Linguistic metafictions: towards formal narratology

PEA Workshop (University of Genova)

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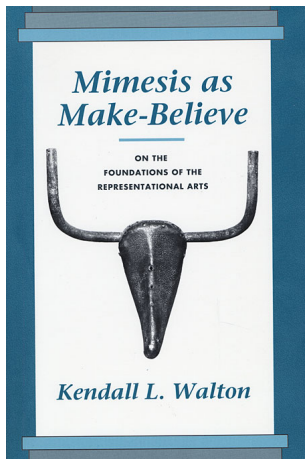
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Plan

Plan

Preliminaries: games of make-believe

In search for the "fiction principle"

The varieties of linguistic metafictions

Games of make-believe

(Walton 1990)

Winsor McCay 1905

Walton's *props*

- ▶ (Walton 1990: 37-8):

    Props are generators of fictional truths, things which, by virtue of their nature or existence, make propositions fictional. A snow fort is a prop. It is responsible for the fictionality of the proposition that there is a (real) fort with turrets and a moat. A doll makes it fictional in a child's game that there is a blond baby girl.

    Representational works of art are props also.

- ▶ **Def**: a *prop* is a real-world object which is used in a game of make-believe in such a way that it *generates* fictional propositions.
    - ▶ Typical examples from children games of make-believe: dolls, toy cars, cards, ...
    - ▶ Typical example from adult games of make-believe: paintings, movies, comedians, texts, ...
- ▶ Props do not have general essential features, they are defined by their *function* in the context of a game of make-believe (Walton 1990: 24).

Artefactual props

- ▶ Some props are natural objects
    - ▶ e.g. clouds, stars, bananas, stumps...
    - ▶ See also (Currie 1990) for a critical discussion of Walton's "natural props".
- ▶ Some are artifacts:
    - ▶ some artefactual props' primary function is not pretence-related (broom, theater props, etc.)
    - ▶ some artefactual props' primary function is to ground pretence (dolls, books, paintings, etc.)
    - ▶ the later may be called *experiential artifacts*.

Frank King *Gasoline Alley* (1918-1959)

Principles of generation

▶ (Walton 1990: 38):

> *Props generate fictional truths independently of what anyone does or does not imagine. But they do not do so entirely on their own, apart from any (actual or potential) imaginers. Props function only in a social, or at least human, setting. The stump in the thicket makes it fictional that a bear is there only because there is a certain convention, understanding, agreement in the game of make-believe, one to the effect that wherever there is a stump, fictionally there is a bear. I will call this a principle of generation.*

▶ Principles of generation ground the *normativity* and the *objectivity* of fictionality.
  ▶ What is fictional is what *is to* be imagined, regardless of what one actually imagines.
  ▶ *ex*: Walton's hidden bear.

Towards pretence semantics

▶ For *linguistic* fictions (viz. games of make-believe based on discourses),
fictionality can thus play the role of truth (Everett 2013: 29):

> *I should emphasise that, on this view, truth within a pretence is not
> really a species of genuine truth, rather it is a distinct linguistic norm
> which mimics real truth within the scope of the pretence.*

▶ *Pretence semantics* is the systematic study of the principles of generations
aiming at giving a general theory of "fictionality-conditions",

  ▶ i.e. it models what the text invites to imagine, systematically and
compositionally.[1]

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[1] See (Friend 2016) for the distinction between *mandates*, *prescriptions* and *invitations*:
> *I will say that a work mandates imagining that P if failure to imagine that P would mean
> falling below a minimum threshold for comprehension. A work prescribes imagining that P
> if we should imagine that P to have a fuller appreciation of the story. Finally, a work invites
> imagining that P on the following condition: if the question arises and we must choose
> between imagining that P and imagining that not-P, we are required to imagine the former.*

The general mechanics of generation

- ▶ Simple principles of generation:
  - ▶ By stipulation (T1): "Bears should be neutralised"
  - ▶ or prop-relative (T2): "Stumps are bears"; "there is a big stump here, therefore in the pretence there is a big bear there"
- ▶ Elaborate principles of generation (Everett 2013: 22):

  > *In addition to Type-I and Type-II principles of generation, our episodes of imagination and pretence often seem to be governed by various more general principles which allow us to* fill in the background *of our imaginative scenario on the basis of what the real world is actually like or what it would be like were the content of our pretence to really obtain, and so on.*

  - ▶ By inference (T3): "Reality" and "mutual belief" principles[2]
- ▶ There are no doubt many other general principles.[3]

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[2] For a seminal discussion (Lewis 1978) and (Walton 1990). For a (fairly) recent review of the literature, see (Woodward 2011).

[3] See (Walton 1990: §4.3 "other implications"); (Everett 2013: 23-6). See also (Kim 2021).

Plan

Continuity and differences

▶ (Walton 1990: 11-12):

Children devote enormous quantities of time and effort to make-believe activities. And this preoccupation seems to be nearly universal, not peculiar to any particular cultures or social groups. The urge to engage in make-believe and the needs such activities address would seem to be very fundamental ones. If they are, one would not expect children simply to outgrow them when they grow up; it would be surprising if make-believe disappeared without a trace at the onset of adulthood.

It doesn't. It continues, I claim, in our interaction with representational works of art (which of course itself begins in childhood). The forms make-believe activities take do change significantly as we mature. They become more subtle, more sophisticated, less overt .

The report principle

- ▶ Are there principles of generations which apply to all and only linguistic fictions?[4]
  - ▶ Distinguishing them from children games of make-believe *and* other kinds of fiction.
  - ▶ In other words: what is the specificity of fictional *texts*, *qua* experiential artifacts?
- ▶ The best candidate in the literature is certainly the "report model", thus introduced in (Everett 2013: 32):[5]

  > *We will treat the fictional text or narrated story essentially as if it were purported factual report. This is in certain ways close to the "report model" of our engagement with literary fiction, on which we pretend or imagine that the fictional text we are reading is a factual report.*

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[4]I subtly move to stories, or *narrative* fictions here. I do not think anything hinges on these subtle distinctions for the rest of the talk.

[5]See in particular (Macdonald 1968), (Searle 1975), (Lewis 1978) and followers; as well as (Ryan 1991) and (Eco 1994), for a literary theory's perspective.

Strong and weak interpretation of the report model

▶ The report model is ambiguous (Everett 2013: 32):

> *In fact the report model can be understood in two different ways, depending on whether or not we understand the texts themselves to be present within the scope of the imaginings they prompt.*

(Strong) it is fictional that the text is a factual report.
(Weak) it is not the case.

▶ There are many examples of novels according to which it is fictional that a report of the facts was produced, and this is what the novel is.

  ▶ Nabokov's *Lolita* is presented as Humbert Humbert's memoires;
  ▶ Towards the end of Vonegut's *Cat's Cradle* (ch. 123), one reads:
  A curious six months followed – the six months in which I wrote this book.

▶ But (Strong) does not generalise: for many other fictions, the fact that, fictionally, a report was produced is *incompatible* with what is reported.[6]

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[6]"the fact that the stories can be told as known fact is a highly unusual feature." (Proudfoot 2006: 34)

Generalisation of (Weak)

- ► Counter-examples to (Strong):
    - ► This is "reporting the unreported" problem (Walton 2013: §4);
    - ► An *ad hoc* example is a story ending with "and no one was left to tell the tale" (Lewis 1978: 266); see also the discussion of "mindless fictions" (Voltolini 2021);
- ► And so (Everett 2013: 33):

    Understood in the second, weaker way, the report model holds that when we consume fiction we treat the text as if it were a source of factual information,   although   the text itself is not a denizen of my pretence . Rather we are to let the text guide our imaginings as we would let a real text guide our beliefs.

- ► How should this "guiding" work?

Primary and secondary pretence

▶ The answer is:
  ▶ *by deploying a double-structured pretence.*

▶ Here is (Walton 2013: 23)'s response to the "reporting the unreported" problem:

> *I think [one should] recognize a world, call it the "primary" story world, containing the events of the story but not the narrator (perhaps this is what is meant when a narrator is said not to be a character). It is fictional in this world that the events occur but not that the narrator reports them. Readers do imagine the narrator's reporting them (and probably expressing attitudes about them in doing so), but this imagining does not belong to the cluster associated with the primary story world. We can recognize a "secondary" story world, in which the narrator does report the events of the story.*

Focus on the secondary pretence

- ► In the secondary pretence,[7] one finds:
    - ► the narrator-tale-narratee structure, as well as their characteristics (language and modality of the report, etc.)
    - ► The way the story is told (especially its time structure, see (Vuillaume 1990))
    - ► the personality of the narrator and narratee (their age, sex, biases, etc.)[8]
- ► Interestingly, many "realist" 19th century novels make display overtly this secondary pretence.[9]
    - ► So this secondary fiction (i.e. the fiction *of the* narrative) is not an *ad hoc* solution to a philosophical problem...
    - ► ... it is a structural feature of linguistic fictions, which authors use as a literary device.

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[7]There are several names in the literature, including the influential "fictional periphery" put forward in (Predelli 2020). See also (Genette 1980)'s distinction between story and *fabula*.

[8]See for instance (Gilbert and Gubar 2000) for a feminist investigation of many secondary pretences of English 19th century novels.

[9]This is wonderfully investigated in (Vuillaume 1990: ch.3). See also (Pelletier 2003), though he refrains from distinguishing the two pretences in the context of his discussion of the ontology of fictional objects.

The narrator-narratee conversation I

(1) Comme le lecteur a pu le conjecturer, le vieillard à barbe grise remplissait auprès du jeune homme l'office de valet. (Féval, P., *Le Loup blanc*, 86)
As the reader has probably guessed, the grey bearded old man was occupying the position of the young man servant.

(2) Et il se rangea pour démasquer ce grand et noble jeune homme au front large que nos lecteurs se rappellent avoir vu à Marseille. (Dumas, A., *Le comte de Monte-Cristo*, 494)
He pulled on the side to discover this noble, tall, young man with a large forehead whom our readers remember having seen in Marseille.

(3) Maintenant, il faut que le lecteur franchisse avec nous la Seine, et nous suive jusqu'à la porte du couvent des Carmélites de la rue Saint-Jacques. (Dumas, A., *Vingt Ans Après*, 1064)
Now, the reader must cross the Seine river and follow us up to rue Saint-Jacques, at the the Carmelite convent's gate.

The narrator-narratee conversation II

(4) Voilà ce qu'il était nécessaire d'apprendre au lecteur avant de lui montrer M. Cagliostro causant d'affaire avec M. de Crones. Maintenant, nous pouvons l'introduire dans le cabinet du lieutenant de police. (Dumas, A., *Le Collier de la reine*, t.II, 393)
Here was all that the reader had to know before they can be shown the business conversation between M. Cagliostro and M. de Crones. Now, we can introduce them into the police officer's cabinet.

(5) Tandis que la porte de l'abbaye de Saint-Antoine s'ouvre pour le roi, et celle de la prison du Chatelet pour le chevalier de Bourbon, nous transporterons le lecteur au château qu'habite Isabel de Bavière. (Dumas, A., *Isabel de Bavière*, 81)
While Saint-Antoine Abbey's gate opens before the King, as well as Chatelet prison's gate before the Chevalier de Bourbon, the reader shall be transported to Isabel of Bavaria's castle.

(6) Usant du privilège du privilège du romancier, nous allons sauter, sans transition aucune, du sombre bouge que nous venons de décrire, dans une élégante maison du West-End. Cet écart, loin de nous éloigner de notre histoire, nous y ramène. La scène est bien différente, mais nous n'avons pas cherché le contraste. (Gautier, Th., *Partie Carrée*, 55)
Using the novelist's privilege, we will jump, without any transition, from the gloomy hovel we just described to an elegant West-End mansion. This distance, far from taking us away from our story, leads us back to it. The scene is very different, but the contrast was not looked for.

The narrator-narratee conversation III

(7) Tandis que Maurice Lindey, après s'être habillé précipitamment, se rend à la section de la rue Lepelletier, dont il est, comme on le sait, secrétaire, essayons de retracer aux yeux du public les antécédents de cet homme. (Dumas, A., *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge*, 42)
While Maurice Lindey, after having rushed to get dressed, goes to the section from rue Lepelletier, for which he is, as we know, the secretary, let us try to recount this man's antecedents to the public's eye.

(8) Et maintenant, laissons mademoiselle Danglars et son amie rouler sur la route de Bruxelles. (Dumas, A., *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*, 1185)
Now, let us leave Miss Danglars and her friend drive to Brussels.

(9) - Je n'ai pas dormi, s'écria-t-elle. C'était la jeune fille admirablement belle que nous avons vu entrer tout à l'heure chez M. de Gonzague. (Féval, P., *Le Bossu*, 121)
- I did not sleep, she said. It was the marvelous young girl whom we saw enter earlier on at M. de Gonzague's.

The narrator-narratee conversation IV

(10) Une sentinelle cachée dans les broussailles veillait à ce qu'aucun profane ne vînt troubler l'important conciliabule auquel, en notre qualité de romancier, c'est-à-dire de magicien à qui toutes les portes sont ouvertes, nous allons faire assister nos lecteurs. (Dumas, A., *Le Page du duc de Savoie*, t.I, 15)

There was a sentinel hidden behind the bushes, watching that no layman would make trouble for the important council which, as novelist, that is as a magician who can pass all kinds of doors, we will have our readers attend.

(11) Accrochons-nous à la corde de M. Jackal: elle est assez solide pour nous porter tous les deux, et même tous les trois, cher lecteur, – et tâchons de reconnaître la mystérieuse et funèbre localité où se passe la scène que nous avons à décrire. (Dumas, A., *Les Mohicans de Paris*, 250)

Hold on to M. Jackal's rope: it is solid enough for the two of us, even for the three of us, dear reader, – and let us now try to recognise the mysterious and bleak locality where the scene we have to describe takes place.

(12) As we have now brought Sophia into safe hands, the reader will, I apprehend, be contented to deposit her awhile, and to look a little after other personages, and particularly poor Jones, whom we have left long enough to do penance for his past offences, which, as is the nature of vice, brought sufficient punishment upon him themselves. (Fielding, H., *Tom Jones*, Book XI)

The narrator-narratee conversation V

(13) Leaving it [the coach] to pursue its journey at the pleasure of the conductor
      aforementioned [. . .] this narrative may embrace the opportunity of ascertaining the
      condition of Sir Mulberry Hawk, and to what extent he had, by this time, recovered
      from the injuries consequent on being flung violently from his cabriolet, under the
      circumstances already detailed. (Dickens, C., *Nicholas Nickleby*, ch.38)

(14) Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing signs of
      discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath. We may take advantage of this pause
      in the narrative to make certain statements. Orlando has become a woman – there is no
      denying it. (Woolf, V., *Orlando*, 138)

The secondary pretence

▶ The secondary pretence appears as populated with two ghost-like creatures witnessing the fictional events, the one talking to the other.
▶ So they are in contact with the fictional events (i.e. primary fiction), yet in a different metaphysical realm:
  ▶ no possible interaction;
  ▶ flow of information only.
▶ This generalises (Weak), which conspicuously displays a double-structured pretence.

Fictional events

Primary pretence

Secondary pretence

Reality

Narrator ← → Narratee

(Pretends to)
know about

Pretends to be /
Plays the role of

Factual report

Definitions:
- **Narrator** = report's producer
- **Narratee** = report's consumer

Writes   Fictional text   Reads

Author   Reader
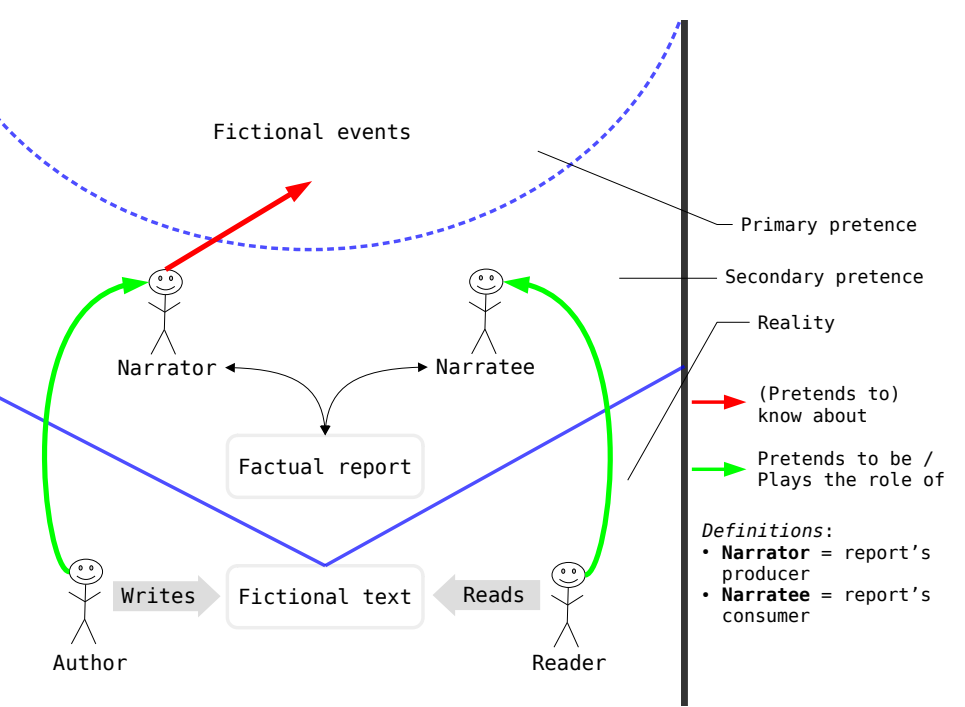
Caveat

▶ Though it is useful to introduce the secondary pretence with *heterodiegetic* narrative (Predelli 2020: 46):

Emma's teller not only never crosses Emma's path, but is in principle prevented from doing so, since, in some sense, that teller and that lady fictionally inhabit different domains.

▶ the double-structured pretence *generalises* (Predelli 2020: 47):

[T]he distinction between storyworlds and periphery emerges not only as a characteristic of heterodiegetic fiction, but, in the end, as a feature of fictional discourse tout court.

That boundary [btw 1ry and 2ry pretence], though inevitably in place, is also a porous frontier. Emma's fictional teller cannot fictionally kiss that handsome young lady or kick her father. Yet, fictionally, he can speak of them, and he can do so by means of using their names. (Predelli 2020: 53)

   ▶ *Reason*: the narratee, by definition, is always in the secondary pretence (as a ghostly presence from the 1ry fiction viewpoint).

Going further than usual

- ▶ We now have a new interpretation of the homo/hetero-diegetic distinction:
    - ▶ Homodiegetic = part of the primary pretence;
    - ▶ heterodiegetic = part of the secondary pretence.
- ▶ By definition, fictional characters are homodiegetic;
    - ▶ and the narratee is heterodiegetic.
- ▶ **Incidentally**: if we apply the distinction to the narratee, we get the distinction between *passive* and *interactive* fictions.
    - ▶ It seems that when the narratee is homodiegetic, then there is no need for a narrator or a report (though it is not impossible).
    - ▶ In this case, the narratee is an avatar.

4 types of narrative structure

- ▶ But the narrator and the report can be either.[10]
- ▶ When the report is homogiegetic (as in *Cat's Cradle* or *Lolita*), I will say that the narration is *strong*, and *weak* otherwise.
    1. Weak heterodiegetic narration:
        - ▶ both the narrator and the report are part of the secondary pretence.
    2. Strong homodiegetic narration:
        - ▶ both the narrator and the report are part of the primary pretence.
    3. Weak homodiegetic narration:
        - ▶ the narrator is part of the primary pretence, but not the report.
    4. Strong heterodiegetic narration:
        - ▶ the report is part of the primary pretence, but not the narrator.

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[10]It is not clear how we can separate the narrator from the report in some cases, though.

Fictional events

Narrator ← → Narratee

Factual report

Author → Writes → Fictional text ← Reads ← Reader

Primary pretence

Secondary pretence

Reality

→ (Pretends to) know about

→ Pretends to be / Plays the role of

Definitions:
- **Narrator** = report's producer
- **Narratee** = report's consumer

Fictional events

Primary pretence

Secondary pretence

Reality

Narrator

Narratee

Factual report

(Pretends to) know about

Pretends to be / Plays the role of

Definitions:
- **Narrator** = report's producer
- **Narratee** = report's consumer

Writes   Fictional text   Reads

Author

Reader

Fictional events

Primary pretence

Secondary pretence

Reality

Narrator ← → Narratee

Factual report

→ (Pretends to) know about

→ Pretends to be / Plays the role of

Definitions:
- **Narrator** = report's producer
- **Narratee** = report's consumer

Author → Writes → Fictional text ← Reads ← Reader

Spark 1955 *The Comforters*

A (partially) strong heterodiegetic narration

Plan

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Linguistic metafictions: a definition

- ▶ Fictions (i.e. double-structured pretence) is indeed "more subtle, more sophisticated, less overt" than children games of make-believe.
  - ▶ My proposal is original in that it takes weak heterodiegetic narration to be the norm, to be deviated from.
  - ▶ Some deviations being more stable than others.
- ▶ Metafictions will be those fictions which intentionally sabotage the double-structured pretence.
  - ▶ They *thus* are reflexive narrative structures.
  - ▶ And they *presuppose* the structure.
- ▶ **Remark**: I predict a gradual series of metafictions.[11]
  - ▶ The precarious narrative structure of which will be aesthetically appreciated.

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[11] Maybe we should restrict the term "metafiction" to some specific subset involving the crossing of the reality-fiction metaphysical boundary. "Reflexive fictions" are those which "acknowledge their own fictionality" as put in (Friend 2007: 12). In order to avoid over-generation, perhaps I should add: *within the primary fiction*.

Toying with the double-structured pretence

- ▶ One can first distort it gently. Here are some ideas:
    - ▶ More than one narratee:
        - ▶ Children literature often displays an adult and child narratee, with ironical effects.
    - ▶ Dispensing with the narrator:
        - ▶ Epistolary novels, fictional diaries, ...
        - ▶ The possibility of unproduced reports (i.e. narrator-less fictions) is very much discussed in literary theory: see for instance (Birke and Köppe 2015).[12]
    - ▶ Dispensing with the report (or rather making it difficult for the narrator to produce one)
        - ▶ Blatantly impossible fictions
        - ▶ See Woolf's *Jacob's room* for a narrator not convinced that factual report *is* possible.[13]

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[12]Maybe "auto-fictions" are those for which the 2ry fiction contains a report produced *by the author* (as opposed to the narrator).

[13]The narrator presents itself as homodiegetic, but trespasses its prerogatives as if they had relapses of omniscience. There is a suspicious motto running through the novel: "It's no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not entirely what is said, nor yet entirely what is done."

Malfunctioning secondary fictions

The Slithergadee has crawled out of the sea
He may catch all the others, but he won't catch me
No you won't catch me, old Slithergadee
You may catch all the others, but you wo–
(Shel Silverstein "The Slithery-Dee")

If you had a giraffe and he stretched another half,
you would have a giraffe and a half
...
(Shel Silverstein *A Giraffe and a Half*)
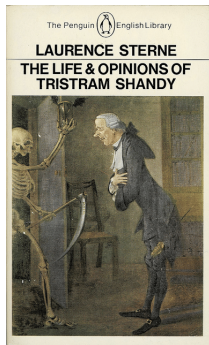
Laurence Sterne
1759

Italo Calvino 1979

A metafictional encounter

▶ In several places of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera identifies his characters with a *situation* (II, 1):

It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived. They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation. Tomas was born of the saying Einmal ist keinmal. Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach.

▶ This grounds the following encounter between the author and the character, which develops into theory (V, 15):

And once more I see him the way he appeared to me at the very beginning of the novel: standing at the window and staring across the courtyard at the walls opposite.

This is the image from which he was born. As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about. But isn't it true that an author can write only about himself? [...] The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. [...] The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become. But enough. Let us return to Tomas.

Metafictional encounters
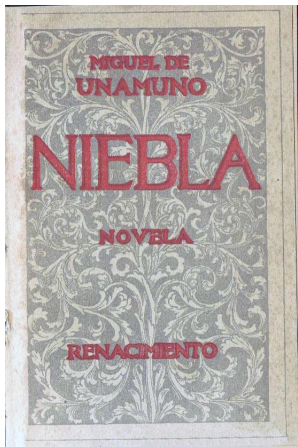
Miguel de Unamuno 1915   John Fowles 1969   Salvador Plascencia 2005
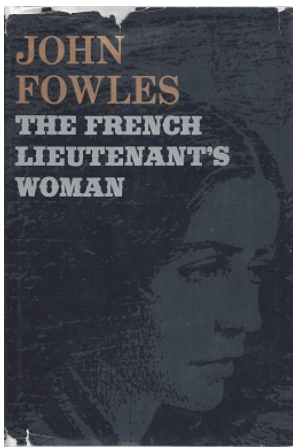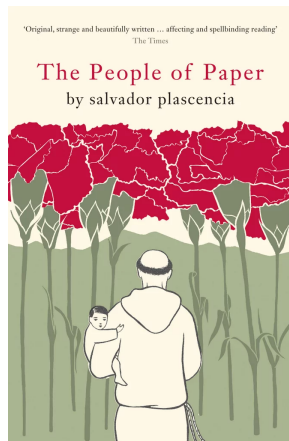
Metafictional encounters as extended pretence

- When such encounters happen, there is a great instability of the narrative because it is impossible to determine whether it is fictional or not.[14]
  - The fictional character makes it a fictional encounter.
  - Reference to the real author (writing the real book) makes it non-fictional.
- One way of resolving the tension consists in fictionalising the author:
  - The fiction takes over;
  - the metafiction becomes a fiction about fictionalising (i.e. creator-creature relationships);
  - which is an extension of the original double-pretence structure.
- *Again*: the predicted narrative instability is a literary effect which *presupposes* the narrative structure I argued for.
  - The double-pretence structure being very complex, it can yield different unstable combinations.
  - Bringing the author into the primary fiction is probably the most unstable structure, hence a clear-cut case of linguistic metafiction.

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[14]Again, this instability is intentional, and usually has a literary point.

On the naturalness of metafictions

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The French Lieutenant Woman (ch.55) I

Now could I use you?
Now what could I do with you?

It is precisely, it has always seemed to me, the look of an omnipotent god – if there were such an absurd thing – should be shown to have. Not at all what we think of as a divine look; but one of distinctly mean and dubious (as the theoreticians of the *nouveau roman* have pointed out) moral quality. I see this with particular clarity on the face, only too familiar to me, of the bearded man who stares at Charles. And I will keep up the pretence no longer .

Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles, is not quite the same as the two above. But rather, what the devil am I to do with you? I have already thought of ending Charles's career here and now; of leaving him for eternity on his way to London. But the conventions of Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending; and I preached earlier of the freedom characters must be given. My problem is simple – what Charles want

The French Lieutenant Woman (ch.55) II

is clear? It is indeed. But what the protagonist wants is not so clear; and I am not at all sure where she is at the moment. Of course, if these two were two fragments of real life, instead of two figments of my imagination, the issue to the dilemma is obvious: the one want combats the other want, and fails or succeeds, as the actuality may be. Fiction usually pretends to conform to the reality: the writer puts the conflicting wants in the ring and then describes the fight – but in fact fixes the fights (in other words, in persuading us that they were not fixed) and by the kind of fighter they fix in favour of: the good one, the tragic one, the evil one, the funny one, and so on.

But the chief argument for fight-fixing is to show one's readers what one thinks of the world around one – whether one is a pessimist, an optimist, what you will. I have pretended to slip back into 1867; but of course that year is in reality a century past. It is futile to show optimism or pessimism, or anything else about it, because we know what has happened since.

The French Lieutenant Woman (ch.55) III

So I continue to stare at Charles and see no reason this time for fixing the fight upon which he is about to engage. That leaves me with two alternatives. I let the fight proceed and take no more that a recording part in it; or I take both sides in it. I stare at the vaguely effete but not completely futile face. And as we near London, I think I see a solution; that is, I see the dilemma is false. The only way I can take no part in the fight is to show to versions of it. That leaves me with only one problem: I cannot give booth versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the "real" version.

I take my purse from the pocket of my frock-coat, I extract a florin, I rest it on my right thumbnail, I flick it, spinning, two feet into the air and catch it in my left hand.