

Varieties of metafictions

Narratives Across Fiction and Non-Fiction (Uppsala)

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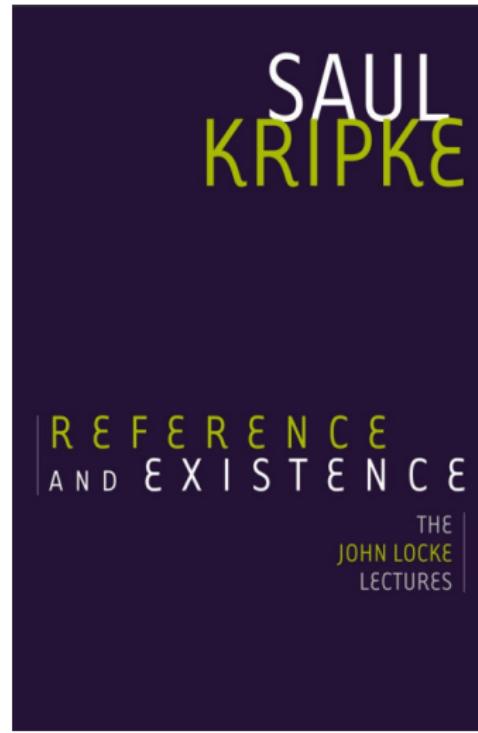
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The root of evil!



THE distinction

- ▶ Since Kripke (1973/2013) the philosophy of fiction is essentially worried about the distinction between *fictional* and *metafictional* statements.¹
- ▶ Here is a nice example from the Q&A of Kripke's 3rd lecture adapted in (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 144):

Who created Frankenstein's monster? One answer, from the internal perspective, is of course: Frankenstein. Only from the external point of view must the reply be: Mary Shelley.

¹There are alternative labels for the same distinction. Following (Bonomi 2008), some philosophers distinguish between “textual” and “metatextual” uses. Others distinguish between “internal” and “external” perspectives (Friend 2007). Kripke (1973/2013: 104) originally contrasted between the “fictional way” and the “‘out-and-out’ way”. Van Inwagen (1977) contrasts between statements “about creatures of fiction” and “typical narrative or descriptive sentences taken from works of fiction”. But everyone agrees on the distinction itself, so it is merely a terminological point. See (García-Carpintero 2019) for a comprehensive, opinionated review of the literature on this distinction.

Standard analysis

- There is a history of “standard” theorising about this distinction in the analytic philosophy of language...
 - ... along 2 relevant (and related) dimensions, viz. *truth* and *aboutness*.
- *Fictional* statements are:
 - neither true nor false;²
 - about an imagined (typically nonexistent) flesh-and-blood individual.³
- *Metafictional* statements are:
 - genuinely true or false;
 - about an “individual of paper”.⁴

²This goes back to Frege (1979: 130)'s discussion of “mock thoughts”, later developed by Macdonald (1954) and Searle (1975) into the “standard analysis” of fictional statements as pretend assertions.

³This is Walton (1990)'s general theory of make-believe at the level of semantics; see (Friend 2016) and (Woodward 2014) for details.

⁴This terminology is a tribute to Salvador Plascencia 2005 literary metafiction *The People of paper*. Alternative terminologies include “creatures of fiction” (Van Inwagen 1977), “abstract artefacts” (Kripke 1973/2013), “cultural artefacts” (Thomasson 1999), “ficta” (Voltolini 2006).

However, complications do occur...

- Kripke (1973/2013: 74) thus writes:

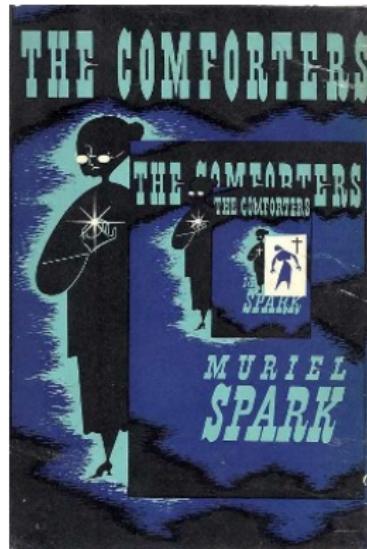
Let's take the statement 'Hamlet was a fictional character.' That is not true in the work of fiction itself. Using predicates according to their use in fiction — that is, according to the rule which applies a predicate to a fictional character if that fictional character is so described in the appropriate work of fiction — we should conclude that Hamlet was not a fictional character. In fact, paradoxical as it may sound, in this sense no fictional person is a fictional person. For (virtually) no fictional person is said in his own work of fiction to be a fictional person. But applying the predicate on the level of reality—that is, so to speak, straight — one should say that Hamlet was a fictional person, and that every fictional person is a fictional person.*

* However, complications do occur, leading to my parenthetical qualification. See, for example, "Enoch Soames" by Max Beerbohm and *The Comforters* by Muriel Spark. In some other version of the present lectures [??!!] I discussed at least these works. But I won't give away any plots here.

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Muriel Spark 1957



Enoch Soames by Max Beerbohm

Philosophical definition

- ▶ This suggests a definition:
 - ▶ A *metafiction* is a fiction which invites imagining that some metafictional statement is true *in the fiction*;
 - ▶ i.e. a fiction for which the fictional and metafictional perspective *overlap*.
 - ▶ ex: “Caroline Rose is a fictional character” is true simpliciter *and* true *in the Comforters*.
- ▶ This overlap raises a series of worrisome questions:
 - ▶ are these fictions (at best accidentally) true or not? what are they (really) about? how is metafictional imagination sustained?
 - ▶ how widespread are these fictions? do they challenge THE distinction or not?⁵
- ▶ Let us for now let these problems on the side and keep this idea that a *metafiction* is a fiction that internalises (some of its) metafictional content.
 - ▶ notably because it gives a nice counterpoint to the narratological perspective on the same phenomenon.

⁵Pelletier (2003) and Friend (2007) argue that these fictions are more problematic for realists (as opposed to anti-realists). Everett (2013), as a radical anti-realist, argues that THE distinction was wrong-headed all along.

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Reflexivity

- According to literary theorists metafictions = fiction + reflexivity.⁶
 - Metafictions are thus standardly construed as a subset of narrative fictions (see e.g. Fludernik 2009: §6).
- A rich terminology speaks for itself (Ommundsen 1993: 14):

The coinage [metafiction] was not particularly original: attention to 'meta-phenomena' has in the second half of the 20th century been common in a number of disciplines (William Gass himself mentions meta-theorems in mathematics and logic) and the French critic Roland Barthes (1972 Critical essays; p. 97) had in the short essay 'Literature and metalanguage', first published in 1959, identified the double consciousness of contemporary literature as both 'literature object' and 'metaliterature'. A great number of other names have been given to the same type of writing: self-conscious, reflexive (or self-reflexive), self-referential, introspective, introverted, narcissistic or auto-representational. [...] While some critical consensus seems to exist regarding the basic definition of metafiction or reflexive fiction (it is about fiction), critics vary considerably in their account of the phenomenon.

⁶For better or worse, metafictions have been associated with self-reference paradoxes: see esp. the reception of Hofstadter (1979)'s notion of a "strange loop" in literary theory.

Some influential studies

A self-conscious novel, briefly, is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice. [...] A fully self-conscious novel [...] is one in which from beginning to end, [...] there is a consistent effort to convey to us a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention. (Alter 1975: x-xi)

"Metafiction", as it has now been named, is fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity. "Narcissistic" – the figurative adjective chosen here to designate this textual self-awareness – is not intended as derogatory but rather as descriptive and suggestive. (Hutcheon 1980: 14)

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, but they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. [...] [T]he lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. (Waugh 1984: 6)

A taste of literary debates

- There are two main literary debates around metafictions:

1. Is it a genre?

- if so, is it historically determined within the “post-modernist” movement?
- what about the metafictional effects in *Don Quixote*, in *Tristram Shandy*?

2. Are there specific themes associated with metafictional reflexivity?

Candidate answers:

- 2.1 creation (religion, sex, art);
- 2.2 suicide (death);
- 2.3 theory (writing history vs. fiction, challenging authority).

Focus on anti-mimetism

- ▶ Immediately after rehearsing the agreed-upon definition of “self-reflective fictions”, Polvinen (2023: 6) mentions the breaking of illusion as a dominant view:⁷

Metafiction – literary self-reflection at its most extreme – is fiction about fiction; that is, the kind of fiction that refers to its own fictionality, and as such it is often seen as a mode of writing designed to break the illusion of reality created by storytelling.
- ▶ as far as I can see, this theme of anti-mimetism is a non-argued for dogma,
 - ▶ perhaps stemming from a conflation of fictional immersion and illusion...
 - ▶ ... or a literal reading of the transparency-opacity metaphor.

⁷Note that Walton (1990: 275)'s reading of Calvino's *If in a winter's night a traveller* is based on this idea that reflexivity "discourages participation"; see Simpson (2005) for an apt criticism of Walton's reading.

Metaleptic moves

- Within narratology proper, metafictions are often theorised as a special case of *metalepsis*:
 - The term comes from Genette (1972, 1983, 2004) and denotes a deliberate transgression of narrative levels.⁸
 - Given the definition, the concept of metalepsis obviously has a much larger extension than that of metafiction:
 - e.g. Woody Allen 1977 *The Kugelmass Episode*: the main character is a contemporary New Yorker who manages to go into the world of Madame Bovary and has an affair with her, among other things.
 - e.g. transgression between the narrative space and the storyworld:

*Let us hold onto Mr Jackal's rope: it is sturdy enough to carry both of us, and even the three of us, dear reader, – and now, let us try to identify the mysterious and gloomy place where the scene we have to describe is happening. (Alexandre Dumas 1854-9 *Les Mohicans de Paris*)*

*What would prevent me from having the Master get married and be cuckolded? (Diderot 1796 *Jacques le fataliste*)*

*House of the king, march, ensure victory... Come, valiant elite, honor of our armies; Go forth, arrows of fire, flaming grenades... (Voltaire 1745 *Le Poème de Fontenoy – a non-fiction*)*

⁸See the collected volume (Schaeffer and Pier 2005) for studies on metalepsis; see (Lavocat 2020) for a recent overview of the history of the term and Genette's (changing) views.

► Using Ryan (2005)'s terminology, one may distinguish between:

1. *Diegetic metalepsis*: crossing the boundary between a fiction within a fiction and its frame fiction;
2. *Rhetorical metalepsis*: crossing the boundary between the fictional space and the heterodiegetic narrative plane;⁹
3. *Ontological metalepsis*: crossing the boundary between the fictional and the real ↞ metafiction proper.¹⁰

⁹This is also called “metanarration” and is possible in both *factual* and *fictional* narratives (Neumann and Nünning 2015).

¹⁰One may then distinguish kinds of metafictions depending on *the way* the ontological border is crossed: see (Fludernik 2003), (Bell and Alber 2012), (Lavocat 2016: 476-481).

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- ▶ The convergence between the 2 fields is itself an interesting result:
 - ▶ Metafictions define a subset of narrative fictions;
 - ▶ this subset is defined via formal features, somehow exploiting the “normal” narrative structure to achieve some kind of reflexivity.
- ▶ My working hypothesis:
 - ▶ metafictions are “malfunctioning” fictions,¹¹
 - ▶ NB: malfunctioning ≠ failed, or bad.
 - ▶ Since narrative structures are sophisticated structures, there are many different ways it can go astray.
 - ▶ Studying those is interesting just like it is interesting to study, say, a software containing bugs: one learns a lot about softwares when debugging them.
 - ▶ To paraphrase Tolstoy (and pace Nabokov): “All well-functioning fictions are alike; each metafiction is malfunctioning in its own way”.

¹¹This owes to a broadly waltonian “artefactualist” view of fictions (props): see Enrico Terrone’s **“Philosophy of Experiential Artefacts”** ERC project and (Polvinen 2023) for recent such frameworks.

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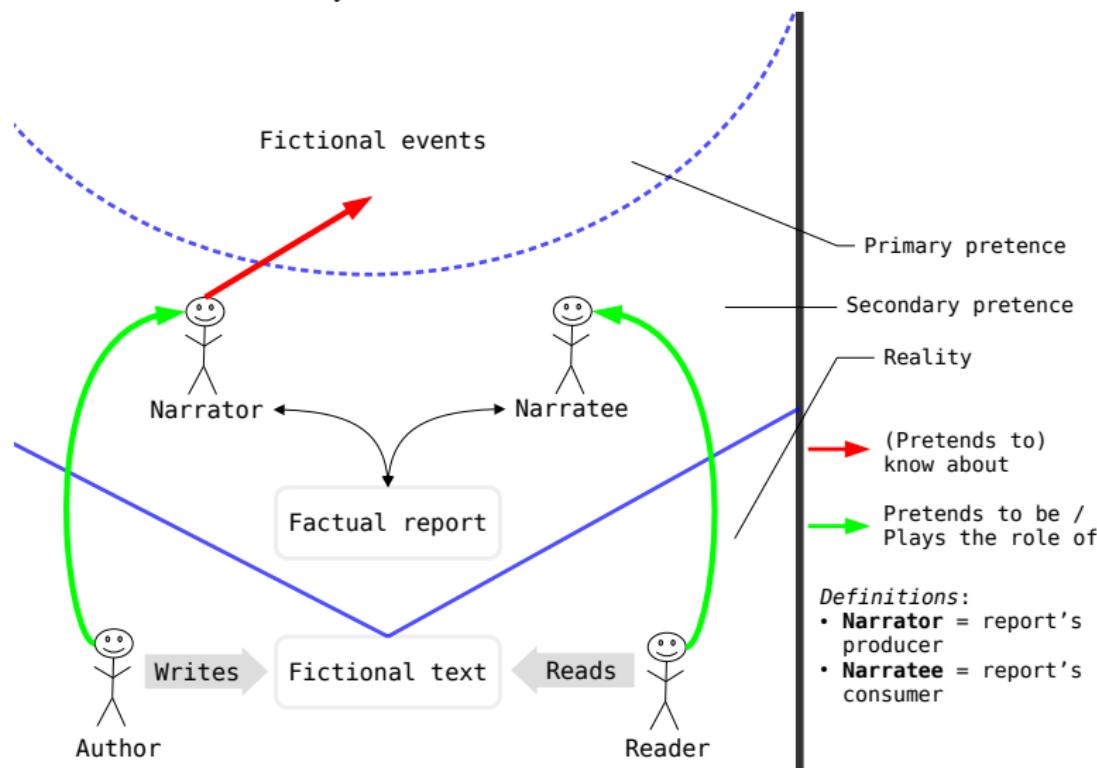
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A plausible theory of narrative fiction



Terminology

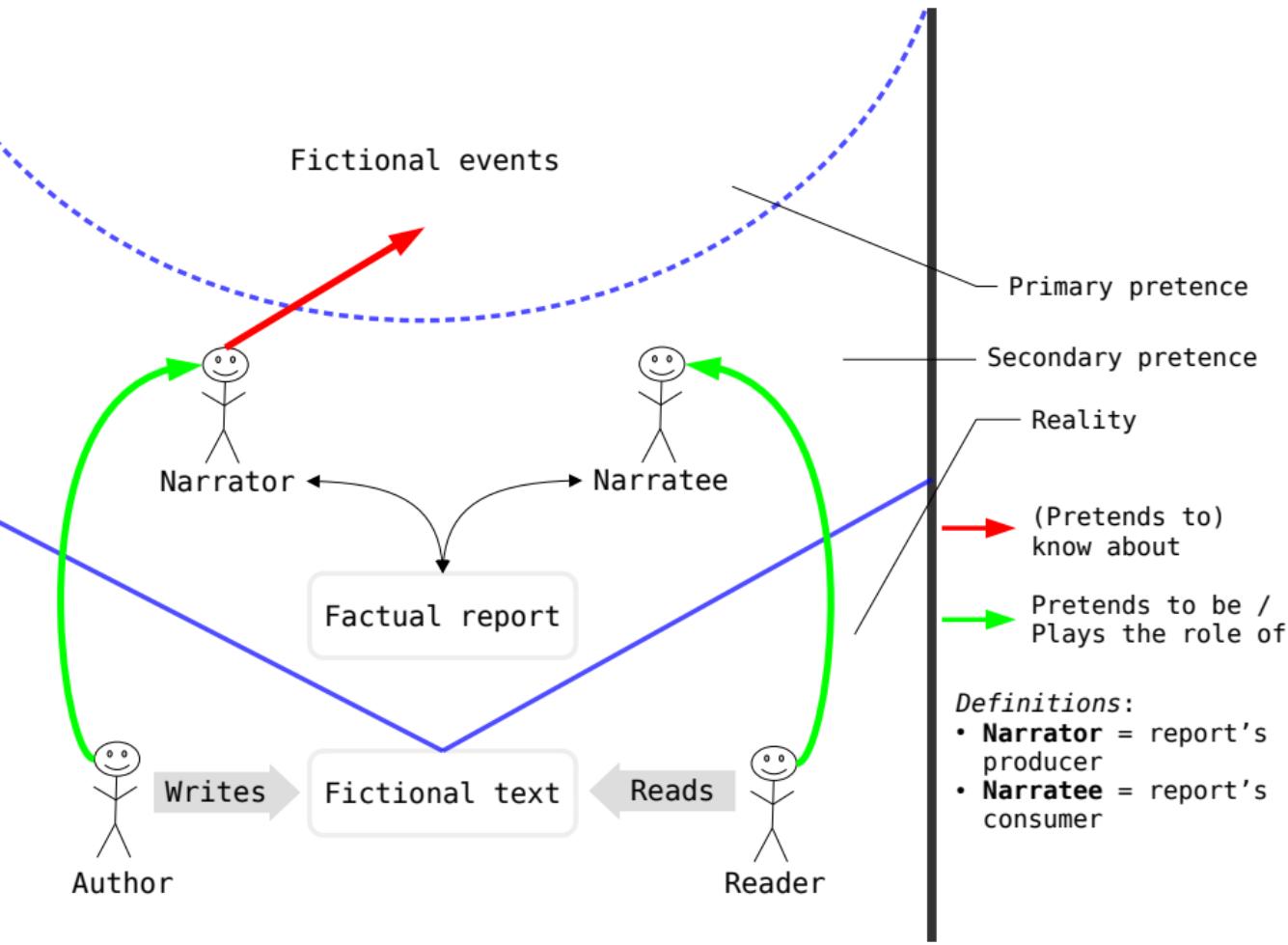
- ▶ This schema is a variation on Genette (1991)'s “fictional contract”:¹²
 - ▶ Rk: it exactly corresponds to Everett (2013)'s “report principle”, who adapts Macdonald (1954), Searle (1975) and Lewis (1978) into the waltonian framework (see also (Walton 2013)).
- ▶ “*Fiction secondaire*” (vs. *fiction primaire*) is Vuillaume (1990)'s term;
 - ▶ alternative *philosophical labels* include:
 - ▶ “game world” (vs. work world) (Walton 1990), “fictional periphery” (vs. core fiction) (Predelli 2020);
 - ▶ alternative *narratological labels* include:
 - ▶ discourse (vs. story) (Culler 2011); *sjuzet* (vs. *fabula*); narrating (vs. narrated); *Besprochene Welt* (vs. *Erzählte Welt*); expression plane (vs. content plane) ...¹³
- ▶ Borders are characterised by a:
 - ▶ *metaphysical gap* (no interaction);
 - ▶ and a *semantic bridge* (information flow).

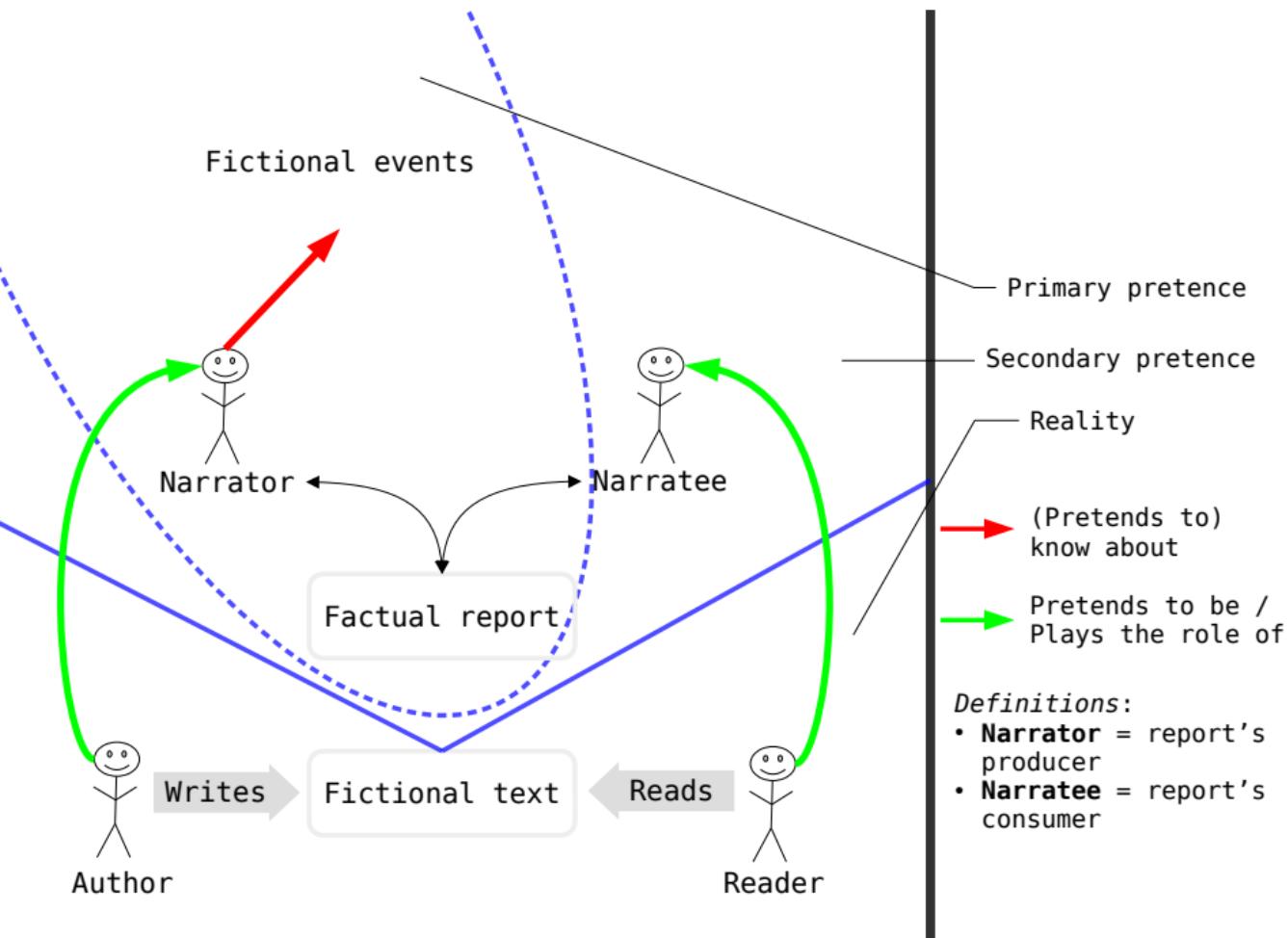
¹²vs. Hamburger (1957)'s theory of fictional markers. Equivalent three-layered models are called “realist” or “communicational models” (Fludernik 2009): see e.g. Ryan (1991)'s and Eco (1994)'s schemas.

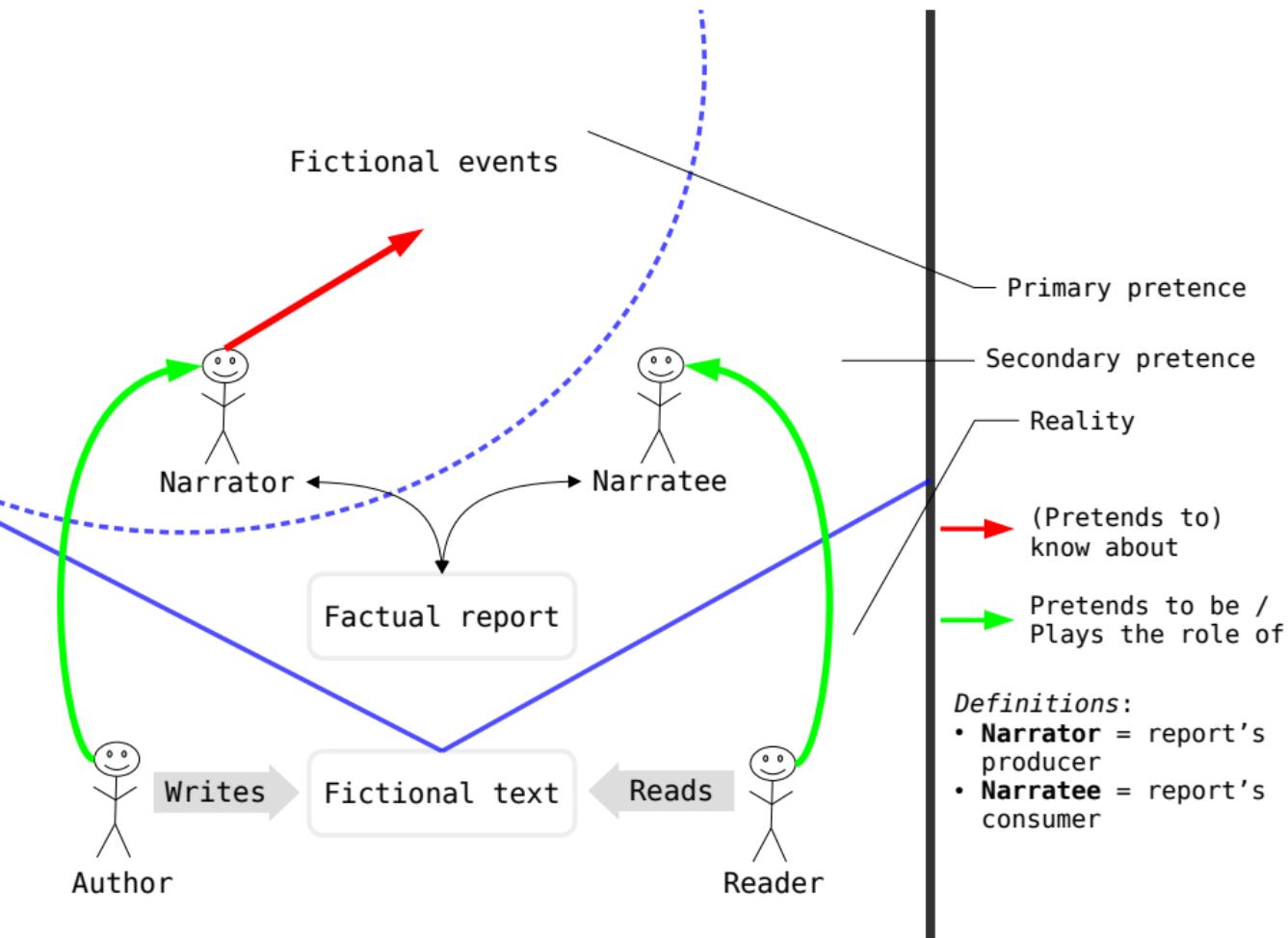
¹³See Prince (2003) for references.

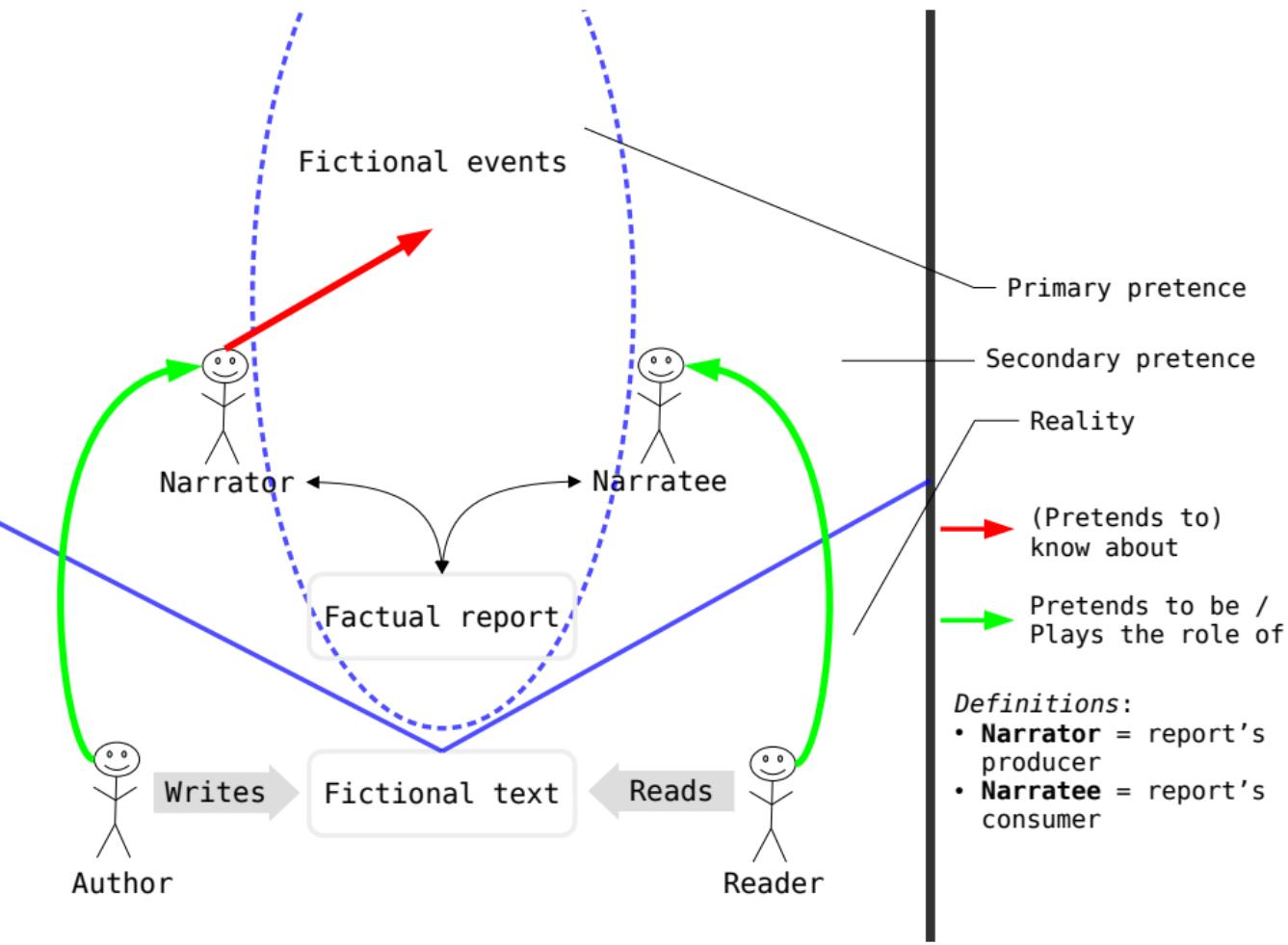
Re-interpretation of homo/hetero-digegetic

- ▶ We can now re-interpret Genette (1972)'s famous distinction...
 - ▶ A *homodiegetic* narrator is one that dwells in the primary fiction;
 - ▶ a *heterodiegetic* narrator is one that dwells in the secondary fiction.
- ▶ ... and extend its scope...
 - ▶ When the narratee is *homodiegetic*, we have an *interactive* fiction;
 - ▶ when the narratee is *heterodiegetic*, we have a *contemplative* fiction.
- ▶ ... way further than you thought!
 - ▶ The narration is said to be *strong* when the factual report exists in the primary fiction;
 - ▶ it is *weak* when it exists in the secondary fiction only.









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Spark 1955 *The Comforters*



A plausible example of strong narration with heterodiegetic narrator!

Working hypothesis reloaded

- ▶ The “malfunctionning” can now be checked against:
 - ▶ The deviation from the “norm(s)”¹⁴, viz. weak narration with heterodiegetic narrator and/or strong narration with homodiegetic narrator;
 - ▶ and our intuitions about the unstability of the resulting narrative structure.
 - ▶ e.g. *The Comforters* (strict/heterodiegetic) feels very unstable...
- ▶ **Methodology:** there is a systematic way of designing unstable narrative structure:
 - ▶ one can tweak the different entities in place;
 - ▶ one can tweak the two borders.
 - ▶ Let's call this: narratological engineering!
- ▶ **Corrolary:** metafiction is a gradual, multiscalar phenomenon.
 - ▶ Then we can discuss whether there is a cut-off point which corresponds to what literary theorists have identified...
 - ▶ ... though I am sceptical about it.

¹⁴Or what Fludernik (2002) calls “‘natural’ narratology”.

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Toying with the secondary fiction's items

1. Narratee:

- ▶ More than one: think of children literature, with a child and adult narratee and ironical effects in between.
- ▶ No narratee (?!): narrator speaking to themselves (?), or directly to the reader (?)

2. Narrator:

- ▶ More than one: this **multiperspectivity**.
- ▶ Narratorless fictions are fully compatible with this model;¹⁵
 - ▶ though it opens two ways of interpreting them: either the factual report is unproduced, or it is produced by the author directly (?)

3. Factual report:

- ▶ More than one (with a non-merging into one single report mechanism):
 - ▶ e.g. blatantly impossible fictions? forking plots? counterfactual narrations?
- ▶ No report: ↪ rather setting difficulties to produce a report;
 - ▶ e.g. Silverstein's ("The Slithery-Dee") narrator dies in the middle of a sentence;
 - ▶ e.g. Woolf's (*Jacob's room*) homodiegetic narrator repeatedly trespasses its prerogatives as if they had relapses of omniscience...

¹⁵See (Köppe and Stühring 2011), the contributions in (Birke and Köppe 2015); developed in Garcia-Carpintero (2022, 2022).

Tweaking the real/secondary fiction border

1. Author-narrator:

- ▶ The case of the theorizing narrator:
 - ▶ Some narrators (while being narrators) engage in heavy theorising about novel writing, *usually echoing some essays by the author*:
 - ▶ e.g. Fowles 1969 *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; Kundera 1984 *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*
- ▶ Auto-fiction (?):
 - ▶ $A \neq N; N \neq C$; and $A = C$ (Genette 1972)

2. Reader-narratee:

- ▶ Second-person narrations, see (Fludernik 1994);
 - ▶ e.g. Butor 1957 *La Modification*, Perec 1967 *Un Homme qui dort*, ...
- ▶ Calvino 1979 *If in a winter's night a traveller* is a special case:
 - ▶ An attempt to dispense with the primary fiction to focus entirely on the secondary fiction!
 - ▶ see my "Stuck in the fictional periphery: a philosophical analysis of *If on a winter's night a traveller*", forthcoming in Odradek.
- ▶ Brecht (1961)'s "alienation effect", with *inter alia* direct addresses to audiences as (metafictional) techniques to this end.

Metafictional encounters

- ▶ Inviting the problematically real items *as real*, against the fictional background:
 - ▶ The metafictional encounter as a topos: when the fictional character meets the real author;
 - ▶ e.g. Miguel de Unamuno 1915 *Niebla*, Kurt Vonnegut 1973 *The Breakfast of Champions*, Salvador Plascencia 2005 *The People of Paper*, ...
- ▶ Rk: this kind of fiction is (metaphysically) impossible and yields characteristically unstable narrative structures.
 - ▶ A standard stabilisation reading strategy: reinterpreting the metafictional encounter as a fiction, within the original fiction.
 - ▶ *Idea*: in order to cross a metaphysical border, first fictionalise it.
 - ▶ There are debates though: see Lavocat (2016: §4.4.1.) for a fairly recent overview.

Formal metafictions

- ▶ Last, but not least, are the works which use formal techniques making the real-world text collide with the fictional events.
 - ▶ Canonical examples are from *Tristram Shandy* where the page is sometimes blackened, white and ready for actual drawing, filled with lines, parallel texts...
 - ▶ Plascencia 2005 *The People of Paper* nicely includes a character called Baby Nostradamus which can hide parts of the text by ink-spilling, and teaches another character Little Merced how to do it.

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- ▶ *Take-home message:* (literary) metafictions are intentionally malfunctionning fictions,
 - ▶ i.e. whose narrative structure is made unstable by design;
 - ▶ no (aesthetic) judgement attached.
 - ▶ Studying this instability is informative for what fictions are in general:
 - ▶ *Method:* narrative engineering.
- ▶ Perhaps the notion of *reflexivity* was not as central as what one would have thought:¹⁶
 - ▶ reflexivity is perhaps just an *effect*
 - ▶ i.e. the instability of the narrative structure focuses the reader's attention on the structure itself;
 - ▶ or a *means*
 - ▶ i.e. to drive the reader's attention on the narrative structure may have a destabilising consequence.

¹⁶*Recall:* in the philosophical definition, reflexivity shows in the overlap of the internal and external perspective; in the narratological definition, self-reference is central to the definition.

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Kundera *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

- In several places, Kundera identifies his characters with a *situation* (II, 1):

It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived. They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation. Tomas was born of the saying Einmal ist keinmal. Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach.

- This grounds the following encounter between the author and the character, which develops into theory (V, 15):

And once more I see him the way he appeared to me at the very beginning of the novel: standing at the window and staring across the courtyard at the walls opposite.

This is the image from which he was born. As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about. But isn't it true that an author can write only about himself? [...] The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. [...] The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become. But enough. Let us return to Tomas.

The French Lieutenant Woman (ch.55) I

Now could I use you?

Now what could I do with you?

It is precisely, it has always seemed to me, the look of an omnipotent god – if there were such an absurd thing – should be shown to have. Not at all what we think of as a divine look; but one of distinctly mean and dubious (as the theoreticians of the *nouveau roman* have pointed out) moral quality. I see this with particular clarity on the face, only too familiar to me, of the bearded man who stares at Charles. And I will keep up the pretence no longer .

Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles, is not quite the same as the two above. But rather, what the devil am I to do with you? I have already thought of ending Charles's career here and now; of leaving him for eternity on his way to London. But the conventions of Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending; and I preached earlier of the freedom characters must be given. My problem is simple – what Charles want

The French Lieutenant Woman (ch.55) II

is clear? It is indeed. But what the protagonist wants is not so clear; and I am not at all sure where she is at the moment. Of course, if these two were two fragments of real life, instead of two figments of my imagination, the issue to the dilemma is obvious: the one want combats the other want, and fails or succeeds, as the actuality may be. Fiction usually pretends to conform to the reality: the writer puts the conflicting wants in the ring and then describes the fight – but in fact fixes the fights (in other words, in persuading us that they were not fixed) and by the kind of fighter they fix in favour of: the good one, the tragic one, the evil one, the funny one, and so on.

But the chief argument for fight-fixing is to show one's readers what one thinks of the world around one – whether one is a pessimist, an optimist, what you will. I have pretended to slip back into 1867; but of course that year is in reality a century past. It is futile to show optimism or pessimism, or anything else about it, because we know what has happened since.

The French Lieutenant Woman (ch.55) III

So I continue to stare at Charles and see no reason this time for fixing the fight upon which he is about to engage. That leaves me with two alternatives. I let the fight proceed and take no more than a recording part in it; or I take both sides in it. I stare at the vaguely effete but not completely futile face. And as we near London, I think I see a solution; that is, I see the dilemma is false. The only way I can take no part in the fight is to show two versions of it. That leaves me with only one problem: I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the “real” version.

I take my purse from the pocket of my frock-coat, I extract a florin, I rest it on my right thumbnail, I flick it, spinning, two feet into the air and catch it in my left hand.

SATURN

Froggy was the first recruit to join Federico de la Fe's war, but soon others from EMF followed. On the second day of the campaign against Saturn, the fungus that grew on the stems of carnations spread onto Froggy's shoes. From his soles it spread to the brown carpet in Froggy's living room, and then to the walls and ceiling. And as Froggy tried to beat the white mold from his curtains, the fungus spread onto the broom and down to his hands.

And every day, as more EMF cholos joined Federico de la Fe's army, the fungus spread to more houses until all of El Monte was covered in a layer of white mold.

They scrubbed the fungus from their hands with pumice and kerosene, and when mushrooms sprouted from the crevasses in their bathroom tiles they scraped them with spatulas and poured bleach.

During the two-week plague, twenty-three EMF cholos died. When the coroner split open their chests to drain the blood and stuff them with tissue paper, he found roadstools growing between their ribs.

In the midst of sorrow and funeral processions, Froggy survived and at nineteen became the oldest living member of EMF. After the plague, the chain of command was Froggy, Smiley, Pelon, and then Little Oso. But still it was Federico de la Fe who oversaw the war.

Saturn had won the first battle, but instead of surrendering, Froggy increased their ranks by jumping in more cholos and inviting teenage girls to join EMF and the fight for emancipation.

The first girl to join EMF was named Sandra. There were no other women to jump her in and so the official initiation was waived. But there was no need for a brinca anyway, as she had fled from a father who had beat her so much that she could no longer remember what it was like to properly knit.

Sandra had survived the plague, impeding the growth of fungus by sniffing ammonia. And instead of Sandra being initiated at the hands of Froggy, it was Sandra who used her knitting needle to tattoo "EMF" onto Froggy's neck.

LITTLE MERCED

I fought the mold with bleach and a wire brush. I pushed it back from the living room floor out to the porch and splashed bleach onto the sidewalk. My father walked around town sniffing kerosene from a mason jar and sipping maté. At night, while I laid in bed, my father sat bent over the dominoes table sketching plans and chewing the leaves of his tea.

Once the fungus receded back into the flower fields, the daily games of dominoes resumed. Froggy made Sandra subcomandante of EMF and as subcomandante, Sandra sat next to Froggy.

But unlike the other EMF cholos, Sandra did not cuff her pants or shave her head. She cut her pant legs below the knee and pulled her hair into a ponytail that she tied with string pulled from fertilizer sacks, loosing her hair only when alone with Froggy.

Every Sunday morning, as families walked by holding their soup bowls, new members were jumped into EMF. When Froggy and Sandra returned from the flower fields, my father gave them petroleum and towels to wipe the splatters of blood from their faces.

They entered the house with their collars stained and smelling of arnica cream and petroleum. They would sit and study the charts that my father had drawn.

One of which looked like this:

• ||| • •

The three tallies circled:



"Here is where we attack," my father said.

And Sandra listened while trying to knit the tail of her shawl, but her knots always unraveled, leaving strands of string strewn wherever she sat.

SANDRA

My father recognized the stitching from the old tablecloths I had attempted to make. He followed the hem of my knitting through the town of El Monte and into my bed. As he picked up the yarn from the floor and placed it into his swollen pockets, I lay there wrapped around Froggy, until I felt the familiar fits of my father pounding against my back.

And before I could turn, Froggy had lunged out of bed and dropped my father to the floor, putting two slits across his throat with the blade of his carnation knife.

And even though my whole life I wanted to flee from my father, I did not like seeing him wrapped in the shreds of my shawl and buried in the middle of a flower field.

I remained subcommandante of EMF but moved out of Froggy's. I could not sleep in the same room with the man who had killed my father.

I took only the bureau drawers, two rugs, and two pillows from Froggy's, and moved into a stucco at the edge of El Monte. I slept alone, cushioned by rugs and pillows. I was a quiet sleeper and did not thrash about or even snore, but I began to wake with welts on my arms and my ribs sore and bruised. It was not until I looked in the mirror and noticed the black eye on my face that I knew I had been dreaming of my father.

SATURN

Saturn waited. He watered his grass. When she did not show, he spit the thinning carpenter nails from his lips and onto his yard. Five hours later, still no sign of her, he tossed two fistfuls of chestnuts onto the lawn, their prickly husks anchoring them to the soil. And two days later, when she had yet to arrive, he shattered six bottles and swept the glass shards into the grass. By the end of the week the lawn had become so treacherous that it penetrated the soles of his shoes, cutting his feet and soaking his socks with blood.

NATALIA & QUINONES

After four decades of winter we sold the hotel and headed home. We sold it to a man who carried a briefcase and planned to replace the bidets and install his-and-hers sinks and towel racks. He said he was going to tear the coal boilers from each restroom and install a centralized water heater controlled by an automatic thermometer. He also planned to make love easier, requiring identification only when guests brought out their checkbooks or approached the front desk to pick up a package.

The romantic age was over, and so we headed south, stopping here to watch a falling planet, to see the ravages of love. Perhaps, Napoleon was right all along—perhaps love causes more damage than good, cracking the sky and ruining the horizon.

SUBCOMANDANTE SANDRA

The end of Saturn was imminent. His role in the story had diminished. What was once a powerful planet was now shedding its mass, disintegrating into a trail of dust.

"All this time we wasted hiding under lead, shy of our own freedom and voice," I said to Froggy. "We should have fought from the beginning."

"But that was never de la Fe's way," Froggy answered.

Had it been up to de la Fe, we would still be walking around with our lips shut, thinking of ruffled petals, waiting for Saturn to flee from ennuí.

But regardless of strategy, it was Federico de la Fe who had first led us against Saturn. Federico de la Fe had showed us that we were not free people, that we were enslaved and serving Saturn. Emancipation has many paths, some with more ruckus than others, but the quiet mediation of monks had failed us. We surrendered silence and opened our mouths, saying whatever we wished under open air.

After all these pages, as Saturn faded, it was our voices that directed the story, our collective might pressing Saturn into a corner.

No master pushed us forward or held us back. We were no longer obliged to serve anybody's expectations but our own. I could sit in my chair and do nothing. Glory or dénouement could come, and I didn't have to move.

CAMEROON

My Saturn,

There is no haze in the African sky, but the smell of smoke is everywhere. I stopped at the Tangier observatory, I wanted to see you, but the house astronomer said that there is no more Saturn. "Not even the rings are left," he said. Cameroon is still very far away, I will write when I get there.

Yours always,
Cam

LETTUCE PICKERS

She always wants the spotlight, forcing herself into stories that are not hers. The sky falling and she starts her dancing routine. She'll toss her cigarette holder in midair and catch it between her lips.

Same routine and she wants an ovation every time.

"Orson bought this for me," she'll say, and untwist her bracelet. But before Hollywood and fat white men it was we who watched her dance. We who laid out the paths of lettuce so she would not stain her sequined dress or scuff the bottom of her shoes.

Once she betrayed us, we stopped tearing the romaine leaves from their stock. Instead we dumped wheelbarrows of rotting salad on the headquarters of her fan club and tossed icebergs over the wall of her Hollywood home.

They slumped down in her pool, and in the morning when she went for her daily dip the butler had to remove the bobbing heads of lettuce. And when her movies premiered smears of green stained the screens.

SMILEY

They trampled the flower fields and brushed off their aprons, leaving sandusks and trimmings of leaf in the furrows, cigarette ashes and lettuce heads on the streets, the gray smoke from incense lamps lingering around the altar boys but leaving the stretch of Rome where they stepped.

Their litter—newspapers, wrappers, postcards—all caught in the wind, floating over my skyline.

I stayed inside, watching the flowerpots and watching as Monroe was slowly destroyed. Liberated from Saturn, from the order that for years had kept us in line, our narrative organized and mindful of the conventions of story. Now the order had been upset, lost in a mélée of voices that for years warned their freedom.

ELOTE MAN

I pushed my cart through the spectators, selling cobs of corn covered in butter and graced cheese. They kept looking up at the sky, anticipating the fall of Saturn.

But in the time I was there, selling corn to Hollywood starlets and millionaires, no Saturn fell. The crash head in the flower fields was nothing but an old dinner dove tangled in his own wings. And in the late afternoon, with their necks still cocked to the sky, finally a small piece of Saturn fell: a blue flake floating down, resting on the soft lawn of Federico de la Fe.

JULIETA

I fled the town of El Detramadero, a town named after decay, where everything fell apart. A disease I thought I had left behind. And now in El Monte, sky came down in flakes, and the flower fields were trampled, spreading petals everywhere, sprinklers breaking, water soaking into our shoes.

Even the words of Little Merced smelled like rot. And our leader, Federico de la Fe, spent his days kneeling on his lawn, airing the soil with the tip of his carnation knife and rolling eggs across the grass.

But Froggy remained brave and confident. "Don't worry, Julietta. This is how war is won," he said, flakes of sky in his hair, mud on his shoes, smelling of incense.

"And after the war? What is left?" I asked.

"Reconstruction," Froggy said. "We sweep the streets, reseed the fields, and patch our roofs. We rebuild and live how we always wanted, with hammocks swinging from our backyards and cloth curtains hanging from our windows, only thin draperies between us and the world.

newsprint permeated the curtains, and the flakes of ash, buoyant even in whirlpools, floated in the toilet for nearly a week.

She rested her burnt and waterlogged arm on the kitchen table and tore the tattered blackened scraps, gathering a neat pile before dumping it in the wastebasket. She called the gas company to request a stoppage of service. They asked if she was moving, but instead of explaining that she had no need for stoves and hot water she said she was going on a long trip.

Merced de Papel was the only known survivor of her people, and as is always the case with those nearing extinction, she chronicled everything. Her manuscript began with an explanation of cunnilingus, noting the pleasures of human lips but also the aftermath of those who touched her, describing blood and the bits of paper pulp they would have to floss from their teeth.

In the last entry, the dangers of fire were cited, followed by a brief tutorial on the use of paper sacks and newsprint to repair what had been burned.

But it was not just burns that demanded repair. The friction from shoes tattered her toes, and simple things like holding a dinner fork wore away at her fingers. And so every weekend she walked down from the second floor of her Hollywood apartment, turned two corners to the newsstand, and returned with the Sunday edition. She sat at the kitchen table peeling away layers of paper, repairing what she had stripped with fresh, tight wraps of newsprint.

Compared to her creator Antonio, her origami was crude, often resorting to glue and tape. The messy folds and crusts of paste were hidden beneath her blouse and skirt. The sloppy tucks and cuts revealed themselves when she undressed and the lips of men tasted paste and jagged creases.

SMILEY

Smiley lived with the knowledge of Saturn. He knew his true name, the color of his sheets, and the position of his sleeping sprawls: always face down, his hands gripping the cliffs of the mattress.

But Smiley said nothing. He walked to de la Fe's dominoes game wearing only his pants, his chest and back bare to the sun and to the fluorescent light inside Federico de la Fe's house. It was there, standing above

the dominoes—an absurd game where the greatest value ended in loss, a game that Smiley saw as a direct parody of the mathematical principles his ancestors had pioneered—there over the table, as the ivory pieces were shuffled, Smiley resigned.

"I can't do this anymore," he said. "I don't care if Saturn sees me."

Federico de la Fe simply nodded, but his wrists and hands tightened and arthritis of melancholy inflamed his joints, and he shut his eyes trying to suppress the pain.

Eventually Federico de la Fe and EMF forgave Smiley, understanding that they were involved in a war for volition. They banned Smiley from the dominoes games and military meetings but still extended a kind civility to him, allowing him to retain his dairy privileges and complimentary admission to the monthly cockfights. But Smiley's EMF membership was revoked and the letters that ran across the side of his neck were blotted into black blocks.

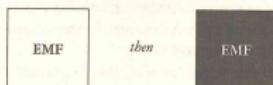
BABY NOSTRADAMUS

At first Little Merced's attempts were unsuccessful. Simple exercises involving only fragments of thought and singular words ended in disaster.

The Baby Nostradamus would demonstrate:



And then Little Merced would make an attempt:

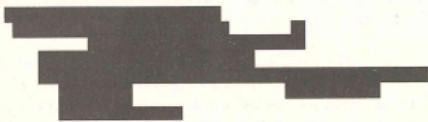


Instead of hiding the letters, they became more pronounced. But after three days, as Little Merced practiced under the protection of her lead ceiling she was able to obscure not only basic acronyms but also simple sentences:

My name is Little Merced



After the simple phrase, she hid compound sentences that utilized semicolons and commas, and soon could manage even full paragraphs. Her skill level increased, allowing her to take on complete, sophisticated thoughts. Thoughts that branched and strayed into tangents and then returned, only to split and sprawl again. She became so proficient that she was able to elude even the Baby Nostradamus:



When she succeeded and her thoughts were impenetrable, as a courtesy to her teacher Little Merced whispered the contents into the Baby Nostradamus's ear.

MERCED DE PAPEL

The men who came to love Merced de Papel did so with caution. But when they left her apartment their lips and penises glistened, and the tube of Neosporin was left empty and flattened, its twist cap carelessly dropped and disregarded on the restroom floor.

They left cut by her edges, knowing that they would never sit with her again and watch her as she tore off the scraps where their blood and salt had stained. The crumpled paper collecting at the center of the table, men sometimes hoping that she would let some of the stains remain, if only for the afternoon.

But Merced de Papel never allowed history to accumulate, her skin changing with the news of the world. She peeled away the story that

reported the unearthing of a dead Samson; his healthy hair had sprouted from the ground and tangled itself around the shovels and pickaxes. And the following day, she wrapped a headline around her fingers that announced, in a follow-up report, the death of two Philistine archeologists choked by the locks of hair.

She peeled away every mark and scribble her lovers left, rarely saving any of the notes, grocery lists, and small reminders that men had written on her: pick up shirts from cleaners; dentist appointment 9:00 a.m.; milk, bread, cereal. And once she had to strip the whole of her back where someone had written the name Liz a thousand times over in blue ink.

Merced de Papel remained unmarked by her lovers, but men left with split lips and tongues, cuts that scarred, remaining deep into old age. The men walked into the Los Angeles streets, encountering others with the same distinctive paper-thin scars. They introduced themselves, casually licking their lips to reveal the depth and age of their cuts, at times flicking cleft tongues as quick as lizards.

But this was an unspoken fraternity; never were Merced de Papel or the cause of the scars mentioned. Their conversations were about the cities they had lived in and jobs they had worked. With the exception of a gourmet chef whose tastebuds had been shredded and now had to rely on memory and precise measurements when stirring his sauces, there were no regrets.

Merced de Papel had many lovers. On any given night, when the wait for a table at Musso & Frank's exceeded half an hour, the chef who poured salt into a teaspoon and minced two cloves of garlic, two waiters (each carrying a plate of Caesar salad and a bowl of unsalted lentil soup), a patron on table eight wearing pleated slacks and a wool sweater and two at table twelve who asked for their steaks medium-rare with a side of chef's marinade, the supplier who personally delivered the French and Napa wines, and the electrician who on an emergency call, forgetting to wear his rubber-insulated steel-toe shoes, had to replace two fuses that blacked out the west side of the restaurant—all of them licked their lips. A gesture that was both a greeting and a sign of solidarity with those who had been cut by paper.

SMILEY

Smiley tore down the lead scutes from his walls and opened the roof, transforming his living room into a courtyard. And in his bedroom,

SATURN

As Federico de la Fe began to recover, Little Merced's power grew progressively stronger, and by the time de la Fe was able to eat bread and pork, she had spread her protective shield beyond her own boundaries, cloaking even the thoughts of others.

The shield spread, unbeknownst to Federico de la Fe and EMF. So while Little Merced sat in her room in deep concentration, occasionally reaching into her burlap sack and pulling out a handful of limes, Federico de la Fe and Froggy sat at the dominoes table planning the next assault.

"We cannot hide from Saturn," Froggy said to Federico de la Fe. "Perhaps it is time that we took control and pushed him out."

Federico de la Fe did not say anything; he emptied the dominoes box and then turned the tiles face down so that the unmarked ivory faced upwards. As Froggy spoke of new battle strategies, Federico de la Fe took three dominoes, arranging them like this:



Froggy grabbed the blocks from Federico de la Fe, turning tiles and then adding to the formation:



And while nothing was said, Froggy and Federico de la Fe had devised a new plan to combat Saturn.

LITTLE MERCED

I sat on my bed peeling the skins from limes and then eating the meat. Father and Froggy sat around the dominoes table. I closed my eyes and followed the procedures that the Baby Nostradamus had taught me, focusing but making sure not to deny my own thoughts.

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those with the post written upon them.

EMF

Froggy called us to the dominoes table. We all gathered around and looked down at the blocks of ivory.

"This is how we stop Saturn," Froggy said, pointing at the dominoes, "but we will need more than just EMF."

"It is their war too," Federico de la Fe said.

Federico de la Fe and Froggy were sending the war, recruiting beyond the boundaries that surrounded El Monte.

And so the preparations began. We combed our hair and tucked in our shirts and practiced the pleasant smiles of salesmen. We then drove out of El Monte to the cities of Alhambra, San Gabriel, and South Pasadena. We knocked on doors, asking people to join us in the war against Saturn.

Some answered their doors and politely declined.

"You want to destroy the only thing that is holding us together," they said. We apologized and moved on.

We also came upon veterans who had fought their own wars.

"I fought in Chromos, in Locos, and Chimeras," they said.

And because they had lost every war, they too declined.

After three days and four cities, only a few recruits had agreed to join in the battle against Saturn.

SATURN

EMF kept recruiting, knocking on doors until the skin on their knuckles was tender and bruised.

Even Little Merced, now proficient in her powers and able to quickly spread the protective shield, went door to door asking for help, at every doorstep dropping lime seeds and peels.

Federico de la Fe's initial strategy had called for patience, a war of waiting and hiding, hoping that Saturn would eventually tire and withdraw. It was not direct combat but a slow defense eventually undermined by the toxicity of lead. De la Fe realized that it was time for full engagement. Time for an all-out war.

Saturn was prepared for whatever assault Federico de la Fe launched. In trying to displace her from his mind, she whose name he now refused to say, he pulled several tomes from the library's military wing. He read about every naval, land, air, and epistolary battle in the history of the Americas. He supplemented his knowledge by familiarizing himself with the autobiography of Napoleon Bonaparte, which the Little Corporal had written while in exile. The main body of the work was a rumination on offensive philosophies, with a short chapter on defensive considerations. The epilogue consisted of recipes for rotisserie chicken and a health regimen.

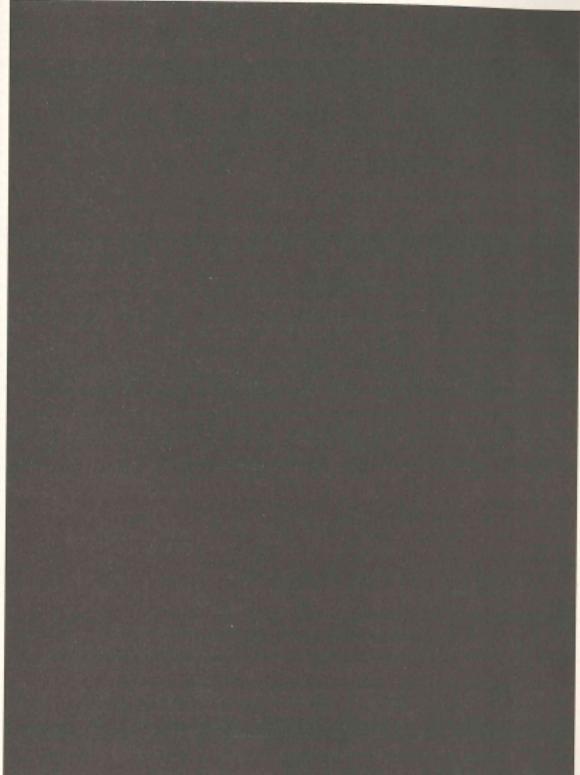
The regimen consisted of six basic rules that Napoleon followed religiously, except in his last two campaigns, when he was defeated by the Fifth Coalition in the War of Liberation and by Marie Louise in a battle that was never named.

From the two hundred twenty-third page of the biography, Saturn carefully tore out the six basic rules a commander must follow:

- 1) Breakfast: 2 eggs, 1 oz. of lard, and a glass of milk.
- 2) Before lunch: one hundred pushups, two hundred sit-ups, and one Hail Mary.
- 3) Abstain from writing love letters.
- 4) Do not think of her (even on her Saint's Day).
- 5) If you think of her, do not do it again.
- 6) At night use sleeping goggles.

LITTLE MERCED

VETERANOS



♦ I landed on my hands and knees in the middle of Fairchild Boulevard.

Kazak was flung back by the fence. Gravity took charge of him as it had taken charge of me. Gravity slammed him down on concrete. Kazak was knocked silly.

Kilgore Trout turned away. He hastened anxiously back toward the hospital. I called out to him, but that only made him walk faster.

So I jumped into my car and chased him. I was still high as a kite on adrenaline and coagulants and all that. I did not know yet that I had retracted my testicles in all the excitement. I felt only vague discomfort down there.

Trout was cantering when I came alongside. I clocked him at eleven miles an hour, which was excellent for a man his age. He, too, was now full of adrenaline and coagulants and glucocorticoids.

My windows were rolled down, and I called this to him: "Whoa! Whoa! Mr. Trout! Whoa! Mr. Trout!"

It slowed him down to be called by name.

"Whoa! I'm a friend!" I said. He shuffled to a stop, leaned in panting exhaustion against a fence surrounding an appliance warehouse belonging to the General Electric Company. The company's monogram and motto hung in the night sky behind Kilgore Trout, whose eyes were wild. The motto was this:

PROGRESS IS OUR MOST IMPORTANT PRODUCT

♦ "Mr. Trout," I said from the unlighted interior of the car, "you have nothing to fear. I bring you tidings of great joy."

He was slow to get his breath back, so he wasn't much

Breakfast of Champions

of a conversationalist at first. "Are—are you—from the—*the Arts Festival?*" he said. His eyes rolled and rolled.

"I am from the *Everything Festival*," I replied.

"The what?" he said.

I thought it would be a good idea to let him have a good look at me, and so attempted to flick on the dome light. I turned on the windshield washers instead. I turned them off again. My view of the lights of the County Hospital was garbled by beads of water. I pulled at another switch, and it came away in my hand. It was a cigarette lighter. So I had no choice but to continue to speak from darkness.

"Mr. Trout," I said, "I am a novelist, and I created you for use in my books."

"Pardon me?" he said.

"I'm your Creator," I said. "You're in the middle of a book right now—close to the end of it, actually."

"Um," he said.

"Are there any questions you'd like to ask?"

"Pardon me?" he said.

"Feel free to ask anything you want—about the past, about the future," I said. "There's a Nobel Prize in your future."

"A what?" he said.

"A Nobel Prize in medicine."

"Huh," he said. It was a noncommittal sound.

"I've also arranged for you to have a reputable publisher from now on. No more beaver books for you."

"Um," he said.

"If I were in your spot, I would certainly have lots of questions," I said.

"Do you have a gun?" he said.

I laughed there in the dark, tried to turn on the light again, activated the windshield washer again. "I don't need a gun to control you, Mr. Trout. All I have to do is write down something about you, and that's it."

♦ "Are you *crazy*?" he said.

"No," I said. And I shattered his power to doubt me. I transported him to the Taj Mahal and then to Venice and then to Dar es Salaam and then to the surface of the Sun, where the flames could not consume him—and then back to Midland City again.

The poor old man crashed to his knees. He reminded me of the way my mother and Bunny Hoover's mother used to act whenever somebody tried to take their photographs.

As he cowered there, I transported him to the Bermuda of his childhood, had him contemplate the infertile egg of a Bermuda Ear. I took him from there to the Indianapolis of my childhood. I put him in a circus crowd there. I had him see a man with *locomotor ataxia* and a woman with a goiter as big as a zucchini.

♦ I got out of my rented car. I did it noisily, so his ears would tell him a lot about his *Creator*, even if he was unwilling to use his eyes. I slammed the car door firmly. As I approached him from the driver's side of the car, I swiveled my feet some, so that my footsteps were not only deliberate but *gritty*, too.

I stopped with the tips of my shoes on the rim of the narrow field of his downcast eyes. "Mr. Trout, I love you," I said gently. "I have broken your mind to pieces. I

want to make it whole. I want you to feel a wholeness and inner harmony such as I have never allowed you to feel before. I want you to raise your eyes, to look at what I have in my hand."

I had nothing in my hand, but such was my power over Trout that he would see in it whatever I wished him to see. I might have shown him a Helen of Troy, for instance, only six inches tall.

"Mr. Trout—*Kilgore*—" I said, "I hold in my hand a symbol of wholeness and harmony and nourishment. It is Oriental in its simplicity, but we are *Americans*, Kilgore, and not Chinamen. We Americans require symbols which are richly colored and three-dimensional and juicy. Most of all, we hunger for symbols which have not been poisoned by great sins our nation has committed, such as slavery and genocide and criminal neglect, or by tinhorn commercial greed and cunning.

"Look up, Mr. Trout," I said, and I waited patiently. "Kilgore—?"

The old man looked up, and he had my father's wasted face when my father was a widower—when my father was an old old man.

He saw that I held an apple in my hand.

♦ "I am approaching my fiftieth birthday, Mr. Trout," I said. "I am cleansing and renewing myself for the very different sorts of years to come. Under similar spiritual conditions, Count Tolstoi freed his serfs. Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves. I am going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career.

"You are the only one I am telling. For the others, to-

night will be a night like any other night. Arise, Mr. Trout, you are free, you are *free*."

He arose shamblingly.

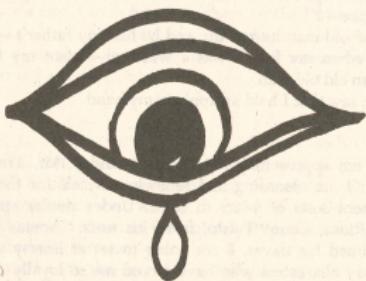
I might have shaken his hand, but his right hand was injured, so our hands remained dangling at our sides.

"*Bon voyage*," I said. I disappeared.

♦ I somersaulted lazily and pleasantly through the void, which is my hiding place when I dematerialize. Trout's cries to me faded as the distance between us increased.

His voice was my father's voice. I *heard* my father—and I *saw* my mother in the void. My mother stayed far, far away, because she had left me a legacy of suicide.

A small hand mirror floated by. It was a *leak* with a mother-of-pearl handle and frame. I captured it easily, held it up to my own right eye, which looked like this:



Here was what Kilgore Trout cried out to me in my father's voice: "*Make me young, make me young, make me young!*"

ETC.

