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Part One

The Artifactual Theory of Fiction

Foreword

Discussions of fiction typically begin with the question of whether or not we must postulate fictional objects, with the defender of fiction attempting to establish that we absolutely cannot do without them, and the opponent attempting to show how we can manage to avoid postulating them through paraphrasing our apparent discourse about them and reconceiving our apparent experience of them. I believe that this approach to fiction is misguided on two counts.

It is misguided, first, to address the question of whether we should postulate fictional objects without first understanding what sorts of things they would be. We cannot see the potential costs and advantages of bringing fictional entities into our ontology until we have a clear conception of what sorts of entities fictional characters would be and how they would compare with other entities we might bring into our ontology. Vague fears that fictional characters would be too disorderly, too strange, so that postulating them would be liable to get us into trouble often drive decisions to avoid fictional objects at all costs. But we can only address whether such fears are grounded on the basis of understanding what these entities would be. Thus I propose that in Part One we postpone the question of whether or not there are such things as fictional objects, and begin by considering an easier question: If we were to postulate fictional objects, what would they be? In answer to this question I begin to draw out the *artifactual theory* of fiction. Because, in this view, fictional characters turn out to be paradigmatically dependent objects, indeed entities dependent on a variety of entities in a variety of ways, the main tool needed to develop this view of fictional characters is a theory of dependence. After making use of this theory of dependence to draw out in greater detail the view of fictional characters as abstract artifacts, I address how such a

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view can handle two central problems ordinarily seen as stumbling blocks to postulating fictional characters: How to refer to them, and how to offer identity conditions for them. Drawing out solutions to these purported problems relieves fears that incline some to reject fictional objects and serves to fill in the details of how the artifactual theory works so that we can better examine the costs and benefits of postulating fictional characters.

It also is misguided to conceive of the game in discussions of fiction as establishing whether we can or cannot do without fictional characters. Properly considered, the question of whether we should admit anything into our ontology should not be cast as a question of whether we could possibly, through radical reinterpretations of experience and language, avoid postulating them. Making ontological decisions is a balancing act; we need to know not whether one can possibly eliminate fictional characters, but rather whether one can offer a better theory overall with them or without them. To properly evaluate the situation, we need to attempt a balanced evaluation of postulating and nonpostulating theories in terms of their ability to analyze adequately our experience and language, and to weigh this against their relative ontological parsimoniousness and elegance. In Part Two I return to address the question of whether, on balance, we should or should not postulate fictional characters as they are described in Part One.

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*If We Postulated Fictional Objects,
What Would They Be?*

If we are to postulate fictional characters at all, it seems advisable to postulate them as entities that can satisfy or at least make sense of our most important beliefs and practices concerning them. Often theories of fiction are driven not by an independent sense of what is needed to understand talk and practices regarding fiction, but rather by a desire to show how fictional characters may find their place in a preconceived ontology of possible, nonexistent, or abstract objects – to demonstrate one more useful application of the ontology under discussion, or to provide catchy and familiar examples. Instead of starting from a ready-made ontology and seeing how we can fit fictional characters into it, I suggest that we begin by paying careful attention to our literary practices so that we can see what sorts of things would most closely correspond to them. I thus begin by discussing what sorts of entities our practices in reading and discussing works of fiction seem to commit us to, and I draw out the *artifactual theory* of fiction as a way of characterizing the sort of entity that seems best suited to do the job of fictional characters.

WHAT FICTIONAL CHARACTERS SEEM TO BE

Fictional objects as I discuss them here include such characters as Emma Woodhouse, Sherlock Holmes, Hamlet, and Tom Sawyer – characters who appear in works of literature and whose fortunes we follow in reading those works.¹ In our everyday discussions of literature we treat fictional characters as created entities brought into existence at a certain time through the acts of an author. If someone contended that George Washington was a great fan of Sherlock Holmes, we might object that in Washington's time there was no Sherlock Holmes – the Holmes character

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was not created until 1887. The term “fiction” derives from the Latin *fin-gere* meaning “to form,” and this linguistic root is still evident in our practices in treating fictional characters as entities formed by the work of an author or authors in composing a work of fiction.² We do not describe authors of fictional works as discovering their characters or selecting them from an ever-present set of abstract, nonexistent, or possible objects. Instead, we describe authors as inventing their characters, making them up, or creating them, so that before being written about by an author, there is no fictional object. Taking authors to be genuinely creative as they make up fictional characters is central to our ordinary understanding of fiction. One of the things we admire about certain authors is their ability to make up sympathetic, multidimensional characters rather than cardboard cut-outs, and at times we count our good luck that certain characters like Sherlock Holmes were created when, given a busier medical practice, Arthur Conan Doyle might never have created him.

Thus, if we are to postulate fictional characters that satisfy our apparent practices regarding them, it seems that we should consider them to be entities that can come into existence only through the mental and physical acts of an author – as essentially created entities. Once we begin to treat fictional characters as created entities, a further issue arises. Do they simply need to be created at some time, by someone, or is the identity of a fictional character somehow tied to its particular origin in the work of a particular author or authors taking part in a particular literary tradition? Unexamined intuitions may provide no clear answer to this question, but our goal is to draw out a view of fictional characters that corresponds as closely as possible to our practices in studying fictional characters. Such critical practices provide grounds for taking the latter view, that a particular fictional character not only has to be created but is necessarily tied to its particular origin.

Suppose that a student happens on two literary figures remarkably similar to each other; both, for example, are said to be maids, warding off attempts at seduction, and so on. Under what conditions would we say that these are works about one and the same fictional character? It seems that we would say that the two works are about the same character only if we have reason to believe that the works derived from a common origin – if, for example, one work is the sequel to the other, or if both are developments of the same original myth. Literary scholars mark this difference by distinguishing “sources” drawn on by an author in composing a work from coincidentally similar characters or works, mere “analogs.” If one can show that the author of the latter work had close acquaintance

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with the earlier work, it seems we have good support for the claim that the works are about the same character (as for example in the Pamela Andrews of Richardson's and Fielding's tales). But if someone can prove that the authors of the two works bore no relation to each other or to a common source but were working from distinct traditions and sources, it seems that the student has at best uncovered a coincidence – that different individuals and cultures generated remarkably similar analogous characters.

So it seems that if we wish to postulate fictional objects that correspond to our ordinary practices about identifying them, fictional characters should be considered entities that depend on the particular acts of their author or authors to bring them into existence. Naturally the process of creating a particular character may be diffuse: It may be created by more than one author, over a lengthy period of time, involving many participants in a story-telling tradition, and so on. But the fact that the process of creating a fictional character may be diffuse does not disrupt the general point that, whatever the process of creation for a given character may be, for coming into existence it depends on those particular creative acts. Such a requirement not only is consistent with critical practices in identifying characters but also (as we see in Chapter 5) is crucial to treating characters as identical across different sequels, parodies, and other literary developments.

Once created, clearly a fictional character can go on existing without its author or his or her creative acts, for it is preserved in literary works that may long outlive their author. If we treat fictional characters as creations invented by authors in creating works of literature, and existing because of their appearance in such works, then it seems that for a fictional character to be preserved, some literary work about it must remain in existence. And so we have uncovered a second dependency: Characters depend on the creative acts of their authors in order to come into existence and depend on literary works in order to remain in existence.³ Here again the question arises: Does a fictional character depend on one particular literary work for its preservation, or does a fictional character need only to appear in some literary work or other to remain in existence? It certainly seems that a character may survive as long as some work in which it appears remains. If we could not allow that the same character may appear in more than one literary work, or even slightly different editions of a work, then we would be unable to account for literary critical discourse about the development of a character across different works, and we would even be unable to admit that readers of different editions of *The Great Gatsby* are discussing one and the same Jay Gatsby. In short, we would be left postulating many

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characters in cases in which there seems to be but one. So it seems we should allow that one character may appear in more than one work, and if it can appear in more than one work, it must remain in existence as long as one literary work about it does. Thus even if “A Scandal in Bohemia” should exist no longer, the character Sherlock Holmes can go on existing provided that one or more of the other works in which he appears remains in existence. So, although a fictional character depends on a literary work for its continued existence, it depends only on the maintenance of some work in which it appears.⁴

The dependence of a character on a literary work forces us to address a second question: If a character depends on a work of literature, what does a work of literature depend on? When can we say that a literary work exists? Because characters depend on literary works, anything on which literary works depend is also, ultimately, something on which characters depend. As ordinarily treated in critical discourse, a literary work is not an abstract sequence of words or concepts waiting to be discovered but instead is the creation of a particular individual or group at a particular time in particular social and historical circumstances. Thus, as with characters, it seems that literary works must be created by an author or authors at a certain time in order to come into existence.

Like a character, it also seems that a work of literature depends rigidly on the acts of its particular author to exist, so that, even if two authors coincidentally composed the same words in the same order, they would not thereby have composed the same work of literature. One way to see the essentiality of a work’s origin to its identity is by observing that literary works take on different properties based on the time and circumstances of their creation and creator. By virtue of originating in a different place in literary, social, and political history, at the hands of a different author, or in a different place in an author’s *oeuvre*, one and the same sequence of words can provide the basis for two very different works of literature with different aesthetic and artistic properties.⁵ The same sequence of words appearing in *Animal Farm* could have been written in 1905, but that literary work could not have had the property of being a satire of the Stalinist state, a central property of Orwell’s tale. If the same words of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* were written by James Joyce not in 1916, but instead after *Ulysses* came out in 1922, that work would lack the property of exhibiting a highly original use of language, which *Portrait of the Artist* has. Two mysteries based on the same sequence of words written in 1816 and today, both ending with “the butler did it,” might have the property of having a surprise ending in the former but not the latter case.

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A screenplay with the same sequence of words as Oliver Stone's *Nixon*, if written in 1913, could have the properties neither of being about (the real) Richard Nixon, nor of being a sympathetic portrayal of the main character, nor of being revisionary and speculative. Similar cases could be brought to bear to show that a wide variety of aesthetic and artistic properties central to discussions of works of literature – being a work of high modernism, a parody, horrifying, reactionary, exquisitely detailed, an updated retelling of an old story – depend on the context and circumstances of creation, so that literary works may be based on the same series of words but have different aesthetic and artistic properties. In at least some cases, these properties seem essential to the literary work, e.g., being a satire seems essential to *Animal Farm* considered as a work of literature. For that reason, it seems that a literary work is best conceived not as an abstract sequence of words but as an artifact that had to be created in those original circumstances in which it was created.

Like fictional characters, literary works, once created, can clearly survive the death of their author; indeed the great majority of literary works we have today persist despite the deaths of their authors. But does a literary work, once created, always exist, or can a work once again cease to exist even after it is created? If we take seriously the view that literary works are artifacts created at a certain time, it seems natural to allow that, like other artifacts from umbrellas to unions to universities, they can also be destroyed. It would surely seem bizarre to claim that all of the lost stories of past cultures still exist as much as ever. On the contrary, one of the things that is often lamented about the destruction of cultures, be they ancient Greek or Native American, is the loss of the stories and fictional worlds they created. We treat literary tales as entities that can cease to exist, that at times take special efforts and government projects to preserve (e.g., by recording the oral folktales of Appalachia), or that may be destroyed by a temperamental author burning unpublished manuscripts. Treating works of literature as entities that may be destroyed – at least if all copies and memories of them are destroyed – seems a natural consequence of considering them to be cultural artifacts rather than Platonistic abstracta.

Yet certainly there are many who do not share the intuition that literary works may cease to exist after being created. The idea that literary works, if they exist, must exist eternally (once created) seems to me to be a hangover of a Platonism that assimilates all abstract entities to the realm of the changeless and timeless, and in particular a consequence of viewing literary works roughly as series of words or concepts that can survive the destruction of any collection of copies of them. To the extent that it is a

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hangover of Platonism, this position should lose its appeal if one accepts the earlier arguments that literary works are, instead, artifacts individuated in part by the particular circumstances of their creation.

Apart from a lingering Platonism, one feature of our language might incline some to the view that literary works cannot cease to exist: We often speak not of *destroyed* or *past* works, but rather of *lost* works, as if all that were missing was our ability to find these (still existing) works of ancient, careless, or temperamental authors. This language practice, however, is easily explained without adopting the odd view that works of literature, once created, exist eternally despite even the destruction of the whole real world. The explanation is simply that, because a literary work does not require any *particular* copy to remain in existence, it is hard to be certain that there is not some copy of the work, somewhere, that has survived, and with it the work of literature. Who knows what may be lurking in the basement corridors of the Bodleian Library? A formerly lost sonnet of Shakespeare's was discovered there not so long ago. Unlike in the case of a unique painting, of which we can find the ashes, we can always hold out hope in the case of a literary work that a copy of it remains in some library, attic room, or perfect memory, so that the literary work might be "found" again. (This is reinforced by noting that, although we ordinarily speak of old or ancient works as lost, in the case of a modern manuscript burned by its author, we are more prone to count the work "destroyed" than merely lost.) But none of this speaks against the idea that, provided all copies and memories of a literary work are destroyed, never to be recovered, the literary work is gone as well – or, to put it another way, the literary work is then lost not in the sense in which sets of keys are lost, but in the sense in which an exploded battleship is lost, or a doctor can lose a patient.

If we consider characters to be creations owing their continued existence to the literary works in which they appear, then if all of the works regarding a character can fall out of existence, so can that character. Thus it is a consequence of this view that if all copies of all of the works regarding some ancient Greek heroine have been destroyed, never to be recovered or recalled, then she has fallen out of existence with those works and become a "past" fictional object in much the same way as a person can become a dead, past, concrete object. If we take seriously the idea of fictional characters as artifacts, it seems equally natural to treat them as able to be destroyed just as other artifacts are.⁶ Thus fictional characters as well as the literary works in which they appear may fall out of existence with the literature of a culture.

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One objection that might be raised to the idea that both fictional characters and literary works may fall out of existence is that it seems we can still think of them, refer to them, and so on, even after their founding texts have all been destroyed. But this is no different than in the case of other perishable objects and artifacts: We may still think of and refer to people after they have died, buildings long since destroyed, civilizations long gone by. If fictional characters and literary works cease to exist, I am not suggesting that they then enter a peculiar realm of Meinongian nonexistence or that it is as if such objects never were, but rather that they become past objects just like the other contingent objects around us. The problem of how we can think of and refer to past objects is no small one but is not unique to fiction.

Ordinarily, a literary work is maintained in existence by the presence of some copy or other of the relevant text (whether on paper, film, tape, or CD-ROM). It is in this way that the literature of past ages has been handed down to our present day. But even if printed words on a page survive, that is not enough to guarantee the ongoing existence of the work. A literary work is not a mere bunch of marks on a page but instead is an intersubjectively accessible recounting of a story by means of a public language. Just as a language dies out without the continued acceptance and understanding of a group of individuals, so do linguistically based literary works. A literary work as such can exist only as long as there are some individuals who have the language capacities and background assumptions they need to read and understand it. If all conscious agents are destroyed, then nothing is left of fictional works or the characters represented in them but some ink on paper. Similarly, if all speakers of a language die out, with the language never to be rediscovered, then the literary works peculiar to that tongue die out as well.⁷ Thus preserving some printed or recorded document is not enough to preserve a literary work – some competent readers are also required. If competent readers and a printed text survive, however, that is enough to preserve a literary work.

In other cases, however, we speak of a work of literature as being preserved even if there are no printed copies of the text. In oral traditions, for example, the work is preserved in memory even if it is not being spoken or heard, and (as in *Fahrenheit 451*) it seems that a work could be preserved in memories during times of censorship, even if all printed copies of it were destroyed. So even if a literary work is typically maintained by a printed, comprehensible text, it seems that such is not necessary. A latent memory of the work (disposed to produce an