomenon of mental

life—namely the fact that thought, language, and knowledge routinely operate with non-existent, possible, ideal, or even impossible objects, without this being a marginal accident of meaning.

Meinong introduces an ontological distinction between existence (*Existenz*) and subsistence (*Bestand*). Existence is reserved for objects endowed with spatio-temporal determinations—that is, for objects belonging to the real world—whereas objects lacking existence, yet nonetheless available as terms of thought or discourse, enjoy a different kind of ontological status: they subsist. Within this elastic ontology, Meinong offers a model in which fictional beings are neither marginal nor aberrant, but rather constitute exemplary cases of thinking about objects in the absence of existence. Meinongian objects—as they would later be called—are not mere illusions or arbitrary fabrications, but possible entities that participate in the logical architecture of thought and language. Such objects may be contradictory (like the round square), incomplete (like the unknown hero), or fully determinate, without existence being necessarily involved: “*There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects*” (Meinong 1960, 82). Fictional beings therefore exist—in the order of thought—yet lack any foothold in the actual world; they are “real” in the sense that they can be predicated of, can have properties, and can function as intentional objects of thought and discourse.

Meinong’s most important contribution, however, is the principle of the independence of *Sosein* from *Sein*. Here, fiction becomes a testing ground for metaphysical robustness: if we can speak coherently about a golden mountain or a round square, if we can predicate properties of them and integrate them into inferences and judgements, then existence can no longer be treated as a condition of possibility for predicability or intelligibility. Meinong formulates this thesis in terms that have since become emblematic: “*None of this alters the fact that the Sosein of an Object is not affected by its Nichtsein*” (Meinong 1960, 82). Within the logic of this principle, the fictional object is not a “nothing”, but a determinate term of thought; the fact that it does not exist does not affect the determinative content that can legitimately be associated with it. Fiction thus becomes the privileged terrain on which the separation between determination and existence is displayed in its purest and most provocative form. For Meinong, fiction is intelligible precisely because the domain of objects is broader than the domain of existence, and this enlargement is not an arbitrary licence, but a response to a structural fact about intentionality and the functioning of knowledge.

Finally, this theoretical construction brings about a reconfiguration of taxonomic criteria within theories of fiction. The theory of objects does not compete with theories of pretence or make-believe at the same explanatory level; rather, Meinong (and those who follow this line of thought) provides a model showing that such practices are possible without being reducible to illusion, deception, or nonsense.

Objectual / Abstract Realism: Terence Parsons. Edward N. Zalta

In critical continuity with Meinong, yet articulated within a conceptual framework disciplined by the tools of contemporary analytic logic, the theories developed by Terence Parsons and Edward N. Zalta configure what may be described as objectual realism.

In Parsons's work, objectual realism is explicitly articulated through the nuclear/extranuclear distinction, designed to preserve literal predication without existential commitment. Fictional objects are genuine objects of quantification, characterised by a set of nuclear properties that define their intentional content, while existence is treated as an extranuclear property, structurally decoupled from the descriptive core of the object. Parsons formulates this separation unambiguously:

Existence and nonexistence are not among the nuclear properties of an object. They are extranuclear properties, and hence they do not belong to the core of the object itself. Nuclear properties determine what the object is like, while extranuclear properties determine how the object stands with respect to reality. (Parsons 1980, 23).

This ontological architecture enables Parsons to maintain that nonexistent objects can be coherent bearers of properties, without the theory generating the kinds of contradictions traditionally attributed to Meinongianism. Fictional characters are treated as nonexistent yet determinate objects, and fictional predications are literally true by virtue of the object's nuclear properties, rather than as the effect of a fictional operator or of a pragmatic strategy.

In Zalta's work, objectual realism takes on an axiomatic and more explicitly Platonising form. Fictional entities are treated as abstract objects, defined not by the exemplification of properties but by their encoding. The distinction between exemplifying and encoding is fundamental and primitive within the theory:

[...] [A]n object exemplifies a property instead of saying that it satisfies it, and we shall say that an object encodes a property instead of saying that the object is determined by the property. The distinction between exemplifying and encoding a property is a primitive one. (Zalta 1983, 15).

This distinction makes it possible to formulate a general principle for the generation of abstract objects, grounding a fictional ontology without recourse to Meinongian nonexistence: *"For every expressible condition on properties, there is an abstract object which encodes just the properties meeting the condition"* (Zalta 1983, 12).

Crucially for the theory of fiction, Zalta emphasises that abstract objects—including fictional characters—do not exemplify ordinary properties (spatio-temporal, causal, or physical), but merely encode them, which accounts for their specific ontological status:

Abstract objects do not exemplify ordinary properties such as being round, being colored, or being located in space and time. Nevertheless, they may encode such properties, and it is in virtue of this encoding that fictional characters have the features attributed to them in stories. (Zalta 1983, 40–41).

By means of this mechanism, statements such as “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” are literally true, because the corresponding abstract object encodes the property of being a detective, without any need to attribute concrete existence to it.

Analytic Realism: Nicholas Wolterstorff

Nicholas Wolterstorff’s contribution is distinguished by a decisive shift in emphasis away from the ontology of fictional objects considered in isolation and towards the structure of the acts through which worlds are projected, as well as the pragmatic function of artistic artefacts. In *Works and Worlds of Art*, Wolterstorff argues that fiction is an intentional practice of world projection, carried out through artefacts that organise possibilities of action and imagining. In this sense, artistic invention becomes an act of selection and configuration: “*World projection is a mode of selection, not a mode of creation*” (Wolterstorff 1980, 131). The author selects, combines, and orders possible states of affairs, giving them an intelligible form.

The worlds thus projected possess, for Wolterstorff, a determinate ontological status: they exist as worlds in the sense of structured totalities of states of affairs, even though they are not, as a rule, actualised. The characters that populate these worlds are not concrete individuals, but abstract person-kinds, capable of exemplification yet not spatio-temporally locatable in the actual world. For this reason, the fact that a projected world does not occur does not undermine its ontological consistency; what is lacking is not the structure of the world, but its actualisation. This distinction enables Wolterstorff to claim that fiction is not a separate ontological domain, but rather a specific regime governing the use of projected worlds. In an explicit formulation, he insists that world projection is not peculiar to fiction, but cuts across multiple discursive practices: “*Worlds are not projected only in fiction. But whether projected in the fictional mode or in some other, they are the same*” (Wolterstorff 1980, 107). The difference between fiction, history, documentary, or religious discourse does not lie in the “substance” of the projected world, but in the pragmatic mode of projection—in how the world is offered for use.

Within this framework, representation becomes the key concept: to represent is to project a world by means of an artefact, to provide access to a configuration of states of affairs. Wolterstorff formulates this thesis unequivocally: “*Representation, or mimesis, is world projection*” (Wolterstorff 1980, 131). Representation is thus the institution of possibility, insofar as it creates

the conditions under which a world can be explored, imagined, and appropriated by others. From this follows a reconfiguration of the authorial stance: the fictional author does not assert, does not lie, and does not describe non-existent facts, but adopts a fictional posture—a regulated form of pretence. As Wolterstorff puts it, “*The pretence theory of what constitutes the fictional stance treats the fictioneer as one who plays a role rather than as one who asserts or reports*” (Wolterstorff 1980, 232). Pretence is not deceptive, but conventional: it establishes the rules for entering a projected world and indicates the appropriate mode of participation.

Authorial invention thus emerges as a series of coordinated acts through which the author configures access to a world: selecting circumstances, distributing traits, establishing relations, and delimiting what counts as salient and what remains indeterminate. The text, play, image, or score is not an end in itself, but an instrument that enables others to reactivate the world projection, repeatedly and publicly, in a manner analogous to the way a musical instrument makes the performance of a score possible. Wolterstorff situates this idea in the opening pages of his book, emphasising that the value of artistic creation is not exhausted by the originating act itself: “*The fundamental (though not exclusive) value of artistic creation lies not in what is inherent in the action of creation itself but in its providing us with instruments and objects of action generally*” (Wolterstorff 1980, Introduction, xi). Fiction thus becomes an infrastructure of action.

Modal Realism: David Lewis

Another major line of reflection on fictional worlds and the beings that inhabit them is possibilism, whose paradigmatic figure is David Lewis. Within the framework of modal realism, Lewis develops one of the most radical and systematically coherent ontologies in contemporary philosophy. The core thesis of modal realism is that there exists an infinite plurality of possible worlds, each of which is ontologically real in exactly the same sense as our own world. The point of departure is a common intuition: things could have been otherwise than they are. Lewis transforms this intuition into an explicit metaphysical claim, maintaining that every possible way things could have been corresponds to a world that actually exists. Our world is not ontologically privileged; it is merely actual relative to us, by virtue of the fact that we are its inhabitants: “*There are ever so many ways that a world might be; and one of these many ways is the way that this world is. Are there other worlds that are other ways? I say there are*” (Lewis 1986, 2).

Within Lewis’s framework, actuality is not an absolute property, but an indexical one: each world is actual for its own inhabitants, and the difference between the actual and the possible is a matter of standpoint, not of degree of existence. Lewis emphasises both the completeness and the self-sufficiency of each world, as well as their radical isolation: “*The worlds are*

isolated: there are no spatiotemporal relations at all between things that belong to different worlds, nor does anything that happens at one world cause anything to happen at another" (Lewis 1986, 2).

This ontology has direct implications for fiction, even though Lewis does not explicitly set out to construct a theory of fictional characters. Within modal realism, fictional beings can be understood as concrete inhabitants of non-actual possible worlds. Hamlet, Sherlock Holmes, or Emma Bovary are neither nonexistent objects nor abstract artefacts, but concrete individuals located in the possible worlds corresponding to the fictions in which they appear: they are real in their own worlds, although non-actual for us. Modal realism nevertheless introduces a decisive constraint: individuals are world-bound. No individual can exist in more than one world; across worlds there is no numerical identity, but only counterpart relations. Lewis formulates this solution to the problem of transworld identity explicitly: *"Individuals are world-bound. Nothing is in two worlds. Instead of identity across worlds, we have counterpart relations"* (Lewis 1986, 13). This thesis implies that Napoleon in a novel, Napoleon in a film, and the historical Napoleon are not the same individual, but distinct individuals belonging to different worlds, connected only by relations of counterpartship. Fictional "identity" thus becomes a matter of relevant similarity rather than strict identity.

On this ontological basis, Lewis also develops a modal analysis of truth in fiction. A statement of the form "according to fiction F, p" is true if and only if *p* holds in all the relevant possible worlds in which the story F is told as fact. Our world is excluded, since here the story is told as fiction rather than as factual report. Lewis further cautions, however, that there is no single "world of the fiction". The structural incompleteness of narratives means that multiple possible worlds may be compatible with the same fiction, which in turn explains the plurality of faithful interpretations. In this sense, fictional truth is not determined by the facts of the actual world, but by what is explicitly established or implicitly presupposed within narrative and interpretative practices.

Modal realism via Lewis therefore provides a robust ontological framework for integrating fiction: characters are real entities in non-actual worlds, fictional truth is world-relative truth, and identity is replaced by counterpart relations. The cost is a maximalist ontology; the benefit is a coherent articulation of the relations between possibility, truth, and fiction, within a system that connects modal metaphysics to literary hermeneutics.

Role Realism: Gregory Currie

Gregory Currie's theory of fiction occupies a strategic position insofar as it relocates fictional realism from the register of substantive ontology to that of the normative practices of representation. Currie is not an ontological realist in the Meinongian or possibilist sense; rather, he advances what may

be termed role realism, according to which fictional characters are treated as roles established by texts and recognised within public interpretative practices.

The central thread of Currie's theory is the claim that fictional beings should not be conceived as individuals—whether concrete or abstract—but as role-structures defined by their position within a story and by the set of properties and actions authorised by the text. In *The Nature of Fiction*, Currie formulates this conceptual shift explicitly, arguing that characters are better understood as narrative functions rather than as autonomous entities: "*Fictional characters are not individuals, but roles—roles that can be occupied, in different ways, by different individuals in different contexts of representation*" (Currie 1990, 171).

This thesis is decisive for locating Currie within the paradigm of fictional realism: roles are not merely private mental investments, but real structural entities of narrative practice, comparable to social or institutional roles. Roles can be instantiated, discussed, evaluated, and compared, even though they do not exist as concrete individuals. Currie insists that fictional roles are determined by the text, yet not exhausted by it; they are defined by norms of interpretative correctness that determine what is true or false of a character within a story. For this reason, fictional truth is the outcome of the application of narrative norms, rather than a matter of ontological correspondence. Fictional roles are thus objective in a normative sense: there are public criteria for deciding whether an attribution is legitimate or not—for instance, whether it is true that Hamlet is indecisive or that Emma Bovary is an adulterous woman: "*What is true in a fiction is fixed by the content of the story together with principles governing how stories are to be extended and interpreted*" (Currie 1990, 53). Acts of imagination are norm-governed: "*Engagement with fiction is not mere free imagining; it is constrained imagining, governed by rules that determine correctness within the fictional practice*" (Currie 1990, 75).

Moderate Realism: Harry Deutsch

For Harry Deutsch, fiction is an act of institution. In his most widely cited paper, *Making Up Stories*, Deutsch advances a programmatic thesis: fiction—constitutive rather than descriptive—is the bringing-into-being of characters and events through the act of storytelling itself: "*In making up a story, we create fictional characters; we do not merely describe or refer to entities that were already there*" (Deutsch 2000, 149). This claim places Deutsch's realism in a position distinct from both Lewisian possibilism and Meinongianism: fictional characters are neither concrete individuals inhabiting non-actual worlds nor nonexistent objects correlated with sets of properties, but entities created through a practice of public communication. Deutsch is concerned with the conditions under which fictional characters are created and recognised, rather than with their metaphysical status as such:

“Storytelling is a rule-governed practice. The creation of fictional characters depends on publicly accessible conventions governing what counts as introducing a character into a story” (Deutsch 2000, 152).

Accordingly, Deutsch’s fictional realism is closely aligned in spirit with Currie’s role realism. Characters exist because they have been created through a narrative act recognised as such within an interpretative community. To say that Sherlock Holmes exists is to acknowledge that he has been created and that he occupies a stable position within a cultural practice: *“Once a fictional character has been created, there is something there to be talked about, criticized, and evaluated, even though that thing is not a concrete individual”* (Deutsch 2000, 154).

Artifactualism: Amie Thomasson

Within the realist strand that runs through the contemporary debate on fiction, the artifactualism proposed by Amie L. Thomasson represents one of the most methodologically sophisticated positions, precisely because it rejects both “exotic” ontological solutions and minimalist explanations of a purely pragmatic or psychologistic kind. The specificity of Thomasson’s approach lies in her treatment of fiction as an ontology of dependent objects. She observes that theoretical discussions of fictional characters have long been distorted by a shared presupposition, embraced by both realists and antirealists alike: namely, the assumption that fictional characters, if they exist at all, must be ontologically bizarre entities requiring a separate realm of reality. *Fiction and Metaphysics* explicitly sets out to dismantle this presupposition and to show that fiction is a case that forces a refinement of our ordinary ontological categories. Thomasson argues that fictional characters are best understood as abstract artefacts—that is, as created entities, historically and intentionally dependent, yet perfectly real in an ontological sense: *“The key to seeing the centrality of fiction in metaphysics lies in giving up this assumption and recognizing the similarities between fictional objects and other entities”* (Thomasson 1999, xi).

This conceptual shift is essential to the realist grounding of her theory. For Thomasson, to be abstract does not mean to be atemporal or independent of human activity; on the contrary, fictional characters are abstract only in the sense that they lack spatio-temporal location, not in the Platonic sense. They are historical entities, with a determinate moment of coming into being and with well-defined conditions of existence and persistence. The book underscores this point through an example that has become canonical, showing that our intuitions about fictional existence are ontological rather than merely pragmatic: *“If someone claimed that George Washington was a great fan of Sherlock Holmes, we might object that in Washington’s time there was no Sherlock Holmes”* (Thomasson 1999, 5). The fact that such a claim is simply false indicates the presence of genuine temporal conditions

governing fictional being—conditions incompatible with the idea of eternal abstract objects or atemporal possibilia.

Rather than asking what fictional beings are in a purely metaphysical sense, Thomasson is primarily concerned with how fictional beings function within literary and cultural practices. Accordingly, the focus shifts from attempting to slot fictional entities into pre-established ontological categories (possible objects, nonexistent objects, and so forth) to examining the processes of creation, circulation, and interpretation that sustain their cultural existence. As she puts it:

“If we are to postulate fictional characters at all, it seems advisable to postulate them as entities that can satisfy or at least make sense of our most important beliefs and practices concerning them. Often theories of fiction are driven not by an independent sense of what is needed to understand talk and practices regarding fiction, but rather by a desire to show how fictional characters may find their place in a preconceived ontology of possible, nonexistent, or abstract objects—to demonstrate one more useful application of the ontology under discussion, or to provide catchy and familiar examples. Instead of starting from a ready-made ontology and seeing how we can fit fictional characters into it, I suggest that we begin by paying careful attention to our literary practices so that we can see what sorts of things would most closely correspond to them. I thus begin by discussing what sorts of entities our practices in reading and discussing works of fiction seem to commit us to, and I draw out the artifactual theory of fiction as a way of characterizing the sort of entity that seems best suited to do the job of fictional characters” (Thomasson 1999, 5).

On this view, fictional characters no longer appear as entities awaiting placement within a metaphysical realm, but as cultural artefacts brought into existence through the creative acts of authors and sustained by literary works and by the shared understanding of a competent audience. Thomasson rejects theories of fiction driven by the desire to accommodate fictional characters within an already constructed ontological architecture. Her argument is that ontological investigation must begin from the demands imposed by actual practices of reading, writing, and critical analysis, through careful observation of how people in fact speak, think, and interact with fiction.

For Thomasson, fictional characters such as Emma Woodhouse or Sherlock Holmes are created through deliberate mental and linguistic acts on the part of authors. They do not pre-exist the works in which they appear but are brought into being through the process of fictional representation. The genesis of fictional characters is comparable to conventional illocutionary acts in speech-act theory: just as the utterance of a recognised formula institutes a marriage, discursive institution brings a fictional character into existence within the fictional context. Fiction is thus to be understood as a cultural practice grounded in the conventional conferral of existence upon entities that lack any physical counterpart. The

acceptance of fictional conventions functions analogously to other norm-governed social practices, such as the conclusion of a contract. A marital contract, for example, presupposes a set of formalised procedures: the performance of a ceremony at a given place and time, the drafting and signing of a document, the utterance of recognised formulas in the presence of witnesses. The legal effects of the contract are not reducible to the moment or location of the act itself, but extend through institutional recognition, existing in virtue of the social convention that the fulfilment of these steps confers a new status, irrespective of individual perception or public notoriety.

Accordingly, fictional characters are best understood as ontologically dependent entities. They depend creatively on an author; they depend institutionally on the socio-cultural infrastructure, inasmuch as a character continues to exist only so long as the works in which it appears are preserved, transmitted, and recognised as part of cultural heritage; and they depend interpretatively on communities of readers who, through acts of reading, keep them active within the cultural space and sustain their meaning and relevance. These forms of dependence jointly define the persistence of fictional objects, which continue to exist only so long as the material, institutional, and interpretative support that sustains them remains in place.

A further theoretical issue clarified by Thomasson concerns the principle of ontological parsimony, according to which we ought not to postulate more entities than are necessary. To those who argue that positing fictional objects violates this principle, Thomasson responds that eliminating fictional objects does not yield genuine simplification: in order to explain our reflexive engagement with fiction, we would in any case be forced to introduce notions such as “text”, “description”, or “interpretation”, which are ontologically on a par with abstract artefacts. Explicitly recognising such artefacts is therefore both more honest and more theoretically efficient: *“Is doing without fictional objects really more parsimonious? Often it is a case of false parsimony, where we eliminate entities only at the cost of explanatory adequacy”* (Thomasson 1999, 139).

On the map of theories of fiction, Amie Thomasson’s artifactualism thus constitutes a crucial point of reference, clearly fixing an ontological framework and articulating the analysis of fiction with fundamental issues in metaphysics. In contrast to Meinongian theories, which postulate nonexistent objects, and to modal realism, which locates fictional entities in other possible worlds, Thomasson proposes a “middle” ontology: fictional characters and objects are abstract artefacts, brought into existence by creative acts and sustained by the cultural institutions that support them. Fiction is a real practice, ontologically productive, placed in the service of thought, discourse, and human life.

The conceptual gain: in lieu of conclusions

Fictional realism proposes a reorganisation of the methodological toolkit through which we approach fiction. The theoretical value of fictional realism lies, first and foremost, in its capacity to extend the ontological domain without turning such extension into an arbitrary proliferation of entities. Fictional realism shows that an excessively restrictive ontology risks leaving unexplained precisely those phenomena it purports to handle; ontological generosity, in this context, is an option of rigour rather than indulgence. A further conceptual gain of fictional realism is its redefinition of the relation between truth and context. It is worth recalling that what fiction communicates has all too often been dismissed as illusion, falsehood, or deception. The lesson of fictional realism is that fictional truths are genuine truths, even if they are conditioned by determinate frameworks. In the same vein, fictional realism establishes an ontological horizon of interpretability. Interpretation always presupposes something to be interpreted, and fictional realism makes this “something” explicit without over-reifying it. Characters, representational structures or repertoires are not treated as mere pretexts for interpretative activity; they function as stable points of reference that enable differentiated evaluations of meaning-scenarios. Interpretation is not an exercise in unconstrained projection, devoid of criteria of adequacy; fictional realism thus provides the minimal ontological conditions for interpretative normativity, explaining why certain interpretations may be rejected not merely as unconvincing, but as erroneous.

Fictional realism therefore offers an indispensable framework for understanding the cognitive and cultural value of fiction. If fiction were reduced to an objectless game or to a wholesale suspension of truth-criteria, it would become difficult to explain how it can yield knowledge, ethical reflection, transformation, or emancipation. Fictional realism renders this intelligible precisely by recognising a domain of reference and truth proper to fiction—distinct from that of the actual world, yet not severed from it, but grounded in it as a foundation of our shared life.

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