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A Revisionary View of Texts, Textual Meaning, and Fictional Characters

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ABSTRACT: Using ideas from John Searle, Roy Harris, Michael Reddy, and Nelson Goodman, I argue that texts, such as they are commonly conceived, lack brute existence. The common idea of texts is a conceptual construction which is useful in practical everyday contexts but not in serious theorizing, where it creates illusions and contradictions. One of these illusions is the idea of an objective textual meaning, a meaning which is "in the text": what we actually have in the way of textual meaning are the ideas of various persons – authors, readers, and commentators -- about the meaning of the text. When applied to fictional characters, this way of viewing things explains why it makes sense to regard fictional characters as being created and as lacking brute existence.

KEYWORDS: The ontology of texts – textual meaning – fictional characters – John Searle – Roy Harris.

This paper will introduce and explain a partly new perspective on texts, textual meaning, and fictional characters.[2] The discussion will

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[2] The general perspective is presented much more comprehensively in my book – Pettersson (2017). However, fictional characters are not discussed in the monograph,

finally lead up to a reflection on two alternative conceptions of verbal communication.

The word "text" refers, here, to any whole piece of verbal utterance or discourse – short or long, oral or written, literary or non-literary. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) will be used as an example of a text and Madame Bovary's husband, Charles Bovary, as the main example of a fictional character.

Charles Bovary is first introduced in the opening sentence of Flaubert's text, a sentence which reads, in Flaubert's original French,

> Nous étions à l'Étude, quand le Proviseur entra, suivi d'un nouveau habillé en bourgeois et d'un garçon de classe qui portait un grand pupitre.[3]

and in Eleanor Marx-Aveling's English translation,

> We were in class when the head-master came in, followed by a "new fellow", not wearing the school uniform, and a school servant carrying a large desk.[4]

The new fellow is Charles Bovary.

1. Brute existence and mentally constructed existence

Ontological considerations play an important role for the understanding of texts, textual meaning, and fictional characters. In particular, there is a distinction worth drawing between two kinds of existence, which could be called "brute existence" and "mentally constructed existence". A planet is a good example of an entity enjoying brute existence: a planet is simply

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and the ontology of what I call "commentator's meaning" is treated differently here than in the book.

[3] See Project Gutenberg. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, accessed 16 March 2017, http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/14155/pg14155.html.

[4] See Project Gutenberg. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Eleanor Marx-Aveling, accessed 16 March 2017, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2413/2413-h/2413-h.html.

there, irrespective of what humans think or say. The contents of a daydream, on the other hand, do not possess that mode of being. They form part of the imaginings of the daydreamer, who can also change the contents at will. Still, the contents of a daydream exist, in a sense. They enjoy a mentally constructed existence. [5]

The distinction between brute and mentally constructed existence is a modification of John Searle's distinction between brute and institutional facts (see, especially, Searle 1995, 1-2). The main difference between the two dichotomies is that Searle only considers mentally constructed existence which involves social agreement and thereby results in institutional facts, while the mentally constructed also includes purely individual mental products. Traffic rules can serve as examples of institutional facts in Searle's sense, while daydreams can not. Traffic rules are not features of brute reality, not parts of the structure of the universe: they depend on institutionalized human agreement for their very being. Still, we would certainly like to say that traffic rules exist.

2. The mode of existence of languages

What are the brute realities in connection with a language, for example, English? If by "English" we mean English as used, verbal communication in English, what are brutely real must be the physical sounds or physical marks produced and received and the mental processes in senders and receivers which underlie the ideas associated with these sounds or marks.

English as a language system, a "grammar", is something different and something which lacks brute existence. A grammar of English is a linguistic description of the knowledge presumed to be at the command of a fully competent speaker of English. A grammar is made up of a phonetics, a lexicon, a syntax, and so forth: it consists of phonemes, words, sentences,

[5] I will take the existence of an outer world for granted and suppose that the outer world contains, at least, physical objects and biological organisms, including humans. While I will think of human mental processes as brutely existing, I will regard the contents of thoughts, such as, for example the contents of a daydream, as mental constructs.

and suchlike.[6] The phonemes, words, sentences, etc. are obviously mental constructs. They belong to the linguistic description of a system supposed to be employed when communication in English takes place. They are, so to speak, elements of the map constructed by linguists, not elements of the linguistic terrain supposed to be mapped.

Many theorists seem to deny this. Many like to say, for example, that people utter words and write down sentences (see, e.g., Lycan 2008, 72; and Chaudhuri 2010, 11). However, while we are certainly used to saying, casually, that people do such things, this cannot be literally true. An English sentence is not a physical phenomenon, and one cannot very well utter or write down something which lacks physical existence.[7]

3. Textual meaning

Senders mean something by the texts they issue, and receivers achieve some kind of understanding of the texts. When writing and publishing *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert meant something by the physical marks he produced and expected to be reproduced and disseminated. He will no doubt have intended the marks to be interpreted as standing for meaningful French words and sentences, and he must also have entertained some wider, albeit vaguer, expectations concerning the overall import of his novel. Readers of *Madame Bovary*, for their part, attempt to understand Flaubert's text. Deciphering the physical marks in their respective copy of the novel, they construe a verbal understanding of its words and sentences, and they also seek a point or points in Flaubert's story, something that can make the novel meaningful to them. I will call such things as Flaubert's

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6 For the concept of a grammar see, e.g., Fromkin (2000, 7), or Baker & Hengeveld (2012, 18-19).

7 Many philosophers would object that *tokens* of words and sentences are in fact concrete and can be uttered, while word- and sentence-*types* are abstract. I do not share that idea. The view requires us to think of physical sound and physical marks as being linguistic entities, but a soundwave or a configuration of ink cannot very well, in itself, belong to a language and be a word or a sentence, although philosophers often presuppose that it can – see, e.g., Bach & Harnish (1979, 285, note 1), and Wetzel (2014, sec. 1.1).

intended meaning "sender's meaning" and receivers' constructions of meaning "receiver's meaning".

There are many possible ways of making the concepts of sender's meaning and receiver's meaning more precise if one wishes to do so with some specific research objective in mind. However, since my purpose here is not of any narrowly circumscribed kind I will leave the two concepts open and intuitive. It should be emphasized, though, that sender's meaning and receiver's meaning are mental entities, and that each receiver's meaning will be his or her own. While it is possible to speak of the one and only sender's meaning of *Madame Bovary*, it can never make sense to speak of the one and only receiver's meaning.

One may believe that there exist not only the sender's meaning and the various receivers' meanings, but also the true meaning of the text. Most theorists take it for granted that a text has some definite body of meaning associated with it, whether the theorist conceives of that meaning itself as being indeterminate (as poststructuralists typically do) or as being more or less determinate (like most adherents of other schools). Yet it is difficult to see how objectively true textual meaning could come into existence. Where *Madame Bovary* is concerned, a third party – a critic, say, or a schoolteacher – can certainly present an interpretation of the text. But that interpretation will inevitably just represent one more idea about the textual meaning of the novel – not a sender's meaning or a receiver's meaning, since the critic or teacher will be placed outside the situation of actual literary communication, but something which can be called a "commentator's meaning".

The belief in true textual meaning, the belief that every text has some definite body of meaning associated with it, seems to be very nearly universal. One of the rather few people who has challenged such a view in a conscious and reflective manner is the British linguist Roy Harris. For Harris, there is the sender's understanding of the meaning and the receiver's understanding, and if these do not coincide there is no supreme authority to appeal to. "The signs that occur in first-order communication are those that the participants construe as occurring", he writes, "and what is signified is what the participants construe as having been signified. *There is no higher court of appeal*" (Harris 1998, 145). Harris holds that "where two or more participants are involved a message must be open to two or more interpretations. And these cannot be guaranteed to coincide. Furthermore,

where they conflict, no one interpretation holds a privileged position *vis-à-vis* another" (Harris 1998, 84).

I fully agree with Harris, and I will return to these matters later in the essay in order to defend the perspective on textual meaning sketched here. But let us first look at the implications of the way of thinking about communication presented thus far for the understanding of a special kind of element of textual meaning: fictional characters. I will add a revisionary view of fictional characters to the revisionary view of textual meaning just presented.

4. The mode of existence of fictional characters

It should be clear that a fictional character, for example, Charles Bovary, lacks brute existence. That is what most fundamentally distinguishes fictional characters from genuine human beings. In the most simple and straightforward sense of "exist", then, fictional characters do not exist. Yet fictional characters obviously enjoy a mentally constructed existence. Flaubert mentally constructed Charles Bovary. He had ideas, imaginings, in which Charles Bovary figured, and eventually Flaubert made ideas about Charles Bovary part of the textual meaning of his novel *Madame Bovary*. Ideas about Charles Bovary indubitably form part of the sender's meaning of the text, and such ideas will also have to form part of any defensible receiver's meaning and commentator's meaning. These brief remarks seem to me to answer all basic questions about the ontology of fictional characters. Not to put too fine a point on it: Charles Bovary does not exist. What exist are ideas about Charles Bovary.

Ideas about Charles Bovary should not be understood as being ideas about some extra entity existing apart from the ideas. As a reader of *Madame Bovary*, I form an idea of the fictive situation described in the first sentence of Flaubert's novel. My idea of the fictive situation features, among other things, a classroom, a class servant, and a new boy who will later prove to be called Charles Bovary. The classroom, the class servant, Charles Bovary, et cetera, are some of the constituents of my idea. There is no need to reckon with any extra, somehow independent, entities forming the referents of my idea – a fictive classroom, a fictive class servant, the fictional character Charles Bovary, and suchlike. My idea is just such-and-such an idea, an idea featuring such-and-such elements.

Once again I build on previous thinkers. This time Nelson Goodman is the key reference. Goodman maintained that there is nothing that a picture of a unicorn or a picture of Pickwick is a picture *of;* rather, a picture of a unicorn is a special kind of picture: a unicorn-picture. Similarly, a picture of Pickwick is a special kind of picture: a Pickwick-picture. The existence of unicorn-pictures and Pickwick-pictures does not, according to Goodman – with whom I entirely agree –, force us to suppose that unicorns, or fictional characters like Pickwick, enjoy some kind of separate, independent existence (cf. Goodman 1968, 21-22).

Two additional comments. First, note that I do not claim that Charles Bovary exists in the minds of individual people. It is more to the point to describe me as maintaining that Charles Bovary does not exist, not anywhere, but that there can be ideas of Charles Bovary in the minds of many individuals.

Second: it can seem as if we often refer to Charles Bovary in a way which cannot be understood as involving reference to any specific, individual mind. For example, in the Wikipedia article about *Madame Bovary* we read: "Charles Bovary is a shy, oddly dressed teenager arriving at a new school where his new classmates ridicule him."[8] But such an utterance should not be understood as referring to a non-mental Charles Bovary. The anonymous writer may well have thought of the utterance as genuinely referring, but in reality the writer has produced a comment on the novel, conveying commentator's meaning, which is just as mental as sender's meaning and receiver's meaning.[9] Nobody would want to challenge the substance of what the writer says. Still, we are faced with just another person-bound idea about Charles Bovary.[10]

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[8] See entry "Madame Bovary" in Wikipedia. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madame_Bovary.

[9] The Wikipedia writer's utterance has a sender's meaning, of course, but part of this sender's meaning is a commentator's idea about Charles Bovary.

[10] Commentator's meanings can be of different kinds. I understand the utterance in question as meant to convey something more than a purely personal perception: as meant to point to features expected to be experienced by all competent readers of Flaubert's novel.

5. More about fictional characters: a defence of antirealism and creationism

The way of thinking about fictional characters introduced in the previous section differs from the approaches current in the philosophical discussion. It is not possible to enter really deep into these differences here, but I will relate my own standpoint on fictional characters to the current philosophical debate on a couple of points.

Distinctions like the one between brute and mentally constructed existence tend to play a marginal role at best in standard ontology, and they seem to be largely neglected in the philosophy of fictional entities.[11] This may seem surprising, since the question of whether or not fictional characters exist – the question of realism or antirealism about fictional characters – is one of the main issues in the field (see Kroon & Voltolini 2016, secs. 2.1, 2.2). True, everybody will probably be ready to accredit fictional characters with at least a mentally constructed existence, so that the question of realism or antirealism will concern brute existence. Yet it is my impression that not drawing the distinction between brute and mentally constructed existence gives rise to a certain amount of confusion in the debate.

The standpoint advocated here, according to which fictional characters possesss mentally constructed existence but not brute existence, is probably best characterized as a variety of antirealism about fictional characters. Arguments have been raised against antirealism. A particularly favoured argument rests on the observation that there are truths about fictional characters. It is commonly thought that if you can make a true statement about some singular entity, that singular entity must exist: if the statement "Bratislava is the capital of the Slovak Republic" is true, then Bratislava must exist (cf. e.g., Hale 1987, 11; and Effingham 2013, 172). If this is a valid principle, it seems that Charles Bovary must exist, for it appears hard to deny the truth of the statement "Charles Bovary is a fictional character".[12]

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[11] The philosophy of fictional entities is not a specialty of mine. In the rest of this section I draw heavily on the overview of the field presented by Fred Kroon and Alberto Voltolini in their article Kroon & Voltolini (2016).

[12] See the discussion of assertions of this kind in Kroon & Voltolini (2016, secs. 2.1.2, 2.1.3).

However, the principle in question obviously presupposes that brute reality is in itself, independently of any human representational schemes, divided into separate objects fit to function as referents of linguistic statements, and it also presupposes that language can reflect the structure of brute reality. Both suppositions are controversial[13] and in my view mistaken. This is not the place to pursue the matter in depth, but the very simplicity of the principle should raise suspicion. If this line of thought were tenable, one could prove the brute existence of such abstract objects as natural numbers just by pointing out that it is true that two and two make four.[14]

Now to another point. Some theorists believe that fictional characters just exist, timelessly as it were. Other theorists, sometimes called "creationists", hold that fictional characters are created – a creationist will maintain, for example, that Charles Bovary was created by Gustave Flaubert.[15] I certainly believe that Charles Bovary was mentally constructed by Flaubert: Flaubert had imaginings about Charles Bovary and he made such imaginings part of his sender's meaning of *Madame Bovary*, actually causing imaginings of this kind to also form part of every defensible reader's meaning and commentator's meaning of his novel. I suppose this way of viewing the matter makes me a creationist of sorts.

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[13] Thus, e.g., Searle comments, on what he calls conceptual relativity: "Systems of representation, such as vocabularies and conceptual schemes generally, are human creations, and to that extent arbitrary. It is possible to have any number of different systems of representations for representing the same reality" (Searle 1995, 151; and cf. Searle 1995, 163-165). What is or is not a single object will then also depend on the chosen system of representation and not just on brute reality. Regarding language, N. J. Enfield remarks that "language is not a means for *reflecting* how things are, but rather a means for *portraying* it in certain ways" (Enfield 2015, 2).

[14] I should perhaps add that I have no problem at all with accepting the proposition that Charles Bovary is a fictional character. Indeed, when I read the first sentence of *Madame Bovary* the new boy figures in my mental representation of the scene as a boy but also as a fictional character, for I am fully aware of the fact that I am reading a piece of fictional discourse. However, in taking the new boy as a fictional character I take him eo ipso as *lacking* brute existence. Thus the fact that Charles Bovary is a fictional character does not appear, for me, to furnish material for an argument for his brute existence. Quite the opposite.

[15] On creationism, see Kroon & Voltolini (2016, sec. 1.3).

An objection that has been raised against creationists is that they are bad at specifying the identity criteria of fictional characters.[16] It is true that I have not specified any criteria for being Charles Bovary, but I do not believe that any such criteria exist. Charles Bovary does not brutely exist, and therefore he does not actually have any quite specific identity. What exist are ideas about Charles Bovary.[17] To repeat: Flaubert had imaginings about Charles Bovary and he made such imaginings part of his sender's meaning of *Madame Bovary*, actually causing imaginings of this kind to also form part of every defensible reader's meaning and commentator's meaning of his novel. For me, that is the whole story, or at least the central part of the story. (People who have merely heard about Charles Bovary quite vaguely and in second or third hand may also entertain ideas about Charles Bovary.) Identity criteria play no role in this account. [18]

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[16] Thus Kroon and Voltolini comment, in sec. 1.3, that creationism "makes it hard to see how to individuate a fictional entity".

[17] Kroon and Voltolini also write, still in sec. 1.3, that creationism "fails to account for the idea … that there must be a sense in which fictional objects *actually* have the properties that characterize them in the relevant stories". In my view, there are properties that Charles Bovary has according to the various representations of various people – Flaubert, his readers, et cetera – but these may not all coincide. The perceived properties will probably be in accordance to a large extent, but they may also differ on many points, and there are no properties that Charles Bovary *actually* has in any absolute sense. He lacks brute existence, and people's ideas of Charles Bovary may differ.

[18] At this point it lies near at hand to object that a traffic rule, which is also a mental construct, seems to have a specific content, so that a mental construct can very well have a specific identity. I would say, however, that the fundamental situation is the same in both cases. The existence of the traffic rule is an institutional fact backed up by a formal authority (while the existence of Charles Bovary is not), so there will be an authoritative verbal formulation of the traffic rule, and one will have attempted to make the meaning of the formulation as univocal as possible, i.e., one will have tried to ensure that the sender's meaning and all receivers' meanings will coincide as much as possible (something which was hardly a main concern in connection with *Madame Bovary*). Despite this, people may of course understand the rule differently, and rules are in fact open to interpretation. What is the "true" way of understanding the traffic rule may, ultimately, have to be decided in court. (Concerning the "true" characteristics of Charles Bovary, there is no court to turn to.)

I foresee the objection that I should at least be able to point to criteria for being an idea *about Charles Bovary* as opposed to an idea not pertaining to Charles Bovary. But why should I? I believe I can explain in what sense Charles Bovary exists and in what sense he does not. I have no qualms about speaking of ideas about Charles Bovary, since there are ideas which it appears natural and uncontroversial to call ideas about Charles Bovary, for example, some of the ideas making up Flaubert's sender's meaning of *Madame Bovary* and defensible readers' meanings and commentators' meaning in connection with the novel. But I do not believe that there are any pre-given criteria to unveil which will effect a distinction between ideas that are and are not about Charles Bovary. Where could such criteria conceivably come from? One can certainly impose criteria, but that will be an arbitrary thing to do unless one does so for some quite specific theoretical or practical purpose.

6. Conventions and textual meaning

Let us now leave fictional characters aside and come back to textual meaning. Many will no doubt want to dispute the idea that there is no true meaning associated with a text but "only" a sender's meaning and, possibly, various receivers' meanings and commentators' meanings. Some might even suspect that establishing the true, necessarily non-mental, meaning of *Madame Bovary* will give access to a Charles Bovary very different from the elusive figure whom I have been speaking of.

In the rest of this paper I will discuss three important arguments for the existence of true textual meaning and, naturally, attempt to refute the three arguments. The discussion will eventually lead over into questions about the nature and ontology of texts, and a revisionary view of texts will be added to the revisionary views of textual meaning and fictional characters.

According to the first of the three arguments for the existence of true textual meaning that I will consider, language and context – semantic conventions, pragmatic conventions, cultural context, and so forth – determine the meaning of texts; consequently, a text has a true meaning. Richard Gaskin has recently formulated such an idea by contending, referring to literature, that "the meaning of a work of literature is its original meaning" and

that "the original meaning of a work of literature is a function of the meanings that its component words have in the language at the time of that work's promulgation, of the contemporary significance of the syntactic constructions into which those words are fitted, and of the work's historical and literary context" (Gaskin 2013, 219).

I find that far from credible. Think of *Madame Bovary*. On an account like Gaskin's the true (original) meaning of the novel is supposed to be a function of the meanings of its words and syntactic constructions at the time of publication and of the novel's historical and literary context. But can one really specify all the relevant features of the historical context, all the relevant features of the literary context, all the contemporary meanings of the words forming part of *Madame Bovary*, and the significance of all the syntactic constructions used there? And can one, having done all that, also demonstrate how all these factors *function together* to fix the textual meaning of Flaubert's novel? To my mind, already because of their very enormity none of the five tasks can be actually performed. Nor, in my view, can any of the tasks be performed with any plausible claim to objectivity. But those who assert, like Gaskin, that there is true textual meaning arising through the mechanism just mentioned invariably content themselves with making the assertion. They never make any attempt to prove their point by specifying the concrete linguistic and cultural facts supposed to be relevant and by demonstrating how a textual meaning becomes defined as a function of those facts.

Nobody denies that linguistic and cultural knowledge plays a role for the understanding of *Madame Bovary*. But the idea that language and culture provide the novel with a definite meaning is an entirely different proposition. I find such standpoints unrealistic. I also find them empty, lacking in substance, as long as they remain naked assumptions.

7. Semantics and textual meaning

A second argument for the existence of true, non-personal textual meaning could take linguistic semantics as its starting-point. Linguists tell us that words have word-meanings and that sentences have sentence-meanings. (A sentence-meaning is supposed to be a function of the meanings of the constituent words and the syntactic structure of the sentence – cf., e.g.,

Birner 2013, 24.) There is no reason to dispute the (mentally constructed) existence of word-meanings and sentence-meanings, and this can foster the impression that texts must indeed have definite, impersonal bodies of meaning associated with them, since texts consist of words and sentences possessing word-meanings and sentence-meanings.

I do not believe that such an impression is correct. In my view, when linguists describe word-meanings they try to capture what members of the linguistic community mean by these words when using them. (As Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish once pointed out, "what words mean is what we mutually believe them to mean" (Bach & Harnish 1979, 133).) Likewise, when linguists describe sentence-meanings, what they actually describe is some central aspects of what senders would typically mean by utterances of these sentences and how receivers would typically understand them. The linguists' meaning ascriptions are thus to be seen as a kind of commentator's meanings: as idealized or generalized characterizations of certain elements of what actual senders and receivers would (supposedly) mean or understand by real utterances of the words or sentences.

In my view, it is consequently not the case that the sentence-meanings described by linguists determine what is meant by real utterances of those sentences. Things are the other way round: the real senders' and receivers' meanings of actual utterances of the sentences determine what the sentences mean. The linguist's map of the language does not determine the makeup of the real-world terrain of discourse in the language. On the contrary: the linguist's map of the language should try to picture, in a useful fashion, linguistically relevant aspects of what is meant, and by what means, in actual communication in the language.

Linguists and philosophers of language sometimes seem to me to turn things upside down, as if they believed that the tail is actually wagging the dog. Linguists like to say that language is governed by rules, meaning the rules formulated by linguists, seemingly oblivious of the circumstance that these rules (or, rather, these observations of linguistic regularities) cannot have come down from some semantic heaven but will have had to derive from their own ideas about the prevalent or correct use of the language. And philosophers of language sometimes seem to take sentence-meanings as the prime facts of language, letting sentence-meanings determine the meaning of actual utterances. Thus Searle has argued that an utterance of

the sentence "Snow is white", if it is an utterance of the sentence worth to be taken seriously, amounts to an assertion that snow is white *because that is what the sentence means*. For him, "the meaning of the sentence 'Snow is white' by itself determines that its appropriate utterance *counts as* a statement to the effect that snow is white" (Searle 2010, 10). Searle does not seem to ask himself what makes the sentence "Snow is white" itself mean what it means.

In this section, I wanted to point to the idea that linguistic semantics shows that there must be some objective meaning associated with real-world texts and utterances, and I wanted to indicate some of my reasons for not sharing the idea. Very much more could certainly be said about semantics, its nature, and its scope, but once again I have touched upon issues that I cannot discuss in depth within the confines of this essay.

8. Texts and textual meaning

A third ostensible reason to believe in the existence of "true" textual meaning comes from our standard way of conceptualizing human commuication. A simple communication model features a sender, a text, and a receiver. Applied to *Madame Bovary*, the picture will look like this:

Flaubert ⟹ *Madame Bovary* ⟹ Reader

But – so this line of thinking goes – a text contains words and meanings. Who would want to deny that *Madame Bovary* contains words and meanings? There must consequently be words and meanings in the text in the middle of the figure, not only in Flaubert and his reader, and it seems that the meaning in the text itself must be non-personal and objective.

The problem with this line of thinking is that our ordinary way of conceptualizing communication is not fit to be taken literally. As the American linguist Michael Reddy has shown, the simple communication model rests on a complex metaphor according to which senders insert their thoughts or feelings into physical objects (texts) from which receivers can then retrieve them. (We are used to supposing that a sender can "put his thoughts into words" and that the receiver can then "get something out of" those words

– see Reddy 1979/1993, 164-201.) But thoughts cannot be taken out of somebody's head, and a physical book does not contain any inner cavities into which such thoughts can be inserted. The ordinary picture of communication is straightforwardly metaphorical and the text, as characterized above, is a contradiction in terms. The *Madame Bovary* figuring in the model will have to be a physical object, since it is supposed to exist on its own outside sender and receiver. The text is also supposed to be possible to read, and in order to be possible to read *Madame Bovary* will have to be a physical entity: one cannot read something which lacks material existence. However, according to the model, the physical object which is *Madame Bovary* also contains non-physical elements: words and meanings are not material entities. *Madame Bovary*, as conceived according to our everyday conceptualization of communication, is thus an ontological monstrosity, physical and non-physical at the same time.

It is actually very easy to transform the ordinary conceptualization of communication into something more intellectually tidy. What exists between sender and receiver is not a text as ordinarily conceived but a physical something, in this case, a physical copy of *Madame Bovary*:

Flaubert ⟹ Physical copy of *Madame Bovary* ⟹ Reader

The physical copy is just physical. There are no words in the physical copy and no meanings, but there are word-ideas and meaning-ideas in the sender and in the receivers. So we are back with only person-bound meanings. The idea of an objective text of such a character that it can encapsulate objective meaning proved illusory.

But what, then, is *Madame Bovary*, if Flaubert's novel is not a physical object supplied with words and meanings? The best alternative way of thinking of *Madame Bovary* may be to put aside entirely the idea that there is ever any such thing as a unitary object that is *the text itself*. There are, instead, a cluster of interrelated entities: there are the physical copies, and there are the various word-ideas and meaning-ideas entertained by the author, the readers, and the commentators. This way of thinking, this alternative perspective, eliminates reference to unitary texts-themselves, but it still gives us everything we need to think or talk about when thinking or talking about texts – for what else is there to refer to, apart from

physical copies, sequences of signs, and textual meaning? The cluster conception of what a text is removes the ontological contradictions surrounding texts, for the physical copies are of course physical through and through, while the sequence of signs and the textual meaning are non-physical through and through. Consequently, the cluster conception does not give rise to the same kind of theoretical illusions as the ordinary conception of a text, for example, the illusion that a physical copy can contain an immaterial meaning. But the cluster conception is certainly a revisionary notion.[19]

It is worth emphasizing that the ordinary conception of texts and the cluster conception are both mental constructs. Both are human ways of conceptualizing certain aspects of the brute facts of human communication. I would also like to add that both conceptions have their pros and cons. Like so many everyday conceptions, the ordinary conception is profoundly illogical but also, because of its very lack of intellectual precision, eminently practical and easy to handle. One would not want to be without the ordinary conception of texts. Yet, if taken seriously, the ordinary conception does not make sense, and it gives rise to aporias and illusions. It is therefore good to have the cluster conception to fall back on whenever theoretical clarity is more important than conversational ease. On the other hand, the amount of precision required by talk in cluster conception terms – talk not about presumedly unitary texts but about more or less specific copies, sequences of signs, and meanings – makes cluster-conception formulations too cumbersome to use in less demanding contexts.

9. Conclusion

Despite the use of *Madame Bovary* as an example, my real focus in this essay has been on the general understanding of verbal communication, literary or non-literary. In the previous section I suggested, following Reddy,

[19] While the idea of a text suggested here is, in this form, original, it is associated with a special family of theories about what a text is, theories that are usually called "eliminativist". About "eliminativist" thinking about texts, see Livingston (2016, sec. 3.2).

that our standard way of conceptualizing communication is in need of radical reform. I have pointed to an alternative way of understanding what is going on when people communicate in speech or writing, and I have used reflections on texts, textual meaning, and fictional characters as means of introducing that way of thinking and making it more concrete.

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