

ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: LIT2012-0289

Athens Institute for Education and Research

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ATINER's Conference Paper Series

LIT2012-0289

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Pragmatics of Fictional
Communication**

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URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN 2241-2891

15/11/2012

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Wood, T. (2012) **“Towards A Hermeneutic Pragmatics of Fictional Communication”** Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: LIT2012-0289.

Towards A Hermeneutic Pragmatics of Fictional Communication

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with fictional communication as the act of an author in relation to a reader. It is argued that fictional discourse exhibits certain complexities that are not observable in other forms of discourse. For example, the author's act is mediated for the reader by a set of persons called characters. This fact generates certain relations, at a minimum the triad of author-reader, author-character, and reader-character. In pragmatics, where we are concerned with the nature of the performed *act*, we require a notion of authorial *agency*. It may be, however, that for pragmatics to be adequate to the task of explaining fiction, certain new developments in the field will become necessary. Established approaches in pragmatics, such as speech act theory, are not in themselves adequate for the full range of relations that can be identified. For one thing there is the fact that authorship is not only conventional – it is that – but it is also unique and individual, as authors such as M. M. Bakhtin have shown.

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Introduction: Fiction as a test case for pragmatics

Regarding the question of authorship, there seems to be a gap between literary studies, on the one hand, in which discussions of authorship have been strongly discouraged (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1980), and pragmatics on the other hand, where literature has not always been taken seriously.¹ To reverse this and to take literature seriously as an *act*, or series of acts, is to pose precisely the question of authorship. How does one characterize authorship from a pragmatically informed perspective?

In literary studies a number of constructs have been proposed that are frequently treated as if they were more real than the author, particularly ‘narrator’ and ‘implied author’. But authorship is partly an empirical question and cannot simply be banished by theory. Authorship can be ‘bracketed’ certainly in a phenomenological approach to a fictional text, but, it will be argued, this reading strategy is only one among others and there is little of pragmatics in such a strategy and a dimension of the literary experience is thereby omitted.

For one thing it leaves out the question of how the worlds of fictional characters, as simulated persons, relate to the real worlds of authors and readers. Consideration of characters leads to a concern with the world they inhabit and its relationship to the actual world that *we* inhabit. Often it seems that pragmatic analyses in fiction are confined to the fictional world itself, for example the simulated speech acts that characters perform in relation to one another. But this cannot amount to more than one level of analysis, no matter how intriguing the fictional world thus described may be, no matter the depth of the ethical dilemmas posed by these characters’ actions, etc. A host of questions remain even after the most detailed of such analyses of the fictional world: ‘What is the author’s purpose in creating such a fictional world?’ ‘Why are readers interested in such worlds and what makes them actively engage with the many pages of a novel?’ ‘What sorts of positings of the other are involved in the act of communication, for example author’s positing of reader, reader’s positing of author?’ ‘How much of convention is there in a work of fiction (in the way that a speech act is conventional), and how much of a fictional text is a once-only non-recurrent event of communication?’

Searle ends his (1975) article with the following claim: ‘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.’ (1975: 332) This is at least a statement of the problem, to which I doubt whether Searle has himself supplied much of an answer. There is in his formulation still too much suggestion that ‘seriousness’ in fiction is to be equated with the performance of specifically illocutionary acts. In what follows I will present a theoretical framework that has been developed

¹ See, for example, Austin’s statements (1975: 104).

as an alternative to mainstream pragmatics and to speech act theory in particular.

The hermeneutic square

Unlike the structuralist semiotic square of Greimas and his associates (Greimas & Courtés 1989), the hermeneutic square that I present below is not made up of oppositions. Rather it is a model of four aspects of cognition that are jointly involved in any act of verbal communication, and therefore also in fictional communication. Along the horizontal rows are represented the two aspects of ‘convention’ and ‘autopoiesis’, characterizing, respectively, the social and the singular. The vertical columns of ‘memory’ and ‘performance’ separate the passive and active aspects respectively. The matrix structure of the model then yields four quadrants showing the elements that are regarded as essentially operative in all instances of verbal communication, including literature. They can be labeled as signification, genre, knowledge and agency respectively, although some further explanatory terms are included in the model below.

Table 1 appears here

It has been observed how certain schools in language and communication have retained a strongly rules-based and normative approach to pragmatic questions. I try to show instead that the radically normative approach is incompatible with the nature of agency. The conventional aspects of performativity cannot be denied, but the things that we do with words are things that we do because we have the will to do them, sometimes regardless of prevailing norms, rules or conventions. In fact we also use language to change norms, not only by violating them, but also by questioning them. It is not the case that in all places and times people have married one another, baptised their children, delivered verdicts or given batsmen out. Nor have they always and everywhere made promises, issued orders, or had to trouble themselves about Grice’s (1975) maxims concerning perspicuity or having sufficient evidence for what they were saying. And even if they had, there is no reason to assume that any list of such functions could exhaust the possibilities of human communication:

A text, and most of all a literary text, is always redefining the codes that allow us to understand it, escaping automatism and convention, and therefore redefining the play of illocution and perlocution. Each phase of the sender’s utterance has a corresponding activity in the reader if communication or understanding is to take place. The author’s speech must be complemented by the reader’s interpretive act. (Garcia Landa, 1992: 99)

These are some of the considerations that underlie the hermeneutic square, especially the distinction between convention and autopoiesis. This is a distinction between the modes of communicating that are given to the individual by society on the one hand, and the modes of responsiveness and self-activity of agents on the other. So each agent is given a language (quad. 1a), but each agent uses it to express differing ideas and information (quad. 2a). Similarly, each agent is given a set of norms and conventions of communication by society (quad. 1b), but each agent communicates according to own intentions, purposes and motivations (quad. 2b). Now it is precisely 2b that concerns me most in this context and it is particularly the matters connected with 2b that find little place in pragmatic theories. In speech act theory, for example, such matters tend to arise only perfunctorily in occasional mention of the ‘perlocutionary effects’ of communication. But I am particularly concerned with how these effects may in fact motivate the act in the first place, as *telos* in relation to underlying intentions or purposes, (or, conversely, be unintended and unforeseen), or how such effects may cue the responsiveness of the interlocutor, in short how they are inherent to the purposive acts of communicating agents in their relations with one another.

Let us try to illustrate these various hermeneutic dimensions with particular reference to fiction and its authorship and readership.

Authorship

The ‘intention of the author’ is obviously a part of the pragmatics of fiction, despite some bad press in literary studies; but equally important is authorial *motivation*, relating to cognition, feeling, experience, literary influence, etc., many of which aspects cannot be brought under the head of conscious intention, but which are nevertheless assumed to be real foundations of the creative act. The mediation between author’s and readers concerns is then the point of interest, especially the role of characters in bringing about this mediation. There are two obvious questions that occur here: (a) why do readers want to engage with fictional worlds and (b) why do authors wish to create them? No doubt a part of the answer to both questions is concerned with enjoyment, the nature of which then needs to be explained. Can the pure contemplation of ‘possible worlds’ itself be the entire source of interest and enjoyment? Walsh (2003: 114) has addressed this question:

From a literary critical perspective fictional worlds theories need to do more than address philosophical and linguistic concerns about reference: they must also offer an alternative account of the rhetorical use of fiction. Readers cannot be content merely to construct fictional worlds, as if this in itself were endlessly satisfying; they must also be concerned to evaluate them, to bring them into relation with the larger context of their own experience and understanding.

So we need to avoid the problem of a ‘possible world’ that is to be thought of as quite dissociated from the ‘real world’. There could not be a fictional world that is not dependent on real-world experience for its construction, and therefore the idea of separating two worlds for purposes of comparison risks misconceiving the nature of both. For one thing it might obscure the rhetorical purposes (as well as some of the contents) that fictional and non-fictional genres sometimes have in common.

There can be no doubt that a significant part of what a novel does, or rather what its author can be seen to be doing through the novelistic text, is to persuade a reader to a certain view of the *actual* world, that is, once he or she has been lured into the fictional world. No doubt there are prodigious ethical implications of this and the skillful author exerts a measure of power. What then is the power of the fictional ‘lure’?

It is observable that authors – let us take George Orwell and John Fowles as examples – frequently pursue the same ideological purposes in their novels (fictional world) as they do in their interviews and essays (actual world). Therefore the rhetorical purposes that literature may play in the actual world should not be obscured by an over-emphasis on the purely imaginative dimension. Let us consider the possibility of an oblique reference to the actual world via the fictional world, and also the possibility that such reference is intended to have consequences for readers.

The author *simulates* in the reader’s mind a knowledge of reality – this is at an immediate level – but, apart from more or less pleasing illusions of esoteric knowledge, such as the simulated activity of mind reading, what is on offer to a reader, at a more reflective level, is the subjective relationship of the author to his/her own creations. There are thus two essential levels of reading involved: (a) a ‘luring-in’ of the reader, based on the reader’s wish to *mind-read* (Zunshine, 2003) and to penetrate secret worlds, and (b) a view of the actual world, partaking of the author’s own subjective nature, that the latter wishes us somehow to share.

Similarly with the reader: the reader is driven through his or her own wish to insert him/herself into novelistic worlds as spectator and to attain there a kind of *faux* omniscience, to be able to mind-read, to perceive what is happening simultaneously in different places, and other similarly impossible abilities. But for the more reflective reader, or critic, what is at stake beyond this must be his or her recognition of the subjectivity of the author, an envisioning of the author’s relationship to his or her own self. Let us consider this from Orwell:

When one reads any strongly individual piece of writing, one has the impression of seeing a face somewhere behind the page. It is not necessarily the actual face of the writer. I feel this very strongly with Swift, with Defoe, with Fielding, Stendhal, Thackeray, Flaubert, though in several cases I do not know what these people looked like and do not want to know. What one sees is the face that the writer *ought* to have.
(Orwell, 1940: no pagination)

Bakhtin expresses something similar when he says: ‘The author’s reaction to what he depicts always enters into the image. The author’s relationship is a constitutive aspect of the image.’ (Bakhtin, 1986: 115). From the image in the text the reader constructs an image of the author, based no doubt on the author’s relationship to his or her characters, the way they are described, the actions they are seen to perform, and above all the *evaluations* that the author offers through these accounts, evaluations that the reader is invited to share, or at least to consider sharing. When Orwell says the following, ‘every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism, as I understand it’ (Orwell, 1946: no pagination), he is undoubtedly imagining the way that his own image of himself is somehow reflected in the way his characters and their situations are evaluated.

Whether one is considering Flaubert’s famous identification with his character Emma Bovary or Fowles’s statement that ‘You are every character you write’, one needs to accept that in such statements there is an authorial self-relationship involved. For the moment let us consider that such self-relationships derive from one’s experience of milieu that one has inhabited, or wished to inhabit, or perhaps wished that one had never inhabited. To illustrate, an interviewer of John Fowles remarks:

Fowles's greatest bugbear is his background, his parents. Both were irredeemably suburban, a trait which he loathes. Fowles's leading characters are invariably womanisers, middle-class, caddishly intelligent and orphans. From Nicholas Urfe to Daniel Martin to Charles Smithson, he never hesitates to kill off the parents. Fowles sees himself as a one-off genetic fluke. (Lee-Potter, 2003: no pagination)

He then goes on to quote Fowles:

No one in my family had any literary interests or skills at all. I seemed to come from nowhere. I didn't really have a happy childhood. What bored me about my mother was her lack of taste. My father's great fault was that he hated France from his experiences in the war, at Ypres. And he liked Germany. We had a geographical falling out. I deviated at the wrong branch of European culture ... (Lee-Potter, 2003: no pagination)

The lack of interest in authors and their self-relatedness that is characteristic of literary theory today means that one misses out on what may be quite crucial in the relationship between the author and his or her characters. Why should we not consider that Fowles’s deep and vehement disidentification with the milieu in which he was raised has not been a determining force in his fictional characterizations, when he himself presents such abundant evidence that it has?¹ Such a lack of interest seems to me to disallow one of the most intriguing

¹ Expressed frequently throughout his *Journals* (2004).

of all questions relating to fiction: the possibility that character reflects not some objective unmediated reality, as naïve realism assumes, but rather a form of externalization of the author's relation to his/her own self.

In some cases the attitudes and perspectives of characters are those of the author in the special sense in which he or she is able to adopt them as momentary personae, in the way that one might try on clothes in order to imagine what it is like to be the person who wears such clothes. As Orwell says of Shakespeare, '... the very fact that Shakespeare had to use these subterfuges shows how widely his thoughts ranged. He could not restrain himself from commenting on almost everything, although *he put on a series of masks in order to do so.*' (Orwell, 1947: no pagination [emphasis added])

But the greater the distance that the author wishes to put between him/herself and a milieu, the more of a regression there may be to caricatures and stereotypes, even if done playfully, for example when Fowles's character, Daniel Martin, makes the following observation about a minor character: 'I could see he was a townee, he wore a lapelled cardigan with a zip, and looked like one of the countless Midland and Northcountry grockles that invade the West every summer.' (Fowles, 1978: 405) Fowles would not condescend to exploring the subjectivity of such a character, termed a mere 'grockle' in the Dorset vernacular, as he would a character that more closely reflects his own sympathies or interests. Such a character is viewed only externally for purposes of categorization and perhaps expression of distaste.

Consider another example, this time from popular crime fiction. At the beginning of James Ellroy's recent crime novel, *Blood's a Rover* (2009), the reader is addressed thus: '*I am going to tell you everything*' [author's italics]. Is this not what every novelist in a sense promises his or her readers? Is the gnostic aspiration of the reader not what is always at stake in seeing a novel through to the last page? This is the *lure* that I mentioned earlier. The reader of Ellroy's book is led to believe that the 'everything' that will be revealed includes the facts about the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. We are led throughout *Blood's a Rover* to believe that we are witnessing the inner psychodramas of all the leading figures. Yet a careful reading of such a novel, and of many others, shows that there is very often a 'despised other' whose subjectivity is perhaps too outré or ghastly to contemplate. An example in *Blood's a Rover* of this kind is the figure of J. Edgar Hoover, of whose subjectivity we learn very little, and all of that from his utterances and other purely outward data. (In several of Ellroy's novels the figure of Howard Hughes is similarly treated.) So, while we are (apparently) privy to the deepest subjective musings of murderers, gangsters, FBI agents, black-power activists and leftwing agitators, there are other areas of subjectivity that the author declines to imagine or to invite us to imagine. The subjectivity of a grockle or a Hoover or a Hughes is placed beyond thought, as an act of authorial control over a reader on one level, and no doubt as an act of authorial self-expression on another.

The realism of subjectivity

When Žižek says that ‘the reality I see is never “whole” – not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it’ (2009: 17), this accords with my point that an author does not stand outside his work; the work includes a blind spot or stain that marks his inclusion in it. The blind spot might consist in a refusal to enter the subjectivity of a despised character, as I have mentioned. This subjective blind spot on the part of an author is precisely what is real in my hermeneutic framework, the reality of authorial presence in the work.

Similarly with the reader; the reader is driven through his or her own wish to insert him/herself into novelistic worlds as spectator and to attain there the *faux* omniscience that I have mentioned. The attraction into the subjective world of a character is a simulation of invaded privacy, the lure of a simulated mindreading ability, and who does not occasionally wish for such powers? But for the reflective reader what lies beyond this is his or her recognition of the subjectivity of the author, an envisioning of the author’s relationship to his or her own self, as externalized in character. An author does not simply write to create these revelations for a reader’s enjoyment, but also to draw the reader into his or her own subjective view of the world.

What is real in fiction then includes the subjectivities of author and reader and their mutual engagement through the simulated subjectivities of characters. How is this possible? The answer might well be that a character is a figure that presents a social milieu to us *problematically*, the problem being precisely the author’s relation to his or her socially conditioned self, that is, his or her experience of just such milieux. A milieu is not presented to us in anything like an ideal form, i.e. as the pure reflection imagined in naïve theories of realism – here I include even the formidable work of Georg Lukács (1962, 1972; see Wood, 2011). – but rather in such a form as to bring out inherent instabilities in the milieu and the writer’s problematic relationship to it.

Conclusion

A work of fiction implicates all four quadrants of my hermeneutic square, as follows:

1a. It is written in a language that is shared by reader and author. This language is a historical product and, when viewed from the perspective of 1a alone, comprises an open system with an unstable and quasi-infinite set of potentials and possibilities for meaning. But:

2a. When the author begins to write in this language, meanings become relatively fixed, as particular thoughts expressed, as ideas, information and relations between people, objects, events, places, and so on. Similarly:

1b. The genre of communication as a historical product, e.g. the novel, stands as a set of conventions and generic possibilities, which are cognitively shared by reader and author alike, albeit abstractly. But:

2b. In the performance of the writing task, these generic possibilities are actualized as a specific text, its form determined by the interests of readers and the purposes of an author. Only with the incorporation of 2b do we have a *concrete act*. The term *act* thereby takes on considerably more meaning than it does, say, in speech act theory.

I have focused on 2b in the present essay because the matters covered there have yet to find a place in mainstream pragmatics, where I believe they belong. Such a pragmatics I call a hermeneutic pragmatics, because it concerns itself with deep levels of interpretation, not merely with structures of text, with linguistic meanings or with conventions of communication and genres. A hermeneutic pragmatics must regard the text as a datum from which to recover the subjectivities of those who have shaped it. It should go without saying that when an author writes, he or she already posits an ideal reader or a set of potential readers as proxy for the real readers who will eventually come to read the work. Thus the author is engaged, in ways that we might come to understand much better, with the subjectivity of readership from the very beginning, and it is such an engagement of subjectivities that is the shaping force of the text.

The basic triad of relations, author-character-reader, turns out to be a complex one, which is why a hermeneutic approach must be postulated for its further understanding. What I have highlighted in relation to 2b is the nature of fictional authorship, whereby the author externalizes his or her own self-relationship in the form of characters. But one can just as well turn this around and say that an author posits a reader's own self-relation as a kind of target. A reader will make his or her own judgments of the presented characters, on the basis of own values and tastes, curiosities and fascinations, self-reflections, etc., and then perhaps proceed to judgments concerning the authorial presence in the work. In the complex engagement with character, I suggest, author and reader become engaged in a mutual recognition, a simultaneous recognition of self and other, which may be where the formative power of literature lies. The fact that such recognition will inevitably contain *misrecognition* of some kind is no doubt where some of the fascination of literature lies, but the latter point must be explored on another occasion.

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Table 1. The hermeneutic square

| | a. Memory | b. Performance |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| 1. Convention | 1a <i>Signification</i> form/eidos 'dictionary' | 1b <i>Genre</i> phronesis techne |
| 2. Autopoiesis | 2a <i>Knowledge</i> episteme 'encyclopedia' | 2b <i>Agency</i> projection introjection |