

On the Nature of Fiction-Making: Austin or Grice?*

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Abstract

I contrast the normative view of fiction-making that I have defended in previous work, on which it is not primarily author intentions but norms that determine fictional content and define fictionality, with Stock's Gricean view. I reply to an objection that she makes to the normative account, arguing that it has explanatory advantages given the subordination of author-intentions to fictional contents independently determined by social practices.

Keywords: fiction; meaning-intentions; norms; imagination.

Only Imagine ('OI' henceforth) is a wonderful book. Clear and tersely written, it provides a compelling defence of a rather unpopular view – indeed, one usually dismissed without serious appraisal as a non-contender –, *extreme intentionalism* about the determination of fictional content and the nature of fictionality. It thus unquestionably advances the philosophical debate. It is also a pleasure to read for those of us who like fictions and not just the philosophy thereof: Stock discusses for her arguments many examples from real fictions, systematically making perceptive remarks.

Stock (*OI* 161-3) critically engages with an alternative view that I have defended in previous work, on which it is not primarily author intentions but norms that determine fictional content and define fictionality (García-Carpintero, 2013). However, as I'll show in the next section, in spite of initial appearances the differences between our views are not that big, and the coincidences are huge. The reason is that my view ascribes a crucial role to intentions too, and in fact, like Stock, to the actual intentions of the fiction-maker, as opposed to those of hypothetical constructs of various sorts; while, on the other hand, she is also prepared to assign a comparably important role to fiction-making norms (*OI*, 161).

The differences between our views in this respect turn out to concern what in the respective accounts is taken to be *essential*, or *constitutive* of fiction-making and fictionality, and what is left as playing instead subsidiary (methodological, epistemological, derivative) roles – whether something psychological in nature or something normative instead. Such issues however, although of course important for philosophical theorizing itself, are rather subtle, difficult to adjudicate when at all decidable, and one is in my view even entitled to adopt in some cases a Yablonian “quizzicalist” (fictionalist) attitude: declining going beyond the articulation of one's own story (one's proposal to interpret the data) in as clearly as possible a way, limiting oneself to setting it in contrast to the alternatives.

When debates can be adjudicated and scepticism overcome, it would only be on the basis of an abductive inference to the best explanation (IBE). I thus also agree with Stock on the methodology (*OI*, 4-7). We want an account of fictions with the best explanatory pay-offs, unburdened by any imperative to accept ordinary usage and folk intuitions. Our only difference here is that this is what I take conceptual analysis to be, in the spirit of Carnapian *explications* or *rational reconstructions*. This might perhaps be merely verbal, however. From a Carnapian perspective, intuitions about cases should play a distinguished evidential role – even if they might be overridden – vis-à-vis data from fiction studies, critics or cognitive

psychologists. But Stock's practice in the book is not at odds with this, as shown by the several occasions in which she discards a view because (e.g.) it "seems to do unnecessary violence to ordinary ways of talking" (*OI*, 204, fn.).

In the spirit thus of contributing to such an IBE-like decision on global explanatory merits, in my comments I'll set my view in contrast with Stock's, and I'll present in what I hope is a clearer way in response to her objections the explanatory advantage I previously claimed for the sort of normative proposal I favour.

Following Currie (1990), both Stock and I think of fictions as resulting from a *sui generis* speech act, which – also following him – I'll call 'fiction-making'. In saying that it is *sui generis* I mean that it is a *specific* speech act, with its own individuating definition, along with others such as promises, guesses, conjectures, and so on. It doesn't mean that it doesn't belong in one of the highest genera for such acts in a proper taxonomy (cp. Alward 2010, 390; 2010b, 356). Both Stock and I take fiction-making to be a specific sort of invitation, request or proposal to imagine, addressed to a specific kind of audience. Like Currie and others (see Grant 2001, Sutrop 2002), both Stock and I thus disagree with Searle and followers such as Alward (2009, 2010) that acts of fiction-making are just "acts of speech" (as Green 2017, 54 puts it) as opposed to proper speech acts with specific force and contents –, mere acts of pretending to do something devoid of the representational aims of speech acts proper.

There are disagreements internal to the fiction-making account camp. From the earlier stages of speech act theory, there has been a fundamental divide between descriptive, psychological theories (favored by Grice, Strawson, Schiffer and their followers) and prescriptive or normative theories (preferred by Austin, Alston, Searle and their followers). The former take psychological attitudes to be constitutive of speech acts. On the Gricean view that Stock favors, it is constitutive of an assertion that *p* that the speaker intends the hearer to believe *p*, or to believe that the speaker believes *p*, on the basis of the recognition of that

intention. Fiction-making is characterized by the intention to lead the audience to imagine its content by the recognition of that intention. Griceans of course know that we evaluate assertions, for instance criticizing them when they are false, and fictions when they are uninteresting or provoke imaginative resistance in its different varieties; but they take the norms thereby deployed to be *regulative* – derivable from non-illocutionary norms, perhaps moral or prudential ones (*OI*, 161). Normative accounts take instead some of those norms to be *constitutive* of the relevant speech acts, on the model of games whose natures are thought to be specifiable in terms of norms.

Gricean accounts have been popular for many years, but lately normative views have been taking center stage, at least in debates about assertion. An important influence has been Williamson (1996), to a good extent in my view on account of his clear articulation of the murky notion of *constitutive norms*. Something that remains obscure even in that paper (as shown by the argument there against the conventionality of norm-constituted kinds), however, is that the notion we need is not just that of a kind whose definition is given by norms, but rather that of one which is, as such, *in force* in a community.¹ Given the FIFA norms that define football, we can easily think of variations of the game defined by slightly different norms. Nobody is currently obligated by such norms, however, because they are not in force; when Cristiano Ronaldo plays the game, he is only answerable to the current FIFA norms. The same applies to speech acts, if they are defined by norms. What makes them to be in force? In the first place, general facts about social practices, certainly conventions in some cases (*pace* Williamson) such as the speech acts in Searle's category of *declarations* (*giving out* players, *marrying*, *naming* and so on). And secondly, in each particular occasion, the intentions of agents; because rule-following is an intentional activity, and without his willingness to abide by them Cristiano Ronaldo would not be beholden to the FIFA norms.

Thus, as anticipated, both Gricean and Austinian accounts have a place for norms, and both have one for intentions. Which intentions, in fiction-making? I grant to Lewis (1978) and Alward (2009) that even verbal fictions without explicit narrators have implicit ones, in that they lead audiences to imagine a fictional narrator uttering the sentences comprising the fiction – saying the relevant propositions, in the declarative case. But I fully agree with Stock that it is the *actual fiction-making intentions* of the *actual author* that matter, rather than the *fictional assertoric* ones of a *fictional* narrator. She (*OI*, 49-61) has compelling criticisms of the Lewisian view that fictional content is to be determined counterfactually, by considering otherwise nearby worlds in which fictional narrators tell the fiction “as known fact”. I myself gave in previous work (García-Carpintero, 2007) another counterexample to the Lewisian view, which I’d like to briefly rehearse here for further use.

I quoted in full a short story by Julio Cortázar, “A Continuity of Parks”. It features a reader “transported” to what he reasonably takes to be a merely fictional story which, unfortunately unbeknownst to him, narrates a succession of events crucially involving him and simultaneously unfolding while he reads, eventually leading to (one is required to infer) his being killed “offscreen” in the story’s denouement. This is the central plot-element of the fiction, a proposition that any competent interpreter must imagine for her to properly appreciate it. However, she could never have inferred it from the assumption that audiences consider assertions in nearby worlds, trying to find out what a fictional narrator puts forward there “as known fact”, because the required inferences wildly defy epistemic credibility. We obviously take the work instead as produced by a fiction-maker, motivated to generate interesting imaginings. As I pointed out, this example also tells against Currie’s (1990) view that fictional content is determined by what informed readers would infer about the *beliefs* of a fictional narrator, which Stock also critically discusses along related lines (*OI*, 66-8).

Stock does a very nice job of replying to standard objections to intentionalist accounts of meaning-determination. She deploys two well-taken claims that Griceans have standardly resorted to (see Grant 2001), including myself for my own appeal to intentions (García-Carpintero, 2007, 212-4). The first is the point that intentions are belief-constrained; it doesn't matter exactly how, let's just say that for one to (rationally) intend ϕ in doing something, one must (rationally) believe that what one does makes more probable ϕ than it would otherwise be.² This deals well with clear cases of alleged counterexamples involving hidden or Humpty-Dumptyish, powerless intentions: the alleged intentions are not there, or are not rational enough for us to be worried about the cases. The second is that intentions are means-end structured, and that a very common way for one to speaker-mean something is to invoke a practice or convention aimed at that very effect: a very good way for one to speaker-mean something is to (intentionally!) use a sentence that conventionally means it. Similarly, a fiction-maker might intentionally lead her audience to imagine that a character drinks whisky, by – relying on thespian practice – having an actor drinking an amber liquid; and the author of a verbal fiction leads her audience to imagine that the narrator knows p , and hence p , by – relying on literary practice – representing him as asserting p . This gives as much of a center role to the text itself as we might want, and it allows for unsuccessful intentions.

Stock also compellingly argues that intentions are nonetheless required: they fill up the contribution of indexicals and other context-dependent expressions, resolve ambiguities, explain how nonconventional meanings come to be standardized, and trump conventions in some contexts (*OI* 40-2).³ What, then, is the difference between us? She wonders (*OI* 162), “are there any cases of an F-unit/fiction where it seems that the author does not have a reflexive intention that readers imagine certain things, but does have the intention that what she produces be subject to the norms ...?”, and then she goes on to critically discuss an example I gave in previous work (García-Carpintero, 2013, 353-4). The example concerns a

film, Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*, while in the book (*OI* 3) she puts aside films, on account of the complexity that an intentionalist account like hers would have to untangle in order to explain how their fictional contents are determined by intentions, given the plurality of agents involved. This is already telling, because, as I'll show below, the appeal I make to intentions doesn't confront the serious difficulties that hers must surmount, precisely for the very reason I was trying to articulate. I'll come back to this presently.

In spite of her having put aside films, Stock does consider the objection I made, and she offers a reply. I am not convinced by it, and hence I will reiterate the objection, trying to make the punch line clearer. Stock reminds us the methodological spirit in which she conducts her research, which, as said at the outset, I sufficiently agree with. In particular, I do not take my objection to resort just to intuition-mongering. It is instead made in the same methodological spirit that she assumes, offered as just one illustration of a wide class of cases for which normative views offer better explanations. Stock contends that, in this respect, my account "also clashes with some intuitions: for it seems to entail that children who write stories unaware of the norms governing the practice of fiction-making cannot be making fiction, which will strike many as intuitively implausible" (*OI* 3). On the contrary, I think that normative accounts have a clear advantage here over straightforward intentionalist views; and one precisely of the very same kind that the *Marienbad* example was intended to illustrate.

The problem that I take both the *Marienbad* example and fiction-making children pose to Stock is one of *sufficient determinacy*. Note first that intentions should be fine-grained; this is because, as she herself notes, "intentions look referentially opaque: co-referring terms cannot be freely substituted into their content without a change in the nature of the intention", *OI* 103. Now, we might acquire fairly determinate normative commitments by having nonetheless fairly unspecific intentions, if we rely in them on *independently established well-defined codes*. This is how in driving we are committed to a specific speed limit, even in cases

where our intentions lock into it only *in sensu diviso* (*de re*), not *in sensu composito* (*de dicto*) (Schiffer 2017): there is a specific speed limit to which we intend to be answerable, even though we cannot specify with a digit which it is in this region: we can at most describe it generically, as the speed limit, whatever it is, operating around here.

Note that I am not using this point to support conventionalist views, which I have already agreed with Stock should be rejected. I don't take the *sensu diviso* intentions I am assuming here to always trump conflicting, more specific intentions. I agree with Stock that in many cases of malapropism we shouldn't say that the speaker has made the conventionally indicated speech act (*OI* 43; cf. also Simons 2018, 293-6). I cannot think of a good reason to insist that the speaker who utters 'the vote was anonymous', meaning that it was unanimous, has asserted anything other than the latter; other than this, he has merely *put forward a sentence* that in standard contexts – which this happens not to be – would serve to assert that the vote was anonymous. I am instead relying here on cases in which there is no such conflict: there is an intentional commitment to a specific content, given the presence of the *sensu diviso* intention and the independently existing code, and no intention conflicting with it.

Given the independently established code, children pose no problem that I can see to the sort of view I defend. They do appear to have communicative intentions enough to be granted the *sensu diviso* intentions that my proposal requires (cf. Simons 2018, 289-91). However, as has been repeatedly emphasized over the years (cf. Schiffer 2017 for a recent rehearsal; cf. also García-Carpintero 2001), Griceans have a serious problem here. This is because we need the independently established, content-determining “code”; and it is quite doubtful that the intentions of reflective adults need go much beyond the ones it is fair to ascribe to children, when it comes to specifying the meaning-contributing role of the semantic machinery in natural languages. As I pointed out in my previous piece, there are many similar cases involving adults who for different reasons appear to lack the intentions Griceans need. As it

has been argued in many criticisms of Gricean views before, this raises serious doubts in particular about the third clause in such accounts; in the present case, that we come to imagine what is true in the fiction by recognizing the author's intention for us to do so. Rather, both author and audience rely on independently well-established fiction-interpreting practices.

The goal of my *Marienbad* example was to illustrate that something similar might obtain, and typically so, in the fiction-making case.⁴ Not many authors are as reflectively articulate as Flaubert or James, to put forward the contents that really pertain to the fictions they produce given their generic, *sensu diviso* intentions and the independently established character of the practice. We read reviews by good critics we cherish because they typically come up with interpretative proposals we feel to be correct, but were unable to come up with by ourselves, or not at least in such a clearly articulated way. This capacity to articulate specific correct interpretations of fictions (correct in part, I grant to Stock, because in agreement with the *sensu diviso* intentions of their authors) is a very different one than the capacity of producing engaging, interesting, thought-provoking fictions with such contents. Many authors decline to offer critic-like interpretations of their works. Sometimes this might just be a modest reluctance to prevail on the critical capacity of their readers. But oftentimes I suspect that it is based on the sensible assumption that in producing their work they have already done what they are properly in a position to do, as fiction-makers, to settle such issues.

As anticipated, the case of fictions collectively produced, like films, poses an analogous problem for Stock. Collective authorship has difficulties of its own; but I surmise that an account that relies only on modest, *sensu diviso* intentions, while nonetheless allowing for fairly determinate fictional contents to be thereby fixed, should ease them and has therefore better prospects than those that cannot, like Stock's.⁵

In a piece to some extent close to the stance I am promoting vis-à-vis intentionalist accounts, Alward (2010) provides a nice metaphor for the fiction-making speech acts from

which I take fictions to result: they are the deployment of “word-sculptures”. It would be better to generalize this to “representation-sculptures”, so as to encompass films, pictures, and, indeed, sculptures; but perhaps Alward would balk at this, on account of his view that verbal fictions don’t result from speech acts. He provides a “weakly institutionalist” account of fictionality, which is consistent with my normative speech-act account – the speech acts themselves, normatively understood, count in it as the relevant institutions. Alward’s institutionalism is “weak” in that it allows fiction-making to depend on a practice, but it doesn’t require it; I also agree with this. Alward, however, sets his account in contrast to speech-act views, which as we have seen he rejects. His main criticism of them, however, is based on the assumption that “what is characteristic of illocutionary action is the intention to produce an effect in an audience by means of the latter’s recognition of this intention” (*op. cit.*, 395). But this only applies to Gricean descriptive proposals like Currie’s or Stock’s; normative accounts like the one I propose reject it on the basis of the sort of criticism that I have been rehearsing here. The only effect intended on my view in the aimed-at audience is the recognition that by her act the speaker has become beholden to a norm.

Something I find most appealing in the normative speech-act account of fiction-making is the clear light it throws on the relation between truth and fiction; this virtue, however, is lost in many Gricean versions, as I have argued (García-Carpintero 2016) probably because of their intentionalist underpinnings. Of course, there is an ordinary sense of ‘fiction’ in which this just means *falsehood*. But such intuitive use of ‘fiction’ and derivatives is not the one at stake here, but rather the one used in the classification of works as fictional or non-fictional.⁶ Stock is equally worried about this issue, for similar reasons: we agree that we can obtain knowledge from fictions, in fact I very much like her account of how this works, and her explanation on that basis of cases of “imaginative resistance”. She also criticizes on grounds similar to my own views by Currie, Davies, Deutsch, Lamarque & Olsen and others, which

impose on F-imaginings variations on the condition that fictional truths are made-up, i.e., that they don't tract the facts (*OI*, 153-8).

Stock, however, still keeps a weak “made-up-truth” condition on F-imaginings, which I criticized in previous work: “*some* of the F-units which compose a fiction may be believed by the reader, but not *all can be, simultaneously*. A fiction, *taken as a whole*, cannot be believed by the reader (*OI*, 157, Stock's emphasis). I objected that we engage in imaginative projects that are not beholden to this constraint, whose imagined worlds we leave open to coincide with the actual world, for instance when reading biographies or trying to make a decision. If I properly understand it, her reply is that these are not F-imaginings (*OI*, 158). However, as I pointed out, there are cases that appear to be so; I mentioned Javier Marías's *Dark Back of Time*, which I take to be correctly classified as a novel given the intentions of the author and our practices, and similar cases have been mentioned in the literature, such as Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, which won an award for fictions (Davies 2007, 32).

Of course, the claim that these cases are fictions can be challenged; given that she disavows commitment to intentionalism when it comes to genre classification (*OI*, 71), Stock may consistently say that the alleged examples are not novels after all. Again, my point should be taken in an IBE spirit. I don't think that in the cases at hand there are good reasons to deny that these are fictions, which competent readers may engage with without assuming Stock's constraint on F-imaginings; and there is an alternative account that allows for it, and accounts for much of the many valuable contributions in Stock's work.

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Notes

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¹ Williamson’s discussion of conventions overlooks this, cf. (García-Carpintero, forthcoming).

² Cf. Sinhababu (2013, 681). This accounts for the case of a basketball player who shoots from behind halfcourt just before time expires. The player rationally intends that the ball should go into the basket, despite knowing that long-distance shots like this rarely go in

³ Simons (2018, 300) also makes these points, in response to Lepore & Stone's (2015) extreme speech act conventionalism.

⁴ Alward (2010, 392) makes a related point: “arguably, at least, reading a work as fiction requires imagining or making-believe the propositions expressed by the sentences contained therein, and so in this sense authors who disseminate their works typically intend that the recipients of them engage in such imaginative activity. But it is worth emphasizing that many authors may not realize that this is what reading as fiction requires. Hence, the sense in which they intend recipients to imagine the propositions expressed by their works is the same sense in which, for example, Lois Lane can be said to believe that Clark Kent can fly simply in virtue of believing that Superman can”. In a recent pessimistic reappraisal of the Gricean intentionalist view, Currie (2014, 359-60) also makes a related point.

⁵ I think my view is fully compatible with Mac Uidhir's (2011) account, for instance.

⁶ For related reasons, I don't think Van Leeuwen's (2013, 221) distinction between “constructive” imaginings, whose contents might be entirely true, and “attitude” imaginings, whose contents must be partially “fictional”, track different concepts, still less different kinds. The difference between imagination and belief is normative: belief is truth-constrained, the imagination by itself isn't – it might or might not, depending on the “projects” that it serves.