PHILIP E. DEVINE

THE LOGIC OF FICTION

In developing a logic of fiction, it is first necessary to distinguish two modes of discourse: (a) what may be called *fictive* discourse, i.e. the discourse comprising a work of fiction; and (b) what may be called *fictional* discourse, a certain kind of discourse about works of fiction.

Fictive discourse consists in a writer's setting down, in narrative form, a series of sentence-forms or sentences of indeterminate content. These may contain pronouns for which no corresponding name is to be found, or else names to which no referent has been assigned. The first sentence of *Scaramouche* – "He was born with the gift of laughter, and a sense that the world was mad" – will serve as an illustration of the use of sentence-forms in fiction. (One can imagine a work of fiction going on like that forever, without a proper name corresponding to 'he' ever being supplied.) Such sentences are best understood as containing the natural-language equivalent of an unbound variable, and hence as not making any statement at all, whether true or false. But the situation would not have been altered if the writer had spoiled the rhythm of his sentence by writing 'Scaramouche' for 'he.' For 'Scaramouche' in such a context is (logically speaking) nothing but a more colorful 'he.' (Recall how 'Jones' can function as 'X' in a philosophical example.) Like sentence-forms in logic, the sentences comprising a work in fiction can stand in logical relation so one another – they can for instance have entailments, or be inconsistent – but they have no truth value. And this is as it should be, since they are set down at the mere pleasure of the writer of fiction, and thus cannot be criticized from a cognitive point of view.

In saying that 'statements' lacking truth-value can nonetheless be inconsistent, I have deviated from the view that the logical relations such as inconsistency can be defined in terms of truth-value, whether actual or possible. But surely I am right in so doing. An author who writes 'Jones is fat' and then (later on) 'Jones has always been very slim,' has contradicted

himself, whether deliberately and for effect or through inadvertance it matters little. But he has not made two sentences at least one of which must be false, since there is no external standard by which either sentence by which such statements can be judged false at all.

When fictive discourse is engaged in, no talking-about or referring is done, because no asserting (or related activity) is done. The author of a work of fiction does not, as author, talk about his characters, although they may talk about him.[1] Both the purpose and the standards of assessment for fictive discourse are alien to the realms of talking-about, reference, and truth.

Of course we may say that the various occurrences of 'Scaramouche' in *Scaramouche* all refer to the same person, but this is only to say various occurrences are to be taken together and that they control one another. (Consider a set of similtaneous equations without a unique solution: all the occurrences of 'x' in the set control one another, although there is no number to which they all refer.)

There is also another sort of discourse pertaining to works of fiction: fictional discourse. This takes place when literary criticism does not limit itself to such statements as '"Hamlet" is a great play' but goes on to relate the events contained in the work, and to make inferences to facts or situations not there explicitly revealed. 'Hamlet had the chance to kill Claudius but didn't,' the critic will say. "Perhaps his motive was unconscious misgivings about the revenge ethic."[2] Such discourse can, in contrast to fictive discourse, be true or false. It is true that Hamlet (finally) killed Claudius and that King Lear was the father of Goneril, and false that Hamlet killed Gertrude, or that Gertrude was Ophelia's mother. Likewise those who engage in fictional discourse talk about (refer to) fictional characters. Fictional discourse is assessed as to truth as is ordinary empirical discourse, except that the standard to which it must conform is found in a work of fiction and not in the empirical world, except, perhaps in so far as the empirical world is relevant to the author's intentions.[3]

There are, however, problems concerning fictional discourse not to be found in its empirical counterpart. Chief among these are the indeterminacies and contradictions to be found in fictional works. Some fictional works have a tendency to inspire speculations about the characters and situations in it which are in principle unsettleable with certainty – the reality of Lady Macbeth's faint for example. Others contain contradic-

tions – Sherlock Holmes is said to have died in one story of the Sherlock Holmes corpus, but turns up alive in one placed later in his career.[4] One way of dealing with indeterminacies is to assign truth-values to fictional statements in the way probability figures are assigned. That which is clearly stated in, or manifest from, the text, such as that Hamlet was a prince of Denmark, will be assigned a truth-value of '1,' and that which is clearly stated in, or manifest from, the text *not* to have been the case, such as that Marc Antony killed Caesar, will be assigned a truth-value of '0.' If the text is such that either a proposition or its negation conforms equally well to it, it could be assigned a truth-value of '.5.' Intermediate truth-values ('.75' for example) can be assigned to other sentences such as that Hamlet was thirty years old, or that Ophelia was pregnant by Hamlet at the time of her suicide, according to the strength of the textual evidence. (The case is not altered if non-textual evidence is also admitted: even being able to read the author's mind will not necessarily solve all our questions.) In each case the sum of the values assigned a proposition and its negations will be '1.'

The foregoing sketch of an assignment of truth-values requires certain qualifications if it is to be adequate to the data. Some indeterminacies – such as whether Hamlet had a mole on the back of his right knee – will be just irrelevant to the fiction, so that not even a probabilistic assessment of their truht-values is appropriate. And some contradictions – such as the two answers given to the question of Sherlock Holmes' death – will have to be treated in accordance with another rule, that the later statement governs. Others will mean that the whole scheme has broken down. (It was only by means of very elaborate explanations that Conan Doyle prevented this result in the case of Sherlock Holmes.) Finally, in no case is the precision suggested by a decimal scale to be treated with much seriousness: no literary critic will go beyond such expressions as 'possibly' and 'very probably' – words which do not, however, have the usual implication that only lack of knowledge stands between him and an outright 'Yes' or 'No' – in determining the weight to be given a fictional statement.

We are now prepared to understand talk about a thing's 'existing in fiction' and about fictional worlds or universes. As a general rule, the proper thing to say is that fictional characters do not exist. 'King Lear existed' is false and 'King Lear was the father of Goneril' is true. None-

theless, there are two sorts of contexts in which one may speak of existence in fiction:

(1) Existence in fiction is sometimes simply occurrence in fiction. To occur in a myth or a work of fiction is to have what looks like a statement about one among the utterances which make up the myth or work of fiction – that is to say, a statement which would assert or imply the real existence of the thing if it were an ordinary statement and not part of the story. To speak of 'existence' here is somewhat misleading, although not, of course, in all contexts.

(2) We may also use the notion of existence in fiction to make certain contrasts. 'Ivan existed, but not the Grand Inquisitor' draws a distinction internal to the *Brothers Karamazov*, one that can usefully be drawn only in this or an equivalent way. But for all this, Ivan Karamazov does not exist. We use the notion of existence in fiction as a specialized develop- ment of the notion of existence in order to resolve this antinomy, reading the statement quoted as 'Ivan exists in the *Brothers Karamazov*, but not the Grand Inquisitor.'

Even here it is best not to speak of existence in fiction as a kind or mode of existence. Ivan does not exist. It is better to think of fictional existence as standing to (real) existence as counterfeit money stands to (real) money. It is not existence, but a kind of imitation of existence. (One can imagine that the work of a famous art forger might itself be forged, leading to a distinction between real and forged forgeries parallel to that between existence and non-existence in fiction.')

But even the comparison between fictional existence and counterfeit money may be objected to on the following grounds. It is not that Ivan Karamazov has some peculiar analogue of existence: he exists in a per- fectly ordinary way *in the story*. The function of the phrase 'in the story' here is to warn the reader that the statement 'Ivan exists' is not made in an ordinary way, but is a case of fictional discourse lacking in the commit- ments of ordinary discourse about persons and their existence.

These remarks should not be allowed to obscure the peculiar status of 'Ivan exists.' Such a statement is peculiar in a way 'Richard III killed the princes' (interpreted in such a way as to make irrelevant the claims of the historical Richard's defenders) and 'Gandalf was a wizard' are not. It depends, in a way they do not, on a contrast between the ordinary fictional world and fictions or illusions within it, a contrast which is not present in

all works of fiction. In the absence of such a context of contrast, 'Ivan exists' is just false. (As it is, 'Ivan was the brother of Alyosha' will be assented to in many contexts where 'Ivan existed' will not.) This can be shown by imagining that we have a fiction-within-a-fiction-within-a-fiction. Normally what is the correct thing to say about characters in fictions-within-fictions is that they do not exist, no matter what the context of the question of their existence. But as soon as we have a fiction-within-a-fiction-within-a-fiction, it becomes correct to say such characters exist. If we think of Jesus in the Grand Inquisitor story as the Grand Inquisitor's fantasy (the projection of his guilty conscience) then the Grand Inquisitor exists in contrast with him.

In fine, what we have in the case of 'Ivan exists' is a specialized employment of the word 'exists,' designed to deal with the fact that the distinction between fact and fiction or between truth and illusion can be drawn with what is itself an imaginative creation. It does not involve a special mode of existence, the fictional.

So far I have considered the direct considerations in favor of a fictional mode of existence – the contexts in which we are prepared to say things like 'Ivan Karamazov exists.' There are other considerations which might lead us to treat Ivan or Hamlet as having a kind of existence in a less direct way. One is that fictional characters can stand out from their fictional sources and take properties not given them by their creators. Statements such as 'The Grinch is my favorite fictional beast,' 'Oedipus is a greater tragic hero than Willy Loman,' and 'Ivan was more given to despair than I am' exemplify this feature of fictional characters. Moreover, a fictional character may be found in more than one fiction: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern occur not only in 'Hamlet,' but also in 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead' (indeed, that the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of both plays be the same is necessary to the latter play's point), and could be found in indefinitely many other fictions composed in the same manner.[5]

Such facts about fictional discourse show that fictional characters may be talked about or referred to, that what looks like talk about fictional characters is not a disguised form of talk about the works in which they appear. But this does not mean that they (in any sense) exist. It is better to note this peculiarity of the logic of fictional characters, and to drop the view that only what exists can be talked about or referred to.

Many of the things I have said about fictional characters can simply be

reiterated in an account of fictional universes. Two points should be clear.

(1) Talk about the universe of a work of fiction is often very attractive, and there are no good grounds for regarding it as somehow illegitimate. When we deal with a writer like Tolstoy who vividly portrays an elaborate network of persons and events, or one like Tolkien who spins a fantasy whose locale has little or no connection with our world, but nonetheless is pictured in detail, talk of a fictional world is indispensible to an adequate account of the work. Moreover, it makes excellent sense to speak of the laws of a fictional world, and to say whether its laws are like or unlike our own.

(2) A fictional universe is not a universe, any more than a decoy duck is a duck. The objects ('objects' here, of course, being here taken in a resolutely minimalistic sense) in it do not exist.[6] (They may exist in fiction, but to exist in fiction is not to exist.) When this is understood, it will no longer be a source of puzzlement that a fictional universe can engage in vagaries in which a real universe could not. We need the picture of a universe parallel to our own – even when a fictional universe breaks down through its internal contradictions (as only fails to happen in the case of the Sherlock Holmes corpus because of energetic explanations on Conan Doyle's part) it is important to see that a fictional universe is breaking down – but when the picture is pressed too far it leads to absurdity (for instance, the feeling that Lady Macbeth's faint *must* have been real or faked, and that further research necessarily could settle the question one way or other).

A comparison of a fictional universe with a possible world is now in order, since the two notions would seem to have some affinities. Two points of divergence will at once emerge: (1) Not all possible worlds are fictional worlds. A fictional world requires an act of creation on the part of some storyteller. (Nor are all possible worlds even *possible* fictional worlds: even nowadays there are requirements of hanging-together for a fiction not met by all possible worlds.) (2) Not all fictional worlds are possible worlds. Some fictions contain irresoluable contradictions, and thus cannot be made to yield a consistent fictional world. Yet in this sort of case it is often as attractive to speak of a fictional world as in any.

It is not clear whether the problem of identity across possible worlds is also present for fictional worlds. We may ask whether Richard Nixon would have been the same person if he had not been elected President in

1968, but if Sherlock Holmes is the same person in 'A Study in Scarlet' and 'The Hound of the Baskervilles,' it is because the worlds of 'A Study in Scarlet' and 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' (along with the other writings of the Holmes corpus) coalesce to form a single fictional world. (I am not here concerned with possible fictional worlds, i.e. with questions of whether Sherlock Holmes would have been the same character if he had never taken morphine.) This is admittedly not so clear in the case of a work like 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead,' since here a divergence of author seems to mark a divergence of fictional world, but I would still insist that insofar as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the same characters in both plays, the world of 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead' is part of (one might say: an annex to) the world of 'Hamlet.'

So far this essay has been concerned (for the most part) with fictional worlds conceived of as not intersecting our own. A statement such as 'Gandalf was a wizard who saved Frodo' may be taken as simply true, since the only relevant standard of truth for it is one that is met – conformity to what is said in *Lord of the Rins*. But what about 'Richard III killed the princes in the tower?' There is a school of thought which holds that according to a relevant standard of truth (that of history) this is not the case, that Henry VII was the real culprit. Yet it is true according to another standard of truth, fidelity to Shakespeare's play 'Richard III.'

Even in a historical fiction, which seems to be about real persons, we have, I think, merely and simply a fiction. 'Richard III killed the princes' is ambiguous: it may be taken as a statement of historical fact (in which case it has been doubted), or as a statement of what goes on in Shakespeare's play (in which case it cannot be). Shakespeare's Richard III is as much a fictional character as Tolkien's Gandalf and the England of Shakespeare's history plays is as much a fictional land as Tolkien's Middle Earth. The same holds of fictional times, past, present, and future.

This does not mean that a story-teller may not incorporate by reference what is known to be the case about a real person, place or time into history. By setting a story in contemporary academia I may be able to establish in my audience certain background assumptions about what life is like there, and thus enrich my fictional world in an economical manner. Yet all such facts become fictional by being incorporated into a fiction, as is shown by the privilege the author has of departing from his

real model at will. The avoidance of anachronism in historical novels or
plays is merely a convention of style. Not all literary ages – Shakespeare's
for example – have felt bound by it.

I do not wish to exclude by these remarks criticisms of a writer for
betraying his ignorance of a certain locale by his deviations from ac-
curacy. Nor do I deny, of course, that someone may be guilty of libel
even if he heads his libelous tract 'A Fictional Story.' But the first is an
aesthetic point: the merit of a work will be decreased by its lack of au-
thenticity. And the second is a moral-legal one: a person may not, simply
by stipulating the sort of discourse in which he is engaged, evade stric-
tures on his writing which apply when other cues as to its nature are
followed.

A particular case of the inclusion of real person in a work of fiction is
autobiographical fiction. Imagine a story written in the first person, where
the narrator has the same name as, and otherwise closely resembles, the
author. It seems that what was said above applies in this case as well: a
writer's fictional self is as much a fictional character as any other of his
creations. Yet it seems odd that a mere fictional character can speak for
the author in the way his fictional self can.

Let us approach this qeustion by asking what goes on when an author
uses his work of fiction to advance a thesis about the world outside it.
This is what happens, for instance in a play like the *Deputy*, in which
Hochhuth uses his play to advance historical theses concerning the role of
the Papacy in the Second World War and the extermination of the Jews.
The simplest account here is that Hochhuth is simply doing two things –
writing a fiction and advancing a historical thesis – each of which is to be
judged by criteria proper to it. This is not to say that these two purposes
will not interact – reinforcing each other or interfering with one another
as the case may be – but only that two purposes are distinguishable, and
Hochhuts' success must thus be judged in two different ways. We can
ask both whether his portrayal of Pope Pius XII is historically accurate
and whether it is dramatically convincing.

This line of approach seems to suffice for all cases where the narrator,
speaking for the author, pronounces on matters external to the work of
fiction. The narrator, insofar as he is a spokesman for the author, is the
author himself, who has chosen this indirect means of making his views
known. In another capacity he is simply a fictional character. Thus what

the tape-recorder says at the end of the *Deputy* is from one standpoint
Hochhuth's own assertions, from another it is merely one part of his fiction-
al creation alongside others.

But what of such statements as "Martha (in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia
Woolf') is really a man; her relationship with George is really a homo-
sexual one"? Here there is no way of treating the statement as ambiguous
between modes and hence true when taken as a statement about the
realities outside the play although false within it. It can, I believe, be taken
in two ways: (1) as an aesthetic criticism (Albee has failed to portray
Martha as a convincing woman; she is a man in skirts) or (2) as a statement
about the model Albee employed for Martha (cf. Flaubert: "Madame
Bovary c'est moi" or Pope's Sporus = Lord Hervey) especially if he in-
tended that this model be recognized. If what is intended is that the Martha
of the play should really be a man, despite the many contrary indications
in the text, then I am forced to reply that I am not obliged to explain
everything literary critics try to say. Literary criticism must be allotted its
share of nonsense.

But I have not explained the ability of the author, speaking through a
narrator or through the course of events, to pronounce authoritatively
for the world of his creation in moral matters. One of the things we
expect an author to do is to tell us in what terms the actions of his charac-
ters are to be judged, and his failure to do so clearly enough – indicated
by the fact that critics feel moved to moralize independently about the
fictional world – may occasion critical comment.[7] The device of an om-
niscient narrator is a common one for establishing the facts of a fictional
world, but what is more interesting is the ability of the author by this
means to define the moral structure of his world.[8] Shakespeare has the
ability to establish the revenge ethic as one of the givens in terms of which
the action of 'Hamlet' is to be judged, as much so as monarchy as a form
of government or the fact that Hamlet is an educated man. And this could
be done (less gracefully, to be sure) through a narrator – indeed that is
what is done in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the narrator is likely to
follow a speech by a comment assigning it its moral place.[9] For the author
to use the narrator as a way of defining the moral parameters of the world
of his creation is for him to assume an identity with a portion of his work,
and thus for him to take part in the events of the world of his creation,
beyond the part he plays as its author.

It may be objected that no such power to define the moral structures of one fictional world exists. The revenge ethic – someone might say – is just irrational, and no author has the power to impose it on us. But it is not *us* he is imposing it on. We are under no obligation to follow the revenge ethic in our daily lives, or even to read works in which the revenge ethic is postulated. But if we are to seriously enter the world of a fictional work, we must – *for the purposes of talking about that world* – accept its givens, including its ethical givens. Of course we may criticize the author for the givens he establishes or the way in which he establishes them, but to criticize a work is not to rewrite it, and the givens of a work remain its givens even when they do not meet with critical favor. (Conversely, the value of examples from novels, and so on, for moral discourse is limited by the fact that the actions of novels may take place within moral structures which for the purpose of real-life moral reflection we may very well wish to deny.)

The intervention of the author within the world of his creation is also required to explain such remarks as "Flaubert relentlessly pursues Madame Bovary" (Matthew Arnold, followed by George Steiner). If all the evidence we have for this statement is disasters overtaking Madame Bovary, it is groundless. These disasters must in some way be identifiable as the work of Flaubert other than simply as his work as author of the novel.

Another way our world may intersect the world of a work of fiction is in the performance of a play. Here a real person is associated with a fictional one, likewise a real place (the stage) and a real time with a fictional place and time. What happens in such a case is that the actors take upon themselves the person of the fictional characters, but no real identity is established. The names of the characters continue to refer, not (except by a figure of speech also exemplified by using the actor's name when one means the character) to the actors but to the fictional character whose persons they bear. (In the case of a mime-game or improvisation, where the actors make up the story as they go along – making assignments of parts in midstream as well perhaps – the actors are also the authors [producers, directors] but the situation is otherwise unchanged.)[10]

North Adams State College

NOTES

[1] Cf. Leonard Linsky, 'Reference and Referents', in *Philosophy and Ordinary Language* (ed. by Charles E. Caton), Urbana, Illinois 1963, p. 85.

[2] For abundant examples of such discourse, cf. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearian Tragedy*, London 1929.

[3] For more on how such statements are to be assessed, cf. F. Cioffi, 'Intention and Interpretation in Criticism', *Selected Papers in Aesthetics* (ed. by Cyril Barrett), Oxford, 1965.

[4] What is relevant here is of course the time-sequence *internal* to the Holmes corpus, not the sequence in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote the stories.

[5] There is actually a range of cases here, illustrating the complications involved in the establishment of identities in this context. A character who appears in one work as manifesting only – though not necessarily all – the characteristics manifested by one with the same name in another is the strongest case of identity. The case of Sherlock Holmes, even in Sherlock Holmes stories written by others than Sir Arthur Canan Doyle, is also inviting, despite the contradictions to be found in the Sherlock Holmes canon. Faust, who in Goethe is called Heinrich and is saved, and in Marlowe is called Johann and is damned, is an intermediate case. We cannot make the Fausts cohere into a single figure, yet an important point is served by speaking of the same character. Travesties, in which a character has properties wildly different from that which he has in the model, and stories in which only the same name is used, without other substantial resemblance, lie at the other end of the scale.

[6] 'Hamlet was Prince of Denmark' will be assented to in many contexts where 'Hamlet existed' will not be. This point is commonly overlooked, e.g. by Kendall L. Wolton, 'Pictures and Make-Believe', *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973), 287, note 5.

[7] Cf. A. L. French, '*Hamlet* and the Moralists', *Oxford Review* 6 (Michaelmas, 1967), esp. pp. 68–74.

[8] By 'the moral structure of his world' I mean the moral judgments applicable to the actions of the characters within it, not (a) the moral code regnant among them or (b) the hierarchy of values actually manifested in their behavior. Either or both of these may be opposed by the narrator, and through him by the author.

[9] For example:

> Thus *Belial* with words cloth'd in reason's garb
> Counselled ignoble ease, and peaceful sloth
> (II, 226 f.)

It is necessary for this to be a case of the narrator-as-character speaking on behalf of the author that the narrator be given a personality. This is what is done in the prologue (I, 1–26) and more clearly in III, 32 ff., where the narrator is, like Milton, blind.

[10] For an application of these results, see my 'The Ontological Argument and the Charge of Question-Begging', *Philosophy* (forthcoming).