Fiction: Serious Business or Play-World for the Imagination?

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Richard Walsh may be the most brilliant devil's advocate currently active in narratology. He has tackled a wide variety of subject matters (narrators, emotion toward characters, narrativity of music, emergence in narrative, video games, literary cartography), displaying an encyclopedic knowledge and an ever-curious and critical mind that never adopts an easy or widespread position. After slaying (or at least confronting) the third person impersonal narrator, he is now taking on the leading theories of fiction and the currently popular notion of world (Wolf). In this paper, he proposes a theory of fiction that breaks with the notions generally proposed as cornerstones of fictionality, such as pretense, nonseriousness, make-believe, nonasserted propositions, lack of reference, reference to other worlds, and even invention (though this one was central to Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "Ten Theses"), and he replaces them with a conception of fiction as rhetorical resource. What does this formula mean?

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines *rhetoric* as "the study of writing or speaking as a means of communication or persuasion." The term *rhetoric* has wide currency in narratology; it is generally associated with an approach to narrative concerned with the strategies through which narrative information is efficiently conveyed to the audience. In this perspective, narrative uses rhetorical resources, without necessarily being one itself. But Walsh is concerned with fiction, not with narrative, and his purpose is to capture the essence of fiction. For him, fiction does not simply display rhetorical resources, it is itself a rhetorical resource to which people resort for a certain type of communicative purpose.[1] He reviews an impressive number of theories in order to show how they all miss the communicative nature of fiction. This blindness can be attributed to two major factors.

The first consists of defining fiction negatively as "nonserious" utterance (Austin), "affirming nothing" (Sir Philip Sidney), merely "pretending" to perform speech acts (Searle), or "entertaining (or presenting) propositions unasserted" (Carroll), while failing to specify the purpose of this attitude, or

operation. This deficiency could, however, be easily remedied by adding a clause that captures the intent of the sender in positive terms.

The second cause of blindness to communication resides in the postulation of an imaginary world, or fictional world as the target of an act of make-believe that creates, in the most successful cases, an experience of immersion. Being myself a proponent of the notion of fictional world (Ryan, *Possible Worlds*), or more broadly of storyworld, a concept that covers the semantic domain of both fictional and factual narratives (Ryan, "From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds"), I feel particularly challenged by this position. According to Walsh: "It is not just that fictional-worlds approaches have nothing to say about communicative purposes; it is that they actually foreclose the possibility that the distinctiveness of fiction might have something to do with its communicative use" ("Fictionality as Rhetoric" 401). Why could the creation of an imaginary world, and the invitation extended to the audience to use this world as a "prop in a game of make-believe," to borrow Walton's formula, not constitute an act of communication? The reason lies in Walsh's conception of communication. In his ontological model, there is only one world, the real world. It follows that all communication must refer to this world. If fiction is defined as referring to another world, it cannot be regarded as communication; and since rhetoric is essentially a means of communication, a rhetorical theory is incompatible with a conception of fiction as a world-creating activity. Though Walsh does not state explicitly that fictional communication must be about reality, this idea is made clear in the 2015 article coauthored by Nielsen et al. that introduced the rhetorical theory of fiction: "Fictive discourse is not ultimately a means of constructing scenarios that are cut off from the actual world, but rather a means of negotiating an engagement with that world" (63).

Walsh's restriction of communication to messages that concern the real world derives from his conception of meaning, which is inspired by Wilson and Sperber's theory of meaning as relevance. This theory, in a nutshell, tells us that when people are faced with an utterance that does not seem to make immediate sense, they look for a context that restores, and maximizes relevance. Indirect speech acts are a particularly telling illustration of this principle: when somebody asks you during dinner "can you pass the salt," this person is not interested in your physical ability to pass the salt, she is rather instructing you indirectly (and politely) to pass the salt. How does this apply to fictions? According to Walsh, Wilson and Sperber "treat them as representations of fictional worlds offering a global relevance through some analogical

relation to reality" ("Fictionality as Rhetoric" 410–11). Audiences, presumably, are not interested in information concerning characters who never existed and events that never happened, but this information becomes relevant if it translates into a message that concerns real issues in the real world. Walsh keeps his distance from Wilson and Sperber's suggestion, possibly because it uses a notion of fictional world, but their remarks are vindicated by his own reading of the last sentence of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: "It is Clarissa, [Peter Walsh] said. For there she was." The sentence, which expresses Peter Walsh's surprise and delight at seeing Clarissa, who had previously retreated to a secluded room, "brings home the novel's formal exploration of the variance between the leaden regularity of clock time and the volatile intensities of psychological time" (413). By saying something about time, the novel conveys a potentially truthful message for the real world (its validity is for the reader to decide), though it does so through information that cannot be regarded as true since it concerns invented characters. This conception of fictional relevance as conveying relevant messages about the real world through statements that cancel commitments to literal truth is not exclusive to high literature; according to Nielsen et al., the author of the popular young adult novel *The Hunger Games* provides her readers with a model that they can emulate, by showing how the heroine refuses either/or situations where both options are ethically unacceptable, and finds instead a creative way to avoid the choices imposed on her. But is this moral, or whatever other lesson one may derive from *The Hunger Games*, really what young people find fascinating about the novel? By the same reasoning, did the author of *Anna Karenina* chose the rhetorical resource of fictionality over other possible resources (such as writing an essay or a sociological study) to instruct his readers that "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"? Or is this communicative content only a by-product of the imaginative experience of the fictional world? Many readers will disagree with the sentence, or suspend its evaluation, but will still enjoy the novel for its plot, characters, style, representation of human experience, and evocation of a historico-cultural milieu.

It could be, however, that Walsh has a broader conception of relevance than relevance to the real world, a conception that associates it with textual coherence. In the case of narrative fiction, relevance-as-coherence would instruct audiences to construct a logically consistent plot, or fabula, and it would put a stop to the process of drawing inferences once events and actions are explained as well as they can be. This is the kind of minimalist reading that

Walsh proposes of the first sentence of Kafka's *The Trial* (Walsh, "Pragmatics"). The practices of fan culture, such as expanding (or modifying) fictional worlds by writing fan fiction, drawing maps of these worlds, or creating illustrations, would be declared irrelevant, because they take imaginative participation far beyond the requirements of coherence. So would the widely attested practice of forming mental images of fictional situations far more vivid and detailed than what is prescribed by textual information. As Walsh writes:

The desire to treat fictions as ontological wholes [i.e., as deploying autonomous worlds] results in a theoretical repurposing of the role of inference in interpretation. It ceases to serve the interpreter's cognitive effort to ascertain the communicative relevance of an utterance, and becomes instead (whether or not formalised under a principle of minimal departure) a *runaway engine of world construction*—which is a task of ontological extrapolation no longer accountable to any specific communicative purposes at all. ("Fictionality as Rhetoric" 401, my italics)

Note the importance, for Walsh, of keeping the engine of the imagination under control rather than allowing it to run away, as it would presumably do under my principle of minimal departure (Ryan, *Possible Worlds*), which allows a rich variety of inferences, as long as they respect both our experience of reality, and the textual specifications. In Walsh's conception, fiction is not a game; it is dead serious business. You should not play with or in fictional worlds, as do the fans of popular culture or even literary critics who propose ever new and ever more far-fetched interpretations; you should extract messages from fiction that bear strict relevance to either textual coherence, or to the real world.

A central purpose of the rhetorical theory of fiction is the extension of the notion of fictionality beyond "generic fiction," so as to include forms of expression such as thought experiments, philosophical examples, and parables, all of which achieve communication by suspending commitment to literal truth. This expansion sometimes results in unwelcome inclusions; for instance, Walsh is forced to accept metaphors as microlevel fiction, because they satisfy his definition, but no new insights are to be gained about their way of making sense by this categorization: it has always been known that metaphors do not make literal sense. Expanding the scope of a theory of fictionality may reveal important similarities between uses of signs normally considered distinct, but similarities should not obscure differences. In a

world-approach to fiction, distinction between imaginative experiences can be maintained by asking whether or not fictional worlds are experienced for their own sake, or as a way to say something about the real world. Three cases are possible. (1) The text creates an imaginary world, but this world is only a vehicle for saying something about reality. This situation is illustrated by parables and thought experiments (i.e., constructs introduced in argumentative texts by "let's imagine that"). (2) The text creates an imaginary world, and the contemplation of this world is a self-rewarding activity. This will be the case with "escapist" genre fiction, or with texts whose tellability resides in a display of invention, such as fantastic texts like *Lord of the Rings*. The joke quoted at the beginning of Walsh's article also falls into this category: its point resides in its irrelevance to any real-world situation (though Walsh might say that it conveys the real-world message "I am a bad joke"). (3) Texts that satisfy both criteria: the fictional world is worth enjoying for its own sake, but it also conveys something important about the real world. This double relevance is generally considered the mark of aesthetic superiority, and literary critics go out of their way to capture what great novels or plays have to tell us, even when the message is as vague as making the reader think about what it means to be human. It is up to the user to decide which category is represented by a given text, and if (3) is chosen, what exactly is the real-world message: I may find great universal truths in *Lord of the Rings* while you treat it as a vacation from reality. Some fictions fulfill a didactic purpose, others provide entertainment, and still others manage to satisfy both criteria. By defining fiction as a distinct and specific rhetorical resource, Walsh misses out on the variety of its functions, whether or not we call them rhetorical.

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NOTE

1. I assume that for texts that have both an author and a narrator, Walsh means communication between author and reader. Many fictional narrators, such as Benjy in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* or the narrator of Beckett's *The Unnamable*, do not engage in communicative acts.

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