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Fictional Names and Literary Characters: A Defence of Abstractism*

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ABSTRACT: This paper is focused on the abstractist theory of fictional discourse, namely, the semantic theory according to which fictional names refer to abstract entities. Two semantic problems that arise in relation to that position are analysed: the first is the problem of accounting for the intuitive truth of typically fictive uses of statements containing fictional names; the second is the one of explaining some problematic metafictive uses, in particular, the use of intuitively true negative existentials.

Keywords: fictional names, literary characters, abstractism.

RESUMEN: Este artículo se ocupa de la teoría abstracta del discurso de ficción, a saber, la teoría semántica según la cual los nombres de ficción refieren a entidades abstractas. Se analizan dos problemas semánticos que surgen en relación con esta posición: el primero es el problema de dar cuenta de la verdad intuitiva de usos típicamente fictivos de enunciados que contienen nombres de ficción; el segundo es el de explicar algunos usos metafictivos problemáticos, en particular el uso de existenciales negativos intuitivamente verdaderos.

Palabras clave: nombres de ficción, personajes literarios, abstractismo.

In this paper I am concerned with the abstractist theory of fictional discourse, namely, the semantic theory according to which fictional names refer to abstract entities (Kripke 2011 and 2013, van Inwagen 1977, Salmon 1998, Thomasson 1999, Predelli 2002, among others). As emphasised by Kripke, those entities are not to be conceived of either in terms of nonexistent ones, along the lines of neo-Meinongians (Parsons 1980 and 1982), or as merely possible ones, following Lewis' suggestions (1978): they are rather fictional characters, a *sui generis* kind of abstract entities, namely, ones that originated in acts of artistic creation, such as literary writing and storytelling. My purpose is to focus on two semantic problems that arise in relation to that position: the first one is accounting for the truth of some typically fictive uses, such as the tokening of

(1) Ulysses is sleeping on the beach of Ithaca

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as it occurs in the *Odyssey*, given that, as will be clear below, a literary character like Ulysses cannot literally and strictly have the property of being asleep. The second one is accounting for some problematic metafictional uses, in particular, the use of intuitively true negative existentials, such as

(2) Ulysses does not exist,

which on this account come out false, since ‘Ulysses’ is taken to refer to an existent literary character.

1. *The abstractist framework: some background assumptions*

What is an abstract entity? Traditionally, it is an entity that is not concrete, namely, that *does not have a spatiotemporal location*. The most common kind of abstract entities that have been posited to exist are properties, sets, classes and numbers, which have not been created by anybody and will exist forever. On most conceptions, abstract properties have been thought to be *universal* entities.¹ Abstractists about fictional discourse think that those are not the only kind of abstract entities that can be posited, though: there are also some abstract entities, namely, fictional characters, which are *created* when some artworks, prominently literary ones, are and disappear together with them. They are thought to be *a kind of artefact*, namely, something that is not natural.²

So, the introduction of this new kind of abstract entities involves a change in the traditional conception, since fictional characters *do have a temporal location*, even if, of course, it is a non-standard one: they exist whenever the corresponding artworks might be considered to exist, and they are *particulars*, not universals. More specifically, literary characters are thought to depend on the existence of literary narratives, which are in turn generally conceived of as depending for their existence on some physical realisation — a written copy, a living memory, etc. — of an abstract structure.³ Moreover, literary characters are conceived of as the theoretical objects of literary theory and cultural studies, as much as The French Revolution, for instance, can be regarded as a theoretical object of history. In this sense, they are the referents of some theoretical terms, in particular, names, of those disciplines, as much as species have been thought to be the referents of the theoretic-

¹ An exception is the conception of properties in terms of *tropes*, which are thought to be abstract particulars (Campbell 1990).

² An exception to this line originated in Kripke’s 1973 manuscript is Zalta (1983), who claims that fictional characters are akin to Platonic entities, namely, they are not created (which strikes me as a very counterintuitive claim).

³ See Thomasson (1999) for a typical account of abstract characters as dependent on abstract artworks. In contrast, there are authors who reject the claim that literary (or musical) artworks can be conceived of in terms of abstract entities. García Ramírez and Mayerhofer (2015) object that no abstract entity can be created, since abstract entities exist outside time, which amounts to an altogether rejection of the possibility of the existence of any *sui generis* kind of abstract entities. Although it is a complicated issue, I suspect some types can be created: one can create a bus line, which cannot be identified with any concrete bus following a certain route; words and, in general, languages seem to provide us with another example of created abstract entities.

cal terms of biology –after all, from some perspectives (Ghiselin 1974, Hull 1976, 1978), species, though non-abstract, have also been conceived of as peculiar particulars.

Setting aside the metaphysical details concerning the nature of literary characters, which I do not intend to go deep into, the semantic point is that they are taken to be the referents of the proper names appearing in literary narratives (and the discourse about them), hence being rigidly designated by them. Back to our initial example, ‘Ulysses’ designates Ulysses, a literary character, in all the possible worlds in which it exists. Two claims are hereby involved: (i) given that in all the worlds Ulysses is an abstract entity, there is no possible world in which Ulysses is a war hero, and in general no possible world in which it exists as a real person; (ii) the worlds in which Ulysses gets killed in the war of Troy or drowns in the middle of the ocean are not real possibilities either. I will explain both claims below.

To begin with the first claim, if ‘Ulysses’ designates a literary character, namely, an abstract entity, in all possible worlds, there will be no possible world in which Ulysses is a real person: what might have existed is a world in which there is a real person with all the properties attributed to Ulysses in the *Odyssey* but that person would not be identical to Ulysses since he would not be a literary character created in Ancient Greece but would have had a different origin.⁴ A real possibility is, for instance, a world in which Ulysses is not the well-known character that he is, since all traces of Greek civilisation have disappeared from it. In general, real possibilities are the worlds in which Ulysses is a character that lacks some of the properties he has in the real world, such as the property of being a well-known character, or has properties that are different from the ones he actually has, such as the property of being ignored by most literary critics.

The second claim states that the worlds in which Ulysses gets killed in the war of Troy or drowns in the middle of the ocean are not real possibilities either. It also follows from the thesis that ‘Ulysses’ rigidly designates a literary character, namely, an abstract entity: if Ulysses is an abstract entity in all the worlds in which it exists, there will be no possible world in which it has properties such as getting killed in the war of Troy or drowning in the ocean, namely, properties that can only be possessed by concrete (and living) entities. Notice that this does not imply that all the properties that are ascribed to a character in a fictional narrative are constitutive of that character: the character might have had in the fiction properties that are not the ones it has in it. In terms of the previous example, the *Odyssey* might have been such that Ulysses died in the war of Troy, namely, Ulysses might have fictionally died in Troy.⁵ But, in as far as those are possibilities *in the fictional story* or, to put it in different terms, *internal to a fictional narrative*, I take them to be purely *fictional*, though not real, *possibilities*. It looks then as if a fictional narrative serves to intro-

⁴ What about those characters like the Napoleon of *War and Peace*, which, in contrast with Ulysses, may be considered to be also real entities? I do not want to take a side on this controversial issue. If such characters were imported from the real world, my claim should be restricted to (what may then be regarded as) the *strictly* fictional characters; otherwise, it could be taken to cover all the characters belonging in a fictional narrative. I owe this important clarification to a comment made by an anonymous referee.

⁵ This clarification has been introduced in reply to an important comment made by an anonymous referee.

duce a *fictional context*, with its set of alternative worlds –which may be *conceivable* or *imaginable* but *not metaphysically possible* ones. Counterfactuals, like

- (3) If Ulysses had been enchanted by the songs of the mermaids, he would never have made his way back to Ithaca

are made true by some of those *purely fictional* possible worlds.

2. *How can a literary character be sleeping on a beach?*

Some people find it intuitive that there is a reading that makes (1) true, as opposed to

- (4) Ulysses is sleeping on a Caribbean beach,

which does not have such a reading. As is known, Kripke (1973) has originally distinguished between two possible readings of statements containing fictional names: whereas *external* or *factual* uses (“out and out”) are uses made to describe the real world, *internal* or *fictional* uses (“according to the story”) are those made to describe what happens in a fictional story. More specifically, among these, which will be jointly referred to as ‘fictional’, it is possible to distinguish *fictive* uses, made within the framework of a fictional narrative, from *parafictive* ones, made from outside the corresponding fictional framework, such as a tokening of (1) in a literature class.⁶ Accordingly, it can be claimed that *factually* interpreted (1) is intuitively false, but if interpreted *fictionally* it comes out intuitively true. As is also known, though, some philosophers, along Frege’s lines, think that no fictional use of (1) can be either true or false, since there is no place for genuine truth-values within the realm of fiction –at most, one might say that utterances are loyal (or disloyal) to a narrative or true (or false) relative to a narrative.⁷ Be that as it may, an explanation of the notion of *truth in a fictional story* or *relative to a fictional narrative* seems to be required in relation to our typical fictional uses.

Now, *prima facie* the abstractist seems to have a problem in explaining the fictional truth of fictional uses: in as far as ‘Ulysses’ refers to an abstract entity, there is no possible reading that makes (1) true, since no abstract entity can be sleeping on a beach.⁸ (Moreover, it seems to be not only false but also *categorically* false, namely, involving a categorial mistake.)

The standard abstractist answer has appealed to the claim that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, statements like (1) involve an ambiguous predication, since there are two senses in which one can ascribe a property to a fictional character: a character can be said either to *instantiate* a property or to *encode* it (Zalta 1983).⁹ Therefore, coming

⁶ See, for instance, Bonomi (2008).

⁷ More specifically, this is usually held in relation to *fictive* uses, whereas *parafictive* ones are mostly regarded as having a truth-value.

⁸ See, for instance, the following quote from Sainsbury: “No abstract object is a detective, or plays the violin, or flies, so ordinary sentences from fiction (like ‘Holmes is a detective’, ‘Holmes plays the violin’, ‘Pegasus flies’) will receive the same truth-value, false, whether on the RWR account or on the account in which these uses are awarded robust fictional characters as referents.” (2005, p. 211)

⁹ See also van Inwagen (2003), who puts the distinction in terms of the contrast between *having* and *holding* a property.

back to the example, even if it is false that Ulysses *instantiates* the property of being asleep, *it is true that it encodes it*, since it is the property that it is thought to have in the story narrated by the *Odyssey*.¹⁰ As pointed out by Crane, the properties that are encoded by characters seem to be representation-dependent ones: “The best way to think of non-existent objects as encoding properties is to think of them as being *represented* as having these properties” (Crane 2013, p. 70). But this does not seem to help the abstractist solve his problem: the fact that an abstract object can be taken to represent (by means of a fictional narrative, of course) a concrete one and thus be ascribed properties that are typically ascribed to concrete objects is precisely what has to be explained. Therefore, the distinction between having properties *in itself* and having properties *by virtue of being a representation of another object* is as much clarifying as the distinction between *instancing* and *codifying* a property: both seem to be an alternative way of pointing out the existence of two possible readings (a factual and a fictional one) for the statements at stake.

Another traditional approach has it that on its fictional interpretation (1) is semantically equivalent to the following statement, containing a fiction operator, usually construed in terms of an intensional operator,

(5) *According to the Odyssey*, Ulysses is sleeping on the beach of Ithaca,

which is literally and strictly true (Lewis 1978). ‘According to the *Odyssey*’, like any intensional operator, is taken to shift the circumstance of evaluation of the embedded sentence from the actual world to an alternative, merely possible one, namely, the world as described in the *Odyssey*. As explained above, though, the abstractist cannot take the world at stake (a world in which Ulysses is a real person that sailed back to Ithaca after having fought in Troy) to be a possible world at all: in as far as ‘Ulysses’ is a rigid designator, the name is supposed to designate the same abstract entity in all the possible worlds in which it exists (and nothing otherwise), hence not anyone who can sail, fight or fall asleep. So, for an abstractist, there is a tension between, on the one hand, taking fictional names to be rigid designators, and, on the other, being committed to the existence of a possible world in which *our fictional name* ‘Ulysses’ designates something different from what it designates in the actual world, namely, a real person who can, among other things, fall asleep.^{11 12}

I would then like to explore a different line, the so-called ‘Context-Shift View’ (Predelli 1997, 2005 and 2008, Recanati 2010). According to it, fictional uses, rather than including an implicit intensional operator that shifts the circumstance of evaluation of an allegedly embedded sentence, involve *a shift of context*: whereas factual uses are to be interpreted and evaluated in relation to some parametric values determined by the context of utterance, fic-

¹⁰ Notice that neo-Meinongians have put forward a parallel distinction between kinds of *properties*: according to them, Ulysses can be truly said to have both the *extra-nuclear* property of being a literary character and the *nuclear* property of being asleep on the beach of Ithaca. See Parsons (1980) and Priest (2005).

¹¹ Notice that this problem does not arise if fictional names are *not* taken to be rigid designators, as is the case with Lewis (1978), who takes them to designate those individuals, however different they happened to be among themselves, satisfying the corresponding description in each possible world; from an ontological point of view, they are considered to be counterparts of one another.

¹² For other criticisms made to this approach, see, for instance, Predelli (2005, p. 69).

tional ones must be interpreted and evaluated in relation to values set by a different context. Such context provides us with what might be called ‘the point of view of the fictional narrative’, as opposed to the point of view of reality. In Predelli’s own terms:

Suppose that we are discussing Milos Forman’s film *Amadeus*, and that I say

(6) Salieri commissioned the *Requiem*.

My utterance is apparently true: in the film, the composer Antonio Salieri is the mysterious figure who anonymously commissions the Mass for the Dead. [...] (2005, p. 66)

In this case, the parameter which differentiates the appropriate index from the simple-minded index is the possible world co-ordinate: the index with respect to which my utterance is evaluated does not contain the world in which it took place, i.e., the actual world, but ‘the world’ of the story. (2005, p. 70)¹³

According to my interpretation of this proposal, accounting for the intuition that any fictional use of (1) is true requires shifting the context, which implies that the statement gets evaluated with respect to a world that is neither the actual world in which the utterance takes place nor any alternative metaphysically possible world but *the world of the story, a purely fictional world* -in the above explained sense in which some possibilities are not real but purely fictional ones.¹⁴ Now, although I strongly agree with this view, there are certain aspects I would like to elaborate in a different way.

Predelli thinks that the indexicals occurring in a certain fictional statement get their corresponding referents in relation to (not the real context of utterance but) what may be called ‘the fictional context’. The following quotation, though a bit long, is clear on this point:

Suppose that, while talking about the film [*Amadeus*], I say:

(8) Although Mozart thought that the mysterious figure was his father’s ghost, the actual commissioner of the *Requiem* was Salieri.

Given how things are described in the film, this utterance is intuitively true. But in order to obtain the correct interpretation for ‘the actual commissioner’, (8) must be evaluated with respect to an index containing the fictional world of *Amadeus* as its world parameter. *With respect to such an index, ‘the actual commissioner of the Requiem’ denotes Salieri*, and the sentence ‘The actual commissioner of the *Requiem* was Salieri’ comes out true. But *with respect to the world in which my utterance takes place [...] ‘the actual commissioner of the Requiem’ denotes Count Walsegg*, and ‘The actual commissioner of the *Requiem* was Salieri’ is, wrongly, evaluated as false. (Predelli 2005, p. 70, my emphasis)

Likewise, he seems to think that fictional definite descriptions and names are to be interpreted in relation to the fictional context, which is the only context in play in interpreting fictional statements.

Following Walton (1990), I think that fictional uses are to be mainly interpreted as involving an indication or a prescription of what we are supposed to imagine to exist *while be-*

¹³ ‘Index’ is Predelli’s word for what is usually called ‘context’.

¹⁴ For the sake of simplicity, I would assume that circumstances of evaluation are constituted only by possible worlds, though other parameters, such as times, are commonly included as well.

*ing aware that it does not.*¹⁵ Making and understanding them involve engaging oneself in an interpretative process that in turn involves a use of the imagination that is characteristically disentangled from our perception of the external world and our action in it. Now, I think that the interpretative process at stake has as its point of departure our interaction with the literary artwork: more specifically, at a first stage, we interpret the literary narrative as such (as opposed to a journalistic chronicle, for instance), which means that we take the fictional names in it to refer to literary characters (as opposed to real people). This is the ground in which our imaginative powers anchor: then, at a second stage, we imagine those literary characters to be real people who lead their own real lives. (This can be taken to replicate, in the sphere of semantic competence, Walton's metaphysical conception of games of make-believe as involving a *prop* as the basis of the imaginative process.)

So, differently from Predelli, I think that *the indexicals, definite descriptions and names occurring in a fictional narrative get their referents in relation to the real context of utterance, which is subsequently imagined to be totally different from the way it is like as a matter of fact.* It is precisely the work of our imagination on the objects provided by the real context of utterance that determines the context shift. In other words, *we shift from one context to the other because we are able to transform, imaginatively, what is originally given to us, by virtue of our interpretative interaction with the literary narrative.* This one plays the role of a manual: if it were not for the descriptions of the characters, places and times that it contains, we would not be able to imagine anything at all in the face of the fictional use of names and indexicals. In terms of the previous example, the fictional interpretation of 'Ulysses' involves referring to a literary character that is imagined to be a real person, on the grounds of the profile provided by the *Odyssey*. Likewise, the fictional interpretation of 'actual' involves referring to the real world that is imagined to be a fictional one, different from what the world is like as a matter of fact; and so on with the rest of the indexicals.¹⁶ As for Predelli's example, I would say that 'the actual commissioner of the *Requiem*' in sentence (8) included in the above quotation denotes a fictional character, who is imagined to be Salieri, a real person, on the grounds of the main personality traits carefully provided by *Amadeus*.

Now, once the context has been shifted by the work of our imagination, the corresponding use will be evaluated as true or false with respect to the world of the new con-

¹⁵ The italicised part of the sentence has a significant import because it points out the difference between our use of imagination regarding fictional narratives and our use of it regarding factual ones. See Matravers (2014) for the claim that imagination is not only put to work in our engagement with fiction.

¹⁶ On this point, Recanati seems to think something similar: "The objective features of the context of utterance are indeed 'given' and, to that extent, they cannot be shifted. But what the speaker can do is pretend that the context is different from what it is. If the pretence is mutually manifest, it will be part of what the speaker means that the sentence is uttered in a context different from the actual context *c*. In such a situation a context shift does occur: there are two contexts, the actual context *c* in which the sentence is produced, and the pretend context *c'* in which the utterance presents itself as being produced." (2010, p. 193) However, there are two main aspects on which I disagree with him. First, I think that the features of the context of utterance are generally 'not given': far from that, they require a process of interpretation on the interpreter's part, who puts his/her pragmatic knowledge at work. Secondly, I do not think it is necessary to imagine that the sentence is uttered in a different context: as pointed out in the text, most of the times, it is enough to imagine that the character is a real person, the real world, a fictional one, etc.

text (namely, the new home-circumstance). In terms of the previous example, once we get to imaginatively build up a person from our understanding of Ulysses' personality traits and deeds, any fictional use of (1) will come out true with respect to his fictional world, the world of the *Odyssey*. Likewise, once we get to imaginatively build up a person from our understanding of Salieri's personality traits and deeds, any fictional use of (8) in the above quotation from Predelli will come out true with respect to the fictional world of *Amadeus*.¹⁷

To summarise,

- (i) indexicals, definite descriptions and names get interpreted in their original context of utterance,
- (ii) the work of our imagination determines what can be characterised as *a context shift*,
- (iii) utterances and inscriptions get evaluated as true or false with respect to the world of the new context.

There are some aspects of this view that I would like to clarify.

First of all, the fictional world of the *Odyssey*, though relevant to evaluate any fictional use of (1), does not have any role to play in *fixing the referent* of 'Ulysses', constituted by the literary character on which it was originally grounded by the author of the *Odyssey* in the actual world. Like any other name, fictional or otherwise, 'Ulysses' is a rigid designator: it designates that very literary character in all the worlds in which it exists. What determines the identity of a character across worlds is similar to what determines the identity of a real person: in both cases, it seems to be a historical trait, but whereas in the case of people that trait is constituted by a genetic code, in the case of characters it is constituted by the creation of the corresponding literary narrative.

Secondly, as we have seen, imagination determines a context shift, according to which the world relevant to the evaluation of a fictional use turns out to be a purely fictional one. Notice that, as mentioned before, such a world is not a metaphysically possible one: it is the world as described in a literary narrative, the product of an author's imagination. It is a conceivable world, an epistemically possible one, namely, a way we might have come to know the world to be had it been as imagined by a certain author or storyteller. Epistemic possibilities include worlds that are compatible with what can be known *a priori*, namely, before developing an empirical research – for all we know *a priori*, water might be XYZ and Hesperus might be different from Phosphorus. Likewise, for all we know *a priori*, Ulysses might be a real person rather than being a literary character.¹⁸

Finally, I would like to address the following worry: is it not implausible and even absurd to think that readers of fiction are asked to imagine that abstract entities are either

¹⁷ As pointed out by an anonymous referee, the present proposal is akin to Salmon's 1998 abstractist theory. My contribution is centered on offering a specific explanation of how fictional uses can be taken to be *true in a fictional* or *relative to a fictional narrative*, within that kind of framework.

¹⁸ I am setting aside the fact that some fictional narratives seem to involve logically impossible worlds, namely, worlds that are neither metaphysically nor conceivable or epistemically possible, as pointed out by Lewis (1978). Anyway, the minimal point that the relevant world of evaluation is not a metaphysically possible one still holds.

concrete things or human beings populating fictional worlds?¹⁹ I think this objection mixes up *characters* with their metaphysical descriptions: in interacting with literary narratives, and, more particularly, in understanding fictional names, readers grasp literary characters, which, from the abstractist's perspective, are to be construed in terms of abstract entities. Likewise, in understanding a mathematical text, one grasps *numbers*, which may be metaphysically construed in different ways (in terms of psychological capacities, abstract objects, etc.). As readers, we are not conscious of the *metaphysical status* of the referents of the terms we deal with. In as far as I know, something similar could be said about our interaction with people: we generally do not know what kind of entities we are thought to be from a metaphysical point of view.²⁰

3. On true negative existentials

3.1. WHY ARE TRUE NEGATIVE EXISTENTIALS A PROBLEM?

As stated above, some statements containing fictional terms, paradigmatically exemplified by (1), require a fictional interpretation to come out true. In contrast, some others, exemplified by (8),

(8) Ulysses is the main character of the *Odyssey*

usually give rise to *factual* or *metafictive* uses, namely, uses of statements containing fictional names, made to describe the real world -in the most typical ones, they serve to ascribe literary characters features that are not ascribed to them in the corresponding fictional narratives.²¹ Accordingly, they must be interpreted in relation to the parametric values determined by the real context of utterance and evaluated, like most statements, with respect to the home circumstance, that is, a pair constituted by the actual world and the time of utterance. This allows for an intuitively correct evaluation of (8), which comes out true, given that 'Ulysses' refers to Ulysses, a literary character, who, as a matter of fact, stars, among other artworks, the Ancient epic poem.

Now, true negative existentials like the previous (2), repeated below,

(2) Ulysses does not exist,

involve a *prima facie* problem for this proposal. As usual, this statement can be interpreted in two different ways: fictionally and factually. The first interpretation amounts to the idea

¹⁹ This worry has been forcefully pressed by an anonymous referee. As he/she points out, it has been put forward by Sainsbury (2005) against abstractist theories, in particular, the version proposed by Salmon in his 1998's article.

²⁰ As far as authors of fictional narratives are concerned, from an abstractist point of view, they can also be taken to interact with *characters*, whose metaphysical status as abstract entities may be completely ignored by them (and is usually far from their interests).

²¹ Strictly speaking, in *metafictive* uses, one intends to assert something about a fictional character, as it happens on the typical use of (8), whereas in *factual* uses, one mistakenly takes the character to be a real person and intends to assert something about that alleged person, as would be the case with an utterance of "Penelope waited ten years for Ulysses to come back from Troy", made under the wrong impression that Penelope and Ulysses were historical figures.

that Ulysses does not exist in the world of the corresponding fictional story. This is certainly not what is usually meant in uttering (2), since Ulysses clearly exists in the world of the *Odyssey*. So, what is usually meant must be the factual interpretation, namely, that Ulysses, the character, does not exist in the real world.²² But, interpreted in this second way, the theory makes (2) false, since in the real world Ulysses exists as the literary character referred to by ‘Ulysses’.²³

Notice that statements of that kind have always been considered to be a bit paradoxical: in uttering (2) we seem to be first identifying an object, Ulysses, to then say of it that it does not exist. An argument along the following lines seems to have paved the way to Meinongian ontology:

- (i) (2) is meaningful.
- (ii) If (2) is meaningful, it has to be true or false (given bivalence).
- (iii) (2) is a subject-predicate sentence.
- (iv) A subject-predicate sentence is true if and only if the object referred to by the subject does have the property expressed by the predicate and is false if and only if the object referred to by the subject does not have the property expressed by the predicate.

Then,

- (v) There is an object referred to by the subject of (2).

Neo-Meinongians (Parsons 1980 and 1982, Priest 2005) have followed von Meinong (1904) in taking the object in question to be the nonexistent Ulysses. The main reactions are well-known. Russell (1905) has rejected premise (iii): on his view, (2) is not a subject-predicate sentence but an existentially quantified one –as such, it does not ascribe a property to a particular object but expresses a general proposition, such as “There is nobody who survived the war of Troy and came back to Ithaca after a long journey”.²⁴ Based both on Frege’s thesis that existence is not a first-order predicate and his semantic dualism, Church (1956) has construed (2) as expressing a proposition of the likes of “The concept of Ulysses is empty”, namely, as a statement about an individual concept or Fregean sense.

As must be clear, those options are not open to the abstractist. On the one hand, as emphasised at the beginning, an abstractist is not a neo-Meinongian, so she does not want

²² According to what is said in the previous footnote, this would be, strictly speaking, a *metafictive* interpretation, given that one is supposed to intend to say something about not a real person but a character (namely, Ulysses).

²³ See the following fragment from Kripke’s text: “Why not say that when one says ‘Hamlet does not exist’ one is speaking of a fictional character? Perhaps many people might think that that is what I want to say. But it can’t be right, taken straightforwardly, because one is not saying of a fictional character that it doesn’t exist. On the contrary, the fictional character does exist. So the fictional character is not something which is being said not to exist. If you say that the fictional character didn’t exist, you would be wrongly assimilating this case to the case of Moloch, where one can say truly, as I did before, there was no such god as Moloch, that Moloch did not exist. That is in contrast with the case of Hamlet, rather than being the same kind of case. If one wishes to talk about the fictional character, one should say that it does exist.” (Kripke 2013, pp. 147-148)

²⁴ I use angular brackets to designate propositions.

to ontologically commit herself to a realm of nonexistent objects -abstract entities exist, as much as concrete ones. On the other hand, Russell's proposal and Church's construal are not viable options for her either, since she wants to stick to the idea that the concept of existence is a first-order predicate, namely, it expresses a property of individuals (Kripke 2013). So, the abstractist has to explain how we can truly say of Ulysses that it does not exist -given that it is neither a Meinongian nonexistent nor an individual concept.

As is known, Kripke (2013) has suggested a solution crucially appealing to the notion of proposition -"There is no true proposition that there are bandersnatches", "There is no such true proposition as that Sherlock Holmes exists -in fact, really no such proposition at all as that Sherlock Holmes exists" (pp. 119-20). A problem with this proposal is that, to go on with the previous example, the fact that there is no proposition at all as that Ulysses exists does not seem to help us clarify the fact that Ulysses does not exist (if anything, it will be the other around: the fact that Ulysses does not exist explains why there is no proposition at all as that Ulysses exists). Therefore, it does not address what I take to be a serious challenge for abstractist accounts, namely, accounting for the true factual reading of (2). In what follows, I am going to pursue a different line.

3.2. A PERSPECTIVIST PROPOSAL

As is known, according to the so-called 'Non-Indexical Contextualism', certain kinds of statements, in particular, evaluative statements, knowledge ascriptions, epistemic modals and future contingents, are true or false with respect to circumstances of evaluation constituted by a set of parameters that is richer than the usual pair of a possible world and a time (MacFarlane 2007a and 2009, Recanati 2007). Non-Indexical Contextualism involves thus an extension of Classical intensional semantics so as to include, together with possible worlds and times, new parameters in the circumstances of evaluation for certain kinds of statements, such as a standard of taste relevant to the evaluation of statements of taste or, to put another example, an epistemic standard, relevant to the evaluation of knowledge ascriptions. Those statements are thus thought to exhibit a kind of contextual sensitivity that is different from the contextual sensitivity of indexical ones: it is not their content but their truth-value that is context-sensitive -hence the name given to this approach, '*Non-Indexical Contextualism*'. Their context-invariable contents are evaluated as true or false *with respect to circumstances that include a new parameter, usually a kind of standard*, whose value is inherited from the context of utterance by default. Notice that this position only involves a *mild* or *moderate* form of relativism, since once the possible world, the time and the relevant standard are settled, the corresponding utterance or inscription will get definitive and absolute truth-conditions.²⁵ Moreover, it is worth emphasising that the proposal is restricted to some particular kinds of statements (the above-mentioned evaluative statements, knowledge ascriptions, epistemic modals and future contingents): it then involves not only a mild or moderate but also a *local* form of relativism. Now, in what follows

²⁵ In this regard, Non-Indexical Contextualism can be contrasted with more extreme forms of relativism, such as the position defended later on by MacFarlane in several works (2003, 2005, 2007b and 2014), called 'Relativism', according to which any utterance or inscription of an evaluative judgment/knowledge ascription/epistemic modal/future contingent can be indefinitely re-evaluated as true or false from different *contexts of assessment*.

I would like to argue that Non-Indexical Contextualism might also be applied to the analysis of that part of our discourse constituted by existential statements. My grounds for this claim is that I take those uses to be *perspectival*, and consequently *they must be evaluated as true or false with respect to not only a possible world and a time but also a certain perspective*. Once perspectives are taken on board, it will be possible to explain how an abstractist can allow for a reading of (2) that makes it true.

First of all, I will try to clarify in what sense I take the use of existential statements to involve a certain perspective. Our common, metaphysically uninformed use of the existence predicate restricts its application to concrete entities that are present at the time of utterance, since it is common knowledge that a general feature of concrete entities is that they endure for a certain period of time.²⁶ Accordingly, we usually hold true statements such as

- (9) Napoleon has ceased to exist
- (10) Troy does not exist any longer
- (11) The first baby of the twenty-fifth century does not still exist
- (12) Unicorns do not exist,

since, standardly, in uttering existential statements we ascribe the property of concrete existence with respect to a temporal condition (determined by the context of utterance, for instance, some time during the twenty-first century), which Napoleon, the city of Troy, the first baby of the twenty-fifth century and unicorns certainly lack. But it is clear that the predicate can be applied in other ways. For one thing, someone might have reasons for applying it to *a different kind of entities*, depending on her beliefs and commitments. Accordingly, it is worth noticing that there are existential statements that look more akin to eternal sentences, namely, sentences whose truth-values do not vary with respect to a time parameter. Statements such as

- (13) Numbers exist
- (14) Fairness exists
- (15) Properties exist, as well as individuals/There are properties, as well as individuals
- (16) God exists

seem to behave, for semantic evaluative purposes, like “The Earth turns around the sun” or “Grass is green”. Notice, though, that they are not used in everyday-life situations but are characteristic of metaphysical debates, among philosophers of mathematics, political philosophers and general metaphysicians, or theological debates among philosophers of religion, theologians or common people discussing issues of faith. Moreover, there are still other situations that prompt the use of existential statements, in which the interest is focused on *a particular way of existing* that is taken to be relevant to a certain purpose. Take into account examples such as the following dialogue:

- Maria: Do you think that Peter could be promoted to president of the company?
 Giulia: (17) No, he does not exist, the only possible candidate is Donald,

²⁶ As before, I follow Kripke (2013) in presupposing that existence is a property of individuals and can be thus represented as a first-order predicate rather than a quantifier, but the point does not really depend on this assumption.

where (17) is uttered with the intention to say not that Peter is dead but that he is absolutely out of consideration when a certain purpose is at stake, which might be either explicit or implicit in the conversational context.²⁷

On the basis of these considerations, I would like to maintain that an existential claim can be taken to be true or false *from a certain perspective*, which is determined by *the kind of situation in which the utterance takes place*. According to this, the content of existential statements will be true or false not only with respect to a world and a time parameter but also *with respect to the perspective at stake*: the one of common sense, a certain metaphysical perspective, the point of view determined by what is taken to be relevant in a certain situation, etc. If perspectives are taken on board, it can be said, for instance, that the above-mentioned tokening of (17) is false with respect to the usual commonsense perspective but true with respect to the point of view adopted by someone who has a certain standard of relevance (concerning what it takes to reach a certain position in a company) in mind. Likewise, a tokening of (13) will come out true from a certain metaphysical perspective in the philosophy of mathematics (such as, for instance, Platonism) but false again from the standpoint of 'the man in the street'.²⁸

It is worth pointing out that the perspective varies with the kind of use that the existence predicate is being made of. In other words, it is the different kinds of situations in which the existence predicate can be applied (ranging from everyday life to metaphysical debates) that allows for the different perspectives from which an existential statement can be evaluated as true or false. Grasping the perspective at stake depends on our pragmatic competence with the existence predicate, namely, our knowledge of the different situations in which it can be applied. It is a kind of pragmatic knowledge characteristic of language users *qua* language users, not the kind of theoretical knowledge that could (or could not) settle a metaphysical dispute between Platonists and Nominalists. Independently of whether metaphysical disputes can be settled or not (namely, independently, for example, of whether it can be established that numbers exist, properties exist, etc.), it seems to be a fact that uses of existential statements in metaphysical debates are different from everyday

²⁷ Notice that sometimes the peculiar ways in which existence is ascribed to some entities are made explicit, as shown by the following examples:

- (13') Numbers exist as Platonic Ideas
- (14') Fairness exists as an ideal of justice
- (15') Properties exist as instantiated universals
- (16') God exists as the first cause of the universe/a loving father of his creatures
- (17') Peter does not exist as a possible candidate for the presidency
- (18) Ulysses exists as the main character of the *Odyssey*.

²⁸ Of course, a tokening of (13) will also come out false from the perspective of a Nominalist regarding numbers. I do not want to enter into the debate in the philosophy of mathematics on whether truth can only be relative to a certain theoretical perspective (Platonism, Nominalism, etc.). I am concerned with the more general (and, in principle, less controversial) claim that existential statements are to be evaluated with respect to a certain perspective in a more general sense of the term, according to which we can distinguish perspectives not on the basis of understanding rather complicated theoretical conceptions but on the basis of grasping some basic features of the context of utterance (as will be emphasised below, this involves a pragmatic competence).

uses: as above-mentioned, this is the ground for the introduction of the different perspectives that seem to be relevant to the evaluation of existential statements.

So, coming back to our initial example of the factual use of the negative existential statement repeated below

(2) Ulysses does not exist,

it can be taken to be true *from a commonsense perspective* but *false from a theoretical perspective*, like the one represented by the abstractist about fictional discourse.

Finally, I have a clarification to make: throughout this discussion, I have been taking the factual interpretation of (2) (as much as of the other above-mentioned existential statements) for granted, which may suggest that a certain perspective is relevant to evaluate existential statements *once the factual interpretation has been assumed*. However, it should be noticed that perspectives are at work also in fictional uses, since all the above-mentioned existential statements may occur within the framework of a fictional narrative or as a report of what is told in a fictional story. So, the pragmatic knowledge of the situation in which the utterance or inscription of an existential statement takes place seems to play two importantly different roles: on the one hand, it serves to disambiguate it in the sense of distinguishing whether a fictional or a factual use is involved; on the other hand, it serves to identify the perspective that is constitutive of the corresponding circumstances of evaluation, together with either a real or a purely fictional possible world and time.

4. Concluding remarks

This essay has focused on two different semantic problems that any abstractist theory of fictional discourse has to face. The first one is accounting for the truth of fictional uses, such as a token of our initial (1) as it occurs in the *Odyssey*, given that an abstract entity like Ulysses seems not to literally and strictly have the property of being asleep. In regard to this, I have suggested that fictional utterances and inscriptions involve a use of our imaginative capacities that determines a context shift: the fictional story provides us with the world of evaluation, a viewpoint from which the characters, prey of our imagination, can be said to bear some human properties. The second one is accounting for some problematic factual uses, in particular, the utterances and inscriptions of intuitively true negative existentials, such as (2) above, which on the abstractist framework come out false, since 'Ulysses' is taken to refer to an existent literary character. As far as this difficult issue is concerned, I have suggested that existential claims are to be evaluated with respect to not only a world and a time but also *a certain perspective*: different uses of (2) may then have different truth-values, according to the perspective in play.

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