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2007

John Gibson, Fiction and the Weave of Life

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How to assess the truth value of statements of apparent fact that occur in fictions (“Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street” is a favorite example) may sound like a merely academic, indeed philosophical question. And indeed it is, having been debated by philosophers since the turn of the twentieth century, when pioneers of analytic philosophy such as Alexis Meinong, Gottlob Frege, and Bertrand Russell took sides on a question that, if truth be told, is still batted around by philosophers more as a way of testing competing theories of meaning and truth than from any burning interest in literary writing as such. Roughly, Meinong thought that such statements could be true in a fictional world; Russell that, there being no world to refer to except the world, they are all false; and Frege that fictions are all sense or meaning (Sinn) and no reference (Bedeutung), and so don’t have truth values. These days analytic philosophers tend to approach this question in terms of “possible world semantics.” Gibson is a philosopher. But he does not go down the road of possible world semantics because he wants to make a contribution to analytic philosophy of literature, not, except per accidens, philosophical semantics. He wants to know whether we can learn about life from novels and plays, and, if so, how.

Gibson raises doubts about a way of answering this question that he calls “humanism,” that is, the notion that it is possible to acquire knowledge of life from fictions and proper to their function to enable readers to do so. Humanism as he defines it fails to realize that because fictional persons, places, and events do not exist we can ‘refer’ to them (in scare quotes) only in the ‘world’ constructed by the fiction. We cannot extend their reference to the real world. So far forth, his view seems to combine elements of Meinong, Frege, and Russell without quite agreeing with any of them.

Gibson says that humanism comes in two flavors. Direct humanism says we can learn general truths about the real world from fictional works because at a certain level of abstraction they represent and
refer to the real world in the first place (17). The indirect version is less insouciant about the fact that “literary texts . . . generate the characters and events to which their descriptions refer” (30–31). It argues that fictional works do not make assertions about made up events and characters; they are merely pragmatic devices or tools for inducing the kind of learning that direct humanists presume (18). Gibson finds indirect humanism defended by philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Cavell and on display in their efforts at literary criticism (14n2, 24n14, 26,n16). His objection, if sound, is strong enough to take out the direct version as well. The humanist’s thesis fails because whatever we learn by means of fictions necessarily comes at a severe cost to their literary quality and artful integrity. We do not acquire knowledge about life from fictions *qua* works of literary art.

For his part, Gibson thinks that the humanist’s core intuition can be preserved without violating the literary and more generally the aesthetic status of fictions if we say that fictional texts do not make either particular or general claims about the real world, but rather erect the standards by which we evaluate and appropriate such claims (69, 79). He means that by following the tale of Othello, for example, we learn what jealousy is in a way that both presupposes and goes beyond our factual knowledge of jealousy (114–15). Taking up a distinction he appropriates from the alleged humanist Cavell, Gibson says that fictions, or at least those that succeed in setting up such standards, enable us to ac-know-ledge (roughly: take to heart and properly judge) what we are presumed already to know (103–11).

In this connection, Gibson compares the cognitive work fictions do to the role played by the standard meter bar that is kept hermetically sealed in Paris. Is this bar a meter long, mused Wittgenstein? Well, not quite, since this object is that by which we judge whether things in “the real world” are a meter long (*pace* Saul Kripke, 62–64n6). But by the same token neither is it false (*pace* Russell, 64). The point is to deny that the norms by which we judge facts are brought to the world from a transcendent source, like Plato’s forms, or are abstracted from our experience with the real world, as Aristotle first proposed. Rather, we designate an object that already exists in the world alongside ourselves as a standard by which to make certain kinds of judgments about that shared world. As with Wittgenstein, the general point is to suggest that conventionalism does the work traditionally ascribed to transcendentalism and naturalism without entangling itself in fact-value or subject-object dualisms. Gibson brings this perspective to
bear on literary fictions. Though he does not make this point, I find it interesting that on the Platonic view Homer and the entire tribe of fiction makers must be expelled from the city, while on Gibson’s account the *Iliad* affords the standards by which we reflectively judge what we already know, or can learn, about war and its effect on behavior and character.

To my mind, Gibson’s most persuasive arguments are directed against the popular view among contemporary philosophers and narrative theorists that the speech act proper to fictions is pretending, making believe, or playing (164). He rightly finds this gambit, which is most fully developed in Kendall Walton’s *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard U. Press, 1990), too parasitic on affirming and denying to deal properly with sentences about “the bombing of Dresden in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, and the notoriously tedious accounts of whaling practices in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*” (165). Surely attentive readers do more (or less) than merely pretend that these things are either true or false.

Nonetheless, Gibson’s own theory runs risks in the opposite direction. Because real reference to drive-by facts would disrupt the construction of a standard, the theory demands the complete expulsion of factual assertions from fictional texts. Otherwise the fictional text would be a disintegrated hodge-podge of true and false statements. Accordingly, we find Gibson sticking to his guns when it comes to statements like Tolstoy’s about invading Russia, Vonnegut’s about bombing Dresden, and Melville’s about whaling. Such sentences, as well as statements about Mississippi written by the William Faulkner who declared himself sole proprietor of a fictional county located in that state (31), and, I might add, intriguing sentences written by Tennessee Williams implying that in the city of New Orleans there exists a streetcar named Desire, do not make assertions at all. In reading fictions we suspend judgment about whether such statements are true or false (raised problematically at 31–32, affirmed at 165, 169).

This claim does not sit well with my experience as a reader. It implies that if I do not want to end up like Don Quixote I must erect and obsessively patrol a strict boundary between fictional and non-fictional worlds, suspending in the first case belief in the same propositions that I blithely countenance in the second. In this disciplined effort, the reader may be aided by the mediating critic, whose job is to help in the difficult work of determining whether a given work does or not have the requisite meaning and integrity to serve as a standard
by which the value-laden facts of experience and testimony may be judged and appropriated in an “acknowledging” way. Small wonder that Gibson invokes the example of canon-mongers like F. R. Leavis and his high modernist Scrutineers (50n1; 118; but see also 14n2). Small wonder, too, that he rejects more or less completely what he invidiously calls the “panfictionalism” of the post-structuralists, since they seek to deconstruct the very boundaries that Gibson wants to firm up (47). To be sure Gibson’s account earnestly seeks to re-situate language within cultural practices, a shift that dismantles all epistemological pictures in which I am “in here” and the world is “out there” and in which I bring the “out there” into the “in here” by copy-like representations. But in the effort to produce the kind of reader his theory requires the dualisms Gibson wants to transcend still seem to live a shadowy existence in his epistemological fear that readers will inappropriately contaminate fact and fiction and must be disciplined not to do so.

These fears may well be among the occupational hazards of philosophers. A different approach has for some decades characterized literary historians. The study of culturally sited practices includes the study of the reading practices of literate cultures. To see how various these have been and are one has only to consult the work of Anthony Grafton. If Gibson had reflected even further than he does on the social nature of language, he might have acknowledged that his theory assumes a very specific, very precious, and very private reading practice, and that, in the absence of this largely modernist discipline, readers will continue to cross, and even erase, lines that Gibson wants to shore up. Support for this view can be found in Gibson’s indifference to fictional narratives in media like film. Why should they not serve as standards too?

The essay is well written in a way that sometimes obscures the fact that arguments are missing and not every possible objection has been canvassed and worked through. Some objections show up in obscure replies to readers of earlier drafts that are found in footnotes. These sometimes have a last minute feel. I was also tripped up by the fact that, although Gibson does not say so, the phrase “weave of life” is Wittgenstein’s and is used by him to make points that do not seem to play a role in Gibson’s book. We are not told whether he just liked, and so lifted, the phrase or is drawing on Wittgenstein’s notion. The index is hopelessly lacunose.

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