

Peter Lang

Disputable Core Concepts of Narrative Theory

Göran Rossholm &
Christer Johansson (eds)

The present volume is a contribution to the theory of narrative by scholars from various disciplines, mainly scholars from Comparative Literature but also contributors from Philosophy, Psychology and the languages. The essays focus on central terms and concepts in narrative theory over the last forty years. Established narratological concepts, such as narrative, narrator, story, fiction, character, narrative (un)reliability and point of view, but also relational concepts motivated by the expansion of narratology, such as narrative and non-verbal media, narrative and personal identity and narrative and literary genre, are themes dealt with.

In addition to presenting a critical examination of the core concepts of narrative theory, the volume is a demonstration of the vigour of contemporary Nordic narrative theory. The authors work at universities in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Norway and Sweden, and they all belong to the *Nordic Network of Narrative Studies*.

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Introduction

The present volume is a contribution to the theory of narrative by scholars from various disciplines, focusing on central terms and concepts in narrative theory over the last forty years. Established narratological concepts, such as “narrative”, “narrator”, “story”, “fiction”, “character” and “point of view”, but also relational concepts motivated by the expansion of narratology, such as “narrative and non-verbal media”, “narrative and personal identity” and “narrative and literary genre”, are themes dealt with. The double characterisation “core concepts” and “disputable concepts” shall be seen against the background of the following brief sketch of the field and the history of our discipline.

The term “narratology” was coined by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969, and the French classical structuralists Roland Barthes, Algirdas Greimas, Claude Bremond, Gérard Genette and Todorov all published seminal works on narrative theory in the following decade. But narratology dates further back: Barthes’ “Introduction à l’analyse des récits” (*Communications* 8) and Greimas’ *Sémantique structural* appeared already in 1966, and their works have a well-known prehistory in Russian formalism and in the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev – for a survey of early narratology, see Herman (2005). The French structuralists dominated the scene of narrative theory during the 70s, but after 1980 – the year when the English translation of Genette’s highly influential book, *Narrative Discourse*, appeared – the focus moved from *story narratology*, the study of the structure of the story, to *discourse narratology*, the study of how the story is told.

The second high tide of narratology is more difficult to summarize as we are still there, but although there is more that unites than separates today’s narrative theory and the classical narratology of the

60s and 70s, a few shifts can be observed. The post-structuralist reaction contained some criticism of the systematic scientific aspirations of the narratological project, and a number of competing less “scientific” scholarly fields, such as post-colonial studies, gender studies and cultural studies, gained ground. One consequence of this development was the emergence of amalgated narratologies, such as post-colonial narratology, gender narratology and so on. Another consequence of the post-structural scepticism, highly relevant to the present volume, was the increased need to reflect on and reappraise the basic assumptions and concepts of narrative theory.

The systematic ambition is crucial to narratology, new and old. Discussing literary scholarship Genette posits narratology at the scientific end of a scale of methodological elaboration: “literary studies today oscillate between the philately of interpretative criticism and the mechanics of narratology” (Genette 1988, 8). (The formulation is inspired by the physicist Ernest Rutherford’s tripartition of science into physics, chemistry and philately.) The scientific aspirations in the first generation of narratologists – to which Genette belongs – were often put in even more grandiose terms: the field under investigation was not only literary narratives such as novels and short stories, but narratives of every kind in any medium, and the aim of the narratological enterprise was to establish the laws of narration. These aspirations of the classical narrative theorists of the 70s and their predecessors in East and Central Europe stood out in sharp relief to the standard hermeneutic conception of literary studies in post-romantic Europe. According to this latter concept, the Humanist scholar focused on the particular, his/her task was “ideographic”, in contrast to the “nomothetical” natural scientist who sought general laws to make sense of the course of events in the universe, and in contrast also to the standard idea of the narratologist.

However, the analogy between the natural sciences and narratology should not be taken too far. It is true that both seek general patterns, but only the physicist does so in order to explain and predict. The narratologist’s ambition is generally more humble – to describe and systematize. The “laws” of classical narrative theory are not directly inspired by natural sciences but by linguistics. The history of

narrative theory from the 70s until this day may – as suggested by Monika Fludernik – be described as a series of reflections of successive dominant linguistic theories, such as Saussurian structuralism, generative grammar, pragmatics, text grammar, and – for the moment – cognitive linguistics (Fludernik 2005, 48). But such an account leaves out several parts of the picture. One is what is sometimes referred to as “the narrative turn”, i. e. the transfer of narrative terms and ideas into new disciplines, such as the social sciences and medicine, and a more intensified application of narrative theory to non-verbal media, and other transgressing activities. Another difference between classical narratology and narrative theory today is the increased role played by theories of fiction, due to the works of philosophers, notably David Lewis (1983), Gregory Currie (1990) and Kendall Walton (1990). Philosophers being as inclined to seek general truths as linguists, their impact on narrative theory has been one more factor strengthening the nomothetic character of narrative theorizing. Finally, in the wake of Monika Fludernik’s book *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (1996) many scholars in the present generation have stressed the continuity between what is considered to be the basis of different kinds of narratives, namely everyday verbal informative communication, and narrative literary works in general.

So, the present situation motivates a deepened examination of the basic concepts, terms and assumptions of narrative theory as well as an inspection of some themes and consequences of the “narrative turn”. The export of narratological key words such as “story” or “narrative” requires renewed reflections on what we should put into these terms. The thesis about the continuity between everyday communication and narrative literary works requires a closer look on the concepts that are central in narratology but problematic with respect to this thesis, for instance fictionality and the phenomenon of the unreliable narrator. What is taken as unreliable or untrue cannot be regarded as information in any usual sense of the word. One more crucial term, “character”, is problematic in a related way: is a fictional character to be understood as an existing person or as an aesthetic invention? Conversely, in the social sciences the issue has been raised of the relation between personal identity – in real life, not in litera-

ture – and narrativity. Within literary studies similar tendencies have shifted the focus from narrative studies of novels and short stories to multi-medial narrating and to genres not normally recognized as narratives, such as lyrical works, replacing the question Narrative or not? with What kind of narrativity, and to what degree? These and other questions motivated by the present situation in narrative theory are discussed by the eighteen contributors to the book.

Several of the articles in the present volume discuss fictionality in different senses. Sten Wistrand critically analyzes the Fiction-as-fact-thesis as formulated by James Phelan in his often quoted “natural” definition of narrative (“somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened” [Phelan 2004, 631]) and as it is manifested in the idea of fictional worlds in the theories of Marie-Laure Ryan, Kendall Walton and David Lewis. Staffan Carlshamre’s topic is the “fictionalizing” of narratives, that is, the question whether narrativity necessarily implies fictionality. He discusses the happy ending in this respect, whether there are happy endings, and whether there are endings at all, in our extra-narrative reality. Leif Søndergaard approaches the dividing line or the grey zone separating fictional narratives from factual ones. In many novels from the last fifty years the very concept of fiction is challenged by genres such as the documentary novel from the 1960s to today’s performative biographism. Søndergaard’s perspective is not confined to narratological themes; he also discusses the ethical implications of blurring or transgressing the facts-ficta distinction. Mari Hatavara approaches the fact-fiction issue by analyzing a novel about the Finnish civil war 1918 as an example of a narrative genre – the historical metafiction, mixing fictionality and factuality, which rather than unveiling the historical past presents obstacles to grasping it.

In Per Krogh Hansen’s article fictionality is also central, though its main topic is another: character. As Hansen points out, this concept has received little attention in structuralist narratology, in spite of its central role in classical poetics. He examines the two approaches to characterology, the mimetic and the textualist. Lars-Åke Skalin makes a similar distinction, between internal and external approaches to character, and he argues in favour of the latter: characters are motifs, not

particulars, not existents, and as motifs they are inseparable parts of an aesthetic whole. Marina Grishakova focuses on character-narrators who cause trouble to traditional characterology – psychopathological, in particular schizophrenic, characters. She proposes a performative-situational approach toward this problematic kind of consciousness, a method informed by ideas from psychology, philosophy of mind and other fields.

Christer Johansson's and Göran Rossholm's contributions are about even more basic narratological concepts. Johansson discusses telling and showing – a distinction central in many narratological studies but rooted in an ancient poetological tradition – from a semiotic point of view, using the concepts of iconicity and indexicality, and Rossholm presents proposals to the role and anatomy of the story concept in relation to different definitions of the term “narrative”.

Jeremy Hawthorn focuses on a narratologically neglected term in Phelan's definition of narration quoted above: “occasion”. (From the formulation “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened”.) Hawthorn discusses the applicability and the ethical significance of this concept with regard to Joseph Conrad's novel *The Shadow-Line. A Confession* and Philip Roth's novel *Exit Ghost*.

Three of the authors discuss the concept of narrative unreliability. When Wayne Booth (1961) first presented his ideas about unreliable narration he restricted the term to fictional narratives. However, he could hardly be said to argue for this restriction, he rather took it for granted. Pekka Tammi investigates the possibilities of unreliability in the Boothian sense in non-fictional narratives. Another restriction, according to most narrative theorists, is the presumed fact that unreliability only occurs in homodiegetic narratives, never in heterodiegetic ones, i.e. third person narratives. This contention is challenged by Rolf Gaasland's analysis of Franz Kafka's short story “Erstes Lied”. Anniken Greve sets out to defend a communicative view on form as a feature of literariness. To that end she analyzes the role played by nonsense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Kafka's “Die Verwandlung”. Her conclusion comes close to Gaasland's position, that is, an assent to the idea of heterodiegetic unreliability.

Erik van Ooijen and Greger Andersson examine aspects of the history of narratology. van Ooijen discusses the two opposing tendencies in classical structural narratology and also in the historiography of narratology, the tendency toward building a Humanist nomothetic science about narrativity as a human characteristic, and the poetological tendency to analyze literary works. van Ooijen argues that the practice of the two most influential narratological structuralists, Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, is firmly rooted in literary and aesthetic criticism, not in any structuralist Humanistic superdiscipline. Andersson examines critically Fludernik's and Herman's account of the history of narrative theory mentioned above. He concludes that in important aspects narratology today and classical structuralist narratology have the same shortcomings. As an alternative he advocates Lars-Åke Skalin's "fictionological" approach to literary narratives (Skalin 1991).

Jakob Lothe's article on W.G. Sebald's use of photography belongs to the extension of narrative investigations referred to as the "narrative turn" above. Lothe analyzes the function of photos of trains and railways in relation to the text in two of Sebald's works. Matti Hyvärinen scrutinizes Galen Strawson's influential contribution to the discussion about narrativity and personal identity – one more example of a "narrative turn"-issue – and concludes that Strawson's critical attitude is partly founded on a simplistic view of narrativity. Markku Lehtimäki also explores the outskirts of the traditional narrative territory; he demonstrates how the aesthetic program of imagism – a lyrical program – is brought to work in the prose of Ernest Hemingway.

A secondary aim of the volume is to demonstrate the vigour of contemporary Nordic narrative theory. The authors are working at universities in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Norway and Sweden, and they all belong to a Nordic narrative network (Nordic Network of Narrative Studies, <<http://www.nordicnarratologynet.ut.ee/>>, Nordforsk) active since 2007.

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STEN WISTRAND

Time for Departure? The Principle of Minimal Departure – a Critical Examination

[The inn-keeper] asked him also, whether he had any money about him. Don Quixote replied, he had not a farthing, having never read in the histories of knight-errant, that they carried any. To this the host replied, he was under a mistake; for, supposing it was not mentioned in the story, the author thinking it superfluous to specify a thing so plain, and so indispensably necessary to be carried, as money and clean shirts, it was not therefore to be inferred, that they had none: and therefore he might be assured, that all the knights-errant (of whose actions there are such authentic histories) did carry their purses well lined for whatever might befall them; and they also carried shirts [...]. (Cervantes 1998, 33)

A narrative, fictional or not, is usually understood as a “recounting” (Prince 2003, 58). A modern and often cited definition is this one by James Phelan: “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened” (Phelan 2004, 631). Already in 1980 Nicholas Wolterstorff summarized this as “the orthodox view” on the matter, adding that he himself found it a “most surprising” thesis (Wolterstorff 1980, 170–172).

Every concept defining narratives as being *about* something implies the existence of gaps in the rendering, the possible existence of more, but on this occasion not delivered, information. Related to, you might even say part and parcel of, this idea is the concept of fiction stories as “worlds” to investigate and even to enter. But in comparison to a real world the fictional world can be considered “incomplete” since it would be impossible for the author of a novel to mention and describe everything which might belong to this implied world. “Fictional entities are inherently incomplete”, as Ruth

Ronen puts it, as opposed to reality where “we assume that there are no gaps and that gaps in representation can be filled by reference to a complete, fully detailed and, at least in principle, available object” (Ronen 1994, 114–115). On this topic classical as well as modern narratologists – and also many others not engaged in narratology – seem to be unanimous although their conclusions might differ.¹

I suppose most of us would sign a statement saying that fictional narratives normally are created by an author, but as long as you treat those narratives as worlds being told about, this world will gain an existence of its own – and so the narratives become something to *reconstruct* rather than to follow.² Even Lubomir Doležel, who emphasizes the work of fiction as a construction by an author, treats it as a world built up by objects and inhabited by characters talked about – that is, something for the reader to reconstruct.³

But we also have dissident voices in this discussion. Käte Hamburger for example is prepared to take the consequences of regarding fiction as a non-referential construction, saying: “The narrative poet is not a statement-subject. He does not narrate about persons and things. But rather he narrates these persons and things” (Hamburger 1973, 136). In that case everything must be seen as working on the same ontological level in producing to the reader an aesthetic experience and we cannot speak of the characters as subjects walking around among objects in a world. Instead objects, characters, “worlds” are all

1 See for example Ingarden 1973, 251, Iser 1978, 279–280, Chatman 1980, 120–121, Pavel 1986, 108, Sternberg 1987, 236, Gerrig 1993, 17, Doležel 1998, 169, Spolsky 2005, 193, Harshav 2007, 131.

2 Cf. Ronen: “Anna Karenina is logically an incomplete being, but she is not grasped as such in the process of *reconstructing the fictional world*.” (Ronen 1994, 130; my italics)

3 Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff’s remark that in Doležel’s work there are passages that “would lead one to think that Prof. Doležel’s theory is not that the fiction-maker brings into being, or creates, his characters; but rather that his fiction-making turns entities already in being into entities having the property of being characters in fiction” (Wolterstorff 1989, 244, note 2). Wolterstorff is commenting on a conference paper from 1989 by Doležel, but his remark is equally valid for the later Doležel, the paper to a high degree being a forerunner to the “Prologue T” in his *Heterocosmica* (1998).

rhetorical means in the hand of the author.⁴ Lars-Åke Skalin puts it like this:

My view is this: *the reader's interpretation*, understood as the realisation of the entities of the work as they are presented before him during the narrative process, *must be on the same logical level as the configurative act of the poet, his poesis*. (Skalin 1991, 158; my trans.)

And according to Richard Walsh

the reader's interpretative agenda cannot be understood within the bounds of a fictional world, or indeed in relation to its fictional existence rather than its actual communication, and that relevance, even when it is described internally as relevance to story, is always, reciprocally, relevance to the reader. (Walsh 2007, 20)

This way of seeing it will not only have consequences for the discussion of “completeness” and “gaps” and for the relation between fictional worlds and our actual world, it will also question the very concept of fiction as worlds to enter.

In this article I will mainly discuss what Marie-Laure Ryan has launched as the Principle of Minimal Departure, Kendall Walton as the Reality Principle and the Mutual Belief Principle, and David Lewis as Analysis I and Analysis II. Though they term it in different ways, they all say about the same thing, and if you want to summarize the meaning of it, you could refer to the view held by the inn-keeper in *Don Quixote* (as cited above), although expressed 400 years earlier and with no far-going theoretical pretensions. A basic assumption is that we understand fiction in about the same way as we understand reality and regard

4 It is telling to compare how Doležel and Hamburger respectively understands Aristotle's concept of mimesis. For Doležel it is a question of “imitations or representations of actually existing entities” (Doležel 1998, 6) while Hamburger interprets it not as copying this and that from reality but as a representation of life as it goes on. Her point is that mimetic literature “represents and ‘makes’ men in action” (Hamburger 1973, 10–14). Cf. Skalin, according to whom the “very essence of mimesis is this *dramatic* presentation of life as a sequential movement understood in contrast to the *telling* of it” (Skalin 2008, 240).

it as worlds to enter. If a narrative is understood as someone telling someone else that something has happened this presupposes a world in which these happenings have taken place, and this world we are supposed to imagine (or enter) in order to understand the narrative.

I find all these principles and presuppositions problematic, both on theoretical and on practical grounds, but it should also right from the start be stated that I approach these matters not as a philosopher but as a literary critic. My main concern is what the consequences will be when applying the principle of minimal departure, here used as a generic term, on fictional texts. To me it seems that principles of this kind are hard to make operational without bringing about absurd outcomes. But since the principles at stake are inseparable from certain theoretical standpoints, the latter also must be included in this discussion.⁵

In *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* Marie-Laure Ryan derives

a law of primary importance for the phenomenology of reading. This law – to which I shall refer as the principle of minimal departure – states that we reconstrue the central world of a textual universe in the same way we reconstrue the alternate possible worlds of nonfactual statements: as conforming as far as possible to our representations of AW [the actual world]. We will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text. (Ryan 1991, 51)⁶

Ryan reasons in about the same way as Roman Ingarden in *The Literary Work of Art* – which is not surprising since they both work within a phenomenologist tradition. This means that she discusses fiction in a special way, putting a certain kind of questions concentrating on what could be said of the fictional worlds presented. For example

5 Cf. Richard Walsh declaring that “narrative theory must be accountable to the general experience of narrative” (Walsh 2007, 4).

6 Fourteen years later she holds the same opinion, saying that “when readers construct fictional worlds, they fill in the gaps in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own experiential reality”; this is “the principle of minimal departure”, and it “can only be overruled by the text itself” (Ryan 2005, 447).

she maintains that a statement like “Charles Bovary is one-legged” is to be taken as false in the universe of the novel. The reason for this is that the text presents Charles as a human being, and the normal number of legs for a human being is two (Ryan 1991, 51).⁷ And when Babar the elephant goes to a restaurant Ryan holds that we make this inference: “Babar was hungry, and he went to the restaurant to eat.” We draw this conclusion because we assume that this anthropomorphic elephant is “attracted to restaurants for the same reason we are” (52). In other words, Ryan regards the matter a pure physiological/psychological question. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, we do not go to restaurants for just one reason, so even if we accept Ryan’s own theoretical grounds it is not for certain that Babar is hungry. He could be tired and so he just wishes to sit down for a while, he might choose a restaurant for social reasons and so on.⁸ Secondly, and more important, if this supposed hunger-motif is not introduced by the author of the story, Jean de Brunhoff, and if it is of no importance for the story, why should we as readers make it up? And, by the way, what are we to do with a talking elephant dressed in a green suit? This kind of restaurant visitor is, after all, not that common in the actual world. I imagine that the answer to this

7 In this case Ryan refers to Doležel’s article “Truth and Authenticity in Narrative” (1980). But I cannot see that he falls back on the kind of logic Ryan ascribes to him. This becomes even clearer when he revisits the issue in *Heterocosmica* (1998, 22). David Herman, in turn, wants to reconcile Doležel’s discussion of implicitness with Ryan’s principle of minimal departure, although they talk of quite different things. Herman’s argumentation also shows to be close to Ryan’s but alien to Doležel’s. For example he refers to Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* saying that: “even though Chopin’s narrator nowhere states as much in the text [...], I assume that Edna Pontellier is human, has two rather than six or twenty-four eyes, is not equipped with a canine kidney or the spleen of an ancient Egyptian [...] and does not have a secret and uncanny ability to speak the Klingon language, some sixty or seventy years before the science fiction series *Star Trek* was even created” (Herman 2002, 66–69). This is in line with Ryan but would rather be regarded as a kind of nonsense statements if we were to follow Doležel.

8 In this case I suppose Ryan would argue that the *most common* reason for visiting a restaurant is to get some food and so the principle of minimal departure still would be at work.

would be that we recognise Babar as being anthropomorphised, and so we compare his habits with human behaviours rather than elephantine. But in that case we might get into troubles explaining his, for a human, somewhat odd exterior and why the author insists on calling him an elephant.

Of course Ryan is aware of these problems. In order to deal with the latter she introduces the concept of “generic landscapes” (55). That means that the textual actual world (TAW) is understood in accordance with what we expect to find in it due to its genre:

Reading a fairy tale, we know right away that we may find dragons and flying horses, foxes and frogs, but not catfish, mosquitoes, or sparrows. [...] We expect some animals to be able to talk (foxes, frogs, owls, golden fish, deer) and some other to be deprived of this ability (cows, pigs, flies). [...] On the other hand, we expect some suspension of the real world laws of human psychology: the princess and the hero may have many children, but their love is Platonic, and they are free from urges of sexuality. (55)

Since generic landscapes are

extracted from fully reconstituted textual universes, these objects have already been preprocessed according to the principle of minimal departure. Generic competence tells us that flying horses belong to the landscape of fairy tales, while knowledge of the world enables us to visualize them. (55)⁹

But how are we to treat things not mentioned in fairy tales? We know that sexual feelings are part of the human nature, and yet they seem to be strangely wanting among princesses in this kind of stories. Ryan argues that the

prototypical fairy tale princess is an incomplete entity, lacking determination on the feature of sexuality, but the princesses of individual fairy tales are ontologically normal human beings, who simply reveal nothing of their sexuality in the events shown in the text.

9 I suppose that this also would be Ryan’s way of handling Babar’s dressing habits: animals are often clothed in children’s books and our real world knowledge of elephants and green suits make it possible for us to imagine the combination. Now, of course the whole thing is even easier because of de Brunhoff’s illustrations, but that’s another matter.

This means that the principle of minimal departure “operates on the individuated characters of particular texts, not on the abstract classes of generic landscapes”. Thus, reading is a “compromise between minimal departure and intertextuality”, allowing dragons in “Snow White”, although they violate the principle of minimal departure from the actual world, and money in the chivalry romances, which according solely to the generic landscape concept could not be accepted (56).

Coming so far Ryan seems to hesitate: “It may be objected that these questions are irrelevant to anyone not enamored with the logic of possible worlds: if dragons and money play no part in the plot, does it really matter whether or not they do exist in TAW?” (56) But she has an answer at hands:

Fortunately, the usefulness of minimal departure and of generic landscapes is not limited to Byzantine philosophical questions: minimal departure explains the very possibility of making truth-functional statements about fiction, as well as the (pretended) ontological completeness of fictional beings, while generic landscapes predict what will be shown and hidden in a certain type of text, what will be given or denied significance. (56–57)

But isn’t this answer only begging the question? The idea of things being “shown and hidden” in the text for example presupposes the concept of a complete fictional world.

Another potential objection to the principle of minimal departure, Ryan says, is that all texts will be tuned into one and the same kind, “pressing the variety of fictional universes into the same ontological mold” (Ryan 1991, 57). She admits that “it seems counterintuitive” to say that Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina and Carroll’s Alice “participate in the same mode of existence” and that it would be to misread Kafka’s *The Trial*

if we filled in the gaps in the representation of the Court according to our knowledge of real world institutions [...]. The information about the Court is so sparse and contradictory, the logic of its operations so arcane, that assimilation with familiar institutions never takes root. (57)

Her reply to these objections is that “every text is placed under the authority of the principle of minimal departure, but that it is textually

feasible to challenge this authority by either frustrating or subverting the principle” (57). To exemplify the latter she mentions works like *Alice in Wonderland* and Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*: “The point of the text is to call in mind the principle of minimal departure – only to block its operation”. (58)

As I see it, there are some problems here. Dissident authors during the so called “normalization” in Czechoslovakia – launched in 1969 after the crushing of the Prague Spring in August 1968 – actually could feel uncomfortably at home in the Court practice of *The Trial* and explicitly referred to it in order to describe their own situation and dealings with the judicial authorities.¹⁰ This of course is not the same as practising the principle of minimal departure, but it shows that “arcane operations” and recognizable features from the actual world not always are that easy to keep distinct from each other.

But let us consider another famous fictional, but not that arcane, court. I think of the one in Albert Camus’ *The Outsider*. Personally, I know nothing about courts in Alger in the 1930s and, to be honest, I have never felt the need to inform me in order to understand what is going on during the proceedings in part two of the novel. However, I have read somewhere, as a comment on the novel, that a French court at the time being never would have sentenced a Frenchman to death only for killing an Arab. Does this information make it easier to comprehend the story? I would say no, and the reason for this is simple: if it showed up that I have been subjected to misinformation on the issue – and that the courts in fact had dozens of Frenchmen executed every year for committing this very crime – it wouldn’t alter a thing when it comes to my understanding of *The Outsider*.

All this said it stands to reason that authors of fiction can presuppose the reader to have certain knowledge about things in the world in order to understand their novels and dramas: plain facts, historical events, philosophical ideas, and so on, and so on. “Do you want a touch of that cat before you walk the plank?” the horrible captain Hook cries out to the captive boys in *Peter and Wendy* (Barrie 2004, 125), a question that might seem quite absurd if you do not know of

10 See for example Vaculík 1985, 273.

any other cats than the one-tailed ones – and of course you will miss some of the amusing irony if you do not grab the allusions to Eton College in the same book (chapters XIV and XV). But this is another kind of matters than those discussed by Ryan.

The “principle of minimal departure presupposes that fictional worlds [...] are ontologically complete entities” and “[t]o the reader’s imagination, undecidable propositions are a matter of missing information, not of ontological deficiency” (Ryan 2005, 447). In this respect Ryan is in direct opposition to Doležel and, as we have already seen, Ronen who claim fictional worlds to be ontologically incomplete. But what they all have in common is the use of the actual/real world as a kind of basic reference. If you, like Ryan, hold the fictional/possible world to be complete in the same way as the actual world it is because it is supposed to work just like the actual world (which is complete). On the other hand, following Doležel, fictional worlds could reasonably only be incomplete *as compared to* the complete actual/real world – which in turn means that they are viewed upon as worlds in the same sense as the actual/real world.

Ryan concludes that “[f]rom the point of view of the ‘actual actual world’ the worlds of fiction are discourse-created non-actual possible worlds, populated by incompletely specified individuals; but to the reader immersed in the text the TAW [textual actual world] is imaginatively real, and the characters are ontologically complete human beings” (Ryan 2005, 448). Interpretations of a work are therefore understood as understanding it *from within*.¹¹ This means that we

11 This transportation theory, and the concept of immersion, is widely spread. “Worth stressing, too,” writes David Herman, “is that the power of narrative to create worlds goes a long way toward explaining its immersiveness, its ability to transport interpreters into places and times they must occupy for the purposes of narrative comprehension” (Herman 2002, 16). Cf. Wolfgang Iser (1980, 140), Kendall Walton (1990, 6), Richard Gerrig (1993, 6–7, 16–17), James Phelan (1998, 97), Manfred Jahn (2007, 102), Uri Margolin (2007, 102), Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Iona Vultur (2005, 238), and Catherine Emmott (2005, 351). Lars-Åke Skalin makes a critical examination of the transportation theory in his “Readers in Wonderland? On the ‘Transportation’ Theory in Cognitive Narratology” (forthcoming).

are supposed to understand it in just about the same way as we understand our real, actual world. But do we?

Let us pretend we are looking at a painting showing some mouldy apples in a broken bowl standing on a table. Understood from within, as if we had been transported to and immersed in the presumed fictional world of the tainted fruits, the view might invoke a feeling of disgust and raise questions and possible answers to why these apples haven't been properly thrown away. If we instead look at the picture from the outside – that is, beholding it as a picture, an artistic artefact showing an aesthetically enjoyable vanitas-motif – we will not treat it as apples in a world but as an *apple-picture*, recognizable and appreciable as belonging to a certain genre. I would say that this is what most of us do. About the same goes for literature. How could we decide *what kind* of a story we are reading if we are to understand it from within? I am not saying that advocates of possible worlds and immersion theories deny our capability to recognize different genres and I am not protesting that they cannot deal with specific works in accordance with the genre to which they belong. The problem is that I cannot see how you are to combine the concept of an aesthetic structure, which is able to generate genre etc., with the concept of immersion and games of make-believe. If the former concept is subordinated to the latter it would be impossible to make out rules for how to fill in gaps etc. – but if the latter concept is subordinated to the former, as argued in this article, there is no point at all to engage oneself in any games of make-believe.

Opposite to what you at first might think, Ryan holds that it would be awkward to fill the TAW (the textual actual world) with everything existing in the AW (the actual world). For example, she finds it counterintuitive to see Paris as part of the geography of Kafka's *The Trial* or to think of the writings of Aquinas as “potentially available to the characters of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’” (Ryan 1991, 53). In order to “prevent the invasion of textual universes by unwanted species and individuals, we must give special treatments to existential propositions” (53) she states and then proposes three rules to make it possible for us to determine what in the AW which might be found or take place in the TAW. But this only seems to make the whole

thing even more complicated. To be able to read in the proper way, knowing what to include in and what to exclude from the TAW, the reader now is requested to have a lot of things in mind. If “a novel has a Rouen, it also has a Paris” (53), says Ryan with a reference to *Madame Bovary*. But, she continues, if a novel does not mention any specific town at all, as is the case in *The Trial*, it would be disturbing to claim that Paris is part of its TAW. And since fairy tales are supposed to be “roughly” medieval in setting more modern props must be excluded from their TAW:s – and so on (53–54). That is why computers must be excluded from fairy tales like “Little Red Hiding Hood”. They, simply enough, cannot come up with rule number 1: “x’s existed in AW in the stage of its historical development that corresponds to the stage at which TAW is shown” (53). Now, Ryan doesn’t want any computers to exist in the world of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” either. In this case rule number 1 is of no help; instead the computers violate rule number 2 which states that a species can only be transferred from AW to TRW (Textual Reference World) if “the appropriate environment for x’s is set up in the TAW” (53). This means that we exclude computers from “Jabberwocky” on “the basis that the text actualizes none of the frames in which they are likely to be found: technology, business, bureaucracy, etc. (53).” I find this rule a highly problematic one, and what’s more: it ought to be highly problematic also for Ryan since it undermines her whole possible world concept. The very moment Ryan begins to discuss matters in this way she actually, in practice, admits that fictional stories work in an entirely different way than factual stories.

Of course I agree that computers and the writings of Aquinas have nothing to do in “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Jabberwocky”. The problem is that Ryan argues from the story’s supposed world or environment and not out from the story. Aquinas is no motif whatsoever in these tales; he is kept out of fiction and therefore we do not need to bother about him at all. This, I suppose, is why Ryan right from the start found it counterintuitive to include him – but in that case her reading practice is alien to her own theory of reading. If she introduced the principle of minimal departure to explain how we *actually* read and understand factual as well as non-factual narratives,

she, a bit surprisingly, ends up presenting and discussing distinct *rules* for reading fiction in the *right* way. And to read in the right way is understood as reading in accordance with the principle of minimal departure without allowing it to produce what might be regarded as bizarre results. But the very setting up of this kind of rules undermines her theory and instead of solving any problems the rules in themselves only generate new ones.

A work causing Ryan thorough troubles is, not surprisingly, George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. Its TAW includes Churchill and Hitler but nevertheless she is not happy to accept Margaret Thatcher as part of it – in spite of the indisputable fact that this Iron Lady was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in the year 1984. This seems to be in conflict with Ryan's rule number 3 which goes like this: "the text names as member of TAW at least one individual or geographic location belonging to AW" (Ryan 1991, 53). So, why exclude Thatcher when other political leaders of the 20th century are mentioned? The crucial and disturbing point in this case is rule number 1: "x's existed in AW in the stage of its historical development that corresponds to the stage at which TAW is shown" (53). Well, Thatcher fulfils that demand. But the novel is, as we all know, *written* some decades *before* the story is supposed to take place and – ay, there's the rub!

All Ryan can do is to make this proposal: "Alternatively, the modern reader could assume that [Thatcher] exists in the world of *1984* but became a housewife, a chemist, or a member of Big Brother's police." (54) I suppose (or at least I hope) that this is meant as a joke; nevertheless it pinpoints the problem of the whole minimal departure concept. But Ryan shakes it off declaring that the case of *1984* "is so odd that it confirms the rule: the history of the real world had to catch up with the anticipated year 1984 for a textual universe to be selective in its hospitality toward historical figures" (53–54). This is, to say the least, hardly a satisfactory way to handle the question – and it is revealing that Ryan, who up to now has talked of minimal departure as a *law* for the phenomenology of reading and as a *principle* for understanding fiction, suddenly resorts to talking of it as a *rule*. By now it seems as if the Principle has got her into such an amount of troubles that one cannot help but asking why she does not

just get rid of it. Instead of solving problems it seems to constantly generate new ones.

Thomas Pavel in turn addresses the same inconveniences and also comes to the conclusion that some kind of relevance criteria are needed for what is to be included in the fictional world and what is not:

Since we do not want inference to spread indiscriminately across fictional worlds [...] some increasing resistance to maximal structures, must be at work in most fictional worlds, keeping them from expanding indefinitely along irrelevant lines. (Pavel 1986, 95)

Commenting on this, Richard Walsh finds it

striking [...] that all these manifestations of relevance are contingent upon the reader's realization of the fictional world. Yet [...] that realization itself must be contingent upon relevance criteria of a quite different order, if it is not to be an endless project. (Walsh 2007, 18)

I also find his conclusion hard to defy: "Once the idea of relevance is admitted [...] it entirely supersedes that of completeness." (18)

Whatever you think of Ryan's principle of minimal departure it seems to be at work – so to speak – when you compare it to the Reality Principle (RP) and the Mutual Belief Principle (MBP) launched by Kendall Walton one year earlier in his *Mimesis as Make-Believe*:

The basic strategy which the Reality Principle attempts to codify is that of making fictional worlds as much like the real one as the core of primary fictional truth permits. It is because people in the real world have blood in their veins, births, and backsides that fictional characters are presumed to possess these attributes. (Walton 1990, 144–145)

The Mutual Belief Principle modifies this by saying that what matters is not how things in reality really are, but how they, in the artist's society, are mutually believed to be or have been. Walton exemplifies with old stories the understanding of which demands a familiarity with a today vanished world picture. There are, for example, ancient sailor's yarns whose very point will be lost if not read in accordance

with the once upon a time shared belief that we are living on a flat earth and therefore might fall into the abyss if we are sailing too far away from shore (150–152).

Not surprisingly Kendall Walton gets involved in the same kind of troubles as Ryan. He prefers “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” to “Little Red Riding Hood” but his questions are similar: What could we reasonably claim to exist in the world of this specific tale? Does, for example, Neil Armstrong landing on the moon belong to the same world as Goldilocks and her bears? In this case I suppose Ryan would say no, and this for the same reason (not being appropriate to the environment) as she bans Aquinas from the world of Little Red Riding Hood.¹² But Walton says in principle yes, although he admits that the astronaut is of no importance for the tale. You might say that Walton is more consistent in his concept than Ryan.

Some prefer devising a way of excluding unimportant fictional truths entirely to declaring them thoroughly deemphasized. I have no strenuous objection to the former, but I favour deemphasis. On my suggestion we need not even imagine that there is a sharp break somewhere between those features of the real world that are related closely enough to the action of a story to be included in its fictional world and those that are not; and we can easily recognize the finest variations in degree of emphasis and deemphasis. It would be considerably more awkward to retreat to a meta-level and speak of its being more or less plausible that a given real-world truth is or is not included in the fictional world. (149–150)

The case of Margaret Thatcher and *1984*, which, as we have seen, troubled Ryan and to which she has no answer, would probably file under what Walton calls “silly questions”, questions that

are pointless, inappropriate, out of order. To pursue or dwell on them would be not only irrelevant to appreciation and criticism but also distracting and destructive. The paradoxes, anomalies, apparent contradictions they point to seem artificial, contrived, not to be taken seriously. (Walton 1990, 176)

12 If “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” is to be regarded as a fairy tale Ryan would ban Armstrong from it also because he is post-medieval.

Two of Walton's examples on silly questions go: How come Othello can speak such superb verse and none of the other characters not even noticing it and why do the diners in Leonardo's *Last Supper* all sit on the same side of the table? (175) Most of us, I believe, easily agree on the silliness inherent in this kind of questions. The trouble for both Ryan and Walton, however, is that their own theoretical frame makes it difficult for them to answer *why* these questions are as silly as everyone, themselves included, intuitively thinks they are.¹³ The reason for this is that these questions are perfectly logical and fully motivated if we maintain the idea that a work of art is understood from within (the theory of immersion). But they will actually not even emerge as long as we simply are *watching* or *reading* the tragedy *Othello* without believing – or playing the game of make-believe – that we are taking part in some real life family troubles. As a theatre audience or as art spectators we do not demand any kind of actual world realism when it comes to the characters' way of speaking or assembling to supper, rather we demand an aesthetic experience.¹⁴

Ryan tried to formulate distinct rules for how to decide what might be included in and what must be excluded from the possible world of a certain story. Walton takes a somewhat more relaxed view on the matter:

Rather than banishing all this clutter from fictional worlds, I propose to ignore it. We need to recognize enormous differences in the importance of a work's various fictional truths, in any case. Some are emphasized and highlighted; others remain in the shadow. (148)

He simply declares that different things are of different importance for a story (149). This, of course, is true. But, curiously enough, it

13 Walton doesn't discuss Orwell's *1984* but it is hard to see that it would be any easier for him to deal with this novel than for Ryan.

14 Besides, you could argue that the very placing of *The Last Supper* makes it quite natural having the apostles gathered the way they are. Being a mural in the refectory of the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie the table is turned into a kind of honorary table in the dining hall of the monks. But this, of course, is a kind of argument impossible to reconcile with Walton's theory.

doesn't lead Walton to ask himself *why* this is so. What is it that makes fictional things highlighted or remaining in the shadow?

The crucial problem is that Walton's theory cannot answer a basic question like this. And this is so, because to answer it you have to look at the work from the outside and not from within. You must understand it as an aesthetic structure and not as something that makes you engage in a game of make-believe. Like Ryan Walton intuitively seems to read and understand fiction more or less in this way but, also like Ryan, he doesn't let this interfere with the theory presented. He can describe reading as "going along" (155) a story but he doesn't have any grounded conception of what this "going along" really means. Sometimes it is equivalent with experiencing the fictional world from within and sometimes as understanding the guiding norm of the story. But these two concepts are, as I see it, impossible to unite. To be able to detect the norm and to decide the importance of different events you have to view the work from the outside; otherwise it is impossible to get an idea of what it is all about. Events could only be of different importance as related to something. The question whether or not Neil Armstrong belongs to the *world* of Goldilocks seems silly because it is nonsensical. What matters is that he has nothing to do with the *story*. When it comes to aesthetic structures the only possible "going along" is to follow how they unfold in front of us as something the author conveys to the reader.

If Ryan's principle of minimal departure didn't differ that much from Walton's Reality Principle and Mutual Belief Principle, these two principles in turn do not really differ from David Lewis' two principles, "Analysis 1" and "Analysis 2", presented 12 years earlier in the paper "Truth in Fiction". In the first Analysis fictional truth is seen from the standpoint of the actual world while in the second it is seen from the standpoint of the collective belief of the time the fiction was written (Lewis 1983, 273).¹⁵

15 In *The Nature of Fiction* (1990) Gregory Currie proposes a modification of Lewis' theory, but, as Staffan Carlshamre argues, "the difference between the two is smaller than it may at first sight appear to be" (Carlshamre 2004, 33,

Lewis, like the bulk of narratologists, defines narratives (Lewis talks of “fiction”) as someone telling someone else about something (Lewis 1983, 265). And this also will constitute the problems he is getting into. Towards the end of his article he discusses truth in “impossible fictions”:

Let us call a fiction *impossible* iff there is no world where it is told as known fact rather than fiction. That might happen in either of two ways. First, the plot might be impossible. Second, a possible plot might imply that there could be nobody in a position to know or tell of the events in question. If a fiction is impossible in the second way, then to tell it as known fact would be to know its truth and tell truly something that implies that its truth could not be known; which is impossible. (274)

Now, given Lewis’ definition of fiction this is logical, and so, I think, it would apply to most narratologies, classical or cognitivist. The only problem is that Lewis seems to think that this kind of impossible fictions is rare when, on the contrary, the vast majority of fiction stories must be defined as impossible following Lewis’ own definition. As argued by say Dorrit Cohn a common fiction marker is the very fact that the narrator tells about things that he could not possibly know, for example and foremost what’s going on in peoples’ mind. Fiction, she writes,

note 2). Currie introduces what he calls the “fictional author”, an instance close to the implied author (as known from Wayne C. Booth): “The fictional author [...] is that fictional character constructed within our make-believe whom we take to be telling us the story as known fact. Our reading is thus an exploration of the fictional author’s belief structure.” (Currie 1990, 76) It is hard to see what is gained by this. What is the point making up a fictional author if that fictional author isn’t anything but what the text is saying? Moreover it looks like an (onto)logical contradiction. If the fictional author is made up in the reader’s mind from what we are reading (just like the implied author), then he cannot act as a subject telling us the story (cf. Rossholm 2003). The basis for Currie is the standard narratology’s conception of a story (someone telling about something to someone), the only difference to a factual rendering being that in fiction the story is told *as if* it were true: “Interpreting real people is a matter of building up a picture of their belief set. So, too, with the fictional author.” (Currie 1990, 76)

allows a narrator to know what cannot be known in the real world and in narratives that target representations of the real world: the inner life of his figures. This penetrative optics calls on devices – among others free indirect style – that remains unavailable to narrators who aim for referential (nonfictional) presentation. (Cohn 1999, 16)

For Cohn, then, “fiction” would be about the same as what Lewis regards as “impossible fiction”.

Lewis does not explicitly discuss gaps in fictional texts, but logically they are part and parcel of his concept. If a possible world is defined as complete, and if fictions are regarded as possible worlds, the fictional text as it is cannot be complete. This incompleteness, Lewis argues, will in turn result in an amount of different possible worlds, each one realizing one possibility. In one world we will find a Sherlock Holmes with an even amount of hairs on his head, in another world a Holmes with an odd amount; in one world the blood group of Inspector Lestrade will be identified as A, in another as B and so on (Lewis 1983, 270). This will lead to one world with a Holmes with an even amount of hair and a Lestrade with blood group A and another world with a Holmes with an odd amount of hair and a Lestrade with blood group B and yet another with a Holmes with an odd amount of hairs and a Lestrade with blood group A – and so on and so on realizing every possible combination. To put it short, we will end up with an almost uncountable amount of possible worlds. This might be. But as a reader of fiction there is, as I see it (thank Heaven), no need to bother about them. Still, the interesting thing is that the very concept of fiction as a world being told about leads Lewis to put a certain kind of questions and answering them in a certain kind of way – although I think most of us would agree on that the questions above are, using the vocabulary of Walton, quite silly. I will give some more examples showing how this way of discussing fiction tends to focus odd things and generate “disquieting” interpretations¹⁶.

16 I have borrowed the term from Skalin: “‘Disquieting’ divergences of interpretation are such as disclose deep rifts in basic practice, in the very grammar of literary comprehension.” (Skalin 1991, 303)

In Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* all principal characters constantly are betraying one another and so they can, according to Lewis, be called treacherous.¹⁷ But then we have this streetsinger who "goes about his business without betraying anyone. Is he also a treacherous fellow?" (274) According to Lewis the answer must be yes, because in "the worlds of the *Threepenny Opera*, everyone put to the test proves treacherous, the streetsinger is there along with the rest, so doubtless he too would turn out to be treacherous if we saw more of him" (274). Defining fiction as being about a (possible) world the question concerning the streetsinger's moral might be a reasonable one, although I am not sure if everyone sympathising with this definition also would agree on the answer given by Lewis.¹⁸ But the problem is the very question. Why should we at all bother about the streetsinger being treacherous or not? No one reading or watching the play is likely to ponder about this matter since the question will not spontaneously arise. The reason, as I see it, for this is that we do not conceive the play as a world being told about and where all characters act on the same basis. The streetsinger is not a man in a world; he is *Brecht's device* for guiding us, the audience/readers, through the *play* he is offering. In this respect his role is totally clear; discussing and questioning his moral would not only blur his *function* in the fiction but also our understanding of what we are watching/reading.

Another of Lewis' examples is closely attached to his two analyses, and again Sherlock Holmes is called into philosophical duty. In "The Adventure of the Speckled Band", a locked room mystery, the murderer turns out to be a snake who has entered the closed room by

17 Lewis seems to take for granted that plays and operas (among his examples we find, apart from Brecht, Gilbert & Sullivan's comic opera *H.M.S. Pinafore*) also are to be understood as being told by someone to someone else (since they are fictions), although he doesn't explain how the "act of telling" (Lewis 1983, 265) in these cases is to be understood.

18 For Doležel I presume that the streetsinger's moral would be a gap impossible to bridge, while Iser probably would regard this indeterminacy as a trigger for the reader's imagination to coming to terms with the question whether man is a treacherous creature by nature or not.

climbing up a bell-rope and passing through a ventilator in a neighbouring room. Lewis cites an article in *Scientific American* where Carl Gans identifies the snake as being a Russell's viper. This species, however, is not a constrictor and therefore, unfortunately enough, incapable of the concertina movement acquired to climb a rope. Therefore Gans concludes: "Either the snake reached its victim some other way or the case remains open." (271)¹⁹ Now, of course the exact nature of this very snake is of no importance for Lewis' discussion. The main thing is that we are given information that we are supposed to take for true but, scrutinized by an expert on the matter, is shown to be false. According to Lewis' Analysis 1 (equivalent to Walton's Reality Principle) the conclusion of Gans cannot be refuted. But for those who still find it hard to accept this solution Lewis offers his Analysis 2 (equivalent to Walton's Mutual Belief Principle). This would mean that "[w]hat is true in the Sherlock Holmes stories is what would be true, according to the overt beliefs of the community of origin, if those stories were told as known fact rather than fiction" (273). In other words: the storyteller believes that swamp adders/Russell's vipers, or maybe all snakes, can climb and so do his fellow

19 In the short story the snake is identified in this way: "It is a swamp adder!" cried Holmes – 'the deadliest snake in India.'" (Doyle 2005, 256–257) This snake has actually troubled a lot of people and Mr. Gans' zoological attribution is not at all that assured. There are more candidates than the Russell's viper. The commentary in Norton's edition of the complete Holmes stories states "swamp adder" to be "a name by which no snake is commonly known". According to the description of it in the story there are four criteria for a real life snake to match: a) fast-acting, b) an inclination to climb a rope, c) yellow with brownish speckles, diamond-shaped head, puffed neck, and d) Indian origin. This have resulted in no less than 11 proposals – including the Russell's viper which however is slow-acting, lacks speckled markings and with disputed abilities when it comes to climbing (Doyle 2005, 259–261). According to the schema presented in the commentary the viper seems a weak candidate as compared to for example the cobra. All this might seem just an amusing game to play, tongue in cheek, for Sherlockians and not to be taken seriously. But for many literary theorists this really *is* a problem, and, more alarming, *must* be a problem. To me, the very treating of this as a real problem shows the need for reconsidering the theoretical frame making it a problem.

countrymen.²⁰ Lewis himself prefers to “keep neutral in these quarrels” and only “try to provide for the needs of both sides” (271). But again his very starting point seems odd, and the reason for this is, like before, his main concept of what fiction is and how we understand it. I cannot see that there is any need at all to identify the true species of this fictional snake; its only function in the story is to climb and kill. Boris Tomashevsky would say that it is compositionally motivated (Tomashevsky 1965, 78–80).²¹

It is understandable if an expert on snakes gets irritated finding an adder described as behaving in ways he knows to be biologically impossible. But being a competent reader of fiction he would hardly make the conclusions of Gans. He would still understand the story that Doyle offers his reader to enjoy, having no problems viewing the case as closed in just the way it is described as being closed – only accusing Doyle, as the responsible originator, for being an ignorant when it comes to reptiles.

But, one could ask, is not Lewis’ analysis 2 the answer to this? We accept the climbing adder as a truth because we think that both the storyteller and his contemporary audience believed in it. Lewis’ proposal is that we, enlightened as we are when it comes to vipers, say to ourselves: now, this storyteller was an ignorant but so too were his common readers – and therefore I have to act an ignorant myself in order to comprehend the story. This is surely to make things complicated, not least for the modern reader of old works. Few of us have any knowledge at all about the common beliefs in different societies in different times when it comes to the behaviour of certain species of

20 Personally I do not believe that most people have any overt ideas at all when it comes to climbing snakes. Lewis, however, does not discuss matters where no overt beliefs are likely to be found.

21 Cf. the discussion on what kind of an animal Gregor Samsa is transformed into in Kafka’s novella *Die Verwandlung* (Nabokov 1980, 258–260, Binder 2004, 194, Ekblom 2004, 131–132). Is it a beetle, a cockroach, a bed bug or a wood louse? Kafka himself only talks of it as an “ungeheuren Ungeziefer” (Kafka 2001, 7) – and that, as I understand it, also is all we really need to know. Trying to determine it entomologically will only lead us astray.

snakes and other like things.²² And yet we obviously can appreciate Greek tragedies as well as Islandic sagas and Russian 19th century novels. We understand what kind of a story the author has written, and so we understand what functions the different motifs have in this story. This also means that I can determine when the *author* has made a blunder and understand this as something else than a rapture in a presumed fictional world. The (non)climbing snake is a problem only as long as you keep describing fiction as told-about-worlds.

When it comes to the winding question of this evasive snake some of the commentaries might very well, as I have already suggested, be part of the games played by “Sherlockians” who deliberately and just for fun treat the stories as if they were factual and Holmes a historical figure. But, as we have seen, for some theorists the reptile really *is* a problem, and more so, *must* be a problem. Mr. Gans, as you might remember an advocate for the snake being a Russell’s viper, claimed that either the case was not closed or the snake must have entered the room some other way than via the bell string. But of course there could be at least two more explanations due to the fact that the only explicit specification of the species that we get is made by Sherlock Holmes who actually identifies the snake as a “swamp adder”, disregarding that apparently no species is known by that name in the real world. When Gans and others propose existing names they all act in accordance with the principle of minimal departure. This means that they out from the description of the fictional snake try to find some matching actual species. But what to do with Holmes’ own, and apparently false, attribution?

22 You might try to solve this by saying that we, as soon as we are confronted with a case like this, say to ourselves: As I do not know anything at all about the common beliefs at the time of the story’s origin I, for the sake of simplicity, choose to *regard* the beliefs implied or expressed in the story as being the mutual beliefs in the society at that time. But this is hardly satisfactory. Would it not just as well allow me to choose the other way round? And it would also mean that I suddenly would get into troubles if I learned that the mutual beliefs of the time actually were of another kind than I chose to believe them to be.

Should we understand this as the private detective being mistaken and just pretending to be an expert on snakes? As a matter of fact he hasn't got the slightest idea what he is talking about? If that is the case, the episode will have a somewhat different meaning, namely showing that Holmes isn't that all-wise which we might have believed him to be up to now. And this being once exposed, can we ever after trust his self-assured assertions? Are we to act Mr. Pickwick and burst out "You are a humbug, Sir!"?

The other possibility is to regard Doctor Watson, who is the one telling the story, an unreliable narrator. Is it, in other words, Watson rather than Holmes who doesn't know what he is talking about? Has he forgotten the true words of Holmes and now, writing the story down, just makes things up? Or might it be that Watson, who actually has served far East, knows the snake by a local nickname and uses that one, because that's the one which strikes him at the moment he is sitting at his writing desk? Could we be even more suspicious, claiming that Watson deliberately puts something ridiculous, like this "swamp adder", in the mouth of Holmes? Being envious on his clever and bullying friend he at last has found a chance to sting him in his heel? By falsifying what Holmes really said he cunningly exposes his friend to the reading audience as an ignorant (at least when it comes to snakes) to be justly ridiculed? Do we witness the revenge of a personality sunk, poor fellow, in Nietzschean resentment? And if Watson in some way or another can be said to show up as unreliable in this story, can we trust him at all in *any* of the Holmes-stories he has told us as known facts (as Lewis puts it)?

As you already have understood, I am not serious. And yet I am. Most of you probably agree on the suggestions above as being silly. No one, may be with the exception for some literary theorist or philosopher, would really read "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" like this. But why not, if reading is to imagine a world or to immerse in a fictional world, and if a fiction story is understood as someone telling someone else about something that has happened? To dismiss the interpretative proposals above as silly, you actually have to argue in another way and from another concept of fiction. I cannot see that either classical or modern narratology can answer this kind of