

Giovanni Tuzet

Bocconi University

giovanni.tuzet@unibocconi.it

HOW FICTIONS ARE CREDIBLE*

0. *A World of Fictions*

Fictions are everywhere. They spring and grow not only in literary works, but also in mathematics, empirical science, metaphysics, social science, economics. As the chapters of this book effectively show, any domain of our experience and thought seems to be crowded by fictions created and used for various purposes. This is a world of fictions, you may say. No doubt that Hamlet and Sherlock Holmes are fictional entities. But some say that numbers and mathematical entities are also fictional¹. Others say that scientific laws and some of the entities you may find in the works of empirical science are fictions as well². Others add that metaphysics is full of fictions³, not to talk about social science and economics, where things like corporations and economic models, respectively, are taken to be genuine cases of fictional entities⁴.

So fictions are everywhere but not for the same purpose. The purpose of creating literary characters and narratives is, for instance, obviously different from that of settling our institutional reality or that of providing models of economic transactions. Therefore, if one were required to provide a unified theory of fiction, it would be a bad idea to start from a single-purpose point of view, that is, inquiring what the purposes for which fictional entities are posed are. Such purposes

* In “Fictions and Models. New Essays”, ed. by J. Woods, Philosophia Verlag, Munich, 2010, pp. 389-419.

¹ See in this volume the contributions by Mark Balaguer and Otávio Bueno. Cf. H. Field 1980.

² See B. van Fraassen 1980, N. Cartwright 1983, and, in this volume, the contributions by Mauricio Suárez and Roman Frigg.

³ See in this volume the contributions by Jody Azzouni and Alexis Burgess.

⁴ See e.g. U. Mäki 2002, A. Rubinstein 2006, and the papers collected in *Erkenntnis*, 70 (1), 2009. On corporate personality and a pragmatist account of it, cf. J. Dewey 1926.

are radically different and, if prospects for unification are required, a single-purpose theory of fiction seems to be highly inadequate.

Therefore, we may think it is a better idea to start from the way fictions work, that is, how fictions are accepted and used. In this perspective a unified theory of fiction becomes less implausible. I think that a unified theory of fiction could and must do two things in particular: first, distinguish fiction from other, similar phenomena such as presumption; second, tell us what a fiction is, in abstraction from the specific contexts in which fictions are created and used. Is this possible? The first task is feasible in my opinion; the second is more challenging. This contribution is mainly devoted to the second, but, before coming to that, let me say just a few words on the first and the importance thereof.

I take fictions to be assumptions which are knowingly false but accepted for some purpose. When we use a fiction, we act *as if* something known to be false were true⁵. One source of confusion in the debates and discussions about it is the fact that fiction is not carefully distinguished from similar phenomena such as deception, presumption, and abstraction. (I shall come back at the end of this work to the theoretical and ontological implications of these remarks).

Fiction is different from *deception*, for in the case of deception someone believes to be true something which is in fact false. Someone could maliciously make me believe that the butler did it, while in fact he did not. (I believe that *p*, while it is false that *p*). Fiction is also different from *presumption*, for the latter might be true, while the former is knowingly false. Presuming that the butler did it is not the same as acting as if he did it although we know that he did not. (When I suppose that *p*, it might be true that *p*). Finally, fiction is different from *abstraction*, for, if we take the latter to have a truth value, it is the same truth value of that of which it is an abstraction, while in the former something false is taken as if it were true. When we say that the butler is a human being, instead of saying that he is a man of 65, born in London, named John Smith, etc., what we say has the same truth value of the more detailed information: it depends on the relevant facts and does not

⁵ Cf. H. Vaihinger 1924.

change in the abstraction. Taking our male butler to be a female would be a quite different thing. (In fiction, we know that it is false that p but we take it to be true).

I think that the capacity to grasp what a fiction is, and to deal with it, is acquired quite early in our cognitive development. When children play *as if* they were police and thieves, they do not deceive themselves, or presume to be police and thieves, or abstract from something concrete. They just use a fiction (even if they lack the concept of it), taking as true something they know to be false. They are not police and thieves and they know it, but they act as if they were such.

This being said, I turn to the second task of a unified theory of fiction, namely to propose what a fiction is in general, making abstraction from the specific domains of fictional entities. This does not prevent from starting, and taking examples, from a specific domain, provided that the conclusions that we eventually draw in it can be extended to other domains. Our starting point is, in this sense, the field of literary fictions⁶: I will try to point out how literary fictions work, then I will try to see if it is different or not from the way they work in other domains.

My starting hypothesis is that fiction must be, in some sense, credible (§ 1). Then I consider the so-called “No-truth” theory of fiction (§ 2) and present what I call the “Puzzle of Credibility” (§ 3). My following hypothesis is that, at least in literary works, credibility means coherence (§ 4). Such a criterion is checked against some literary (§ 5) and legal (§ 6) fictions; then I ask whether it is or it might be a unification standard (§ 7). My answer to this final question will be, unfortunately, quite prudent.

1. *Fictions and Credibility*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge claimed that poetic faith involves a *suspension of disbelief*. I do not know what “poetic faith” is. But I have an idea of the reason why disbelief is suspended when a literary

⁶ See in this volume the contributions by Robert Howell and Amie Thomasson. Cf. A. Voltolini 2006.

fiction is involved. The main reason is, I think, that literary fictions can hardly be appreciated if they are not credible. Their aesthetic value is in some sense dependent on their credibility. You may be surprised at hearing this. In what sense a literary fiction must be credible? I admit it is more of an intuition than a demonstration, but I guess that any professional author of literary works would agree with this starting hypothesis. Literary fictions are not constraint-free. (Even Kafka once said that the unusual has a limit). Writing seriously requires respecting various constraints, one of which is that of credibility. If this is true, the question is: What criteria do determine the credibility of literary fictions? I will consider and discuss the criterion of *coherence*.

Before going into that, let me discuss in greater detail the status of fictions and a puzzle we face when their status and the credibility requirement are taken together. The puzzle is the following: We normally believe what we take to be true, but a fiction – at least according to the definition given above – is by definition false; so how can a fiction be both known to be false and credible? Coherence might answer to this. In fact, I will check this further hypothesis against some poems which *prima facie* seem to be devoid of any coherence. If the criterion of coherence fits even such cases, *a fortiori* it would fit the less problematic ones.

We must remember, however, that a conclusion reached in the domain of literary fictions does not automatically hold in any other fictional domain.

2. “No-truth” Theory of Fiction

What are fictions in general? As I said before, I take them to be what is knowingly false but accepted for some purpose⁷. Literary fictions are constituted by false sentences that are worked out, accepted and used for aesthetic purposes. (To be true, not any sentence in a literary fiction needs to be false, but, to distinguish it from historical or factual narrative, at least one sentence of it must be

⁷ On the nature of fiction see in particular G. Currie 1990, K. Walton 1990, A. Thomasson 1999.

knowingly false)⁸. Legal fictions, to take another kind of example, are constituted by statements that are knowingly false but accepted in order to yield a good legal consequence⁹. Such an account is not shared by all authors working on fictions. In fact, there are authors who deny that fictions can be characterized in terms of falsity, since fictions do not aim at being true and, in consequence, are not false when they fail to be true. Along these lines, some authors propose a “No-truth” theory of fiction and claim that there is no *essential connection* between the concept of truth and the concept of fiction¹⁰.

I cannot see clearly the reasons for claiming this. I think it is trivially true that a fiction is literally false. By definition, as it seems to me, it is true that (*a*) a literary fiction is not true. Besides, two other things at least ought to be noted: (*b*) the concept of fiction presupposes the concept of truth; (*c*) it is factually true that many literary works give veridical information on their subject. Of these two considerations, (*b*) is trivial as (*a*) since both are conceptual truths about fiction (notwithstanding this, the theory under consideration seems to forget them); (*c*) is on the contrary a non-conceptual consideration which is perhaps more interesting. It is not rare that a literary work informs its readers veridically about its subject. Think of a novel giving veridical information about the period spoken of; think of a work expressing truths concerning the human mind and psychology; etc. That a literary work informs veridically is not necessarily true, for it is not a conceptual truth about literary fiction, but it is a factual truth about many works. However, the factual truth of (*c*) does not contradict the conceptual truth of (*a*) according to which a literary fiction *on the whole* is not true, nor the conceptual truth of (*b*) according to which the concept of fiction presupposes the concept of truth. If you want to work out a more precise definition you may put it this way: of a literary fiction, one sentence at least must be knowingly false.

⁸ On the issue of truth in fiction see D. Lewis 1983.

⁹ See L. Fuller 1967. Cf. e.g. J. Smith 1917 and R. Demos 1923.

¹⁰ See P. Lamarque and S. Olsen 1994.

Now, if this is correct, once we reject the “No-truth” theory and claim that fictions are constitutively false, we face a puzzle about the falsity of fictions on the one hand and the need of credibility on the other. It is what I call the *Puzzle of Credibility*.

3. *The Puzzle of Credibility*

Enjoying a literary fiction is an experience involving a suspension of disbelief, as Coleridge put it. From this we can extract a sort of aesthetic norm that we may call the *Norm of Credibility*:

(NC) To be good, a literary fiction must be credible¹¹.

Now, what do we mean by “credibility”? Of course literary credibility does not mean truthfulness or something similar, since literary fictions are by definition false. It must mean something else. But what else if credibility in this context cannot be equated with truthfulness? We face a puzzle consisting in the fact that, on the one hand, we normally believe what we take to be true, and, on the other, here we are asked not to disbelieve what we know to be false. So the puzzle is this: To be good, literary fictions must be both false and credible; but, if they are knowingly false, how can they be credible? If Coleridge was right, literary fictions must be both false and credible. But, so runs the puzzle, how can a false set of sentences be credible? A way out is provided by a criterion of credibility compatible with the falsity of fictions. I will consider the criterion of *coherence*. In this sense credibility will be equated with coherence. Such a criterion is compatible with the constitutive falsity of fictions: a set of sentences can be a false but coherent one. This logical problem being settled, the question is whether coherence is a satisfying criterion of credibility; that is, whether credibility can be significantly equated with coherence.

¹¹ This does not mean that credibility is a sufficient condition of aesthetic value, or that being a fiction is identical with being a good fiction.

4. *Credibility and Coherence*

It is well known that the notion of coherence has different senses and is susceptible of different uses. On the one hand, coherence is not to be identified with logical consistency (absence of contradictions). On the other, it is not easily definable. It is something more than mere logical consistency. Coherence is a sort of “making sense” that concerns not only the logical relations between sentences but also their content and their relations to the world. Recently, coherence has been invoked in various philosophical debates. Moreover it is related to the various strands of holism available on the philosophical market¹². Some authors take it to be the key criterion of epistemic justification¹³; others take it as a principle of reasoning and rationality¹⁴; others, to take a more specific example, think of it as a main criterion of correctness in legal interpretation and legal reasoning¹⁵. In each possible domain, coherence may play a significant role in addressing the problems we may find. Paul Thagard in particular has claimed that coherence is a fundamental criterion not only in assessing scientific hypotheses but also in evaluating thought and action; he also distinguished to these extents different kinds of coherence¹⁶. Of course these different views and domains face different problems and issues. But they share the same idea, namely that coherence is a main criterion in addressing their different problems.

In our present context, I claim that coherence is a main criterion of fiction credibility, perhaps the most important one. It has aesthetic value, even if it is not a sufficient condition of it. An important thing should be noted, however: that coherence is a main criterion of fiction credibility does not mean that the same standard is required in all literary fictions. What satisfies

¹² Think of Quine’s famous opinion that “our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body” (W. Quine 1953, 41).

¹³ Cf. L. Bonjour 1985, D. Davidson 1986, S. Haack 1993.

¹⁴ Cf. G. Harman 1986, P. Thagard 2000.

¹⁵ Cf. N. MacCormick 1978, B. Jackson 1988, R. Alexy and A. Peczenik 1990, B. Pastore 1996, S. Berteau 2005.

¹⁶ See P. Thagard 1988, 1992 and 2000.

NC is not the same standard in all literary works. Different literary styles have different degrees of credibility. To deal with this, let me introduce the notion of *Threshold of Credibility*. I claim that every literary style has its own threshold of credibility. Of course they differ. A realistic novel, for instance, must meet a higher threshold of credibility than a surrealist one. A dadaist novel, say, must meet an even lower threshold than a surrealist one. However, each style has its own credibility threshold, vague as it might be.

Different credibility thresholds correspond to different thresholds of coherence. In fact, coherence may mean different things. The basic idea is that of a set of elements “making sense” on the whole. “Coherence in a view consists in connections of intelligibility among the elements of the view”, as Gilbert Harman put it¹⁷. You may object this is too vague a criterion, susceptible of being specified in many different and perhaps incompatible ways¹⁸. This is a serious challenge and an effort must be done in order to understand in what sense coherence is relevant here. I think it is relevant in one of the most important senses of coherence, namely *explanatory coherence*¹⁹.

Explanatory coherence seems to be quite important not only in the evaluation of scientific hypotheses, but also in the appreciation of literary fictions. For it answers the abductive questions that the text may arouse in the reader²⁰. Or, to put it differently, it provides the best explanation of a narrative or literary text²¹. Notice that in a narrative there usually are some elements which are not crucial for the story to be told but contribute to its development and representation. These elements might be called “neutral elements”. Besides, there are some “crucial elements”, or non-neutral ones, which are the key elements of the story. Now, explanatory coherence holds in particular for such crucial elements. If they do not cohere, the fiction is not credible.

¹⁷ G. Harman 1986, 65.

¹⁸ One of these ways is that of distinguishing synchronic coherence and diachronic coherence; see on this G. Postema 2003. Another consists in characterizing analogical and deductive coherence; see on this P. Thagard 2000, 48 ff.

¹⁹ Cf. G. Harman 1986, Ch. 7 and P. Thagard 2000, Ch. 3. On coherence in literature, see e.g. A. Fletcher 2004, Ch. 13.

²⁰ Elsewhere (G. Tuzet 2004, 2005 and 2006a) I tried to show what role abduction has in legal reasoning. On abduction in the recent debate, cf. L. Magnani 2001, S. Paavola 2004, D. Gabbay and J. Woods 2005, A. Aliseda 2006.

²¹ On the notion of Inference to the Best Explanation, cf. in particular G. Harman 1965, P. Lipton 1991, J. Josephson and S. Josephson 1994.

You may still ask in what sense explanatory coherence gives the best explanation of the narrative or of its crucial elements at least. The answer is not difficult, if we think at what an explanation usually does. It gives the *causes* or *reasons* of what happens in the story, in particular at the crucial joints of it and in relation to its crucial elements. Explanatory coherence makes sense of them telling why a given event occurs, why a given character behaves in a given way, why a given decision has been made, etc. Remember in any case that there are different thresholds of credibility and coherence. A surrealist work must meet a lower threshold than a realist one; a dadaist one an even lower one. This means that the framework of explanatory coherence may include more or less elements of the text depending on the style, the literary mood, the author's intent. Not each element must be explained. Some passages can be elliptical; some actions and events can lack a definite reason or cause. The author can deliberately leave something unexplained, arousing abductive questions that the reader herself must answer in the way she can, or leaving open questions to be appreciated as such. But one thing is having something unexplained; another is lacking any form of explanatory coherence. Who shall be interested in a completely incoherent work?

One could suggest a different criterion, for instance *verisimilitude*. I think that verisimilitude is too narrow to give an account of literary fictions: if credibility were verisimilitude, non-realistic fictions will be excluded. Some thresholds of credibility will be inappropriately excluded from the range of literary credibility. Yet it may be objected that such a relaxed notion ends by lacking any definite content. If we can get a credibility threshold for each literary style, such a requirement becomes trivial. If, for each literary style, there is a threshold of credibility determined by a variable threshold of coherence, such a requirement becomes a sort of analytic property of literary works. I do not think it is so: it is rather a *normative* requirement on literary works. Then the interesting thing is to see how this general requirement is satisfied in the different styles and in the specific works we may take into consideration; that is, in what ways the credibility threshold is met by the internal or contextual coherence of a specific work.

In what follows I will take a quite stimulating example, namely some poems which *prima facie* seem to be devoid of any coherence. If we find that, on the contrary, the criterion of coherence is at work even there, the hypothesis of credibility as coherence gets a significant confirmation. Moreover, notice that considering poems instead of a novel is definitely more challenging for the hypothesis we are going to test. For a novel is constitutively inclined to have a coherent plot, while a poem is apparently less constrained in this respect. So, if our hypothesis gets a confirmation with respect to poetry, it is reasonable to suppose that it holds *a fortiori* for other literary works like novels.

5. *Lear's Coherence*

In order to check the criterion of coherence I want to take into consideration some limericks from Edward Lear's poetry. My conclusion will be in the affirmative: coherence is a main standard of credibility and credibility is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of aesthetic value in the literary field.

A Book of Nonsense and *More Nonsense* were published by Lear in 1846 and 1871 respectively. They are constituted by short poems of five lines each, rhymed according to the schema *aabba* and accompanied by an equivalent number of drawings realized by Lear himself, a drawing for each poem. Poems of this sort are called *Limericks* in homage to an old Irish literary mode.

According to the standard way of assessing and evaluating these works by Lear, they are poems of the absurd, of the incongruous, of the illogical, of the bizarre. What are the features that determine such judgments? Mainly the following: words that are subtly inadequate to the situation represented; heterogeneous categories paradoxically matching; details that are incongruous or absurdly scrupulous; unbelievable temporal determinations; and undue importance attributed to

things that are completely extraneous to the situation represented. Consider for instance the case of the *Old Person disgusted with life*:

There was an Old Person of Fife,
 Who was greatly disgusted with life;
 They sang him a ballad,
 And fed him on Salad,
 Which cured that Old Person of Fife.

Is this a credible story? Now consider the case of the *Old Man with a nose*:

There was an Old Man with a nose,
 Who said, "If you choose to suppose
 That my nose is too long,
 You are certainly wrong!"
 That remarkable Man with a nose.

These are strange, bizarre, illogical situations – or at least unusual! So states the standard judgment on them. My claim is, on the contrary, that they have their own logic and coherence which determines their credibility. Of course their credibility threshold is not as high as in realistic poetry and the like. But indeed they present some form of coherence.

To begin my analysis, let me point out that the final line is almost coherent with the first: it is an end which coheres with the situation presented in the first two lines and developed in the central part of the poem (moreover, the first, the second and the fifth are the lines with the *a* rhyme and the last word of the fifth is almost the same of the first). Obviously, as to the *Old Person disgusted with life*, it is not plausible that a man disgusted with life is cured by eating a salad and listening to a ballad. However, such implausible solutions bring to a plausible end the initially presented situation. Thus, there is an internal and explanatory coherence in the text, even though the plausible

problem is given an implausible solution. Something similar holds for the *Old Man with a nose*, whose uttered words reply to a possible objector according to whom the nose of the old man is too long. We are not told who is this possible objector, nor the reason why such nose is considered to be too long (these elements lack an explanation). But the old man's reaction in defence of his nose is certainly plausible and coherent with the rest. An even more interesting example is that of the *Old Person in the crater*:

There was an Old Person of Gretna,
 Who rushed down the crater of Etna;
 When they said, "Is it hot?"
 He replied, "No, it's not!"
 That mendacious Old Person of Gretna.

Note that what happens in the third and fourth line is coherent with what happens in the first and second. What is asked in the third ("Is it hot?") is not incoherent with the given situation. The question is not, say, whether $2 + 2$ makes 5, or whether Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon (questions that would be completely incoherent with the rest). Since the Old Person rushed down the crater of Etna, the question is whether in the crater it is hot. What is bizarre is the answer to such question: anyone knows that in a crater of an active volcano it is hot, but the Old Person answers that it is not. Notice how Lear defines him in the final line of the limerick: "That mendacious Old Person of Gretna". The poet calls him *mendacious* for he says that in the crater it is not hot, while anyone knows that in a crater it is. Let me ask then: Do you know something more logical than calling mendacious he who speaks the false? These are the crucial elements of the poem and they manifest a clear form of explanatory coherence. (While, on the contrary, coming from Gretna is a neutral element just used for rhyme purposes).

Consider this further example:

There was an Old Man of the West,
 Who wore a pale plu-colored vest;
 When they said, “Does it fit?”
 He replied, “Not a bit!”
 That uneasy Old Man of the West.

That the Old Man is *uneasy* follows from what the poet says in the second line of the limerick, namely that he wore a “pale plu-colored vest”. The same is true of a man so blind that he could not see his foot: the poet qualifies him as “doubtful” since he does not believe those who show him his toe. And again:

There was an Old Man of Cape Horn,
 Who wished he had never been born;
 So he sat on a chair,
 Till he died of despair
 That dolorous Man of Cape Horn.

It may happen that someone wishes he had never been born; less probably it happens that he sits on a chair till he dies of despair. So the strangeness of the case consists in the fact that something strange follows something which is not.

On the other hand, there can be very strange situations, even absurd ones, which are followed by relatively normal consequences (not normal according to our everyday standards of course, but relatively to the given situation, strange or absurd it may be). Such is the case of the *Old Person of Troy*:

There was an Old Person of Troy,
 Whose drink was warm brandy and soy,
 Which he took with a spoon,

By the light of the moon,
In sight of the city of Troy.

It is not normal that someone drinks warm brandy and soy; but, were it the case, it would not be that strange that the person in question had such beverage with a spoon, by the light of the moon, in sight of his or her own city.

What lesson could be extracted from the examples given above? Is it possible to generalize about the ways in which they are structured and composed? If yes, what are the ways at work in them? Are there any aesthetic rules that Lear presumably followed (in a deliberate way or not) in composing and characterizing them? In my view, the answer is in the positive. The ways in which these poems are characterized are basically two: 1) when something normal (or relatively such) is the case, something strange follows; or, vice versa, 2) when something strange is the case, something normal (or relatively such) follows. Before supporting this claim with further examples, let me clarify what I do mean here by “normal”. I mean what is usual, ordinary, common, or possible at least. And by “strange” I do mean what is highly improbable, or impossible, or senseless²². Let me add the following examples now.

1) *From normal to strange situations*

An Old Man who had a fall from his horse and, though split in two, was mended “With some very strong glue”. Another Old Man who, menaced by a cow, decides to sit on a stile and continue to smile, “Which may soften the heart of the cow.”

2) *From strange to normal situations*

²² Let me give some further examples from Lear’s Limericks. An Old Person constantly fanning three Fowls to make them feel cool: an improbable but not impossible situation. An Old Person riding on a Tortoise’s back: an impossible situation. A Lady who wore a Wig and rode out on a Pig: a nonsense situation.

An Old Man with an immoderate mouth who dies swallowing a dish “That was quite full of fish”. Another Old Man who frequented the top of a tree but stopped “When disturbed by the crows”.

Of course these are clear cases. There are many intermediate ones, falling between the two categories and hard to consider as clear examples of 1) or 2). There can be shades of strangeness either in the initial situation or in the conclusion. For instance, to take another example from Lear, an Old Man whose nose was exceedingly large and who used it to support a light for fishing by night. Is this a strange or a relatively normal situation? In any case, if you judge the condition to be possible (having an exceedingly large nose), the conclusion is striking (fishing with a light on it!); if you judge it to be implausible, the conclusion becomes relatively normal (if you have an exceedingly large nose, why not fish with a light on it?). In any case, Lear’s rules seem to be at work. There are also situations which are not properly strange but puzzling at least. For instance a Young Lady who, after arriving at destination by a slow train, goes back making no observation. In this last case, the element is given no explanation by the text, but the story is coherent; we wonder why such Lady did not make any observation, but we take such story as perfectly credible.

Do I claim that each of Lear’s limericks exhibit a form of coherence, either of the first or of the second kind? I do not. Some of Lear’s limericks are singularly strange and puzzling indeed; they seem to be lacking in coherence, or even without any coherent pattern.

There was a Young Lady of Welling,
 Whose praise all the world was a-telling;
 She played on a harp,
 And caught several carp,
 That accomplished Young Lady of Welling.

Nevertheless, I think that this and other examples are exceptions to the rule. The rule I am talking about is not a scientific law susceptible of being falsified by any counterexample. It is an aesthetic rule susceptible of various departures from it. It is related with a credibility criterion, that of coherence, which can be met at different degrees according to different thresholds. Sometimes such a criterion is perfectly met. Sometimes it is not met at all. (An example of this is the last limerick I cited, it seems to me). The analytic question is whether a literary fiction meeting no coherence criterion is no fiction at all. I do not think we can answer in the affirmative (it would be a very strict stipulation about the meaning of “literary fiction”). But I venture to say that it would be a bad fiction. Remember what I have presented above as the Norm of Credibility (NC): To be good, a literary fiction must be credible. If we accept a coherentist reading of Coleridge’s dictum about the suspension of disbelief, we ought to conclude that a fiction without any coherent pattern is a bad fiction, a fiction with poor aesthetic value or no value at all. Remember also that the conclusion just reached does not hold only for poetry: presumably, it holds *a fortiori* for narrative, novels and other kinds of literary works that are less constraint-free than poetry; in particular, it holds for those of them that constitutively have a plot expected to be coherent and appreciated as such. The question arising now is whether such a criterion holds for other kinds of fiction and, if this is the case, whether it can serve as a unification standard.

6. *Law’s Coherence*

The domain I explore in this section of the present contribution is the law. Legal fictions are one of the classic subjects of jurisprudence. You may find in the relevant literature several accounts of what they are, of how they work, of why they are used in the legal domain²³. I take them to be constituted by statements that are knowingly false but accepted in order to yield a good legal

²³ See e.g. L. Fuller 1967, P. Olivier 1975, F. Todescan 1979, G. Mitsopoulos 2001.

consequence. I am not interested in discussing here whether they are a good legal device or not. Bentham famously delivered an attack on them claiming they are a means to deceive the layman and preserve the power and privileges of the jurist²⁴; this is not an issue I will address here. What I am interested in is showing how they do work in this field and what the general criteria of their use are.

Before going into that, let me say something in general about their purposes. Some legal and political fictions are used to provide a foundation for a whole legal or political institution or system. Think of the State of Nature, or (even more controversially) of the General Will of the citizens. These are fictional entities. It is knowingly false that the State of Nature existed as such, but it is accepted as an assumption leading to some desirable legal or political consequence. What consequence? In particular, the establishment of a sovereign (Hobbes), of civil and political liberties (Locke), of democracy and equality (Rousseau). In general, some principle of justice is at stake but the fiction's consequences vary according to the author and her different picture of the State of Nature. (John Rawls' contemporary appeal to the "veil of ignorance" in the "original position" is a restatement of this traditional fiction)²⁵. In any case, these fictions serve as premises of an argument purported to provide a foundation for a legal or political system. Therefore I call them *Foundational Fictions*.

Other legal fictions are used to justify a legal consequence that could not be reached otherwise (or that could be reached otherwise but at too high a price). I call them *Justificatory Fictions*. They are constituted by knowingly false assumptions accepted to justify a certain conclusion. There are some remarkable examples of them. One of the most striking is that of the English court pretending that the Island of Minorca was a part of the city of London²⁶. Why did they do that? In order to be competent to decide a case arising in Minorca. In order to settle it in London, the court made use of the fiction that Minorca was a part of London. Another interesting

²⁴ See B. Parekh 1993. Cf. N. Stolzenberg 1999.

²⁵ J. Rawls 1971. In a different context, see B. Williams 2002.

²⁶ See L. Fuller 1967, 18. Cf. P. Chiassoni 2001, 72 ff.

example of justificatory fiction is the Roman *Lex Cornelia*²⁷. If a Roman soldier was captured and eventually died in captivity, it should be treated *as if* he died when he was captured (or, more correctly, a moment before). Why the Roman jurists had recourse to this fiction? Why did they need it? An old legal rule, still valid at the time, deprived of the testamentary capacity those Romans who died *in hostium potestate* (in the hands of the enemy), but such a consequence was felt as highly unjust in the case of a soldier who made his own will and who died in captivity; so, because changing that rule on testamentary capacity was too complex at the time, and because they wanted to justify a different conclusion about the soldier's will, Roman jurists had recourse to the *Lex Cornelia* fiction: taking the soldier who died in captivity as died when he was captured, in order to preserve the validity of his will.

Other fictions in the legal domain, though not traditional as the forgoing, are what I call *Cognitive Fictions*, namely the artificial reconstruction of the past facts a trial is about, or the artificial representation of future facts that are relevant for the present judgment, or the judicial use of computer simulation to get information about the relevant facts²⁸. I refer to the technological artefacts whose function is to represent something which is not presently observable. In this sense, these fictions are not statements knowingly false but accepted in order to produce a good legal result. For they incorporate hypotheses or predictions on the relevant facts, and, when such hypotheses or predictions are correct, they are true, while on the contrary the fictions I have talked about are always false. Hence these devices are fictions in a different sense: in a sense that I am inclined to qualify as “phenomenological”, since the point of them is to give an artificial representation of the relevant facts. (To give a more precise definition of them, I would say they artificially represent non-actually-observable facts inferred from actually observable ones).

Finally, there remain to be considered those legal fictions consisting in entities that do not exist in the physical world but only in the legal world. For instance corporations and parliaments. They do not exist *per se*: they belong to the legal world and, more in general, to the world of

²⁷ See F. Todescan 1979, 25-31.

²⁸ Cf. T. Ostrom 1988, R. Conte *et al.* 1997, G. Tuzet 2006b, and the papers collected in *Synthese*, 169 (3), 2009.

institutional reality (like money, taxes, financial crises, political boundaries, governments, etc.)²⁹. How do they come into (legal) existence? By virtue of legal norms and legal acts constituting them. The existence conditions of a corporation, for instance, include some norm prescribing how it is to be created, and some act creating it according to the relevant norm. Therefore I call them *Constitutive Fictions* (even though what are strictly speaking constitutive are the relevant norms and acts). They are created for various purposes, going from economic and commercial ones (as in the example of corporations) to political and institutional ones (as for parliaments).

If we now consider all these different kinds of legal fictions we may put the question we are interested in: Do these fictions follow a credibility norm and a coherence requirement?

As I said before, the criterion of coherence has recently been at the centre of many debates in legal theory and jurisprudence. Some, in particular, have claimed that coherence is a major criterion of correctness in legal interpretation, legal reasoning and legal decision-making³⁰. This is not what is at stake here, however. What we have to consider here is whether coherence is a credibility criterion for legal fictions. To this extent we will use the above classification of legal fictions and consider each kind in its turn.

Starting from the *foundational* fictions, we should reflect on the fact that they need to support their legal and political conclusions with acceptable (though fictional) premises. For instance, a certain kind of story has to be told about the State of Nature, about the way it is, about the way we are in it, about the way we behave in such conditions, about the relevant desires and attitudes, and so on. (Famously, a big issue is whether the State of Nature is peaceful or not). Now, as it seems to me, to be effective and persuasive such stories cannot fail to be coherent (not only consistent). What about a story claiming that in the State of Nature resources are scarce and human beings behave peacefully? Such a story would be very implausible. So, independently of the

²⁹ One interesting question I cannot address here is the relation between these fictions and the constitutive rules of institutional reality in philosophical pictures like Searle's. I deal with such pictures in G. Tuzet 2007. Cf. J. Searle 1995.

³⁰ Many debates find their origin in Dworkin's provocative work. See in particular R. Dworkin 1986.

specific conclusions you want to support, if you want to provide a foundational fiction it should consist in a coherent narrative.

Let us move to the *justificatory* fictions now. I think that they follow a similar rule. The story told in the *Lex Cornelia* fiction is perfectly coherent: the soldier died just before being captured. Remember that the fiction was needed in order to preserve the validity of the soldier's will. It was a false story, but it was coherent with the relevant facts and attitudes, and it provided a convincing legal solution to the problem in hand. Think about the same problem and a fictional narrative assuming that the soldier did not die in captivity because, just before dying, a stork took him away from the enemy's land and brought him to Rome. Such a story would have been false, as the *Lex Cornelia* one, but surely less credible. Why less credible? Because, I think, less coherent with the relevant facts and background, which was made of human efforts, desires and wars, not of human fancies and storks. (The reader on her own can develop this insight with reference to the *Minorca* fiction: striking as it is, the coherence of it lays in the institutional nature of boundary fixation, I think).

What about our *cognitive* fictions then? Here the answer is quite easy. As far as they incorporate hypotheses and predictions on past and future facts – being technological representations of them – they should be coherent in order to be not only credible but also plausible. Of course their coherence does not amount to their truth (which depends on the relevant facts, not on the narrative's coherence). But surely an incoherent one would be a false one on the whole.

The most difficult case is that of the fictions I called *constitutive*. We just saw that the coherence criterion applies to the other three kinds of legal fictions. But one may be skeptical about this last kind. For the fictions I refer to now are not sentential entities capable of being true or false, and coherent or incoherent; they are fictional objects which are not capable of being such. A parliament is neither true nor false, neither coherent nor incoherent. Coherence and truth do not apply to a corporation as such. So, apparently, these fictions are not coherence-apt. If this is correct, they constitute a remarkable exception to the criterion considered here. However, in the last section

of this contribution I will see if such an objection can be resisted and such an exception is only an apparent one. Then I will try to generalize about fictions in other domains, in order to draw some conclusions in the perspective of a unified theory of fiction.

7. Is Coherence a Unification Standard?

I defined fictions as knowingly false assumptions accepted for some purpose. The first task of a unified theory of fiction is that of distinguishing it from other similar phenomena such as presumption, and I think that the definition I used is very helpful in this respect. Of course it has several implications. One of them is that fictions, being truth-apt, are linguistic, sentential entities. (Unless you think that in some sense ‘true’ and ‘false’ also apply to non-linguistic items)³¹. Being so, fictions are also coherence-apt: they are capable of being (more or less) coherent and incoherent. If we now consider the second task of a unified theory of fiction, namely providing the best theory of fiction for every fictional domain, and saying what a fiction is independently of its specific contextual features, we may ask whether a coherentist account of it is a good candidate for this job. We saw that it works in the literary domain, where, according to the norm of credibility, a good literary fiction must be credible and where, to be credible, a fiction must meet some threshold of coherence. We also saw that coherence applies to the legal domain, where many juristic fictions are required to be coherent. So, can we generalize about it and say that coherence is a unification standard accommodating not only literary and legal fictions but also scientific, economic, mathematical and metaphysical ones? Is coherence capable of giving us not only an abstract definition of what a fiction is, but also a penetrating explanation of what a good fiction is in general? We must be prudent about this. A big obstacle we met dealing with the law is that of the fictions I called constitutive, namely those entities constituted by legal norms and acts, belonging to

³¹ On this issue see W. Künné 2003, 104-107. Cf. G. Tuzet 2008.

the world of institutional reality. Corporations and parliaments, for instance. Such entities are not sentential. Strictly speaking, a corporation is not a narrative; it is not made of sentences. Therefore, it could not be true or false, nor coherent or incoherent. For this reason these fictions constitute a remarkable exception to a coherentist account of them. They follow other criteria and standards; coherence does not apply to them.

However, you may ask if we can grant this exception and generalize about the other domains. The problem is that, when we look at the other domains and see what are in them the fictions dealt with, we immediately realize that we face the same problem we have with the legal constitutive fictions. What is a standard example of fiction in mathematics? Numbers, since many authors claim that they are fictional, or conventional, objects? But a number is not the right kind of thing for coherence. *Per se* a number is not truth-apt, nor coherence-apt. It does not make sense to say that the number 3, for instance, is false. So our account of fictions as coherent and knowingly false assumptions accepted for some purpose does not apply to such entities. Take now the case of fictions in empirical science. If you think that (some of) our scientific laws are fictions, our criterion can accommodate them, insofar as they are coherent with the present body of science and they are knowingly false assumptions accepted for some purpose (for instance, to “save the phenomena”). A scientific law is truth- and coherence-apt, so it can meet our criterion. But things are different if you think about other examples of fiction in science. If you are an anti-realist about the entities dealt with in empirical science, you may think that electrons belong to fiction³². In this case our criterion does not do, since electrons are not coherence-apt. It does not make sense to say that an electron is coherent. Something similar holds for fictions in economics. If an economic model is a standard example of economic fiction, insofar as it is truth- and coherence-apt, our criterion applies and we can take economic fictions to be coherent knowingly false assumptions accepted for some economic purpose. The conclusion is different, however, if you take a different example – for instance hedge

³² Cf. the different perspectives discussed in e.g. I. Hacking 1983 and M. Suárez 2008.

funds, which are neither truth- nor coherence-apt. Similar remarks can be made, I think, about fictions in metaphysics³³.

Let me summarize now the point of the last remarks. The exceptions we encountered in these different domains are such because of their non-sentential nature. Insofar as we deal with sentential entities, our criterion applies since they are truth- and coherence-apt. We may explain such fictions saying that they are coherent and knowingly false assumptions accepted for some purpose. But our criterion does not apply to non-sentential entities. So, you might conclude that coherence is not a unification standard, that coherence fails in this respect and that the unification question must be addressed differently. I think it is a reasonable conclusion, but before jumping to it I would like to reflect on a possible rejoinder and explore a possible way to resist that conclusion.

Think about one of the first examples we gave: Hamlet and Sherlock Holmes are fictional objects. They are literary fictions and, in the light of what we have just said about numbers and electrons, you may think that they deserve the same treatment: *per se* literary characters are neither true nor false, neither coherent nor incoherent. It does not make sense to say that Hamlet is coherent as such. So, you may think that we should revise our previous conclusions and admit that a coherentist account of fictions does not do for literary fictions either. In fact such a conclusion would not be surprising if you consider that a great part of the contemporary debate in fiction theory is about the metaphysical status of such entities like literary characters³⁴. Given that entities of such a kind are not coherence-apt, we should conclude that coherence fails not only as a unification standard but also as a contextual criterion explaining in particular what a good literary fiction is. Now, are we really committed to this conclusion? I do not think so.

The argument I would like to give in this respect is quite simple. We saw that fictional objects like numbers and literary characters are neither truth- nor coherence-apt, *per se*. This is correct. It is also true of physical objects and real human beings. The tree I see in front of me is not

³³ See M. Kalderon 2005.

³⁴ See among others K. Walton 1990 and A. Thomasson 1999, whose different theses provoked a lively and still going-on debate. On the linguistic features of the matter, cf. e.g. S. Predelli 2002.

true, *per se*. What is true is something else, a bit more complex, namely that I see a tree in front of me. Similarly, Dante was not coherent as such. What was coherent was, suppose, his conduct, or, in a different sense, the plot of his celebrated *Commedia*. So, both those fictional and non-fictional objects are neither truth- nor coherence-apt. Why? Because, you may say, they are not sentential, and because truth and coherence only apply to sentential entities. This is strictly speaking correct. But we should not disregard an important difference. Think about the properties of Dante and Hamlet, respectively. Dante was born in Florence; he wrote the *Commedia*; he was buried in Ravenna; etc. These are some of his properties, and they are such independently of any fiction about him. He would have been born in Firenze, he would have written the *Commedia*, and he would have been buried in Ravenna, even if it were true that nobody ever wrote about him. Think now about Hamlet's properties: Do you know of a property of him that would be such even if it were true that Shakespeare did not write about him? This is to my mind an important difference between Dante and Hamlet. While Dante was an entity whose properties did not depend on any fiction, Hamlet's properties depend on a specific fiction. While Dante was not a fictional entity, Hamlet is a fictional object *depending on a fiction*. Not only Hamlet's properties would not be such without Shakespeare's fiction: without it, Hamlet himself would be nothing. This is not an epistemic question relative to what we know or ignore about Dante or Hamlet. It is a more fundamental difference between non-fictional and fictional entities.

This being said, what is a fiction made of? A literary fiction is mainly made of sentences. This seems to be uncontroversial, for novels and narratives in particular. (Perhaps it is less true of poetry, but one may claim that a poem's lines are at least fragments of sentences). Therefore, if a literary character would be nothing at all without a fiction about it, and if a literary fiction is made of sentences, then a literary character would be nothing at all without the relevant sentences about it. Hence we can say that a literary character is wholly sentence-dependent; something untrue of real human beings. (I leave aside the issue of the relation between language and mind; if you think that there is no language without mind, you can say that sentence-dependence is mind-dependence and

that fictions only exist as intentional entities whose properties are susceptible of being expressed by language sentences).

Finally, to bring our argument to a conclusion different from the one considered above – namely that coherence is neither a unification standard, nor a contextual criterion for fictions – notice that sentence-dependence is perfectly in tune with our coherentist account. As far as a fictional entity is sentence-dependent (it is such only if a fiction talks about it), it is dependent on something which is truth- and coherence-apt. A fictional object like Hamlet is strictly speaking neither true nor false, neither coherent nor incoherent; but it depends on something which can be true or false, and coherent or incoherent. So coherence understood in this way is a legitimate criterion for assessing literary fictions and evaluating them³⁵. What about the other domains we referred to? I think that the argument just given can be used in their respect as well. One may say that economic entities like hedge funds do not exist except in economic talk and economic theory; they are, in the above specified sense, sentence-dependent: they are constitutively part of linguistic structures (or mental if you prefer) susceptible of being true or false, as well as coherent or incoherent. The same about electrons: if you are an anti-realist about scientific entities and you claim that they are fictions, you are committed to the claim that they depend on scientific practice and talk, that is, on the way scientists put into sentences and theories the observational data at their disposal³⁶. Commitment to scientific anti-realism is commitment to sentence-dependence of scientific fictions. To conclude, the same seems to be true of mathematical fictions: if you claim that numbers are fictional objects, you seem to have a commitment to the claim that they belong to mathematical practice and talk; being such, they depend on something which is truth- and coherence-apt.

³⁵ There might be, it is true, incoherent literary fictions or even inconsistent ones. But remember that the coherence requirement is a normative standard, not an analytic one. An inconsistent fiction is still a fiction; and it is almost always a bad one.

³⁶ Recently, B. van Fraassen 2002 has made the weaker claim that empiricism is a *stance* rather than a doctrine. I think that empiricism taken seriously deserves a stronger account; but fictionalism is too strong perhaps: why exclude *a priori* the possibility of a scientific theory's being true?

So, what are our prospects for unification? If what we have said so far is correct, what we claimed about literary fictions can be generalized to every kind of fictional entity. Being dependent on fictional talk, a fictional object is what a fiction says it is. Outside fictional talk it is nothing at all. Fictional objects depend on fictions being understood as knowingly false but credible assumptions. This being true, we have at least partially resisted the conclusion that coherence is not a fiction unification standard. We seem to be in the position to claim legitimately that fictions in general are: (i) coherent and (ii) knowingly false assumptions accepted for some purpose. This is the way fictions work. We must remember, however, that our coherentist account does not apply directly to fictional objects as such, but only via their sentence-dependence. There is no fictional object without fictional talk. This is not fiction: I think it is the truth about it.

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