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FIRST VARIATION. PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE:
A HYPOTHETICAL COMPARISON BETWEEN DIFFERENT
APPROACHES

1.

What is literature? One could naïvely answer: any kind of written work could be considered *literature*, just think about its Latin origin, “littera” (letter). Nonetheless nowadays we tend to adopt a more restrictive use of the term *literature* as referring to those written accounts somehow showing literary, aesthetic merit. According to this more restrictive use, we say that *Crime and Punishment* written by Fëdor Dostoevskij and *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust are good examples of literature whereas the diary of a young boy full of dreams, fears and expectations may not be – unless the diary is the recording of Pip’s life Charles Dickens wrote and published as a series from December 1st 1860 to August 1861¹. Of course diaries can be considered good examples of literature as well, but only when characterized by a special style, an interesting use of language for describing relevant events under a certain point of view. That’s why Franz Kafka’s and Anne Frank’s diaries are to be seen as literature: the former provides an impressive look into the life of the bohemian novelist, together with an extraordinary sketch of the society and the historical period he lived in, whereas the latter is remarkable in its recounting of the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam in the 1940s through the eyes of a thirteen year-old girl.

Literature can also be classified according to whether it is fiction or non-fiction (even if, as Stacie Friend following Kendall Walton has exhaustively explained², a sharp divide between the two cannot be established), whether it is poetry or prose, a novel or a short story.

¹ Dickens 1861.

² Friend 2012; Walton 1970.

One of the most interesting issues in the analytical approach to philosophy of literature is truth, for the simple reason that in literary works we find set of sentences, and sentences are exactly those entities traditionally considered as possibly having a truth-value. What is the difference between: “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” and “Donald Trump is the president of the Usa”? One would reply that the difference is that whereas the second sentence is true in the actual world at the present time (December 2018), the first one could be (by following a Fregean line of thought³) considered as being neither true nor false (i.e. as actually lacking a truth-value), or, in alternative, it could be seen as simply false (in line with Russell’s position⁴) or true (following Meinong⁵). But if “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” were false, what about “Sherlock Holmes is the grandfather of Hercule Poirot”? Should we accept that there are different degrees of falsehood? Clearly, this is not a suitable option. Nevertheless, as already Frege⁶ emphasized, the truth-value of the sentences we find in those literary texts that we aesthetically appreciate is not what we should focus on, since what is interesting in them is not their being true/false, but their showing some distinctive properties, their transmitting a certain content, their being written with a particular style and so on.

Another fundamental issue related to that is the one concerning the intentions of the author while creating a literary work. What do they intend to do? Given that they – with some exceptions that we will examine at the very end – do not want to deceive or lie, could we say that all they mean is to create something we, as readers, are required to imagine as true?

2.

Harry Deutsch thinks that the role of the author is fundamental in order to decide whether a literary work is fiction or not and he summarizes his idea in the notion of “being made up”. The author of fiction is the one who makes up the story, who creates what did not exist, without having to respect elements or facts external to themselves. Nonetheless, as Stacie Friend⁷ has objected to him, it is not really possible to create everything in a novel, and it is not simply insisting on the author’s activity that we can explain such a complex phenomenon. Readers’ activity should also be taken into account. According to Kendall Walton, for instance, the reader needs to use their own imagination in order to

³ Frege 1892.

⁴ Russell 1905.

⁵ Meinong 1904.

⁶ Frege, cit.

⁷ Friend, cit.

turn what is told in the story into truth⁸. And exactly in the same way as children are asked to imagine that a certain tree stump is a bear and not a lion, readers of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* are required to imagine that Gregor Samsa was turned into an insect, and not, for example, into a pterodactyl. Hence, according to this view, what distinguishes fiction from non-fiction is the function of prompting imaginings: "It is not the function of biographies, textbooks, and newspaper articles, as such, to serve as props in games of make-believe. They are used to claim truth for certain propositions rather than to make propositions fictional. Instead of establishing fictional worlds, they purport to describe the real world"⁹. Walton himself changed his mind on this specific point, defending the idea that "[p]rescriptions to imagine are necessary but not sufficient for fictionality"¹⁰.

Let us not further insist on who's imagining, whether the author while creating/inventing the story or the reader while appreciating it, and let us just try to go back to the author. Who is the author? One could answer: the one who created that particular literary text. Another could add that the author is also the one knowing what the right interpretation of the text he has created is. This idea has been (as it is well known) strongly criticized by Roland Barthes who defended the total autonomy of the text, maintaining that "it is language which speaks, not the author"¹¹. According to Barthes, even though the author is the origin of the text (as far as its genesis is concerned), he is not the one we should rely on in order to decide what a text says or not, because the text, once created, is liable to a multiplicity of interpretations. A good way out could be shifting the focus from the author, too difficult and obscure to be adequately understood, to the narrator, the one who, inside the novel, tells the story.

Dr. John H. Watson, the friend and assistant of Sherlock Holmes, is a narrator, as we read from the first lines of *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) – whose subtitle is: *Being a reprint from the Reminiscences of John H. Watson, M.D., Late of the Army Medical Department*:

In the year 1878 I took my degree of Doctor of Medicine of the University of London, and proceeded to Netley to go through the course prescribed for surgeons in the army. Having completed my studies there, I was duly attached to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers as Assistant Surgeon. The regiment was stationed in India at the time, and before I could join it, the second Afghan war had broken out. On landing at Bombay, I learned that my corps had advanced through the passes, and was already deep in the enemy's country. I followed, however, with many other officers who were in the same

⁸ Walton 1990.

⁹ Ivi: 70.

¹⁰ Walton 2013: 9.

¹¹ Barthes 1967.

situation as myself, and succeeded in reaching Candahar in safety, where I found my regiment, and at once entered upon my new duties

Watson is at the same time a character of the novel and the narrator. He speaks directly to the reader, telling them how he first met Sherlock Holmes and what his personal involvement in the case was. The narration at stake here is a naturalistic one, and what Walton knows and tells us is based on conversation and observation in the ordinary way. In this case we could therefore say that the fiction somehow includes the reader in the story, since the fact that the reader is following a true account of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes published by a magazine whose name is *The Strand* is part of the fiction itself. Nevertheless, even though Watson is the narrator, of course he is not the author of the novel, for the simple reason that he does not exist. The story was written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Watson, exactly like Holmes, is nothing but an invention of Doyle.

But what do readers imagine? And what do they believe? We could say¹² that readers do imagine that they are reading a true account of real people and they do believe that they are reading a novel written by Doyle whose main characters are Holmes and Watson.

Of course there are also cases when the author *is* the narrator, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*¹³, where we read:

Je suis née à quatre heures du matin, le 9 janvier 1908, dans une chambre aux meubles laqués de blanc, qui donnait sur le boulevard Raspail. Sur les photos de famille prises l'été suivant, on voit de jeunes dames en robes longues, aux chapeaux empanachés de plumes d'autruche, des messieurs coiffés de canotiers et de panamas qui sourient à un bébé: ce sont mes parents, mon grand-père, des oncles, des tantes, et c'est moi.

Here the narrator, the one to which "je" refers to, is one and the same with the author – the French writer and intellectual famous all over the world for her works, especially *Le deuxième sexe*, the treatise she wrote in 1949.

Partly different from this are those cases such as Marcel Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann*, the first volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu*¹⁴, where we read

Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire : «Je m'endors». Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir dans les mains et souffler ma lumière: je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais

¹² Gaut 2003.

¹³ De Beauvoir 1958: 11.

¹⁴ Proust 1913-1927: 12.

ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles-Quint. Cette croyance survivait pendant quelques secondes à mon réveil; elle ne choquait pas ma raison, mais pesait comme des écailles sur mes yeux et les empêchait de se rendre compte que le bougeoir n'était plus allumé.

Here it is more difficult to understand whom “je” is referring to, since although the author and narrator share many features, they cannot be considered as being the same person. The seven volumes Proust wrote are half way between autobiography (full of memories from the author's childhood and adulthood) and novel (some characters derive from the fusion of two or more real people, other real individuals are split into two, some names of places – e.g. Combray/Illiers – have been changed).

So, if in Doyle's stories the narrator is a fictional character, in de Beauvoir's book she is the author (i.e. the narrator is not a fictional character at all) and in Proust's work the narrator, even if somehow in strong connection with the author, cannot be considered as being him.

3.

But does a specific kind of narrator depend on the literary genre? It seems quite obvious that the narrator of an autobiography or of a testimony should be the author. Nonetheless would it be possible to have a real narrator of a fictional story (a totally invented story)? For instance, might Doyle himself have been the narrator of the Sherlock Holmes' stories instead of Watson? In that case he would have said some false things about himself – i.e. that he is a friend of Holmes', that he knows what has happened, and so on – as it happens when we tell fictional stories about ourselves, for fun (as when I tell the story of having had a couple of beers with Barack Obama last Saturday) or for some other reason (as it happens quite often in *motivated irrationality phenomena* as self-deception, self-illusion, weakness of the will, wishful thinking...). But since Doyle, if he were the narrator, could have told false things about himself, then he could have also said that his name was “Watson” – and, if so, the story would read exactly the way it does. Hence the Sherlock Holmes' stories could be seen both as having a fictional character narrator like Watson, and having a real narrator/author like Doyle pretending his name is “Watson”. However there clearly is no particular benefit in considering Doyle the real narrator, therefore Watson is more than enough. Still, there are cases in which having a real narrator in a fictional story would be, not only a preferred option, but a necessary one. Think about *Mémoires d'Hadrien*¹⁵ written by Marguerite Yourcenar, a sort of

¹⁵Yourcenar 1951.

pseudomemory of the Roman emperor written in the first person and framed as a long letter to his adopted son and successor, Marcus Aurelius. Here, even if what is told (battles, triumphs, thoughts and passions) is mostly faithful to the historical Hadrian¹⁶, clearly it is not true that the real person is the one narrating the story, i.e. that the narrator's voice is Hadrian's, even if this is what we are actually asked to imagine by the author (Hadrian did write an autobiography which has nevertheless been lost).

There are difficult cases like the ones where the narrator is not reliable and we are not sure about what we have to think of what is told. Should we consider it as being true in the novel? Herman Melville refers, in his *Moby Dick*, to all whales, including the white whale itself, as fish, and, when Ernest Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea* describes Santiago fishing dolphins, he writes what follows:

Just before it was dark, as they passed a great island of Sargasso weed that heaved and swung in the light sea as though the ocean were making love with something under a yellow blanket, his small line was taken by a dolphin. He saw it first when it jumped in the air, true gold in the last of the sun and bending and flapping wildly in the air. It jumped again and again in the acrobatics of its fear and he worked his way back to the stern and crouching and holding the big line with his right hand and arm, he pulled the dolphin in with his left hand, stepping on the gained line each time with his bare left foot. When the fish was at the stem, plunging and cutting from side to side in desperation, the old man leaned over the stern and lifted the burnished gold fish with its purple spots over the stem. Its jaws were working convulsively in quick bites against the hook and it pounded the bottom of the skiff with its long flat body, its tail and its head until he clubbed it across the shining golden head until it shivered and was still¹⁷.

Should we, as readers, imagine that in both stories whales and dolphins are to be considered fish? Not really, as what happens here is nothing but a trivial mistake derived by the involuntary confusion of the author between marine mammals, such as dolphins and whales, and fish.

And what if we had to deal with a voluntary confusion created by the author, better known as *intention to deceive*? Take Enric Marco's case, the one so skilfully described by Javier Cercas in his *El impostor*¹⁸. Marco wrote *Memoir of Hell*, telling his horrific experience as a prisoner in Nazi German concentration camps in Mauthausen and Flossenbürg during the Second World War. Marco, besides being the general secretary of the Confederación

¹⁶ As Chastagnol explains, "le portrait que trace de lui Marguerite Yourcenar correspond sans aucun doute à ce que les sources nous apprennent" (1974: 160).

¹⁷ Hemingway 1952: 219.

¹⁸ Cercas 2014.

Nacional del Trabajo, was the president of the Spanish association *Amicale de Mauthausen* and was awarded a medal (Creu de Sant Jordi) by the Catalan government in 2001. In 2005 his deception was revealed thanks to the investigation conducted by university researcher Benito Bermejo. Marco explained during an interview to the Catalan television that he was not prisoner number 6448 and that he had not been in a concentration camp; nevertheless he said that he was held in captivity and that the Nazis did impose penalties on him. This example is interesting because it makes us think from a different perspective on the role of the narrator/author/protagonist. Who is the narrator here? Enric Marco, obviously, the impostor. And what kind of story is he telling? A true one or a fictional one? The story is, unfortunately, a true one, even though it is not the story of the narrator himself. But then how to consider his role? And how to decide the truth-value of the sentences we find in *Memoir of Hell?* Couldn't we simply consider his book as having imported real events into a fictional frame?

Thanks to the rippling debate in philosophy of/in/about literature, we are confident that some answers will indeed be provided.

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