

Telling Tales*

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Abstract. Utterances within the context of telling fictional tales that appear to be assertions are nevertheless not to be taken at face value. The present paper attempts to explain exactly what such ‘pseudo-assertions’ are, and how they behave. Many pseudo-assertions can take on multiple roles, both within fictions and in what I call ‘participatory criticism’ of a fiction, especially when they occur discourse-initially. This fact, taken together with problems for replacement accounts of pseudo-assertion based on the implicit prefixing of an ‘in the fiction’ operator, suggest that pseudo-assertion is best understood as a kind of make-believe. This proposal is elaborated and defended, and some applications to fictionalism are tentatively explored.

1.

Works of fiction contain grammatically declarative sentences with a completely standard semantics, continuous with the rest of the natural language in which those works are written. Some given group of sentences might actually comprise a novel, yet those same sentences could equally possibly comprise a biography, with no semantic alteration. One would not need to learn anything about meanings in one’s natural language to understand one of these, if one already understood the other. However, there must be some difference between the novel and the biography, as we do not take sentences in novels to be attempts to describe reality; nor do we take the authors of fictions to be asserting the content of those sentences. Moreover, there must be something we learn when we learn the difference between novels and biographies, which doesn’t involve the meanings of the sentences but rather involves learning how to deal successfully with those sentences.

This is particularly clear if we consider the kinds of errors that can be made by those who do not understand what is involved in fictions. One plausible error that a child might make is to mistake the content of the fiction for told fact. But the possibility of this error depends on a uniform semantics between fictional and factual language, else it would not be possible for the child to get on to the content of the fiction in the first place in order to make the mistake. The error then is to mistake declarative sentences in fictions for reports of genuine beliefs of the author, and to respond to such apparent reports by coming to believe their content. Those who come to understand the practice of storytelling (in which works of fiction are given oral expression) avoid such errors. They grasp that neither the storyteller nor her normal hearers take the speaker’s utterances in the course of telling the tale to be attempts to communicate the literal truth of those sentences, nor do they take the utterances to commit the speaker to believing the propositions thereby expressed.

2.

Could such utterances nevertheless be assertions? One straightforward view is that tellers of tales knowingly assert literal falsehoods, but such assertions are

* This is a pre-copy-editing, author-produced PDF. The definitive publisher-authenticated version of Eagle, A. (2007) ‘Telling Tales’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **107** (issue 1, part 2), 125–147, is available online at <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com>.

permissible in the storytelling context. Precedent might be found in practices of approximation ('France is hexagonal') or exaggeration ('Everyone knows who Madonna is!'). In these practices the known assertion of literal falsehoods is permitted without committing the utterer to the falsehood.

Nevertheless, these practices do not provide a good model. For what justifies the assertion of these falsehoods is that they thereby implicate, perhaps imply, a truth: respectively, that France is roughly hexagonal, or that Madonna is very well known. Yet only very archaic views hold that fictions are to be justified in virtue of the truths that they manage to communicate.

Approximation or exaggeration are governed by norms of assertion, and it is only their ability to successfully communicate truths that is a reason for exempting these utterances from those norms. But utterances in fictions need no such exemption, because neither speaker nor hearer of a tale takes the utterances to be governed by the norms of assertion. Take, for example, the normative injunction *assert only what you know* (Williamson 2000). It simply is not a constraint on the tellers of tales that they utter only what they know. And hearers of tales do not hold the tellers responsible for violating this norm, as they would if they thought it was a norm governing the practice of tale telling.

The only apparent reason for assigning these utterances in oral fictions to the class of assertions seems to be that the sentences uttered have a declarative grammatical form which is typical for assertions. This reason is not sufficient, though it does emphasise that, whatever is going on in tale telling, it resembles assertion. The difference occurs in the *force* with which the semantic content of the sentences which comprise the fiction are uttered or inscribed. We can explain both the continuous semantics between fictional and factive discourse and our non-committal attitude to fictional content, if we suggest that the content in a fiction is not asserted, but is the subject of another speech act with different pragmatics. For present purposes, I dub this putative speech act *pseudo-assertion*. Works of fiction differ from works of non-fiction in that the content of a work of fiction is not asserted, but instead (merely?) pseudo-asserted.

3.

Further light may be shed on pseudo-assertion if we consider some other familiar utterances. While the natural home for pseudo-assertion is within fictions, it is equally clear that sometimes critical discussants appears to engage in pseudo-assertion as well. One obvious way in which this can occur is when a critic simply adopts a sentence taken directly from the fiction in order to make a critical point. So, in a tutorial discussion of the final stages of Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, a student A may announce the following sentence from the novel in order to make a point about the novel:

(1) Mason at last came to admire Dixon for his bravery. (698)

Intuitively, the student is not asserting (1). Though all of her hearers are well aware of what the truth conditions of (1) are, no one is tempted to regard an utterance of (1) in that context as correct iff those conditions obtain. It does not matter for a correct

utterance of (1) whether or not, in fact, Mason came to admire Dixon—even though in this case the literal semantic content of (1) may well be true. But a hearer who interpreted (1) as asserting its literal semantic content would be misunderstanding the situation in question. It seems straightforwardly plausible that the student’s utterance of (1) is a pseudo-assertion of the semantic content of (1). Their hearers can grasp the content of what is said, and can recognise it as declarative in form and thus apt for an assertion, yet none take it to involve any commitment to the content uttered. Rather, all of the student’s hearers understand that for this utterance of (1) to be felicitous it need not be true; rather, the relevant fiction just needs to be committed to (1). If the hearers agree that the fiction is so committed, they will acquiesce in the utterance; if not, they will disagree, typically by pseudo-asserting the negation of (1).

This phenomenon, where a critic is naturally interpreted as speaking from ‘within’ the fiction rather than adopting an explicitly external perspective, is I hope familiar enough that it may be taken as a starting point for further analysis. Here, for example, is Harold Bloom on Hedda Gabler:

Whether commanding an army or an arms factory, Hedda would have acted like her forerunners Iago and Edmund. Her genius, like theirs, is for negation and destruction...her intelligence is malign, not because of social circumstances but for her pleasure, for the exercise of her will. (Bloom 1994 p. 351)

Here we must recognise that Bloom (whatever the merits of his criticism) is not merely talking about Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, but participating in the elaboration of the content of that play by adopting a manner of talking which seems embedded in the text, talking about the characters as if real, comparing them with other such entities, predicting their behaviour in a robust fashion, and so on. I wish to make a distinction between such *participatory* criticism (where the critic apparently acquiesces in the tale, and draws out the content by using appropriate sentences from the fiction) and the more distanced perspective of *descriptive* criticism (where the content of the tale is explicitly given—to give an analogy, mentioned rather than used). I take this distinction to be crucial, yet one that has so far not received due attention in analyses of fictional discourse.

4.

Lewis (1978) offers a natural interpretation of the phenomenon of critical participatory pseudo-assertion:

Thus if I say that Holmes liked to show off, you will take it that I have asserted an abbreviated version of the true sentence ‘In the Sherlock Holmes stories, Holmes liked to show off.’ (Lewis, 1978, 262)

Thus the student who pseudo-asserts (1) does so appropriately because they really truthfully assert (2):

(2) In the fiction of *Mason & Dixon*, Mason at last came to admire Dixon for his bravery.

If critical pseudo-assertion is, as it appears, of a piece with pseudo-assertion within fictions, we can extend this to a general account:

Operator A pseudo-assertion that S is an assertion that, according to, or in, some contextually relevant fiction f , S .¹

A pseudo-assertion of S , on this view, is a genuine assertion of a sentence S^* with a different content to S , but such that the content of S is systematically embedded within S^* .²

Subsequent to Lewis' discussion, there has been considerable debate over how the operator 'In the fiction f , ...' works. Rather than enter the intricacies of this discussion, at this point I'll rest content with an intuitive understanding of that operator. I will return to this issue in §10. The question that concerns us more immediately is: does the Operator account provide a successful analysis of pseudo-assertion?

5.

Several difficulties for the Operator theory have been noted. Richard Joyce (2005, pp. 292–5) has argued that the Operator account cannot make sense of our judgements about the validity of mixed arguments using some pseudo-asserted premises and some straightforwardly asserted premises. Some intuitively valid arguments of the surface form ' $p, p \rightarrow q$ therefore q ' turn out invalid, if some premise is pseudo-asserted (given the non-factivity of the 'in the fiction' operator). Stephen Yablo (2001, p. 76) has argued that the Operator account cannot make sense of our concerns about fictional situations; we are concerned that a character is being mistreated, yet the Operator theory suggests that the object of our concern is that in the fiction, a character is being mistreated—something which we might have reason to praise, not be concerned at.³ Moreover, an Operator account of pseudo-assertion *within* fiction seems to make the content of the fiction include inappropriate self-reflexive claims about the fiction.

Rather than elaborate these criticisms further, I'll articulate what I take to be their fundamental common source. Joyce objects that the genuine content of a quasi-asserted sentence, if the Operator view is correct, differs from the content we intuitively wish to ascribe to it, namely the content that sentence appears to have. Yablo concurs: our concern is for the apparent content, not the genuine content

¹ Another adherent is Currie: 'I might say "Holmes was a pipe smoker". My utterance differs in important ways from Doyle's original utterance of the same sentence. In my mouth it is an assertion; something that I intend to get you to believe is true, something which I probably believe to be true, and which, in some sense or other, *is* true. I follow David Lewis and others in thinking that such statements are best understood as implicitly prefixed by an intentional operator...' (Currie 1988, p. 477).

² An immediate difficulty here comes when we think about critical *disagreement*. Above I suggested that critics can disagree with a critical utterance of (1) by uttering its grammatical negation; but does the negation take wide or narrow scope when interacting with the 'in the fiction' operator? There is scope for ambiguity here, which doesn't ever seem to appear in practice, and we should be suspicious of semantic differences which don't appear syntactically marked (Stanley 2000).

³ We aptly direct praise at Dickens for including discomforting situations in his novels; though we are concerned at the situation, we are pleased that Dickens has included them in the fiction and thus raised them to public prominence, so we are *not* concerned that the situation is included in the fiction.

according to the Operator theory. And pseudo-assertions within fictions must have their apparent content rather than the content that the Operator theory ascribes to them.

The Operator view is what Predelli (1997) calls a ‘replacement view’: pseudo-asserting ‘*p*’ is asserting, by means of an elliptical utterance, a different content that replaces the content of *p*. Replacement views are implausible as accounts of our ordinary semantic understanding of pseudo-assertions, as the Joyce and Yablo examples show: replacement views fail to predict our actual responses, which are much better predicted by a non-replacement view.

The behaviour of critical discourse that makes no explicit mention of a content-modifying operator like ‘in the fiction *f*’ is most easily explained as involving pseudo-assertion that doesn’t involve implicit content modification by a suppressed operator. This is particularly noticeable if we consider the *flexibility* of pseudo-asserted content.

A’s utterance of (1) could just as easily have been followed by an utterance of:

(3) Bravery is a great virtue.

If *A* or any other conversational participant had uttered (3), the conversation would have taken a different path, perhaps coming to be a discussion of the virtues by means of literary illustration. Alternatively, *A* or another conversational participant could have gone on to recite further sentences from the novel, and the conversation would have become their telling the tale of *Mason & Dixon*. There thus seem to be (at least) three ways in which (1) could legitimately be uttered, with the very same content, in addition to an assertion of (1) as known fact: (i) as part of the fiction, (ii) as part of critical discussion of the fiction, and (iii) as fictional illustration of a related factual situation.

(1), uttered *discourse initially* (that is, initiating a new conversation without prior background utterances), can go on play a role in any of these types of conversation. The most plausible explanation of this is that (1) really does have the same semantic content in each of these roles, and what varies is how the conversational participants decide to use that content, offered up at the beginning of the discourse, in directing the future course of the discussion. It is implausible at best to think that future utterances, whether (3) or some further sentences from the novel, somehow retrospectively alter the semantic content of (1) to make it an apt contribution to the subsequent discussion. So we must suppose that (1) had the flexibility to play any of these roles to begin with, and thus to suppose that the contribution an utterance of (1) makes to those various conversations is its overt semantic content, publicly available to all potential speakers in any potential conversational continuation of the utterance, and not any more subtle implicit and conversation-specific content.

For similar reasons, this flexibility also supports the hypothesis that (1) is equally pseudo-asserted in each of the cases (i)–(iii); it is understood by all conversational participants in each of these situations what the content of (1) is, and also that that content is not to be interpreted as a belief of the utterer *A*, or adopted as

a belief by the hearers. Thus these three situations all contrast with the case of assertion of (1) as known fact. There may well be some resistance on the part of the utterer *A* when the conversation takes a turn other than her intent, but that resistance is far more easily explained as frustration at her intentions being thwarted than as a symptom of a distinct speech act in each of the three situations. This frustration is not irritation at the other speakers for misunderstanding or misusing the utterance; it is annoyance that the audience has mistaken the conversational purpose or point for which *A* made the utterance. This shows that any attempt to defend the Operator theory by appeal to speaker's intentions will fail; it simply is not plausible to suppose that the intentions of the speaker manage to restrict the force of an utterance of (1) so that it can play a role in just one of the discourse types (i)–(iii) when all the observational evidence is that no such restriction exists. This is good evidence for the thesis that there is indeed a single speech act of pseudo-assertion which can play a common role in each of these ways of continuing a conversation begun with (1). I introduced the act of pseudo-assertion only because of the manifest inadequacy of the pure assertion account of fictional declarative utterance; we should not needlessly multiply speech acts to deal with these different conversational contexts without similarly powerful evidence that a divided account is required.

One final defence of the Operator theory might be to appeal to *speech act pluralism*. In defending semantic minimalism, Cappelen and Lepore (2005) argue that every sentence has a minimal semantic content that is context invariant, but that when a given sentence is uttered a multitude of different speech acts are performed. In the case of pseudo-assertion, this could amount to the claim that (1) has a core semantic content, and that when uttered (at least) three subtly different speech acts occur: uttering it within the fiction, uttering it illustratively, and uttering it about the fiction. To defend an Operator theory, this last speech act must amount to an assertion of (1) within the scope of the 'in the fiction *f*' operator. However, if (1) occurs in a fiction, it is not plausible to think that it always contributes any speech act with this content: for not all fictions reflexively discuss themselves. So that is not a speech act that every utterance of (1) can involve, and there is no reason apart from special pleading to suppose that (1) can make that speech act under the circumstances required by the Operator account.

In sum, this potential flexibility of discourse initial pseudo-assertions to contribute to multiple conversational contexts militates strongly against any replacement analysis of sentences like (1). No replacement content, particularly not the replacement content proposed by the Operator analysis, is fit to play a role in discourse both within fiction and about fiction. The potential we just observed for sentences like (1) to be neutral between all the types of pseudo-assertion, which (2) clearly is not, shows that the division of pseudo-assertions required by Operator theories cannot succeed. Rather, we need a semantically and pragmatically uniform account of all kinds of pseudo-assertions. Such a theory would explain not only these somewhat elaborate cases of discourse initial pseudo-assertions, but also give a natural account of how participatory criticism of a fiction meshes with the actions of telling the tale by the author. In the remainder of this paper, I will try to give such a theory.

6.

Operator theories take utterances about fictions as paradigmatic, and extend an initially plausible account of those utterances to pseudo-assertion in general. Reflecting on this suggests why the distinction between participatory and descriptive criticism (§3) has been overlooked, as following Lewis' analysis immediately forces one to assimilate the two categories. But the failure of the Operator theory should lead us to separate the two categories, and while I agree that sentences like (2) have a significant and useful role to play in descriptive critical discourse, I don't think that role is essentially the same role that (1) plays in participatory critical discourse. In §10 I will return to the semantics for (2) in descriptive criticism, but for now I'd like to focus on the similarities between participatory critical utterances, and utterances made in the course of telling tales.

The most natural proposal here is that telling a tale involves *pretending* that what one tells is true. The teller of a tale, when uttering a declarative sentence,

is pretending ... to make an assertion, or acting as if she were making an assertion, or going through the motions of making an assertion, or imitating the making of an assertion... [She] is engaging in a nondeceptive pseudoperformance which constitutes pretending to recount to us a series of events. (Searle, 1975, 324–5)

Using this to characterise non-literary fictions is problematic (Walton, 1990, 81–5). Walton suggests that fictions in general are to be characterised as objects that aid the practice of *make-believe*; sentences in a literary fiction are 'props' facilitating making-believe that the content of those sentences holds, and thus play the same role as props in other types of representational fictions. Walton and Searle do not radically disagree, and Searle's account of telling tales as pretended assertion seems roughly right as measuring the joint contribution of fiction and language in this case. We then arrive at

Make-believe A pseudo-assertion that *S* is an utterance of *S* in the course of making-believe that the content of *S* obtains (Walton, 1990, 400).⁴

This account seems quite intuitive for sentences used in the telling of a tale itself; the teller of the tale is pretending to narrate events which didn't actually occur, involving entities which needn't actually exist. As the creator of the tale, he is in a position to make it the case that when he says *S*, *S* is part of the content of the tale. For the audience, then, adequately engaging in that fictional tale apparently also involves pretending that *S* is true, and that what the teller does is assert *S*. Teller and hearer must engage in a joint pretence that *S*, whose existence and content is determined by utterances of the teller (things are generally similar, though more complex, in cases of collective storytelling—for one thing, tellers of jointly authored fictions cannot make it the case that the fiction involves *S* just by uttering *S*, as *S* also needs to be consistent with what other authors have already made part of the tale).

⁴ Evans (1981, ch. 11) also defends a pretence account of fictional and critical discourse, but he seems to have understood it as a pretence that empty fictional names have referents, while simultaneously maintaining a Russellian theory of the semantic values of names, which seems to rob the pretence of content in a way that Make-Believe cannot readily accommodate. It should also be noted that some Operator theories adopt a pretence component to explain emotional responses to fiction (Currie 1990).

The act of making-believe that *S* is introduced as a primitive notion for present purposes. Yet it may be helpful to compare this act with other similar acts, both to establish that a non-committal attitude of this sort can exist, and to clarify what making-believe might involve.

It is helpful to think firstly about *supposition*. If someone begins a conversation by saying ‘Suppose, for the moment, that *S*’, her hearers add *S* to those propositions which the hearer takes to be the accepted background of the conversation. Stalnaker gives an explicitly pragmatic characterisation of presupposition:

A speaker presupposes that *P* at a given moment in a conversation just in case he is disposed to act, in his linguistic behavior, as if he takes the truth of *P* for granted, and as if he assumes that his audience recognizes that he is doing so. (Stalnaker 1973, p. 448)⁵

‘Suppose that’ is a mechanism that explicitly allows the introduction and formation of a common presupposition by participants in a conversation. Supposition, so defined, is clearly non-committal: While everything that is said involves the participant’s presupposition that *S*, and the conversation as a whole is sensible only if it is understood as committed in some way to *S*, we do not take it that the any of the participants is committed to *S* in a way that carries over to contexts outside the scope of the supposition. Moreover, the content supposed is clearly the same as the content one might come to believe, so there is no reason to give a non-standard semantic account of sentences in the scope of a ‘suppose that’ operator. Perhaps the best model of this suppositional context is counterfactual: if one supposes that *S*, it is then appropriate to utter only those sentences obtain in all the nearest *S*-worlds. This doesn’t commit one to the actual truth of *S*, though it is not incompatible with it.

I doubt that making-believe can be understood directly in terms of supposing: to do so is to conceive of tale telling as a kind of counterfactual history, and that misses much of the point of telling tales—particularly, as Kripke emphasised, this model jeopardises the intuition that fictional characters are *essentially* fictional and thus not apt for concrete instantiation in any possible world (though of course a qualitative duplicate may be instantiated). Nevertheless there is a similar imperatival operator to ‘suppose that’ in the case of pretence: the ‘imagine that’ operator. In the actual practice of speaking and writing one may use these operators interchangeably to get one’s audience to adopt a hypothesis for the purposes of present discussion without having to convince them of its truth and indeed holding the question of truth in abeyance. ‘Imagine that’ has a more conventional role in fictions, and may be explicitly uttered at the beginning of a tale to introduce the fictional context, or it may be implicitly introduced either by the conventions of publishing or storytelling—‘Once upon a time’ may function idiomatically as ‘imagine that’.

⁵ Stalnaker (2002) analyses presupposition in terms of *common acceptance*, where acceptance involves treating a proposition as true for some reason; it is not clear that the later formulation significantly advances on the earlier explicitly dispositional formulation. For more on the Stalnakerian picture, and contrasts with more explicitly semantic theories of presupposition (such as those involving dynamic semantics), see Simons 2003.

While imagining is distinct from supposing, it is still the case that it behaves presuppositionally: the content of the imagining is added to the conversational background in such a way that it can be cancelled by further utterances in the conversation (setting aside the common though apparently non-essential role of imagery in imagination). The connection between imagining and making-believe seems quite tight. The differences between supposing and making-believe seem to lie firstly in the ease with which conversational presuppositions induced by imaginings are cancelled or temporarily suspended and then resumed (as when one interrupts a tale to deal with some practical matter), and secondly in the dispositions of conversants to take seriously the possibility that they could come to believe what is currently supposed. These differences explain some features of make-believe: for instance, why people hearing a tale aren't deceived (fictional suppositions aren't apt for transformation into belief), and why it is often inappropriate to explicitly cancel an imagined presupposition (to object to a tale on the grounds of untruth is to cancel a presupposition that no one was going to adopt, and to therefore spoil the pleasures of imagination for no good reason). Yet these differences are not substantive enough for us to regard make-believe as a fundamentally different non-committal attitude from supposition (which seems to make further difficulties for a replacement account of fictional content, assuming one does not implausibly adopt a replacement account of supposition).

Pretending and imagining are not the same thing; the teller of the tale pretends, while the audience imagines. We may then gloss 'making-believe that *S*' as the common attitude to *S* shared between audiences who imagine that *S* and tellers who pretend that *S*. Both parties entertain *S* without regard to its actual truth (and without regard to whether its designators refer), and presumably for purposes for which the actual truth value of *S* (or successful reference of its designators) is irrelevant.

7.

The Make-believe theory is plausible as an account of pseudo-assertions by the tellers of tales. But what of the other uses we suggested that (1) could be put to? The Make-believe theory will maintain that when someone talks about the content of a tale, they also make-believe that the tale is told as fact. Participatory criticism and appreciation of a tale is done by imaginatively entering into the presupposition that the tale told is true, and then speaking under that presupposition. A critic joins with the teller in the elaboration of a tale.

On the present model, this is all fairly straightforward: a critic is a hearer of the tale like any other, and thus adopts the very same conversational presuppositions as other hearers who understand the practice. Little wonder, then, that critics speak from the perspective of the fiction: such participatory utterances are *precisely* what we should expect if telling tales induces presupposition-like behaviours in one's hearers.

An asymmetry remains: in typical cases, the critic has no power to make his utterances part of the content of the tale because the power to add to the content of the supposition belongs to the author(s) alone. Yet similar asymmetries exist in other suppositions; if a mathematician asks us to suppose that *x* is prime in the course of a

proof, we are not usually entitled to make any additional supposition, say that x is less than 37, lest we invalidate or trivialise the proof being constructed.

The Make-believe theory analyses a remark by A about a tale told by C as an attempt by A to engage in the *same* make-believe that C engages in. That is, A imagines what she takes C to intend to induce in his hearers by his pretence; and A then articulates the content of her imagination. A may not succeed in imagining what C pretends, which is why it cannot be a condition on A 's engaging in the same make-believe that A and C suppose exactly the same things. Though there is usually substantial overlap in content, what ultimately secures the attempt to engage in the same pretence is that A *defers* to C , by being willing to make-believe any content S that is used by C in telling the tale. Fictional make-believe is thus individuated by propositions involved in authorial constructions.

The correctness conditions for pseudo-assertions on this account derive fairly immediately from this constraint: A pseudo-asserts S correctly or felicitously iff S occurs within, or is entailed by propositions occurring within, the author's make-believe (where this is self-validating if A is the sole author), and A engages in that same make-believe. This account certainly explains the student's utterance of (1) in §3: (1) appears in the novel, and so is part of Pynchon's make-believe, and the student is deferring to Pynchon's authority in elaborating that make-believe. The correctness conditions derive fairly quickly from what is licensed by the joint presuppositions that engaging in Pynchon's make-believe impose of author and reader.

8.

However, a correct pseudo-assertion needn't be true. The truth-conditions for S are the ordinary truth-conditions on the Make-believe account. While those correspond to the correctness conditions for genuine assertions, and while the truth conditions surely show the relation of S to the presuppositions involved in the make-believe, whether those truth-conditions are in fact satisfied has no bearing on whether it is correctly pseudo-asserted. S may be correctly pseudo-asserted if S follows from, or is consistent with, a *presupposable* content; and I am inclined to think that actual fact places little constraint on what is presupposable in fictional contexts. Almost always, I am inclined to think, correct pseudo-assertions are in fact false.

In adopting this position I am running against a common theme in writing on fictional discourse. Many writers on this topic make the slide from the correctness of (1) to the thought that there must be something true about (1). The Operator theory makes this slide in the most direct way possible, by assigning to (1) a content, that of (2), which is plausibly true in a very straightforward sense. But other authors, more overtly favourable to a Make-believe account, still appear to feel the residual attraction of taking pseudo-assertions of (1) to involve some true content.

One notable example is Walton himself, who even after giving an elaborate account of make-believe, proceeds to give complicated 'paraphrases' of fictional discourse in order to assign some true content to sentences like (1) in addition to their overt semantic content involved in the pretence (Walton 1990, 401–2). A different strategy to the same end is pursued by Predelli, who considers interesting and

potentially troublesome cases like that of a history textbook which begins in this attention-grabbing style:

- (4) It is May 1940. Germany outflanks the Maginot line. Now, nothing stands between Hitler's troops and Paris. (Predelli, 1997, 72)

The indexical 'now' as it occurs in (4) must apparently be given a reading on which it refers not to the time of inscription, but rather to May 1940. If we now insist that indexical terms like 'now' have a semantic content fixed by some relevant context, then this 'dramatic' context seems to be the appropriate context for evaluation. Consideration of such sentences, and particularly the similarities between this dramatic textbook and more typical fictions, might drive one to the conclusion that indexicals in fictions derive their semantic value from non-standard contexts, not the context of utterance or inscription.

Predelli (1997, §4) uses this example as motivation for maintaining that in all fictional discourse the relevant context of evaluation to fix the semantic values, including truth value, is 'the world of the fiction'. He thus maintains that sentences like (1) are true simpliciter, because the appropriate world of evaluation is the world of *Mason & Dixon*, and not the actual world. If (1) had been asserted, the appropriate world would have been the actual world.

This goes too far. If Predelli is right, there is nothing distinctive about fictional discourse except these strange context-shifts: Pseudo-asserting *S* is asserting *S* with a non-standard context of evaluation. This model assimilates fiction to counterfactual biography, and cannot accommodate the intuition that fictional discourse has a role and point that is not constitutively tied to the role of assertion. And many of the problems for the replacement view recur: intuitively valid arguments where different premises may have different contexts of evaluation aren't guaranteed to be valid (Joyce), and nothing explains why we are concerned about an event of torture in fiction and yet unconcerned that torture is metaphysically possible (Yablo). This device of context shift is just a novel kind of replacement view, which keeps truth-conditions fixed but varies the world component. And this can lead to mystifying results if applied across the board: since (1) involves historical figures, it may well be actually false, and we should not want to ever say that (1) expresses a truth even when correctly pretended. Yet Predelli's view has the unappealing consequence that (1) is literally true when pseudo-asserted, yet has the same content as the false sentence (1) when asserted!

The ultimate motivation for this view is extremely suspect: it is simply the idea that utterances about fictions are 'apparently true' (Predelli, 1997, 69). This apparent truth is more easily explained by pointing to the temptation to slide from correctness to truth, and noting that claims like (1) are correct. Work remains to be done on the present account, particularly work explaining how indexicals pick up content from presuppositions in a way that makes sense of the content of (4). But this need for additional work is very weak grounds for adopting Predelli's context shifting machinery, particularly when my alternative explanation, that (1) is false but we make-believe that it is true, is much less revisionary and more plausible.

In the end, I think that Walton's and Predelli's desires to offer some true sentence that is related to the correctness of (1) stems from an ultimately misguided thought that mere correctness cannot be sufficient to explain the existence and persistence of fictional discourse. Yet as the example of presupposition clearly shows, false claims can be correctly made under a false presupposition, and understanding the role and importance of presupposition needn't invoke any contortions in defence of the idea that, somehow, the content of those false claims is nevertheless true (though there will of course be many true claims about which utterances are licensed by a given presupposition). I see no reason for a defender of a Make-believe account to saddle themselves with this additional constraint. Rather, they should happily acquiesce in the commonsense idea that fictional discourse has truth-conditions, and correctness-conditions, and the pragmatics of fiction means that these conditions diverge.

9.

The major problem for the present view arises when one considers the content of fictions involving purely fictional characters. (1), involving historical figures, has a straightforward semantic content. But non-historical fiction typically has *empty names*, and understanding the content of sentences with non-referring designators ('Esther Summerson', 'The Rainbow Serpent', 'Vulcan') is difficult in general.

Quite a bit of ink has been spilled on the problem of empty names specifically in fiction, and while such names provide good examples, I'm not convinced that there is any *special* problem of fictional empty names. As such, I don't propose to enter into this debate; I think that any account which can provide appropriate semantic values for empty names in scientific theories like 'Vulcan' can carry over to fictional names like 'James Bond', whether that account is Millian/Russellian, involving 'gappy propositions' as the objects of thought and providers of content (as in Braun 2005), or of a more descriptivist bent (Currie 1988). I think that one nice consequence of a Millian view is that the gappy propositions expressed by sentences with empty names are false, which concords with intuition, and with the truth of negative particular existentials. As long as the acceptable account gives the sentences in fiction some content that agents are able to take the make-believe attitude towards, and to presuppose and entertain, pretty much any account of the semantic value of empty names is compatible with the present pragmatic account of pseudo-assertion of those sentences containing such names.

One problem does arise on a particular view of fictional names, the *artefactual* view (Thomasson 1999), according to which fictional names denote abstract artefacts: fictional characters. Such a view proposes, of course, that 'empty' names are not empty at all, and so the content of fictional sentences may be fixed by their Millian constituents in a straightforward way. She supports her theory by appeal to sentences like

(5) James Bond is the most famous successful spy.

Such sentences do pose a problem for my view, as they seem to be acceptable without being correct (as it is *not* part of the Bond fiction that he be famous: he would hardly have been successful if he were). The best explanation of why (5) is acceptable is that

it is true, which seems to entail that ‘James bond is a spy’ is true, and this opens the door to the problematic views I rejected in §8.

Before jumping to this conclusion, we should think more about (5). If it does entail ‘James Bond is a spy’, that would appear to be because (5) is synonymous with:

(6a) James Bond is a successful spy **and**

(6b) for any distinct successful spy x , James Bond is more famous than x .

The artefactual view deals well with (6b), because the artefact James Bond does exist to stand in the comparative relationship to other existing entities. But I wonder at the ability of the artefactual view to deal with (6a), because while an abstract artefact might be famous, it surely cannot be a spy or indeed have any of the other properties James Bond is depicted as having. A naturally available way to understand the mixed coordination in (5) is that (6a) is made-believe; we pretend, following the James Bond fictions, that the fictional entity James Bond is a spy, even while recognising the second conjunct has to be dealt with in a different way. So the artefactual view needs pretence to understand the most straightforward claims about fictional entities.⁶

This picture seems to demand that (5) have a mixed interpretation, partly made-believe and partly asserted on the artefactual view. The acceptability of (5) is thus not a matter of its truth, and accepting it does not therefore entail a commitment to the content of (6a) in an objectionable way.

I could stop there, content with accepting the artefactual view as a candidate theory on which to understand fictional names. But since I do in fact think that one reason for adopting a pretence view is that it gives a way of giving literal meaning to sentences in fictions without taking those sentences seriously, I am reluctant to accept Thomasson’s preferred reading of (6b), namely that it refers to an abstract fictional entity JB and says something true of that thing. I think Thomasson’s objections to a pretence view of (6b) can be overcome,⁷ but I still need to sketch what a pretence view of (6b) might involve.

One view that might have legs here is that (6b) is made-believe as part of a *different* pretence: making-believe *that there are fictional entities*. Such games of make-believe depend on the existence of novels and texts, and in some cases on a shared referential intention to use the same name in different fictions as if it referred to the same object. The correctness of (6b) will depend on whether we appropriately

⁶ We should also note that make-believe is the only plausible way to understand historical novels: the artefactual theory plays no role because these historical characters were not created by the author. To render them roughly continuous with other sorts of fiction then requires that ordinary fictions have a significant make-believe component, as the present view advocates.

⁷ Thomasson’s objections to pretence views rest on the methodological offence of offering ‘different analyses of sentences of the same type ... just on the basis of the types of object they are purportedly about’ (99). Yet she violates this; insofar as one arguably should not extend the specific artefactual account of fictional entities indiscriminately to all empty names, she will be committed to giving different analyses to ‘Sherlock Holmes does not exist’ and (say) ‘Vulcan does not exist’.

pretend that there is a famous thing James Bond; insofar as the texts in which ‘James Bond’ appears are widely read, that pretence seems appropriate.⁸

Certainly more work needs to be done to fill out this account. Yet my main point has been established; there is no necessity to interpret (6a) as anything other than false, and there is some hope of analysing (5) as correct according to some suitably mixed make-believe. None of these objections show that a successful analysis of fictional discourse cannot be given which adopts truth-conditions wholesale from elsewhere, and assigns all of the distinctively fictional aspects of such discourse to the correctness conditions explained in terms of acceptable make-believe.

10.

Having described and defended the Make-believe theory of pseudo-assertion within fictions and in participatory criticism, let me return to the topic of explicitly descriptive criticism as exemplified in an utterance of (2). I think we can use our understanding of the role of participatory criticism to give an analysis of the ‘According to the fiction f ’ operator:

‘In the fiction f , S ’ is true iff any genuine telling of the fiction f requires making-believe that S .

Let me unpack this proposal. A ‘genuine telling’ is not a mere recitation of the content of the text; a computer that reads the text of *Madame Bovary* is not a genuine telling, though Flaubert’s original inscription does count, as does any suitably faithful translation. X is a ‘required’ part of the make-believe just in case X follows from the established authorial content of f ; in general, if X is entailed by the content of the sentences that constitute f . The basic idea is that every authorial pseudo-assertion of f involves making-believe that the minimal content f obtains; while some hearers may fail to get on the right content, and some pseudo-assertions may have content that goes beyond the minimal content of the fiction (perhaps when different audiences have different bits of background knowledge that need to be cancelled for them to be able to get onto the same fiction), nevertheless the standards for what is involved in the fiction are just what is minimally demanded of the content of a make-believe for it to be making-believe that the particular fiction f obtains.

Adopting the counterfactual account of the content of make-believe (§6), this comes out close to the idea that what is true in the fiction is what is true at all of the nearest worlds in which the fiction is fact.⁹ With this account of the operator, (2) turns out to be synonymous with

⁸ Brock (2002) defends a similar theory to fictional characters from within an Operator theory; for obvious reasons I prefer the Make-believe approach here.

⁹ This is not quite right; what we want is that the fiction hold at those worlds which are *typical* according to the fiction (Elga, 2004), so that all the nearest worlds to the world of the fiction are also like the world of the fiction. The appeal to typicality avoids that case where some part of a nearby world is manipulated in an ad hoc and contrived way to make the content of a fiction obtain there. What we want instead is that the fiction have a high chance of being true when considered as if the world of the fiction were actual.

- (7) Any genuine telling of the tale of *Mason & Dixon* requires making-believe that Mason at last came to admire Dixon for his bravery.

And of course whenever (7) is satisfied, it will be the case that (1) is appropriately pseudo-asserted in or about *Mason & Dixon*. We may now explain the appeal of the Operator theory: while (1) and (2) are not synonymous, it is the case that (1) is correct of *Mason & Dixon* iff (2*) is true. It is easy to see here why Lewis and others should have mistakenly thought that (1) simply had the truth conditions of (2).

11.

Does all this have any consequences for *fictionalism* in metaphysics? It does serve to establish that the linguistic mechanisms that fictionalism appeals to do exist: there are linguistic practices in natural language that resemble assertion, ascribe normal semantic content to sentences in them, and yet do not commit their utterers to that content.

But I'm sceptical about how much further mileage fictionalists can get out of this. The discussion above in fact makes difficulties for certain kinds of fictionalists like Rosen (1990), who offer explicit paraphrases for the content of 'problematic' discourse. The replacement theories of fictional content on which such paraphrase theories rest are in trouble if the arguments of §5 succeed. Insofar as the distinctive contribution of fictionalism was the possibility of giving a continuous semantics with the rest of language, such paraphrase replacement views look less and less like fictionalism.

The prospects for non-paraphrastic fictionalism, whether 'revolutionary' (Joyce 2005) or 'hermeneutic' (Yablo 2001) look more promising. Yet there seems no way to straightforwardly understand the problematic discourses of mathematics or modality as make-believe pseudo-assertions, whether explicitly adopted or implicitly used all along. It is spectacularly infelicitous to ask mathematicians to make-believe that $2+2=4$ as the foundation for number theory. And it is similarly bad to suggest that they have been pretending all along without knowing it.

The key to non-paraphrase fictionalism will come not from assimilating all problematic discourse to fictional discourse, but perhaps by understanding fictional discourse and pseudo-assertion in fiction as a species of a broader category of non-committal yet semantically continuous speech acts, such as Yablo's notion of *simulation* (2001, 90–1), which evolve and persist for different reasons depending on the point and use of the discourse practices in which they occur. The point and function of number discourse is quite different to that of fictional discourse; about the best we should have expected is a broad similarity in non-committal speech act. While it seems quite implausible that abstract objects (numbers and possible worlds) that give the semantic content of mathematical and modal discourses actually had a role in causing the discourses to arise or explaining their persistence, the correct story of what did in fact cause them to arise, and how they came to have the semantic content they do, must go far beyond merely stating that the declarative utterances in those discourses are pseudo-assertions. The role that specifically fictional discourse

plays in understanding fictionalist metaphysics is probably going to be a relatively minor one.¹⁰

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¹⁰ More or less distant ancestors of this material were presented at RSSS, ANU; McGill; NYU; and Oriel College Oxford; thanks to those audiences, and the audience at the Aristotelian Society, for helpful discussion, and Richard Joyce for useful written comments.

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