

ON THE EXISTENCE OF NON-EXISTING ENTITIES  
/ISSUES IN THE ONTOLOGY OF FICTION/

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O. Current work in the semantics of fiction usually starts from post-Russellian ontologies in which, according to Quine's formula, "to exist is to be the value of a variable". The domain where these values are chosen is supposed to be the actual universe and its modal counterparts. In order to account for the semantics of fiction, some authors are ready to accept an extension of this domain, while others appear to think that the only real thing about fiction is fictional discourse: hence, the speech-act theory of fiction. In this paper I will criticize the attempt to ground the theory of fiction in a theory of fictional discourse and I will suggest an ontological expansion to account for fictional constructions.

1. A mime enters an empty stage. He greets an invisible person by taking off an invisible hat and putting it back on again. Offering a broad smile, he shakes an invisible hand and utters a few inaudible words. He then takes the arm of his /invisible/ partner and the two companions walk a few steps. It is by now clear that the invisible person is a woman. The mime smiles gallantly, puts his arm around her waist, carasses her hair, whispers a few words of love in her ear. His hand becomes more daring but the invisible woman soon puts things back in order. They stop and sit on a /visible/ bench. The /inaudible/ conversation becomes more and more



lively. As his partner does not appear to believe him, the mime insists, argues, swears, falls to his knees. Still timid, she rejects his advances. But soon they embrace. Black out.

There is little doubt that a competent public correctly grasps at least two kinds of facts about the mime's performance: first, that the mime is *only pretending* to meet, talk to or embrace someone, second, that the mime's activity on the stage can be described as pretending *something*. A naive or unperceptive spectator who believes that the mime *actually* speaks to and kisses shadows is certainly wrong. By the same token, a person who, while realizing that the performer is only acting, does not understand what all this coming and going on the stage means, is said to have missed the point of the performance.

Consider now two theorists who want to account for the mime's performance. One of them would argue that it is useless to look into what exactly the mime pretended to be doing. Did he meet a woman? Did he kiss her? Pointless questions, since it would be equally awkward to answer "Yes, he did" or "No, he didn't." In this theorist's views, what is essential about the mime's show would be precisely the fact that it is a piece of *acting*.

The second theorist would claim that despite the acting, in order to understand what the show is about, one has to correctly interpret each detail of it. For the second theorist, the answer to questions like "Did the mime meet a woman?" must be affirmative or negative. Indeed, would argue the second theorist, the meaning and the course of the act would change completely if at the beginning of the show the mime did not meet a woman but a mad dog.

In answering this, the first theorist may bring into the discussion conditions and rules which govern our relations with the external world and other minds. Suppose that he establishes a few rules of appropriateness, asking people to

use certain types of behaviour /e.g. talking, kissing/ only when interacting with other people, to make certain gestures only when handling the appropriate objects, etc. When checked against these rules of "appropriateness", the mime's behaviour is clearly spurious. The mime talks to and kisses non-existing entities, handles non-objects, etc. Therefore, the first theorist may argue that the mime's gestures lack the appropriateness of their counterparts in actual life. True, the moving of lips and smiling occurs in communicative situations, but the mime is not involved in such a situation. Whom does he kiss and talk to? No-one, the first theorist would answer. It is all a pretense. There is no need to worry about the woman: she is nothing but the result of "special effects" used by the mime.

But this argument need not convince the second theorist. For, it is clear that as the appearance of the woman is the result of the mime's industry, it is no less clear that *in the act*, the woman does play a role.

The first theorist may then add that he does not deny the woman's role in the act. All he is trying to show is that there are two types of acts: *actual actes* and *pretenses* and that some entities involved in pretenses do not exist, even if we can be brought to a certain kind of perceptual awareness of them. Although we may well believe that a woman is kissed by the mime, or rather we may suspend our disbelief that no woman is there to be kissed by the mime, it remains clear that there is no woman there on the stage. The first theorist would conclude by sketching a theory of the public: the audience may be said to have internalized a system of codes to be used in different situations. In order to correctly assess the mime's behaviour all the spectator has to do is to switch his system to, say, the code of "pretense" or of "artistic fiction". This triggers a modification in the spectator's perceptual framework allowing him to see what is not there, to hear what is not said, and to correctly in-

fer what is not the case from what is not genuine. Moreover, although the system has been switched to "pretense", there remain perceptual outlets which work on the "actuality" switch. Thus, the spectator knows all along that he is sitting in a theatre, that "in fact" the woman is not there, that he is more or less willingly suspending his disbelief, etc.

How many positions are on the switch-board? asks the second theorist.

At least two, answers his opponent, but not necessarily only two. Systems with more options can be thought of, with the important qualification that in each of these systems *to exist* would mean *to exist* in the basic "actual" option. In all the other options existence is a mere illusion.

Consider, however, another performance by the same mime, the second theorist would say. At some point in this performance, the mime is pretending to be a priest who blesses the audience. Is the blessing genuine? Certainly not, as both the actor and the audience correctly interpret the setting of the act. But think of a few variations on this theme. Consider, for example, the case of an unbeliever who attends a mass and sees the priest blessing the crowd. The unbeliever assumes that what he sees is either collective delusion or plain imposture. In the first alternative the priest is himself the victim of an unwarranted belief, in the second, he takes advantage of the popular faith. Suppose, moreover, that the ritual observed by the priest is assumed to compel a certain holy being to descend invisibly upon the heads of the attendants. Does this being exist? Not for the unbeliever, of course, who disdainfully scorns the popular piety. Nor does the holy being exist for a sceptic priest, who vacuously performs the sacred gestures. The crowd nonetheless, as well as a sincere minister, knows that the holy being is there. But let us consider the impostor priest. He "pretends" to invoke the holy spirit, while believing that there

is no such being. Suppose, in addition, that the ritual involves some manifestation of deeply felt belief, such as closing the eyes, trembling, sweating, etc. Suppose also that the attendants are trained to carefully scrutinize the minister in order to detect and punish superficial /and hence ineffectual/ enactments of the rite. The perjured performer of the rite has to perform it as "sincerely" as possible, while knowing perfectly well that his rapture is fake. But in order for his performance to appear genuine, he has to keep his own knowledge of the imposture as marginal as possible. In fact, he may be said to willingly suspend his disbelief in the epiphany of the holy spirit, and enter the performance of the rite with his system "switched" to some non-actual option. For more common situations similar to the invocation rite, think of the innumerable cases of false lovers who willingly and perversely suspend their disbelief in the presence of love, and simulate all the symptoms of this feeling: palor, shyness, blushes, tears, raptures, etc. Some get caught, as the simulation of love can sometimes conjure up the feeling itself. After repeatedly having lied "I love you," these lovers succumb to their own fantasy. To ask whether their love exists or not does not make sense. *They* would say yes, but they also did so when they were only lying. Soon they will forget that there was a time when they were not deeply in love, just as after their love passes, some will claim that it was never there.

The first theorist would certainly argue that love is as elusive as can be and that even if it is not impossible to grant love some sort of existence, it would be mistaken to give it the status of *entity*. Hence, the simile between the holy being and love does not work: one should not compare *entities* and *states*.

To this the second theorist can reply that in many cultures love has been thought of as an /invisible/ entity which takes possession of the body and soul. Contemporary biology

and psychology do not subscribe to a dybbuk-theory of love, but neither does modern science approve of invisible holy beings. And in any case, we are not talking about science, but about *pretense*. Now, as the previous examples suggest, pretense sometimes carries more reality than reality can itself provide. To see this better, let us examine again the mime's impersonation of a priest. Let us assume that the act takes place in a country where, against the general wishes of the people, religion has been entirely forbidden by a cruel, unscrupulous tyrant. Churches have been closed, priests imprisoned and true believers martyred. A well-orchestrated campaign against the old faith is launched; among other things, every artistic event is preceded by or includes some anti-religious act. The cultural leaders of the country force our mime to include in his repertoire a parody of priestly gestures. But suppose that, like the large majority of the inhabitants, the mime is a deeply religious man. Unable to refuse the performing of the blasphemous act, he decides to subtly transform it into an unobtrusive remembrance of the mass. Do not forget that the audience has been deprived of any sacred ceremony for a long time, so that even an imitation of the precious forbidden gestures can electrify the public. Moreover, the image of a minister has become so venerable in this society without ministers, that the spectators instinctively do not pay much attention to the parodic sequences of the anti-religious act. But then, in the midst of the performance, the mime turns towards the public and letting a saintly expression invade his face, he slowly and solemnly blesses the crowd. A stream of grace goes through the hall. No one present doubts the genuineness of the blessing. Neither do the few censors who supervise the performance; indeed, the next day the mime is arrested and executed.<sup>1</sup>

Was the blessing a true one? or was it nothing but the delusion of a deprived crowd bewitched by a poor tumbler? If the situation is seen as an emergency, then it may be judged

according to rules applicable in other similar emergencies. The Christian Church, which traditionally concedes baptism an essential role in the individual path towards salvation, and which jealously keeps for itself the privilege of distributing it, allows the layman to administer baptism in well-defined crisis situations. If new regulations concerning sacraments and blessings were ever made which would take into account the social conditions of modern tyrannies, they could carefully consider situations in which some rites acquire full force even if the usual conditions for their effectiveness are not met. Thus, not only could a layman validly baptize a still-born, in the absence of an ordained minister, but he would be equally enabled to felicitously pronounce a couple husband and wife in cases when, say, the two must depart for concentration camps.

2. The preceding examples all involve cases where the existence of some entity of state is not well established. The entities or states in question appear to exist according to some criteria, while they do not exist according to other criteria. Thus, it is not easy to decide whether the invisible woman in the mime's act exists or not, whether a holy being descends or not upon a crowd of believers, whether or not someone really is in love with someone else. Some of the examples equally involve situations where the opposition between genuine acts and competences and faked ones starts to blur. On the one hand, the blessing of the crowd by an impostor priest is not a genuine blessing.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, a juggler can sometimes acquire the competence of a priest. There appear thus to be situations in which the pretense of an action becomes the very action. Wouldn't the second theorist be justified in surmising that supposedly nonexistent beings, states or properties do possess after all some kind of existence? Shouldn't one refrain from too drastic a use of Occam's famous razor in situations where beards

should grow? Wouldn't a bit of trimming largely suffice in such situations?

But notice first that the mime's act is not a *text* made up of words and sentences.<sup>3</sup> The choice of this type of example is deliberate. It is only natural when examining a fictional text to be led to believe that what makes it *fiction* lies somewhere in its linguistic wrapping. Our first theorist, who supports the speech-act theory of fiction, would claim that fictional discourse embodies a special type of speech-act, characterized notably by the /deliberate/ failure to follow the rules of assertion. Thus, fictional discourse would transgress the following usual regulations for assertions. Notably the speaker must believe that his utterance is true /the rule of sincerity/. Some theoreticians add that the speaker must be prepared to defend the truth of his utterance /the rule of argumentation/; the speaker must be prepared to accept the consequences of his utterance /the rule of consequences/.<sup>4</sup> Since, in a sense, it may appear that a story-teller and more generally the originator of a fictional discourse does not believe in the truth of his utterance, nor is he prepared to defend it or to accept its consequences, the speech-act theorist may well claim that for fictional discourse the above rules are out of place.

But is this claim defensible? The second theorist, with whom we will side from now on, may find at least three ways of attacking it: by arguing that the above rules cover only a minor part of assertive utterances, by casting doubts on the notion of speaker or originator in the case of fictional discourse, finally by showing that linguistic meaning is only a subclass of a much wider category.

To begin with, the above rules for assertion cover only a small section of actual assertive utterances. They describe the behaviour of an ideal speaker whose capabilities far exceed those of human being. Thus, in order to follow the rule of sincerity a speaker has to be transparent to himself



with respect to his beliefs. But since his linguistic competence enables a speaker to utter an astronomically large number of/new/ assertions, in order to follow the rule of sincerity the speaker must possess at least two things: a set B of propositions he believes in and a machinery able to quickly pick up for each assertive utterance of the speaker the corresponding proposition belonging to the set B of sentences the speaker believes to be true. When the speaker utters a sentence, this machine is automatically triggered: if the result of its scanning the set B ends successfully, the speaker may be said to have been sincere, while if the machine fails to find the corresponding sentence in B, the speaker has been insincere.

However, when confronted with real speakers, this model of sincerity involves serious problems. First, it is highly improbable that real speakers possess anything like a set B of propositions that they believe to be true. The picture we get from actual situations appears rather to suggest that we more or less believe a limited number of propositions, while for a large number of propositions we simply do not know /in any serious sense of the word/, whether we believe them to be true or not. In many cases people assert sentences they think they believe, when in fact they adhere to these sentences for other reasons than belief. For instance, they may only strongly admire the person whom they heard assert these sentences. A speaker A, for example, will utter with conviction sentences like:

*/1/ In our riding X is the best candidate.*

in situations where A does not know anything about X, but has a friend B who asserted /1/ several times in the most convincing tone of voice. Equally often, speaker A may utter sentences like:

*/2/ The best vacation spot in Germany is  
Baden-Baden.*

*/3/ Under Mao Tze Tung the Chinese people lived*

*a free and happy life.*

despite the fact that he has never visited Germany and knows nothing about contemporary China. Again, these are his friend B's professed opinions and he feels that he has the right /and the duty/ to use them as his own. When uttering /1/ to /3/, is speaker A sincere? That is, does he believe in what he is saying? But what exactly do we mean by "A believes that utterance *a* is true?" Do we refer to rational belief? To irrational belief? Do we ask the speaker to believe deeply in the truth of *a*, or are we prepared to allow for a perfunctory assent of the speaker to his own sayings? Is the belief supposed to last for a long time, or are we satisfied with a belief equal in duration to the utterance believed to be true? And if the last alternative is chosen, should the belief be simultaneous with the utterance, or may it precede and/or follow the assertion?

These are not spurious questions. Witness the difficulty, in which we so often find ourselves, of discerning whether or not we in fact believe in the truth of some of our incautious statements. Does speaker A believe sentence /3/ to be true? If his life depended on his rejecting /3/, would he hesitate a single moment to /sincerely/ retract it? Are we not justified in claiming that, rather than believing that /3/ is true, A prefers to play with the idea that he believes /3/ to be true? Or take the case of a domestic quarrel, during which one of the partners asserts that the other is the basest human being ever to have lived on earth. Does the utterer believe this to be true? Probably yes, at least at the time of the argument. Or perhaps he believed it a few moments before saying it, but when the words were on the tip of his tongue, he suddenly realized that the statement sounded greatly exaggerated, without, however, his being able to stop the already triggered utterance. Or it could be that the speaker did not fully believe the words until later in the verbal exchange when he saw how right he had been. And so on.

Thus far we have examined only examples of evaluative assertions. When factual assertions are considered, the sincerity requirement appears even more out of place. Suppose that speaker A says:

/4/ *President Kennedy's murder was by  
Castro's orders.*

/5/ *The chemical composition of water is H<sub>2</sub>O.*

/4/ is a controversial statement which A has probably read in some newspaper or heard in a conversation with, say, his vocal friend B. The sincerity of A in uttering /4/ depends less on his own genuine belief that /4/ is the case than on his tuning in to the circulation of statements around him. Confronted with the pressing question "Do you really believe this?", A may well answer "I don't know. Many people say that" or "It's in the papers" or "They said so on T.V."

Such *sincerity by participation in a group* is even clearer in the case of the uncontroversial statement /5/. As has been pointed out by Putnam, a given community collectively masters its own language and its relation with reality. It may well be that as an individual a member of the community is not well acquainted with the full meaning of terms like *elm*, *gnosis*, or *werewolf*. One can employ such terms, however, by virtue of the social division of linguistic labour. An ignoramus may refer to *elm*, *gnosis* or *were-wolves* on the assumption that in the community there are specialists in elms, gnosis and werewolves who could provide all the information necessary should the need arise for a closer scrutinizing of the statements about elms, gnosis or werewolves. Similarly, speaker A can utter /5/ as carelessly as he wishes, without ever bothering to check whether he believes it to be true or not, since in uttering /5/, he can count on the testimony of innumerable chemists who know /5/ to be true. And more important, perhaps, he can rest on the firm support of an entire educational and academic apparatus strongly sanctioned by his society. To assert that the chem-

ical composition of water is  $H_2O$  has less need of sincere belief in the truth of the statement than epistemological adherence to a given society.

What has been said about sincerity applies all the more to the rules of argumentation and consequence. As the image of a speaker capable of finding out whether or not he believes what he says appears to be rather unrealistic, how can one ask such unreliable speakers to defend the truth of their utterances or to accept their consequences? Speakers who are *sincere by participation* should not be expected to defend the truth of their utterances other than by reference to the community /"I don't know; my friends told me that," "It's in the newspapers," etc./, nor to readily accept the consequences of what they say /"How should I have known that saying 'X is a good leader' entails endorsing concentration camps?"/. Accordingly we have to reject the claim that fictional discourse differs from assertive discourse by the suspension in the former of rules of assertion in force in the latter. It appears, indeed, that in many cases the rules of assertion are far from being in force in assertive discourse itself. The application of these rules can be construed either as a normative idealization /corresponding probably to a more or less circumscribed attitude towards the ethics of language/, or as applying only to a few marginal cases, such as the assertions of people such as geniuses or saints who control exceptionally well the beliefs they share.

The above considerations suggest that qualities such as sincerity, ability to argue about assertions, and readiness to accept their consequences are far from being *individually* possessed by speakers. In many cases the individual speakers behave as if their personal linguistic duties had somehow *waivered*. They need not scrupulously perform these duties, since at every failure to do so the community is there to cover for them. But if this is so, the very notion of the speaker as the originator and master of his own utterances

becomes suspect. When our speaker A irresponsibly carries over the assertions of his friend B, may he be said to be *the speaker*? Or, if we still want to qualify him as a speaker, should we not defuse some of the connotations of the term?

The contemporary notion of an ideal speaker in total command of his linguistic competence, knowing the syntax, the meaning of words, the speech-act rules, controlling his beliefs and his expectations, seems to be a modern offshoot of the cartesian subject, that motionless master of an inner space entirely under his own control. But when seen as a member of a social group that largely covers for his utterances, the individual speaker appears to be much less distinctively in charge of his discourse than the cartesian tradition maintains.

In any case, there are few areas where the cartesian notion of subject-speaker is more out of place than in relation to literary fiction. For, indeed, who is the speaker uttering a folk-tale? The raconteur narrating a token of the tale? But is the raconteur more than an occasional speaker who happens to utter the tale on this particular time? Aren't his chances of success increased as he smoothly enters the more formalized role of a tale-teller, as he so to speak lets the tale speak itself through his mouth? While dealing with speech-acts we are tempted to neglect the persistent testimony of story-tellers, bards, poets and writers, who so often mention a *vicarious speech experience* as one of the central aspects of poetic acts. The muse may have become a worn-out symbol, more often ridiculed than actually used. Reference to the muse is, nonetheless, far from spurious. Like the prophet's reference to his god, the poet's reliance on the muse, on inspiration, on the dictation of the sub-conscious, etc., is precisely a way of mentioning this particular type of speech experience, in which the speaker is "spoken through," as it were, by a voice which is not exactly his

own. Who is the originator of the literary utterance? Does it make sense at all to look for a "speaker"?

3. The absence of an individuated speaker does not mean that no speech-act can ever be performed. Take promises, for instance. There can be anonymous promises, or unclear promises, or promises implicit in the behaviour of a group of persons. Thus, the group of young ladies met by the narrator of "Remembrance of things past" on the Balbec beach did not perform an explicit speech-act when promising Marcel happiness. This was an implicit promise, deducible from the care-free appearance of the band, from their youth, from myriad details out of which the narrator gathers the resulting message: promise of happiness. The same thing can be said about warnings, denouncing, even assertion. For every speech-act with a well individuated originator, it is possible to find its "vague" equivalent, consisting of fuzzy communication conveyed by imperfect means, sometimes without any use of natural language, often without a clear originator. Let us call these "vague" equivalents of speech-acts *messages*. In the acceptation used here, natural events can carry messages as well. Dark clouds may be interpreted as a warning, a fresh morning as an exhortation, etc. That these are only anthropocentric interpretations of events which lack meaning is not important here. The fact is that the human species sees messages in many natural events and that linguistic and paralinguistic behaviour is only a narrow, specialized type of message-carrying activity. Speech-acts are only the tip of a huge non-linguistic iceberg: linguistic promises, warnings, assertions, etc. are but a subset of the mass of messages that surround us.

Now, if instead of speech-acts, we direct our attention towards messages, we can see that fictional discourse includes a large number of the latter. More generally all types of fiction, literary or non-literary, are replete with mes-

sages.

An interesting aspect of seeing speech-acts as a subset of the more general class of messages is that in this way we can dispense with the so-called *principle of expressibility*. While it may be strategically important for the theoretician of linguistic acts to postulate that any content is linguistically expressible, once the notion of message has been extended to include non-linguistic signs and signals, the principle of linguistic expressibility is no longer needed. Indeed, why should we assume that the class of messages is expressible in one of its sub-classes, namely the set of linguistic messages? Think of physiognomic expressions. Are all of them translatable in linguistic terms? The mixed feelings which can be instantly grasped on a face like Chaplin's in the last frames of *City Lights* are not necessarily expressible in our everyday language. The same point can be made about musical moods. Are the moods of any Beethoven piano sonatas or Mahler's symphonies translatable into words? Nonetheless, each section of these sonatas or symphonies can be said to convey a certain message. But aren't's music lovers correct in reacting impatiently when pedestrian critics translate these messages into trivial statements about, say, suffering, hope, heroism, and so on? Such statements essentially miss the linguistic inexpressibility of musical messages.

To recapitulate, we have seen that genuine speech-acts are only a minority of linguistic utterances, that consequently the notion of speaker or originator implied by speech-act theory should not be accepted as such, and that linguistic meaning is only a sub-class of a much wider category, which we called *messages*. All this points towards a rejection of the so-called 'speech-act' theory of fictional discourse. But this means that in order to understand how fiction /and perhaps literature/ works, one should not shun models involving nonexistent entities, states or properties.

4. Let us turn back again to our mime. How does he manage to attract our attention? How does he lead us to interpret his gestures correctly and to posit next to him the imaginary presence of a woman?

The public's attention is directed towards the mime by a score of conventional elements. An artistic production is a special happening carefully isolated from other activities, usually taking place in a hall reserved for artistic events, on a stage situated in such a way as to constitute the focal point of the hall. The beginning of the show is marked by a gong, by music, by the dimming of lights, by the raising of the curtain, etc. But more fundamental than these conventional ways of channeling attention is the /trivial/ fact that events which potentially carry messages recommend themselves to the attention in a natural fashion. One stops to see a car accident, one turns his head to better see two people arguing in the street, or an interesting physiognomy, or an elegant dress. Much of our daily activity /trivially/ consists of message detecting and decoding.

Now, a general characteristic of messages is their *in-completeness*. It suffices to notice a slowdown of highway traffic and the distant flashing of police car lights in order to understand the message: "car accident." A spark of hostility in a colleague's eye is enough to warn us that he /she doesn't agree with our ideas. The expression on the face of a passing woman may be all we need in order to feel that she is the only human being capable of loving us /Baudelaire, *A une passante*/. In no situation are we offered complete information on the state of affairs taking place. All we have access to are a few factual clues, from which we are programmed to infer a general message. The programming may be biological or cultural. In deriving configurations and messages from clues we have a bias towards an anthropological or at least animistic interpretation. Cultural specifications may be added at will, as well as individual idiosyncrasies.



Accordingly, a basic fact of our understanding of the environment in which we live, is that an individual belonging to the human species, born and raised in a given culture, must be capable of integrating the incomplete perceptual clues with which he is constantly faced into coherent pictures of states of affairs. In order to represent this capability, a theoretical model is needed, a model which shows how the individual constructs configurations out of facts. Whatever form the model takes, it will include some ability of hypothetically *positing worlds* in which the factual clues are included. Constructing worlds obeys different sets of rules which are both biologically and culturally determined. But basically all world positing involves *the positing of individuals whose presence may be only an indirect result of the processing of factual clues*. In other words, a model of our understanding of the environment must contain some device for positing individuals whose actual existence is unwarranted. The same reasoning applies to states, properties, acts, and so on. Not unlike the familiar Popperian scheme, tested /as opposed to unwarranted/ existence is obtained by checking the posited individuals, states, properties, etc. against some accepted battery of criteria, such as authority, personal experience or intersubjective observation.

Notice that the process described above is independent of the philosophical dispute between realism and antirealism. An Anti-realist can take the positing-checking scheme as involving unwarranted versus warranted assertibility /Dewey/, while a realist may see the scheme relating hypotheses and their partial confirmation, as a way of indefinitely approaching an *actual* world.

Now, if clue-processing and positing unwarranted worlds, individuals, states, and properties is a fundamental way of taking our environment into account, to posit the existence of an invisible woman next to our mime has nothing

special about it. Her Meinongian existence simply fails to result in actual existence after further checking is completed. But such was already the case with all Greek gods, with phlogiston and with ether.

5. From what has been said, it appears that in order to function epistemologically, human beings and presumably human communities as well, have to develop at least two abilities. On the one hand they should be capable of positing various worlds, individuals, states, etc. On the other, they should develop techniques for controlling these worlds and checking them in actuality. In order for the barber who handles Occam's razor to be able to make a living there must be a great deal of beard-growing. Or, to put it otherwise, actual ontology is but a particular case of Meinongian und ultra-Meinongian ontologies.<sup>5</sup>

However, if there is *nothing special* about the mime's girl friend, how can the difference between fiction and non-fiction be captured? We saw that this difference is not be found at the level of discourse. In what follows we will examine the possibility of explaining the difference between fiction and non-fiction and non-fiction at the level of ontologies. We will contrast mono-level and multi-level ontologies, plain and special ontologies, and ludic and non-ludic uses of ontologies.

Consider the following model. An ontology  $O$  is defined as an ordered pair  $/K, F/$  made up of a cosmos  $K$  and an ontic foundation  $F$ . The definition of the cosmos closely follows that of model structures. A cosmos  $K$  is an ordered triple containing a non-null set  $C$  of worlds, a world  $W$  belonging to  $C$  and given as the actual world and a binary relation  $A$  on  $C$ , the relation of accessibility. A world  $I$  belonging to  $C$  is defined as a pair  $/D_I, T_I/$ , constituted of a domain  $D_I$  of entities which exist in  $I$  and of a set  $T_I$  of sentences true in the world  $I$ . Depending on the constraints on  $D_I$  and

$T_I$ , we can include in the description of the world  $I$  such elements as properties, stages, events, acts, sensations, perceptions, values, etc. The ontic foundation  $F$  of an ontology  $O$  contains a set  $N$  of elements and a set  $M$  of functions, the ontic functions, which take as their domain members or ordered  $n$ -tuples of members of  $UD_I$  where  $I \in C$ , and as their values members or ordered  $n$ -tuples of members of  $N$ . According to this definition, it is possible to match a given ontic foundation with more than one cosmos and vice-versa. It is possible as well that a cosmos  $K$  belonging to a given ontology  $O_1$  serves as the ontic foundation of another ontology  $O_2$ , in the sense that the set  $UD_1$  of entities to be found in the worlds of the cosmos  $K$ , or some subset of  $UD_I$ , serves as the set  $N$  of elements of the ontic foundation of the second ontology  $O_2$ .

An example will show what is meant by this construction. Let us consider a fragment of a cosmos  $K_p$  belonging to the ontology  $O_p$  made up of two worlds  $W_1$  and  $W_2$ .  $W_1$  is the actual world of this cosmos. We concentrate upon a sub-domain of  $W_1$ , consisting of three individuals  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  as well as upon some of the true sentences about these individuals. Assume that among these sentences one can find statements which characterize  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  human beings, assign them proper names, a gender, a national and social status, etc. Suppose moreover that  $b$  and  $c$  are respectively the mother and father of  $a$  in  $W_1$  as well as in all worlds of the cosmos  $K_p$ . In most of these worlds and particularly in  $W_1$  and  $W_2$ ,  $a$  is a religious prophet who preaches the near coming of the end. The difference between  $W_1$  and  $W_2$  consists in that while in  $W_1$ , the actual world of  $K_p$ ,  $a$  becomes a martyr, in  $W_2$  he dies of sickness shortly after being tried and acquitted. Suppose now that these elements of  $K_p$  serve as the ontic foundation of a second ontology  $O_2 = /K_s, F_s/$ . The ontic foundation  $F_s$  is made up of a set of elements, among which  $a$ ,  $b$  and  $c$  are included, and of a set of relations. One of

these is the identification relation which associates some or all entities belonging to the new cosmos  $K_s$  with one and only one element of the set  $F_s$ . Let us suppose that among the entities of  $K_s$ , there are the elements  $g, d, e, f$ . Among the true sentences in the world  $W_s$  which is actual in  $K_s$ , there are sentences asserting that  $g$  is God,  $d$  is his son,  $e$  is the mother of  $d$  and  $f$  is the husband of  $e$  and protector of  $d$ . The identification relation contains the pairs  $/a,d/$ ,  $/b,e/$ ,  $/c,f/$ . This amounts to saying that he who in  $K_p$  is a religious prophet, in  $K_s$  is the son of God, his mother, in  $K_p$  is his mother in  $K_s$  as well, while his father in  $K_p$  becomes in  $K_s$  his protector. The ontic foundation should also contain a relation of correspondence, which matches relations in  $K_p$ . For instance, to the relation *father of*  $/c,a/$  in  $W_1 \in K_p$ , the correspondence relation associates *father of*  $/g,d/$  in  $W_s \in K_s$ .

It should be clear that this two-level ontological construction is designed to represent the contrast most societies make between the sacred and the profane. Indeed, according to the classical analyses of Mircea Eliade, the religious mind divides the universe into two regions qualitatively different. Space, time, and more generally the whole ontology divides along the sacred-profane distinction. The religious mind needs two different frames of reference, independent of one another, yet intimately interconnected. The Kwakiutl neophyte who shouts "I am in the Center of the World!" while being in the cult house next to the sacred pole, does not deny the *profane* reality of the pole; he only asserts the establishing of a sacred ontology, in which the pole becomes the Center of the World. Similarly, the Christian who asserts the divine nature of the Christ is using a sacred ontology having as its ontic foundation the profane ontology containing Jesus as a human being.

Multi-level ontologies are not in principle restricted to the sacred/profane opposition, nor to having at most two levels. Philosophers of science who oppose reductionism and believe in such notions as level-independence and emergence /Bunge, Polanyi/, may need a larger number of ontological levels. The point I wish to make here is that, besides their use by the religious mind, two-level ontologies typically serve artistic fiction. The mime's body and movements as they exist in the actual world serve as part of the ontic foundation in a second ontology in which he is the timid lover courting the /invisible in the first ontology/ woman. If so, we are prepared to understand why it is false to claim that "in *Little Red Riding Hood* both ... 'red' means red and yet ... the rules correlating 'red' with red are not in force" /Searle/. What happens in fact is that the rules correlating "red"-in-the-second-ontology with red-in-the-first-ontology are a bit more complex than the rules relating "red" with red in the first ontology. Indeed, as the first ontology serves as the ontic foundation of the fictional ontology, "red"-in- $O_2$  is matched with red-in- $O_1$  via the ontic relations. It is clear, however, from the way we define these relations, that nothing forces us to relate "red"-in- $O_2$  to red-in- $O_1$ . The writer of fiction can always fabricate a story about a land where red was in fact green. But he will choose to do so only rarely, probably because in order to be manageable, secondary ontologies have to respect as much as possible the inner structure of the primary ontologies they use as their ontic foundation.

A further distinction of some interest for our topic is that between plain and special ontologies. This distinction is meant to account for the contrast between plain existence and special kinds of existence. Again, this contrast is best seen in the ontology of the sacred, where the absolute reality of the sacred is crucially opposed to the plain existence of the profane. Sacred beings not only obey other

laws than sublunar creatures, but their way of being is *fundamentally different* [according to R. Otto's formula]. Christian theology, which reflected at length on this aspect of sacred ontology, arrived at the theory of the *analogy of being*, according to which most or all predications, especially those involving the verbs *to be* or *to exist*, are only analogically asserted of God and of his creatures. God's existence and being belong to a special ontology. Fictional constructions may be said to involve special ontologies as well, ontologies in which *being* and *existence* are only analogically similar to the same notions in plain ontologies. Without entering into the details of this hypothesis, it may well be that the main difference between plain and special ontologies lie in the status of existence; while in plain ontologies the Russellian explanation of the notion of existence in terms of variables and their values is in force, in special ontologies existence could still be a predicate, probably a predicate the content of which greatly varies from one special ontology to another.

Finally, if both sacred and fictional beings belong to special ontologies, what distinguishes them? For despite the frequent identification of myth with fiction, it must be pointed out that *for their users*, nothing could be farther apart than myth which have "absolute authority" [Eliade], and mere fictions. Like any other element of the accepted ontology, myths can be employed in fiction for as long as the public believes in them. When they are no longer in force, myths globally *become* fiction, or rather they start to be used as fiction. What seems to distinguish myth from its fictional uses is the *ludic* character of fiction. Theoreticians of ludic activities agree to a few common characteristics to be found in most of these: the *free* character of games, their *separation* from the rest of time and space, the *uncertainty* of their outcome, their *unproductivity*, their being governed by *rules*, their *fictional* character.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, as opposed to

belief in the myths of the community, which is in most cases compulsory, assent to fiction is *free* and clearly *circumscribed* in time and space. Myths are all supposedly fixed in advance and true forever, while new fictional constructions are always possible. Fiction is moreover governed by rules and conventions, and is /trivially/ fictional. The implications of the ludic use on the structure of fictional ontologies remains to be explored.

To conclude, we have seen that speech-act oriented theories of fictional discourse are inadequate. Fictional discourse should be seen as part of a more general class, that of fictional constructions. In order to understand fiction, one needs a strong ontological apparatus. Based on *multi-level ontologies*, fiction involves *special ontologies* and it differs from sacred ontologies in that its main use is ludic. Complex as they may seem, These ontologies could provide a non-reductionist and flexible basis for the semantics of fictional constructions.

#### Notes

- 1 One presumably has recognized in this apologue an updated version of Rotrou's tragedy *Saint-Genest, comédien et martyr*.
- 2 Incidentally, medieval philosophers were disturbed by the possible conflict between the social aspect of a rite and its secret effectiveness. According to Saint Bonaventure, a priest who celebrates the mass while in a state of sin does not have the power to perform the transsubstantiation. This entails the frightful consequence that a layman who

attends the mass officiated by the bad priest is in fact deprived of the benefit of it. If this answer appears to be a bit severe, let us think of a dying man who confesses his sins to and receives the last sacraments from an unordained impostor. Will the dying man be saved or damned? If the answer is "saved," why is it then necessary to maintain the conditions on genuineness and appropriateness of rites? (But then, what would the rites be, if genuineness and appropriateness are taken away from them?) If the answer is "damned," think that the impostor could later repent, confess to a genuine priest and thus be saved, and what, then, becomes of divine-justice?

- <sup>3</sup> In any case, not if by text we mean "a coherent sequence of sentences." As the term text sells quite well nowadays, it is not unlikely that someone has either already spoken or will speak of the 'text of pantomime', just as so many writers refer to the 'text of a dance', the 'text of a society' or even to the 'text of a city'. But these are, of course, metaphorical uses of the term.
- <sup>4</sup> These rules are argued for in G. Gabriel, "Fiction-- a semantic approach" in *Poetics* 8(1979), p. 249. J. Searle, in "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *New Literary History* 7 (1975), pp. 319-32, uses only the sincerity rule.
- <sup>5</sup> By ultra-Meinongian ontology is understood an ontology containing beings about which it is impossible to speak adequately.
- <sup>6</sup> R. Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1967, pp. 42-43.  
(Paper presented at the working group on *Reference in Fictional Texts* 1979)