Contribution to Fictional Epistemology

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ABSTRACT: In his article "Who is Who in the Fictional World", Petr Koťátko argues that fictional worlds are, in general, complete, that is the logical law of the excluded middle holds in fictional worlds, though he admits that there are exceptions—he mentions Samuel Beckett's trilogy as an example. The present article agrees with both these conclusions, and it continues Koťátko's discussion by suggesting an explanation why so many scholars have claimed that fictional worlds in general are incomplete, and by presenting different kinds of exceptions from Koťátko's basic position, and, finally, by sketching alternative interpretations of these examples of incomplete fictional worlds.

KEYWORDS: Completeness – fictional worlds – incompleteness.

Is the number of Sherlock Holmes' cousins odd or even? Or is it neither odd nor even? Are fictive worlds in distinction to the actual world construed in such a way that some statements are neither true nor false? Basically, this discussion concerns the ontology and epistemology of narrative fiction, what exists (in a manner of speech) in a certain fictive world, and how we reach knowledge (figuratively speaking) about its contents. At the end of this essay I will turn to the question of how the conclusions drawn relate to what I will call "narrative immediacy"—the quoted term will be explained in that context.

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Roman Ingarden, in his *Das Literarische Kunstwerk* from 1931, first formulates the presumed fact that fictive worlds in distinction to the real

world are incomplete. His example is a table in a hypothetical novel. The material of the table is not mentioned, and, consequently, it does not consist of any particular material. Ingarden calls such incompletenesses "Leerstellen". He contrasts them to the conditions that hold for the real world: "In a real object such Leerstellen are not possible. At most the material is unknown." Thus, according to Ingarden, incompleteness in fiction is ontological, and in the real world it is "at most" epistemic.[1]

After Ingarden, the discussion about fictive incompleteness has been stimulated and refined by the influence of possible world semantics on literary theory. Within this theoretical frame, Lubomír Doležel (1998) has claimed that fictive worlds are incomplete, while Marie-Laure Ryan (1991) has argued against the general validity of the incompleteness-thesis from the same point of departure.[2] David Lewis' article "Truth in Fiction" from 1978 has played a crucial role for both these literary scholars. A simplified description of Lewis' position with respect to incompleteness runs as follows: there are (at least) two principles relevant for the question of what is true in a particular fictional world, one rooted in the actual world, and one rooted in the "collective belief worlds of the community" of the work in question. Thus, in order to conduct an investigation concerning what material Ingarden's table was made of, we may either ask ourselves what the world would be like if the book were told as a true story, not as a work of fiction, or, in the second case, we would ask ourselves what would be true if the book were true against the background of common convictions in the author's community, when this background is taken as true as well. In the second case we would certainly have Leerstellen, as some questions are always left undecided by the body of shared beliefs in any community, and when these questions coincide with gaps in the book, we have instances of incompleteness. The first approach also admits for Leerstellen: if the hypothetical novel were true, it is as likely that the mentioned table would be made of oak as of birch (and so on). The question concerning what it is made of is left unanswered.

In logical terms, this leads to an anomaly: the fictive world of Ingarden's hypothetical novel contains neither "t is an oak table" nor "t is not an oak table" as truth, that is, the logical law of the excluded middle is violated.

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[1]   See Ingarden (1960, 264-265); the quoted translation is my own.

[2]   For an exposé of the application of possible world semantics in narrative and fiction theory, see Ryan (2005).

Kendall Walton calls his pair of principles, roughly corresponding to Lewis' pair, "the Reality Principle" and "the Mutual Belief Principle" (Walton 1990, 141-161). Like Lewis, Walton stresses the fact that the result generated by one of them may contradict the result generated by the other, and, again like Lewis, both principles accord with the thesis of fictive incompleteness. Walton illustrates how the two principles work by presenting an example, with two different readings, of one and the same hypothetical work. One reader, Loretta, reads a fictional narrative about a character, Andy, who behaves in certain anti-social ways. After consulting modern medical expertise, she concludes that Andy suffers from an inherited neurological disorder. Mabel reads the same book but establishes her epistemic background by consulting historical archives. She concludes that Andy is possessed by the devil, an explanation well in accord with beliefs held in the author's community. Loretta applies the Reality Principle and Mable the Mutual Belief Principle. One lesson of this is that the phrase "what's true in the fiction" may cover more than one truth. Moreover, since neither what is true nor what was commonly believed to be true at the time and place of the writing of this novel will dictate the answer to all the questions regarding the material of all pieces of furniture mentioned in the book, there will be Leerstellen in it. Walton's example may also be used to illustrate the fact that the metaphorical terms "truth", "conviction", and "knowledge" always applies in relation to a certain interpretation or reading—both Mabel's reading and Loretta's reading generate "knowledge", in spite of the fact that they are in conflict.

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Like Ryan, Petr Koťátko critically discusses the incompleteness thesis. His example is Balzac's novel *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes.* His example runs as follows:

> "Was Mme d'Espard's gall bladder [at a certain time] in good condition?" (Koťátko 2010, 97)

Since nothing is stated or presupposed about the condition of her gall bladder, and since neither the Reality Principle nor the Mutual Belief Principle settle the case, both assumptions are excluded from this fictional world in accordance with the incompleteness thesis. It is not the case that Mme d'Espard's gall bladder is in good condition, and it is not the case that

her gall bladder is not in good condition. Koťátko concludes: "A novel whose world would be inhabited by such bizarre creatures ought to aspire to some genre rather different from 'scenes from Parisian life'". (ibid., 97) I agree; the very idea that fictional worlds are inhabited by incomplete persons is absurd. Our knowledge about them is incomplete, but they are not incomplete themselves. Incompleteness is epistemic, not ontological; in Koťátko's words:

> It is [then] right to say that our *construction* of the character is incomplete—but the incomplete construction of a character is something very different from the construction of an incomplete character. (ibid., 99)

In his article, Koťátko refers to realistic novels of the nineteenth century—novels by Balzac, Stendahl, Tolstoy. Does his defence of completeness comprise all fictional narratives, or are they valid only for realistic fiction?

A final quote about Balzac's novel seems to indicate the latter, more limited, interpretation: "To give up this assumption [that is, the assumption of completeness] means to start reading the *Splendeurs* as one of the novels of Beckett's Trilogy". (ibid., 99) Thus, he points at the possibility to interpret the fictional worlds of Samuel Beckett as ontologically incomplete.

I will come back to this, but I will first address a question not discussed by Koťátko: why do many scholars treat fictional and factual discourses so differently with respect to incompleteness? As said, Ingarden calls the incompleteness of fiction "Leerstellen" and contrasts them to the conditions that hold for the real world: "In a real object such Leerstellen are not possible. At most the material is unknown". Why not just say the same about fictional and factual accounts that mention a table without mentioning the material it is made of: we do not know the material, and that is all. Koťátko does not discuss this question.

My first approximate and preliminary suggestion as an answer to this is: the reader of a fictional work receives "the whole truth and nothing but the truth". We may know that a certain factual statement is true or false for various reasons. We may see with our own eyes that it is true (or false), or we may infer from a reliable source, other than the text we read, that it is true (or false), but we believe that a certain fictional statement is true in the fiction simply because the text says so. If we want to reject or revise the information we receive from a factual text we are free go to other, more reliable, sources. The understanding of a fictional narrative coincides with, or

even is the same as, the recognition of fictional truth. The understanding of a factual report is not the same as the recognition of its truth. The reader of fiction is in the highly privileged state of being informed about "the whole truth and nothing but the truth," and this state is impossible to achieve in real life. Furthermore, this intimate relation between understanding and truth has a consequence with respect to the possibility of completion. When we have read Ingarden's hypothetical novel to the end, there is in principle no way to find out what material the table is made of. When we read the same sentence in a factual report, there may be difficulty in finding out what the table is made of—and it might even be practically impossible—but it is not in principle impossible. A reliable document may turn up which says that it is made of oak.

Or, put in another way: the understanding of a fictional narrative, and what is true in fiction, are two categories which come so close to each other that the border between epistemology and ontology seems to break down; the reader, and the theorist, become victims of the illusion that the two categories coincide.

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As said, Koťátko hints at the idea that certain modernist literature may be ontologically incomplete. Is this right? He refers to Samuel Beckett's *Trilogy*, but I believe that Franz Kafka's *The Process* may equally well serve as an example. According to most commentators, the protagonist Josef K. is arrested in the first chapter. But how does this happen? Only one utterance made by a man—obviously, or should we say, seemingly an employee of the Court—provides the appearance of an arresting procedure: "Sie sind ja verhaftet". Nevertheless, such a formulation rather presupposes that K. already is arrested—to perform the speech act of arrest, one should say "Sie sind verhaftet" and nothing more. Moreover, after this scene, that is after having been arrested—if he is—he is free to go. Observations of this sort could, I assume, be used to support an interpretation according to which it is neither true nor false that he is arrested. In semantic terms, the word "arrest" is vague in the world of Kafka's novel, and I guess that the interpretation may be elaborated to include more juridical phenomena. Another close interpretative possibility can be exemplified by the final point of the juridical process, the death of Josef K. A common reading of the killing of K. is that he is executed after having been found guilty by the court, but Lubomír Doležel has pointed to several circumstances that indicate that we

do not witness an execution but a slaughter with no explanation (Doležel 1998, 195-196). A possible interpretative strategy could be to select convincing textual evidence for the thesis that K. is not executed, and equally convincing evidence for the thesis that he is executed. A similar strategy might be applied to question whether he is arrested or not in the first chapter. That is, the examples of incompleteness in *The Process* could easily be reinterpreted as examples of contradictions.

This case differs in several ways from Mme d'Espard's gall bladder and Ingarden's table. In the two latter cases the reader does not pay any attention to the incompleteness. The reader is not aware of the gaps unless the theorist forces her to see them, and there is nothing in the text that may give rise to an impression of a contradictory state-of-affairs, and, finally, the so-called gaps are insignificant to a global interpretation. In Kafka's novel, the Leerstellen are staring the reader in the face, they may also be interpreted as contradictions, and they are highly significant, but the crucial point is this: is the arrest/non-arrest in the first chapter, in distinction to the previous cases, the table and the gall bladder, an instance of ontologic incompleteness?

Kot'átko points to a circumstance that has a bearing here. He says that even if we—that is, the readers—never get any information about the condition of Mme d'Espard's gall bladder, we have counterfactual access to relevant facts in the case. If a skilled medical doctor, with a modern medical education and with modern medical equipment, should examine Mme d'Espard's gall bladder he would be able to tell whether it was healthy or not. Balzac's world is like ours in that respect. I would like put it this way: it is presupposed in the novel that Mme d'Espard's gall bladder is *examinable* in this sense, and to be examinable means that it has a property, a property that in turn implies that her gall bladder is in a certain condition. If we try to apply a similar line of reasoning about the arrest—or non-arrest—in the first chapter of *The Process*, we will fail. No counterfactual procedure available (that is, imaginable) will decide the question about the arrest/non-arrest. To try and find such a test would be as much in vain as finding a test for deciding of every person whether or not he or she is bald. It might be argued that this amounts to saying that this incompleteness is ontological, but it may also be called an instance of semantic vagueness. Whatever label we prefer, cases like these differ markedly from Kot'átko's example with Mme d'Espard's gall bladder.

Before leaving this topic I will present one more kind of incompleteness. Comical narratives require that we dispose our attention in certain ways in order not to weaken the comical point. In Astrid Lindgren's three books about Pippi Longstocking, the comical stories and the practical jokes produced by the protagonist Pippi are intentionally unclear. The reader usually has no access to Pippi's inner life, in particular whether she acts with the intention of being funny or not, and sometimes whether she acts with any intention at all. It might be argued that we should not pay any attention to these Leerstellen, indeed, we should not notice that they are Leerstellen because this should just diminish the comical effect. In these cases, the missing information is relevant in one sense, but not in another. The information is relevant for understanding Pippi's motives, that is, they are relevant for our understanding of the causal structure of the story, but they are not relevant for intended effect. On the contrary, insertions of this missing intentional information would reduce the humorous effect.[3]

Thus, the conclusion with respect to the impression of incompleteness is that two factors contribute to explain our inclination to talk about fictive incompleteness: closeness between understanding and truth, on the one hand, and narrative irrelevance in terms of story-understanding, or rhetorical effect, on the other. In addition to this, we have incompleteness as vagueness, cases which may be labelled incomplete in a more substantial sense.

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Back to the epistemic basis of fiction:

As said, the formulation of the basic principle of fictive knowledge—that is, the book as "the whole truth and nothing but the truth"—is only an approximation. Firstly, we have to skip the words "the whole truth". In many cases it is clear that information belonging to the world of the work is hidden from the reader. Information about Mme d'Espard's gall bladder is unavailable but still counterfactually accessible in the sense I have indicated above. Further, in contrast to this example, the missing facts may be relevant to a more complete understanding of the story. Julian Barnes' novel *The Sense of an Ending* can be used as an illustration. The reader follows the narrator's reconstruction of his own life, a revision caused by a letter he has received, but not all questions raised by this letter are answered in the

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[3]   This paragraph is a condensed version of the essay Rossholm (2010b).

book. The narrator is informed, by the letter, that the mother of his ex-girlfriend has died and that she has left 500 pounds and the diary of his friend Adrian, who had committed suicide several years earlier, to the narrator. However, he only receives one page of the diary. This page together with some events sheds new light on the narrator's life, but still, some questions remain: why 500 pounds? What more is in the diary? These questions are relevant for a more complete understanding of the story, but we never get the answers. That is, we certainly do not get the "whole truth". This example points to one more important circumstance. When we recognize what belongs and what does not belong to the world of the work, we cannot confine ourselves to what is said in the text, plus what is inferred from what is said and some relevant background. We must also ask ourselves what information is omitted from the presentation of the story.

One more type of narrative phenomenon may seem to conflict with my thesis even after deleting the words "The whole truth", namely narratives told by unreliable narrators. Unreliable narrators are often *not* telling "Nothing but the truth". Sometimes the term unreliable is used to refer to punctual and transparent unreliability, that is, the narrator sometimes says things that are incorrect. The reader recognizes this and also understands what is behind the words of the narrator, that is to say, the reader sees through what is said. The Swedish novel *The Dwarf* by Pär Lagerkvist is an example. Narratives of this kind do not cause any trouble—the information received by the reader is all true. Nevertheless, there is more radical unreliability. A narrative may as a whole be taken in two distinct ways, and we, the readers, are never told which is the right one. Henry James *The Turn of the Screw* is often mentioned as such a work, and, of course, the alternatives may be more that two (*American Psycho* is ambiguous in several dimensions: what is true and what is imagined, who is X and who is Y?). One more example is the stories of Baron Münchhausen, as told by himself. The reader understands that all he says is false; he is just making things up, and there is nothing behind it. He certainly does not us tell us "nothing but the truth". On the contrary, he tells nothing but lies.[4]

However, the thesis about the truthfulness of the fictive narrative is not a thesis about the truthfulness of the narrator. The thesis says that so-and-so is true because *the book* says so. The radically unreliable narratives at least tell us that they are false. The emergence of the unreliable narrator in

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[4]   Cf. Lewis' discussion of a similar case (Lewis 1978/1983, 279-280).

modern prose is, I admit, an important epistemic change in the history of literature, but it does not constitute any challenge of the accuracy of the principle "nothing but the truth". Nevertheless, there are other reasons to question the unexceptional certainty of fictive information. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, we understand what we read against backgrounds of several kinds, most importantly what we ourselves take to be true—factually true, not fictionally true—and what we take to be generally accepted beliefs in the community of the author. Kendall Walton's example about Loretta and Mabel reading the same book, about a man with an inherited neurological disorder in Loretta's reading, and about a man possessed by the devil in Mabel's reading, might be changed a little to illustrate how our reading might be affected by exterior information. For example, when we read we only notice how the character acts, that is, Andy's anti-social behaviour. Later, after we have studied history or medicine, we could remember what we have read and conclude that the character is possessed by the devil, or that the character suffers from an inherited neurological disorder. In this case, we *add* something to our reading. We could also read as true that the character suffers from an inherited neurological disorder against the background of our medical knowledge, and later learn from studying history that, from the point of view of the community of the author, the character should be interpreted as possessed by the devil; moreover, we could also assume, in addition to this, that we have come to the conclusion that this latter interpretation is more valid than the anachronistic neurological-disorder-reading. Thus, we occasionally *revise* and *reject* our previous readings.

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The conclusion that fiction reading is not immune to revisions does not mean that fictional reception copies factual reception. A historical account of a man named Andy identically spelled to the fictional novel about Andy may simply be false—his behaviour may be fabricated by the author, and even the protagonist himself may by invented. The novel could not be so blatantly untrue. Even if the principle "The whole truth and nothing but the truth" does not ultimately hold, it is still true that the gulf between understanding and conviction is narrowed in the reading of narrative fiction in comparison to factual reading. This difference is important concerning what was mentioned in the introduction, that is to say, the connection between fictional reading and direct, not mediated, information.

Before I go into that, a terminological digression: By the term "immediacy" I mean the quality of not being mediated but being experienced directly; not being represented in words, pictures or in any other semiotic medium, but being seen, heard, etc. directly (see Rossholm 2004; 2010a; 2012a; 2012b). Of course, narratives *are* mediated, by words or something else, but the term "narrative immediacy" is to be taken metaphorically. A central narratological thesis, which I believe is true, is that narrative immediacy characterizes narrative reading in general. We, the readers of narratives, tend to experience ourselves as directly experiencing what is represented by the text. Of course, narrative immediacy varies in intensity from genre to genre, text to text, passage to passage, and from reader to reader. Nevertheless, I still believe that narrative immediacy is pertinent for all kinds of narratives, factual and fictional.

However, this thesis is not presupposed in the present context. Most narrative theorists agree that some narratives are composed in ways that make the readers experience themselves as being dragged into the world of the narrative, as if directly in contact with narrative events. If you only want to subscribe to this modest thesis of narrative immediacy, the following will present the question: does the character of fictive knowledge presented in this paper in any way contribute to the experience of immediacy?

Fictive truths have a more stable ground (paradoxical as it may seem) than the corresponding factual truths; most fictive statements we accept without the shadow of a doubt. We do not doubt that Sancho Panza is sitting on a donkey, but we are less sure when reading a statement that Roman Ingarden was sitting on chair made of oak. In reality we often want evidence independent of the text, but in *Don Quixote* the text is proof enough. The kind of information this resembles is direct information, that is to say, what we are told by our eyes and ears. Most of the time we rely on what we see and hear, and when mediated information such as a text conflicts with our direct knowledge, we trust our senses. Still, it happens that we revise and reject our previous perceptual convictions, and when we do it is usually because our background beliefs have changed, a process similar to our revision of fictive beliefs.

However, in addition to this, there is one more dimension of directness. Per Krogh Hansen (2007) discusses readings of Nabokov's novel *Lolita* in an article about unreliable narrators. According to standard readings today, the narrator Humbert is unreliable, in particular when he describes the girl Dolores as a "nymphette", because his picture of her is dominated by his

own paedophile projections. Krogh Hansen demonstrates how several Danish literary scholars, ten or more years ago, agreed with Humbert, that is, they did not see Humbert as unreliable, at least not in this respect. We have, as in the imagined novel about Andy, two conflicting readings, and this situation resembles another situation with two conflicting versions of direct perceptions. For example, two persons meet a third, face to face, and they get very different impressions of the person—one as reliable and another as unreliable. Immediacy has moved to another level, and the reader can adjust his optics back and forth so that the narrating process and the narrated process come, in turns, into the focus of directness. To settle the question as to what degree such interplay can take the form of a simultaneous double perception requires empirical ingenuity. If the term "simultaneous" is taken in a more approximate sense, it seems to me obvious that we can hear—metaphorically speaking—the voice of Baron Münchhausen at the same time as we perceive him—metaphorically—raising himself and his horse out of a swamp by grabbing his own hair and lifting them up. What this final example also demonstrates is that what I call immediacy or directness is not only confined to what is true in fiction—we all know that the Baron is telling a pack of lies.

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