



## Issue Nine, Autumn 2008 Art and Lies II


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### Truths *in* Narrative Fiction?

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More than half-a-century ago, P.F. Strawson reminded readers wedded to a strictly logical analysis of language that they cannot talk of an expression or utterance

being true or false, but only of its being used to make a true or false assertion, or (if this is preferred) to express a true or false proposition (1950, p. 7).

Hence, he concludes,

referring to or mentioning a particular thing cannot be dissolved into any kind of assertion. To refer is not to assert, though you refer in order to go on to assert (1950, p. 15).

Expanding a little further, referring truly or falsely is not something an expression does—whether drawn from everyday speech or its representational equivalent in, say, narrative fiction. If so, then referring truly or falsely is something that someone—be it an actual speaker or writer and his or her listeners or readers or even a fictional character or narrator and his or her actual readers—can use an expression to do.

With this very distinction in mind, this paper aims to tease out some of the crucial concepts which bear upon the questionable belief that we can literally apprehend truths and, presumably by extension, lies *in* narrative fiction alone as distinct from doing so *through* narrative fiction. The cluster of concepts to be investigated here, especially those of narrative and fiction, authorial intentions and readers' imagination and interpretations, will be probed by way of Henry Handel Richardson's 1910 novel, *The Getting of Wisdom*. More specifically, we shall focus upon the seventeenth of its twenty-five chapters which exposes the protagonist, Laura Tweedle Rambotham, to be lying to her wealthier school peers in her desperate quest for their acceptance. It is a chapter, we should add, that is thematically framed by an epigraph culled from Part Four of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1885):

Inability to lie is far from being love of truth... He who cannot lie does not know what truth is... (trans. Michael Ackland).

I

Let us begin by inverting the question of truth *in* fiction, as well as narrowing it to more manageable proportions, and ask ourselves: Can a novel lie? Can a novel be false or true in a distinctively different way from other kinds of writing? Given the highly

contested nature of what we might mean by fictional, imaginative narrative—three of the constituent concepts underpinning most notions of the novel—we immediately confront deep divisions amongst efforts to define these concepts. For example, as Jerome Bruner (1986, pp. 11-16) contends, narrative can be construed as a mode of thought or a kind of discourse. As a mode of thought, it is often contrasted with causal and logical reasoning; as a kind of discourse, it is typically offset against the argumentative. Yet the contrast is not absolute as is obvious when we hear that Laura's desire for acclaim did not imply an inability to

Tell the plain truth, state the pedestrian facts—and this she would have been capable of doing with some address; for she had looked through her hosts with a perspicacity uncommon in a girl of her age... (pp. 144-145).

Again, as Gerald Prince (1982, pp. 3-4, 148-150) shows us, narrative can be depicted from the perspective of its content or its articulation. As content, it minimally includes at least one event or state of affairs undergoing a change to another; as articulation, it minimally involves someone making one or more utterances with the intention of linking particular events and participants. Or again, narrative can be connected with the actual world or experience of its readers and listeners or with the depicted world or experience of its textual participants, be they imaginary or other. It is here, when so connected, that we begin to characterise narrative in epistemological terms, focusing upon how it relates to truths or falsehoods, facts or fictions.

This epistemic focus seems largely motivated by the question of how a narrative's events or states of affairs and its participants are to be known. In other words, how through the medium of language is information about them made manifest to readers? In the case of narrative fiction, the question quickly centres upon the imaginative content of readers' experiences of fictional events, states of affairs, and participants. And such a question cannot be *solely* resolved by referring to the activities as distinct from the intentions of the actual author, let alone his or her publisher. Why? Not because institutional practices are totally irrelevant, but because, more fundamentally, we do distinguish between a narrative being a fiction or a non-fiction and a narrative being treated as a fiction or a non-fiction. *The Getting of Wisdom* could be taken as a *Bildungsroman* or as a thinly disguised autobiography. One test for the distinction, as formulated by David Davies (1996, p. 51), is whether or not readers assume the selection and ordering of events comprising the narrative are constrained by the author's intention to take into account the manner in which actual events emerged. To read a narrative as a fiction is to assume that the choices governing its telling were not so constrained, even in cases such as Richardson (1910) where actual settings and persons in colonial Melbourne were exploited. The constraints upon narrative fiction are largely, though not exhaustively, those generated by the point or significance of the tale.

So, when narrative fiction is shaped by what its author intends it to undertake, then we are implying that he or she is not asserting that the tale is in fact the case. Rather, as John Searle (1975) suggests, he or she is basically pretending to do so. Yet, pretended assertions are compatible with mimicking someone not pretending. Therefore, perhaps it would be more accurate to say with Nicholas Wolterstorff (1980, pp. 219-234) that the author stops short of genuine assertion in at least one respect. He or she is intending readers to make-believe or imagine what is narrated, although that, in turn, as Davies (1996, p. 53) postulates, may well "require a prior determination" about what the author "wants us to *believe*." Whether readers self-consciously have to include their relationship to the narrative as part of their imaginative engagement with its protagonists and their actions is optional; certainly, it seems, less experienced or younger readers rarely do. However, the reader's relationship to the author is another matter. When talking of the author's intentions, there need be no implication that these must be construed as his or her mental plan, preconception, or projection of the narrative in its entirety, "envisaged," as Richard Wollheim (1987, p. 18) expresses it, "as a kind of internal command addressed to [her-

or] himself." Rather, the reader's response is attuned to the author's intentions relevant to and causally involved in the creation of the narrative such that the perspectives of each become interwoven because, as Wollheim (1987, p. 39) argues, the distinction between them is "not between persons but between roles." Nor, when referring to authorial intentions, are we necessarily trapped in what M.C. Beardsley and W.K. Wimsatt influentially dubbed the "intentional fallacy," namely, that, when judging an author's "performance, we must know *what he [or she] intended*" (1946, p. 4); an evaluative state of affairs they condemn because "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work" (1946, p. 3). Accordingly, they object to the ways in which evidence drawn from the actual languaging of the text, any external accounts of its composition, and the putative psychological associations of features of the text for the author become conflated (1946, pp. 10-11). Although we would agree that not every intention that an author might have is pertinent to an interpretation or an evaluation of a given work, only his or her communicative intentions are causally germane to the work as previously stated.

No amount of glib talk about imagination can ignore the competing conceptions of imagination that might be applicable to narrative fiction. Consider the preliminary incident in class the morning after Laura's visit to the Shepherd household when she is caught in the throes of gesturing "what she has been through":

In the thick of this message she was, unluckily, caught by Dr Pughson [the headmaster], who, after dealing her one of his butcherly gibes, bade her to the blackboard, to grapple with [Euclid's] Seventh Proposition (p. 144).

How might we portray what it is to imagine here? On the one hand, if we believe that imagining this incident is tantamount to supposing it, we face the problem of categorising a supposition as an activity or process which we can fulfil or fail when attempting it. However, in themselves suppositions, be they appropriate or not, are, to draw upon the distinction first developed by Gilbert Ryle (1949, pp. 149-153), not "tasks" but results or "achievements." On the other hand, if we believe that imagining can be equated to pretending in a non-deceptive sense, then we face the difficulty of categorising imagination as a performance. As Alan White (1990, p. 150) succinctly exemplifies the difference, "malingerers pretend, but hypochondriacs imagine." Nor, despite their common etymology, does imagining necessitate having a (mental) image, be it visual or any other. We can imagine the above scene without having to conjure a portrait of the myopic, red-eyed, curly-haired Pughson described in the seventh chapter (p. 58).

How, then, might we overcome the apparent impasse thwarting these attempts to elucidate readers' imaginative responses to Laura's public upbraiding by Pughson? One way is to construe readers as entertaining the proposition "that Laura was publicly upbraided by Pughson" where, in the words of Roger Scruton (1982, p. 98), "imagining is a special case of 'thinking  $x$  as  $y$ ,' or, more precisely, as White (1990, p. 184) contends, "to think of it as possibly being so." In this case, it is worth noting that imagining as entertaining or thinking possibilities holds whether or not imagining is accompanied by particular emotions, say, some readers feeling mortified on Laura's behalf. Similarly, it holds whether or not such imagining is consciously willed or even whether such imagining is empathetic or not with respect to, say, Laura but not Pughson. Furthermore, it holds in such a way that imagining that Laura was publicly upbraided by Pughson is akin to, if not substitutable for, believing that Laura was publicly upbraided by Pughson. To that extent, imagining conceptualised this way seems to imply a capacity which enables us to consider alternatives in light of what we have been reading as much as to anticipate alternatives in light of what might be read next—the kind of continual retrospective and prospective shifts characterising the phenomenological depiction of the reading process associated with the reader-response analysis of Wolfgang Iser (1978, pp. 107-134). At the same time, imagining this narrated fictional state of affairs has as its primary object not simply an image or a word but a proposition—that Laura was publicly upbraided by Pughson—whether or

not both persons ever existed, whether or not one publicly upbraiding the other was false or even impossible, and whether or not the author provided all or sufficient background details licensing readers to draw the conclusion in the first place that Laura was publicly upbraided by Pughson. If the foregoing is an adequate sketch, then narrative fiction and what we might call propositional imagining are closely tied for readers.

## II

Now, where do truths enter the fray? Consider the following proposition as part of the explanation why Laura's coterie failed to "conceive the possibility of such extraordinarily detailed lying" (p. 149) by Laura about the Shepherds:

Romance...was no more permitted to interfere with...practical conduct...than it is in the case of just that novel-reader, who puts untruth and unreality from him, when he lays his book aside (p. 148).

*Prima facie*, we can have propositions, not always assuming the logician's form of subject-copula-predicate, woven into narrative fiction that are both true of the actual world and apparently true for the narrative itself. However, controversies about truths *in* fiction, narrative fiction, are not stirred by such cases. Rather, controversy lies with those propositions, narrated or quoted, that seem to have no explicit connexion with the extra-textual world of facts, such as "In the afternoon, Laura was called on to prove her mettle" (p. 148) or, quoting Laura, "'And listen, Chink, no one must ever know it was you who gave it me'" (p. 150) respectively. Perhaps, popular doubts about truth *in* fiction are intensified by the kinds of connotations associated with conceptions of fiction generally which range from the false and the unreal to the invented or the imaginative. Not surprisingly, those who wish to uphold a place for truth *in* fiction have tended to qualify how truth is to be understood. In an early but influential discussion, John Hospers (1946, pp. 141ff.) would have us avoid conceptions of truth as sincerity or acceptability, coherence or consistency, value or significance, let alone of truth needing to possess verisimilitude or authenticity, since none capture for him the artistic sense of being "true to" as opposed to the epistemological sense of being "true about" or "true that."

Be that as it may, the assumption by Hospers amongst others that we have little choice but to resort to a special notion of artistic or literary or imaginative truth threatens to entangle us in a conundrum. For instance, how would we know that a narrative fiction is true to the alternative world depicted by that narrative especially if that world reveals inconsistent truths when, to be fictionally possible in the first place, it needs to be consistent? Perhaps we might gain more mileage by returning to the earlier notion that experienced readers of narrative fiction focus upon the point or significance of the narrative being told in the particular way it has, that is, that there are a set of constraints operating upon the narrative that are tied to the author's intention in so devising the narrative. From this perspective, truths in narrative fiction tend to be re-conceptualised in terms of, firstly, how they might furnish readers with knowledge about the actual world or, secondly, how they might confirm or disconfirm readers' psychological and moral understanding.

In the first instance, although Laura and the events embroiling her are fictional, the circumstances or setting—colonial society and schooling towards the end of the nineteenth century in the Antipodes—could well introduce readers to a past world as much as draw upon their prior testimonial knowledge of it. The occurrence of the latter need not imply that, contrary to its author's intentions, such readers are only able to read *The Getting of Wisdom* as if it were merely an historical document or a disguised piece of autobiography. Moreover, by tracing Laura's growth through her propensity to fantasize and lie, the author applies a principle normally applied to actual detective and legal enquiries into criminal culpability or to therapeutic and clinical ones into

psychological disorders. That is to say, narrative fiction is not simply limited to incorporating factual propositions, but can potentially enlarge or re-apply existing categories of thought by importing them into the very fiction itself.

In the second case, too, *The Getting of Wisdom* could be said to function as a source of our moral development and understanding unlike religious and philosophical tracts which often furnish us with moral and immoral exemplars. As proposed by Martha Nussbaum (1990, pp. 5ff.), there are "certain truths about human life [that] can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist" (p. 5). To the question of how narrative accomplishes this, Nussbaum replies:

A view of life is *told*. The telling itself—the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life—all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life's relations and connections. Life is never simply *presented* by a text; it is always *represented* as something (1990, p. 5).

Alternatively expressed, the role of the author of narrative fiction is centred upon "representing as," the role of the reader upon "imagining as"; roles tied to the production and reception of the very tale itself. Whereas narrative non-fiction, be it autobiographical or historical, which aims at truth about an individual or collective life has, in the words of Kendall Walton (1990, p. 102), "a reality independent of *itself* to answer to, whatever role sentient beings might have in the construction of this reality," the truth of the fictional world within a narrative fiction "is not thus independent of it."

### III

Although formal linguistic and rhetorical properties as such fail to provide the necessary and sufficient criteria of narrative fiction whether in the literary domain or not, they may nonetheless give us some insight into the ways in which readers are in practice able to anchor their imaginative responses to the propositions within narrative. By so concluding this paper, the questions of truths *in* narrative fiction can be radically re-assessed.

Consider the following passage from Richardson (1910):

After those first few awkward moments, however, which had become well nigh being a fiasco, Laura had no more trouble with her story. Indeed, the plunge once taken, it was astonishing how easy it became to make up things about the Shepherds; the difficulty was, to know when to stop (p. 148).

Here, we, as readers, face a relatively unproblematical passage where the author in her role as narrator combines both storytelling and running commentary as Laura, the key protagonist, begins to overcome the "initial scepticism as may have lurked in her hearers" (p. 148). In the unfolding of this passage, we encounter a set of imbricated propositions that forms the basis of our imaginative beliefs, such as:

We [= *the readers*] imaginatively believe [= *are given to believe by the narrator*] that she [= *Laura*] later [= *that Monday afternoon*] had no more trouble devising it [= *her fabricated story about the Shepherds*].

At least three linguistic factors in operation are particularly worth noting here. First of all, "to imagine" or "to believe" is characteristic of verbs of propositional attitudes—not unlike other cognitive or intentional processes such as "to realise" or "to comprehend"—in that it can be truly ascribed to the subject, the "we," without implying that the object, "that she later had no more trouble devising it," is true or false, fact or fiction. Yet the proposition as a whole remains true of the belief even if the embedded

proposition in the object were false or indeterminate. The same holds if we had taken the role of the author into account, namely,

She [= *Richardson*] creatively intended that they [= *her readers*] imaginatively believe [= *are given to believe by the narrator*] that she [= *Laura*] later [= *that Monday afternoon*] had no more trouble devising it [= *Laura's fabricated story about the Shepherds*].

Here, of course, we now have a multiple embedding of propositions.

In the second place and returning to our first example, as readers we are at the intersection of a shifting set of deictic or indexical relationships or contextually sensitive references to space, time, and persons—"we...she...later...it"—which immediately anchor us to preceding or to succeeding passages. Although personal and temporal deictic references predominate, again, in the first example, the "we" refers beyond the narrative in a way that the "she," "later," and "it" do not, and, in the second example, the initial "she" and the "they" refer beyond the text. Expressed in different terms, the deictic references shift between textual references and the actual persons, in their roles as readers or writers, who are in a position to make inferences about matters of truth or falsity on the basis of those textual references.

Thirdly, such instances of imaginative beliefs of readers and creative intentions of authors whose object is expressible as an embedded proposition telling or reporting the narrative serve, as Jill de Villiers (2004, p. 8) contends, a unique testimonial function in our language. They enable us to take or incorporate the perspective of another, be that other existent or non-existent, fact or fiction. One need only apply the "wh-question" test to make the point: in the first example of the reader, "What did we imaginatively believe?" and in the second example of the author, "What did she creatively intend?"

In conclusion, what do these three features of language imply about truths *in* fiction? Providing the ascription of propositional attitudes to the role of reader and author does not involve pathologically unreliable or incoherent cases, then the respective beliefs and intentions can be said to be true, subject of course to further verification. The truth or falsity of the constituent propositions comprising the narrative fiction is simply a secondary matter. "Can a novel lie? Can a novel be distinctively true or false?"—to return to our initial question in this paper—has no purchase in relation to truths *in* fiction because, as argued from the outset, our focus ought to be directed to truths *through* fiction.

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