



Folk Stories

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Folk Stories: What Has Fiction To Do With Mental Fictionalism?

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1. Fictionalism without the fictional is just another -ism

What characterises a fictionalist approach to subject matter X is the suggestion that X can be understood by appeal to the notion of fiction. Otherwise, fictionalism does not deserve its name. Something about the features of fiction leads fictionalists to think that it provides a model for engaging in a way of talking about X without incurring the commitments of a realist approach to X . Yet the nature of fiction is itself philosophically complex, and often underdeveloped in fictionalist approaches. Our aim is to examine how some of the resources made available by some theories of fiction impact on the prospects of fictionalism, and whether they serve fictionalist aims as well as is often assumed. We focus on mental fictionalism – here understood as the view that we should adopt a fictionalist treatment of folk psychology (hereafter, FP) – although, in places, our arguments will generalise to other fictionalisms. Our aim is not to endorse nor to reject mental fictionalism, but to show some of the ways in which the terrain changes when more detailed consideration of fiction itself is introduced. In doing this, we unearth some difficulties for a figurative fictionalist approach to FP (§2), but also show new ways in which approaches to the nature of fiction might benefit the mental fictionalist, such as in offering an approach to impossible content (§3) and a new solution to the so-called ‘suicide’ problem (§4).

On the surface, fiction is a form of representation well-suited to metaphysical aims often stated as motivations for fictionalism. Fiction is assumed to lack ontological commitment insofar as it is about things which do not exist. Fictionalists typically think it is of value to retain a representation, but not as an attempt at telling the truth; fiction is taken as a model for a type of representation which is not to be understood in terms of how the actual world is. Fiction seems to provide a paradigm for the kind of representation a fictionalist needs.¹ But scrutiny of the nature of fiction is needed if one is to make good on fictionalist claims. Attending to the nature of fiction in more detail raises (at least) five issues for mental fictionalism.

First, the ontology of representations: what kind of objects are fictions? Sainsbury argues that fictionalism may push the problem back if its motivation is discomfort with abstract objects: ‘Mathematics is a fiction, a story. But what is a story? The most natural answer is that it is something abstract.’ (2010: 2) We will not discuss this challenge further here.

Second, discussions of fictionalism often take for granted that there is a distinctive attitude which we take towards fictions, so that the fictionalist position can be understood as suggesting that we take *this* attitude, whatever it is, towards FP discourse; or that there is a set of properties characteristic of fiction, so that the mental fictionalist can suggest that FP has *those* properties,

¹ Mental fictionalists may also see the indefiniteness in FP (see, e.g. Dennett (1991: 49)) as having a precedent in fictional representation. Whether indefiniteness in FP is the same phenomenon as the indefiniteness found in fictions, which inevitably leave their fictional worlds incomplete in some respects (e.g., the colour of a character’s socks), requires further argument. We shall not discuss indefiniteness in this paper.

whatever they are. Joyce characterises fictionalism as concerned both with the ontological commitments of utterances, and with ‘the positive (though vague) thesis that the role that these utterances do play is *substantively similar to the role of familiar fictional discourse*’ (2013: 520; our italics). There is a risk of equivocation in Joyce’s comment which may lead fictionalists to think they can help themselves to a concept of fictionality. We are familiar with engaging with fiction. But this does not mean we are familiar with what is going on that *makes* this a case of engaging with fiction as opposed to engaging with something else. The idea that there is a well-defined role of fictional discourse, and something which demarcates fiction from other kinds of representation, is contentious (see, e.g., Friend (2012)). Whether fictionalists require there to be a distinctive attitude or set of features constitutive of fictionality, and if so, whether it can be identified, is something that fictionalism will need to resolve in consultation with this debate in the theory of fiction.

Third, the ‘suicide’ problem (e.g. Joyce (2013), Wallace (2016)). Suppose that psychological concepts are involved in an account of how the content of fictions is generated. For instance, suppose we adopt (as a number of fictionalists do) Walton’s (1990) theory, in which fiction is understood in terms of games of *make-believe* in which we are prescribed to *imagine that* various facts hold. The suicide problem alleges that mental fictionalism is self-defeating, because *make-believe* and *imagining that* (for instance) are folk-psychological concepts; thus, appeal to folk-psychological concepts is needed in order to explicate the fictionalist’s appeal to fiction. We discuss this in §4.

The fourth issue concerns what commitments are incurred in taking fictional representations to be contentful. It is easy to assume that there can be content without ontological commitment for the very reason that (it is often assumed) fiction can be contentful without being committal. But a theory of fiction might hold that what it is for a fiction to have content is for there to exist the things the fiction is about. For example, our own preferred view is that what supplies the content for fictions are concrete possible worlds (e.g. Bourne & Caddick Bourne (2016)). On this account, invoking fiction does not sidestep ontological commitment. If the mental fictionalist posits a fiction which represents states of belief and desire, then, on our view, there are such things as belief and desire states; at best, the fictionalist can say that they are not located in the actual world. Mere appeal to fiction does not, without a supporting theory of fiction, guarantee avoiding commitment to whatever the fiction is about. Neither does an approach to fictional truth in terms of imagination or games of make-believe automatically allow us, as might be assumed, a non-committal account of fictional content. One might agree that it is prescriptions to imagine (for example) which determine that the fiction is about this rather than that, whilst still holding that what allows it to be about *anything* is that there exist things that it is about. The fictionalist needs an appropriate answer to the further questions of what the content of make-believe is, or of how the game can be contentful, if their account of fiction is to be secure enough to ground a lack of ontological commitment.

Fifth, the mental fictionalist aim of retaining a representation without its commitments is often expressed by envisaging FP as a ‘useful fiction’. But fiction is not an obvious model for the ‘useful’ representation required by the fictionalist, since identifying something as fiction leaves open the possibility of it being unreliable in various ways. Thus, to make good on the notion of a useful fiction, the fictionalist needs to specify the ways in which FP can be *both* useful *and* a fiction. One way of making progress with this might be to adopt a figurative fictionalist approach to FP, in which the usefulness of the fiction can potentially be unpacked as its illuminating the actual nature of mentality or behaviour in the way a metaphor illuminates its target. A successful metaphor improves our understanding of its target by, in some way, allowing us to ‘see’ that target ‘through’ our thoughts about something else. One view which ties metaphor to fiction is Walton’s (1993). A recent mental fictionalist proposal from Toon (2016), which we shall now discuss in detail, aims to utilise

Walton's account of metaphors as utterances which alert us to the possibility of their targets featuring as props in certain 'prop-oriented' games of make-believe.

2. Figurative approaches: co-opting Walton's framework for mental fictionalist purposes?

For Walton, a prop is something which prescribes imaginings to players of the game. (For instance, a stick may be a prop for imagining a gun; pointing the stick at somebody and shouting 'Piugh-piugh-piugh!' is a prop for imagining that the gun is being shot.) In prop-oriented make-believe, the imaginings prescribed allow for illuminating reflection back on the actual nature of the props. For instance, Walton proposes that calling a folded piece of paper a 'paper aeroplane', or a frisbee a 'flying saucer', points towards the possibility of make-believe that is useful for understanding the prop. Other examples include locating Crotona 'on the arch of the Italian boot', calling plumbing or electrical connectors 'male' and 'female', and describing a cloud as an 'angry face'. Walton writes: 'All of these cases are linked to make-believe. We think of Italy and the thundercloud as something like pictures. Italy (or a map of Italy) depicts a boot. The cloud is a prop which makes it fictional that there is an angry face. Male and female plumbing or electrical connections are understood to be, fictionally, male and female sexual organs.' (1993: 40) The possible games of make-believe suggested by the metaphors are prop-oriented because they offer a way of grasping actual facts about the props: 'It is by thinking of Italy or the thundercloud or plumbing connections as potential if not actual props that I understand where Crotona is, which cloud is the one being talked about, or whether one pipe can be connected to another.' (41)

Toon proposes that 'Similarly, invoking the game of folk psychology provides ... a useful means for describing John and his behaviour ... Within this game, we are to imagine that people have certain inner states inside their heads, such as beliefs and desires. We are also to imagine that these states arise in certain circumstances, interact in certain sorts of ways, and produce certain sorts of behaviour.' (2016: 283-4) For example, 'If someone is looking at an object in good light, then normally we are to imagine that they have a particular inner state (a belief) which says that there is an object in front of them.' (284) Further, 'when we attribute a belief, we also make a genuine assertion: we claim that they [the person described metaphorically as believing such-and-such] are in a particular state such that is appropriate to pretend in this way.' (287)

Toon's proposal is an interesting attempt to substantiate, through consideration of the nature of fiction, what a folk-psychological fiction could be. However, for it to be a successful application of prop-oriented make-believe, certain conditions must be met. Recognising the possibility of the game must allow us to reflect on, or further understand, *the props* (and not just some other aspect of the world). Moreover, our increased understanding has to take the form of recognising them *as* potential props. In Waltonian prop-oriented make-believe, the game to which a metaphor alludes facilitates understanding of the target by showing how that target can be made to function *as a representation of* (part of) the content of the game. Directing a friend to look at 'the angry face' calls up an ability to 'recognize which cloud can best be understood to be an angry-face-picture' (67; our italics). We can distinguish between clouds based on their representational potential in a game in which clouds are props for imagining faces. Genuinely prop-oriented make-believe demands a particular relationship between props, content and understanding. It is not clear that this relationship can be borne out in the case of FP.

Toon's account is not explicit about what the props are. One natural thought is that FP is a metaphor for actual mentality. This would require that actual mentality is the prop(s) which prescribes

imaginings about beliefs, desires, etc. But since Toon provides no account of what actual mentality is, he does not show how it could serve as a prop, i.e. what it would mean to identify it as a potential representation.

More promising is to take the props to be utterances. FP utterances certainly play a role in Toon's fictionalism, for his claim is that 'we should understand ordinary talk about mental states in terms of pretence' (282). Here, however, FP talk plays the role of the metaphor, not the prop. But might we also construe the *props* of Toon's games as linguistic items?

Toon may have this in mind when he introduces his fictionalism:

'Sellars asks us to imagine a society who at first ... is restricted to terms referring to overt behaviour. At some point, along comes a visionary theorist, called Jones, who develops a theory of internal, psychological episodes, which he dubs *thoughts*. Jones bases his theory of thoughts on the model of overt verbal behaviour ... I want to propose an alternative, fictionalist, myth ... [W]hat Jones introduces ... is not a theory, but a useful game of prop-oriented make-believe. Jones invents a game in which we are supposed to imagine that people undergo inner episodes, called thoughts, which are analogous to overt verbal behaviour ... the entire model is proposed merely as a useful metaphor for describing people and their behaviour.' (283)

Is *Jones's statement of FP* a prop, prescribing us to imagine that there exist beliefs and desires? Such a prop would function in the way a novel functions as a prop. But the make-believe would clearly not be *oriented* on this kind of prop. We are not learning about the *statements* Jones offers by seeing that they can be used as props for imagining them to be true (else reading novels would automatically be prop-oriented).

Another option is that it is not Jones's utterances, or FP utterances, but utterances more generally which are the props in the folk-psychological game of make-believe. For instance, an utterance of a sentence is a prop for imagining that there is something called a 'thought' that has a similar structure and content to the sentence that has been uttered. Although Toon does not develop this option in any detail, it would at least give a clear and attractive account of *what* exactly the content of the make-believe takes from the prop: language's representational nature is itself seen as a potential representation of the (fictional) representational nature of something else (the fictional things, thoughts). But again, the make-believe here would not be obviously prop-oriented. To make this a plausible case of prop-oriented make-believe, and retain the Waltonian framework he hopes to adopt, Toon would have to show why we should think that we are learning *about the nature of linguistic utterances* by seeing that their structure can be used as a prop for imagining the structure of the silent world of thought.

Might Toon instead take observable behavioural events (and not only linguistic ones) as the props which prescribe imaginings about belief, desire and so on? This seems to be Toon's overall preference – e.g., when he envisages somebody *looking at an object* as what prescribes us to imagine that they believe the object is there. But again, this does not provide a clear case of *prop-oriented* make-believe, since it is not obvious how, in recognising the possibility of the FP fiction, we come to understand behaviour by recognising its representational potential. On Walton's framework, recognising the prop *as a (potential) prop* must do some work. The possibility of make-believe must alert us to something about the props beyond the trivial information that in a game where they are props for imagining such-and-such, they are props for imagining such-and-such. It is hard to articulate, in the case of Toon's folk psychological make-believe, what more than this we

learn about the props. What exactly does it tell us about a behavioural prop – e.g., someone looking at an object – to know that it prescribes imagining something folk-psychological – e.g., that they believe the object is there?

The fact that prediction is enabled by playing the game – imagining the prescribed things when we encounter the right props – is not sufficient to make the make-believe *prop-oriented*. For it is not by recognising that someone's not having eaten can *function as a representation of* wanting to eat that we gain any understanding of patterns of behaviour. Compare how the metaphor of connectors as 'male' and 'female' might aid us in fitting pipes together. Here, seeing *why those props make that make-believe appropriate* is what is informative. In prop-oriented make-believe, the content trains us onto a feature of the prop that makes the imagining appropriate. Take, too, Walton's paper aeroplanes. What we know about aeroplanes makes it illuminating to recognise the folded paper as a prop for imagining *that*. We can well understand the structure and flight of the folded paper, and the objectives of throwing it and adjusting it, through seeing them as props for imagining the behaviour of a plane rather than something else. Making the analogous claim about behavioural props and folk-psychological make-believe is much more difficult. What exactly are we identifying about behavioural props in seeing them as suited to prescribing those imaginings rather than others? Attempting to treat FP as prop-oriented make-believe offers no account of how recognising *the representational capacity* of the potential props – that is, their suitedness to the role of prescribing certain imaginings – furnishes a way of identifying or attending to certain of their features. Thus, Toon's proposed folk psychological game has not been shown to be a genuine case of prop-oriented make-believe.

A useful comparison here is with Levy's (2011) fictionalist approach to information in biology, which also proposes a link between fiction and metaphor, drawing on Walton's account. According to Levy, 'Biologists metaphorically describe molecules and cells as engaged in communication and information sharing. Such descriptions invoke games of make-believe in which participants are to imagine the relevant elements – genes, hormones, cells or whole organs – as if they were sending and receiving messages.' (649) For instance, 'In glucose regulation the pancreas ... is the sender; muscle cells ... are receivers; insulin ... is the signal; and the message is: "glucose levels are up, break glycogen".' (652) This fiction helps with understanding the metaphor's target – actual biological processes – insofar as it engages us in 'using a schema associated with information and its communication ... to bring to the fore coarse-grained causal properties of the [target] processes in question' (648). Levy offers an account of *how* a fiction about communication foregrounds certain features of the target. He argues that attending to it introduces features of communication – directionality, and differentials in how much change the different elements of the system undergo – which can then be more readily identified in the actual biological processes of organisms (649-650).

Levy's figurative fictionalist approach to informational talk in biology has an advantage over Toon's figurative fictionalist approach to FP, in that it says more about which similarities between source and target make the metaphor illuminating. This gives traction to considering actual biological systems through the lens of communication; thanks to the similarities, it makes some sense to consider what (for example) the pancreas's activity is, if not communication but something like communication. No such account of the mechanics of metaphor-interpretation is given by Toon's

application of Walton to FP, making it much less tractable to consider what thought or behaviour is, if not folk-psychological but something like a folk-psychological system.²

A defender of Toon's approach must explain which properties of behavioural states FP serves to foreground, and how. This may be possible. Perhaps a point about FP's predictive usefulness can be transposed into one about foregrounding particular behavioural regularities. But, importantly, this would not yet vindicate a Waltonian treatment. For Levy's framework does not actually require *prop-oriented* make-believe, either. Taking the human pancreas *as a potential representation* of communication plays no obvious part in engaging with informational talk in the way Levy suggests. To 'use [the] fictional set-up to track non-fictional truths' (649), it is enough that we take the biologists' informational utterances *themselves* as props – prescribing us to imagine a fictional body whose parts communicate as those utterances specify – and learn about the actual, non-communicative pancreas (for example) by *comparing* its workings with those of the fictional, communicative pancreas. Although make-believe is involved here, the process of metaphor interpretation is not Waltonian, but Davidsonian (e.g. Davidson (1978)).

Moreover, once the possibility that comparison does the work in interpreting the metaphor is admitted, it is not obvious that *any* appeal to make-believe is necessary. Rather than saying we are to compare the content of a fiction about communicative bodies with the actual behaviour of bodies, we might say simply that the metaphor prompts us to compare the actual behaviour of bodies with communication between persons. With metaphor divorced from fiction, a figurative approach is no longer fictionalist.

The would-be fictionalist may hope that a general argument of Walton's will help to bolster an appeal to prop-oriented make-believe over a Davidsonian approach to metaphor that does not involve fiction. Walton's paper does not target Davidson explicitly, but he does argue that similarity cannot be the basis of metaphor, since similarity is symmetric whereas 'Many metaphors are not reversible' (1993: 48). Prop-oriented make-believe explains irreversibility, since the relation *generates fictional truths about* is asymmetric. However, this does not damage Davidson's account (whether or not Walton intends it as a criticism of Davidson). The crux of metaphor interpretation, for Davidson, is a *process* of comparison which the hearer is to carry out. Asymmetry can arise in how this process unfolds, which properties of which object are held fixed at what point, and which object we examine with a view to identifying features of the other. And the order in which the words feature in the metaphorical utterance indicates what asymmetries we should try building in.

There may be mileage in a figurative approach to FP. For instance, suppose one thinks that FP concepts apply on the level of persons, but do not apply to sub-personal states. (Thus, a person can believe something, but not because an internal system is in a belief state.) FP may nevertheless illuminate the sub-personal level metaphorically, if for some reason it is illuminating to compare the non-representational structure of sub-personal states with the representational structure of personal states, or to identify properties of the former through comparison with properties of the latter. But the point is that this is not helpful to fictionalism. First, though such an approach is figurative, it does not appeal to fiction, relying only on a connection between metaphor and comparison. Second, the approach holds that there is FP going on – on the level of the person – which can be understood independently of the metaphor. This illustrates a general requirement of appeals to metaphor: that there are things which can be compared. Metaphor is not a device for the

² Another advantage in the biological case might be that our grasp on the *independent* nature of the target (biological processes) helps set parameters for metaphor-interpretation. Perhaps this independence between source and target does not hold in the case of FP concepts and behavioural concepts. See Demeter (2013).

introduction of theoretical terms, about which one can then withhold commitment. A metaphor cannot get off the ground unless there is some characterisation of its terms which is not bound up with their metaphorical use.³ It is possible that fictionalism's historical connections to both Waltonian accounts of fiction and debates in the philosophy of science over the meanings of theoretical terms (e.g. Churchland (1981); van Fraassen (1980)) makes it tempting to run together the workings of metaphor and the introduction of terms, thinking, erroneously, that there could be a metaphorical use which is enough by itself to introduce a content with which the target of the metaphor can be compared. There cannot, so metaphor cannot provide a complete account of FP.

Specifying the details of how metaphor works has uncovered internal tensions in the figurative fictionalist position. For those who are ontologically motivated, there is another. To be a figurativist, the fictionalist has to assume a characterisation of FP terms independent of the metaphor. Their ontological commitments depend on what *that* characterisation commits to. By itself, an appeal to metaphor does not stop the terms which feature in the metaphor incurring ontological commitments (and even if the ontology is dispensed with by other means, it is not metaphor that is doing that fictionalist work). Figurativism is not a go-to solution for those who want to avoid ontological commitment.

Whilst §1 showed why fictionalists should not assume anything about the nature of fiction without considering theories of fiction, this section shows that even when theories of fiction are consulted, there is a danger that resources assumed to be helpful to fictionalism turn out to be inappropriate. In discussions of fictionalism there is enthusiasm for applying Walton's framework, but more scrutiny is needed of when and why prop-orientation is an illuminating resource. Many of Walton's examples are geometrical. The reason the cloud would make a good picture of a face is its shape. The reason the pipes would make a good sculpture of coitus is their spatial relations. Walton also takes 'It has been Grand Central Station around here all day' as a metaphor that suggests prop-oriented make-believe, involving 'thinking of the household in question as a kind of unwitting theatrical portrayal of Grand Central Station' (1993: 45). Motion can easily be used to represent motion, so it is clear what it would be to use the motion of people in the house as a representation of activity at the station. We cannot so easily see what would make a behavioural prop a good representation of a folk-psychological state – or a pancreas a good representation of a communicator, even if the two bear fruitful comparison. The would-be fictionalist must pay attention to the special reasons for connecting metaphor to prop-oriented make-believe in particular cases, and the difficulty of finding these reasons in the cases they are interested in.

3. Impossible fiction, content, and what's true to the folk story

According to Demeter (2013), 'Folk psychology represents agents in a way similar to how some fictions represent the world: in a way they are not, and ... cannot be. In this sense folk psychology is a tool for making Escherian representations.' (497) Demeter arrives at this position through an expressivist account which divorces the usefulness of FP from its content. FP plays an expressive role that enables coordination among the folk. 'Offering [a folk-psychological] interpretation for

³ McDowell, discussing the case of perceptual experience, posits two metaphors of 'telling', or information-transfer; one for the level of the whole animal, one for its parts. The former is grounded in non-metaphorical characterisation of some source concepts: 'underneath the metaphor of the environment telling the frog things, we have the literal truth that the frog becomes informed of things' (1994: 197). See Hutto (2013: 587-8) for discussion of what illumination McDowell's metaphors offer.

acceptance to others is an attempt at communicating affects ... This communication is successful if the listener understands how the interpreter feels' (490).

Should one, with Demeter, consider this position fictionalist? Demeter suggests an expressivist genealogy for FP utterances. Similarly, Blackburn (1993) suggests an expressivist genealogy for moral utterances. But Blackburn classifies his position as quasi-realist and explicitly not fictionalist. His argument that quasi-realism is not fictionalism (Blackburn (2005)) is that the fictionalist withholds commitment where the quasi-realist is fully committed. The moral quasi-realist says with 'full-blown commitment' (2005: 336) that it is 'bad to neglect the needs of children' (325). Further, Blackburn argues that the fictionalist has to be able to say what they are retreating from; that is, to articulate what more it would be for the realist position to hold. The fictionalist must make good on a distinction the quasi-realist deflates, in order to give content to a fiction which they say represents things as they are not.⁴

Our question here is not whether Demeter *should* adopt quasi-realism, rather than attempt to combine expressivism with an appeal to fiction, but what gives his position a claim to be fictionalist. Demeter likens expressive to fictional discourses in that neither 'is founded on the convention of truthfulness' (493), but given the differences between the two – including that fiction, even if not aimed at telling the truth about the actual, is representational – this is surely not enough to make expressivism a form of fictionalism. Rather, what relates Demeter's position to fictionalism is the attempt to uphold content to FP which is distinct from how things actually are: 'A fictionalist interpretation of folk psychology retains the superficial semantics of mental-state ascriptions: they admittedly express propositions ascribing mental properties to individuals.' (497)

Demeter goes on to posit FP as a representation of impossibility. But he then qualifies his claim: 'Escher's *Drawing Hands* ... is not a representation of hands drawing one another, but a representation as if hands were drawing one another – as if it were possible' (497). What would it mean for FP to be a 'representation as if' individuals have mental properties? Demeter takes this to be a type of representation. We think that those who invoke impossible content would be better off explaining how something can be, not a *representation as if*, but rather *as if it is a representation of an impossibility*, without being such. In the case of fiction, we have argued for a distinction between being *true in a fiction* and being *true to a story* (Bourne & Caddick Bourne (2016)). To treat sentence S as being true to a story, one provides an explanation of how the impression is generated that S is true in a fiction. In so-called 'impossible fictions', rather than taking them to have impossible content (and taking on the attendant problems of trying to develop an appropriate semantics and ontology for impossible fiction), one should instead aim to explain where the impression of impossible content comes from.

In some cases, fictions represent possible scenarios but are structured in such a way that an impression of representing an impossible scenario is created. In the case of *Drawing Hands*, the strategy would be to say that there are two representations, each of a hand drawing, which are packaged in such a way as to create the impression of a single representation of hands drawing each other. As the picture does not represent two hands drawing each other (since they could not), there is no fiction in which hands draw each other; nevertheless, it is still true to the story to say 'the hands draw each other', since the impression that this reports something which is represented has

⁴ Similarly, Thomasson argues that fictionalism bears a metaphysical load which her preferred 'deflationary realist' position does not: the fictionalist must make sense of what more it would be for the realist metaphysical picture they reject to be true (2015: 269).

somehow been generated.⁵ In other cases, an impression is generated of something being represented when *no scenario* is represented at all. This may occur in some nonsense poetry, such as Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. There is no fiction in which the Borogoves are mimsy, since there is nothing it is for the Borogoves to be mimsy, but it is still true to the story to say 'the Borogoves are mimsy', since Carroll's use of language creates the impression that this reports something which is represented by the poem.⁶ In neither type of case should we expect a unified account of how sentences which seem to report impossible fictional truths are in fact true to the story, since the ways in which the relevant impressions can be generated are varied. The explanation to be given depends on attention to the particulars of each individual case.

This introduces the possibility of what we shall call a 'storyist' position that lies between fictionalism and quasi-realism, appealing to the resources of fiction but without countenancing the content a fictionalist does. Rather than associating Demeter's expressivist treatment of FP with a fictionalist approach which 'retains the superficial semantics of mental-state ascriptions' (497), it may be more productive to deny that there *is* any semantics of mental-state ascriptions, and say that what is retained in Demeter's treatment of FP is the regulations of a practice that allow people to know what words to say next. In saying what we do, we track not what is true in the fiction, but what sentences are true to the story.⁷

To develop such an account, one would need to find in the practice of FP discourse something like the mechanisms that explain how the impression of impossible fictional content can be generated in the practice of engaging with stories. Speculatively, one place to start may be with Demeter's suggestion that '[A folk psychological] interpretation [of some behaviour] is successful if one can understand the social world by its means – if the world is made familiar by it' (490). For Demeter, the sense of familiarity comes from the relationship between the world and our affects. This is different from attaining an explanation, if explanation involves representing the relations between states (e.g., causal mechanisms). However, the *experience* of understanding – which might involve, for example, satisfaction, or the sense of *seeing* something – may be in common between affective familiarisation and explanation. If so, then perhaps with further work, a storyist version of Demeter's account could argue that the experience of understanding FP contributes to creating the impression that FP represents (fictional) mechanisms that explain behaviour.

This discussion, though brief, shows that the prospect of a storyist position deserves investigation. The storyist would not be vulnerable to the objection the fictionalist faces, that they must make sense of what it would be for the world really to work as the discourse represents it as working. For

⁵ For a start on the mechanisms involved in generating the impression in this case, see our discussion of Escher's *Waterfall* (2016: 129-30).

⁶ We discuss *Jabberwocky* in (2016: 202, 208-9). The case is also useful for reflecting on the idea of pretending to assert, sometimes employed in fictionalism. Joyce considers a position where, in saying 'Mary believes that *p*', 'we do not (or need not) assert that Mary believes that *p*, but rather we do something more like pretending to assert it' (2013: 523). Holding that sentences of *Jabberwocky* do not represent anything is compatible with holding that reciting *Jabberwocky* involves pretend assertion. The pretence can involve pretending that the sentences have assertable content. Thus, one can pretend to assert even if the sentence used is not contentful, and denying that FP utterances are representational would be compatible with treating FP as pretend assertion.

⁷ This might also call for a modification of Demeter's claim that the practice of FP discourse involves 'rules of composition of psychological narratives which by stabilizing conceptual connections provides their internal logic' (494). On an approach which replaces fictionalist content with storyist specifications of *how* impressions of content are generated, (apparent) inferences between (apparent) folk-psychological contents go the same way as the apparent contents themselves; 'internal logic' is replaced by an *impression* of logic.

the storytyst, there is *nothing* it would be, since the discourse does not represent. But, unlike quasi-realism, storyism holds that engagement with the discourse is to be characterised in terms of an impression of the discourse being contentful which does not call for Blackburn's 'full-blown commitment'. Like the fictionalist, the storytyst maintains a distinction where the quasi-realist deflates it. But they maintain it without positing the content fictionalism does.

4. Fictionalist 'suicide'

There have been several attempts to respond to the alleged problem that the mental fictionalist cannot ultimately articulate their own position without using folk-psychological explanations of the nature of fiction. One strategy often discussed (e.g. Wallace (2016: 16-18), Toon (2016: 292-3)) adapts Paul Churchland's (1981) response⁸ to the (alleged) problem that the eliminativist must use, to state their theory, terms they wish to eliminate. The fictionalist version says that articulating what fiction is does not essentially depend on the folk-psychological concepts currently used to describe fiction, since some other, acceptable description of whatever we are doing when we create and engage with fiction would in principle be available. However, appealing to the supplanting of the folk-psychological concept by non-folk-psychological facts does leave a mental fictionalist with an awkward question. Why does *this* piece of FP discourse come in for a different kind of justification from the rest? In the main, the fictionalist wishes to retain FP as a fiction; yet now, they wish to retain it as a place-holder, in trust that a non-folk-psychological account could be given. If the fictionalist's statement of their theory turns out to be an example of how to use FP discourse permissibly which *bypasses* treating the discourse as fiction, then some tension remains between the statement of the theory and the fictionalist project.

Whether this tension is serious is something we will not resolve here. Our aim is to point out an alternative path, which makes fuller use of the resources of fiction, and allows the mental fictionalist to adopt a unified strategy to the maintenance of FP. The proposal is that FP's status as fiction is articulated *from within* the fiction: the fictionalist may take their statement of their theory as part of the fiction the theory posits. One way of pursuing this is to say that the statement of the theory makes it true in the fiction of FP that FP is fictional. Thus, FP is not just a fiction, but a metafiction. There are already fictions which (seemingly) have this reflexive structure, and there is no immediately obvious reason why FP could not be understood as one of them, if it is to be understood as fiction at all.

One reason for resisting might be that it is a tenet of FP that FP is *true*, and thus that what ought to be true in the fiction of FP is that FP is true, not that it is a fiction. Three initial responses suggest themselves. First, say the two are compatible. Walton (1990) holds that something which is actually true can also be fictional. Perhaps it can be true in a metafiction that it itself has this status. (Second, the mental fictionalist might understand their position as partially revolutionary, in the sense that their statement of fictionalism is designed not to capture existing fictional truths within FP, but to generate new ones (transforming FP from a fiction to a metafiction). Third, all the mental fictionalist in fact needs is for it to be true in the fiction of FP that they have stated that FP is fictional, since the suicide problem concerns their ability to *articulate* mental fictionalism. It is open to them to say that their implicitly folk-psychological statement of fictionalism makes it fictionally true that they have *wrongly* stated that FP is fictional. This may seem a peculiar position because it is *close* to a form of

⁸ Which also draws on argument from Patricia Churchland (1981).

irrationality – namely, taking a position one knows to be wrong. On reflection, however, it is not obviously irrational to facilitate its being *fictionally true* that one’s position is wrong.⁹

This is not a developed mental (meta)fictionalist position. Among other things, the fictionalist requires supporting accounts of how fictional truths are generated, whether metafiction is coherent and how it works. But this is an indication of how attention to the nature of fiction itself opens up novel ways of potentially resolving problems.

We have seen how fictionalist possibilities, and obstacles, are revealed when mental fictionalism turns in detail to the nature of fiction. Some resources from fiction, such as prop-oriented make-believe, are harder to mobilise than they first appear; we have identified some of the challenges such an approach to FP must face. At the same time, as we have shown, some resources are available – such as metafictionality, and alternative treatments of apparent impossible content – that fictionalism has not yet recognised. Either way, attending more closely to the nature of fiction is the way forward for debates over fictionalism.

⁹ This description favours forms of fictionalism where FP is a means of participating in fiction-making, rather than something to be analysed using fiction operators. If the strategy can be adapted, it may offer an alternative to Parent’s (2013) ‘quietism’ for operator fictionalists. The adaptation is not easy, particularly for the third suggestion, but cannot definitively be ruled out without further work on metafiction. (We also leave open, here, whether the strategies of §3 and §4 are ultimately compatible, or whether they offer diverging ways forward for mental fictionalism.)

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