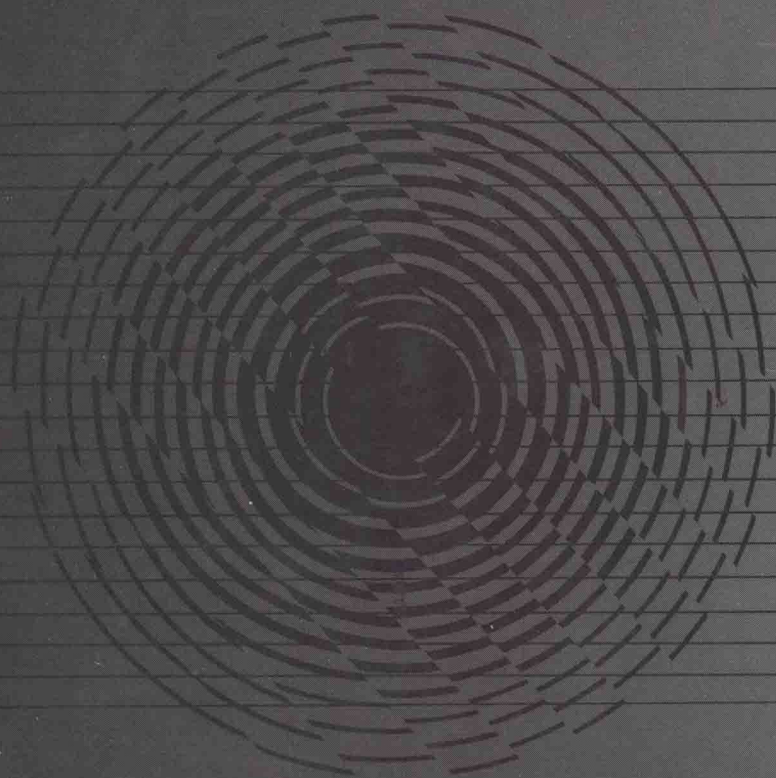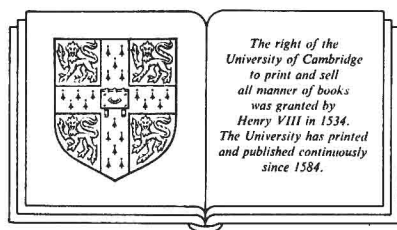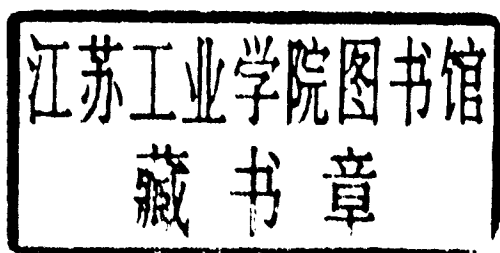# THE
NATURE OF
FICTION

GREGORY CURRIE

The nature of fiction

GREGORY CURRIE

UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO

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Preface

There are fictions that contribute to the enterprise of philosophy. And there are intellectual traditions for which fiction is a natural means to the expression of philosophical ideas. But the tradition in which I feel most at home is not one of them, and I leave it to others to explore the ways in which fiction does or could contribute to a philosophical explanation of the world. Instead I shall treat fiction itself as something that needs explaining. This is a book written in the belief that there are certain very general questions about the nature of fiction, the answers to which can be discovered more or less a priori by appeal to the methods of philosophy rather than to those of the critic or literary historian. How we come to have the kind of fiction we do have is one question; how it is possible for us to have any fiction at all is another, and that is the question I want to ask. It is a question that resolves into several others: What, if any, are the characteristics that distinguish a work of fiction from a work of nonfiction? What sorts of entities must the world contain in order for there to be fiction? What psychological and linguistic resources must we bring to the world in order to be producers and consumers of fiction?

I said that the method I favor is more or less a priori. But it is tempered by the knowledge that we must not abandon our common, everyday perception of what sort of thing fiction is, or we shall be in danger of constructing an elaborate theory that relates only marginally to the phenomenon it seeks to explain. Throughout the book examples of fictional works of various kinds will appear, sometimes as test cases

against which we can judge the explanatory power of a hypothesis, sometimes merely to relieve the sense of abstractness generated by extended philosophical arguments. But there is something that we must bear in mind in choosing our examples and our arguments: Fiction is a category that includes the bad and the mediocre as well as the good. If literature rather than fiction were our subject things would be different, for we cannot separate the enterprise of explaining literature from an understanding of good literature. To say of something that it is literature is, except in certain special circumstances, to ascribe to it a certain kind of value. Not so with fiction; I learn nothing about the merit of what I'm reading when I learn that it is fiction. Good fiction is no better a guide to the nature of fiction than the characters of saints are a guide to human nature.

Distinctions of form will be no more relevant here than distinctions of quality. *The Canterbury Tales*, *Purple for a Shroud*, *The Man from Ironbark*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Garden of Forking Paths* are all fictional works in my sense. The theory embodies no preference for the printed or even the written word; an impromptu story for the children, told and forgotten, will count as fiction in my sense. It applies also to those kinds of fiction that appear in media of visual presentation, plays and movies being the obvious examples. I shall argue that paintings, sculptures, and even photographs can be works of fiction. Any medium that enables us to represent, enables us to make fiction.

I have not in general tried to give self-contained explanations of philosophical ideas that I borrow from other areas and other writers: possible worlds, counterfactuals, proper names and definite descriptions, conventions. A comprehensive account of these things would have doubled the length of the book and been a poor substitute for the exemplary clarity of Kripke, Lewis, Stalnaker, and others. So I've made do with brief explanations and references to the relevant literature. The exception is Grice's theory of meaning, dealt with in Chapter 1. Because it is central to my account of fiction and because I need to emphasize certain features of the theory at

the expense of others, I have chosen to give it a fuller exposition. Partly for this reason, and partly because I have tried to be explicit about the fundamental assumptions I make, Chapter 1 moves rather more slowly than the rest of the book. Readers familiar with the sort of material that would be contained in an elementary course in the philosophy of language will be able to move very quickly up to Section 1.8. Thereafter the exposition gets a little denser, but anyone at or above the level of advanced undergraduate work in philosophy should be able to follow the arguments. Agreeing with them might be more difficult.

The philosophy of fiction lies at the intersection of aesthetics, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of mind. The problems I have chosen to deal with, and the manner in which I deal with them, make this book rather heavily weighted in the direction of the last two of these disciplines. Some of the issues that arise when we think of fictional works as works of art – issues concerning, for example, the nature of appreciation, the differences between literary, visual, and musical works – I have explored in *An Ontology of Art* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

I have a number of people to thank for their criticisms and suggestions concerning various parts of this book. Among them are Ismay Barwell, Frank Jackson, Don Mannison, Alan Musgrave, Graham Oddie, Roy Perrett, Graham Priest, Barry Taylor, Pavel Tichý, and Aubrey Townsend. Special thanks are due to David Lewis. The comments of two readers for the Press were most helpful. Penelope Griffin's careful reading has helped to improve the clarity of this book. The errors and unclarities that remain are my own responsibility.

While this book was being written I knew of Kendall Walton's work on fiction and make-believe only through his articles, published mostly in the 1970s. Later, with the book already at the Press, I was fortunate enough to obtain a copy, in typescript, of his *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, to be published by Harvard

University Press. I was then able to make some emendations to those parts of the text where I discuss his views. I thank Kendall Walton for allowing me to see his book, and I heartily recommend it to the reader.

It will be apparent that I have been greatly influenced, through his writings, by the late Paul Grice.

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Chapter 1

The concept of fiction

There can hardly be a more important question about a piece of writing or speech than this: Is it fiction or nonfiction? If the question seems not especially important, that's because we rarely need to ask it. Most often we know, in advance of reading or hearing, that the discourse before us is one or the other. But imagine we did not know whether *The Origin of Species* is sober science or Borgesian fantasy on a grand scale. We would not know whether, or in what proportions, to be instructed or delighted by it. No coherent reading of it would be possible.

What makes a piece of writing or speech fictional? Despite the apparent ease with which we judge that this is fictional and that is not, and despite the significance that judgments of this kind have for our subsequent experience of the work, most of us are in no good position to answer the question. Fiction is one of those concepts like goodness, color, number, and cause that we have little difficulty in applying but great difficulty in explaining. Conceivably, no general account of what fiction is can be given. Fiction might be so basic a concept that any attempt to explain it will be circular, or the concept might dissolve on closer inspection into a variety of sub-cases with no more in common than the name. Neither possibility can be ruled out a priori. But the best answer to those who think either one a plausible option is simply to *give* a general account of what fiction is in terms that do not presuppose an understanding of fiction itself. That is what I shall do in this chapter.

What can we expect from a general theory of fiction? Such

1. The concept of fiction

a theory ought to tell us what it is about a work (written, spoken, or in some other medium) that makes it fiction rather than nonfiction. If the theory is adequate it will sort items of the relevant kinds into the fictional and the nonfictional in a way that seems intuitively correct, perhaps after the theory itself has had a chance to shift and to sharpen our intuitions a bit. If it is a really good explanation it will help us to answer other questions about fiction as well; it will help us, for example, to understand the kinds of effects fiction typically has on those who read it. The theory I shall offer is, I believe, a theory of this kind.

1.1. FICTION AND LANGUAGE

Let us begin with the drastically simplifying assumption that all fiction employs the medium of language. It's natural to think that we can discover whether the work before us is fiction simply by reading it. In that case, we might say, its being fiction (or not, as the case may be) is determined by the work's verbal structure; reading a work is, after all, a matter of reading the words and sentences that go to make it up. If we find out whether the work is fictional by reading it, that must be because there is some quality of its words and sentences – perhaps a quality of its sentences taken as a whole – that makes it fiction. But here we confuse constitutive and evidential issues. It is true that facts about style, narrative form, and plot structure may count as evidence that the work is fiction, but these are not the things that make it so. It is possible for two works to be alike in verbal structures – right down to the details of spelling and word order – yet for one to be fiction and the other not. A diarist and a novelist might produce texts identical in their words and sentences.

Characteristic of literary theory in this century has been the view that the text is, in Northrop Frye's words, "an autonomous verbal structure."[1] Older schools of criticism, with their emphasis on affect, history, and biography, have been castigated as impressionistic and unsystematic. There's truth

[1] *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 122.

in the accusation, and the benefits of close reading can hardly be denied. But a purely textual inquiry, whether it employs the methods of Formalism, the New Criticism, Structuralism, or Frye's own archetypal analysis, must leave important questions unanswered, and one of them is the question that interests us here.[2] There simply is no linguistic feature necessarily shared by all fictional works and necessarily absent from all nonfictional works.[3]

It has been claimed that all fictional works belong to one or another of a limited number of narrative kinds or genres. Perhaps an exhaustive enumeration of these kinds will amount to a definition of fiction.[4] But the question is not whether fictions are all of these kinds and no others, it is whether they *must* be. A definition by cases must always be accompanied by a proof that the enumeration of cases is complete. To my knowledge, no such proof has ever been attempted for the case of fiction, and on the rare occasions when something like one can be reconstructed the premises look suspiciously parochial; they can't sustain the generality necessary to cover not merely the fiction we actually have but the fiction we or any rational beings might have. Frye's postulation of mental archetypes based on the distinctions between seasons would be an implausible framework for fiction-producing inhabitants of Mercury – or for us if we all lived in equatorial regions.[5] In the absence of a convincing argu-

2 For a useful introduction to these and other modern schools of criticism, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983). For the work of the Russian Formalists, see L. T. Lemon and M. J. Reis (eds.), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965). On Structuralism, see Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975). For an influential employment of the methods of New Criticism, see Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1949). Frye's most important theoretical work is *Anatomy of Criticism*.

3 Significantly, all these schools have taken literature as their subject; they say little about the concept of fiction itself.

4 Here I simply grant that genre membership can be regarded as a feature determined by the linguistic structure of a work. My own view is that it cannot; genre membership depends upon a variety of extrinsic features including the historical relation of the work to other works and the intentions of its author. For further remarks on genre, see Section 3.4.

5 See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* Third Essay. For a critical view of genre based methodology, see John Reichert, "More Than Kin and Less Than Kind," in Joseph

ment to the contrary we ought to say that membership in one or another of a given range of genres is neither a necessary and a sufficient, nor even a necessary, condition for being fictional. And the presence of a preferred set of structural-generic features in a work cannot be a sufficient condition for its being fictional. A historical narrative does not become fictional by being given the structure of a tragedy.

1.2. SEMANTIC PROPERTIES

If fictionality does not reside in the text itself, it must be a relational property: something possessed in virtue of the text's relations to other things. Among a text's relational properties will be its semantic properties, such as reference and truth. A text will be true or false (or partly true and partly false) insofar as the sentences that compose it are true or false (have truth values). It will make reference to real people and places insofar as it contains terms like "London" and "Napoleon" that so refer. Truth value and reference are characteristics determined by the text's relations to the world. Sentences are true and words refer because there are things they are true of and refer to. Perhaps fictionality, while not a purely linguistic matter, is a semantic matter.

Philosophers and critics have sometimes argued that fictional works do not possess semantic features, that they are neither true nor false, and make no reference to anything outside the text. These claims are sometimes the product of a general skepticism about semantics according to which no text ever succeeds in making extralinguistic reference. This strikes me as one of the great absurdities of the contemporary cultural scene, but we need not make this the occasion for an assault upon it.[6] After all, even if the theory were correct, it

Strelka (ed.), *Theories of Literary Genre, Yearbook of Comparative Criticism*, vol. 8 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

6 This doctrine derives ultimately from Saussure's doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign (*Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966; first published in French in 1916]). It is prominent in, for example, Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen,

would leave us where we began: without a means of distinguishing between fiction and nonfiction.

Somewhat less extreme, and certainly more relevant to our present concern, is the view that it is only fictional works which are characterized by their lack of semantic connections with the world. But this position, while not manifestly absurd, is hardly plausible. Surely the reader of the Sherlock Holmes stories is supposed to understand that "London," as it occurs in the stories, refers to London. Someone who did not have the slightest idea what city London was, or who thought that the location of the story was as fictional as any of the characters in it, would not properly understand the story. The Holmes stories are about (among other things) London, not "the London of the Holmes stories," if that's supposed to be something other than London itself. Certainly, Doyle says things about London that are not true of London; he says, for instance, that a detective called "Sherlock Holmes" once lived there. But this shows merely that what Doyle said was false.

In speaking falsely, Doyle was not lying, because he was not making an assertion; a lie is an assertion made in the knowledge that what is asserted is untrue. It is sometimes said that where no assertion is made, as the author of fiction makes no assertion, there is nothing said that could be either true or false.[7] But in one perfectly good sense, the author of

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1977). For critical comments on the treatment of language as "a self defining system," see John Holloway, "Language, Realism, Subjectivity, Objectivity," in L. Lerner (ed.), *Reconstructing Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), as well as the essays by Cedric Watts and Roger Scruton in the same volume. See also the defense of fiction's mimetic function in Robert Alter, "Mimesis and the Motive for Fiction," in *Motives for Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984). Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny's *Language and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987) contains a useful chapter on Structuralism that highlights, and criticizes, the Structuralist's rejection of reference.

7 See, for example, Margaret Macdonald, "The Language of Fiction," in C. Barrett (ed.), *Collected Papers on Aesthetics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965); J. O. Urmson, "Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (1976), pp. 153–7; and David Novitz, "Fiction, Imagination, and Emotion," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38 (1979–80); 279–88, 284. (Of course, assertions do often occur *in* fictional works. See Section 1.10.)

fiction does say something: he utters a meaningful sentence, a sentence with a certain *content*. Imagine that Doyle had written "It rained in London on the night of January 1, 1895." In that case Doyle would have written a sentence the content of which is that it rained in London on the night of January 1, 1895. And this content is straightforwardly either true or false, depending on the historical facts about the weather. For Doyle not to have said anything in this sense he would have to have written something with no content – something that isn't meaningful – and that is not what writers of fiction usually do. Competent language users have, after all, no trouble in understanding what is written in fiction: no more, at least, than they do when they read history.

Here it's useful to distinguish between meaning and force. We can identify what is said in terms of meaning alone (as I did while discussing Doyle's utterance), or in terms of force together with meaning. When we identify what is said in terms of meaning alone we identify the content, or the proposition expressed. When we add considerations of force we identify what is said as a certain act of saying, as with the act of asserting or requesting. But identification at the level of force is not relevant to the question of whether the utterance has a truth value. The truth value of a sentence is determined by its referential relations to the world: "Fred is tall" is true just in case the reference of "Fred" is in the extension of the predicate "is tall." And referential relations are, in their turn, determined by the meanings of expressions and facts about the world: the extension of "is tall" depends upon what "is tall" means and upon who happens to be tall. There is no room here for considerations about force to intrude in the determination of truth value. The claim that sentences in fiction have no truth value is based on a confusion of meaning with force.

Another way to put the distinction between meaning and force is this. Force can vary where meaning does not. If Doyle had been writing history instead of fiction when he wrote "It rained in London on January 1, 1895," he would have been making an assertion. The transition from history to fiction is

marked, at least, by the loss of one kind of force: assertative force. (Whether it is also marked by the gaining of another kind of force is a question we shall consider presently.) But the transition is not marked by any change of meaning. In the sense relevant to the determination of truth value, Doyle would have said something in writing that sentence, regardless of whether he was asserting it or not. And what he said would be the same in either case.

I rely here on the assumption that words as they occur in fiction may have the same meanings they have in nonfiction.[8] For sentence-meaning is a function of word-meaning; if words mean different things in fiction and in nonfiction, then a given sentence could mean one thing in fiction and another thing in nonfiction. But it is very implausible to suppose that words mean different things in fiction and in nonfiction. In reading a fictional story we bring to the work our ordinary understanding of language. We don't learn special meanings for words as they occur in fiction.

Notice that in the examples of sentences that might occur in fictions I have avoided using what we might call "fictional names": expressions like "Othello" and "Sherlock Holmes" – though in the sentence "Someone called 'Sherlock Holmes' lived in London" one of these expressions is mentioned. The use of fictional names in works of fiction raises problems I don't want to consider here. In Chapter 4, where I discuss the semantics of fictional names, I argue that sentences containing fictional names do have truth values. Just at present I'm concerned to deny the claim that it is because sentences in fictions are not asserted that they have no truth values. The sentences I have considered are counterexamples to that claim; they are sentences, true or false, that the author of fiction may produce without asserting them.

I said just now that the claim that sentences in fiction have no truth value is based on a confusion of meaning with force. The notion of force will turn out to be of the utmost impor-

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8 "May" rather than "must" because, as we shall see, there are problems about the nonliteral usage of words. But this does not affect the present issue.

tance for us in distinguishing fiction from nonfiction, and I shall soon return to it.

Sometimes it is not sufficient merely to argue that a view is incorrect. Sometimes one needs, in addition, to undermine the motivation that makes the view attractive. The view that statements in fiction have no truth value might be grounded in the thought that if they did, many of them would have to be counted as false. And to admit that the story according to which ghosts exist says something false seems to clash with our perception that it is true *in the story* that there are ghosts. But as I shall argue in Chapter 2, sentences can be "true in the story" and false *simpliciter*. Even with this granted, the worry is not at an end: If fictional statements are false, we ought to disbelieve them – and this would interfere with our appreciation of the story. But this objection seems plausible only so long as we fail to distinguish two different ways in which we may disbelieve a proposition. We may actively, occurrently, disbelieve a proposition; we may have the falsity of that proposition vividly before our minds. Usually we do not disbelieve the propositions of a fiction in this sense, at least while we are attending to the story. But there are many things we disbelieve at a given time without occurrently disbelieving them. I disbelieve that the moon is made of cheese; I am permanently disposed to deny it if the question comes up. In this sense we disbelieve in ghosts in general, in the ghost of Hamlet's father, in Hamlet himself. If someone somehow took *Hamlet* for a reliable historical narrative, we would tell him straight off that the play's eponymous hero does not and never did exist. We dispositionally, rather than occurrently, disbelieve the propositions of a fiction. As readers and theatergoers we do not have the falsity of the story vividly before our minds. If we did we should probably not be able to engage with the story as we desire to do.[9]

I conclude, then, that fictional texts, like texts of other

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9 A point I shall make more of in Section 4.3. "The willing suspension of disbelief" is best understood as an operation of the mind whereby we suppress our *occurrent* disbelief in the story.

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