

Exploding Stories and the Limits of Fiction

Michel-Antoine Xhignesse

michelxhignesse@capilano.ca

This is a penultimate draft. Please cite the final version: “[Exploding stories and the limits of fiction](#),” *Philosophical Studies*:1-18.

Abstract: It is widely agreed that fiction is necessarily incomplete, but some recent work postulates the existence of universal fictions—stories according to which everything is true. Building such a story is supposedly straightforward: authors can either assert that everything is true in their story, define a complement function that does the assertoric work for them, or, most compellingly, write a story combining a contradiction with the principle of explosion. The case for universal fictions thus turns on the intuitive priority we assign to the law of non-contradiction. My goal in this paper is to show that our critical and reflective literary practices set constraints on story-telling which preclude universal fictions. I will raise four stumbling blocks for universal fictionalists: the gap between saying and making true, our actual interpretive reactions to story-level contradictions, the criteria we accept for what counts as a story in our literary practices, and the undesirability of the universal fictionalist’s closure principles.

Exploding Stories and the Limits of Fiction

1. The Universal Architecture

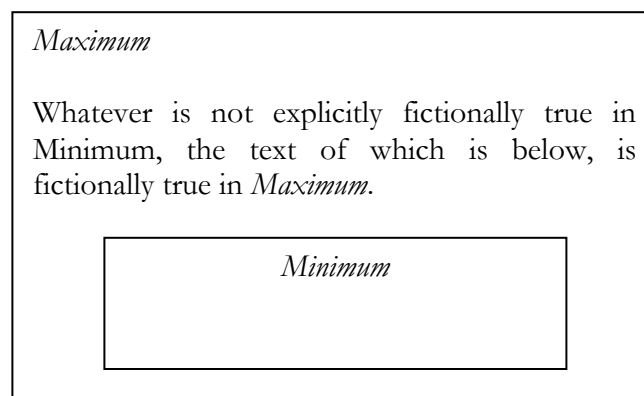
It has recently been postulated that there might be some stories—“universal fictions”—in which *everything* is true.¹ It is natural enough to think that authors can *tell* whatever stories they care to dream up, but universal fictionalists take this otherwise obvious premise one step further: authors can *make true* anything they like, such that building a universal fiction is actually quite a straightforward matter. Three strategies have been offered for constructing universal fictions—call them the *assertoric*, *complemental*, and *explosive* strategies.

According to the assertoric strategy, an author simply needs to tell a story *S* which explicitly asserts that everything is true in *S*.² Consider, for instance, the following story:

True Story

Once upon a time, everything was true. The end.

Nothing could be simpler! In contrast, the complemental strategy is more sophisticated. On that model, the author must first select a (the?) zero-length literary work (a work with no explicit content) *Z*, and preface *Z* with a statement of a complement function to the effect that whatever is not explicitly fictionally true in *Z* is fictionally true in this second story *Z*₂.³ So, for example:



¹ See e.g. Wildman and Folde (2017), Estrada-González (2018), and Wildman (2019).

² See e.g. Routley (1979: 8), Deutsch (1985: 209, fn. 16), and Estrada-González (2018).

³ Wildman (2019, §2). I have adapted the following diagram from the same source, as it is the clearest way of illustrating the complemental strategy.

Maximum thus relies, for its existence as a universal fiction, on the pre-existence of an empty fiction, *Minimum*.

Finally, according to the explosive strategy, all an author needs to do is combine a contradiction with the principle of explosion, so that from that contradiction, anything and everything (fictionally) follows. Such a combination can occur either at the level of ‘primary’ story content (i.e. a story’s explicit content), ‘secondary’ story content (i.e. its background or implicit content), or some combination of the two. Here is one such story that affirms *ex falso quod libet* and introduces a contradiction:

The Exploding Nebula (TEN)

Once upon a time, there was an artificial galaxy known as The Exploding Nebula, a wide and (relatively) empty plane created by a shadowy entity known as the Principal. The Principal made the nebula in such a way that whenever its residents encountered a contradiction, *all the things* followed suit. One day, a circle raised a crew of triangles to pillage a nearby rhomboid village. Unfortunately, the rhomboids had the circle’s number and unleashed a powerful weapon that squared him, thus filling the nebula. The End.

The result in all three cases is supposedly a universal fiction in which numbers are prime and non-prime, Poirot shaves his moustache, Dino the Snorkasaurus⁴ rides a unicorn over Bifröst, the burning rainbow bridge—and in which the negation of all and each of these claims also obtains. Note, however, that none of these three stories—neither *True Story*, *Maximum*, nor *TEN*—is very good. They are paradigmatically silly stories, trivial *phictions* (philosophers’ “fictions”) intended to make a philosophical point rather than reward genuine literary interests. In the rest of this paper, I shall refer to them as ‘phictions’ and ‘phictionalists’ to avoid confusion with uncontroversial fictions proper, or with *fictionalism* about a region of discourse. Although I will address the prospects of all three strategies, I shall focus in particular on the explosive strategy, which I take to be the most promising.

⁴ The snorkasaurus is not, in fact, a real species of dinosaur, but Dino’s phenotype clearly classes him somewhere in the clade Plateosauria.

At issue in all three strategies is the question of whether the law of non-contradiction⁵ imposes hard limits on our ability to tell stories. Lewis (1978 & 1983), Deutsch (1985), Hanley (2004), and Xhignesse (2016) have all argued for some version of the thesis that contradictory stories do not encode contradictory facts into their associated story-worlds: either they encode different facts into different (consistent) story-fragments, or the author or narrator is either lying or mistaken. By contrast, Currie (1990) and Priest (2005) see the common occurrence of contradictory stories as fundamental data to be explained by any theory of fiction. Woods (2018: Chs. 1 and 9) takes a middle road: fictions feature logical inconsistencies but not logical contradictions;⁶ or, when they do feature logical contradictions, closure constraints on consequence-drawing prevent cognitive collapse, such that contradictions are no bother.⁷

My goal in this paper is straightforward: I wish to show that our critical and reflective literary practices set certain constraints on story-telling, among them respect for the law of non-contradiction, that preclude universal phictions. Accordingly, I will raise four stumbling blocks for universal phictionalists. The first is simply the fact that fictionally saying and making true are very different beasts, with different success conditions. While it is clear that universal phictions can claim the truth of anything and everything, this fact does not amount to their actually succeeding in fictionally making it so. Second, I argue that the evidence from our literary practices indicates that we treat story-level contradictions as interpretive cues signalling that some antecedent belief ought to be revised, rather than as truth-makers for absurd consequences. Third, I will show that even if we set these worries aside, it is not clear that phictions are actually stories—fictions, properly speaking—in the first place, since they do not respect our literary practices. Finally, I will show that

⁵ Understood standardly to mean that for every story s and every proposition p , if p is true according to s , then $\neg p$ is false according to s . I am leaving aside the issue of whether fictional inconsistencies should be treated as proper logical contradictions, or simply logical inconsistencies. For more on that topic, see Woods (2018: esp. Chs. 1 & 9).

⁶ i.e. inconsistencies are ambiguous, and could support either possibility; contradictions, however, are quite definite.

⁷ See also Badura and Berto (forthcoming), who offer a formal semantics for which logical closure fails for fictional truth.

our critical and reflective literary practices supply us with good reason to doubt that the phictionalist's closure principles apply to fiction in the first place.

2. The Says-Is Gap

The first hurdle which proponents of universal phictions must overcome is what I will call the *Says-Is Gap*: not everything explicitly said in or by a story is true in that story. Just as claims about the real world are made true by truthmakers such as chemical composition, robust statistical correlations, and actual states of the world, so too are fictional claims made true by features of the story being told, including its genre, plot, text, subtext, and more. This poses a problem for the assertoric and explosive strategies, each of which requires us to accept some dodgy explicit pronouncements. Philosophers and literary scholars alike agree that, by themselves, explicit statements are not **necessary** for fictional truth, nor are they any guarantee of fictional truth. This is because they agree that fiction is characterized by its widespread reliance on implicit content to resolve the kinds of problems which might otherwise result from fiction's (necessary) incompleteness.⁸ The result is that story-truth depends on more than mere sayings.

It is not possible for an author to spell out all of a story's details in finite time.⁹ This results in a number of questions for every story, some of which are ultimately unanswerable, despite presumably having an answer: is Odysseus subject to the laws of gravity? How many children does Lady Macbeth have? Does Robin Hood ever go to the washroom? How many hairs are in Poirot's moustache? What is Harry Potter's net worth? In order to get around the less trivial of these gaps, philosophers generally suppose that authors tell their stories in much the same way that

⁸ Almost all are agreed that fiction is necessarily incomplete, since texts under-determine the properties of their associated worlds and characters. There is, however, some question as to whether this incompleteness is of a merely epistemic or of an ontological nature. I am aware of only two exceptions: William D'Alessandro (2016) proposes that we reject implicit content altogether, and Wildman and Folde (2017) argue that at least some stories (universal phictions) are complete. See also Motoarcă (2017), who strikes several decisive blows against explicitism.

⁹ See, e.g., Lewis (1978 & 1983), Byrne (1993), Currie (1990), Priest (2005)

philosophers specify possible worlds: by stipulating the most relevant ways in which they differ from the actual world and allowing the properties of the actual world to fill out as many of the remaining details as possible.¹⁰ So, for instance, it is safe to assume that Robin Hood occasionally has to excuse himself, because it is clear from those stories that they are meant to take place in the same world we inhabit, that Robin Hood is a human being in that world, and that human beings in this world sometimes have to make a pit stop. The story-content which is implicitly filled out in this way is known as *background*.¹¹ Whatever is left over once a story's explicit content and implicit background have been tabulated thus counts towards a story's incompleteness.

Consequently, anyone who accepts either that stories are incomplete or that some things are implicitly true in a story must also concede that mere words on a page are not required to make something so in a story. Even bracketing implicit background, the relevance of the Says-Is Gap is at its most obvious when we encounter characters or narrators who lie or are mistaken. Iago, for instance, says of himself that "To be direct and honest is not safe" (*Othello* 3.3.388), but it is crucial to the story that we all understand that his protestations of honesty are false. Similarly, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) sees its narrator offer two incompatible versions of the story of his survival at sea: the fanciful one featuring a Bengal tiger, and a darker tale of cannibalism and murder. Reading (or hearing or seeing) a story is not just a matter of passively absorbing everything we are told; we routinely compare the information that is given to us with our own experiences, and with our knowledge of the world, of other stories, of genre conventions, and of the rest of the story so far. In other words, reading a story requires us to actively reconstruct the story as new information is revealed.

¹⁰ This is at the heart of Marie-Laure Ryan's 'principle of minimal departure' (1980), Stacie Friend's 'reality assumption' (2017), and John Woods's 'world-inheritance thesis' (2018), prefigured by his 'fill' conditions (1974: 63-5).

¹¹ The term comes from Lewis (1978 & 1983), but I am not assuming any particular analysis of background here. It suffices for my purposes that we simply recognize the essential role background considerations play in our engagement with fiction.

The point is simply this: when we reflect on a story's content it is not our habit to just take the storyteller at her word,¹² and neither are we required to take universalists at theirs. They have *told* us that their phictions (1) contain a contradiction, and (2) are governed by explosion, but they have not yet *shown* us that these claims are *true* (in or of the story). We are still owed independent grounds for believing that the relevant conditions hold in these stories. But, as I shall argue in the next section, the way we typically engage with stories suggests that none of these conditions tracks our actual critical and reflective literary practices. The point is not that our practices mandate that no such story could ever exist, but rather that in the absence of additional evidence, we ought to be suspicious of a story's claims to universality.

In the real world, merely stating something does not suffice to make it true; so too with stories. Fictional truth requires a proposition to survive the barrage of tests to which we subject it. Thus, *TS* claims that everything is true, but it remains an open question whether that fact obtains in its associated story-world. For instance, as Fine (1982) and Wildman and Folde (2017) rightly observe, it is not at all clear what the range of the quantifier is supposed to be: is it everything in the domain of the story, or everything *tout court*? The only way for *TS* to be properly universal is for it to range over absolutely everything; but the only way to ensure the appropriate domain is to beg the question by assuming that every possible proposition is included in the story. Mere assertion, then, is insufficient—a fact which even some universal phictionalists acknowledge. Routley, for example, acknowledges that auctorial say-so is constrained by category/type restrictions, among others (1979: 24), while Estrada-Gonzalez concedes that, when in doubt about a fictions's domain of quantification, “one has to rely on analysis, and check the consequences of the purported interpretations, especially their coherence with other more secure beliefs or assertions” (2018: 69). Likewise, then, the fact that *TEN* explicitly endorses both explosion and a contradiction suffices to

¹² Although I am happy to concede that it is our habit to do so as far as we plausibly can.

guarantee that the story *claims* that both are true in its world, but not that they *are* true. Claiming and making true are entirely different beasts: you simply cannot get an ‘is’ from a ‘says’.¹³

3. Cues, not facts

The second problem facing universalists is a normative one, and applies to the explosive strategy in particular: story-level contradictions are indications that some antecedent belief ought to be revised, not that some absurd consequence is true in the story.¹⁴ This is not surprising, since the psychology of reasoning has shown us that ordinary folk are not intuitively convinced of the validity of disjunction-introduction, as opposed to other one-premise valid inferences;¹⁵ it is no stretch to suppose that they likewise not predisposed to accept explosion. Similarly, psychological evidence indicates that in doxastic fictional contexts, increased scrutiny inhibits text integration, that belief is a condition on understanding a text (provided those beliefs can be revised later), and that scrutiny varies with the information’s personal relevance to a reader.¹⁶ An outright contradiction, however, gives us an explicit invitation to *disbelieve*, to more carefully scrutinize the text so as to revise our erstwhile beliefs; inference rules, on the other hand, are only of particular personal relevance to philosophers and mathematicians. What this shows is that we typically treat extra-, inter-, and intra-textual inconsistencies as interpretive cues signalling that something in the story requires our critical and reflective attention. We thus embrace the law of non-contradiction as a background principle governing our engagement with texts, and do not draw explosive inferences from apparent contradictions.

¹³ An anonymous referee rightly observes that the Says-is Gap could be read as an objection to making anything at all true in fictions. To my mind, our best defence against such big-box skepticism comes from our critical and reflective literary practices, which simply are not organized that way. Perhaps they could have been, or perhaps they are, once upon a time and in a galaxy far, far away; but not in the here and now.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Woods (1974: 49 and 51), Lewis (1978 and 1983), and Harman (1984).

¹⁵ Cruz et al. (2017).

¹⁶ See Prentice et al. (1997) and Wheeler et al. (1999).

Consider the relatively minor issue of Dr. Watson's first name in the Holmes stories. When we discover in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) that Watson's first name is 'John,' we take Conan Doyle (or, rather, Watson) at his word. But when Watson's wife calls him 'James' in *The Man with the Twisted Lip* (1891), that mismatch prompts (or should prompt) us to reconsider our earlier trust. It will be useful, at this juncture, to distinguish between two ways in which we read: one is *occurrent* reading, the other *reflective* reading. We read occurrently when we sit down and read for pleasure, with the primary aim of making our way through the text; by contrast, we read reflectively when we pay particular attention to the text's properties and internal relations. Think of it as the difference between reading for pleasure, and reading for the classroom. In the occurrent act of reading, our practice is simply to ignore the inconsistency, if we even notice it;¹⁷ but when critically reflecting on the text, as when we try to determine what is true in the story, the inconsistency looms larger. As Stacie Friend (2017: esp. §3 and §4) has shown, knowledge about the real world is *essential* to basic story comprehension; I would merely add the observation that a crucial component of that knowledge is the fact that the real world is governed by the law of non-contradiction, and we take knowledge of this inviolable physical constraint with us into our exploration of the story-world as background knowledge.¹⁸ This means that any apparent inconsistency we encounter is *prima facie* highly implausible.

And a good thing, too, since the very formulation of background principles such as the Reality Assumption and its cognates relies on the law of non-contradiction: they tell us that everything that is true or obtains in the real world is storified *unless it is excluded by the work*.¹⁹ The act

¹⁷ See, e.g., Woods (1974: 49), Lewis (1978 and 1983), and McKoon and Ratcliffe (1992).

¹⁸ With the exception, of course, of paraconsistent logicians. If they are correct, then the Reality Assumption will *not* see the law of non-contradiction actually storified as background, even though it represents a belief that most people take with them into their engagement with stories. My money is on non-contradiction.

¹⁹ Friend (2017: 31). Just what a story includes/excludes will depend on our principles of generation, which are themselves underlain by the Reality Assumption. A detailed exploration of these mechanisms would take us too far afield; suffice it to say that inclusion is usually thought to be the automatic result of our principles of generation; exclusion, by contrast, is effected primarily through explicit story-content, reflection on the story's content, goals, etc.,

of exclusion is motivated by a desire to avoid encoding a contradiction between a story's explicit and background content. Reflecting on Watson's problems thus sets in motion a process of intra- and inter-textual comparisons to the rest of the story as well as to the other fifty-nine stories in the Holmes corpus. The result is two more instances of 'John,' one in *His Last Bow* (1917) and one in *The Problem of Thor Bridge* (1922), giving us a total of three votes for 'John' and one for 'James'. The natural conclusion, then, is that 'James' resulted from a slip on the author's part, or perhaps that Mary misspoke (or used a hypocoronym to which we are not privy), and that the character's first name is actually 'John'. The point is simply that our natural reaction is not to accept that Watson is James-John, but rather to incline to one or the other based on what fits most plausibly with the Holmes corpus.²⁰ The goal here is not to focus on the nature of the putative error, but rather on the process of resolution which it prompts. Indeed, one need only look as far as the many television adaptations of the Holmes stories to see how perfectly commonplace and trivial this kind of revision is; it is never thought to result in an eruption of fictional facts.

Not all inconsistencies are accidental, of course. Sometimes they form central elements of a story's plot, as in Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001). In such cases, it is often unclear just what we should do with the conflicting sub-stories, and which sub-story we should believe: does Piscine share the lifeboat with Richard Parker the tiger, or with the cannibal cook? Readers are left to draw their own conclusions because the intra- and inter-textual evidence is insufficient, and to that end they mobilize extra-textual considerations. So, for instance, we know from our experience of the world that it is extremely unlikely that a child could survive on a lifeboat with an adult Bengal tiger, and the cannibal story is thus much more likely. But that fact about the world must be balanced against

and perhaps also through whichever closure principles are applicable to fiction (itself a matter of some debate). The interpretive norms established by genres, too, may affect our principles of inclusion and exclusion (see, e.g. Friend 2012 and Evnine 2015).

²⁰ Readers who find the naming case implausible are invited to consider, instead, the placement of Watson's war wound, which is in either his shoulder or his leg, but surely not both. Such inconsistencies are clearly accidental, and easily resolved.

genre considerations: the bulk of the story appears to conform to magic realism, where fantastical elements are par for the course. Finally, it seems clear from the text that both the author and the narrator consider the value of the story to lie in its ability to prompt readers to reflect on the difference between a story replete with God, and one without; a journey of self-discovery in the form of a totemistic fable, or a gritty saga of delusion, loss, and childhood trauma. We are free to choose the interpretation that speaks most to us; the fiction's reward lies precisely in the ambiguity of the storyline, in the many different interpretations it licenses (and even suggests).

Outright contradictions are much rarer occurrences, but we deal with them in much the same way. Just consider Graham Priest's short story *Sylvan's Box* (1997), according to which the protagonist discovers a box that is empty and contains a figurine. As before, the contradiction is jarring, and we cannot immediately determine what is true in the story. It motivates readers to take stock of the story's extra-, inter-, and intra-textual content, and to marshal their explanatory hypotheses.²¹ Neither inter- nor intra-textual content proves especially useful in this case, since Priest's story does not belong to any obvious genre (unless perhaps it is the genre of philosophical fiction or thought experiment), nor is it part of a larger canon of stories. *Qua* story, *Sylvan's Box* stands alone. Yet we do have some important extra-textual clues to help us interpret it: after all, we know that Priest is a logician specializing in non-classical logics, and he originally used the story to argue for a paraconsistent logic of fiction. Later, he later appended the story to his non-fiction monograph *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality* (2005). As a result, it is clear that Priest is relying on the juxtaposition of contradictory alternatives to prompt us to reflect on the (extra-textual) plausibility of, e.g., paraconsistent logic as the logic of fiction. The presence of the contradiction is a *cue* for us to reflect on the possibility of stories containing contradictory facts. But it is not, by itself, an indication *of* such a fact—establishing the fictional existence of the

²¹ Nolan (2007) does just this, in fact, by treating *Sylvan's Box's* high intrinsic implausibility as dispositive.

contradiction first requires us to buy into the noneist account of intentionality (and fiction) that Priest details in the preceding six chapters.²²

Crucially, we do not reason as follows about *Sylvan's Box*:

- (1) Sylvan's box is empty.
 Sylvan's box is non-empty.

 Therefore, Dino the Snorkasaurus rode a unicorn over Bifröst
 while shaving Poirot's moustache.

This is because we do not ordinarily assume that stories are governed by (unrestricted) explosion.²³

In fact, it is rather doubtful that *Sylvan's Box* has anything much to say about Dino, Poirot, or mythological creatures and artifacts. But suppose for a moment that we *did* believe that explosion gives us reason to believe (1). Then, by parity of reasoning, explosion also gives us reason to believe the following:

- (2) Sylvan's box is empty.
 Sylvan's box is non-empty.

 Therefore, Dino the Snorkasaurus *did not* ride a unicorn over
 Bifröst while shaving Poirot's moustache.

We would now have just as many reasons to believe in Dino's weird activities as we would to disbelieve them, each of them equally compelling. The question, then, is what we should do with this data. Appeals back to the story will not help us, since the story licenses an equal number of contradictory propositions. The more natural suggestion here is not that we have equal and opposite reasons to believe a proposition about Dino (or anything else, for that matter), but rather that we

²² To see that this is so, one need look no further than Daniel Nolan's (2007), which offers a consistent reading of *Sylvan's Box* according to which the narrator and his friend mistakenly *believe* that the box embodies a contradiction. Priest anticipates this strategy in the original article, arguing that it ultimately mischaracterizes the story and its content. But if we pay attention to the structure of our literary practices, we will see that we cannot simply take authors at their word concerning intended story-content; the Reality Assumption will see our principles of generation encode the world as it is, not as we believe it to be. And if the logic of the world truly is paraconsistent, then so be it, and so much the worse for our actual critical and reflective literary practices.

²³ In this connection, see Currie (1990). It is also worth emphasizing that's Priest's preferred logic of fiction is paraconsistent, and thus not explosive in the first place (Priest 2005: 122).

have *no* reasons to believe it.²⁴ This is not a knock-down argument against accepting explosive fictions. What it is, rather, is an observation about our critical and reflective literary practice, and the lessons we should draw from them. Those lessons are certainly defeasible, but they should form the starting point for our theorizing, not its end-point.

One might likewise worry that the notion of background does not play well with our understanding of logic, since it is widely agreed among logicians that there are no truth-value gaps, whereas philosophers of literature are agreed that stories are necessarily incomplete.²⁵ The two positions seem irreconcilable. And if we allow that background lets us down in this instance, why not accept its failure to encode non-contradiction, too? There is no necessary tension here, however: we need only maintain that stories are *epistemically*, rather than ontologically, incomplete: fictional indeterminacy is a necessary consequence of tying fictionality to acts of story-telling, since no author could (or should!) enumerate all of a story's facts in finite time. This does not mean that there is no fact of the matter about the number of hairs in Poirot's moustache; it only means that we have no epistemic access to that fact unless it can be supplied by means of the act of story-telling, or as part of the story's background.²⁶

Finally, we need to consider just what our interpretive goals are in the first place. Plausibly, interpreting fiction is a matter of identifying interesting or rewarding story-content. So when we ask what is true in a story, we are not asking which propositions we encode during the occurrent act of reading; we are asking about the propositions which we decide, upon reflection, *ought* to be encoded. This is no different from the standard Waltonian claim that what is true in a story is just what *ought*

²⁴ John Woods and Peter Alward draw similar conclusions in their (2004), and Mark Pinder makes this argument in his (2017).

²⁵ My thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

²⁶ Indeed, this is exactly how proponents of background tackle the problem—see e.g. Lewis (1978: 42-3) and Currie (1990: §2.5 and §4.10).

to be made-believe according to the rules of the relevant game of make-believe.²⁷ What is more, this is borne out by evidence from the psychology of text-processing which indicates that readers do not encode much evidence at all during the occurrent act of reading. The work of Gail McKoon and Roger Ratcliffe, among others, has found that readers are not even overly concerned to encode elements as basic as causal relations: they set aside consideration of the rationale for a character's actions, and do not draw inferences about how those actions are performed.²⁸ What is more, they found that readers are not very concerned about the coherence of the text, so long as inconsistencies are more than a few sentences apart. In other words, readers occurrently care about local, but not global, coherence. Concern for causal relations, global coherence, and other important interpretive elements arises at the reflective, not the occurrent, level of reading. This suggests that the act of reading is akin to bare consumption; it is only later, once we have consumed enough fictional flesh, that we start to consider the story-world more broadly, and how its innards fit together. For a reflective reader, however, a universal phiction would be devoid of interesting or rewarding content to consider in the first place, since it would be utterly trivial. The case for universal phictions would have us conflate what seems plausible given an *occurrent* reading with what seems plausible *upon reflection*.

The lesson here is that we do not, in fact, routinely accept contradictory stories: instead, our reflective understanding of a story regularly subjects contradictions to close scrutiny in an attempt to resolve them. We cannot always do so, as in the case of deliberate contradictions, but even these we explore for the delectation of ambiguity rather than accepting at face value. My point is simply this: contradictions are invitations to step outside the occurrent act of reading and into the critical and reflective mood from which we determine what the story actually *is*, and what it is about.

²⁷ Walton (1990: 39). Many thanks to an anonymous referee, who pointed out this parallel.

²⁸ See McKoon and Ratcliffe (1992). This may also, as an anonymous referee observed, have to do with issues of memory, especially if the relevant claims occur far apart in the story. Derek Matravers (2014) provides a useful survey and analysis of the state of the literature in the psychology of text processing.

Contradictions perform this role precisely because they are extraordinary, because they are not natural parts of stories: they are unusual and unacceptable violations of our pragmatic attitudes, and the reader's reflective impulse is to resolve them. In other words, deference to the law of non-contradiction is built into the way we think about stories and evaluate the truth of fictional propositions. Adherence to it is our *default* setting and, at least in principle, that adherence is defeasible rather than necessary. Its default status just means that the onus is on storytellers to overcome our default setting and make their stories truly universal. And to do so, a storyteller must either locate her story against an appropriate background, or do some explicit work to convince us in our reflective engagement with the story. So it might still be objected that our universal phictionalists are just cut-rate hacks, and that better storytellers could succeed where they, in their brevity, have failed; perhaps the problem is merely cosmetic.²⁹ In fact, however, I think that the very character of universal fictions precludes them from counting as 'fictions' or 'stories' in the first place.

4. What looks like a duck...

Universal phictions rely on an implicit version of the duck test³⁰ for their uptake: they look like stories (especially when generated by the explosive strategy), and we're told that they're stories, so surely they must be stories. But are they? I think not—at least, not in the literary sense of 'story'.³¹

Allow me to explain.

²⁹ To be clear, I do not think so. *True Story* is rather dull, but *Maximum* is ingenious, and the author of *The Exploding Nebula* was no slouch, either!

³⁰ As Douglas Adams puts it in *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (1987), if it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, we have at least to consider the possibility that we have a small aquatic bird of the family *Anatidae* on our hands.

³¹ Following David Davies's observations about 'literature' (2007: Ch. 1), I think we can usefully distinguish between the broad, artistic, and extended senses of 'story'. My contention is not that universal phictions are not stories in the broad sense; rather, it is that they cannot count as stories in the artistic or extended senses of the term; they are not literary works, except in the broadest possible sense of having been written down.

It has become commonplace, following Walton's *Mimesis as Make Believe* (1990), to think of fiction-making as a primarily psychological act: one simply imagines something, and the rest follows suit. But while imagining or 'making up' is certainly an important aspect of our practice of story-telling (I leave aside the question of whether it is necessary), it is hardly constitutive, since story-telling is a *linguistic* act that fits into a *cultural practice*.³² This means that determining whether universal phictions really are universal—in addition to whether they're stories in the first place—depends on more than mere say-so; it depends on the ways in which our linguistic and literary practices are organized, and on the conventions that underpin their organization. This is what explains the limitations of auctorial say-so: telling stories is a communicative act, which means that its success-conditions are not all up to the author to satisfy. As Lamarque and Olsen put it, fiction is a *mode of utterance* located in a *social practice* (1996: 33).

At its core, a cultural, or social, practice is just a regulated activity, and learning the practice of story-telling is just a matter of learning how to put our appreciative, critical, and imaginative abilities to the right kinds of communicative uses.³³ This means, of course, that different cultures may well produce different story-telling practices, or set their stories against very different backgrounds. It is entirely conceivable, for example, that some communities or cultures may not believe the world to be governed by the law of non-contradiction. Although I have shied away from offering an analysis of background in this paper, it is worth noting that most analyses on offer—from Lewis's Analysis 1 and Woods's world-inheritance principle to Ryan's principle of minimal departure and Friend's reality assumption—are concerned to encode the way the world *is*, rather

³² See Lamarque and Olsen (1996: Ch. 2) and Davies (2007: Ch. 1).

³³ Lamarque and Olsen (1996: 33-4).

than readers' or storytellers' *beliefs* about the world.³⁴ So, whichever logical principles govern the actual world will also govern fictional worlds, unless the storyteller succeeds in defeating them.³⁵

Like any other regulated activity, there are right and wrong ways of engaging in story-telling, set by fairly minimal conditions of intention and response.³⁶ An author uses language to describe a particular sequence of events with the intention of eliciting a literary response from readers, ranging from bare consumption to critical engagement, the idea being that readers will find something of (literary) aesthetic value in the text. In other words, our literary practices are organized around the possibility of taking an *artistic* or *interrogative* interest in texts.³⁷ The result, as Lamarque and Olsen have put it, is that "To recognize something as a literary work is to recognize it as being intended to convey a humanly interesting content. And a humanly interesting content has always been recognized as one of the most important qualities of literature, a quality which gives literature its cultural prominence" (1996: 265-6). Thus, when we read Peter Benchley's *Jaws* (1974) occurrently, or watch Spielberg's 1975 film adaptation, we understand it to be a chilling horror story about a shark rampaging through the waters of an American resort town; read with a critical eye, however, one wonders whether *Jaws* is about a shark at all, rather than, say, a tale of sexual morality, or the Watergate scandal.³⁸

So: why aren't universal phictions stories in the literary sense? In a nutshell, the answer is that they are not up to code. *True Story* and *Maximum*, for example, were built using non-standard tools, and while their construction is quite clever, it also hampers our ability to take the literary

³⁴ The main exception is Lewis's Analysis 2, which he presented as an alternative to Analysis 1 for anyone squeamish about obscure facts being made true in fictional worlds (e.g. quantum mechanics in *Beowulf*).

³⁵ That said, it may well be that the more promising analysis of background indexes it to a community's beliefs about the world, in which case a commune of paraconsistent logicians could generate a truly contradictory story. I would only add that, on the evidence, present-day Western audiences are not so constituted.

³⁶ Lamarque and Olsen (1996: 37).

³⁷ The notion of an artistic or interrogative interest was introduced by Davies in his (2011: 14-7); it is prefigured in his (2007: 10-13).

³⁸ Lest readers think these interpretations the risible product of my own overactive imagination, I hasten to direct them to Mark Kermode's (2015), which details and defends several such interpretations.

stance towards them. They don't look like ducks in the first place, and closer inspection reveals them to be entirely devoid of literary interest.³⁹ *TEN*, however, at least superficially resembles a literary story, so why isn't it one? The answer is that it is, unless we take universal phictionalists at their word and concede that these are phictions in which anything and everything is true. In that case, we are left with texts that say everything and nothing: they are utterly trivial. And by definition, what is utterly trivial cannot reward any literary interest we might take in it—indeed, what could possibly interest us about them in the first place? Such 'stories' are, as Woods has put it, utterly unengageable.⁴⁰ We can, of course, read phictions, delight in their use of language, and twist our brains into knots trying to unpack their contradictory threads. I do not mean to suggest that we cannot take aesthetic, artistic, or philosophical interests in phictions *qua* phictions. The problem is not that these are *bad stories*; my point, rather, is that we can take no substantive interest in their *content*, as we do with genuine fictions, because their content, if true, would preclude us from doing so. The problem is with their character, not their telling. It is also worth noting that universal phictions abandon any semblance of adherence to the Reality Assumption, since they exclude nothing and thus *cannot* be about the real world. Once we have read them, there is no point in asking further questions of *True Story*, *Maximum*, or *TEN*; the answer will always be 'yes' (and 'no'). *True Story* and *Maximum* have no narrative to speak of, and thus nothing to recommend them in that department, either. And while *TEN* pretends to have a narrative, that pseudo-narrative merely paints an incomplete and misleading picture of the propositions constituting it. *Qua* universal phiction, *True Story*, *Maximum*, and *TEN* exclude nothing, and thus say nothing; they do not represent communicative acts.⁴¹

³⁹ Although, if the universal phictionalist is to be believed, it is true in each story that it *is* (but also isn't) a duck.

⁴⁰ Woods (2018: 142; see also 33-6).

⁴¹ The same arguments will apply to putatively universal works in other art-kinds, too: so, e.g., there are no universal poems because such a piece of writing could not communicate or exclude anything, and thus should not count as a *poem* in the first place.

Nor is it clear that we can adopt the literary stance towards them, since (as I argued in §3) interpreting them as being actually *universal* requires us to actively discard the assumptions and conventions which usually guide our engagement with fiction. Having jettisoned the shared understandings that would enable these vehicles to articulate their content in a *literary* manner, it remains open to us to proceed from a different set of shared understandings—perhaps, say, those appropriate to philosophical thought experiments. So these phictions might still reward our *philosophical* interests (although I will cast some doubt on that notion in the following section), but they certainly do not reward *literary* interest. The upshot is that if universal phictionalists are right that their texts are universal, then they are not stories-in-the-literary-sense: they are failed-stories, the product of failed story-attempts.⁴² The failure is certainly not one of imagination; the complementary strategy, in particular, is rather ingenious. What goes wrong for phictionalists is the attempt itself—not because it isn't a story-telling attempt, but because the success-conditions for story-telling attempts mobilize *external* as well as internal resources. The intention to tell a story is certainly necessary,⁴³ but needs to be complemented by an action of the appropriate sort. And although phictionalists do act on their intentions, those actions are not of the right sort: they do not conform to the external constraints our actual critical and reflective literary practices impose upon successful acts of story-telling. That is why they are philosophers' "fictions," thought-experiments, or logicians' puzzles, rather than fictions proper.

⁴² For more on the failure-conditions of 'art' in general (and to see how these might be applied to stories in particular), see Mag Uidhir (2010 and 2013: Ch. 1).

⁴³ This is not to say that the intention must be *direct*, where an act of Φ -ing is said to be *directly* intention-dependent iff the agent intends to Φ . Intention-dependence also comes indirectly: an act of Φ -ing is said to be *indirectly* intention-dependent iff the agent intends to Ψ , where Ψ -ing entails the satisfaction of the conditions for Φ .

5. Closure

The final hurdle universal phictionalists must overcome concerns the closure principles they mobilize: just how much *can* we deduce from a given set of fictional statements? We know that belief is not closed under logical consequence, but what about stories? Although this worry dogs the assertive and complemental strategies, it is especially poignant for the explosive strategy, which explicitly mobilizes explosion as a closure principle. The issue, then, is whether these closure principles appropriately map discourse *in* as well as *about* the phiction. Notice that these two levels come apart: it is one thing to show that the relevant closure principles apply generally—that is, to the world outside the fiction—and quite another to show that the story itself actually satisfies them. The proposition that a closure principle *C* holds *according to* a story *S* is distinct from the proposition that the notion of truth according to *S* satisfies *C*. This is significant because the only way to get from the propositions in *The Exploding Nebula* to the fictional truth of all things is by way of the background assumption that *TEN*'s content is closed under logics featuring unrestricted explosion principles (e.g. classical or intuitionistic logics). But I have been arguing that we are not entitled to that assumption—in other words, *TEN* might well be inconsistent without being universal (if, e.g., its content is closed under a *paraconsistent* logic, as Graham Priest has suggested).⁴⁴ Nor is it clear that the story in question features a genuine contradiction in the first place, if the arguments of §2-3 are correct.

One way around this objection, of course, is simply to build the relevant closure principles into a story's explicit or implicit content, as part of the story.⁴⁵ So, for instance, the text of *TEN* might also explicitly include the proposition that $(P \wedge \neg P) \rightarrow Q$ (for every *Q*)—call this new story *TEN**. But the problem, as I showed in §2, is that *not everything explicitly claimed by a story is therefore true*

⁴⁴ Priest (2005: 122). A very few paraconsistent logics—not Priest's—do allow for *ex falso*, but limited so that it only holds for entailment, not inference.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Wildman and Folde (2017: 77).

in that story. Closure requires us to first have a set of true propositions in hand and, as we saw in §3, contradictory stories give us good reasons to doubt that both propositions are true in the first place. In fact, critical and reflective experience teaches us that either only one is true, or the issue in question is fictionally indeterminate. In other words, our practices supply us with a ready-made skeptical *modus tollens*: we don't believe that Dino rides a unicorn across Bifröst in *TEN*, so we don't (or shouldn't) actually believe that *TEN* contains a contradiction—or, alternately, that *TEN* contains a contradiction and is subject to explosion. What the universal phictionalist needs here are (1) independent reasons to reject our usual interpretive strategies so that the story actually satisfies the relevant closure principle, and (2) evidence that the logic of fiction is governed by an unrestricted explosion principle.

I have already shown that stories like *TEN** do not supply us with sufficient evidence to grant the antecedent of the explosive conditional. In the remainder of this section, I will argue that even the consideration of an author's extra-textual goals does not suffice to motivate a local rejection of our usual interpretive practices and the concomitant acceptance of contradictory fictional propositions. Simple sayings will suffice to satisfy the vast majority of these goals; fictional truth is supernumerary, entirely surplus to requirements.

We saw earlier that contradictions are invitations for readers to come to an interpretive decision about the story's content. That decision will be informed by the reader's background knowledge of the real world, the rest of the story, and considerations of the author's or narrator's extra-textual goals. Because of the Says-Is Gap and the weight of precedent, we know that neither the real world nor the story itself supplies the reader with a sufficient reason to accept a fictional contradiction. That leaves us with the author's extra-textual goals: could they plausibly suffice to motivate the truth of contradictory propositions?

One way to set this up is by appealing to extra-textual evidence of an author's aims. So, for instance, Graham Priest tells the story of *Sylvan's Box* in the *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* to motivate paraconsistent logic as the logic of fiction, and in the context of his 2005 monograph in order to illustrate a viable noneist account of intentionality. In much the same way, Wildman and Folde (2017) tell stories like *TEN* in order to pump the intuition that universal phictions are plausible. In light of this kind of auctorial intention, it seems sensible to read *Sylvan's Box* as featuring a box that is both empty and contains a figurine, and to read *TEN* as a universal phiction.

But neither Priest nor Wildman and Folde need fictional *truth* in order to realize their extra-textual goals; they simply need to tell the story, and use it as an invitation to the rest of us to take their proposals seriously. They are thought-experiments, nothing more or less: fictional scenarios with tightly controlled parameters whose purpose is to elicit judgements about the likely outcome of the situation described. The resulting judgements form the starting-point for investigations into the general phenomenon captured by the thought-experiment. A thought-experiment needn't be *true* to be good or useful; in fact, most thought-experiments ask us to consider completely *implausible* scenarios. The failure of the stories in question to secure the truth of their fictional claims does not entail the failure of their extra-textual goals. It suffices to simply state the scenario in such a way as to prompt us to reflect on it.

Consider Edwin Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance in Many Dimensions* (1884). The novella has two major aims (1) to satirize the sexism and rigid class structure of Victorian society, and (2) to introduce the reader to some new and controversial (at the time) insights about higher-dimensional geometry. *Flatland* manages to do these things despite (1) not having been especially popular at the time of its initial publication, (2) largely ignoring the dimension of time, and (3) leaving unanswered important questions such as how Flatlanders manage to communicate with one another, or to

disambiguate between individuals of the same shape. The *Flatland* thought-experiment is flawed, but it manages to achieve its aims in spite of those flaws.

In much the same way, *TEN* aims to draw attention to the possibility of universal phictions by showcasing how we might plausibly go about constructing them. It achieves this goal by offering a clear strategy for telling such stories: it tells us that the story in question must both affirm unrestricted explosion and present a contradiction. The mere spectre of universal phictions suffices to draw philosophical attention to their possibility, and to the mechanics of fictional truth. It is perfectly reasonable for us to suppose that a story can claim that any articulable proposition (or class of propositions) whatsoever is true; what is not so reasonable is the inference that claiming makes true. Just consider Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which features the slogans “war is peace,” “freedom is slavery,” and “ignorance is strength.” These slogans do not need to be literally true in the story in order for them to perform a useful epistemic service.⁴⁶ Although Oceania's citizens routinely engage in the kind of double-think embodied by INGSOC's three slogans—that is, although they genuinely accept contradictory propositions—no competent reader would go on to infer that they also believe in Dino's weird exploits from §I or, worse, that a character called Dino actually does those things in *1984*'s story-world.

6. Conclusion

Fictional truth and literary interpretation are explanatory endeavours, and as such they concern our critical and reflective practices, not our occurrent habits. What we are interested in are the capacities of various propositions to play certain kinds of explanatory roles in our practices, and they can only do this by entering into empirically-informed generalizations about those practices. I have tried to

⁴⁶ In fact, it seems important to the story that they *not* be thought literally true in the story-world, since they are pieces of propaganda produced by INGSOC for the purpose of controlling Oceania's population (and are thus ostensibly false or at best misleading).

show that universal phictions neither map on to nor make use of those straightforward explanatory resources. Worse still, the payoffs are negligible since they can easily be had by other means. Faced with an exploding story, our default critical attitude is (and should be) one of skepticism. The onus, then, is on proponents of universal phictions to show that their stories really do make all of their propositions (and more) *true*, rather than merely raising the possibility of their truth as an interesting (but ill-fated) literary thought-experiment.⁴⁷

Works Cited

- Badura, C., & Berto, F. (Forthcoming). "Truth in Fiction, Impossible Worlds and Belief Revision." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.
- Byrne, A. (1993). "Truth in fiction: The story continued." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 71.1: 24-35.
- Currie, G. (1990). *The Nature of Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cruz, Nicole, David Over, and Mike Oaksford. (2017). "The elusive oddness of or-introduction." Edited by G. Gunzelmann, A. Howes, T. Tenbrink and E. Davel. *Proceedings of the 38th Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*. Austin: Cognitive Science Society. 1104-09.
- D'Alessandro, W. (2016). "Explicitism about Truth in Fiction." *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 56.1: 53-65.
- Davies, D. (2007). *Aesthetics & Literature*. New York: Continuum.
- . (2011). *Philosophy of the Performing Arts*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Deutsch, H. (1985, March). "Fiction and Fabrication." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 47.2: 201-11.
- Estrada-González, L. (2018). "(In some fictions) Everything is true." *The Australasian Journal of Logic* 15.2: 64-76.

⁴⁷ I owe particulars thanks to Melanie Coughlin, David Friedell, Maiya Jordan, and John Woods for helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

- Evnine, S. (2015). "But Is It Science Fiction?": Science Fiction and a Theory of Genre. *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, XXXIX(1), 1-28.
- Fine, K. (1982). "The Problem of Non-Existents." *Topoi* 1: 97-140.
- Friend, S. (2012). Fiction as a Genre. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 112 (2pt2), 179-209.
- Friend, S. (2017). "The Real Foundation of Fictional Worlds." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95.1: 29-42.
- Hanley, R. (2004, March). "As good as it gets: Lewis on truth in fiction." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 82.1: 112-28.
- Harman, G. (1984). "Logic and Reasoning." *Synthese*, 60, 107-27.
- Kermode, M. (2015). "Jaws, 40 years on: 'One of the truly great and lasting classics of American cinema'." 31 May 2015. *The Guardian*. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/31/jaws-40-years-on-truly-great-lasting-classics-of-america-cinema>>.
- Lamarque, P. and S.H. Olsen. (1994). *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lewis, D. K. (1978). "Truth in Fiction." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15.1: 37-46.
- . (1983). "Postscripts to 'Truth in Fiction!'" In *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1*: 276-80. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mag Uidhir, C. (2013). *Art & Art-Attempts*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . (2010). "Failed-Art and Failed Art-Theory." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88.3: 381-400.
- Matravers, D. (2014). *Fiction and Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McKoon, G., & Ratcliffe, R. (1992). "Inference During Reading." *Psychological Review*, 99.3: 440-66.
- Motoarcă, I.-R. (2017). A Bad Theory of Truth in Fiction. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 57.4: 379-87.
- Nolan, D. (2007). "A Consistent Reading of 'Sylvan's Box'." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57.229: 667-673.
- Pinder, M. (2017). "A Normative Argument Against Explosion." *Thought* 6.1: 61-70.
- Prentice, D.A., R.D. Gerrig, and D.S. Bailis. (1997). "What readers bring to the processing of fictional texts." *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* 5: 416-20.
- Priest, G. (1997). "Sylvan's Box: A Short Story and Ten Morals." *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 38 (4), 573-82.

- Priest, G. (2005). *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Routley, R. (1979). "The semantical structure of fictional discourse." *Poetics* 8.1: 3-30.
- Ryan, M-L. (1980). "Fiction, Non-Factuals and the Principle of Minimal Departure." *Poetics* 9.4: 403-22.
- Walton, K. (1990). *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wheeler, S.C., M.C. Green, and T.C. Brock. (1999). "Fictional narratives change beliefs: Replications of Prentice, Gerrig and Bailis (1997) with mixed collaboration." *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* 6: 136-41.
- Wildman, N., & Folde, C. (2017). "Fiction Unlimited." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 75.1, 73-80.
- Wildman, N. (2019). "The Possibility of Empty Fictions." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77.1: 35-42.
- Woods, J. (1974). *The Logic of Fiction*. Paris: Mouton.
- Woods, J., & Alward, P. (2004). "The Logic of Fiction." In D. M. Gabbay, & F. Guentner (Eds.), *Handbook of Philosophical Logic* (Vol. 11, pp. 241-316). Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media.
- Woods, J. (2018). *Truth in Fiction: Rethinking Its Logic*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Xhignesse, M.-A. (2016). "The Trouble with Poetic Licence." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56.2: 149-61.