Walton and Fictional Characters

Eileen John

> One after another she creates her fools, her prigs, her worldlings, her Mr. Collinses, her Sir Walter Elliotts, her Mrs. Bennets. She encircles them with the lash of a whip-like phrase which, as it runs round them, cuts out their silhouettes forever. … Sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give Jane Austen the supreme delight of slicing their heads off.[1]

It is hard, perhaps foolhardy, to argue with Ken Walton. His work is a powerful mixture of good sense, bold thinking and meticulous reasoning. Why argue? One reason is that his work makes me want to give good arguments, to be more clear and decisive about tricky issues. I aim to do that here, on an issue that, as far as I am able to think it through, leads me to disagree with Walton. I want to defend the reality of fictional characters. I will try to benefit from Walton's views on this issue. A realist about fictional characters needs to incorporate a role for make-believe, but that role does not settle the ontological status of characters. My alternative view is related to various kinds of realist positions, embodied in Margaret Macdonald's claim that 'it is perfectly ordinary and proper to say that an author has created certain characters and all that is required for them to function' (Macdonald 1954, 177). Broadly, I want to follow out the idea that fictional characters are things with distinctive functions, and that understanding their existence in these terms allows us to make sense of the interest we take in them.[2]

Philosophical accounts of fictional characters tend to emphasise the interpretation of utterances containing apparent reference to fictional characters doing or undergoing things that a person would do or undergo. "Ishmael stayed at the Spouter-Inn." "Lily Bart eventually worked for a milliner." These utterances are a prime puzzle to be explained or paraphrased. What could they mean, if no such person does or undergoes these things? I think this starting point makes it more difficult to reach understanding of what fictional characters are and why they engage us. Recounting the plot when reading Melville's *Moby Dick* or Wharton's *House of Mirth* is one moment in a larger activity that shows the existence of a character. Even if we move to the utterances that overtly identify characters as characters—"Jane Austen created Emma Woodhouse" (Walton, 1990, 410) or "Zavalita is one of the most memorable fictional characters created by Vargas Llosa" (García-Carpintero, 2010, 142)—we are focused only on the discourse that is supported by the larger activity. If we start rather with the larger set of things we do with fictional characters, we will have more to draw on as evidence and different things to do justice to. As García-Carpintero notes, for roughly opposed argumentative purposes, 'the success of apparent references to fictional characters seems to be suspiciously easy to achieve' (García-Carpintero, 2010, 147). Picking up on the names may be easy, a matter of recognizing that conventions involved with fictional characters are in force (Van Inwagen 1977, 307), but knowing a fictional character adequately can be difficult. The easy use of the names should not obscure the sophisticated practices that fictional characters figure in and support.

---

[1] Woolf 2012, 173.

[2] This discussion aims to clarify and improve on ideas presented in John 2016.

If we embrace the role of pretense, as part and parcel of engaging with a novel, that would only help to rule out the existence of fictional characters if their best hope for existence were as the people doing things like staying at the Spouter-Inn. Walton may think this is their best hope, a kind of holy grail for realism: 'If we have a naïve, pretheoretical commitment to fictional people and things, it would seem to be a commitment to people and things that are in most respects perfectly ordinary'.[3] Or, with verve, 'If Donald Duck is anything he is a duck (a talking duck); not an invention or a cultural artifact' (Walton 2015, 103). But as soon as we abandon this commitment, as we must, does realism lose its allure? I do not think so, in part because I do not think this is our pretheoretical commitment. People are by and large competent, sophisticated, and undaunted when it comes to grasping fictional characters' distinctive form of being. If there is another best or better hope, that is what needs to be ruled out. That a fictional character involves us in imagining the life of a person is intuitively a way of grasping what fictional characters are, rather than a way of showing there is no such thing.

The burden of argument for realism is to show that fictional characters make a distinctive contribution to reality. If they did not exist, there would have to be a discernible loss. Speaking more metaphorically, they have to present some tension or resistance to thought and action, some evidence of them not being only and exactly what we imagine or wish. There must be something to learn about how to become acquainted with them and how to treat them. One kind of evidence I highlight concerns purposes that makers and users of fictional characters can have and that can be well or badly met. If there were no characters, we either could not pursue these purposes or could only do so in awkward—at best inefficient, at worst ineffectual—ways. Another kind of evidence involves disputes or inquiries about the nature of a character. Understanding a character—what is most important to it, what it serves to do, what features enable it to do what it does—is sometimes an interesting, engrossing project, and one that people can disagree on.[4] The examples I point to are only indicative, but I hope they show some possibilities for learning, resistance, and distinctiveness of contribution. Fictional characters are functional artefacts that we come to know through their functioning.[5]

This discussion engages only partially with debates about realism and anti-realism, specifically avoiding the hard work—hard for both realists and anti-realists—of showing how 'fictional-character talk' turns out to be true or false as desired. Realists have often drawn on the clarity of one kind of talk or another ("In the novel, Lily became a milliner" *or* "Ishmael is a fictional character"); a realist needs to link those kinds of talk and, broadly, needs to support characters functioning as they do. Characters are representational devices used for a host of purposes, including the imagining of a person. Perhaps the anti-realist will not mind saying that there are such representational devices; it is fine with me if anti-realists want to join this party, as long as they are willing to call themselves realists.[6]

Walton on doing without fictional characters

---

[3] Walton 1990, 387. Further references to this work, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, will cite it as 'MMB'.
[4] See, for example, E. M. Forster on changing his mind about a Jane Austen character, not having seen that all of her characters 'are round, or capable of rotundity' (Forster 1927, 112-7).
[5] My focus on fictional characters is driven by the depth and complexity of what we do with them – the interest they have for us – and is not intended to dismiss comparable realist claims about such things as fictional events and settings. See Macdonald, for instance, on fictional locations and other elements (Macdonald 1954, 179-81).
[6] See Stacie Friend's analysis of these debates, especially pp. 143-4 on anti-realism and the function of fictional discourse and pp. 147-8 on forms of realism (Friend 2007).

How does Walton approach the putative reality of fictional characters? In defending the good sense of nonbelief over belief in fictional entities, Walton draws on his overall account of fiction. 'The key to understanding assertive uses of sentences appearing to make reference to fictional entities is to take as primary their use in pretense. What is asserted by means of them is to be understood in terms of their role in make-believe' (MMB, 396). Appreciators of a work of fiction 'are expected to play games of kinds authorized for the works they appreciate and, when they participate verbally, to make it fictional of themselves in such games that they speak truths rather than falsehoods' (MMB, 398). When Sally, having read Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, says, "Tom Sawyer attended his own funeral," 'Sally's claim is that the novel *Tom Sawyer* is such that to behave in a certain way, to engage in an act of pretense of a certain kind while participating in a game authorized for it, is fictionally to speak the truth' (MMB, 400). This, though complicated, seems right: the work of fiction asks us, among other things, to participate in a pretense of a certain kind, and that participation is manifest through thought and speech that enact or somehow acknowledge this pretense – the pretense that there are such people doing such things. The words "Tom Sawyer" can be used appropriately in the course of this pretense.

There really is a novel written by Mark Twain, with words that really prompt readers to engage in pretense. The readers' participation is real, and they are likely to utter strings of words that are appropriate to participation. Walton's account of what Sally says is careful not to use the phrase "Tom Sawyer"; he does not want to suggest that those words are used to refer to anything. 'We need not suppose even that there is someone, or some character, about whom Sally *pretends* to speak' (MMB, 396), because that would locate quantification outside of the pretense. It is the kind of pretense that is real and explanatorily basic. Walton classifies pretense activity involving apparent reference to individuals as 'kind K' (MMB, 400-401), and he notes the difficulty of specifying a given pretense of that kind.

> There is a sense in which we do not have a ready paraphrase of Sally's assertion that eliminates her apparent reference to Tom Sawyer … The paraphrase I suggested … requires the introduction of a technical term, "K," … whose reference was fixed, by pointing to the use of a sentence containing the name "Tom Sawyer," to an instance of the kind K. Should we conclude that a commitment to fictional entities is deeply embedded in our language and conceptual scheme, even if there aren't really any? No. For it is the use of names like "Tom Sawyer" in pretense that enables us to fix the reference of "K." To pretend to refer to someone with the name "Tom Sawyer" is not in any interesting sense to be committed to there being a referent of that name. What we should conclude is that it is our pretendings to assert, our games of make-believe, that are central to our conceptual scheme. (MMB, 404)

Let me pause to note that this is a Walton kind of passage—kind W—that I especially appreciate. It is conversational, but bracingly clear. It steps back from the argument to consider a possible vulnerability—the apparent name "Tom Sawyer" is hard to do without—and it gives this line of thought its properly big, challenging frame. Where does make-believe sit in our conceptual scheme? Walton gives make-believe a central, fruitful, interesting explanatory role, and I am persuaded that we cannot understand fiction without it. But the realists, in Walton's view, 'are overlooking or underemphasizing the element of make-believe that lies at the heart of the institution. They mistake the pretense of referring to fictions, combined with a serious interest in this pretense, for genuine ontological commitment' (MMB, 390).

In that remark, Walton stresses that we can take a serious interest in the pretense that a work of fiction supports, and that an account of fiction must make sense of that interest. I think this requirement is hard to meet if there are no fictional characters. In relation to representational art,

Walton grounds the interest of our apparent references to characters in the interest and importance of the make-believe characteristic of engagement with fiction: 'Given that the (authorized) games appreciators play with works of art are important, people are bound to be interested in what sorts of pretendings-to-assert are, fictionally in these games, assertions of truths' (MMB, 405). If talk 'about' Tom Sawyer has any point, it is because we are interested in the overall imaginative game that Twain's novel allows us to play. In a way, I agree. The pretendings-to-assert, aiming to make it fictional that one speaks truly about Tom Sawyer's doings, are not in themselves enough to sustain interest. But the safe confinement of Tom Sawyer and our apparent references to him within the pretense leaves us with too little to work with, to account for the interest and importance of the game of make-believe. If our primary concern as make-believers were to make it fictional that we speak truly, that would be a strange fixation on the merely fictional. Sometimes even the great lover of fiction can pick up a novel and experience what might be called 'fiction ennui': 'Do I really have to soak up all of these prescriptions to imagine people doing many quite ordinary things?' Sometimes the fictional truths concern inherently exciting, intriguing or odd events (reversals of fortune, discovering a murderer, attending one's own funeral), but we could not ground the interest of fiction solely in the interest of getting it right about those kinds of fictional truths. If our apparent attention to Tom Sawyer and the rest were to be explained by the project of imagining in a way that is accurate within the game, then it seems that our serious interest in pretense would importantly rest on that project. Getting the fictional truths right would be the contribution that the make-believe made to the interest of the game.

Consider how Walton, discussing Bruegel's *Wedding Dance*, rejects the idea of paraphrasing utterances about the painting in terms of features of the painted surface:

> But a statement detailing the relevant colored splotches would hardly seem to capture what is said in normal cases. … ordinarily we are not much interested in the relevant combination of colors and shapes for its own sake, but are very interested in, and so are likely to talk about, what is fictional in the world of the painting and in the worlds of games authorized for it. We may not even notice the precise characteristics of color and line that make it fictional that peasants are making merry. (MMB, 415)

I suggest that we are not necessarily so interested in what is fictional in the world of the painting. Or at least our interest in truths within the fictional world needs to be carefully situated. I might have sociological, historical interests in 16th century peasant life and be interested in the fictional truths the painting supports for that reason. But most of the time I expect that engaging in and adverting to the pretense, while it requires seeking accuracy about prescriptions to imagine, is a kind of base-line activity that becomes interesting to the extent that it is achieved via this painted record of choice, effort and use of the medium. My sense is that we are interested in the colored splotches as they contribute to a possibility for imagining human life (it is kind of amazing that they do that), and we may be interested in ideas and feelings—ideas and feelings not confined in relevance to the fictional world—that the paint splotches stimulate as they serve to provoke imagining. Yes, I want to recognize whatever is to be recognized in the world of the painting, in this case by participating in or acknowledging a pretense in which I come to know that peasants are making merry. But that it is fictional that peasants did or still make merry makes an inconsequential claim on me. If I try to defend the interest of getting the fictional truths right in that world, I cannot simply say it is because I have an interest in accuracy within a game of make-believe. There must be more to it, or my serious interest in pretense will collapse into something like a fixation on fictional truth, which in turn is hard to defend as interesting.

A serious interest in pretense

Walton of course does not say that games of make-believe matter to us because we care about getting fictional truths right. I am trying to press him into that corner for argumentative purposes. He says things like this:

> But the pretense I speak of is serious business, even if it doesn't involve seriously supposing that we actually refer to what we pretend to refer to. We engage in make-believe in order to think and talk about features of the real world—often ones that matter, and sometimes ones that are not easy to think or talk about in any other way. (Walton 2015, 91)

I want to endorse and follow up on this claim, especially the last clause: the distinctive contribution to reality of fictional characters lies in large part in their role in distinctive projects of thought and inquiry.

One of Walton's main ways of explaining this grip on the real is through the role of props in make-believe. Props, like tree stumps when playing that stumps are bears, or paintings of weddings, have real features that can prescribe imaginings: 'Props are generators of fictional truths, things which, by virtue of their nature or existence, make propositions fictional' (MMB, 37).

> Children may play a game in which bicycles are horses, and a garage is a corral. The real world fact that a bicycle is in the garage makes it fictional, true in the make-believe, that a horse is in the corral. I call the bicycles and the garage props. ... The colors and shapes on the surface of a painting and events occurring on stage in a theatrical production are props which generate fictional truths ... (Walton 2015, 92)

> Representational works of art are props also. What makes it fictional in *La Grand Jatte* that a couple is strolling in a park is the painting itself, the pattern of paint splotches on the surface of the canvas. It is because of the words constituting *Gulliver's Travels* that fictionally there is a society of six-inch-tall people who go to war over how eggs are to be broken. (MMB, 38)

Props are solidly real: stumps, bicycles, paint splotches, words. Maybe words are a little weird in how they fit into reality, but still, they have uncontroversial presence. The real features of props keep appreciators of fiction anchored to reality. A very important kind of prop, with respect to explaining interest in pretense, is the appreciator herself. As participants in make-believe, our own reactions to the work can generate fictional truths within individual games of make-believe. My tears when reading can make it fictional that I am sorry for someone within the world of a novel. As props ourselves,

> We don't just observe fictional worlds from without. We live in them (in the worlds of our games …), together with Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary and Robinson Crusoe …, sharing their joys and sorrows, rejoicing and commiserating with them, admiring and detesting them. True, these worlds are merely fictional, and we are well aware that they are. But from inside they seem actual … and our presence in them … gives us a sense of intimacy with characters and their other contents. It is this experience that underlies much of the fascination representations have for us and their power over us. (MMB, 273)

What we experience within the scope of a pretense is often affectively complex and intense, and that felt intimacy—often not easy to achieve with real people—is itself alluring and gripping. It is also plausible that appreciators can learn about themselves, while serving 'as reflexive props,

generating by their actions and thoughts and feelings fictional truths about themselves' (MMB, 274). We can take an interest in our own activity within a pretense.

A different explanation is driven by the fact that 'Sometimes appreciators participate scarcely at all. Some representations positively discourage participation' (MMB, 274). We can use props, and be supposed to use them, in ways that suppress or deprioritize the generation of fictional truths. As just noted,

> Props can be mere tools or vehicles for establishing fictional worlds which we find exciting or interesting or poignant or moving. But in some cases it is the props themselves that matter. Their role in generating fictional truths in a game of make-believe may help us to understand them, to think and talk about them, even if the fictional world itself is of no interest at all. (Walton 2015, 92)

Focus on the prop is appropriate with many works of art:

> Works that limit our involvement in fictional worlds include acknowledged masterpieces … We may marvel at a work's suitability for use in games of certain sorts; we may be fascinated by the combination of fictional truths it generates …; we may admire the artist's skill and ingenuity in devising ways of generating fictional truths; we may delight in the devices by which participation is inhibited. Even in such "distanced" appreciation, however, the *thought* of the work's serving as a prop in a game of make-believe is central to our experience. (MMB, 274-5)

In appreciating such works, the make-believe is in view, but the prop-oriented appreciator is not immersed in it. The prop is exposed as a prop, and its ways of serving or inhibiting make-believe are real functions that can be the focus of our interest.

Walton is right that we value affective intensity and immersion in pretense *and* are interested in how props do what they do. But I resist the idea that props tend to function in one or the other of these ways. They all function in both ways, or really the functions are not separable, and that combined experience is basic to engagement with fiction. Whether it is a comic strip, a formulaic romance, a suspense movie, or a George Eliot or a José Saramago novel, we experience props as things with a pretense function. When describing engagement with 'content-oriented', immersive fiction, Walton notes that, 'We focus on what happens in the world of a story: on whether the hero will arrive in time to rescue the heroine, why Hamlet was so wishy washy, "who done it," etc.' (Walton 2015, 93). However, if we are attending to heroes and heroines, we are thinking about props of a certain kind, characters with expected functions. Asking why Hamlet was so wishy washy is likely to encompass the significance of the character, not just a man's history and psychology. Wondering about who committed the murder is not just curiosity that arises while imagining people caught up in a murder; it is what we do with a 'whodunnit'. My claim is that even the most immersed appreciative pretense is permeated with its identity as a project of engaging with a prop.[7]

The consequences of this claim lead me to further agreement bound up with disagreement with Walton, though I expect Walton would want to part company just about immediately. One way of putting my view of fictional characters is that they are, partly, props in Walton's sense. One function that identifies them is that they prescribe imagining the lives of persons and thereby

---

[7] Walton's account of the inseparability of appreciation and criticism is relevant here (MMB, especially 393-6). See Friend on the problem of distinguishing internal and external perspectives (Friend 2007, 151-3).

generate fictional truths. However, they are not only props in Walton's sense, and that is because of the permeation of make-believe with characters' further functions, of the kinds just hinted at. A character's service as a prop, with the prop's specific tie to fictional truth, is coordinated with other functions. If we coordinate pretense with those other functions, we have a better way of grounding serious interests in fiction.

Fictional characters and how they function

I take fictional characters to exist as functional artefacts. We come to know them by using them, where that usage involves responsiveness to purposes we understand a character to serve. Such artefacts are made with representational resources such as written language, actors' utterances and gestures, and drawn, painted and sculpted forms. Those resources are intended to prompt experience that unfolds and is unified, at least to some degree, as experience of a person so represented (taking persons very broadly, as conscious agents, allowing for all kinds of non-human persons). The 'so represented' clause is needed to capture something important about these artefacts. They do not achieve independence from their use of representational resources, as, for instance, linguistic reference to a person commonly aims to do. "I saw Lucy Liu at the library!" aims to share knowledge of Liu's location, and probably of my amazing proximity to her, and the intention is that those facts, rather than the utterance itself, should guide future thought and feeling. Fictional characters *exemplify* the use of representational resources to prompt experience as of a person. Fictional characters always embed a claim to the effect that this is a way to represent a person, and they always raise the question of why one would represent a person in this way. Sometimes the 'why' question will prompt us to challenge and critique the character—we can find the use of representational resources on offer in a given character to be problematic or unacceptable. Say, the character gives form to a fantasy that we want to reject or overemphasizes the role of some ideal. Such functions (giving form to fantasies and prioritizing the role of ideals in a life) turn out to be projects well-suited to the potential of fictional characters. Competence with fictional characters involves grasping the goals being pursued by using representational resources in this way. Those general aspirations and questions can explain why fictional characters are interesting and, sometimes, important.

The ontological and epistemological status that I seek for fictional characters—that they exist as artefacts known through their use—means that what they are is shown best in the transactions that occur between the artefact and our imaginative and reflective experiences. I find it helpful to think of fictional characters as belonging to a very broad kind, comprised of things that exist in virtue of some type of representational effort, and that reveal their properties in what happens as the result of people engaging with those efforts. Two other examples of this kind are political campaigns and classes one teaches. Campaigns and classes are real things whose existence requires that someone puts content-bearing materials into circulation, and the particular ways those materials are provided are essential to the campaign or class—the abstract content is not sufficient to identify the campaign or class. It is in the responsive experience of voters and students that the distinctive properties of a campaign or class, and their successes and failures, are explored and revealed. The fictional-character project is distinguished among such examples by the centrality of 'person-shaped imagining'. A character, though an artefact made out of, say, chosen and arranged words, is not knowable by studying those words; to tell what a character is like, the representational materials have to be activated, putting them to some use, including person-shaped imagining. Understanding fictional characters as belonging to this (very loose) kind – artefacts that call for responsive engagement with representational efforts – helps to make sense of how we assess them, by being concerned with how they function.

Criteria for success or achievement for fictional characters draw on our knowledge of persons, but not always because we try to map what a character involves us in imagining onto what we know about persons. Sometimes a character's function requires *not* being particularly familiar or convincing as a living person. Characters can call for forms of testing and appreciation that diverge radically from response to persons. That it is worthwhile to exemplify some possibility for representing persons could flow from the needs of a story, a pointed contrast with a character from another work, a desire to combat a prejudice, an experiment in non-psychological explanation, the humour of a style of portraiture, and so on. And although what is true-in-the-fiction about the character matters to grasping how a character functions, imagining those facts is only one kind of response that is relevant to understanding a character.

Let me cite a few examples of the kind of functioning of characters that I want to highlight.[8] Here is critic Marcia Holly:

> Virginia Woolf, for example, in creating Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* indicates that Mrs. Ramsay's sensitivity and Mr. Ramsay's abstract intellectuality are not givens of the sexes. Lily unifies in herself those qualities typically assigned as sex traits. In fact, the burden of the book seems to be that personal wholeness develops with and from the dialectical integration of qualities seen as opposing. (Holly 1975, 43)

Woolf's character is here discussed as crucially serving to integrate qualities. This allows the character both to challenge what might seem like an apt contrast between women and men, and to manifest a conception of 'personal wholeness'. Setting aside Holly's specific interpretation, we can see her account fully integrating what we are to imagine of a woman with aiming to understand the purposes served by that imagining.

In Michael Bell's discussion of J. M. Coetzee character Elizabeth Costello there is further such combined thinking and also assessment. Bell has qualms about the continuation of Elizabeth Costello from *The Lives of Animals* (which began as real lectures given by Coetzee, in part voicing lectures given by fictional Costello) into the longer, more novelistic work *Elizabeth Costello*. Bell says of the latter extension,

> the resulting work, even as it generates new interests of its own, nonetheless, in so far as it establishes Costello as a more conventionally fictional character, significantly flattens the immediate effect of the original lecture. By privileging her continuity as a character, it blunts the discomforting edge of her irruption into a real historical occasion … (Bell 2007, 219)

Bell's larger argument is that Coetzee had a project of probing the nature and force of conviction, and that this project benefited from Costello's odd way of not sinking into a fictional 'reality' in the earlier work (Bell 2007, 221).

Let me give Coetzee and Woolf a chance to speak as commentators and critics themselves. Coetzee links Turgenev and Dostoevsky around Turgenev's character Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*.

---

[8] Let me note, but not adequately address, Walton's treatment of statements that look to be about characters. He invokes unofficial games of make-believe and betrayal of pretense. In saying, "Jane Austen created Emma Woodhouse", one plays or refers to an unofficial game of make-believe 'in which to author a fiction about people and things of certain kinds is fictionally to create such' – one makes it fictional that Austen created a woman (MMB, 410). To say, "Gregor Samsa is a (purely fictional) character" is 'to acknowledge, while betraying the pretense, only that there is a work in whose authorized games so pretending is fictionally to refer successfully' (MMB, 422). While I think it is implausible that anyone imagines Austen creating living beings (à la Frankenstein's creature?), my main strategy here is to show that characters cannot be betrayed as 'purely fictional' because they have relatively sturdy ways of existing and functioning.

'Turgenev put his finger on a new and ominous social actor, Bazarov the Nihilist' (Coetzee 2001, 141). Coetzee comments as follows.

> There was something puerile in Nihilism, as both Turgenev and Dostoevsky recognized. … in its intellectual complacency …, its mindless destructiveness, its hubris, and … its ill-disguised contempt for those in whose name it claimed to speak … There is every reason to believe that Turgenev shared Dostoevsky's reading of Bazarov. The Left, however, preferred not to recognize the critical dimension of the portrait; and Turgenev furthered this slanted reading by declaring mysteriously that Bazarov was himself. Dostoevsky was outraged by this move on Turgenev's part …
>
> In his ongoing critique of Nihilism, we can imagine Dostoevsky as projecting the career of Turgenev's hero into the 1860s. (Coetzee 2001, 141-2)

Coetzee, citing Joseph Frank's work, sees Bazarov as then a forebear and critical impetus for Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* and Verkhovensky in *The Devils* (Coetzee 2001, 142; Frank 1997). Coetzee thus presents Turgenev and Dostoevsky as diverging around the critical force of Bazarov: was he revelatory of the damning problems of nihilism or not? Why a character can support such a disagreement is suggested by the terms Coetzee uses for the flaws of nihilism: puerile, complacent, contemptuous, etc. These are more obviously the flaws of people than of philosophical positions. Yet we might want access to these terms if a position is flawed especially in its tendency to be wielded in such a spirit. Revealing that kind of flaw might be especially well achieved through characters that get us to imagine lives affirming the position.

Woolf in her criticism often writes about authors' characters, as in her remark about Austen slicing off the heads of her fools and prigs. 'Her fool is a fool, her snob is a snob, because he departs from the model of sanity and sense which she has in mind' (Woolf 2012, 174). The point of such characters is to convey, indirectly, a real model of sanity and sense. Woolf wrote in part critically of George Eliot's characters:

> Those who fall foul of George Eliot do so, we incline to think, on account of her heroines: and with good reason; for there is no doubt they bring out the worst of her, lead her into difficult places, make her self-conscious, didactic and occasionally vulgar. (Woolf 2019, 11)

Woolf's illustration of this problem is Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, when Maggie is old enough to seek love.

> First Philip Wakem is produced and later Stephen Guest. The weakness of the one and the coarseness of the other have often been pointed out; but both … illustrate not so much George Eliot's inability to draw the portrait of a man, as the uncertainty, the infirmity, and the fumbling which shook her hand when she had to conceive a fit mate for a heroine. (Woolf 2019, 11)

I think we cannot locate the problem that Woolf identifies for Eliot without treating Maggie as a character, a heroine who serves to pose a question about what would count as a fit mate. That Eliot fails to portray a fit mate is due, according to Woolf, to the real challenge of meeting aspirations represented in these characters. Eliot's heroines

> do not find what they seek, and we cannot wonder. The ancient consciousness of women … seems in them to have … uttered a demand for something—they scarcely know what—for something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence. … the struggle

ends, for her heroines, in tragedy, or in a compromise that is even more melancholy. (Woolf 2019, 11)

Woolf is interested in these heroines as showing a struggle with real conditions of human nature and society. Eliot, on Woolf's reading, tries but fails to articulate and envisage a certain ideal in these characters; her characters serve as players within an inquiry into a form of good life.[9]

Situating this view of fictional characters

The idea that fictional characters are functional artefacts is variously related to other forms of realism about characters. Without sorting out the similarities and differences thoroughly, I want to highlight a few points concerning how this view relates to and diverges from views of Van Inwagen on the 'theoretical entities of literary criticism' (Van Inwagen 1977, 302) and Thomasson on characters as abstract artefacts (Thomasson 1998).

For Van Inwagen, fictional characters 'belong to a broader category of things I shall call *theoretical entities of literary criticism*, a category that also includes plots, sub-plots, … poems, meters, … influences, … recurrent patterns of imagery, and literary forms' (Van Inwagen 1977, 302-3). The notion and vocabulary of characters are ineliminable from the 'conceptual machinery' and discourse of literary criticism (Van Inwagen 1977, 303). I turned to the discourse of literary critics for examples, though, like Van Inwagen, I do not think fictional characters are essentially beholden to the work of professional critics (Van Inwagen 2014, 92). The notion of a character is woven into basic experience and understanding of fiction. Van Inwagen further articulates a distinction between the properties a character has, e.g., 'being a satiric villainess' or 'having been created by Dickens' (Van Inwagen 1977, 305), and properties that are *ascribed* to it in a work of fiction, such as living in a shoe (Van Inwagen 1977, 305). The latter are the stuff of prescriptions to imagine. The questions I want to raise about Van Inwagen's approach concern his argument's broad strategy, which takes fictional discourse to be the core evidence for realism:

> Since, therefore, I think there are true sentences of fictional discourse … that entail 'There are fictional characters' …, and since I think one should accept the perceived logical implications of that which one believes, I conclude – tentatively, perhaps, but all philosophical conclusions should be tentative – that fictional characters exist. (Van Inwagen 2014, 100-101)

The reality that allows us to infer the existence of characters is the reality of true sentences. Their truth requires, on his view, that fictional characters exist. I think we have to push further to consider what explains the sentences. Why do we have this discourse? What kind of thing would make us need to distinguish predication of properties and ascription of properties in a work? That there are things made using words or other content-bearing forms that ask us to imagine the life of a person, explains why there is such discourse and why ascription is pertinent. If the discourse and its truth-aptness were the core data, the characters would indeed seem like theoretical entities, things whose reality we have reason to infer, but not things we come to know directly. I think fictional characters are not theoretical in this way; their existence is not inferred from the need to do justice to the discourse. The discourse aims to do justice to them and what we do with them. We use whatever

---

[9] See Michael Weston on characters engaging us with 'a possibility of life perceived through a certain conception of that life' (Weston 1975, 86). Weston might not accept what I say characters are, but I take my discussion to be sympathetic to his claims about their functions.

vehicles of representation they are made of to imagine a person, for a host of interesting and ordinary purposes. We encounter and respond to characters in experience, as we engage with a political campaign or philosophy class. Given these encounters, we try to generate discourse adequate to them.

For this reason, Thomasson's view of fictional characters as abstract artefacts is more congenial. Characters are 'entities that can come into existence only through the mental and physical acts of an author — as essentially created entities'; they are artefacts 'created by the purposeful activity of humans' (Thomasson 1998, 6, 35). The artefactual approach makes sense of our interest in the purposes served by characters, even if the purpose behind imagining a life in certain terms is sheer entertainment – that can be an appropriate purpose for a character, though not for a person. For Thomasson, 'fictional objects, in this conception, … are closely connected to ordinary entities by their dependencies on both concrete, spatiotemporal objects and intentionality' (Thomasson 1998, 12). Thomasson uses the relation of dependency to ground these abstract artefacts in non-abstract reality: a character's existence may depend on the existence of words or drawings, such that if the words or drawings went out of existence, the character could as well. But the character is not actually made out of words or drawings. Characters exist in the way that marriages, contracts and promises do, as 'cultural and institutional entities that … can be brought into existence merely by being represented as existing' (Thomasson 1998, 12-3). So,

> fictional characters are created merely with words that posit them as being a certain way. For example, because characters are created by being written about by their authors, Jane Austen creates the fictional character Emma Woodhouse and brings her into existence … in writing the sentence: Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich … (Thomasson 1998, 12)

I would say rather that Emma Woodhouse is a character made out of those words that Austen wrote, and that she does not come into being by being written *about*. Characters are not written about (in being made); they are the structured conglomerations of words or other representational materials that function for us in the ways discussed above. Austen's novel is not written about Emma Woodhouse; Emma Woodhouse is an entity we become acquainted with and perhaps do interesting things with in reading the novel. In this respect fictional characters are not abstract. They have whatever concreteness the range of content-bearing forms such as words have, and they are used in relatively concrete, temporally located activities of perception, thought and feeling.

Precisely what each character can be used to do is of course not settled by the general way characters exist. We find out what we can do with Elizabeth Costello or Maggie Tulliver, but that a character exemplifies a way to represent the life of a person, and is to be used to imagine such a life for some purpose, is basic. Allowing things used in this way into our ontology does not strike me as getting 'something for nothing'—getting existence out of the bandying about of name-like phrases, with no requirement for non-trivial knowledge of a referent[10]—because we do not just encounter an apparent name, but a carefully made structure of representational material. In these encounters we can face sophisticated knowledge questions. Exactly what do George Eliot's heroines seek and why do they not find it? Is Bazarov to be rejected or does he represent a new freedom? That we reach such questions via these representations and exploration of their functions is a tremendous achievement on the part of artists and audiences. Fictional characters are tried and true devices that serve these and more simply pleasurable projects. Characters are not immediately what anyone wants or imagines them to be; we can be wrong or naïve about a character, disappointed by or

---

[10] See García-Carpintero 2010 on the 'something-for-nothing' and knowledge problems (especially pp. 146 and 154-6).

critical of it, and artists making them may not achieve what they hoped. Walton says that make-believe allows us to think 'about features of the real world—often ones that matter, and sometimes ones that are not easy to think or talk about in any other way' (Walton 2015, 91). I think fictional characters help to bear out Walton's claim.[11]

Bibliography

Bell, Michael (2007). *Open Secrets: Literature, Education, and Authority from J-J. Rousseau to J. M. Coetzee*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Coetzee, J. M. (2001). *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-99*. London, Secker & Warburg.

Forster, E. M. (1927). *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Frank, Joseph (1997). *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Friend, Stacie (2007). "Fictional Characters." *Philosophy Compass* 2/2: 141-56.

García-Carpintero, Manuel (2010). "Fictional Entities, Theoretical Models and Figurative Truth," in *Beyond Mimesis and Convention*, eds. Roman Frigg and M. C. Hunter. *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 262, pp. 139-68.

Holly, Marcia (1975). "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic," in *Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Josephine Donovan. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, pp. 38-47.

John, Eileen (2016). "Caring about Characters," in *Fictional Characters, Real Problems*, ed. Garry Hagberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 31-46.

Macdonald, Margaret (1954). "The Language of Fiction." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. 28: 165-84.

Thomasson, Amie (1998). *Fiction and Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van Inwagen, Peter (1977). "Creatures of Fiction." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14(4): 299-308.

Van Inwagen, Peter (2014). *Existence: Essays in Ontology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walton, Kendall (1990). *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

_____ (2015). *In Other Shoes: Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weston, Michael (1975). "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. 49: 81-93.

Woolf, Virginia (2012). *The Common Reader*, 1st Series. Alcester: Read Books.

_____ (2019). "Pride and Paragon: Responding to the Life and Work of George Eliot," *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 Nov. 2019: 10-11. [original publication *TLS* 20 Nov. 1919]