The poet affirmeth

Emanuel Viebahn

July 2024

Abstract

This paper is concerned with fictive utterances, the authorial utterances that make up works of fiction. It is widely held that fictive utterances cannot be constative speech acts, such as assertions. Instead, fictive utterances are construed as pretended speech acts, as invitations to make-believe or as declarations. My aim is to challenge the non-constative consensus and to defend a view on which fictive utterances are constative speech acts after all, namely constatives that have a story as their target. I motivate the constative view by discussing works of fiction that feature plot twists. Some of these plot twists indicate that fictive utterances can carry assertoric commitment and can be lies, contrary to what is commonly assumed. And I spell out a version of the constative view that takes cues from Stalnaker's common ground account of assertion and the debate on commitment and responsibility in constatives.

1. Introduction

Which speech acts do authors perform in telling stories? What is it they do in producing fictive utterances, the utterances that make up works of fiction? Fictive utterances are puzzling. On the one hand, they often have the appearance of constative speech acts. For example, here are the opening sentences of Katherine Mansfield's short story *The Garden Party*:

> (1) And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it.

These are declarative sentences that, uttered outside a work of fiction, would standardly be used to perform a constative speech act, such as an assertion. On the other hand, it is commonly said that fictive utterances have properties that set them apart from constative speech acts.[1] Here are four of the most frequently mentioned differences:

Lack of informativity. Fictive utterances are not informative in the way constatives often are. Whereas a non-fictive utterance of (1) provides information about what the world is like, that is not the case if (1) is uttered fictively. As Antony Eagle notes, "we do not take sentences in novels to be attempts to describe reality" (2007: 125, see also Beardsley 1958: 423).

[1] Henceforth I will also use the simpler label *constative*. Constatives can be intuitively characterised as those speech acts that describe or report (Austin 1962: 5). The class of constatives includes (amongst others) the committal speech act of asserting and the non-committal speech act of suggesting (that something is the case).

Lack of commitment. Unlike many constatives, fictive utterances do not commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed content. If (1) is used to make an assertion, the speaker takes on a commitment to the weather having been ideal for a garden-party. But with her fictive utterance of (1), Mansfield incurs "no commitment whatever as regards its truth" (Searle 1975a: 323, see also García-Carpintero 2018: 450, Currie 2020: 19). Accordingly, fictive utterances are not challenged in the way constatives are ("Are you sure?", "How do you know?"), and authors are not held to account for their fictive utterances (Bergman & Franzén 2022).

Lack of insincerity. Assertions and other constatives can be insincere: they can be used to lie or to mislead. Such insincerity is not to be found with fictive utterances (see MacDonald 1954: 170, Searle 1975a: 323, Schnieder 2013: 17, Abell 2020: 56 and Stokke 2023). This thought is contained in Sir Philip Sidney's famous quote: "Now for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth" (Sidney 1595). More recently, Currie (1990: 37) has confirmed that "there is no firmer doctrine in the poetic tradition than the doctrine that fiction makers do not lie in the act of making fiction."

Creativity. Unlike constatives, fictive utterances are creative. They are used to create stories, plots and fictional characters (Searle 1975a: 330, Schiffer 1996: 157, Thomasson 1999: 7, Abell 2020: 34, Bergman & Franzén 2022). Creativity of this kind is not to be found with everyday constatives, such as assertions, which are meant to report, not create.

So fictive utterances lack three hallmarks of constative speech acts (the potential to be informative, committal or insincere) and they can be creative in a way constatives cannot be. These perceived differences have led to a broad consensus in philosophical research on speech acts in fiction: contrary to initial appearances, fictive utterances are not constatives. And the consensus has instigated a lively debate on what fictive utterances are if not constatives. Approaches in this debate see fictive utterances as (i) merely pretended speech acts, (ii) directive speech acts or (iii) declarations.

The aim of the present paper is to challenge the non-constative consensus. I will argue that characteristic fictive utterances *are* constative speech acts after all, namely constatives that have a story as their target. Authors use fictive utterances to assert or suggest what is the case in their story, in the same way as non-fictive utterances are used to assert or suggest what is the case in the world. The difference between fictive utterance and non-fictive utterances is thus not a difference in the kind of speech act performed, but rather a difference in the target of the speech act.

To make this plausible, I will begin by introducing the three aforementioned views of speech acts in fiction and their solutions to the puzzle fictive utterances present (Section 2). Then, I will look at examples of fictional works containing plot twists to show that two of the observed differences are merely apparent (Section 3). I will focus on what I call *revelatory plot twists*: plot twist that reveal that at least some of the previous fictive utterances have been insincere. In some cases, this insincerity is a matter of misleading, and in others it is a matter of lying. Revelatory plot twists thus show that the lack of insincerity-observation is mistaken. They also show that at least some fictive utterances are committal, *contra* the lack of commitment-observation. By calling into question these two apparent differences, revelatory plot twists provide a reason to reconsider the view that fictive utterances are constatives, after all. I will spell out a version of such a view based on Stalnaker's

common ground account of assertion and insights from the debate on commitment and responsibility in constatives (Section 4), and I will show why none of initial observations are a reason to reject the view (Section 5). Finally, I will consider implications for theorising about speech acts in fiction and beyond (Section 6).

Before I begin, however, a note on the scope of the non-constative consensus. Exactly which kinds of utterances in works of fiction are we concerned with here? Works of fiction consist not only of utterances that move along a story, such as (1). They also contain utterances that describe the background against which the story takes place, which, in many works of fiction, is meant to be historically accurate. Furthermore, they contain utterances that are meant to convey profound messages about the real world. Following Dixon (2022), I will refer to these kinds of utterances in works of fiction as *background utterances* and *profound utterances*, respectively. I will reserve the term *fictive utterance* for "those utterances involved in the production of works of fiction whose contents play a role in determining what is *fictional* in those works" (Abell 2020: 53, original emphasis).[2]

Here is an example of a background utterance discussed by Dixon (2022: 121):

(2) Jews in small towns were being rounded up and transported to work for the Germans. [...] Jews were no longer allowed to work and [...] their businesses had been confiscated. (Heather Morris: *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*)

And the beginning of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is probably the most famous example of a profound utterance within a work of fiction:

(3) All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. (Leo Tolstoy: *Anna Karenina*)

While it is widely held that fictive utterances, such as (1), cannot be assertions (or constatives of other kinds), theorists have argued for views on which background utterances and profound utterances *are* assertions. For example, Walton (1983: 80) and Dixon (2022) argue that both background utterances and profound utterances are assertions.[3] Taken together with the assumption that fictive utterances cannot be constatives, this leads to a view on which a work of fiction is "a patchwork of truth and falsity, reliability and unreliability, fiction-making and assertion" (Currie 1990: 49). I will return to this patchwork claim in Section 6, but for now my aim is to clarify that the non-constative consensus concerns fictive utterances, not background utterances or profound utterances in fiction. It is fictive utterances I will be concerned with in the next sections, unless I give an indication to the contrary.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that the debate about fictive utterances is about the speech acts *authors* perform in *telling stories*. This means, on the one hand, that utterances performed by a

[2] These utterances are also called *fictional statements*, see e.g. by Currie (1990) and Bergman & Franzén (2022). In some cases, the term *fictive utterance* is tied to a particular *theory* of such utterances. I intend to use it in a theory-neutral way, so as to pick up utterances such as (1), regardless of how they are theoretically captured.

[3] Currie (1990: 49) and Abell (2020: 41) defend views on which background utterances are assertions. See Marsili (2023) for an opposing view on which neither background utterances nor profound utterances are treated as assertions.

character within a story, or by a narrator of a story, are not the primary focus. What matters is the telling *of* the story, rather than what is said *within* the story. Of course, authors commonly tell stories through their characters, but it is important to keep in mind that, even then, the words are penned by the author and it is the author who is responsible for them. On the other hand, the debate is not limited to a particular medium or genre of fiction. While central examples in the debate, as well as in this paper, stem from written novels, a theory of fictive utterances should also be able to account for the actions fiction-tellers perform in oral storytelling and drama, in comics and film, as well as in other formats and media.

2. Fictive utterances: existing views

We started with a puzzle: fictive utterances commonly have the appearance of constatives, but they seem to differ from them in many ways. There is a consensus on how *not* to solve the puzzle, namely by nonetheless taking fictive utterances to be constatives and somehow explaining the perceived differences. But there is no consensus on how to solve it instead. The three main views in contention construe fictive utterances as (i) pretended speech acts, (ii) directive speech acts or (iii) declarations. I will now briefly introduce these views and look at how they aim to solve the puzzle of fictive utterances.

A first and popular view of fictive utterances is the pretence view, which denies that fictive utterances are speech acts at all:

> **The pretence view** (MacDonald 1954, Searle 1975a, Lewis 1978, Thomasson 1999, Everett 2013, Recanati 2018, Predelli 2020 and many others):
> In producing fictive utterances, authors merely pretend to perform speech acts, such as assertions. Using Austin's (1962) terminology, fictive utterances involve locutionary acts, but no illocutionary acts.

With respect to our initial example, the pretence view says that Mansfield does not in fact perform any speech act in writing (1). She merely *pretends to assert* that the weather was ideal for a garden-party.

A second popular view of fictive utterances is the make-believe view, according to which fictive utterances ask the audience to make-believe the content put forward:

> **The make-believe view** (Currie 1985, 1990, Walton 1990, García-Carpintero 2013, 2018, Davies 2015 and many others):
> In producing fictive utterances, authors *ask* (or *invite* or *prescribe*) the audience to make-believe the contents of their utterances. Fictive utterances thus fall into the class of directive speech acts; they are close cousins of everyday orders, invitations or requests.

On this view, Mansfield's utterance of (1) asks the audience to make-believe that the weather was ideal for a garden-party.

The first two views are by far the most popular views in the debate on fictive utterances. But recently a third view has emerged, on which fictive utterances are declarations:

> **The declaration view** (Werner 2013, Abell 2020, Bergman & Franzén 2022):
> In producing fictive utterances, authors *stipulate* (or *declare*) the contents of their utterances. Fictive utterances thus fall into the class of declarations; they are close cousins of everyday declarations, such as baptising or marrying.

The declaration view entails that, by writing (1), Mansfield stipulates (or declares), and thus makes it the case, that it is true in the story that the weather was ideal for a garden party.

Each of these views comes in different versions, and much more would have to be said to provide a full account of them. But even with these brief outlines we can see how the views address the observed differences between fictive utterances and constatives, and thus how they are meant to solve the puzzle that fictive utterances seem to present.

To begin with, all three views entail that fictive utterances do not display the *informativity* and *commitment* found with constatives. If fictive utterances are merely pretended speech acts (such as pretended assertions), and if the audience is aware of this, there is no expectation of informativity, and the speaker incurs no commitment to the truth of the expressed content. For informativity and commitment to be present, the speaker would have to *actually perform* a constative speech act, not merely pretend to do so. If fictive utterances are construed as directives, they fail to be informative because the point of directives is to get others do something (Searle 1975b: 355), not to inform others; furthermore, because the point is not to inform, the speaker incurs no commitment to the truth of the expressed content. Similarly, the point of declarations is not to inform or report (Austin 1962: 5), but to bring about a change in the social world, so if fictive utterances are declarations, we should expect neither informativity nor commitment.

The absence of *insincerity* in fictive utterances is likewise predicted by all three views. This is particularly clear for the case of *lying*. It is standardly held that, in order to lie, speakers have to assert something they disbelieve (see e.g. Stokke 2018, Viebahn 2021). On all three views, fictive utterances fail to be assertions, so assuming the standard view of lying, they also fail to be lies. How about the possibility of *misleading* with fictive utterances? In standard cases of misleading discussed in the debate on insincerity, a speaker uses a constative (usually an assertion) to put forward something they believe to be true, and thereby suggests (usually by way of conversationally implicating) something they believe to be false. For example, upon being asked by Jack whether she finished the raspberry jam, Jill might misleadingly suggest that it was not her by asserting:

(4) I don't like raspberries.

Let us assume that Jill indeed does not like raspberries, but that she did finish the raspberry jam. Then (4) is misleading, but not a lie. By ruling out that fictive utterances are constatives, all three views predict that fictive utterances cannot be misleading in the way (4) and other standard cases of misleading are: the first step, the assertion of a content believed to be true, is missing.

This leaves the last perceived difference between constatives and fictive utterances: the latter appear to be creative, while the former do not. On this count, the declaration view seems to have an advantage over the other two views, as Bergman & Franzén (2022) argue. The declaration view sees fictive utterances as declarations, and thus as similar to marrying and baptising. Marrying and baptising are creative in that they bring about a change in social reality: they make it the case that a couple is married, or that an entity bears a name. If fictive utterances are construed as declarations, they can also be said to bring about a change in social reality: they make it the case that the contents expressed are true in the story. So, on this view, fictive utterance *are* predicted to be creative. By contrast, it is less clear how pretending to assert something or asking someone to imagine something is a creative activity. Adherents of the pretence view and of the make-believe view may be able to push back on this question. Indeed, they should, as I will argue below: we should not expect a theory of speech acts to account for how stories, plots or fictional characters are created. But for now, I want to shelve the matter and sum up the preliminary results of this section.

I have tried to bring out that all three existing views entail that fictive utterances are not informative, committal or insincere in the way constatives often are. Furthermore, initial impressions suggest that the declaration view predicts a difference in creativity between fictive utterances and constatives, while the pretence view and the make-believe view appear not to predict such a difference. The three views are thus in line with most or even all of the puzzling observations discussed above. But should that in fact count in their favour? That is not so clear, as I now want to argue by taking a closer look at the narrative phenomenon of a plot twist, which calls into question the perceived differences in insincerity and commitment.

3. Revelatory plot twists

Many fictional works contain plot twists: unexpected twists or turns that give a story a new direction or paint past parts of a story in a different light. Plot twists come in many shapes and forms, but here I want to focus on plot twists which make apparent that aspects or events of the story are different from what the readers were previously told or led to believe. I will label these *revelatory plot twists*, as they reveal that things are not as they seemed to be until the plot twist was reached. Revelatory plot twists require the readers to revise their beliefs about what is the case in a story.[4]

Revelatory plot twists matter here because in the build-up towards them we can find perhaps the clearest examples of insincere storytelling and thus of insincere fictive utterances. I will now argue that among these insincere fictive utterances there are some that are misleading and others

[4] Plot twist have not received much attention in either literary studies or philosophy, but see Aristotle (Poet. 1452a23–29) on reversal and surprises, Wilson (2006) on twists in film and Terlunen (2022) for an insightful discussion of many examples of revelatory plot twists from nineteenth-century fiction. Plot twists are sometimes discussed under the heading of *unreliable narration*. But plot twists and unreliable narration are distinct phenomena. There can be unreliable narration without a plot twist, e.g. if it is evident right at the beginning of a story that the narrator is unreliable. And there can arguably be plot twists without unreliable narration, e.g. if a plot twist is preceded by incomplete rather than insincere narration. For discussion of unreliable narration in the philosophy of fiction, see e.g. Currie (1995), Sainsbury (2014), Maier & Semeijn (2021) and Stokke (2023).

that are lies. These utterances call into question the assumption that fictive utterances cannot be insincere. And by comparing fictive utterances that are misleading with those that are lies, I will try to make apparent that fictive utterances can be committal, after all. Two of the four initial observations thus turn out to be mistaken.

3.1 Misleading fictive utterances

Let us first focus on the possibility of insincere fictive utterances. To find examples of *misleading* fictive utterances, we can turn to Agatha Christie's 1926 detective novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The novel is presented as the memoirs of the narrator, Dr James Sheppard, who assists retired detective Hercule Poirot in finding out who murdered Roger Ackroyd. For the most part of the story, it is strongly suggested that the culprit is to be found among the characters Sheppard is writing about. But the last chapters reveal that Sheppard himself is the murderer. At this point, the readers discover that things are not as they seemed: they have been led to believe that one of the other characters is the murderer, but in fact it was Sheppard.

There are many misleading fictive utterances leading up to the novel's plot twist. As an example, we can consider a passage in Chapter V, in which Sheppard and Ackroyd's butler smash through the locked door of the study to find Ackroyd dead in his chair, stabbed from behind. After the butler has left the room, Christie has Sheppard tell the readers:

> (5) I did what little had to be done. I was careful not to disturb the position of the body, and not to handle the dagger at all. No object was to be attained by moving it. Ackroyd had clearly been dead some little time.

With these utterances, Christie misleadingly suggests that Sheppard is not the murderer. Why else would he be careful not to handle the dagger? Why else would he say that Ackroyd had clearly been dead some little time?[5] But the second reading of the novel reveals how carefully crafted these fictive utterances are: although they strongly suggest that Sheppard is not the murderer, they do not rule out this possibility entirely. After all, it could be that Sheppard is careful not to handle the dagger and that he tells us that Ackroyd had clearly been dead some time *despite* himself being the murderer – and the plot twist reveals that this is indeed the case.[6]

In this way, Christie's fictive utterance of (5) is strikingly similar to Jill's misleading answer to Jack's question about who finished the raspberry jam:

> (4) I don't like raspberries.

Jill's answer strongly suggests that she did not finish the raspberry jam, but it does not rule out that possibility entirely. After all, it could be that she does not like raspberries but nonetheless finished

[5] Presumably, Christie in the first instance suggests that Sheppard hasn't previously handled the dagger and that he didn't previously know how long Ackroyd had been dead for, and *thereby* suggests that he is not the murderer. To keep things simple, I will in what follows focus on her suggestion that Sheppard is not the murderer.

[6] There is some faint foreshadowing of the actual fact of the matter in the first and third sentence of (5). But this foreshadowing is so faint that to most readers it only becomes apparent on the second reading of the novel.

the raspberry jam. Indeed, we know that this is what happened, so Jill tells Jack something she believes to be true to convey something she disbelieves. In the same manner, Christie uses the true fictive utterances of (5) in order to convey something she disbelieves. As mentioned, (4) is a text-book case of misleading, so there is good reason to see (5) as a case of misleading, too. Indeed, Christie's novel caused quite a stir because of its cunning misleadingness, as the following excerpt from a contemporary review illustrates:

> When in the last dozen pages of Miss Christie's detective novel, the answer comes to the question, "Who killed Roger Ackroyd?" the reader will feel that he has been fairly, or unfairly, sold up. (*The Scotsman* July 22, 1926: 2)

Of course, (5) differs from (4) and other everyday misleading utterances in several ways. For one thing, the addressees are misled about different things: Jack is misled about events in the actual world, while Christie's readers are misled about events in a story. For another, Christie not only misleads the readers, but also uncovers the deception later on, and this latter aspect is missing from many everyday cases of misleading. But the fact that Christie uncovers her deception does not make the original fictive utterance of (5) any less misleading and it does not turn it into a sincere utterance, just as a surprise birthday party does not stop previous utterances performed to keep the party a secret from being misleading or insincere. The intent to uncover the deception later on can *explain* or *excuse* a case of misleading, but it cannot unmake it as an instance of insincerity.[7]

In characterising (5) as misleading, I have highlighted an example of insincere storytelling. There are many stories featuring plot twists and misleading fictive utterances similar to (5). Indeed, there are entire genres built around these elements, such as the genre of *detective novels*, in which Christie as a major figure. But even if (5) is misleading, it seems clear that Christie and many other authors of detective novels are not lying. For most novels in this genre, the whole point is to mislead the readers *without* lying to them, and to then uncover the surprising truth in a revelatory plot twist. However, the build-up towards a revelatory plot twist can also involve lies, as I now want to argue.

3.2 Lying with fictive utterances

As an example of a novel featuring fictive utterances that are *lies*, let us consider the 1918 novel *Zwischen neun und neun* (*From nine to nine*) by Leo Perutz. The novel follows the main character, Stanislaus Demba, for a day as he stumbles through Vienna in a desperate search for money. The readers experience how, at 9 o'clock in the morning, Demba jumps from a window into a courtyard and briefly loses consciousness, only to pick himself up unharmed, continuing his chaotic hunt for money for another twelve hours. But on the very last pages it becomes clear that this is not at all what happens: all of the described events between 9 o'clock in the morning and 9 o'clock in the evening are merely Demba's hallucinations in the seconds before his death. The story's course of events thus turns out to be entirely different from what the readers are initially told. It takes up

[7] See Dynel (2021: 242) for related remarks, focussing on the case of film.

much less time than a day, and many of the events described by the third-person narrator never happened. Upon reaching the plot twist, readers thus have to radically revise their beliefs about the story.

For example, in Chapter 13 the narrator recounts how Demba tries to recover some money that has fallen into the hands of a man named Kallisthenes Skuludis. At one point, he is being pursued by Skuludis but narrowly manages to escape. Perutz tells the readers (through the third-person narrator):

> (6) Demba managed to escape by hopping onto a bus. Mr Skuludis stopped and sorrily gazed after Demba, shaking his head. He couldn't get involved in a chase with a bus. [Translation by the author of this paper.]

Upon finishing the book, however, the readers know that Demba was never chased by Skuludis, that he didn't escape by hopping onto a bus, and that Skuludis cannot have sorrily gazed after him. I think a strong case can be made that Perutz lies to his readers through fictive utterance (6) (and through many other utterances in the novel), only to then uncover his lies at the very end of the book.

To begin with, Perutz's fictive utterance of (6) can be described as insincere, as Perutz uses it to convey contents he disbelieves. Perutz's aim is to deceive his readers and to then uncover the deception later in order to achieve the surprise of the plot twist as the book draws to a close. In this sense, the insincere fictive utterance of (6) is similar to Christie's misleading fictive utterance of (5), which is likewise designed to achieve a surprise effect when Sheppard is revealed to be the murderer. But there are important differences between (5) and (6), which strongly suggest that Perutz is lying to his readers about the events of the story, and not merely misleading them.

A first difference can be brought out by attending to the manner in which Christie and Perutz mislead their readers: Christie is careful to offer her misleading utterances in a non-committal manner, while Perutz appears to take on commitment to the disbelieved contents he advances. This is apparent in the examples discussed above: through uttering (5), Christie *suggests* that Sheppard hasn't previously handled the dagger and that he didn't previously know how long Ackroyd had been dead for. But she does not take on commitment to these contents, as is noted by an anonymous author in the *New York Times Book Review* (18 July 1926), who states that "her non-committal characterization of [Sheppard] makes it a perfectly fair procedure". By contrast, Perutz uses (6) to straightforwardly and in a committal manner tell us about events he later reveals never to have happened. There is no indication whatsoever that the readers might be following Demba's hallucinations, nothing to weaken the force of his fictive utterances: Perutz "recounts Demba's story as reality" (Müller 2004: 218).

This difference is important, as commitment to disbelieved content is commonly seen as a hallmark of lying, and lack of commitment as a hallmark of misleading utterances. For example, Andreas Stokke (2018: 84) states that "lying involves commitment to the misleading information one conveys, whereas this type of commitment is avoided by utterances that are misleading but not lies" and Viebahn (2021: 291) argues that "liars take on a commitment that misleaders avoid". So,

if commitment indeed sets apart lies and misleading utterances, then it seems plausible that Perutz is lying to his readers, while Christie is merely misleading them.

A second piece of evidence for categorising Perutz's fictive utterances as lies can be brought out with the help of a diagnostic test that is widely accepted in the debate on how to define lying (cf. Stokke 2018: 89–91, van Elswyk 2020 and Viebahn 2021). According to the test, misleaders can consistently dismiss accusations of lying in a way in which liars cannot. For example, let us compare Jill's misleading utterance (4) with a case in which she utters the outright lie (7):

(4) I don't like raspberries.

(7) I didn't finish the raspberry jam.

If Jack later accuses Jill of lying ("Why did you lie to me about finishing the raspberry jam?"), then her misleading utterance of (4) permits a consistent dismissal along the following lines:

(8) I didn't claim that I didn't finish the raspberry jam. I merely claimed that I don't like raspberries, which is true.

By contrast, if she utters (7), then a consistent dismissal along these lines is not available. According to the diagnostic test, this supports the view that (4) is misleading, while (7) is a lie.

Now let us apply the test to the fictive utterances of Christie and Perutz.[8] If a reader accused them of lying in the run-up to their plot twists, how could they respond? Because of her careful and non-committal wording, Christie could offer consistent responses of the following kind:

(9) I didn't claim that Sheppard didn't murder Ackroyd. I merely claimed that he was careful not to handle the dagger and that Ackroyd had clearly been dead some little time, which is indeed true in the story.

In the case of *From nine to nine*, no such consistent responses can be given. Perutz does not merely suggest that Demba manages to escape from Skuludis by hopping onto a bus, he clearly claims (through the narrator) that this is what happens, only to later reveal the deceit. The diagnostic test thus provides a second reason to classify Perutz's fictive utterance of (6) as a lie, as well as Christie's fictive utterance of (5) as merely misleading.

Finally, the differences in how a plot twist is set up, either through misleading or through lying, are commonly taken to be aesthetically significant. Audiences tend to complain when a plot twist is set up through lies, and they positively comment on cases in which authors avoid lying. For example, contemporary reviewers praised *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* for its "technical cleverness" (*The New York Times Book Review*, 18 July 1926), as well as its "coherence [and] reasonableness" (*The Observer*, 30 May 1926). By contrast, the lack of coherence in *From nine to nine* has been seen as a flaw of the work, with Alfred Kerr (1923: 95) highlighting the "obvious dream-impossibility" and

[8] It is not at all unlikely that Christie and Perutz received such reactions from readers, as both works were immensely successful upon their release. What is more, *From nine to nine* was first published in weekly instalments in the newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt*, so there were many readers who were deceived for weeks about what actually happens in the story.

Müller (2004: 217) calling the final twist "disappointing". While these critics and theorists do not explicitly refer to the distinction between lying and misleading, this is exactly what their judgements seem to be tracking: if an author misleads the readers to set up a plot twist without lying, then they manage to avoid incoherencies in what they commit to with their fictive utterances; but if a plot twist is preceded by lies, then there are incoherencies between what the author commits to before the plot twist and what later is revealed as the real course of events.

In line with this observation, the different ways of setting up plot twists are sometimes put in terms of different kinds of insincerities. Famously, Alfred Hitchcock admitted lying to his viewers by including the so-called *lying-flashback* at the beginning of *Stage Fright* (1950):

> I did one thing in that picture, which I should never have done; to put in a flashback that was a lie. (Hitchcock & Truffaut 1962)

It has been argued that the lie should be ascribed to the film's *character* Johnny, from whose perspective the flashback is presented (Casetti & Bohne 1986), or to the *implied* maker of the film (Currie 1995: 27). But in view of the fact that Hitchcock owned up to the lie, it seems most plausible to hold that he (together with his crew) did indeed lie to the viewers, as is argued by Marta Dynel (2021: 241–242). Dynel also notes that the lying-flashback caused an "angry outcry from critics" (2021: 241); this reaction contrasts with the praise Hitchcock received for many of his films in which he sets up plot twists by cleverly misleading his viewers.

A similar sentiment and dislike of lying in setting up plot twists is found in the following remarks voiced by a writer and a film critic, respectively:

> I tend to dislike plot twists if I get the feeling the writer is being deliberately coy about sharing things that should be revealed in the narrative (or that the viewpoint character/characters should make a note of), or if they're misleading the reader in ways that make it feel like the author (or an external narrator) is lying to the reader. (Wagner 2016)

> A twist becomes a lie, then, when the film doesn't bother to provide its audience with the necessary tools to form a sensible theory in advance, or when the reveal completely collapses under the assembled weight of its own coincidences, improbabilities or outright contradictions of reality. They're frustrating to us because they represent collapses in a movie's internal logic […]. (Vorel 2016)

Once we attend to the distinction between different kinds of insincerities leading up to plot twists, there is thus good reason to see Perutz's fictive utterance as a lie, and not merely as misleading.[9]

[9] I thus disagree with Martinez (2007: 29), who states that Perutz misleads his readers, but does not "explicitly" lie to them. Martinez holds that Perutz is not lying because there is a sense in which the events described do occur in the story, namely as Demba's hallucinations. But this argument disregards the fact that the events are clearly not described *as* hallucinations, as Kerr (1923: 95) and Müller (2004: 218) highlight, and as Martinez (2007: 30) later acknowledges himself.

There are many other stories containing plot twists similar to that of *From nine to nine*. Another example presenting near-death hallucinations as reality is Ambrose Bierce's short story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1890). But revelatory plot twists preceded by fictive utterances that are lies need not involve hallucinations or dreams, as Vorel's (2016) collection of "films that make the jump from twist to lie" illustrates. As we have seen, the storytelling in such works of fiction is commonly criticised: audiences dislike being lied to, even about stories. But criticisable fictive utterances are nonetheless fictive utterances, and so there is good reason to reject both parts of the lack of sincerity-observation mentioned in the introduction: fictive utterances can be insincere, after all; and while some fictive utterances are merely misleading, others are outright lies.

3.3 Committal fictive utterances

So far, I have focused on the fact that some fictive utterances are insincere. But along the way I touched on the issue of commitment and highlighted that at least some fictive utterances are committal. I want to return to this point now to show that not only the lack of insincerity-observation should be rejected, but also the lack of commitment-observation. Bergman & Franzén put this observation as follows (also see Searle 1975a: 323, García-Carpintero 2018: 450 and Currie 2020: 19):

> [A] salient feature of fiction-making is that it does not commit the author to the truth of the sentence uttered. Someone who knows that Tolkien is engaged in pure fiction-making […] in writing ["In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."] would not hold him accountable for having uttered a falsehood. (Bergman & Franzén 2022: 14)

In voicing this observation, theorists commonly work with an intuitive understanding of *commitment*, without specifying explicitly which kind of commitment is lacking in fictive utterances. But the general idea seems to be that fictive utterances do not engender the same kind of *responsibility* as non-fictive utterances, which fits e.g. with Bergman & Franzén's remark on accountability (see also Searle 1975a: 322–323). One way to make this idea more precise, proposed e.g. by Charles Sanders Peirce (1934), Searle (1975b) and Robert Brandom (1983), is that in committing oneself to a content p, one takes on a responsibility to justify p if challenged. I will follow suit in working with an intuitive understanding of commitment for now, but will discuss a more precise characterisation below.[10] Following the discussion of the novels by Christie and Perutz, there are three things to say about this observation.

[10] One final remark on the matter: communicative commitment is sometimes seen as all or nothing (Brandom 1983, MacFarlane 2011, Viebahn 2021), and sometimes as gradable (Searle 1975b). To keep things simple, and following parlance in the debate on fictive utterances, I will adopt the former stance here: either a speaker takes on a commitment to a content expressed, or they do not. But nothing hinges on this choice, and the points of this paper could also be made with the help of a gradable notion of commitment. In that case, the observation (which I hope to show is mistaken) is that fictive utterances do not engender *full* commitment to the content expressed.

Firstly, while there are some fictive utterances that are non-committal, such as Christie's utterance of (5), there are others that are committal, such as Perutz's fictive utterance of (6). This difference in commitment is particularly salient with insincere fictive utterances, but can also be found with sincere fictive utterances. Even without a looming plot twist, there are some events or aspects of stories authors hint at or suggest, thus avoiding commitment, and others which they put forward in a committal manner. What is important here is that the commitment concerns *stories*, not actual events or states of affairs. Perutz takes on a commitment to Demba escaping Skuludis by hopping onto a bus *in the story*, not to this having actually happened. But a commitment to events having taken place in a story is nonetheless a commitment, as the comparison of Christie's and Perutz's fictive utterances illustrates.

Secondly, authors sometimes *are* held accountable for recounting in a committal manner events that later turn out not to be a part of a story. That is what the critics seem to be doing in criticising Perutz for presenting Demba's struggles as reality, only to later reveal that they are hallucinations. Of course, the *way* in which authors are held accountable is different from the way in which producers of non-fictive utterances are held accountable. But that is just as should be expected, as a false commitment about what is the case in a story may be disappointing or aesthetically subpar, but rarely has bad real-world consequences.

Thirdly, the foregoing explains why we do not hold Tolkien accountable for having uttered a falsehood. Even though Tolkien's fictive utterance of "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," does seem to be committal, there is no reason to believe that it is insincere. There is no plot twist that reveals that Tolkien was misleading or lying to his readers, and the rest of *The Hobbit* indeed confirms that there is a hobbit living in a hole in the ground (in the story).

Fictive utterances with which authors commit to something being the case in a story thus provide a reason to reject the lack of commitment-observation. I suspect that many of those ruling out commitment in fictive utterances would actually accept that authors *can* be committed to something being the case *in a story*. What they wish to deny is that, through fictive utterances, authors can be committed to something being the case *outside a story, in the world*.[11] I believe that fictive utterances can be committal in this latter way, too, e.g. when a story is presented as a true story or as based on true events. But arguing for such commitment is beyond the scope of this paper. For present purposes it suffices that fictive utterances can engender commitment about something being the case in a story, for, as mentioned above, this is commitment, too.

3.4 Authors and narrators

While the current section is getting rather long, I still want to take the time to address an objection that some readers might be drawn to. According to this objection, it is *narrators*, not authors, who are insincere in the examples discussed and who either take on or avoid commitment. Sheppard, rather than Christie, misleads the readers in a non-committal way in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. And in *From nine to nine*, it is the nameless third-person narrator, rather than Perutz, who puts forward falsehoods in a committal way and thus lies to the readers. Given that the debate about

[11] This point is made explicit e.g. by Marsili (2023).

fictive utterances concerns the actions of *authors*, not narrators or fictional characters, the objection continues, the examples provide no reason to hold that fictive utterances can be misleading or lies, and no reason to hold that they can be committal.

I see the initial pull of such an objection, but there are several reasons why it should be resisted. Firstly, stating that the examples feature insincere and/or committal narrators does nothing to show that the same examples do not also feature insincere and/or committal authors. For example, everything I have said about Christie being insincere in a non-committal way in the run up to the plot twist is compatible with her narrator Sheppard *also* being insincere in a non-committal way. Indeed, it seems plausible that Christie misleads her readers by telling the story through a character-narrator who produces many misleading utterances. So an argument that identifies insincerity and possibly commitment in narrators of a work of fiction is in itself not an argument against insincerity or commitment of an author of a work of fiction.

Secondly, the arguments provided above are concerned with what authors do in telling stories. So, if they show anything, they do not merely show that the examples involve some kind of fictive insincerity or commitment, but rather that *authors* sometimes produce insincere and committal fictive utterances. For instance, they bring out that *Christie* is praised for misleading her readers without lying to them, for her non-committal and fair way of setting up the plot twist. And they show that *Perutz* is criticised for describing Demba's hallucinations in a committal way as reality. These observations cannot be explained away by pointing to the respective narrators. It would simply be mistaken to say that Sheppard is praised and Perutz's narrator is being criticised for the way in which the story is told – the praise and criticism is clearly (and rightly) aimed at the authors, the producers of fictive utterances.

Thirdly, for those unsatisfied by the first two rejoinders, it would be possible to make the arguments of this section by focussing only on examples of stories that either lack a narrator or feature several narrators. The first possibility is highlighted by Currie (1995), who argues that there are films without a narrator. Such works of fiction can contain revelatory plot twists and insincere fictive utterances leading up to them, as is illustrated by David Fincher's *The Game* (1997). Vorel (2016) holds that the makers of this film lie to the viewers in setting up the plot twist, yet there is no narrator who could be blamed for this insincerity. Multiple narrators are found in many works of fiction, with the historical novel *An Instance of the Fingerpost* by Iain Pears being a good example. Pears's story is told through four distinct narrators, each of whom offers a different perspective on the goings on. The story contains several plot twists with preceding misleading storytelling, but the misleadingness cannot be pinned to one of the four narrators. So even if it could be argued that some examples of insincerity and commitment in fictive utterances should be ascribed to the narrator, rather than the author, this strategy would face difficulties with works of fiction that either lack a narrator or feature several narrators.

Overall, it thus seems unlikely that the lack of sincerity-observation and the lack of commitment-observation can be saved by appealing to the distinction between author and narrator. Whatever can be said about cases of insincerity or commitment by narrators, there will always be the question about whether the *author* is insincere and possibly committal in producing fictive

utterances. And while there are many cases in which authors are neither insincere nor committal in telling stories, I hope to have given reason to doubt that they are always sincere and non-committal.

3.5 Departing from the non-constative consensus

As mentioned, there is a consensus among theorists that fictive utterances are not constative speech acts. There are two ways in which insincere and committal speech acts leading up to revelatory plot twist motivate a departure from this consensus.

Firstly, by illustrating that fictive utterances can be used to mislead or lie, and that they can be committal, they remove two of the main reasons to hold that fictive utterances cannot be constatives. Constatives have as their hallmarks that they can be used to mislead or lie and that they can be committal. And now a closer look at fictional works containing revelatory plot twists has shown that this insincerity and commitment is found with fictive utterances, too. Of course, I have not shown that *all* or even *most* fictive utterances are committal, or that they are used to mislead or lie, merely that *some* of them are. But the same holds for constatives outside works of fiction, which are not insincere or committal across the board: many non-fictive constatives are sincere; and the class of constatives contains both committal speech acts, such as assertions, as well as non-committal ones, such as suggestions or conjectures. So, when it comes to insincerity and commitment, there is no reason to rule out the possibility of fictive utterances being constatives.

What about the other two reasons not to see fictive utterances as constatives: the lack of informativity-observation and the creativity-observation? I will return to these shortly, highlighting that a lack of informativity is compatible with fictive utterances being constatives, and arguing that the creativity observation should be rejected. All in all, I will thus argue that the puzzle presented by the initial observations is merely apparent and dissolves upon closer scrutiny.

There is a second way in which the examples of this section suggest a new take on fictive utterances: they do not sit well with the existing views of fictive utterances introduced above. As we have seen, the pretence view, the make-believe view and the declaration view entail that fictive utterances cannot be lies and cannot be committal in the way constatives can be. For instance, given the standard assumption that a lie is a disbelieved assertion, all three views rule out the possibility of lying with fictive utterances, as they entail that authors do not perform assertions in producing fictive utterances. So the apparent possibility of fictive utterances that are lies is a piece of evidence that speaks against these three views and in favour of reconsidering the view that fictive utterances are constatives. Let us now see how such a view could be spelled out.

4. Fictive utterances as constative speech acts

Fictive utterances often have the appearance of constative speech acts. The constative view takes this appearance at face value:

> **The constative view of fictive utterances:**
> In producing fictive utterances, authors characteristically perform constative speech acts, such as assertions or suggestions. These constatives have a story as their *target*, unlike everyday constatives that have the actual world as their target.

So, on the constative view, Mansfield uses the fictive utterance (1) to assert that the weather was ideal for a garden-party, where this assertion has the story *The Garden Party* as its target. Christie uses (5) to assert (amongst other things) that, according to Sheppard, he was careful not to handle the dagger. Thereby she also performs the weaker constative speech act of suggesting that Sheppard isn't the murderer. Both Christie's assertion and her suggestion have *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* as their target. Finally, Perutz uses (6) to (insincerely) assert that Demba managed to escape Skuludis by hopping onto a bus, with *From nine to nine* being the target.[12]

What does it mean for a constative, such as an assertion, to have a story as its target? The answer to this question depends on which view of assertion and other constatives is in the background. A good place to start is Stalnaker's (1999, 2002) influential account of the essential effect of assertion, according to which an assertion is a proposal to update the common ground of the conversation. The common ground is a "body of information that is presumed to be shared by the participants in the conversation" (Stalnaker 1999: 6), to which information is added as the conversation proceeds. For example, I might presume that it is shared in our conversation that Paul has been recording a new album, and then assert that he has finished the album. In doing so, I propose to add the content that Paul has finished the album to the common ground; if no participant in the conversation objects, my proposal is successful and the content that Paul has finished the album becomes part of the common ground.

Recently, Regine Eckardt (2014: Chapter 3), Merel Semeijn (2021) and Andreas Stokke (2023) have applied Stalnaker's approach to the case of fictive utterances.[13] The general idea is that fictive utterances used to tell a story are proposals to update a body of information, much like non-fictive utterances are proposals to update the conversational common ground. Eckardt highlights that a

[12] Note that the view is that fictive utterances are *characteristically* constative speech acts, thus leaving room for fictive utterances that are not constative speech acts. In this way, the view can accommodate the whole range of storytelling techniques, which goes beyond the examples of declarative fictive utterances considered so far. For example, if an author *breaks the fourth wall* and directly addresses her readers with a question, she is clearly not performing a constative, but rather a directive speech act.

[13] Also see Kölbel (2013: 127–129), who emphasises the linguistic parallels between fictive and non-fictive utterances and briefly sketches a version of an assertion view of fictive utterances based on Stalnaker's approach. Quilty-Dunn (2015) proposes a view of how viewers *experience* cinematic fiction that is in some ways similar to the view defended here.

common ground between author/narrator and audience can be present upon picking up a novel, which is then updated:

> Even at the beginning of a story, reader and author/narrator share *some* information. Apart from speaking the same language, the author/narrator will rely on shared information about the physical laws of the world, cultural institutions and practices, social environments, and much more […]. Adjusting the common ground is part of the reader's activity when reading fiction. (Eckardt 2014: 66, original emphasis)

Similarly, Stokke argues that the narrator's utterances can be construed as proposals to update a body of information:

> In reading or hearing a fictional story, a cache of information is incremented with what the narrator makes explicit and through various other means, including conversational implicatures, presupposition accommodation, and other mechanisms. In turn, the audience draws on this information to make sense of the story. (Stokke 2023: 3103)

I want to use this idea to spell out what it is for an *author* to perform an assertion that has a story as its target: it is to propose to update a body of information *about what is the case in a story*. I will label such a body of information a *story common ground*, and I will use a subscript to indicate which story is at issue: for example, Agatha Christie's fictive utterance of (5) is a proposal to update the story common ground$_{\text{The Murder of Roger Ackroyd}}$. Story common grounds thus work like conversational common grounds, but while the latter are bodies of information about the world, the former are bodies of information about a story.

There are obvious differences between the ways typical conversational common grounds and typical story common grounds evolve. Conversational common grounds often evolve through contributions by different speakers in a face-to-face exchange, while the storyteller and audience often are not in direct contact and proposed updates to a story common ground are more one-sided, stemming only from a single author (or group of authors). But these differences are not always present. On the one hand, proposed updates to conversational common grounds can happen without face-to-face exchanges and in a one-sided manner, e.g. through sending a long email or publishing an extended factual report. On the other hand, a story common ground can evolve in a more conversational manner, with oral storytelling offering good examples: at the campfire, several authors can propose to update the story common ground, and the audience can ask questions or object to improbable turns of events.[14] So the differences between typical cases should not be seen as a reason against applying Stalnaker's approach to fictive utterances.

[14] Another example of updating a story common ground in a more diverse fashion is offered by *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, where the reader can influence the course of the plot. Note also that even in reading a traditional novel, readers have some control over how the story common ground evolves, as it is their decision whether they accept the proposed updates and whether they read on at all.

While my approach follows the general idea of Eckardt, Semeijn and Stokke, it is worth pointing out some important differences. Eckardt (2014: 66) is concerned with how the *author/narrator* proposes to update the common ground. And Stokke talks only of the *narrator* in defining his notion of a *fictional record*, which is the body of information updated as a story is told. A fictional record of a story s for an audience A is "the set of propositions p such that all members of A believe that p is true according to the narrator of s" (Stokke 2023: 3104). By contrast, the narrator does not feature in my construal of a story common ground, for two reasons. Firstly, the aim of this paper is to capture what *authors* do in telling stories, not to investigate the utterances of narrators. Do authors perform constatives in telling stories? Do they sometimes lie or mislead? As mentioned, these questions are compatible with different views on how the utterances of narrators are to be analysed. Secondly, an approach based on narrators seems to run into trouble with works of fiction that either lack a narrator or feature several narrators. Even if a work of fiction lacks a narrator, it seems possible to apply Stalnaker's approach and analyse the fictive utterances as proposals to update a common ground. But it is not immediately clear how Stokke's narrator-based construal could account for such a case. Similarly, Stokke's account at least needs updating to capture works of fiction in which it is wrong to speak of *the* narrator as there are several narrators in play (as in *An Instance of the Fingerpost* by Iain Pears, mentioned above).[15] For these reasons, the story common ground is not connected to a narrator and instead is differentiated from a conversational common ground by being *about* a story, rather than about the world.

A further difference concerns the possibility of asserting and lying with fictive utterances. It is not the aim of Eckardt, Semeijn or Stokke to argue that authors can assert or lie with their fictive utterances. Indeed, Semeijn's aim is to show how the language of fiction differs from "non-fictional but related language uses such as assertion and lying" (Semeijn 2021: 2). Similarly, Stokke sees the proposals to update a fictional record as "non-assertoric speech act" (Stokke 2023: 3100) and he states that "fiction and lying are mutually exclusive categories" (Stokke 2023: 3116). This outlook may have to do with the fact that Eckardt, Semeijn and Stokke are not concerned with the difference between committal and non-committal fictive utterances.

On a different matter, I fully agree with Stokke (2023: 3102–3104), who emphasises that we have to keep apart what is true in the fiction and what is true according to the common ground of a story (which, as mentioned, Stokke calls a *fictional record* and I call a *story common ground*).[16] We have seen several examples where these two things come apart above. For example, according to the story common ground$_{\text{Zwischen neun und neun}}$ following Perutz's fictive utterance of (6), it is true that Demba was chased by Skuludis and escaped by hopping onto a bus. But it is not true in *Zwischen neun und neun* that Demba was ever chased by Skuludis and escaped by hopping onto a bus; rather,

[15] In discussing cases of third-person narration, Stokke (2023: 3108) says that "one can think of the fictional record […] as the audience's picture of what is true according to the author *qua* narrator". This thought might be extended further by allowing for cases in which the fictional record corresponds to what the audience takes to be true *according to the author*.

[16] For discussion of truth in fiction, see e.g. Lewis (1978), Predelli (1997), Bonomi & Zucchi (2003) and Woodward (2011).

it is true in the story that at that point Demba had died. This possible divergence underlies insincere fictive utterances, where the author asserts or suggests something they believe to be false in the story.

I hope the foregoing clarifies at least somewhat the constative view of fictive utterances and what it is for a speech act to have a story as its target: it is to be a proposal to update a story common ground, where a story common ground is a body of information about a story. But the common ground account is not meant to capture all aspects of assertion (and other constatives), as Stalnaker remarks:

> I should emphasize that I am not claiming that one can *define* assertion in terms of a context-change rule, since that rule will govern speech acts that fall under a more generic concept. A full characterization of what an assertion is would also involve norms and commitments. (Stalnaker 2014: 89, original emphasis).

Accordingly, the common ground account of assertion does not suffice to fully spell out the constative view of fictive utterances. Other approaches to constatives have to be brought in to capture the normative aspects of fictive utterances and to distinguish between committal and non-committal fictive utterances. For that purpose, I will now show how the constative view can be further fleshed out by incorporating insights from the debate on commitment and responsibility in constative speech acts.[17]

As mentioned above, the commitment account of assertion entails that, in asserting a content p, the speaker takes on a particular kind of communicative commitment to p being the case, which is commonly spelled out as taking on a responsibility to justify p if challenged (Peirce 1934, Searle 1975b, Brandom 1983). Only minimal modifications are needed to extend this view to fictive utterances that are assertions. The idea, hinted at above, is that in performing fictive utterances that are assertions (henceforth *fictive assertions*), authors take on a communicative commitment to p being the case *in the story that is the target of the utterance*. For instance, in performing the fictive assertion (6), Perutz takes on a commitment to it being the case in *Zwischen neun und neun* that Demba was chased by Skuludis and escaped by hopping onto a bus. If this commitment is spelled out in terms of justificatory responsibility, Perutz takes on a responsibility to justify if challenged that it is the case in *Zwischen neun und neun* that Demba was chased by Skuludis and escaped by hopping onto a bus.

One might think that such a way of spelling out communicative commitment is unsuitable for fictive utterances in novels, as the author is rarely going to be challenged and thus will rarely have to make good on the justificatory responsibility incurred. But whether authors are indeed challenged is immaterial to whether they have incurred the justificatory responsibility in question. And, furthermore, we have seen that it is in fact not that rare that authors are criticised for taking on a justificatory responsibility they could not have fulfilled – Perutz and *Zwischen neun und neun* being a case in point. Furthermore, once we take into account the whole range of kinds of storytelling,

[17] While I will focus on accounts that focus on assertion and commitment, one could equally well take the norm of assertion debate as starting point here. For considerations on the norms of fictive utterances, though with an emphasis of how these *differ* from the norms of constatives, see e.g. García-Carpintero (2013) and Kölbel (2010: 127–129).

including oral storytelling, there are many situations in which authors are indeed challenged upon taking on a communicative commitment. For example, if a storyteller at a campfire fictively asserts something that is deemed to be exceedingly unlikely in the story at issue, this will lead to challenges similar to those in everyday conversation ("Are you sure that's what happened?").[18] Finally, the constative view of fictive utterances is of course compatible with other ways of spelling out the notions of communicative commitment and responsibility, and I have chosen the current approach mainly to have a concrete proposal on the table that can serve as basis for further discussion.

How about non-committal fictive utterances, such as Agatha Christie's use of (5) to misleadingly suggest that Sheppard isn't the murderer? One way to go here is to hold that, although Christie takes on a justificatory responsibility to Sheppard not being the murderer in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, this justificatory responsibility is weaker than that taken on with a committal fictive utterance (Viebahn 2021). For example, one could say that while Perutz with (6) takes on a responsibility to justify that he *knows* that the content of his fictive assertion is the case in *Zwischen neun und neun*, Christie merely takes on a responsibility to justify that she stands in a weaker epistemic relation (such as belief) to the content of her fictive suggestions being the case in in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.[19] Again, this is but one of several options, and the overall idea is that approaches to account for *non-fictive* constatives of different strength can be straightforwardly adapted to capture *fictive* constatives of different strength.

So, by combining the common ground account with insights from the debate on commitment and responsibility in constatives, we can offer a more nuanced version of the constative view of fictive utterances. The general idea is that characteristic fictive utterances are constatives, such as assertions and suggestions, that have a story as their target. Building on the common ground account of assertion, we can also say that characteristic fictive utterances are proposals to update a story common ground, which is a body of information that evolves like a conversational common ground but that is about a story. The notions of commitment and responsibility can then be used to distinguish between fictive utterances of different strength (i.e. proposals of different strength to update the story common ground): fictive assertions involve communicative commitment, and thus a strong justificatory responsibility, while fictive suggestions avoid commitment, but nonetheless come with a weaker justificatory responsibility; in both cases, the justificatory responsibility is about something being the case in the story at issue. The explanation of what it is to perform a constative that has a story as its target can thus also be based on the notion of justificatory responsibility: it is to take on a justificatory responsibility about something being the case in the story at issue.

[18] To be sure, challenges calling in question the *knowledge* of the fictive asserter ("How do you know that's what happened?") will rarely be issued, but that can be explained by the privileged first-person access an author has to their story (if they are indeed telling their own story). Similarly, everyday assertions based on privileged first-person access ("I have a headache.", "I firmly remember packing the book.") are rarely challenged with "How do you know?".

[19] Recall that I am working with a notion of communicative commitment this is all or nothing; if one adopts a gradable notion of commitment, one could also say that the commitment in fictive assertions is stronger than that in fictive suggestions.

Here is one more way to summarise the constative view of fictive utterances and to perhaps highlight its intuitive applicability. Consider the novel as a central kind of fiction. The first pages of a novel typically provide the following four pieces of information: author, title, indication of fictionality ("novel", "This is a work of fiction,") and publisher.[20] On the constative view, the first three pieces of information tell the readers everything they need to know in engaging with the (mainly constative) utterances that make up the work. The indication of fictionality tells them that the utterances are targeted at a story. The title tells them which story is at issue. And the author name tells them who produced the utterances. Similar information is provided with other kinds of fiction (plays, films), and even if it is not provided, audiences are aware that this is how things *typically* work. The constative view thus not only takes the (commonly constative) appearance of fictive utterances at face value, but also meshes well with the information typically provided to readers at the beginning of a story.

The foregoing is a first suggestion as to how the constative view of fictive utterances might be spelled out. Much more would have to be said to fill in the details and to argue for a particular version of the constative view.[21] But I hope that the sketch I have provided is concrete enough to evaluate how the constative view fits with the initial observations about fictive utterances and with my subsequent discussion of some of these observations.

5. Accounting for the initial observations

Let us begin with the observation that fictive utterances lack informativity: unlike everyday constatives, they do not provide information about what the world is like. It is easy to see that the constative view is very much in line with this observation. Fictive utterances are targeted at a story, and so we should not expect them to (directly) provide information about the world. Things are complicated by cases of stories based on actual events or true stories, where fictive utterances might be taken to be indirectly informative about the world. The constative view can account for such indirect informativity by highlighting that there can be overlap between what is true in the story

[20] Interestingly, conventions differ as to where exactly the indication of fictionality is provided. German novels uniformly contain the word "novel" on the title page, while English novels usually mention "This is a work of fiction," on the copyright page, which is usually the verso of the title page.

[21] One important question concerns the difference between fictive utterances and utterances about works of fiction outside a storytelling context. For example, what sets apart Tolkien's utterance of "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," from a reader's utterance of "In *The Hobbit*, a hobbit lives in a hole in the ground"? Here, I can only gesture towards a preliminary answer: Tolkien's utterance is a proposal to update the story common ground$_{\text{The Hobbit}}$, while the reader's utterance is a proposal to update a conversational common ground, which includes information about *The Hobbit*, but also includes other information. In discussing non-storytelling utterances about works of fiction that do not make explicit that they are about works of fiction (such as "Sherlock Holmes lives at 221B Baker Street"), Predelli (1997), Recanati (2000, 224–226) and Reimer (2005) have defended views that fit well with the constative view of fictive utterances. On these views, such utterances must be evaluated as true or false with respect to the world of the story at issue, which explains why "Sherlock Holmes lives at 221B Baker Street" is intuitively true in a conversation about Arthur Conan Doyle's stories. For criticism of these views, see e.g. García-Carpintero (2021: 137; 2023: 611–612).

and what is true in the world. A label such as *true story* posits significant overlap of this kind, and can thus enable the audience to receive information about the world by engaging with speech acts targeted at a story.

Then there are the observations about insincerity and commitment. I have argued that, contrary to what is often claimed, fictive utterances can be insincere (they can be misleading or even lies) and committal – even though most fictive utterances are indeed sincere and many are non-committal. My arguments for these revised observations were intended as a motivation for reconsidering the constative view, and so the view of course the view fits with them. One point that is possibly worth mentioning here is that adopting the constative view allows us to retain the standard view of lies as disbelieved assertions even in view of the possibility of lying with fictive utterances. Given the popularity of the view that lies are disbelieved assertions, and to the extent that my arguments for lying with fictive utterances are convincing, this could be a plus for the constative view.

Finally, there is the creativity-observation, according to which fictive utterances are creative in a way constatives are not. The declaration view seems best-suited to account for this observation, while the constative view offers no immediate explanation of this perceived creativity, just as might be argued for the pretence view and the make-believe view. However, that should not be seen as a downside of the constative view (and neither of the pretence view and the make-believe view), as I will now argue.

Do we really want a theory of speech acts in fiction to account for the creation of stories, plots and fictional characters? That, firstly, depends on whether stories, plots and fictional characters are created in the first place. Here it is worth emphasising that although some metaphysicians accept that such entities are created, Platonists deny this, as they hold that stories, plots and fictional characters exist eternally.[22] The creativity-observation will thus be seen as mistaken or merely apparent by theorists with Platonist leanings. Given that the metaphysical jury on whether fictional characters are created is still very much out, it would be unwise to give weight to this observation in choosing a theory of speech acts in fiction.

Secondly, even if, for the purpose of argument, we do accept that stories, plots and fictional characters are created, it is questionable whether *fictive utterances* play a role in this creative process. The problem here is that the apparent time of the creation need not coincide with the time of any fictive utterance. Consider a case in which an author spends one day devising a short story, thinks it through in detail and, at the end of the day, makes a decision on exactly what is true in the story. The next day, she writes down the story and emails it to a friend. If we assume that the author did create the story, its plot and its fictional characters, *when* did the creation take place? One answer, which I (and many of those I have talked to) find plausible is: on the first day. But the author's fictive utterances (we can assume) take place only on the second day when she writes or emails the sentences that make up the story. So, even if one does have the intuition that authors create stories, plots and fictional characters, this need not be an intuition that they do so *with their fictive utterances*. And although the present example is very much simplified, it does not seem to be unusual in featuring a gap between the time of the creative thinking process and the time of the fictive

[22] See Brock (2010) on the metaphysical debate on whether fictional characters are created.

utterances: for instance, novelists tend to go through all sorts of preparatory steps before they decide to write the fictive utterances that make up the story, and even in producing those final words there is usually a gap between the decision on what to write and the actually writing (even if that gap can be very short).[23]

It is thus far from clear that theories of speech acts in fiction should account for the creation of stories, plots and fictional characters. It is one question which kinds of actions authors perform in writing stories, and another whether, in performing these actions, authors bring stories, plots and fictional characters into being. The first is a question in aesthetics and the philosophy of language, the second in ontology, and I think it should count in favour, rather than against, a theory of speech acts in fiction if it is not bound to a particular view of the ontology of fictional entities.

This concludes my review of the initial observations and how the constative view of fictive utterances can address them. I have argued that the informativity-observation fits nicely with the constative view, and I have argued that the other three observations are merely apparent or questionable. Surely there are ways to push back against each of these arguments, but I hope to have made plausible that the constative view is at least worth taking seriously – seriously enough to reject the non-constative consensus.

6. Outlook

In this last section, I will briefly look at some of the various potential implications a shift towards the constative view might have, both within the debate on speech acts in fiction and beyond it. I will also return to the other views of fictive utterances once more to show that there is room for pretence, invitations to make-believe and declarations in the context of storytelling, even if authors characteristically tell stories with the help of constative speech acts.

The first potential implication concerns the patchwork view of works of fiction mentioned at the end of the introduction. Given the consensus that fictive utterances are not assertions, and given the view that background utterances and profound utterances within works of fiction are assertions (Dixon 2022), one arrives at the view that a work of fiction is "a patchwork of […] fiction-making and assertion" (Currie 1990: 49). If the arguments of this paper are successful, the patchwork view has to be revised. On the one hand, the constative view of fictive utterances is naturally extended to background utterances and profound utterances: these, too, should be analysed as constatives targeted at a story. What sets them apart from fictive utterances is not their illocutionary force, but rather the fact that they provide information about aspects of the story that are meant to overlap with aspects of the world. So, in this sense the contrast between fictive utterances and their counterparts of background and profound utterances disappears. On the other hand, the constative view makes room for different kinds of speech acts featuring in a work of fiction, as constatives are merely seen as *characteristic* fictive utterances. In telling stories, authors can break the fourth wall to ask questions or give warnings, and they can include authorial

[23] Brock (2010) offers related timing-based arguments against views that take fictional characters to be created by authors, though his arguments are concerned not with speech acts, but rather with uses of names of fictional characters.

interjections of other kinds (cf. Abell 2020: 42–43). In that sense, the constative view does see some works of fiction as patchworks of different kinds of speech acts, though not as patchworks of fiction-making and assertion.

Secondly, adopting the constative view leads to a different take on the relation between fictive utterances and non-fictive utterances. Existing views of speech acts in fiction treat the actions of novelists as very different from those of non-fiction writers, even if the latter adopt techniques from fiction writing, such as narrative and free indirect discourse (Forna 2015, Stokke 2021). On the constative view, both kinds of writers perform the same kinds of actions, and the difference rests in the targets of their speech acts. This matters for debates outside the philosophy of fiction, such as the debate on whether science communicators should adopt narrative techniques (Medvecky & Leech 2021).

Finally, if characteristic fictive utterances are constatives targeted at a story, that can provide insights about constatives in non-fictive contexts. For instance, discussions of the norm of assertion consider (amongst other things) how non-fictive assertions are challenged (see e.g. Montminy 2020). Similarly, the debate on the nature and morality of lying is (understandably) focussed on non-fictive disbelieved assertions. In these contexts, the constative view opens up a whole new class of potential assertions (and other constative speech acts) that can be scrutinised and that might evoke different intuitions than the assertions considered to date. The consideration of fictive utterances might thus reshape our view of the nature and morality of constatives more generally.

To end, I would like to note that there is a sense in which each of the four views discussed can contribute to an understanding of how works of fiction are produced. First, there is undoubtedly a role for declarations in producing stories: most stories have a name, and one of the author's tasks is to choose this name and give it to the story through a speech act of baptising. To relate the other three views, I want to return to Austin's (1962) threefold distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary act. If we focus on the *perlocutionary* act, i.e. on the effect of fictive utterances, then it is very much plausible that authors generally intend their readers to make-believe the story they tell. If we consider the *locutionary* act, i.e. the saying or expressing of content, then pretence and imitation can play an important role, e.g. when the author speaks through a narrator, in a sense pretending to be them. But we are concerned with the *illocutionary* acts authors perform, with their speech acts. The possibility of committal fictive utterances and fictive utterances that are lies suggests that these characteristically are constative speech acts.

References

Abell, Catharine 2020: *Fiction: A philosophical analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Aristotle c. 350 BCE/1982: *Poetik*. Stuttgart: Reclam.

Austin, John Langshaw 1962: *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Beardsley, Monroe 1958: *Aesthetics*. New York: Harcourt.

Bergman, Karl and Franzén, Nils 2022: The force of fictional discourse. *Synthese* 200: 1–24.

Bonomi, Andrea and Zucchi, Sandro 2003: A pragmatic framework for truth in fiction. *Dialectica* 57: 103–120.

Brandom, Robert 1983: Asserting. *Noûs* 17: 637–650.

Brock, Stuart 2010: The creationist fiction: The case against creationism about fictional characters. *Philosophical Review* 119: 337–364.

Casetti, Francesco and Bohne, Luciana 1986: Antonioni and Hitchcock: Two strategies of narrative investment. *SubStance* 15: 69–86

Currie, Gregory 1985: What Is Fiction? *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43: 385–392.

Currie, Gregory 1990: *The nature of fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Currie, Gregory 1995: Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53: 19–29.

Currie, Gregory 2020: *Imagining and knowing: The shape of fiction*. Oxford University Press.

Davies, David 2015: Fictive utterance and the fictionality of narratives and works. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55: 39–55.

Dixon, Daisy 2022: Novel Assertions: A Reply to Mahon. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 62: 115–124.

Dynel, Marta 2021: When Both Utterances and Appearances are Deceptive: Deception in Multimodal Film Narrative. In: Fabrizio Macagno and Alessandro Capone (eds): *Inquiries in Philosophical Pragmatics*. Cham: Springer: 205–252.

Eagle, Antony 2007: Telling Tales. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 107: 125–147.

Eckardt, Regine 2014: *The Semantics of Free Indirect Discourse. How Texts Allow Us to Mind-Read and Eavesdrop*. Leiden: Brill.

van Elswyk, Peter 2020: *Deceiving without answering*. Philosophical Studies 177: 1157–1173.

Everett, Anthony 2013: *The Nonexistent*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Forna, Aminatta 2015: Fiction allows me to reach for a deeper, less literal kind of truth. *The Observer*, 6 Dec, 2015.

García-Carpintero, Manuel 2013: Norms of Fiction-Making. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53: 339–357.

García-Carpintero, Manuel 2018: Assertion and Fiction. In: Sanford Goldberg (ed): *The Oxford Handbook of Assertion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 436–457.

García-Carpintero, Manuel 2021: Do the imaginings that fictions invite have a direction of fit? In: Emar Maier and Andreas Stokke (eds): *The Language of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 131–152.

García-Carpintero, Manuel. 2023: The semantics of fiction. *Mind & Language* 38: 604–618.

Hitchcock, Alfred and Truffaut, François 1962: Interview. French Radio Broadcast. Part 17: https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Alfred_Hitchcock_and_François_Truffaut_(Aug/1962)

Kerr, Alfred 1923: Leo Perutz und Hans Sturm: „Zwischen neun und neun". Theater in der Königgrätzer Straße. *Berliner Tageblatt* 24.12.1923.

Kölbel, Max 2010: Literal Force: a Defence of Conventional Assertion. In: Sarah Sawyer (ed): *New Waves in Philosophy of Language*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 108–137.

Lewis, David 1978: Truth in Fiction. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15: 37–46.

MacDonald, Margaret 1954: The Language of Fiction. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 28: 165–184.

MacFarlane, John 2011: What is assertion? In: J. Brown and H. Cappelen (eds): *Assertion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 79–98.

Maier, Emar and Semeijn, Merel 2021: Extracting fictional truth from unreliable sources. In: Emar Maier and Andreas Stokke (eds): *The language of fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marsili, Neri 2023: Fictions that purport to tell the truth. *Philosophical Quarterly* 73: 509–531.

Martinez, Matias 2007: Das Sterben erzählen. In: Tom Kindt and Jan-Christoph Meister (eds): *Leo Perutz' Romane. Von der Struktur zur Bedeutung*. Tübingen: Niemeyer: 23–34.

Medvecky, Fabien and Leach, Joan 2019: Storytelling and Selling Science. In: Fabien Medvecky and Joan Leach: *An Ethics of Science Communication*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 63–72.

Montminy, Martin 2020: Testing for assertion. In: Sanford Goldberg (ed): *The Oxford Handbook of Assertion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 371–389.

Müller, Hans-Harald 2004: Nachwort. In: Leo Perutz: *Zwischen neun und neun*. München: dtv.

Peirce, Charles Sanders 1934: Judgment and assertion. In: *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Boston: Harvard University Press: Vol. V: 385–387.

Predelli, Stefano 1997: Talk about fiction. *Erkenntnis* 46: 69–77.

Predelli, Stefano 2020: *Fictional Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Quilty-Dunn, Jake 2015: Believing Our Eyes: The Role of False Belief in the Experience of Cinema. *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 55: 269–283.

Recanati, François 2000: *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Recanati, François 2018: Fictional, metafictional, parafictional. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 118: 25–54

Reimer, Marga 2005: The ellipsis account of fiction-talk. In: Reinaldo Elugardo and Robert Stainton (eds): *Ellipsis and Nonsentential Speech*. Dordrecht: Springer: 203–215.

Sainsbury, Mark 2014: Fictional worlds and fiction operators. In: Manuel García-Carpintero and Genoveva Martí (eds): *Empty representations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 277–289.

Schiffer, Stephen 1996: Language-Created Language-Independent Entities. *Philosophical Topics* 24: 149–67.

Schnieder, Benjamin 2013: Dichtung und Wahrheit. In: Eva-Maria Konrad, Thomas Petraschka, Jürgen Daiber and Hans Rott (eds): *Fiktion, Wahrheit, Interpretation*. Paderborn: mentis: 9–37.

Searle, John 1975a: The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse. *New Literary History* 6: 319–332.

Searle, John 1975b: A taxonomy of illocutionary acts. In: Keith Gunderson (ed): *Language, Mind and Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 344–369.

Semeijn, Merel 2021: Fiction and common ground. A workspace account. PhD thesis at Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

Sidney, Philip 1595/2014: *A Defence of Poesie and Poems*. Project Gutenberg: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1962 /1962-h/1962-h.htm

Stalnaker, Robert 1999: *Context and Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stalnaker, Robert 2002: Common ground. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25: 701–721.

Stalnaker, Robert 2014: *Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stokke, Andreas 2018: *Lying and Insincerity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stokke, Andreas 2021: Free Indirect Discourse in Non-Fiction. *Frontiers in Communication* 5: 606616.

Stokke, Andreas 2023: Fictional Force. *Philosophical Studies* 180: 3099–3120.

Terlunen, Milan 2022: *All Along...! The Pre-History of the Plot Twist in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. PhD thesis at Columbia University.

Thomasson, Amie L. 1999: *Fiction and metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Viebahn, Emanuel 2021: The lying-misleading distinction: a commitment-based approach. *The Journal of Philosophy* 118: 289–319.

Vorel, Jim 2016: Movie Mysteries: When a twist becomes a lie. *Paste Magazine*: https://www.pastemagazine.com/movies/movie-mysteries-when-a-twist-becomes-a-lie

Wagner, E. L. 2016: I tend to dislike plot twists if… Post #2 in thread: *Deceiving your readers: Plot Twist Techniques?* (Writing as Roxxsmom on 26.09.2016): http://www.fantasy-writers.org/forum/deceiving-your-readers-plot-twist-techniques

Walton, Kendall 1983: Fiction, Fiction-Making, and Styles of Fictionality. *Philosophy and Literature* 7: 78–88.

Walton, Kendall 1990: *Mimesis as make-believe: On the foundations of the representational arts*. Harvard University Press.

Werner, Christiana 2013: Making the fictional world. Fiktionale Äußerungen als deklarative Sprechakte. In: In: Eva-Maria Konrad, Thomas Petraschka, Jürgen Daiber and Hans Rott (eds): *Fiktion, Wahrheit, Interpretation*. Paderborn: mentis: 171–187.

Wilson, George 2006: Transparency and twist in narrative fiction film. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64: 81–95.

Woodward, Richard 2011: Truth in fiction. *Philosophy Compass* 6: 158–167.