

FICTIONS THAT PURPORT TO TELL THE TRUTH

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Can fictions make genuine assertions about the actual world? Proponents of the 'Assertion View' answer the question affirmatively: they hold that authors can assert, by means of explicit statements that are part of the work of fiction, that something is actually the case in the real world. The 'Nonassertion' View firmly denies this possibility. In this paper, I defend a nuanced version of the Nonassertion View. I argue that even if fictions cannot assert, they can indirectly communicate that what is recounted as fictional is actually true. I show that this view is supported by independent linguistic data, and that it is able to defuse the objections that are typically raised against the Nonassertion View. I conclude by showing that this position has some interesting implications for testimonial cognitivism about fiction.

1. CAN FICTIONS ASSERT?

Fictional works recount stories that are about fictional events. This is hardly a controversial claim: we all know that the events narrated in Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* and in Orwell's *1984* are mere figments of their authors' imaginations. But while both works recount fictional stories, they also succeed in communicating something about the real world. Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* contains detailed historical information about the years of the Bourbon Restoration in France. Orwell's *1984*, meanwhile, explores the dystopic implications of mass-surveillance technologies, propaganda and totalitarianism. By recounting fictional events, both works convey important messages about reality. It seems that fictional stories aren't *merely* reports of fictional events: they often communicate something important about the actual world.

While scholars overwhelmingly agree that works of fiction often succeed in communicating something about the actual world, there's substantive scholarly disagreement about *how* fictions manage to achieve this goal, given that the stories they tell are, after all, fictions. Two views play a central role in this debate. According to the *Assertion View*, authors of fiction can talk about the real world *explicitly* and *directly*, by making assertions *in propria persona*. On this view, some of the statements included in a work of fiction are genuine assertions about the actual world.¹ But

¹ Walton (1983; 1990); Searle (1975); Currie (1985; 1986; 1990; 2020); Friend (2012; 2014:231); Reicher (2012); Green (2017b); Konrad (2017); Abell (2020:42–3); Dixon (2022); cf. García-Carpintero (2019b). For a recent overview, García-Carpintero (2020).

most philosophers disagree, and endorse the rival *Nonassertion View*, which denies that authors of fiction can ever assert, by means of explicit statements included in the fiction, that something is actually the case.²

The primary aim of this paper is to settle the disagreement between these two theories. After presenting the Assertion View (§2) and the Nonassertion View (§3.1) in better detail, I introduce my own account (§3.2), according to which works of fiction can at most suggest, but never assert, that something is actually the case. I show that this view is supported by independent linguistic data (§4), and that it can defuse some common objections to the Nonassertion View (§§5–6). I conclude by considering the epistemological implications of this proposal for testimonial cognitivism about fiction.

2. THE ASSERTION VIEW

We have seen that fictions often convey information about the real world. The Assertion View advances a stronger claim: it maintains that fictions can communicate propositions about the real world *by asserting them*. What does this mean, exactly? Since different authors understand the notion of ‘fiction’ (and that of ‘assertion’) in slightly different ways, it is hard to present the Assertion View in a way that will satisfy all its proponents. To remain neutral as to what ‘fiction’ is, it will be helpful to introduce the Assertion View by means of analogy, contrasting genuine assertions with less committal speech acts that resemble fiction.

Asserting is intuitively different from weaker speech acts, such as *supposing*, *hypothesizing*, or *inviting to imagine*. One thing is to genuinely assert a proposition and present it as actually being true. Another is to present that proposition as something that *may or may not* be true, setting it forth for contemplation, imagination, or as a hypothesis. To see the difference, let’s compare two examples. Suppose that Silvia and Sophie are having a conversation about religious history, and Silvia says:

- (1) Fra Dolcino’s Apostles preached the physical destruction of clerics and lords, and committed many acts of violence.

Uttering (1), Silvia makes an *assertion*: she claims that (1) is true. This is different from merely supposing it, or putting it forward as something to imagine, as in (2):

² Beardsley (1958:421–3; 1981); Ohmann (1971); Gale (1971:324–39); van Inwagen (1977:301, 307); Frye (2006); Kripke (2011); Maier (2017), Mahon (2019).

- (2) Let's imagine, merely hypothetically, that Fra Dolcino and his Apostles preached the physical destruction of clerics and lords, and committed many acts of violence

By analogy, to claim that *fictions can assert* is to claim that some of the sentences³ contained in a work of fiction can be offered to the reader not merely as material for contemplation or imagination, as in (2), but as genuinely asserted content, that the author affirms to be true in the real world, as in (1). More concisely: the Assertion View holds that works of fiction can contain assertions about the actual world.

There is more to say about this example: (1) is, in fact, an excerpt from Umberto Eco's fiction *The Name of the Rose*. It is taken from a long digression about European medieval history. The digression (like many others in the book) is historically accurate, and meant to be recognized as such by the reader. If you think that in such a context we should take Eco to be speaking *in propria persona*, and if you agree that in writing (1) he is making a genuine assertion about actual medieval history, then you are a sympathizer of the Assertion View. This theory maintains that Eco isn't merely inviting the reader to treat (1) as part of the fictional story (i.e. as a mere detail of its setup, which may or may not be true): his (1) is a factual claim, meant to inform readers about actual historical facts.

The Assertion View does not impose any specific constraints on which kind of content can be asserted in fiction. Authors can make all sort of claims, including very general remarks, as in the notorious opening of *Anna Karenina*:

- (3) All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

The Assertion View allows that (3) can be a genuine assertion, by Tolstoy, about the different ways in which families can be unhappy. More generally, this view allows for all sorts of assertions in fiction: specific or general; historical or geographical; trivial or complex; and so forth. Of course, no serious scholar ventures to suggest that *every* statement contained in a work of fiction is necessarily an assertion about the

³ Here I am focusing on sentences in literary works. But not all fictions are collections of sentences: the audio-visual content of fiction films, for instance, cannot always be reduced to sentential content. Although principles for identifying propositional content in non-literary works are available (see e.g. Abell 2020), explaining under which conditions audio-visual content can be assertoric requires developing a much more complex theoretical machinery. To set aside these complexities, the Assertion View is typically defended as an analysis of *literary* fictions that can in principle be expanded to cover other works. This paper follows suit, restricting its focus to literary works.

actual world. The idea is merely that fictions *can* convey assertions under the right circumstances. Accordingly, we may formulate the Assertion View as follows:

(FCA) Fictions can assert

Statements occurring in a work of fiction can be genuine assertions about the actual world.

Let me immediately ward off a potential misunderstanding about FCA. There is a trivial sense in which FCA could be regarded as true. It is uncontroversial that genuine assertions can be found at the ‘periphery’ of a work of fiction – what came to be known as ‘paratext’ in literary theory (see Genette 1997). Materials like the preface, the biography of the author on the back cover, or the footnotes added by the translator can clearly be asserted. Whether assertions can occur in the paratext is therefore not really a matter of dispute: it is accepted by both sides of the debate. Assertionists disagree with nonassertionists on a more specific point: the possibility of making genuine assertions within the *main text* of the work of fiction – by means of statements like (1) or (3), or through ‘authorial intrusions’⁴. Accordingly, FCA must be read as a claim about the possibility of making assertions in the main text of a work of fiction, not in its paratext.⁵

A further clarification is in order. The Assertion View could easily be confused with a view that falls outside its scope: the weaker thesis that fictions can convey ‘thematic statements’ – claims that aren’t put forward by single, isolated sentences (like in the examples above) but rather communicated by the work as a whole. To go back to our previous example, in *1984* George Orwell illustrates the dystopic implications of mass-surveillance technologies, propaganda and totalitarianism. Analogously, in *Les Choses* Georges Perec criticizes the materialistic values of European society during the economic boom of the sixties. Perhaps more straightforwardly, in *Pinocchio* Carlo Collodi warns his readers that lies don’t get you far in life. In all these cases, the author communicates something about the real world, but relies on no specific sentence to achieve this goal. Thematic claims aren’t

⁴ A well-known example of authorial intrusion can be found in Emily Brönte’s *Jane Eyre*: ‘A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play; and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see a room [...]’

⁵ Of course, the distinction between paratext and main text is somewhat loose. Authors sometimes introduce footnotes signed by fictional characters, prefaces penned by imaginary editors, and complex combinations thereof (see, e.g., Mayer 1999). Genette’s (1997:2) own seminal discussion acknowledges this point, describing the paratext as a ‘threshold’, ‘an “undefined zone” between the inside and the outside [of the text]’. Such looseness poses no challenge to FCA, which isn’t committed to the existence of a sharp boundary, nor to any specific way of drawing it. FCA merely states that assertions can occur on both sides of the boundary, no matter how the distinction is drawn.

conveyed by explicit statements: rather than putting forward specific propositions as true, like (1) and (3) do, they advance unspecific thematic messages, that could be rendered by various appropriate paraphrases.

That fictions can convey thematic messages of this sort is an uncontroversial thesis; so much so, that it tends to be accepted across the board (by both assertionists and nonassertionists). Most theorists agree that a communicative act is an assertion only if it is direct and explicit (Gluer 2001; Stainton 2016; Pagin 2014:§2; Alston 2000; Searle 1969; Borg 2019 but cf. García-Carpintero 2018). Since thematic messages aren't stated explicitly (but rather conveyed indirectly by the work as a whole), the suggestion that thematic statements can be assertions is a non-starter. It is therefore important not to confuse the view that fictions can convey thematic statements with the Assertion View. The latter holds that authors can make genuine assertions about the actual world *by means of explicit statements* included in their works of fiction.⁶

3. THE NONASSERTION VIEW

3.1 The Nonassertion View, and some of its versions

The Nonassertion View is the polar opposite of the Assertion View: it rejects FCA, and affirms that fictions cannot communicate propositions about the real world *by asserting them*. In a motto: *fictions never assert*. We can formulate the Nonassertion View as follows:

(FNA) Fictions never assert

Statements occurring in a work of fiction cannot be genuine assertions about the actual world.

Consider again the sentence about the Dulcinians, (1). The Nonassertion View maintains that, since Eco's statement is fictional, it cannot be a genuine assertion, by the author, about actual religious history. More generally, the key contention of

⁶ Amongst assertionists, there is disagreement concerning *how* the content of a work of fiction can be asserted. A few philosophers believe that authors can 'pause' and 'restart' the fiction at their will, to make serious and asserted remarks, so that fictional works are often 'a patchwork of fiction-making and assertion' (Currie 1990, 48; cf. Searle 1975, 332; Konrad 2017). On this 'Patchwork View' of fiction, an utterance can be *either* fictional *or* asserted (unless it is aimed at different audiences, cf. Currie 1990, 35). Many philosophers, however, reject the Patchwork View (e.g. Friend 2008; García-Carpintero 2013; Stock 2017). For them, endorsing FCA means holding that an utterance can be *both* fictional *and* asserted. For our purposes, this internal disagreement can be left aside. But it is worth highlighting that there are two ways of articulating FCA: one takes the assertions in fiction to be both asserted and fictional; the other treats them as 'holes' in the fabric of fiction, which are not themselves part of the fiction.

the Nonassertion View is that classifying a work as fictional amounts to denying that it contains assertions about the actual world. This invites a natural question: if with (1) Eco isn't asserting anything about the Dulcinians, what is he doing? One influential answer is that fictional utterances are at most *pretend*-assertions or *mock*-assertions: while they have the surface features of ordinary assertions, the author does not take responsibility for their truth, sincerity, or more generally for the satisfaction of their felicity conditions.⁷

The Nonassertion View does not go as far as claiming that fictions cannot communicate anything at all about the real world. It simply denies that utterances like (1) or (3) can communicate that their content is true *by asserting it*. But there are exceptions to this: a few authors accept the stronger claim that works of fiction cannot communicate anything about the real world 'in the ordinary sense of communication'. These authors contend that, 'since [a fictional utterance] is not an assertion', it 'claims to convey no information' (Beardsley 1958:423; see also Diffey 1995:208). I will call this position the *Strong Nonassertion View*, to distinguish it from the Nonassertion View itself (as expressed by FNA).

3.2 The Indirect Nonassertion View

This paper defends a version of the Nonassertion View that explains (against the Strong Nonassertion View) *how* works of fiction can communicate something about the real world, when they do. The idea is simple and intuitive: although works of fiction cannot contain assertions, they can still *imply* (or otherwise suggest) that something is actually the case in the real world. This view places the distinction between asserting and implying at the centre of the Nonassertion View.

What is the difference between asserting and implying? Although theorists disagree widely on how to define assertion (see Pagin & Marsili 2021), we saw in §2 that most theorists agree that assertion is an *explicit*, *open* and *direct* speech act. By making an assertion with content *p*, a speaker *openly* presents *p* as true, accepting to be held accountable for *p* being the case. What the speaker asserts 'out in the open' can thus be contrasted with what the speaker merely suggests or implies, i.e. content that is not explicit, and that is only *indirectly* communicated.

⁷ Defenders of this view include Macdonald (1954), Frege (1979:130), Ryle (1951), Urmson (1976:156), Lewis (1978), and Kripke (2011). In a similar vein, Ohmann (1971:14), Searle (1975), Beardsley (1978:168–9) and Alward (2009; 2010) maintain, more generally, that authors of fiction merely *pretend* to perform the speech acts contained in their works (cf. Smith 1971; Predelli 2020). This view can be framed using the author/narrator distinction: in fiction one can make assertions *qua narrator* (as part of the fictional pretence), but not *qua author*. However, whether all fictional works have a narrator is a matter of dispute (Kania 2005; Walton 1990; Currie 1990:ch. 4; Wilson 2011; Predelli 2020).

Indirect communication takes many forms. To illustrate how it differs from direct communication, let's consider a paradigmatic example of 'particularized conversational implicature' (adapted from Grice 1975):

- (4) Luisa: Is Bruno still single?
- (5A) Vlad: He has a romantic partner who lives in Bologna.
- (5I) Vlad: He has been paying a lot of visits to Bologna lately.

Intuitively, Vlad answers Luisa's question *directly* in (5A), and only *indirectly* in (5I). In both cases, Vlad may intend to convey the message that Bruno has a romantic partner in Bologna. But while (5A) *explicitly asserts* that Bruno has a romantic partner in Bologna, (5I) at most *implies* or *suggests* that he has one.

When authors of fiction communicate something about the actual world, I contend, the way in which they convey their message patterns more closely with cases of indirect communication like (5I) than with cases of assertion like (5A). Eco's statement about the Dulcinians provides an ideal example for illustrating this difference.

In writing (1) ('Fra Dolcino's Apostles preached the physical destruction of clerics and lords', etc.), Eco communicates that *according to the fictional story* the Dulcinians preached the physical destruction of clerics and lords.⁸ Since this statement occurs in a work of fiction, whose context is presented as a mixture of imaginary and real facts, Eco does not *explicitly* communicate that (1) is actually true. However, given that (1) occurs in the context of a realistic historical fiction, most readers will indeed assume that Eco intends to imply or suggest that (1) is true not merely in the fiction, but also in the actual world. If this is right, Eco isn't communicating that (1) is true in the actual world *directly*, by asserting it – he is merely implying it. We can infer Eco's intention to communicate that (1) is *actually* true from the context, just as we can infer that Bruno has a romantic partner in Bologna from (5I): by reconstructing, fallibly, the speaker's communicative intention, rather than taking their literal word for it.

Let's call the view sketched so far the *Indirect Nonassertion View*. This view sits well with the idea, influential in philosophy and linguistics,⁹ that asserting a proposition necessarily involves undertaking an explicit commitment to the truth of

⁸ For a classic analysis of statements about fiction along these lines, see Lewis (1978), to which Predelli (1997) offers a promising refinement. But I am open to any alternative account, as long as it is compatible with FNA.

⁹ Defenders of this view include Searle (1969; 1975); Brandom (1983; 1994), Searle & Vanderveken (1985), Green (1999; 2000; 2007; 2013; 2017a), Alston (2000); MacFarlane (2003; 2005; 2011), Kissine (2008), Krifka (2014), Marsili (2015; 2020; 2021), Tanesini (2016; 2019), and Marsili & Green (2021).

that proposition. Authors of non-fiction are fully responsible for the truth of the statements contained in their work: they are meant to only include accurate statements. Not so for authors of fiction. No matter how realistic and plausible, a statement contained in a work of fiction may be there for some aesthetic goal other than telling the truth: authors of fiction aren't fully accountable for the truth of any particular statement contained in their works. This would explain why authors of fiction can only *imply* or *suggest* (but not assert) that a fictional statement is true. As we are about to see, beyond the aforementioned considerations, the Indirect Assertion View is supported by pre-theoretical, independent linguistic tests, which have been developed by scholars working on the distinction between direct and indirect communication.

4. TESTING THE INDIRECT NONASSERTION VIEW

4.1. The Indirectness Test

Linguists and philosophers agree that, by and large, assertions can be distinguished from implicata by attending to whether the speaker can *felicitously cancel*¹⁰ the alleged implicature (see Grice 1989; Sullivan 2017; Zakkou 2018). To put it simply, (C) or (R)¹¹ are admissible things to say after having implied that *p*, but inadmissible to say after having asserted that *p*:

- (C) But not *p*.
- (R) But I don't mean to suggest that *p*.

Since this is a bit abstract, let's apply it to our previous example. In both (5A) and (5I) (left column, Figure 1) Vlad communicates the proposition *p*: *that Bruno has a partner in Bologna*. If we insert this proposition into the (C) and (R) schema, we get (5C) and (5R) (right column, Figure 1).

¹⁰ In the familiar Austinian sense of 'felicity' (Austin 1962) and Gricean sense of 'cancellation' (Grice 1989; Zakkou 2018).

¹¹ 'C' here stands for *Contradiction Test*, and 'R' for *Retraction Test*.

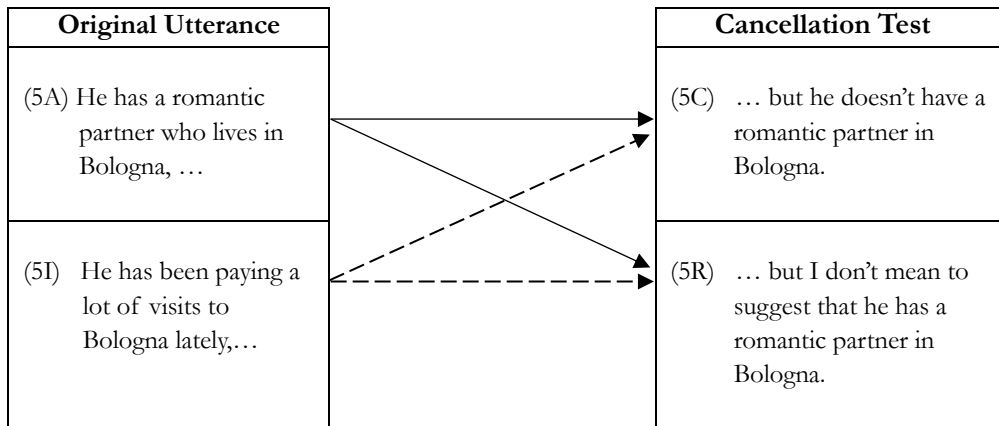


Figure 1: The Indirectness Test

We can now see how the test works. The full-line arrows in Figure 1 indicate the conversational patterns that arise when we apply the test to the *assertion* (5A). Attempting to rectify (5A) with (5C) or (5R) is dramatically infelicitous: saying (5C) after (5A) generates a blatant contradiction, while saying (5R) after (5A) is pragmatically absurd. Not so for the *implicature* (5I) (dashed-line arrows): saying (5C) after (5I) delivers no contradiction, and saying (5R) after (5I) is a perfectly reasonable way for Vlad to clarify what he means.

The example illustrates how the availability of expressions like (C) and (R) can be used to test whether a given proposition has been communicated indirectly, rather than explicitly asserted: implicatures are felicitous when followed by (C) and (R); assertions are not. We can express the test as follows:

The Indirectness Test

For any given utterance U that conveys a proposition p , if uttering (C) after U generates no contradiction, and if adding (R) after U results in a felicitous utterance, then this is *prima facie* evidence that p was indirectly communicated, rather than asserted.

Like many other linguistic tests, the Indirectness test does not offer *conclusive* evidence for telling assertions apart from indirects: it states that the availability of (R) and (C) is *prima facie* evidence that p is being indirectly communicated. Even so qualified, however, the Test provides linguistic evidence that can help us assess whether fictional utterances that communicate something about the real world are best classified as assertions or not.

4.2 Can fictions make assertions about the real world?

Let's go back to Eco's statement about the Dulcinians. Imagine that Eco included the false (1b), instead of the true (1), in his fiction:

(1b) The Dulcinians were fervent papists.

Suppose, further, that Eco is interviewed and pressed about the falsity of the above statement. It would then be admissible and felicitous for Eco to reply with (1b-R) (which applies (R) to (1b)):

(1b-R) You misunderstood me: I didn't mean to suggest that it's actually true that the Dulcinians were fervent papists.

Similarly, it wouldn't be contradictory for Eco to add (1b-C):

(1b-C) In fact, the Dulcinians were anything but papists – they fervently opposed the Pope and his authority.

Eco may clarify that he decided to depart from the historical record because his narrative plot demanded the addition of this detail, and that he took this 'poetic license' because it improved the enjoyability and overall aesthetic value of his work. As predicted by the Indirect Nonassertion View, the Indirectness Test rules that in adding (1b) Eco didn't assert that the Dulcinians were papists. The result of the test suggests that he communicated this claim indirectly, not by means of an explicit assertion.

The cancellation patterns invoked by the Indirectness Test are not uncommon; authors of historical fiction often resort to them. Here's a real life example (cited already in Friend 2006). Gore Vidal's *Lincoln* is a historical fiction that contains very few fictional elements. In the afterword, Vidal even clarifies that '[a]ll of the principal characters really existed and they said and did pretty much what I have them saying and doing'. In a review of the novel, the historian Richard Current (1988, 66) objected that Ulysses S. Grant had never gone into the saddlery business, contrary to what is claimed in the book. In response, beyond describing the criticism as pedantic, Vidal (Vidal 1993, 691) clarified that the claim that Grant went into the saddlery business was an 'idle remark' by John Hay (one of the narrators), not an assertion by the author. Using an expression functionally equivalent to (R), Vidal clarified that he didn't mean to suggest that it is actually true that Grant went into the saddlery business. As predicted by the Indirect Nonassertion View, his reply isn't absurd or contradictory: it is felicitous, because Vidal never asserted that it is actually

the case that Grant went into the saddlery business. He could at most be taken to have implied or suggested it, although in this case this wasn't his declared intention.

Note that this sort of reply isn't available to the author of non-fiction. If Eco had written (1b) in a historical essay about religious history, then it would have been absurd for him to reply with (1b-R), and inappropriate (or at least ineffective) for him to defend this inaccuracy by suggesting that it was just meant to improve the enjoyability of his work. Similar considerations would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Vidal's response to Current, had he published *Lincoln* as a work of non-fiction¹².

4.3 Conflicting intuitions: a digression on digressions

The Indirectness Test provides some evidence in support of the Indirect Non-Assertion View. However, proponents of the Assertion View often report the intuition that some utterances in fiction are straightforward assertions. Can the Nonassertion View accommodate this intuition? This question becomes more pressing if we consider that so far this paper has only debated the status of isolated statements. Putative assertions in fiction often occur within longer digressions, whose recognisable function is to inform the reader about some real-world facts. For the assertionist, it would be wrongheaded to deny the status of assertion to these statements.

Take, for instance, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. One of its books (of the 38 that compose *Les Misérables*), "Waterloo", offers a historically accurate reconstruction of the Battle of Waterloo. Although "Waterloo" contains occasional inventions and inaccuracies, some of its chapters are (it could be argued) entirely factual and accurate, and meant to be recognised as such – they're a sort of *essayistic digression* within the fiction. Arguably, the primary role of these digressions is not to elicit imaginings, but rather to share factual information. Why, then, shouldn't these passages be classified as assertions? The same question is imposed by other straightforwardly factual digressions in fiction, such as the ones found in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Herman Hesse's *Beneath the Wheel*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, Lev Tolstoy's *War & Peace*, and many other novels¹³.

To bolster their counterargument, assertionists will add that these digressions present many hallmark features of assertoric speech: (i) the author intends their

¹² While I am suggesting that authors of fiction are often afforded plausible deniability, I am not claiming that their denials are always *plausible*. The test only predicts that denials of this sort will always be *felicitous*. Clearly, not all felicitous denials are plausible – depending on the context, it might be obvious that the denial is in bad faith (cf. Mazzarella 2021).

¹³ I owe some of these examples to Sophie Grace Chappell. The first two examples are analysed in Konrad (2017).

audience to realise that these passages describe the actual world; (ii) any competent reader would realise that this is how the passage should be interpreted, and indeed (iii) the information conveyed in these passages is accurate, verifiably true, and not accidentally so¹⁴. What, if not the hypothesis that these statements are assertions, can accommodate these observations?

Perhaps surprisingly, the answer is that we can accommodate these observations also if we hypothesise (following the Indirect Nonassertion View) that the author is merely suggesting or implying that these statements are true. To classify statements as *implicata* is not to deny that they can instantiate properties like (i-iii). After all, that implicatures can convey claims about the actual world is hardly questionable. To go back to our previous example, by implying (with (5I)) that Bruno has a partner who lives in Bologna, Vlad can clearly intend Luisa to recognise that that he is talking about actual facts – satisfying (i). Any competent hearer would also (ii) recognise that this is how Vlad’s response should be interpreted¹⁵. And depending on how we construe the example, the implicature can (iii) be true, and verifiably so. Straightforwardly, all three properties can be instantiated by indirect speech.

Upon closer inspection, then, observations like (i-iii) do not testify against the Indirect version of the Nonassertion View. Unlike the *Strong* Nonassertion View (which denies that fictions can ever refer to the actual world), the *Indirect* Nonassertion View does not depart radically from the Assertion View: both acknowledge that fictions can straightforwardly refer to the actual world. The two views only part ways when it comes to explain *how* such feat is achieved. While the Assertion View claims that fictions can talk about the actual world explicitly and directly, the Indirect Nonassertion View denies this possibility. The latter view, however, is better supported by the evidence reviewed so far: on top of being able to accommodate (i-iii), it’s corroborated by the Indirectness Test. It is also better suited to acknowledge an important difference between fiction and non-fiction. Unlike non-fictions, realistic fictions like *Les Misérables* present their stories as a mixture of facts and inventions. Because of this, fiction readers can only rely on (fallible, although often plausible) inferences to reconstruct which parts are meant to be merely imagined, and which are meant to convey information about the actual

¹⁴ These are the observations most frequently brought up in support of the Assertion View (Walton 1983, 80; Currie 1990, 46–49; Konrad 2017; Dixon 2022). I discuss two further datapoints (that statements in fictions can be appropriately criticised for being false, and that they can convey knowledge if true) in section 5 and 6.

¹⁵ The ease with which the speaker’s intention can be recognised is a matter of degree both in indirect speech (compare *particularised implicatures* with *scalar* or *generalised implicatures*) and in fiction (some realist digressions are more easily recognisable than others). This gradedness is easy to accommodate within the Indirect Nonassertion View: since these digressions refer to the real world only indirectly, they exhibit the degrees of explicitness characteristic of indirect speech. The Assertion View, by contrast, cannot easily accommodate this point, since it takes realistic digressions to be just as explicit as direct assertions.

world. This point is easy to accommodate if one accepts the Indirect Nonassertion View, but quite complicated to explain if one rejects it.

4.4 Kinds of Indirection

All in all, the case for the Indirect Nonassertion View may seem fairly convincing. But one may still feel dissatisfied by the lack of details offered so far about its inner workings: not much has been said about the kind of indirection involved. What is missing is an account of the pragmatic machinery that allows fictions to convey information about the actual world. Is it supposed to be explained in terms of *implicature*? Is it perhaps a *sui generis* form of indirection – one that only arises in fictional works? Or maybe an assertive speech act weaker than assertion, like a *suggestion* or an *insinuation*?

It is hard to answer these questions without taking a stance on what fiction is. To give a full characterisation of the indirection mechanism involved in these cases, one must say something about the *direct* speech act that triggers the indirection. But there is widespread disagreement concerning which direct communicative act is performed by authors of fiction, and it would be preferable not to get involved in this broader controversy. To better appreciate this point, let's see how these two apparently unrelated issues intersect, reviewing each of the hypotheses just mentioned.

The *implicature* hypothesis is perhaps the most natural way to spell out the Indirect Nonassertion View. After all, the *Indirectness Test* was inspired by the Gricean cancellability test for detecting implicatures. However, an immediate difficulty arises for this suggestion. The putative implicature arising from (1b) ('The Dulcinians were fervent papists') is identical to the statement that conveys it ('The Dulcinians were fervent papists'). This is unusual for an implicature. In standard implicatures, like (5I), we have a difference between *implicans* and *implicandum*: the implied content (about Bruno's love affairs) is derived from an evidently different asserted content (about Bruno's visits to Bologna).

The objection is avoided if one takes fictional utterances to fall under the scope of a hidden modifier (e.g. '*fictionally*', or '*let's imagine that*').¹⁶ This interpretation identifies a difference between *implicans* and *implicatum*, which can be represented (in broad strokes) as the difference between 'Fictionally, *p*' and 'Actually, *p*' (or: 'Fictionally, the Dulcinians were fervent papists' and 'Actually, the Dulcinians were fervent papists'). While sympathizers of the 'hidden modifier' account of fiction can address the objection in this way, this response is unavailable to its detractors.

¹⁶ See footnote 8 for some pointers to the literature. For an alternative solution, see Voltolini (2021,488-491)

A second option is to expound the Indirect Nonassertion View by arguing that fiction relies on distinctive (*sui generis*) pragmatic mechanisms of indirection that aren't fully reducible to familiar ones (like *implicatures*, *presuppositions*, or *indirect speech acts*). Theorists who deny that fiction constitutes a canonical illocution (for instance, defenders of the view that fictional utterances involve pretend-illocutions or 'etiolated' discourse¹⁷) will find this position appealing. If fiction-making involves pretence, then in suggesting that (1b) is true Eco is doing something slightly more complex than a canonical indirect speech act. He is *pretending to claim* that (1b), while attempting to communicate that (1b) is true outside of the pretence. Projecting claims out of pretence is anything but a standard form of indirect communication. If one endorses this account of fiction, it makes sense to regard (1b) as involving a *sui generis* (or at least non-standard) form of indirectness.

What about philosophers who subscribe to the opposite view that fiction *is* a distinctive illocutionary type?¹⁸ Proponents of this view will likely lean towards the third hypothesis mentioned earlier, according to which authors of fiction can perform indirect speech acts to talk about the actual world. On this view, with (1b) Eco performs both a direct speech act (an illocutionary act of fiction-making, which presents the proposition as 'true in the fiction'), and an indirect speech act (which *suggests* or *insinuates* that the same proposition is actually true). Here, the speech acts differ not in content (as per the implicature hypothesis), but in force.¹⁹

Summarising, to adjudicate between different versions of the Indirect Nonassertion View we would need to take a stance on what fiction is. However, given the widespread scholarly disagreement on the nature of fiction, it would be preferable to remain neutral on this matter. Fortunately, for our purpose (which is to evaluate the explanatory merits of the Indirect Nonassertion View *vis-à-vis* the rival Assertion View) we don't really need to pick sides: it suffices to have shown that there are various options available, each tied to a different theory of what fiction is. In what follows, I will therefore consider the merits of the Indirect Nonassertion View *in general* (as a family of views that encompasses different positions concerning the nature of the indirection involved). Further details can then be plugged into the outline I am providing, according to one's preferences.

¹⁷ Defenders of the former view are reviewed in footnote 7. The latter view has been sketched by Austin (1962), and elaborated by e.g. Friggieri (2014) and Witek (2022).

¹⁸ For instance, defenders of the view that fiction is an illocutionary act whose point is (broadly) to invite the audience to imagine that something is the case, like Currie (1985; 1986; 1990; 2020), Lamarque & Olsen (1994), Davies (1996; 2015), Stock (2011; 2017), and García-Carpintero (2013; 2019a).

¹⁹ This solution comes close to García-Carpintero's (2019b) views, except that he classifies some indirect illocutions as full-fledged (indirect) assertions, rather than as weaker assertives. Note, further, that if you take implicatures to be indirect suggestions, this hypothesis *complements* the implicature hypothesis, rather than challenging it.

In what follows, I will consider two key objections to Indirect Nonassertion Views. I will show that both of these objections are unsuccessful, and that Indirect Nonassertion Views actually fare better than their rivals in explaining some key sociological (§5) and epistemic (§6) facts about fiction.

5. CRITICIZING FALSE STATEMENTS IN FICTION

5.1 The argument from criticisms

Some find that the Nonassertion View doesn't sit well with the way in which we assess the veracity of fictional novels, nor with how we criticize them for the inaccuracies that they contain. It is commonplace for people to criticize some fictional texts (and their authors) for their historical or scientific imprecisions, or more vaguely for a lack of realism. Examples abound: both readers and critics have taken issue with the numerous historical inaccuracies contained in *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (Ehrman 2006), and the Vatican publicly denounced the 'shameful and unfounded errors' found in the book. More recently, despite almost universal acclaim, the HBO series *Chernobyl* was criticized for misrepresenting the historical record: its authors were accused of 'crossing the line from conjuring a fiction to creating a lie' (Gessen 2019). While the complaints about *The Da Vinci Code* seem dramatically off the mark, given that the novel displays little to no realistic aspiration, the critics of *Chernobyl* may have a point: by twisting the story of the meltdown, the authors of this docu-fiction ended up distorting their spectators' historical perception of these tragic events.

These observations are often raised as objections against the Nonassertion View: if fictions don't assert anything about the real world, then it is unclear how these criticisms can be appropriate (Friend 2012; 2014). This 'argument from criticisms' can be formulated as follows, as a simple *modus tollens*:

- (i) If fictional utterances²⁰ cannot be assertions, then it cannot be appropriate to criticize them for being actually false.
- (ii) It can be appropriate to criticize fictional utterances for being actually false.

(∴) It's not the case that fictional utterances cannot be assertions.

²⁰ Here (and below, §6) I use 'fictional utterances' loosely, to refer to any utterance occurring in the main text (as opposed to the paratext) of the work of fiction. This isn't meant to take a stance

The argument from criticisms is certainly a challenge for the Strong Nonassertion View, which maintains that fiction cannot communicate *anything* about the real world (cf. §3.1). If one accepts this view, it is indeed hard to see how authors of fiction could ever be criticisable for misrepresenting the actual world. If there's something that the argument from criticism succeeds in doing, it's showing why the Strong Nonassertion View is implausible: it cannot make sense of the fact that authors of fiction are sometimes liable to be criticized for the inaccuracies contained in their fictions.

Arguably, however, one can be appropriately criticized for implying, without asserting, something that one believes to be false. If this is right, premise (i) is false, and the Indirect Nonassertion View has a way to explain why it is appropriate to criticize inaccurate fictions. This is exactly what I am about to argue.

5.2 The distinction between lying and misleading

Quite obviously, there's something *prima facie* objectionable about deceiving people: if I find out that you intentionally deceived me, I acquire a *pro tanto* reason to criticize you. It is also straightforward that we can deceive without asserting. We do this when we deceive non-verbally, as with Kant's (LE) famous suitcase-packer who ostensibly prepares his suitcase in order to trick an onlooker into believing that he's leaving. And we do this when we deceive verbally, implying something false without asserting it. Consider the conversation between Vlad and Luisa once again:

- (6) Is Bruno still single?
(5I) He has been paying a lot of visits to Bologna lately.

Suppose that Vlad is saying something that he knows to be true: Bruno has indeed been travelling to Bologna. But here's the twist: Vlad is also aware that Bruno doesn't have a romantic partner in Bologna. He's deliberately attempting to deceive Luisa and spread false gossip about Bruno. Vlad has not asserted anything false, but his behaviour is objectionable, and it would be appropriate to criticize him. Against premise (i), then, you can be liable to criticism for implying a false proposition even if you have not asserted that proposition.

Let's see how this applies to fiction. Imagine that Eco included (1b) expressly, to fool his readers into believing, falsely, that the Dulcinians were fervent papists. The Indirect Nonassertion View would rule that Eco wasn't thereby *asserting* that the

against the Patchwork View, which would deny the equivalence. This approximation is merely for ease of exposition, and the argument can always be made more precise by substituting 'fictional utterances' with the corresponding paraphrase (i.e. 'utterances occurring in the main text of a work of fiction').

Dulcinians were papists, but it would also acknowledge that he intentionally attempted to deceive his readers into believing so, by *implying* that (1b) is historically accurate. *Quia* attempted deception, his behaviour is *prima facie* objectionable. It's appropriate to criticize Eco for intentionally suggesting something false, just as it is appropriate to criticize Vlad for doing the same with (5I). Neither of them, however, has asserted anything false: they merely *implied* something they believe to be false.

Philosophers often capture this difference through the distinction between *lying* (asserting what you believe to be false) and *misleading* (merely implying it). For the Indirect Nonassertion View, deceptive statements in fiction cannot be lies – they can at most be misleading. Even if Eco and Vlad aren't strictly speaking *lying*, they are both *misleading* their audiences, and this is what warrants our criticism of their utterances (and of deceptive fiction in general)²¹. The Assertion View, by contrast, is committed to the less plausible claim that deceptive fictional statements like Eco's (1b) are genuine lies.²² This is controversial, since a strong case has been made that while works of fiction can deceive, they cannot strictly speaking contain lies.²³ Contrary to what was initially suggested by the 'argument from criticism', it is ultimately the Assertion View that makes problematic predictions about the inaccuracies that can be found in realistic fictions. For it entails that deliberate inaccuracies should be classified as lies, while philosophers tend to agree that they are best classified as instances of misleading.

The verdict that fictions cannot lie converges with Philip Sydney's famous adage, according to which 'the poet [...] nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth'. But the Indirect Nonassertion View adds a corollary to this: it specifies that the 'poet' can still imply, and can therefore mislead. By clarifying what is objectionable about some factually incorrect claims found in historical fictions, it delivers a simple but explanatorily effective account of why criticizing inaccurate fictions can be appropriate, thus blocking the 'argument from criticism' that is usually deployed against vanilla Nonassertion Views.

²¹ This can be acknowledged independently of one's views about the ethics of lying and deception. While philosophers disagree as to whether lying is morally *worse* than misleading, they overwhelmingly agree that in most circumstances both are *prima facie* objectionable, blameworthy, and therefore liable to criticism (Saul 2012).

²² If Eco asserts (1b), believes (1b) to be false, and intends to deceive his audience into believing that (1b) is true, then there is no way for the Assertion View to avoid the conclusion that Eco is lying (this verdict is rendered by *every* definition of lying on the market. For an overview, see Mahon 2015 and Marsili 2021, sec. 1).

²³ This is a near-universal consensus in the literature (e.g. Austin 1962; Margolis 1963; Gale 1971; Ohmann 1971; Searle 1975; van Inwagen 1977:301; Beardsley 1981:419–23; Lamarque & Olsen 1994:321; Mahon 2019, but cf. Dixon 2021).

6. LEARNING FROM FICTION: ASSERTION AND TESTIMONY

It is often noted that novels can teach us valuable lessons about real life, and that by reading them we can learn truths about history, geography, science and psychology (the list goes on). For instance, Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* contains plenty of historical information about Imperial Rome; Sinclair's *The Jungle* includes detailed technical information about the American meat-packing industry of its time; Kipling's *oeuvre* is a good source of geographical and historical information about the British colonial empire. Many passages of these works are clearly meant to inform the reader about certain real-world facts. If we recognize the author's intention for what it is, then it seems straightforward that we can acquire testimonial knowledge from these passages. Let's call this view *testimonial cognitivism*, as it argues that we can acquire testimonial knowledge from explicit statements contained in a work of fiction.

How can we possibly acquire testimonial knowledge from fiction? The Assertion View has a simple answer: works of fiction can contain genuine assertions, and there's agreement that assertions can be vessels of testimonial knowledge.²⁴ It's not clear that the Nonassertion View is similarly compatible with testimonial cognitivism. If fiction 'presents a state of affairs without asserting that something is the case, it follows that we cannot learn [factual information] from a [fictional] work' (Diffey 1995). Gibson (2003:228) calls this the 'problem of unclaimed truths'. The argument could be presented as another *modus tollens* aimed at rejecting FNA:

- (i) If fictional utterances cannot be assertions, then they cannot convey testimony.
 - (ii) Testimonial knowledge can be acquired from fiction.
-
- (∴) It's not the case that fictional utterances cannot be assertions²⁵

Some nonassertionists (e.g. Diffey 1995) are happy to reject condition (ii): they think that *testimonial cognitivism* is false, and they embrace the unorthodox view that fiction can *never* be a source of testimonial knowledge. For reasons that I am about to outline, I take this view to be misguided; but nothing of what I have argued above blocks this move in defence of the Nonassertion View. In what follows, however, I

²⁴ Some authors are reductionists about testimonial knowledge (see Adler 2006:§§5–7) – but they would not deny that, whatever 'testimony' stands for, it paradigmatically includes assertions.

²⁵ To simplify discussion, I am treating the consequent of (i) as equivalent to the negation of (ii). Of course, the argument relies on the further (and hardly controversial) premise that it is only possible to acquire testimonial knowledge from testimony. A version of this argument is discussed in Reicher (2012).

want to show that testimonial cognitivism is in principle compatible with the Indirect Nonassertion View, contrary to what is suggested by the ‘argument from unclaimed truths’.

The solution is simple, and parallels the one given in response to the argument from criticisms in §5.2: we can easily show that premise (i) is misguided. Arguably, authors of fiction can convey testimonial knowledge indirectly, by suggesting or implying that some of the statements contained in their novels are actually true (see Ohmann 1971:15; García-Carpintero 2016; Alcaraz León 2016; Voltolini 2021, cf. Currie 2020:§9). This is consistent with the view, influential in epistemology,²⁶ that testimonial knowledge can be conveyed not only directly, through assertions, but also indirectly, through implicatures, presuppositions, and other forms of indirect speech (Lackey 2006; O’Brien 2007; Cullison 2010; cf. Rysiew 2007; Langton 2018). To see how indirect speech can convey testimonial knowledge, let’s summon our toy example once again:

- (7) Luisa: Is Bruno still single?
- (5A) Vlad: He has a romantic partner who lives in Bologna.
- (5I) Vlad: He has been paying a lot of visits to Bologna lately.

Call the proposition that Bruno has a romantic partner in Bologna ‘*p*’. By replying with (5A), Vlad informs Luisa that *p* is true *by asserting* that *p*. If Vlad is telling the truth, and Luisa has good reasons to trust him, Luisa can acquire testimonial knowledge that *p* by accepting his assertion. By contrast, if Vlad responds with (5I), he merely *implies* that *p* is true. Still, if (i) *p* is true, (ii) Vlad intends to communicate that *p* by saying (5I), and (iii) Luisa understands Vlad’s intention, it seems that Luisa can come to learn that *p* from what Vlad says. The example is meant to illustrate that a hearer can acquire testimonial knowledge by relying on what a speaker implies, and not only what a speaker says, as long as the hearer correctly infers the speaker’s communicative intention.

My claim above is qualified, and the qualification is important: communication has to be successful in order for testimony to be passed on. I don’t wish to deny that direct, assertoric testimony is typically more likely to be epistemically successful than indirect, implied testimony, because the former typically leaves less room for misunderstanding (Fricker 2012; but cf. Rysiew 2007; Peet 2015). If Vlad uses (5A),

²⁶ I know only two opponents of this view: Goldberg (2001) and Fricker (2012). This paper isn’t the place to settle this disagreement, but not much turns on it. As will become clear below, I hold an intermediate, nuanced position, that accommodates most of what Fricker and Goldberg have to say about implicatures. I take our disagreement to be primarily terminological (we have different preferences on how to define ‘testimony’), and to have little relevance to the general thrust of my argument.

then it is obvious that he is trying to communicate that p is true. But when Vlad uses (5I), he may easily intend to communicate only its literal content, and have no intention to imply that p . Imagine an alternative context in which this is what happens. Luisa doesn't realize that Vlad is being literal about (5I), and infers (incorrectly) that Vlad is trying to communicate that p : she *misunderstands* him. In this scenario, Luisa could not learn that p from (5I), because Vlad isn't testifying that p in uttering (5I).

Recipients of indirectly conveyed testimony find themselves at a higher epistemic risk than recipients of literal messages, due to the greater potential for misunderstanding. Assertions (almost) unambiguously offer their content as testimony; they can be insincere or erroneous, but they leave little room for misunderstanding.²⁷ Indirect communication relies instead on more fallible, complex inferential patterns of interpretation, opening more space for communicative failure.

If the testimony offered by fictional works is at most indirect, then we should expect fictional testimony to be similarly unsafe. This seems right, and the Indirect Nonassertion View offers a plausible account of the source of this unsafety. Just like the recipients of implied testimony, fiction readers must rely on fallible hints (like genre conventions) and complex inferential patterns to reconstruct which parts of the fiction the author is suggesting to be actually true, thus offering them as indirect testimony, and which parts are presented merely as the figment of the author's imagination.²⁸

This hermeneutical gap opens the way for misunderstandings between the author of the fiction and the reader. We have considered a telling example in §4.2: the critic Current took Vidal to be implying (and thereby testifying) that Grant went into the saddlery business, when in fact Vidal didn't mean to suggest this. The indirectness of the (putative) message generated a misunderstanding that would not have been possible had the same statement been asserted. In works of fiction, the statements that are offered as testimony are intermingled with other statements that aren't offered as testimony. Because of this, fictional testimony is conveyed through a riskier and more indirect communicative path than non-fictional testimony.²⁹

In sum, far from failing to make sense of testimony in fiction, the Indirect Nonassertion View sits well with testimonial cognitivism. It offers a nuanced

²⁷ This isn't to say that assertions are *always* literal and unambiguous. For discussion, see Rysiew (2007) and Peet (2015).

²⁸ There is abundant literature on the heuristics that can guide this sort of recovery. See, for instance, Gendler (2000), Friend (2014), Ichino & Currie (2016), Currie (2020:§9).

²⁹ There are other authors (Friend 2014; Ichino and Currie 2016; O'Brien 2017) who concur that fictional testimony is unsafe, but primarily on different grounds. Stock (2018) challenges their views, but her arguments don't put pressure on the view proposed here, namely that testimony in fiction is unsafe *because its content is at most implied*.

account of fictional testimony: rather than rejecting it *tout-court* (as the anti-cognitivist would), or conflating it with assertoric testimony (as the Assertion View would), it assimilates it to testimony via indirect speech. In this way, it is able to explain how readers can acquire testimonial knowledge from fiction, while acknowledging that this path for knowledge transmission exposes them to epistemic risks that aren't faced by recipients of truly assertoric testimony.

In conclusion, the Indirect Nonassertion View offers a novel account of the communicative link between fiction and the actual world, and identifies a promising middle ground between the Assertion View and the Nonassertion View. Works of fiction can talk about the real world *only indirectly, not via explicit assertions*; they can deceive us about the real world, *but only by misleading, not by lying*; and they can convey testimonial knowledge, *but only indirectly, leaving room for potential misunderstandings*³⁰.

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