Impossible Worlds and Aesthetic Illusion

Marie-Laure Ryan

This essay approaches the problem of aesthetic illusion through the examination of a category of texts that inhibit this experience: texts that create impossible worlds. Four types of impossibility are described: ontological impossibility (i. e. metalepsis and co-presence in the same world of characters originating in different texts), impossible space, impossible time, and impossible texts. It is argued that these texts provide no solid target for the operation of imaginative recentering that lies at the core of aesthetic illusion; yet they are not completely deprived of immersive effect, because they are made of subworlds into which the imagination can relocate itself for a limited time. The appreciation of texts that project impossible worlds requires not only an ability to shift back-and-forth between their partial worlds, but also an ability to shift between an illusionist stance that regards the text as the representation of a world and a metatextual stance that regards the text as a writing experiment that pushes back the limits of the textually possible.

In this article, I propose to discuss a type of text that presents a very serious challenge to aesthetic illusion: a type made of texts that create impossible worlds. By impossible worlds, I do not mean simply worlds where things happen that do not or could not happen in the real world, such as animals being able to talk, princes being turned into frogs, or people being kidnapped by space aliens. These are merely unnatural, or fantastic worlds. But literature is not limited to realistic and fantastic worlds; an important form of experimental literature creates worlds that cannot satisfy even the most liberal interpretation of possibility because they transgress the basic laws of logic: non-contradiction (you cannot have p and ~p) and excluded middle (you must have either p or ~p).

Before I discuss various examples of impossible worlds, let me say a few words about possible worlds theory, the theoretical model I am working with (see Eco 1979; Pavel 1986; Ryan 1991; Doležel 1996). This model postulates that there is a plurality of worlds. One of these worlds, the one we live in, is called the actual world. It is the only world with an autonomous existence. The others, the non-actual possible worlds, are creations of the imagination. Nonfictional texts refer to the actual world, while fictional texts create non-actual possible worlds. In this model the distinction between fiction and non-

fiction is a matter of reference: nonfiction makes truth claims about the actual world, while fiction makes truth claim about an alternate possible world.

But what makes a world possible? The answer of the proponents of the model is that for a world to be possible it must be linked to the actual world by an accessibility relation. Depending on the nature of this relation, possible worlds can be more or less close to the actual world. For instance, the worlds of realistic fiction are close, because they respect the laws of the actual world, and the worlds of fantastic tales are remote because they are governed by different laws. But they are still possible, because they respect the laws of logic. As long as these laws are maintained, a world maintains some kind of connection to the actual world.

By this criterion, an impossible world would be a world that is not connected in any way to the actual world. Umberto Eco has argued that impossible worlds do not exist. Or to put this differently: an entity cannot be logically impossible and still remain a world. This would mean that when a text breaks the laws of logic, it does not create a world. Logicians believe that if a single contradiction penetrates into a system of propositions, anything can be inferred, and every proposition and its negation becomes vacuously true. It would be totally impossible to imagine a textual world under these conditions. We could describe the texts I have in mind as texts that cannot be true of any possible world, rather than as texts that refer to impossible worlds.

But even if logic tells us that the phrase 'impossible world' is an oxymoron, I will keep using it because the readers of literary fiction have a broader sense of what is a world than logicians, and because they do not treat inconsistencies as an excuse for giving up the attempt to build mental models of texts. Literary works that project impossible worlds challenge readers to devise new strategies for making sense of them, even if meaning does not arise from the vision of fully imaginable situations.

Impossibility in a fictional world can take many forms:

1. Contradictions

The most obvious type of logical impossibility is a text that openly presents both p and ~p as facts in the fictional world. Contradiction in literature can affect units of various sizes. On the largest scale, it

opposes substantial segments of text. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles, for instance, the last two chapters contain different endings: one in which the lovers, Charles and Sarah, commit to each other after a long separation, and one in which Sarah rejects Charles because she has found a fulfilling life without him. The two endings cannot be true at the same time, but within each of them the fictional world is perfectly consistent. The device does not ask the reader to construct an impossible world, but rather, to weigh the two endings against each other on the basis of such criteria as literary merit or consistency with the personalities of the characters.

On the next level of the scale are contradictions that operate between relatively short narrative segments. An example of this practice is Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" (1969), a short story made of 107 numbered paragraphs. These paragraphs cohere on the local, but not on the global level. The text presents different versions of what can happen when a couple goes to a party and leaves the children in the care of an attractive teen-aged babysitter. In one version the babysitter is murdered, in another she is raped by her boyfriend and his buddy, in another the baby drowns in the tub, and in yet another the father leaves the party under the pretext that he needs to check on the children, but he is really driven by the hope of having sex with the babysitter. But it is impossible to sort out the paragraphs into separate storylines because many of them could belong to different stories. The last paragraph asserts events that belong to different narrative possibilities, thereby demonstrating the futility of trying to disentangle the various scenarios:

> "Your children are murdered, your husband gone, a corpse in your bathtub, and your house is wrecked. I'm sorry. But what can I say?" On the TV, the news is over, they're selling aspirin. "Hell, I don't know," she says. "Let's see what's on the late late movie." (1969: 239)

It is as if all the different stories that have been sketched in the preceding paragraphs had become true in the same world. Yet because the fragments maintain some temporal sequence, leading from the departure of the parents for the party to their return home, the collection of fragments does not totally prevent curiosity for what will happen next. The whole text can be read as a jumbled account of the many stories that can be created to connect a common initial and final event.

A third level of contradiction occurs when individual sentences, rather than entire narrative segments, clash with each other, producing

what Brian McHale calls a "world under erasure" (1987: ch. 7): a world so full of ontological instability that readers cannot tell what exists and what does not. This technique is common in the French New Novel. An example is this passage from Alain Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth (Dans le labyrinthe).* The words in italics are those that are contradicted, but many readers will not notice the contradiction because the opposing statements are separated by several sentences:

> I am alone here now, under cover. *Outside it is raining*, outside you walk through the rain with your head down, shielding your eyes with one hand while you stare ahead, nevertheless, a few yards ahead, at a few yards of *wet asphalt*; outside it is cold; the wind blows *through the leaves*, rocking whole boughs, rocking them, rocking, their shadows swaying across the white roughcast walls. *Outside the sun is shining*, there is *no tree*, no bush to cast a shadow, and you walk under the sun shielding your eyes with one hand while you stare ahead, only a few yards in front of you, at a few yards of *dusty asphalt* where the wind makes patterns of parallel lines, forks and spirals. (1965: 141; italics mine)

In the case of *In the Labyrinth*, contradiction operates between textually distant sentences. In my next example, it operates both between adjacent sentences and within the frame of the sentence itself. The 2010 short story "Here We Aren't, so Quickly" by Jonathan Safran Foer has been described as a collection of *non-sequiturs*, which means, of sentences or parts of sentences that state totally unrelated facts. These facts are evoked either in consecutive sentences ("He was never happy unless held. I loved hammering things into walls"; 2010: 73), or in the constituent clauses of the same sentence ("You were not green-thumbed, but you were not content to be not content"; ibid.: 72). But the true originality of this text, compared with the other types of contradiction, lies in sentences that contain serious logical flaws: for instance "I was always destroying my passport in the wash" (ibid.) denies the unique and punctual character of the act of destruction through an adverb ("always") that presents it as either durative or iterable; "I was always struggling to be natural with my hands" (ibid.) is blatantly self-contradictory, since being natural is behaving without deliberate effort; "[e]verything else [beside the narrator and his wife being killed in a car accident] happened – why not the things that could have?" (ibid.: 73) is a futile question, for if "everything else happened", there is no point in asking why the things that could have happened did not: there are no such things – or at the most there is only one: the accident. The title of the story, "Here We Aren't, So Quickly", epitomizes the logical impossibility that permeates so many of its sentences: since "Here" is a deictic referring to the speaker's

present position, it is incompatible with the negation of this position ("Aren't"); and since 'to be' indicates a static, timeless position, it is incompatible with an adverb that suggests speed of movement through time ("Quickly").

Foer's nonsense sentences strike us as weird at first sight, but in order to diagnose the source of the weirdness we have to perform an elaborate analysis. A text like this makes the reader logically and semantically smarter.

2. Ontological Impossibility

In his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale identifies ontological concerns – which means, concerns with modes of existence – as the thematic dominant of the literature of the late twentieth century (cf. 1987: 9–11). A major form of this questioning is the creation of entities which belong simultaneously to incompatible ontological categories. This kind of impossibility is exemplified by the sentence "I am fictional". The felicity conditions of this utterance could never be fulfilled because the awareness of his own fictionality would attribute contradictory properties to the speaker: by saying "I am", the character views himself as real, which means, as existing autonomously; but by recognizing himself as fictional, he acknowledges that he only exists in a non-actual possible world created through an author's act of imagination. The sentence blends these two perspectives into one, creating a speaker with contradictory properties.

The manifestations of ontological impossibility are known in narratology as metalepsis, a device which exploits the recursive character of fictionality. Just as a text in the actual world can create a fictional world, within a fiction an author can produce a text which creates another fictional world, and so on ad infinitum. Metalepsis occurs when a character who belongs to a certain level moves up or down to another level where he does not exist. For instance, in the movie *Pleasantville*, a teenager is transported into the world of a TV show and initiates its inhabitants into the lifestyle of the world he is coming from. In Julio Cortázar's story "Continuity of Parks" ("Continuidad de las parcos"), metalepsis operates in the other direction: it shows a reader who is so totally immersed in a novel that the characters come to life and murder him. Here it is the characters of a world of a higher level who invade a world of a lower level. In both

cases the result is a merging of ontologically distinct worlds. Meta-lepsis can also operate horizontally by importing characters from different literary texts and having them meet in the same world. This device is systematically exploited in the comic book series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. The cast of characters includes many famous heroes of nineteenth-century novels: for instance, Allan Quatermain from *King Solomon's Mines*, Captain Nemo from Jules Verne's *20000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Mina Murray from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde from Robert Louis Stevenson's novel.

In all of these examples the boundaries that are being transgressed by metalepsis are those that separate distinct levels of fictionality, not the boundary between the real world and the fictional world. It is only within a novel that a reader can be murdered by a character in a novel; in the real world we have nothing to fear from fictional characters because we are located outside the system of fictionality. There is a genuine ontological boundary between the actual and the fictional, but only imaginary boundaries between fictional levels. The characters of level 1 believe that they are real, and they view the characters of level 2 as imaginary, just as the characters of level 2 believe that they are real, and that the characters of level 3 are imaginary. But from my perspective in the actual world, all the characters of all the levels are equally imaginary, and they are only separated by make-believe boundaries. Whereas metalepsis cannot abolish real boundaries, it can easily transgress boundaries created by the imagination. The presence of metalepsis in a storyworld functions therefore as an obvious mark of fictionality. This self-referential, illusion-destroying effect explains why the device has become a dominant feature, some would say a trick of the trade of postmodern fiction.

3. Impossible Space

We are all familiar with impossible space through the paintings of René Margitte and M. C. Escher. But this kind of effect is rare in literature, because language does not speak immediately to the senses, and it cannot therefore produce genuine *trompe-l'oeil* effects. One way for language to create spatially impossible objects is to juxtapose mutually exclusive terms, such as 'round square' or 'flat sphere'. But it is not easy to spin an interesting story that revolves around such

entities. This is why impossible space is rather rare in literature, compared to painting.

An example of a narrative that gives a central role to a spatially impossible object is *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski. The impossible object is a house that is larger on the inside than on the outside. The measured difference is only a few centimeters, but the inside expands into a hallway and then into a labyrinth of infinite dimensions. An expedition is sent to measure this labyrinth and to create a cinematic record of its configuration, but the exit is never found, and many of the explorers disappear or become insane. The structure of the house is replicated on the level of the book as a material object through an outside – the cover – visibly shorter than the pages of the inside.

Impossibility runs however deeper than space in the world of *House of Leaves*: it also affects the narrative structure of the text. The main narrative level (main in terms of thematic importance, not in terms of ontological status) is a text known as the *Navidson Record,* which describes a video made of the inside of the house by its owner, who happens to be a film maker. This text was supposedly written by an old man named Zampanò, and it was found after his death by a character named Johnny Truant, who edits the manuscript and adds foot-notes to Zampanò's text. Yet another editor-character packages Zampanò's narrative, Truant's text, and various other documents – such as letters sent to Truant by his mother, Pelafina – into a book, adding his own notes to Truant's comments. This editor belongs to the ground level of the fictional edifice. So far, so good. But Zampanò, the presumed author of *The Navidson Record*, is a blind old man who lives alone in a decrepit house, and it strains credibility that he could have written a text so heavily focused on visual media, and so full of allusion to postmodern critical theory (Derrida, Foucault, the whole gang). The novel also violates ontological boundaries when Pelafina, who is a patient in a mental hospital, asks Truant to put a checkmark in his next letter to demonstrate that he has received her own letter; we never see Truant's letters, but the checkmark appears in Zampanò's text. Zampanò's narrator belongs to a higher diegetic level than Truant's and Pelafina, and he is therefore not supposed to be aware of their existence. The novel also dismantles the physical space of the text through a wild play with typographical presentation. The segmentation of the text confronts the reader with endless decisions: should she read first Zampanò's narrative about the impossible house and

then Truant's notes, or should she read them concurrently; should she read the text that has been crossed out or should she skip it; should she read the medallions of texts shown on some pages before the text that frames them or the other way round? *House of Leaves* is presented in book form, but it subverts the reading protocol traditionally associated with books: reading pages in sequential order, from top to bottom and from left to right. In *House of Leaves*, the difference between the inside and the outside of the house is the initial inconsistency that, according to logicians, opens a system of propositions to all kinds of paradoxes.

4. Impossible Time

Time is a much more abstract, much less graspable concept than space. We cannot capture its nature in words, as St Augustine famously observed: "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain to him who asks, I do not know." (*Confessiones* XI, 14) But despite the difficulty of telling what it is, we have reasonably firm intuitive beliefs about its properties. It is the contradiction of these beliefs that leads to temporal impossibilities.

Our most fundamental intuition about time tells us that it flows in a fixed direction. But this direction is a matter of debate: according to one conceptual scheme, time flows from the future to the past since future moments become present and then past; in another scheme, time flows from the past to the future since the future is ahead of us and we are marching toward it.

The axiom of the fixed directionality of time can be broken by reversing its flow. Two novels that attempt this conceptual *tour de force* are *Counterclock World* by Philip K. Dick (1961) and *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis (1991). Yet if the head of the arrow of time can stand for either the past or the future, depending on the particular conceptual scheme, how can one distinguish the future from the past, and how can one distinguish 'normal' from 'reversed' time? It takes an external point of reference to determine in which direction time is flowing.

In both novels, this reference is provided by familiar biological processes and social scripts. In *Counterclock World*, characters die before they are born, conversations start with good-bye and end with hello, healthy people get sick after a visit to the doctor, and this is

what shaving looks like: "At the bowl he washed his face, then lathered on foam-glue, opened the packet and with adroit slapping managed to convey the whiskers evenly on his chin, jowl, neck; in a moment he had expertly gotten the whiskers to adhere." (18) In *Time's Arrow*, the reversal of time concerns not only social scripts and biological processes, it is also suggested by a sequence of historical events familiar to the reader: the narrator is the 'soul' of a Nazi doctor who died after emigrating to the US, and he relives his alter ego's life in reverse order, from cold-war America to World War II, and from the liberation (or rather, from the narrator's point of view, creation) of Auschwitz to the rise (or rather decline) of Nazism in Germany. But the reversal of time can be conceived along other arrows than biology or chronology. One of them is causal: since causes precede effects in normal time, they should follow them in reversed time. The other is cognitive: we know what lies in the past, but we don't know what lies in the future. If novels were fully consistent in reversing the flow of time, they would have to invert the causal and cognitive arrows. But this reversal would deprive characters of any form of agency since the flow of time would carry them toward a fate that is already determined and known. This in turn would make planning and consequently plot pointless since the purpose of plans is to control our destiny. To preserve narrative tension, time-reversed narratives typically limit their reversal to history and biology. In Dick's novel the characters remain unaware of what lies ahead of them, and they make plans to affect the future as if they lived in normal time. In Amis's novel the narrator is the only character who experiences time backwards: what is for him an unknown future is a known past for the others, and what is shared history for the others is for him a future which is unknown, and yet unavoidable. Since he is deprived of the freedom to create his own destiny, the hero of *Time's Arrow* has no choice but discover passively the life that his alter ego the Nazi doctor has already written for him.

The difference between the narrator's and the other characters' experience of the direction of time leads to weird situations: when the narrator meets his mistress, and she threatens to commit suicide, he is confident that she won't do it since he knows what is for him the past, and for her the future. On the other hand, he has no clue how he met her, while she is perfectly aware of it. One may even wonder how he knows, on the first (= last) encounter that she is his mistress: this is only one of the multiple paradoxes inherent to the reversal of time.

Another fundamental belief about time tells us that the future is open while the past is written once for all: you can affect the future though your actions, but you cannot undo the past. In his 1986 novel *The Moustache* (*La Moustache)*, Emmanuel Carrère explores the trauma that would arise if the past could be changed for one person but remained stable for all others. A tragic chain of events is set in motion when the narrator and main character decides to shave the moustache he has been wearing for ten years to surprise his wife. But when his wife comes home she shows no surprise at all. The narrator suspects she is playing a trick on him, but the next day at work his colleagues also behave as if nothing has changed. This is the beginning of a steady process that disintegrates the narrator's personal history piece by piece and replaces it with another life. First the past of the narrator is in harmony with his past as other people remember it, and with the events told in the novel. Then a small discrepancy opens – whether the hero ever had a moustache. The discrepancy grows bigger and bigger with each transformation of the past of the narrator. In the last scene, finally, the past that is being changed concerns the events of the earlier chapters. The novel describes how the hero, driven mad by the gradual dissolution of his past, travels to Macao, where he does not know anybody, and nobody, consequently, can rob him of his memories; but when he gets there, he finds his wife in the room, and she shows no surprise at seeing him there. This suggests that the hero has not been taken to Macao by the events reported in the preceding chapters, but that he is there as a tourist on a completely normal family vacation. At this point the novel becomes a self-destructing artifact that denies what is generally considered to be the main function of narrative: its ability to tell about and to preserve the past.

5. Impossible Texts

Impossible texts are texts that cannot exist. Common sense tells us that there is nothing to say about them. They should therefore be treated according to Ludwig Wittgenstein's recommendation: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." (1981: 7) ("Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen."; 1922/1984: 9) But at least some impossible texts can be imagined, and therefore described in language. No author has been more productive than Jorge

Luis Borges when it comes to inventing texts that could never be written. Most of his fictional fictions involve a form of infinity. For instance, the "Book of Sand" in the story by the same name (*Libro de arena*) has no beginning nor end: wherever one opens it, there are always some pages between the cover and the current page, and when one turns a page, one lands at any distance from the previous page, so that a complete and sequential reading becomes impossible. In "The Book of Sand" infinity concerns the book as a physical object. In "Partial Magic in the Quixote" ("Magias parciales del Quixote"), the narrator discusses *The Thousand and One Nights* and he finds in it an infinity that affects the act of narration itself. On the six-hundred-and-second night, Scheherazade supposedly tells the Sultan his own story. This leads to infinite recursion since this story contains all the stories that Scheherazade tells the Sultan to postpone her execution, including the story of the six-hundred-and-second night. One may wonder how *The Thousand and One Nights* can exist as a real text if it creates infinite recursion. The answer is quite simple: Borges himself made up the whole situation; I looked up in the text and found that the six-hundred-and-second night is just the continuation of another story, which has nothing to do with Scheherazade and the sultan. In "The Garden of Forking Paths" ("El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan"), finally, Borges describes a form of infinity that concerns the narrated itself. The story is about a fictional Chinese novel that bears the same name. According to the narrator, who is a descendent of the author Ts'ui Pen, the book is "a contradictory jumble of irresoluble drafts. I once examined it myself; in the third chapter the hero dies, yet in the fourth, he is alive again" (1998: 124). The explanation for the contra-dictions lies in the author's ambition to capture the field of the pos-sible in its totality:

> In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses – simultaneously – all of them. He *creates*, thereby, 'several futures,' several times, which themselves proliferate and fork. This is the explanation for the novel's contradictions. […] In Ts'ui Pen's novel, *all* the out-comes in fact occur; each is the starting point for further bifurcations. Once in a while, the paths of that labyrinth converge: for example, you come to this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend. (Ibid.: 125)

Impossibility has not only to do here with the infinity of the number of possibilities to be covered, it derives primarily from the fact that Borges represents time through a spatial metaphor, the image of the

labyrinth, or garden of forking paths. Here is how he develops this metaphor:

> Ts'ui Pen did not believe in a uniform and absolute time; he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of convergent, divergent and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains *all* possibilities. (Ibid.: 127)

These branching times would be relatively easy to conceive if they remained separate from each other, like the branches of a tree. But in Borges story, time is not a tree, it is a network that loops back upon itself. While it contains some parallel branches that fork out of a common point and never meet again, it also grows converging branches, as the mention of the traveler reaching the same house through different paths suggests. In space this is easy to do, but in time it leads to logical contradictions. Imagine that at a certain point in time you are faced with a decision that will make you either my friend or my enemy. If all possibilities are realized, two different worlds will be created, each giving birth to its own time. When these worlds merge into one, you will be both my friend and my enemy when you arrive at my house – a blatant violation of the principle of non-contradiction. This logical contradiction is the real reason why Ts'ui Pen's idea could never be implemented as a novel.

6. Impossible Worlds: a Challenge to the Readers and their Aesthetic Illusion

The effect of impossible worlds on the reader's experience is very obvious: they act as an inhibitor of aesthetic illusion. To experience aesthetic illusion, or immersion, the reader (or spectator, etc.) must travel in imagination to an alternative, or virtual world, and make herself at home within this world. I call this operation imaginative recentering (cf. Ryan 1991: 18f.). Through recentering, the reader adopts in make-believe the perspective of an anonymous member of the fictional world who regards this world as real. The notion of make-believe (see Walton 1990) is essential to the aesthetic nature of illusion. If the reader truly believed that the virtual world of the work is real, this would be mere illusion; but because make-believe involves an opposition between pretended and actual belief, and an awareness of this opposition, it turns illusion from a state of being deceived into a *lucid aesthetic experience*.

This account of aesthetic illusion makes the experience crucially dependent on the ability of a text – whether verbal, pictorial, or multimodal – to create a world. Or to restate this from the point of view of the audience: aesthetic illusion takes place when a text coaxes the imagination into simulating a world. This leads to the question: what does it take to simulate a world? If we conceive worlds as totalities containing an inventory of objects, and existing in time-space, the modeling of a textual world involves the mental represent-tation of the existents referred to or implied by the text, of the space that surrounds them, of the processes that affect them, and of the changes they undergo. Insofar as this characterization of world corre-sponds to the distinctive features of narrativity, it makes the claim that, at least in the verbal domain, narrative texts have the greatest power to elicit aesthetic illusion. By making narrativity a strong factor, if not a precondition of aesthetic illusion, this account ques-tions the ability of texts such as lyric poetry to elicit such an expe-rience. This of course does not mean that the experience of poetry is not aesthetic; rather it means that because the aesthetic experience inspired by poetry is primarily an experience of language, it involves a self-reflexivity that often impedes illusion. (See Wolf in this volume on the question of aesthetic illusion in lyric poetry.) Immersion in a story requires by contrast the traversal of language toward the world that it deploys to the imagination. The reader under the spell of aesthetic illusion will later remember the world, the characters, the events, but not necessarily the words, while the reader of a poem will remember its exact formulation.

But narrativity alone is not sufficient to create aesthetic illusion. I doubt that the skeletal story proposed by E. M. Forster as an example of plot, "The king died, then the queen died of grief", would elicit an immersive experience because it does not provide a sufficient sense of the fullness of the storyworld. One may wonder in fact whether this so-called narrative produces a world at all: if a world is a totality, it gives the reader (spectator, etc.) a sense that it cannot be completely known, that it offers an inexhaustible space of discovery. But Forster's example of a minimal story leaves me with the impression that I know everything that is to be known about the events that it depicts and the characters that it creates. I do not process it as a world, but as a set of propositions. Its ontological flatness means that it offers no target for the operation of recentering.

Texts with impossible worlds also inhibit recentering, but for a different reason. It is not a lack of ontological density, but an excess of dimensions that prevent them from offering a habitable space to the imagination. I can easily project a virtual body into a three-dimensional world, or even into a two-dimensional world, if I flatten my virtual body (Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* is quite immersive), but I cannot imagine myself inside a world shaped like a Moebius strip where the inside becomes the outside and the outside becomes the inside. Recentering into an impossible fictional world where the true becomes the false and the false becomes the true is a lot like making oneself at home on a Moebius strip.

Yet as Werner Wolf has argued (cf. 1993: 481), aesthetic illusion is an experience that occurs to variable degrees, and I do not want to say that texts with impossible worlds totally prevent it. Take the example of the Escher etching "Print Gallery", an image that represents an impossible space. Through its use of perspective, it allows the spectator to imagine herself within its world. As the eye follows the path of the gaze of a character looking at a picture in an art gallery, we see the world of the picture unfold in a perfectly normal way, until, suddenly, we realize that we have been thrown into another world, without noticing the transition – a world incompatible with the one we started from. In the first world the character is real and he is watching the virtual world of a painting; in the second world, the landscape shown in the painting is real, and it encompasses the spectator, who thus becomes virtual from the point of view of the first world. It is our immersion in the three-dimensionality of Escher's picture that eventually leads to the recognition of the impossibility of its space. But if even impossible worlds can generate some degree of aesthetic illusion, they widely differ in their ability to do so.

The world-creating power of literary works can be represented on an axis that connects two poles. One of these poles is occupied by texts that build a coherent world – a world that can hold everything that the text describes and where, consequently, the imagination can make itself at home. These are the texts that create aesthetic illusion. The opposite pole is occupied by texts that do not create a world at all: texts such as conceptual poetry, random collages of words, texts in an invented, incomprehensible language such as Hugo Ball's sound poetry, or even the impossible texts imagined by Borges. These texts offer no goal for recentering, and the only option left to the reader is to focus on the medium. In the middle of the axis are texts that construct

partial, or unstable worlds, so that the world presupposed by a certain section is not the same world as the world presupposed by another section. We can draw an analogy with painting: one end of the axis is occupied by fully representational pictures, the other by abstract paintings, and the middle is occupied by artworks with an impossible space, such as Escher's "Print Gallery" or some of René Magritte's paintings.

The texts with impossible worlds that I have discussed collapse two or more incompatible subworlds into a single one, thereby violating what Werner Wolf calls the second principle of world-making: "The principle of consistency of the represented world" (2009: 151). This collapse requires extra dimensions that elude the imagination. When a text asserts both p and ~p, one could imagine a world where p is the case superposed upon another world where ~p is true. The imagination can relocate itself into each of these worlds, or it can alternate between them, but it cannot inhabit both of them at the same time.

The power of texts with impossible worlds to create aesthetic illusion depends on how long the imagination can dwell in one of their partial worlds. For a text like *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which offers two different endings contained in whole chapters, the imagination has ample time to make itself at home in each version. In such a text, as Werner Wolf observes (cf. ibid.: 155), an ironic compromise is achieved between immersive narration and self-referential illusion breaking. The novelist and the reader can have their cake and eat it too: having the cake is the pleasure of feeling superior to those naïve readers who read for the plot and ignore the constructed nature of the fictional world, while eating the cake is the pleasure of being immersed in the story and of eagerly awaiting to find out how it ends.

One way to preserve aesthetic illusion in an impossible world is to create what I call a Swiss cheese ontology. In this ontology, the irrational is contained in delimited areas that pierce the texture of the fictional world like the holes of a Swiss cheese, but the laws of logic remain applicable in the solid areas and the reader can make regular inferences. The house in *House of Leaves* belongs to one of the holes: it is the only one in the novel that functions as a portal into a terrifying world. Similarly, in *La Moustache*, the hero is the only character whose past is constantly changing. By confronting a normal world with an irrational one, the Swiss cheese configuration makes the experience of the irrational much more dramatic than if the fictional

world were completely dominated by the irrational, because in this kind of ontology the experience of the protagonist clashes with the normal world in which other characters seem to live comfortably.

Aesthetic illusion is much more seriously compromised in texts that present contradictions on the micro-level because in this case the reader is continually thrown in and out of the partial worlds. The short paragraphs of "The Babysitter" not only contradict each other, they never give the reader time to fully assess the situation, to imagine what will happen next, or to bond emotionally with the characters. What can one do with such a text? One way to deal with it is to regard it as a construction kit: the text does not tell a determinate story, but offers a collection of narrative fragments, out of which the reader can pick and choose to make her own story.

The ultimate in illusion-preventing impossibility occurs when contradiction takes place on the sentential level. In Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, or in Jonathan Safran Foer's short story "Here We Aren't So Quickly", they drill so many holes in the texture of the fictional world that the reader is forced to shift attention to the textual processes. Yet I believe that the only readers who can be satisfied with a purely metatextualist interpretation are literary critics; most readers will do whatever they can to construct a world in which they can achieve at least some degree of aesthetic illusion because make-believe corresponds to a basic need of the human mind, and it is simply more enjoyable than self-reflexivity.

As evidence of the dilemma between the textualist and the illusionist stances I would like to mention a discussion of Foer's story that took place in the summer of 2010 on the forum of the International Society for the Study of Narrative. The interpretations proposed by the participants' reactions were evenly divided between the two stances.

For the illusionists, the text is primarily about human experience: it consists in equal parts of sentences in the first and in the second person, and it can be read as a meditation on the relations between an 'I' and a 'you' who have been married to each other for many years, raised a child together, pursued different interests, and lived in various houses. If the individual sentences do not cohere, it is because consciousness consists of multiple, partial and fleeting narrative drafts, rather than of a coherent and definitive life story. In this interpretation, the non-sequiturs are naturalized as the workings of the narrator's mind.

For the metatextualists, on the contrary, the text is primarily a writing experiment, a collage of sentences which should be read on an individual basis rather than being used as the building blocks of a coherent fictional world. These readers express their aesthetic appreciation of the text by pointing out their favorite impossible sentences.

The example of Foer's story is instructive for two reasons: first, the variety of the reactions suggests that the point of creating impossible worlds is precisely to raise the question: "What should I do with such a text?" Second, it tells us that neither the illusionist stance, which regards the text as the representation of a world, nor the metatextualist stance, which regards the text as a game with language, exhausts the possibilities of literary meaning. What is needed of the reader of texts that project impossible worlds is an ability to shift back-and-forth between the two stances, so as to appreciate the text both as a representation of life experience and as a virtuoso verbal performance that pushes back the limits of the textually possible.

References

Alber, Jan (2009). "Impossible Storyworlds – and What to Do with Them". *Storyworlds* 1: 79–96.

Amis, Martin (1991). *Time's Arrow.* New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Ashline, William (1995). "The Problem of Impossible Fictions". *Style* 29/2: 215–234.

Borges, Jorge Luis (1998). *Collected Fictions.* New York, NY: Penguin Books.

— (1993). "Partial Magic in the Quixote". *Labyrinths*. New York, NY: Modern Library. 193–196.

Carrère, Emmanuel (1986/1988). *The Mustache.* [*La Moustache*]. Lanie Goodman, transl. New York, NY: Scribner.

Coover, Robert (1969). "The Babysitter". *Pricksongs and Descants*. New York, NY: Plenum Books. 206–239.

Cortázar, Julio (1968/1985). "Continuity of Parks". Julio Cortázar *Blow-Up and Other Stories*. Paul Blackburn, transl. New York, NY: Pantheon. 63–65.

Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000). *House of Leaves.* New York, NY: Pantheon.

Dick, Philip K. (1961). *Counter-Clock World.* New York, NY: Random House.

Doležel, Lubomír (1998). *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP.

Eco, Umberto (1979). *The Role of the Reader.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP.

Foer, Jonathan Safran (2010). "Here We Aren't, So Quickly". *The New Yorker* (June 14 and 21): 72–73.

Fowles, John (1969/1980). *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* Chicago, IL: Signet Books.

McHale, Brian (1987). *Postmodernist Fiction.* London: Methuen.

Moore, Allan, Kevin O'Neill (2000). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen.* La Jolla, CA: DC Comics.

Pavel, Thomas (1986). *Fictional Worlds.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

Robbe-Grillet, Alain (1965). *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet:* Jealousy *and* In the Labyrinth. Richard Howard, transl. [*La Jalousie* and *Dans le labyrinthe*]. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2009). "Temporal Paradoxes in Narrative". *Style* 43/2: 142–164.

— (1991). *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Literary Theory.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP.

Stefanescu, Maria (2008). "World Construction and Meaning Production in the 'Impossible Worlds' of Literature". *Journal of Literary Semantics* 37: 23–31.

Walton, Kendall (1990). *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1922/1984). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Tagebücher 1914 – 1916. Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Werkausgabe 1. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

— (1981). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. D. F. Pears, ed. London: Routledge.

Wolf, Werner (2009). "Illusion (Aesthetic)". Peter Hühn et al., eds. *Handbook of Narratology.* Berlin: de Gruyter. 144–160.

— (1993). *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst: Theorie und Geschichte mit Schwerpunkt auf englischem illusionsstörenden Erzählen.* Buchreihe der *Anglia* 32. Tübingen: Niemeyer.