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Author(s): John R. Searle

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# The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse

John R. Searle

## I

I BELIEVE THAT speaking or writing in a language consists in performing speech acts of a quite specific kind called “illocutionary acts.” These include making statements, asking questions, giving orders, making promises, apologizing, thanking, and so on. I also believe that there is a systematic set of relationships between the meanings of the words and sentences we utter and the illocutionary acts we perform in the utterance of those words and sentences.<sup>1</sup>

Now for anybody who holds such a view the existence of fictional discourse poses a difficult problem. We might put the problem in the form of a paradox: how can it be both the case that words and other elements in a fictional story have their ordinary meanings and yet the rules that attach to those words and other elements and determine their meanings are not complied with: how can it be the case in “Little Red Riding Hood” both that “red” means red and yet that the rules correlating “red” with red are not in force? This is only a preliminary formulation of our question and we shall have to attack the question more vigorously before we can even get a careful formulation of it. Before doing that, however, it is necessary to make a few elementary distinctions.

*The Distinction Between Fiction and Literature:* Some works of fiction are literary works, some are not. Nowadays most works of literature are fictional, but by no means all works of literature are fictional. Most comic books and jokes are examples of fiction but not literature: *In Cold Blood* and *Armies of the Night* qualify as literature but are not fictional. Because most literary works are fictional it is possible to confuse a definition of fiction with a definition of literature, but the existence of examples of fiction which are not literature and of examples

<sup>1</sup> For an attempt to work out a theory of these relationships, see J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge, 1969), esp. Chs. 3-5.

of literature which are not fictional is sufficient to demonstrate that this is a mistake. And even if there were no such examples, it would still be a mistake because the concept of literature is a different concept from that of fiction. Thus, for example, "the Bible as literature" indicates a theologically neutral attitude, but "the Bible as fiction" is tenuous.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I shall attempt to analyze the concept of fiction but not the concept of literature. Actually, in the same sense in which I shall be analyzing fiction, I do not believe it is possible to give an analysis of literature, for three interconnected reasons.

First, there is no trait or set of traits which all works of literature have in common and which could constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a work of literature. Literature, to use Wittgenstein's terminology, is a family-resemblance notion.

Secondly, I believe (though will not attempt to demonstrate here) that "literature" is the name of a set of attitudes we take toward a stretch of discourse, not a name of an internal property of the stretch of discourse, though why we take the attitudes we do will of course be at least in part a function of the properties of the discourse and not entirely arbitrary. Roughly speaking, whether or not a work is literature is for the readers to decide, whether or not it is fiction is for the author to decide.

Third, the literary is continuous with the nonliterary. Not only is there no sharp boundary, but there is not much of a boundary at all. Thus Thucydides and Gibbon wrote works of history which we may or may not treat as works of literature. The Sherlock Holmes stories of Conan Doyle are clearly works of fiction, but it is a matter of judgment whether they should be regarded as a part of English literature.

*The Distinction Between Fictional Speech and Figurative Speech:* It is clear that just as in fictional speech semantic rules are altered or suspended in some way we have yet to analyze, so in figurative speech semantic rules are altered or suspended in some way. But it is equally clear that what happens in fictional speech is quite different from and independent of figures of speech. A metaphor can occur as much in a work of nonfiction as in a work of fiction. Just to have some jargon to work with, let us say that metaphorical uses of expressions are "non-literary" and fictional utterances are "nonserious." To avoid one obvious sort of misunderstanding, this jargon is not meant to imply that writing

<sup>2</sup> There are other senses of "fiction" and "literature" which I will not be discussing. In one sense "fiction" means falsehood, as in "The defendant's testimony was a tissue of fictions," and in one sense "literature" just means printed matter, as in "The literature on referential opacity is quite extensive."

a fictional novel or poem is not a serious activity, but rather that, for example, if the author of a novel tells us that it is raining outside he isn't seriously committed to the view that it is at the time of writing actually raining outside. It is in this sense that fiction is nonserious. Some examples: If I now say, "I am writing an article about the concept of fiction," that remark is both serious and literal. If I say, "Hegel is a dead horse on the philosophical market," that remark is serious but nonliteral. If I say, beginning a story, "Once upon a time there lived in a faraway Kingdom a wise King who had a beautiful daughter . . .," that remark is literal but not serious.

The aim of this paper is to explore the difference between fictional and serious utterances; it is not to explore the difference between figurative and literal utterances, which is another distinction quite independent of the first.

One last remark before we begin the analysis. Every subject matter has its catchphrases to enable us to stop thinking before we have got a solution to our problems. Just as sociologists and others who ponder social change find they can stop themselves from having to think by reciting phrases such as "the revolution of rising expectations," so it is easy to stop thinking about the logical status of fictional discourse if we repeat slogans like "the suspension of disbelief" or expressions like "mimesis." Such notions contain our problem but not its solution. In one sense I want to say precisely that what I do not suspend when I read a serious writer of nonserious illocutions such as Tolstoy or Thomas Mann is disbelief. My disbelief antennae are much more acute for Dostoevsky than they are for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In another sense I do want to say that I "suspend disbelief," but our problem is to say exactly how and exactly why. Plato, according to one common misinterpretation, thought that fiction consisted of lies. Why would such a view be wrong?

## II

Let us begin by comparing two passages chosen at random to illustrate the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. The first, nonfiction, is from the *New York Times* (15 December 1972), written by Eileen Shanahan:

Washington, Dec. 14—A group of federal, state, and local government officials rejected today President Nixon's idea that the federal government provide the financial aid that would permit local governments to reduce property taxes.

The second is from a novel by Iris Murdoch entitled *The Red and the Green*, which begins,

Ten more glorious days without horses! So thought Second Lieutenant Andrew Chase-White recently commissioned in the distinguished regiment of King Edwards Horse, as he pottered contentedly in a garden on the outskirts of Dublin on a sunny Sunday afternoon in April nineteen-sixteen.<sup>3</sup>

The first thing to notice about both passages is that, with the possible exception of the one word *pottered* in Miss Murdoch's novel, all of the occurrences of the words are quite literal. Both authors are speaking (writing) literally. What then are the differences? Let us begin by considering the passage from the *New York Times*. Miss Shanahan is making an assertion. An assertion is a type of illocutionary act that conforms to certain quite specific semantic and pragmatic rules. These are:

- (1) The essential rule: the maker of an assertion commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition.
- (2) The preparatory rules: the speaker must be in a position to provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition.
- (3) The expressed proposition must not be obviously true to both the speaker and the hearer in the context of utterance.
- (4) The sincerity rule: the speaker commits himself to a belief in the truth of the expressed proposition.<sup>4</sup>

Notice that Miss Shanahan is held responsible for complying with all these rules. If she fails to comply with any of them, we shall say that her assertion is defective. If she fails to meet the conditions specified by the rules, we will say that what she said is false or mistaken or wrong, or that she didn't have enough evidence for what she said, or that it was pointless because we all knew it anyhow, or that she was lying because she didn't really believe it. Such are the ways that assertions can characteristically go wrong, when the speaker fails to live up to the standards set by the rules. The rules establish the internal canons of criticism of the utterance.

But now notice that none of these rules apply to the passage from Miss Murdoch. Her utterance is not a commitment to the truth of the

3 Iris Murdoch, *The Red and the Green* (New York, 1965), p. 3. This and other examples of fiction used in this article were deliberately chosen at random, in the belief that theories of language should be able to deal with any text at all and not just with specially selected examples.

4 For a more thorough exposition of these and similar rules, see Searle, *ibid.*, Ch. 3.

proposition that on a sunny Sunday afternoon in April of nineteen-sixteen a recently commissioned lieutenant of an outfit called the King Edwards Horse named Andrew Chase-White pottered in his garden and thought that he was going to have ten more glorious days without horses. Such a proposition may or may not be true, but Miss Murdoch has no commitment whatever as regards its truth. Furthermore, as she is not committed to its truth, she is not committed to being able to provide evidence for its truth. Again, there may or may not be evidence for the truth of such a proposition, and she may or may not have evidence. But all of that is quite irrelevant to her speech act, which does not commit her to the possession of evidence. Again, since there is no commitment to the truth of the proposition there is no question as to whether we are or are not already apprised of its truth, and she is not held to be insincere if in fact she does not believe for one moment that there actually was such a character thinking about horses that day in Dublin.

Now we come to the crux of our problem: Miss Shanahan is making an assertion, and assertions are defined by the constitutive rules of the activity of asserting; but what kind of illocutionary act can Miss Murdoch be performing? In particular, how can it be an assertion since it complies with none of the rules peculiar to assertions? If, as I have claimed, the meaning of the sentence uttered by Miss Murdoch is determined by the linguistic rules that attach to the elements of the sentence, and if those rules determine that the literal utterance of the sentence is an assertion, and if, as I have been insisting, she is making a literal utterance of the sentence, then surely it must be an assertion; but it can't be an assertion since it does not comply with those rules that are specific to and constitutive of assertions.

Let us begin by considering one wrong answer to our question, an answer which some authors have in fact proposed. According to this answer, Miss Murdoch or any other writer of novels is not performing the illocutionary act of making an assertion but the illocutionary act of telling a story or writing a novel. On this theory, newspaper accounts contain one class of illocutionary acts (statements, assertions, descriptions, explanations) and fictional literature contains another class of illocutionary acts (writing stories, novels, poems, plays, etc.). The writer or speaker of fiction has his own repertoire of illocutionary acts which are on all fours with, but in addition to, the standard illocutionary acts of asking questions, making requests, making promises, giving descriptions, and so on. I believe that this analysis is incorrect; I shall not devote a great deal of space to demonstrating that it is incorrect because I prefer to spend the space on presenting an alternative

account, but by way of illustrating its incorrectness I want to mention a serious difficulty which anyone who wished to present such an account would face. In general the illocutionary act (or acts) performed in the utterance of the sentence is a function of the meaning of the sentence. We know, for example, that an utterance of the sentence "John can run the mile" is a performance of one kind of illocutionary act, and that an utterance of the sentence "Can John run the mile?" is a performance of another kind of illocutionary act, because we know that the indicative sentence form means something different from the interrogative sentence form. But now if the sentences in a work of fiction were used to perform some completely different speech acts from those determined by their literal meaning, they would have to have some other meaning. Anyone therefore who wishes to claim that fiction contains different illocutionary acts from nonfiction is committed to the view that words do not have their normal meanings in works of fiction. That view is at least *prima facie* an impossible view since if it were true it would be impossible for anyone to understand a work of fiction without learning a new set of meanings for all the words and other elements contained in the work of fiction, and since any sentence whatever can occur in a work of fiction, in order to have the ability to read any work of fiction, a speaker of the language would have to learn the language all over again, since every sentence in the language would have both a fictional and a nonfictional meaning. I can think of various ways that a defender of the view under consideration might meet these objections, but as they are all as unpalatable as the original thesis that fiction contains some wholly new category of illocutionary acts, I shall not pursue them here.

Back to Miss Murdoch. If she is not performing the illocutionary act of writing a novel because there is no such illocutionary act, what exactly is she doing in the quoted passage? The answer seems to me obvious, though not easy to state precisely. She is pretending, one could say, to make an assertion, or acting as if she were making an assertion, or going through the motions of making an assertion, or imitating the making of an assertion. I place no great store by any of these verb phrases, but let us go to work on "pretend," as it is as good as any. When I say that Miss Murdoch is pretending to make an assertion, it is crucial to distinguish two quite different senses of "pretend." In one sense of "pretend," to pretend to be or to do something that one is not doing is to engage in a form of deception, but in the second sense of "pretend," to pretend to do or be something is to engage in a performance which is *as if* one were doing or being the thing and is without any intent to deceive. If I pretend to be Nixon in order to fool the



Secret Service into letting me into the White House, I am pretending in the first sense; if I pretend to be Nixon as part of a game of charades, it is pretending in the second sense. Now in the fictional use of words, it is pretending in the second sense which is in question. Miss Murdoch is engaging in a nondeceptive pseudoperformance which constitutes pretending to recount to us a series of events. So my first conclusion is this: the author of a work of fiction pretends to perform a series of illocutionary acts, normally of the representative type.<sup>5</sup>

Now *pretend* is an intentional verb: that is, it is one of those verbs which contain the concept of intention built into it. One cannot truly be said to have pretended to do something unless one intended to pretend to do it. So our first conclusion leads immediately to our second conclusion: the identifying criterion for whether or not a text is a work of fiction must of necessity lie in the illocutionary intentions of the author. There is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction. What makes it a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes toward it, and that stance is a matter of the complex illocutionary intentions that the author has when he writes or otherwise composes it.

There used to be a school of literary critics who thought one should not consider the intentions of the author when examining a work of fiction. Perhaps there is some level of intention at which this extraordinary view is plausible; perhaps one should not consider an author's ulterior motives when analyzing his work, but at the most basic level it is absurd to suppose a critic can completely ignore the intentions of the author, since even so much as to identify a text as a novel, a poem, or even as a text is already to make a claim about the author's intentions.

So far I have pointed out that an author of fiction pretends to perform illocutionary acts which he is not in fact performing. But now the question forces itself upon us as to what makes this peculiar form of pretense possible. It is after all an odd, peculiar, and amazing fact about human language that it allows the possibility of fiction at all. Yet we all have no difficulty in recognizing and understanding works of fiction. How is such a thing possible?

In our discussion of Miss Shanahan's passage in the *New York Times*, we specified a set of rules, compliance with which makes her

5 The representative class of illocutions includes statements, assertions, descriptions, characterizations, identifications, explanations, and numerous others. For an explanation of this and related notions see Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. K. Gunderson, forthcoming.



utterance a (sincere and nondefective) assertion. I find it useful to think of these rules as rules correlating words (or sentences) to the world. Think of them as vertical rules that establish connections between language and reality. Now what makes fiction possible, I suggest, is a set of extralinguistic, nonsemantic conventions that break the connection between words and the world established by the rules mentioned earlier. Think of the conventions of fictional discourse as a set of horizontal conventions that break the connections established by the vertical rules. They suspend the normal requirements established by these rules. Such horizontal conventions are not meaning rules; they are not part of the speaker's semantic competence. Accordingly, they do not alter or change the meanings of any of the words or other elements of the language. What they do rather is enable the speaker to use words with their literal meanings without undertaking the commitments that are normally required by those meanings. My third conclusion then is this: the pretended illocutions which constitute a work of fiction are made possible by the existence of a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts and the world. In this sense, to use Wittgenstein's jargon, telling stories really is a separate language game; to be played it requires a separate set of conventions, though these conventions are not meaning rules; and the language game is not on all fours with illocutionary language games, but is parasitic on them.

This point will perhaps be clearer if we contrast fiction with lies. I think Wittgenstein was wrong when he said that lying is a language game that has to be learned like any other.<sup>6</sup> I think this is mistaken because lying consists in violating one of the regulative rules on the performance of speech acts, and any regulative rule at all contains within it the notion of a violation. Since the rule defines what constitutes a violation, it is not first necessary to learn to follow the rule and then learn a separate practice of breaking the rule. But in contrast, fiction is much more sophisticated than lying. To someone who did not understand the separate conventions of fiction, it would seem that fiction is merely lying. What distinguishes fiction from lies is the existence of a separate set of conventions which enables the author to go through the motions of making statements which he knows to be not true even though he has no intention to deceive.

We have discussed the question of what makes it possible for an author to use words literally and yet not be committed in accordance with the rules that attach to the literal meaning of those words. Any

6 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1953), par. 249.

answer to that question forces the next question upon us: what are the mechanisms by which the author invokes the horizontal conventions—what procedures does he follow? If, as I have said, the author does not actually perform illocutionary acts but only pretends to, how is the pretense performed? It is a general feature of the concept of pretending that one can pretend to perform a higher order or complex action by *actually* performing lower order or less complex actions which are constitutive parts of the higher order or complex action. Thus, for example, one can pretend to hit someone by actually making the arm and fist movements that are characteristic of hitting someone. The hitting is pretended, but the movement of the arm and fist is real. Similarly, children pretend to drive a stationary car by actually sitting in the driver's seat, moving the steering wheel, pushing the gear shift lever, and so on. The same principle applies to the writing of fiction. The author pretends to perform illocutionary acts by way of actually uttering (writing) sentences. In the terminology of *Speech Acts*, the *illocutionary act* is pretended, but the *utterance act* is real. In Austin's terminology, the author pretends to perform *illocutionary acts* by way of actually performing *phonetic* and *phatic* acts. The utterance acts in fiction are indistinguishable from the utterance acts of serious discourse, and it is for that reason that there is no textual property that will identify a stretch of discourse as a work of fiction. It is the performance of the utterance act with the intention of invoking the horizontal conventions that constitutes the pretended performance of the illocutionary act.

The fourth conclusion of this section, then, is a development of the third: the pretended performances of illocutionary acts which constitute the writing of a work of fiction consist in actually performing utterance acts with the intention of invoking the horizontal conventions that suspend the normal illocutionary commitments of the utterances.

These points will be clearer if we consider two special cases of fiction, first-person narratives and theatrical plays. I have said that in the standard third-person narrative of the type exemplified by Miss Murdoch's novel, the author pretends to perform illocutionary acts. But now consider the following passage from Sherlock Holmes:

It was in the year '95 that a combination of events, into which I need not enter, caused Mr. Sherlock Holmes and myself to spend some weeks in one of our great university towns, and it was during this time that the small but instructive adventure which I am about to relate befell us.<sup>7</sup>

7 A. Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City, N. Y., 1932), II, 596.

In this passage Sir Arthur is not simply pretending to make assertions, but he is *pretending to be* John Watson, M.D., retired officer of the Afghan campaign making assertions about his friend Sherlock Holmes. That is, in first-person narratives, the author often pretends to be someone else making assertions.

Dramatic texts provide us with an interesting special case of the thesis I have been arguing in this paper. Here it is not so much the author who is doing the pretending but the characters in the actual performance. That is, the text of the play will consist of some pseudo-assertions, but it will for the most part consist of a series of serious directions to the actors as to how they are to pretend to make assertions and to perform other actions. The actor pretends to be someone other than he actually is, and he pretends to perform the speech acts and other acts of that character. The playwright represents the actual and pretended actions and the speeches of the actors, but the playwright's performance in writing the text of the play is rather like writing a recipe for pretense than engaging in a form of pretense itself. A fictional story is a pretended representation of a state of affairs; but a play, that is, a play as performed, is not a pretended *representation* of a state of affairs but the pretended state of affairs itself, the actors pretend *to be* the characters. In that sense the author of the play is not in general pretending to make assertions; he is giving directions as to how to enact a pretense which the actors then follow. Consider the following passage from Galsworthy's *The Silver Box*:

Act I, Scene I. The curtain rises on the Barthwick's dining room, large, modern, and well furnished; the window curtains drawn. Electric light is burning. On the large round dining table is set out a tray with whiskey, a syphon, and a silver cigarette box. It is past midnight. A fumbling is heard outside the door. It is opened suddenly; Jack Barthwick seems to fall into the room . . .

Jack: Hello! I've got home all ri--- (*Defiantly.*)<sup>8</sup>

It is instructive to compare this passage with Miss Murdoch's. Murdoch, I have claimed, tells us a story; in order to do that, she pretends to make a series of assertions about people in Dublin in 1916. What we visualize when we read the passage is a man pottering about his garden thinking about horses. But when Galsworthy writes his play, he does not give us a series of pretended assertions about a play. He gives us a series of directions as to how things are actually to happen on stage when the play is performed. When we read the passage from

8 John Galsworthy, *Representative Plays* (New York, 1924), p. 3.

Galsworthy we visualize a stage, the curtain rises, the stage is furnished like a dining room, and so on. That is, it seems to me the illocutionary force of the text of a play is like the illocutionary force of a recipe for baking a cake. It is a set of instructions for how to do something, namely, how to perform the play. The element of pretense enters at the level of the performance: the actors pretend to be the members of the Barthwick family doing such-and-such things and having such-and-such feelings.

### III

The analysis of the preceding section, if it is correct, should help us to solve some of the traditional puzzles about the ontology of a work of fiction. Suppose I say: "There never existed a Mrs. Sherlock Holmes because Holmes never got married, but there did exist a Mrs. Watson because Watson did get married, though Mrs. Watson died not long after their marriage." Is what I have said true or false, or lacking in truth value, or what? In order to answer we need to distinguish not only between serious discourse and fictional discourse, as I have been doing, but also to distinguish both of these from serious discourse about fiction. Taken as a piece of serious discourse, the above passage is certainly not true because none of these people (Watson, Holmes, Mrs. Watson) ever existed. But taken as a piece of discourse *about* fiction, the above statement is true because it accurately reports the marital histories of the two fictional characters Holmes and Watson. It is not itself a piece of fiction because I am not the author of the works of fiction in question. Holmes and Watson never existed at all, which is not of course to deny that they exist in fiction and can be talked about as such.

Taken as a statement about fiction, the above utterance conforms to the constitutive rules of statement-making. Notice, for example, that I can verify the above statement by reference to the works of Conan Doyle. But there is no question of Conan Doyle being able to verify what he says about Sherlock Holmes and Watson when he writes the stories, because he does not make any statements about them, he only pretends to. Because the author has created these fictional characters, we on the other hand can make true statements about them as fictional characters.

But how is it possible for an author to "create" fictional characters out of thin air, as it were? To answer this let us go back to the passage from Iris Murdoch. The second sentence begins, "So thought Second

Lieutenant Andrew Chase-White.” Now in this passage Murdoch uses a proper name, a paradigm-referring expression. Just as in the whole sentence she pretends to make an assertion, in this passage she pretends to refer (another speech act). One of the conditions on the successful performance of the speech act of reference is that there must exist an object that the speaker is referring to. Thus by pretending to refer she pretends that there is an object to be referred to. To the extent that we share in the pretense, we will also pretend that there is a lieutenant named Andrew Chase-White living in Dublin in 1916. It is the pretended reference which creates the fictional character and the shared pretense which enables us to talk about the character in the manner of the passage about Sherlock Holmes quoted above. The logical structure of all this is complicated, but it is not opaque. By pretending to refer to (and recount the adventures of) a person, Miss Murdoch creates a fictional character. Notice that she does not really refer to a fictional character because there was no such antecedently existing character; rather, by pretending to refer to a person she creates a fictional person. Now once that fictional character has been created, we who are standing outside the fictional story can really refer to a fictional person. Notice that in the passage about Sherlock Holmes above, I really referred to a fictional character (e.g., my utterance satisfies the rules of reference). I did not *pretend* to refer to a real Sherlock Holmes; I *really referred* to the fictional Sherlock Holmes.

Another interesting feature of fictional reference is that normally not all of the references in a work of fiction will be pretended acts of referring; some will be real references as in the passage from Miss Murdoch where she refers to Dublin, or in Sherlock Holmes when Conan Doyle refers to London, or in the passage quoted when he makes a veiled reference to either Oxford or Cambridge but doesn't tell us which (“one of our great university towns”). Most fictional stories contain nonfictional elements: along with the pretended references to Sherlock Holmes and Watson, there are in Sherlock Holmes real references to London and Baker Street and Paddington Station; again, in *War and Peace*, the story of Pierre and Natasha is a fictional story about fictional characters, but the Russia of *War and Peace* is the real Russia, and the war against Napoleon is the real war against the real Napoleon. What is the test for what is fictional and what isn't? The answer is provided by our discussion of the differences between Miss Murdoch's novel and Miss Shanahan's article in the *New York Times*. The test for what the author is committed to is what counts as a mistake. If there never did exist a Nixon, Miss Shanahan (and the rest of us) are mistaken. But if there never did exist an Andrew Chase-White,

Miss Murdoch is not mistaken. Again, if Sherlock Holmes and Watson go from Baker Street to Paddington Station by a route which is geographically impossible, we will know that Conan Doyle blundered even though he has not blundered if there never was a veteran of the Afghan campaign answering to the description of John Watson, M.D. In part, certain fictional genres are defined by the nonfictional commitments involved in the work of fiction. The difference, say, between naturalistic novels, fairy stories, works of science fiction, and surrealistic stories is in part defined by the extent of the author's commitment to represent actual facts, either specific facts about places like London and Dublin and Russia or general facts about what it is possible for people to do and what the world is like. For example, if Billy Pilgrim makes a trip to the invisible planet Tralfamadore in a microsecond, we can accept that because it is consistent with the science fiction element of *Slaughterhouse Five*, but if we find a text where Sherlock Holmes does the same thing, we will know at the very least that that text is inconsistent with the corpus of the original nine volumes of the Sherlock Holmes stories.

Theorists of literature are prone to make vague remarks about how the author creates a fictional world, a world of the novel, or some such. I think we are now in a position to make sense of those remarks. By pretending to refer to people and to recount events about them, the author creates fictional characters and events. In the case of realistic or naturalistic fiction, the author will refer to real places and events intermingling these references with the fictional references, thus making it possible to treat the fictional story as an extension of our existing knowledge. The author will establish with the reader a set of understandings about how far the horizontal conventions of fiction break the vertical connections of serious speech. To the extent that the author is consistent with the conventions he has invoked or (in the case of revolutionary forms of literature) the conventions he has established, he will remain within the conventions. As far as the *possibility* of the ontology is concerned, anything goes: the author can create any character or event he likes. As far as the *acceptability* of the ontology is concerned, coherence is a crucial consideration. However, there is no universal criterion for coherence: what counts as coherence in a work of science fiction will not count as coherence in a work of naturalism. What counts as coherence will be in part a function of the contract between author and reader about the horizontal conventions.

Sometimes the author of a fictional story will insert utterances in the story which are not fictional and not part of the story. To take a famous example, Tolstoy begins *Anna Karenina* with the sentence



“Happy families are all happy in the same way, unhappy families unhappy in their separate, different ways.” That, I take it, is not a fictional but a serious utterance. It is a genuine assertion. It is part of the novel but not part of the fictional story. When Nabokov at the beginning of *Ada* deliberately misquotes Tolstoy, saying, “All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones more or less alike,” he is indirectly contradicting (and poking fun at) Tolstoy. Both of these are genuine assertions, though Nabokov’s is made by an ironic misquotation of Tolstoy. Such examples compel us to make a final distinction, that between a work of fiction and fictional discourse. A work of fiction need not consist entirely of, and in general will not consist entirely of, fictional discourse.

#### IV

The preceding analysis leaves one crucial question unanswered: why bother? That is, why do we attach such importance and effort to texts which contain largely pretended speech acts? The reader who has followed my argument this far will not be surprised to hear that I do not think there is any simple or even single answer to that question. Part of the answer would have to do with the crucial role, usually underestimated, that imagination plays in human life, and the equally crucial role that shared products of the imagination play in human social life. And one aspect of the role that such products play derives from the fact that serious (i.e., nonfictional) speech acts can be conveyed by fictional texts, even though the conveyed speech act is not represented in the text. Almost any important work of fiction conveys a “message” or “messages” which are conveyed *by* the text but are not *in* the text. Only in such children’s stories as contain the concluding “and the moral of the story is . . .” or in tiresomely didactic authors such as Tolstoy do we get an explicit representation of the serious speech acts which it is the point (or the main point) of the fictional text to convey. Literary critics have explained on an ad hoc and particularistic basis how the author conveys a serious speech act through the performance of the pretended speech acts which constitute the work of fiction, but there is as yet no general theory of the mechanisms by which such serious illocutionary intentions are conveyed by pretended illocutions.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
BERKELEY