

The Threat of Panfictionalism

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If any recent literary-theoretic argument has made its way from the university classroom into the consciousness of the educated public, it is the argument for what is often called *panfictionalism*, the position that all forms of discourse are at the end of the day equally alike in being forms of fictional discourse. Many philosophers of literary fiction, and in particular those working in the analytic tradition, see panfictionalism as a considerable threat, a competitor that is out to undermine the very distinction that gives life to so much work in the philosophy of literary fiction, namely the distinction between the fictional and the real, between texts that attempt to generate imaginary or make-believe worlds and those that attempt to represent or otherwise refer to the actual world. But panfictionalism, I shall argue, has never been a threat to any of the distinctions relevant to the philosophical study of literary fiction. Indeed, I shall argue that panfictionalism is best described as a ghost argument, for it is entirely unclear that the theorists held responsible for panfictionalism ever promote it in a way that would even make it a threat to the philosophy of literature. Panfictionalism, I shall argue, is a bogeyman that has quite ironically been taken to be a threat by one of the only areas of traditional philosophy on which it has no obvious bearing.

The Form of the Threat

We might begin by stating something obvious but nevertheless rarely acknowledged by those who believe panfictionalism to be an import shipped solely out of the Left Bank, namely that positions which might fairly, if loosely, be called “panfictionalist” have enjoyed currency in both contemporary literary theory and philosophy, on both sides of the ocean, endorsed in one guise or another by philosophers and critics as diverse as Nelson Goodman and Jean-François Lyotard. One respect in which some prominent Anglo-North American philosophy and Continental theory have overlapped is in denying that there is a sustainable distinction between what is made up and what is discovered, between bits of the known world that are culturally constructed and discourse-dependent and those that are just “out there” and free of all linguistic and cultural trappings. This itself is hardly a new claim, if we keep the history of antirealism in mind. Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that in the last twenty years certain literary-critical movements have developed it in such a way that this old position at least seems to have been given very new clothing. I have in mind here panfictionalism as we find it in French and North American poststructuralism and postmodernism, the region of current theory with which we habitually contrast (helpfully or not) analytic philosophy.

In its most notorious and perhaps excessive form, we have the wing of postmodernism typified by the later writings of Jean Baudrillard. To gloss a fairly

familiar position, Baudrillard has popularized the idea that in our age reality has been lost and replaced with “hyperreality.” We live under the tyranny of what he calls *simulacra*, a sort of cyber-world in which symbols have effectively overtaken and banished the symbolized, ousted the reality our linguistic signs once stood for. Baudrillard’s postmodernism, and the school of thought associated with it, might playfully be described as what we would have if Marshall McLuhan had written Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, the belief that media has usurped message sung as a dirge for contemporary culture. A characteristic claim might be:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America, which *is* Disneyland.... Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyper-real and simulation. (1983, 25)

If we generalize Baudrillard’s musing on Disneyland into a description of contemporary culture at large, we have what we might call the pop version of panfictionalism, the territory of critical theory which is likely responsible for the fact that so many analytic philosophers, for better or worse, are unwilling to take seriously anything that goes by the name of postmodernism or poststructuralism. What we might call proper panfictionalism, the form of panfictionalism I am specifically interested in here, comes from another corner of postmodern/poststructuralist thought, and it is none too difficult to pinpoint exactly which. When we find on the back cover of one of the most prominent recent works of analytic philosophy of literature blurbs such as “The establishment has been sitting like a rabbit for too long in the headlights of literary theory,” and “An excellent and accessible account of fiction, which is used to dissect the pretension of postmodernist literary theory,” we just *know*, even if no names are mentioned, whom the authors have in mind. (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994) It is the critical theory identified not with Baudrillardian pop panfictionalism but most conspicuously with Derrida and the Yale School, the very academically active form of deconstruction-inspired philosophy and criticism that has dominated North American departments of literature since the 1970s.

The basic form of the threat they purportedly pose is thought to lie in their taking philosophy’s core distinctions between fact and fiction, truth and falsity, referring expression and referent, and deconstructing them into oblivion, attempting to pull out from beneath us the traditional foundation on which investigations into the nature of literary-fictive writing have been built. Terry Eagleton captures the basic form of panfictionalism with which these theorists are thought to threaten us.

It is a mistake to believe that any language is *literally* literal. Philosophy, law, political theory work by metaphor just as poems do, and so are just as fictional.... [L]iterature for the deconstructionists testifies to the impossibility of language ever doing more than talk about its own failure, like some barroom bore. Literature is the ruin of all reference, the cemetery of communication. (1983, 145–146)

Stanley Fish might also be mentioned here:

When we communicate, it is because we are parties to a set of discourse agreements which are in effect decisions as to what can be stipulated as fact. It is these decisions and the agreement to abide by them, rather than the availability of substance, that make it possible for us to refer, whether we are novelists or reporters for the *New York Times*. One might object that this has the consequence of making all discourse fictional; but it would be just as accurate to say that it makes all discourse serious, and it would be better still to say that it puts all discourse on a par. (1980, 244)

Unlike Baudrillardian pop panfictionalism—which, as even the sympathetic often concede, tends to trade in sweeping pronouncements elicited from fairly flighty critical observations—in its highest form proper panfictionalism is often based on the detailed scrutiny of concrete texts, arguably as a radicalized appropriation of New Criticism’s method of close reading. The fear concerns what these theorists claim to have discovered from their readings: in a word, and as Fish says, that all forms of writing are equally fictional. The perceived threat is that it seems that panfictionalists want to claim that every writer who has based his literary investigation on the assumption of the uniqueness of works of fiction is seriously misguided. Indeed, it *looks* like the thesis of panfictionalism is simply claiming that there is *no* justification for making a basic contrast, as virtually the entire history of philosophy of literature does, between what Dolezel describes as “world-constructing and world-imaging texts,” (1998, 35) texts that elaborate fictional worlds and those that set their sights on the actual world. The implication appears to be that the entire frame of the debate is irreparably damaged, to be thrown aside. For if every form of discourse has the logic of fictional discourse, if all can be reduced to imaginative construction, narratives woven creatively and not by objective discovery, then the traditional philosopher of literature must be misguided, block-headed really since the distinction on which he bases his investigation is metaphysically mute.

Panfictionalism and Literary Fiction

Or so it would seem. But let us take a step back. Clearly there is a threat to a great number of core philosophical ideas here, from the notion that facts and fictions enjoy a different metaphysical status to the possibility of extralinguistic reference. From here it is easy to leap to the conclusion that panfictionalism implies that there is *nothing* of substance in the distinction between literary fiction and works of nonfiction, between texts that function to depict our world and those that depict fictional worlds. The question is whether this conclusion is warranted. I shall call this the *no-difference thesis*, and I shall treat it as claiming that the position described above destroys without remainder any theory of literary fiction that takes seriously the distinction between works of fiction and nonfiction. It is only the no-difference thesis that poses a genuine threat to this distinction. That panfictionalism does not imply this thesis is very easy to show.

Here we could rehearse the standard antiskeptical arguments we often find in philosophy, and attempt to tackle the issue by trying to undermine the panfictionalist's ability to make wholesale claims to the effect that language fails to connect us to reality (as would appear to underlie the claim that all discourse is "fictional"). But the argument I have in mind is not so technical. Indeed it is altogether pedestrian, and I think effective for this reason. It recommends itself without requiring *any* stance toward the thesis of panfictionalism, and so it can be accepted regardless of where one stands in relation to the line that divides the radicals from the conservatives in this debate.

The basic idea is this: while—let us say for the sake of argument—there may be any number of interesting respects in which it is possible to collapse the fact/fiction distinction, *within* the practice of *reading* various texts it makes all the difference whether we read something as fiction or nonfiction. In short, regardless of whether the objects of each type of text turn out, on metaphysical reflection, to be fictitious, we still can give solid ground to the distinction. The question is social, a matter of what sort of attitude is called on by the practice, cultural at root, of appreciating a work *as a work of fiction*. I begin only with the assumption, quite uncontroversial I would think, that if I present you with a text and tell you that it is a work of literary fiction, you would not read it in the same way you would if I presented it to you as (and convinced you that it was) nonfiction, regardless of whether you are a wild panfictionalist or a rigid realist. And from this I think it is a very easy step to see that we explain this by stating that it is because you know, if you at all understand the practices of reading fiction and nonfiction, that while one sort of text asks to be read as attempting to describe our world, the other does not.

It is quite irrelevant to the distinction between fiction and nonfiction whether all narratives—historical, philosophical, or literary—are equally "made-up," groundless. If we embrace panfictionalism, we shall believe that those texts

that feign to represent the world will always fail to give us what they promise, that they will never do anything more than proffer what turn out to be fictions. But notice that we can speak of failure here, that we can say that they are deluded in believing that they can aspire to show us reality. We would never say that a literary text *fails* in this respect, for the obvious reason that we do not even treat works of literary fiction as having this aspiration; we do not regard them as players in this sort of game. This appears to support the common claim that while we use the criterion of adequacy to “the way the world is” when evaluating standard forms of nonfiction, we do *not* when evaluating literary fiction. Panfictionalism may offer reasons for rejecting the traditional ways in which we explain this notion of adequacy (we lose, among other things, the concepts of truth, correspondence to the facts, reference to extratextual reality), but it in no obvious way tells us that there is no interesting distinction to be made between the structure of appreciation and logic of evaluation we apply to the writings we find in *Scientific American* and *Granta*. In other words, regardless of whether we accept or reject panfictionalism, what we are beginning to see is that we still have a way to maintain a distinction between how different sorts of texts attempt to relate us to the world.

The point is so transparent that one finds oneself with a bit of a red face in stating it. Even if one regards works of history and science as both teeming with fictions, if he *reads* them as he reads a work of literary fiction, he would be engaging in a glaring act of cultural incompetence. For this is the best we could say of someone who when discussing his culture does not or cannot distinguish the world he finds in Orwell’s *1984* from the one he learns about in a course in twentieth-century history. When we explain this incompetence, in no obvious sense do we need to invoke a theory of facts and fictions, or any theory at all. It is not because of a particular *theory* of the possibility, say, of extratextual reference that we can say that while a *Rough Guide* travel book speaks about the “real” Venice, *Othello* describes a fictional version of the same city. It is to say that while in the first case the text is read as trying to depict particulars and happenings found in the actual world, in the second it is not.

In short, each brick in the wall that separates fiction from nonfiction can be accounted for in pragmatic terms, in the vocabulary of a convention-based practice—what we might describe as the socially prescribed rules of reading. Once we see that the contrast can be explained on the level of convention, the kind of reflection panfictionalism offers does nothing to threaten the basic distinction between fiction and non-fiction. As Dolezel notes, “if reality is called fiction, a new word for fiction has to be invented.” (X) In other words, even if we accept panfictionalism, at best we shall find ourselves with a contrast between texts we take to offer fictional worlds and those we take to offer representations of *our* “fictional” reality: we shall still have justification for believing in the uniqueness of literary fiction. It may be the case, let us concede for the moment, that everything we call a fact is really only what Bentham called a “fiction of convenience,” that

“reality” is a fiction to which we have allotted special privileges in our language games. But if this is so, without a tremendous amount of additional argumentation, claims of this order in no way suggest that we should regard literary fiction and nonfiction as both pointing the reader in the same direction, toward the worlds of narrative fiction. The reordering of our metaphysical assumptions about the nature of “reality” may cause shifts in what we understand to be the objects of straightforwardly empirical descriptions, but it will not in any conceivable way remove the wall we place between Othello’s world and ours. If we take the metaphysical substance out of our understanding of the difference between these two worlds, we are left with the very thick residue of conventional distinction, thick enough to show that a great space still exists between the two. This reveals the no-difference thesis to be indefensible.

Panfictionalism tells us what counts as fictional—everything—but not what counts as a work of *literary* fiction. It makes a claim about when narratives describe fictitious objects—always—but not when they are narratives of *fictional worlds*. Panfictionalism in no conceivable way suggests that philosophical honesty calls on us to remove the fiction and nonfiction designators we find in bookstores. To be sure, the distinction is no more challenged by the sort of theoretical observations panfictionalism offers than the everyday distinction between past and present is by the theory of relativity or McTaggart’s Paradox. If McTaggart was right, we shall need to change the theory with which we explain the practice of using this distinction. But we would not say that the distinction is to be completely abandoned, as though we would think one a great fool should one still distinguish past from present. Likewise, panfictionalism at best threatens what we believe to be the available range of theories for explaining certain routine ways of contrasting the kinds of objects described in fiction and nonfiction. It in no obvious way threatens the distinction itself.

Panfictionalism in Perspective

I think we can see the bogeyman. For panfictionalism to be any sort of threat to the distinction between fiction and nonfiction as tradition theory and philosophy of literature rely on it, it must amount to a no-difference thesis. But this is patently false, as alluring as the inference might be when we find a Hayden White or a Jacques Derrida arguing that ultimately every form of discourse succeeds no more than narrative fiction in describing nondiscursive reality. It is an interesting question for metaphysics, semantics, and discourse theory, but not for the theory of literary fiction. Indeed, as it is promoted by those who are considered a threat, panfictionalism is always presented on either metaphysical or semantic/linguistic grounds, a theory whose point is to deflate the claim, for example, that philosophy and science are more sophisticated than literature because they attempt to get outside of their own textuality and touch reality. It is a sign of the blurring of the

distinction between the work done by philosophers and literary theorists that literary theorists are entering into this debate, not an indication that they have hijacked core philosophical notions and used them to wreak havoc on our commonsense notions of the different ways works of fiction and nonfiction engage our appreciation. To be sure, as far as I can see panfictionalism is the old dish of idealism served up by literary theorists, seasoned differently than philosophers might be used to, but essentially a contemporary version of a very ancient plate—and no more relevant to the distinction between different types of texts than idealism has ever been. To my knowledge none of the theorists held responsible for panfictionalism ever claims otherwise. It is telling that even Stanley Fish, one of the most noticeable proponents of panfictionalism, reminds us that his arguments raise a question about the “status of the ‘facts’ we oppose to fictions, not that we cannot make a distinction between reading fiction and nonfiction.” (197)

There is an “optimistic” upshot of panfictionalism which we should note before closing our discussion. Proper panfictionalism, as I understand it, is essentially used as a foil against the literarily crude but still prevalent idea that because works of literary fiction are “made-up,” they are at best charming playthings—entertaining but ultimately empty texts that are to be set aside from the cognitively valuable writings of philosophy and the hard and soft sciences. In other words, proper panfictionalism is at least in part motivated by the desire to undermine traditional reasons for denying literature the status of the serious, reasons that since Plato have led many philosophers to dismiss literature as often beautiful and amusing but basically trivial. I would venture that this explains much of the allure panfictionalism has for the serious admirer of literature. This motivation to restore the dignity of literature in the face of the charge that its fictionality makes it frivolous is admirable, a desire we should take to heart.

Nevertheless, we do seem to pay a high philosophical price for this; and I think that in paying this fee, we find, ironically, that we get what we want much too cheaply. We put literature on a par with other forms of writing by vulgarizing the competition, making every form of writing have the same flaw that is traditionally used to deny literature membership among the serious forms of writing. What we should rather try to show is that literature can be seen as having an equal claim to bringing us into contact with what the putative “heavy” forms of writing do. For this reason it is hard to imagine that anyone who believes that literature stores a wealth of cognitive and social value would accept panfictionalism. The authors who have given us “proper” panfictionalism have forced into the debate a much-needed reevaluation of the idea of literature as somehow a non-serious form of writing—we are, and largely because of reactions to pop and proper panfictionalism, talking about this again—but we would do best not to adopt their precise strategy for undermining antiliterary prejudices.

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