Identificatory functions of the description in a fictional text[1]

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We tend to understand part of what we find in a literary text to be descriptions of individual entities: people, towns, houses, rooms, pieces of furniture and so forth. Does the nature of a narrative fictional text justify such a reading? The following paper is intended as a polemic with an answer which (as we shall see) finds some support in contemporary analytical literary theory.

Possible answer: No! No matter how long the novel is, it does not give us a complete description of an individual, e.g. of a person. Quite the contrary, it leaves many things underdetermined: in other words, many obligatory parameters of determinedness of a human being always remain empty. For example, Flaubert does not tell us how much Miss Emma Rouault weighed and measured at the moment she first met Charles Bovary (at the Les Bertaux farm). Hence the descriptions that we collect as we read a novel cannot identify a complete human being, but just a set of properties that in various possible worlds belong to various individuals (differing from each other in other properties not mentioned in the novel). This holds even if the descriptions found in literary texts, or easily deducible from them, include the so-called *definite descriptions*, whose function consists in identifying, in the world to which they apply, precisely one individual or nothing (if they are not satisfied by anything there). The problem is that these descriptions

1 The author is obliged to Professor Lubomír Doležel and to all other participants in the discussion at the *On Description* colloquium for inspiring criticism.

(e.g. "Emma's lover, who accompanied her to the Yonville agricultural show") can do their identificatory work only if it is possible to identify the world to which they are supposed to apply. But this is precisely what the text of a literary work does not enable us to do, since the descriptions it contains are satisfied by a set of worlds (provided that the set of descriptions is coherent). Hence not even definite descriptions used in a literary text can identify an individual, since it is impossible to pick out the world to which they should be applied in order to perform their identificatory function. Gregory Currie summarized this by saying that expressions such as "Emma Bovary" are not actually proper names of individuals, but names of functions that assign individuals to possible worlds (cf. esp. Currie 2012).

Objection*[2]: All inhabitants of the actual world that I can think about, including myself (as the subject of my own thoughts), are in the same position as Emma in this respect. After all, only a limited set of determinations will ever be available to us. But we automatically assume that an incomplete description of an entity is something different from a description of an incomplete entity. Why should it be any different in the case of Emma Bovary?

Answer: In the case of literary characters it is not just that the text provides us with a limited set of descriptions. What is crucial is that we cannot assign anything more to the name "Emma Bovary" than what these descriptions identify, and that is a function from possible worlds to individuals rather than a complete individual. Here the *incompleteness* of a description corresponds to *unsaturatedness* as a characteristic property of a function: it manifests itself in the fact that the function requires completion – an argument to which it might apply. In our case permissible arguments are possible worlds and it is only through application of a function to a possible world that we arrive at an individual (as the value of the function for this argument). Hence for literary fiction it is the case that what appears to us to be an incomplete description of a complete entity actually identifies an incomplete entity, because there is no sphere independent of the sets of descriptions we find in a text, which might determine what those descriptions leave under-

2 Without wishing to influence readers in any way I shall mark my own viewpoints in this debate with an asterisk.

determined. In other words: because the set of descriptions of Emma Bovary which we are offered by Flaubert's text is necessarily *incomplete* (with respect to the obligatory parameters of the determinedness of human beings), *no* description from this set can aspire to the role of a *partial* description of a human being. It can only be a partial characteristic of an entity identified by a whole set of these descriptions, i.e. of a function from possible worlds to individuals.

On the other hand, in the case of descriptions of actual individuals in everyday communication there is a sphere which determines what our descriptions leave undetermined, namely the actual world. This world contains, independently of our descriptions, complete individuals, definite even in those regards which are epistemically (currently or in principle) inaccessible to us. The descriptions available to us then aspire quite naturally to the function of partial descriptions of these individuals.[3]

Objection*: An analogical presupposition belongs to our role of interpreters of literary works. The world in which the story of Flaubert's novel takes place is the world that we must presuppose if Flaubert's text is to fulfil its literary functions. And this is a complete world in which complete human beings live in complete settings (complete towns, rooms etc.), find themselves in complete situations and take part in complete events, while the narrator naturally provides us with only an incomplete description of all this. With regard to literary works there is no point in considering any other world than the one required by the literary functions of the text: and all the descriptions contained in the text relate to this world.

3 This recalls the relationship between Quine's thesis of underdetermination of the physical theory by data and the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation. The former is an epistemic indeterminacy which does not prevent us from assuming that the physical reality is entirely determinate even in those respects in which the available data do not enable us to decide between alternative theories. In the latter case nothing analogous applies. If the observable behaviour of the language users does not enable us to decide between alternative translation systems, there is no place for assuming any other sphere in which what we find to be indeterminate would be determined: since "there is nothing in linguistic meaning, then, beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behaviour in observable circumstances" (Quine 1987: 5).

Counter-objection: If you insist that the world of the novel is complete, we have to ask in which mysterious way the author managed to create it, granted that he can provide us only with incomplete sets of descriptions of characters, settings, events and so forth.

Answer*: It is entirely sufficient if the author has written a text whose literary functions require the reader to presume a complete world as the world where the story of the novel takes place, where its protagonists live etc. In this way, the author has established that world as the world of his novel. Descriptions contained in the text of the novel have thus acquired the status of incomplete descriptions[4] of complete individuals, settings, events and the like.

Objection: In what sense is the reader to presume that Flaubert's text provides him with incomplete descriptions of complete entities, when he knows very well that he has no chance of completing these descriptions in any respect that would go beyond the text?

Answer*: Even the descriptions that we use in our thoughts and utterances about the actual world cannot be completed in an arbitrary respect, if we make appropriate efforts and if circumstances are favourable. Some determinations are *in principle* inaccessible to us – in other words, the fact that they are not among those available to us is not just the result of accidental limitations of our momentary cognitive situation. For example, there is no procedure to decide whether the number of hairs in Alarich's beard was odd or even at the end of the last of those days on which he was alive and nobody had counted his hairs.

Objection: In such cases, however, a consideration still makes sense in which we at least counterfactually exceed the limits of our cognitive situa-

4 This incompleteness is sometimes stressed in the ostentatious indeterminacy of the description (well known from ordinary conversation): e.g. the narrator in *The Red and the Black* states in his description of the Verrière landscape that beyond the left bank of the Doubs, "there wind five or six valleys" http://www.gutenberg.org/files/44747/44747-h/44747-h.htm [accessed 31. 1. 2014]. It would be absurd to interpret this as an instruction for the reader to imagine that in the world of the novel the number of valleys oscillates between five and six.

tion. For the following counterfactual assertion is still true: "If at the given time we had been in a cognitively suitable position, we would have been able to ascertain the number of hairs in Alarich's beard". This consideration rests on the construction of a possible world that is identical with the actual one with the exception that somebody (for instance myself) was in a suitable position at a suitable place at the time in question.

Answer*: In this response you are working with the "evidence-transcendent notion of truth", which has been rejected by antirealists, such as Michael Dummett and Crispin Wright (cf. esp. Dummett 1991, Wright 1987). If we accept this concept of truth as coherent (defending it against the antirealist attacks) we can apply it without difficulty also to the world of the literary work – and perform the manoeuvre that you have just described. Let us consider the assertion: "At the time of her first meeting with Charles Bovary, Emma weighed 132 pounds." This statement evidently cannot be verified, but I can consistently claim: if I lived in the world of Flaubert's novel and was in a cognitively suitable position at the given time, I could find out Emma's weight. In the jargon of possible worlds theory: I consider a world that is identical with the world of *Madame Bovary*, except for the fact that it includes myself and I occupy a cognitively suitable position (i.e. I find myself at the old Rouault's farm at the right time and I am permitted to weigh the farmer's daughter).

Objection: Even if we admit this, it does not mean anything more than that by using the same contrafactual constructions we can consider both completing the descriptions that are part of our store of knowledge about the actual world, and completing the descriptions contained in the fictional text. But there is always this basic distinction: on the one hand the descriptions that we verify and complete by examining the actual world; on the other hand the descriptions constructing a fictional world which does not contain its own source for their completion. At most it is the case that the literary function of a text requires us (in the *as if* or *make-believe* mode) to *presume* that this world is complete, and hence it contains material to supplement our descriptions – unfortunately in principle cognitively unavailable to us. The entire *reality* of this world is exhausted by the fact that the interpretation of the text requires us to *pretend* that we take it for actual. Hence its

completeness may only be a *postulate* required from us by the literary functions of the text.

Answer and proposal*: Pretence, or to be more precise, the acceptance of a belief in the *as if* mode, is indeed a significant component of our interpretation of a narrative fictional text, and thus of our stance towards the descriptions that it contains. Hence it is all the more important to correctly interpret the *content* of this pretence – the content of the belief that we have to adopt (in the *as if* mode), for the text to perform its literary functions for us.

The following interpretation, based on the theory of fictional worlds, suggests: the author creates the fictional world and the role of the interpreter includes pretending that he regards this world as actual. In the well-known version by Marie-Laure Ryan (cf. esp. Ryan 1991, Ryan 2010) it has this form: in his imagination, the reader relocates himself in the fictional world created by the author, while bringing items of two kinds with him:

a) the label "actual", in order to assign it to this world in the *as if* (*pretence*, *make-believe*) mode;
b) descriptions of various parameters of the "actual actual world", in order to complete (in the *as if* mode) the fictional world created by the author; this shift can naturally only be undergone by descriptions from the original actual world which are compatible with descriptions of the fictional world contained in the text, implied by the text and indicated in the text (in the sense of Grice's implicatures; cf. Grice 1989).

It should be obvious that not even this transport (the manoeuvre detailed in b) is sufficient to identify a complete world as the world of the novel, because the descriptions of the actual world which are available to us are just as incomplete as descriptions of the fictional world provided by the author, and even the combination of both sets of descriptions will never put together a complete description of a world. Hence it is only a matter of the multiplication of descriptions, which do not thereby acquire the status of descriptions of a complete world – since, as we presuppose, there is no fictional world *an sich*, whose determinedness could compensate for the incompleteness of our descriptions. The only thing we can do is to *postulate* or *declare* completeness: regarding a fictional world which, as we know, *cannot* be complete, because it is constituted by a limited set of descriptions, the reader is supposed to believe (in the *as if* mode) that it *is* complete, i.e. that

any possible state of affairs either is or is not a fact in that world. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, this is precisely what the reader does, if he accepts the "game" offered to him by the literary text: "The reader knows that fictional worlds are incomplete, but when he 'plays the game', when he submerges in a fiction, he pretends to believe that this world is complete" (Ryan 2006).

As I will attempt to show, such a split is not necessary. But first let us return to the manoeuvre described in point a): the separation of the label "actual" from the actual world of our lives and its transfer to the fictional world created by the author of the literary text. The problem arises if we admit that our concept of actuality or reality acquires and maintains its content (and analogically the terms "actual" or "real" acquire and maintain their meaning) in an inseparable connection to the world in which we live, the facts that constitute it and the objects involved in these facts. The following analogy suggests itself. According to an influential theory of meaning of *natural kind terms*, propounded by Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke (cf. esp. Putnam 1975), the meaning (intension) of the term "water" is inseparably based on our contact with actual occurrences of water and so with examples of what the term "water" refers to (with elements of its extension). In Putnam's words: "intension is extension involving". For the same reason it seems natural to presume that the meaning of the term "actual" or "actuality" cannot be emancipated from the actual world of our lives. Of course we are able to consider that the world might be *different* from the way it actually is. But this does not mean considering a *different world* than the actual world of our lives and attributing actuality to it (in the *as if* mode) This means considering a different state of *this* world – admitting that this world might in some respects differ from what we presume to be the case on the basis of our evidence. Hence in such considerations we do not separate the label "actual" or "actuality" from the world in which we live in order to transfer it to a different world.

This looks like a revolt against the possible worlds theoretical jargon, but it is in perfect harmony with Kripke's proposed way of avoiding confusion that might be generated by the term "possible world" in the philosophers' heads (cf. Kripke 1972: 15). Should we wish to prevent this, Kripke advises us not to speak of *possible worlds* but of "possible states or histories of the world".

What are the consequences for the function of descriptions in a literary text? For the sake of brevity let us restrict ourselves to descriptions of persons and separately consider two cases:

1. Fictional characters (characters created by the author of a literary work)
Let us (for the meanwhile) remain with Emma Bovary. What material does Flaubert's text provide on her case? A set of descriptions that we collect as we read the novel: they concern the way she looked, what she did, what happened to her and so forth. How are we to deal with all this? I suppose we should treat it the same way as the descriptions of actual individuals that we gather in ordinary conversation. Imagine that I witness a conversation in which the name "Jan Novák" is repeatedly uttered. I have no reason to believe that the participants are discussing an imaginary character in order to pass the time or to deceive me, or that they are speaking of an actual person under a false name in order to conceal the subject of conversation. I then interpret the situation as both speakers using the name "Jan Novák" for one of the hundreds or thousands of persons that have been baptized with that name and are continuously referred to by utterances of that name. In terms of Kripke's causal theory of names, in their utterances both speakers link themselves to the chain of the uses of the name "Jan Novák", at the beginning of which some person was baptized with this name. As I have admitted, there are hundreds of such chains anchored in acts in which various persons have been assigned the phonologically identical name "Jan Novák". Nevertheless, in the situation just described I have succeeded to identify one of them (as the chain activated in the given conversation) and so I have picked out one person in the actual world – one of the hundreds of Jan Nováks. To that person I then assign various descriptions, which I collect as I follow the conversation. The set of these descriptions will necessarily be incomplete in the sense that it will not provide me with a full determination of Jan Novák in all the parameters that make up the determinedness of a human being. But of course I will presume that Jan Novák is fully determinate in all respects and that if I had reasons to do so, and if I exerted enough effort, I could add a number of missing determinations, while a number of others will be cognitively unavailable to me (and to anybody else).

As a reader of Flaubert's text I am in the same situation. If it is to fulfil its narrative functions for me I have to presume (in the *as if* mode) that sentences containing the name "Emma Bovary", which I find in the text, are records of utterances made by a real person, the narrator, who links himself to the chain of uses of this name in the actual world. Hence I can identify the person described in this narrative as an individual uniquely satisfying

the following description: "the person who has been given the name 'Emma Bovary' in the act of baptism at the beginning of the chain which includes the narrator's utterances". This description, including reference to the name "Emma Bovary" and to the narrator's utterances in which it occurs, can be labelled as "parasitic" or "derivative" or "nominal" or "metalinguistic" or "formal" in the sense that it is based on the general mechanism of the referential functioning of names rather than on factual information regarding the bearer of the name. Hence as the reader I presume (in the *as if* mode) that this formal description is satisfied by precisely one person in the actual world, and it is the person identified in this way to whom I assign informal descriptions which I collect while reading Flaubert's text. At every stage I presume that this person is fully determined even in regards that have been neglected in the descriptions hitherto. I find some of the determinations that interest me in the descriptions contained in the following text, while others remain hidden for ever: even in this respect the reader's position does not differ from the situation that we experience in ordinary conversation.

From the philosophy of language point of view it is important to note that the functions of the literary text do not require us to approach the names included therein as abbreviations for descriptions or sets of descriptions. For those who presume that in case of literary characters we have to make do with descriptions contained in the literary text, it is natural to conclude that the only identifying principle we can associate with the name "Emma Bovary" is the set of these descriptions. What we get as the referent of the name is then the individual uniquely satisfying all these descriptions, or at least their relevant part.[5] According to the view I am defending here, we are not dependent exclusively upon the descriptions contained in the text when determining the referential function of the name of a literary character. As the basic instrument for identifying the bearer of the name "Emma Bovary" we presuppose (in the *as if* mode) the general mechanism of the referential functioning of names. We take it as granted that this mechanism is the same as in ordinary communication (just as we expect fictional characters to have the same respiratory or digestive systems as we do, their

5 This mitigating clause enables us to take into consideration the unreliable narrator, i.e. to account for the possibility that in some descriptions the narrator is mistaken or is even deliberately confusing us (fortunately, Flaubert's narrator is constructed as reliable).

movements to be subject to the same physical laws and so forth). As for the description of this mechanism, I draw on Kripke's causal theory of names (cf. esp. Kripke 1972), as I believe that it best portrays the actual function of names in ordinary communication, as well as the principle of the referential functioning of names that we *rely on* in ordinary conversation (even though we are not usually able to explicitly describe it in terms of Kripke's theory).

Generally speaking, as participants in everyday communication we assume that the referential function of names is bound to certain conditions (whether Kripkean, as I believe, or of any other kind), and if there are no indications to the contrary, we expect these conditions to be met. The same assumption (in the *as if* mode) is activated in our interpretation of a literary text. Speaking from the author's rather than the reader's point of view we can say together with Saul Kripke: "[…] when one writes a work of fiction, it is part of the pretense of that fiction that the criteria for naming, whatever they are, are satisfied. I use the name 'Harry' in a work of fiction; I generally presuppose as part of that work of fiction, just as I am pretending various other things, that the criteria of naming, whatever they are, Millian or Russellian or what have you, are satisfied. That is part of the pretense of this work of fiction" (Kripke 2013: 17).

2. Historical figures

If sentences of a literary text include names like "Robespierre", as in the case of Victor Hugo's novel *Ninety Three* or Anatole France's novel *The Gods are Athirst*, we deal with it in the same way as with the name "Emma Bovary". We presume that the narrator is speaking about a person who satisfies the formal (parasitical) description: "the person who has been given the name 'Maximilien de Robespierre' at the beginning of the chain which includes the narrator's utterances". Nevertheless, in comparison with the name "Emma Bovary" there is something else here too. We assume (in the *as if* mode) that the chain to which the narrator has linked himself when uttering the name "Robespierre" is the same chain which the editors of Hugo's and France's novel joined in their historical notes and the same chain which my history teacher joined when uttering the name "Robespierre" in his exposition of the French revolution, and the same chain that I joined when I was tested on this subject at school. As I interpret Hugo's or France's text, this assumption enables me to attach to the name "Robespierre" not only

descriptions that I have gathered while reading, but also descriptions that I find in the editorial notes, as well as those which I manage to put together from my schooldays – in all cases on the condition that they are compatible with the descriptions provided by the literary text. The predominance of the latter (i.e. narratorial) descriptions within the interpretation of the text has precisely the form just mentioned: the descriptions from sources other than the literary text in question are only usable in the interpretation of the text if they are compatible with the descriptions explicitly contained or indicated in the text and with the implications of what is explicitly stated or indicated.

Summary*: The starting point of our reflections was a certain contrast concerning the function of descriptions. In ordinary communication regarding the actual world there is a clear difference between the incomplete description of an entity and the description of an incomplete entity: our descriptions of actual individuals function as incomplete descriptions of complete entities. We assume that whatever our descriptions leave underdetermined is fully determined in the actual world. In contrast, if we approach fictional world and its entities as the author's creation in the straightforward sense, i.e. that the material from which they are built are the descriptions which we find in the text (possibly supplemented by descriptions that we import from the actual world), we are left with the exact opposite. What we are inclined to interpret as incomplete descriptions of complete individuals (people, cities, mountains and the like) are in reality characteristics of incomplete (unsaturated) entities: functions from possible worlds to individuals.

The situation radically changes if we opt for a different understanding of the author's achievement. Descriptions offered to us by the author participate in the constitution of the fictional world and its inhabitants, but not in the sense that they together make up the world of the work and all that is contained in it. The author's performance consists in creating a text whose literary functions require us to relate it to the actual world as a narrative of what has taken place in that world. In this context the descriptions that we find in the text have the function of incomplete specifications of the state of the actual world that we have to assume (in the *as if* mode) for the text to perform its literary functions. The descriptions that we have available *beforehand* in our store of knowledge of the actual world are incorporated into the world of the work without having to be exported from the actual world

elsewhere. Nor does their standard function of incomplete characteristics of complete entities alter. The same applies to descriptions contained in the text even if they relate to fictitious entities. They function as descriptions of entities that we have to assume (in the *as if* mode) in the actual world, if we are to allow the text to perform its literary functions. Their presumed existence in the actual world then naturally includes the ontological completeness of actual entities – full determination in all respects belonging to their ontological type, including those which the descriptions contained in the text leave underdetermined.

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