

The Alethic Status of Contradictions in Fictional Discourse


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Abstract: Whether contradictions could be “true in fiction” has become an unavoidable topic in the debates on the bounds of fictionality. This paper claims that genuine contradictions in fiction are far more infrequent phenomena than is usually claimed. The majority of cases that have been put forward as examples of contradictory fictions can be convincingly understood either as instances of rhetorical pseudo-contradictions or (in the case of the so-called “forking-path“ narratives) as disjunctions of possible outcomes rather than contradictory conjunctions of simultaneously enacted exclusive scenarios. The only philosophically interesting category of contradictory fiction would be the one in which a single “root” contradiction is explicitly affirmed as the central element of the story (in the third-person, authoritative narrative voice). The paradigmatic example would be the revised version of Graham Priest’s “Sylvan’s Box” this paper presents. However, it could be argued that the problem with such narratives is that they unsuccessfully attempt to perceptually code what remains exclusively propositional content. They are, thus, fatally under-described, and the truth of the contradictory proposition fails to be adequately established in fiction. The idea that one can posit contradictions as fictional facts is

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based on oversimplified notions of narrative conventions and truth in fiction.

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1. The Principle of Poetic Licence (PPL) vs. the Law of Non-Contradiction (LNC)

In the debates on the nature of fiction, two claims seem to be commonly accepted:

- (i) We take “various propositions to be true according to a particular [fiction]” (Nolan 2021, 14).
- (ii) What is true in any given fiction is not necessarily bound by the standard of actuality.

The first claim has become familiar under the phrase “truth in fiction.” It’s a way of distinguishing fictional facts from, e.g., (possibly misguided) beliefs of various fictional characters. In *Don Quixote*, to offer Doležel’s example, it’s not true that the protagonist fights monstrous giants, but it’s true that he charges at windmills (delusionally convinced that these are the monstrous giants). Since Don Quixote tilting at windmills is an event that “really” took place in the “fictional world of [Cervantes’ novel]” (Doležel 1998, 149), we can describe the proposition that asserts it as being “true in fiction.”

The second claim simply means that what is true in fiction “may [...] deviate enormously from the actual world” (Routley 1979, 6). Although we are aware that things like sapient teapots (*The Beauty and the Beast*) and sloth bears endowed with the command of human language (*The Jungle Book*) are physically or biologically impossible, we, nevertheless, concede that they are fictional possibilities.

Does this mean that authors can make “anything whatsoever true in their fictions” (Xhignesse 2016, 149)? Some people have argued precisely so. The idea is encapsulated in what Harry Deutsch has dubbed *the principle of poetic license* (PPL): for any proposition *p*, one can produce a fiction

in which p is true.¹ According to this approach, the authorial “sayso” (Nolan 2021, 16) is enough to make a proposition true in fiction.

However, there is one obvious problem with the PPL: the price for upholding it seems to be “simply too high” (Xhignesse 2016, 161). If the PPL holds, then even logical contradictions could be true in fiction. We can accept that “impossibility with respect to reality is significantly different from impossibility with respect to [fiction]” (Ashline 1995, 231). For me to transform into a talking ashtray would be physically impossible in the world as it is. However, we can easily imagine logically possible worlds in which such transformations routinely take place. Such bizarre events are still logically possible. The laws of logic, however, are not just dispensable elements of possible worlds but are the prerequisite of their very possibility.²

¹ For various formulations of Deutsch’s principle, see (Xhignesse 2016, 149) and (Hanley 2004, 121).

² Here, one terminological elucidation concerning “worlds” is called for. For instance, imagine a student taking an English literature exam and being asked how many people did Frankenstein’s creature murder. She’s well aware that “Frankenstein’s creature” has never accurately referred to anything in the actual world, and she may reasonably believe that the existence of such a being would even be physically impossible. However, the question doesn’t seem meaningless since there appears to be a correct answer to it. This is because we understand all such questions as being discretely prefixed by an operator: “In work of fiction f , ...” (Lewis 1978, 38). According to Lewis, our engagements with fictions require us to agree to an act of “pretense” (1978, 40). The storyteller pretends “to be telling the truth about matters whereof [she] has knowledge” (Lewis 1978, 40). When Mary Shelley produced her novel, she wanted her readers to make-believe that it was a factual report “rather than fiction” (Lewis 1978, 40). Since many of the claims in the novel are obviously “misdescriptions” (Kroon, Voltoni 2019) of the actual world (it’s safe to say, e.g., that there was never an 18th-century Swiss natural philosopher who successfully reanimated a creature comprised of discarded body parts with the use of a voltaic pile), we should understand them as descriptions of some possible worlds in which “the act of storytelling” is “what here it falsely purports to be: truth-telling” (Lewis 1978, 40). Simply put, to say that a claim is “true in fiction” means that it is true in some possible worlds described by the fiction in question. According to the Lewisian approach, the act of pretense involves possible worlds semantics. This model has been influential in both the analytic philosophy of fiction and contemporary narratology and it has been employed to a large extent in discussions of logically impossible fictions by authors such as (Alber 2016, Badura and Berto 2019, Doležel 1998, Fořt 2016, Priest 1997, Ryan 2019,

The law of non-contradiction (LNC) is, according to Aristotle's famous definition, "firmest of all" logical laws and "non-hypothetical": it asserts that for all propositions of the type p and $\sim p$ to be true "simultaneously and in the same respect is [absolutely] impossible" (*Metaphysics* Γ 1005b15-20). There is no possible world in which $\sim(p \wedge \sim p)$ does not obtain: the LNC is "true at all members of any set of worlds, and so is true in every fiction" (Hanley 2004, 117) since fictions are descriptions of possible, unactualized states of affairs. There is no fiction (since there's no possible scenario) in which the LNC could be violated. We cannot have the PPL and the LNC both. It seems that we have reached the frontier of truth in fiction. Fictional possibilities are associated "with logical laws" (Alber 2016, 30). Try as he might, one cannot create a fiction in which propositions of the type " $p \wedge \sim p$ " are true. It appears that we should reject the PPL. So why not stop here and call the case settled? There are two main reasons.

First, various authors have claimed that there is a "special range of [fictional] possibility" that is wider than "the range of [logical possibility] philosophers have tended to consider" (Nolan 2015, 62). To prove this point, Graham Priest has constructed a much-debated fiction called "Sylvan's Box." Two philosophers are going over the archive of their deceased friend and mentor when suddenly they uncover a cardboard box with the inscription "Impossible object" on its lid. After opening it, they are stupified by what seems to be an explicit, observable contradiction: "The box was absolutely empty, but also had something in it. Fixed to its base was a small figurine carved of wood" (Priest 1997, 576). After initially questioning their sanity, the philosophers carefully reexamine the box, trying to come to terms with the far-reaching consequences of their finding on logic: "This was no illusion. The box was really empty and occupied at the same time. The sense of touch confirmed this" (Priest 1997, 576).

One could instantly pose a simple question: "What's true in this fiction?" (Berto, Jago 2019, 246). It seems that "the most straightforward reading" (Berto, Jago 2019: 246) would be to say that it is *true* in the story that there exists a box that is simultaneously empty and non-empty, or to

etc.). Therefore, I will use the Lewisian possible worlds framework throughout much of this paper to address some of these arguments.

put it more formally: $(\exists x) (Fx \wedge \sim Fx)$.³ There's no way around it: the whole point of the story is the discovery of an object that violates the LNC. The assumption that the LNC doesn't obtain in this fiction is "essential for understanding [it]" (Berto, Jago 2019, 246). To comprehend the fiction in any other way would be to misread it.⁴

Second, one could argue that "Sylvan's Box" is not just an odd "philosophical corner-case" but, in a way, a "fictional commonplace" (Xhignesse 2016, 152). In various fictional works, the violation of the LNC seems to be "a central poetical device" (Ronen, qtd. in Ryan 2019, 67). The fact that "the logically impossible" is "a salient feature" (Ashline 1995, 215) of many fictional narratives could be seen as further evidence for the PPL. After all, we "have these stories, we read them, we understand them" (Xhignesse 2021, 3170) and engage with them without substantial problems. It appears that, in our ordinary practice, we accept contradictions as fictional facts that are somehow *true* in these particular storyworlds.

Fowles' *French Lieutenant's Woman* is an often-mentioned example. The story, set in 19th-century England, portrays the intense relationship between Charles Smithson, a young gentleman soon to be married to a rich heiress, and Sarah Woodruff, an ostracized Victorian "fallen woman" whose social standing was destroyed by a short-lived romance with an ill-reputed French military man. However, the novel has three "logically incompatible endings" (Alber 2016, 173) that appear to be simultaneously enacted. In one of these endings, Charles, after a brief dalliance, breaks up with Sarah, never to meet her again, and marries his fiancée. The affair with Sarah becomes an unpleasant minor episode in his otherwise respectable life. In the second ending, Charles calls off the engagement, not without a public

³ For similar notations see, (Horn 2018).

⁴ Such an opinion was upheld not just by Priest himself (who is a prominent advocate for dialetheism, the idea that contradictions can sometimes be true) but also by Fořt, who seems to argue that "the notion of an impossible possible world within fictional discourse" could be "profitable" (2016, 51). A similar position is maintained by Barto and Jago (2019) and narratologists such as Jan Alber, who claims that it's possible to successfully embed "logically impossible elements [...] in the world of fiction" (2009, 80), and Ruth Ronen who distinguishes possible worlds from fictional worlds, since the latter "can be [logically] impossible" (qtd. in Bell, Ryan 2019, 13).

scandal, and eventually ends up with Sarah, fathering a child with her. In the third ending, Charles breaks up the engagement but is ultimately turned down by Sarah, who appears to be no longer interested in him. It seems that the answer to a simple question: “Did Charles and Sarah get married in Fowles’ novel?” would imply a contradiction: “Yes and no.”

Robert Coover’s short story “The Babysitter” is another notable fiction that combines “multiple, mutually incompatible plotlines” (Alber 2016, 175). The narrative begins with the Tuckers hiring a babysitter to watch over their children while they attend a party. However, after the babysitter arrives, the story breaks down into a sequence of incompatible episodes (that are seemingly taking place all at once). In one plotline, Mr. Tucker returns alone from the party to make advances to the babysitter, while in the other (parallel one), he remains at the party with his wife until the end. At one point, things go tragically awry: the babysitter is distracted by a film on TV, and one of the children chokes on a diaper pin. However, the subsequent paragraph suggests that, thankfully, nothing memorable has happened that night: the babysitter prepares the children for bed, watches TV, and then dozes off, waiting for the Tuckers to return. In one storyline, the Tuckers return from the party to find the house in perfect order, and the babysitter leaves. But in another, they discover that their house has become a crime scene: the babysitter has been murdered (by her boyfriend and his friend). According to Alber, the story is “logically impossible” (2016, 25) and violates the LNC since contradictory propositions (like “The babysitter is murdered” and “She is not murdered”) are simultaneously true in it.

Caryl Churchill’s play *Traps* is also frequently invoked as yet another example of fiction that “does not conform to the [LNC]” (Alber 2009, 83). The play features various characters whose lives and mutual relationships substantially differ from scene to scene. In the first act, Albert and Syl are a couple, and they have a baby, but in the subsequent one, they never had children and they even converse about the prospects of raising a child together someday. In another entrance, Albert is completely absent from the picture (as if he never existed as a substantial presence in Syl’s life), and Syl and Jack are lovers. A while later, however, it’s suddenly suggested that Albert and Jack were a couple all along, and Syl was only their friend. Eventually, Albert commits suicide but is, nevertheless, alive and well

afterward. It seems that the characters are going through various contradictory experiences at the same time. Things are simultaneously happening and not happening in the play: Syl (e.g.) is married to Albert but is also not married to him. She has a child but also doesn't have one. She is in a relationship with Jack but also not in a relationship with him, etc. Churchill herself, in "Performance Notes," compares the play to "an impossible object" that can be actualized only "on stage, but [in] no other reality" (1985, 71). It seems that she maintains that contradictions could be realized in the realm of fiction. Fictionality, for Churchill, seems unbound by the LNC.

Other much-debated examples of contradictory fictions include Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Calvino's *The Nonexistent Knight*. *House of Leaves* is a frame tale that employs the gothic convention of the found manuscript: Johnny Truant, the narrator of the novel, discovers an alleged documentary record, compiled by a man called Zampano, that describes a series of uncanny events surrounding a house inhabited by a famous photographer Will Navidson and his family. All sorts of anomalies are taking place inside the house (e.g., its interior appears larger than its exterior, new chambers suddenly materialize, etc.). However, according to Alber (2016, 188), at least one of these eerie disturbances seems to be logically impossible. A haunted dark hallway mysteriously emerges on the north wall of the living room of the Navidson house, only to be subsequently asserted that the same uncanny hallway has always been located only on the west wall. Thus, according to the Zampano record, the hallway appears to be located on the north wall and not on the north wall (at the same time). This incongruity seems to produce a "logically impossible spatial parameter," violating thus "the [LNC]" (Alber 2016, 188).

In Calvino's short novel, we are introduced to Agilulf, Charlemagne's paradoxical paladin. While inspecting his troops, Charlemagne's attention is drawn to a strange knight whose body and face are thoroughly concealed by military gear. When questioned about the reasons for the insolency of hiding his face in front of the emperor, the knight calmly responds that he doesn't exist and, raising the visor of his helmet, reveals the gaping emptiness inside. Everyone (including the emperor himself) comes to accept the contradictory fact that Agilulf "doesn't exist" (Calvino 2012, 6) while simultaneously possessing various properties of existence (like chivalrously

riding to the rescue of distressed maidens). It appears that the knight doesn't exist, yet exists (since existence seems to be the necessary prerequisite of, e.g., wielding a sword and fighting in a battle).

Following Xhignesse (2016, 152) and Berčić (2021, 167), we can call the authors who claim that truth in fiction is not bound by the laws of logic (such as the LNC) *impossibilists*. According to this position, logical impossibilities are “the very possibility of fiction” (Alber 2016, 3). The most plausible explanation of (e.g.) “Sylvan's Box,” according to the impossibilist position, is the one in which “Priest has the right belief, and there actually is a fempty [both full and empty] box, without trivialization” (Badura, Berto 2019, 188).

Now, the author who wants to preserve the LNC “as an important background principle” (Xhignesse 2016, 161)—let's call him, following Xhignesse and Berčić, *the possibilist*—would need to provide a model for dealing with contradictory fictions according to which whenever a contradictory claim is put forward within the fictional discourse it will fail to automatically convert into a fictional fact. There are two promising strategies one could employ in such a venture.

2. The LNC preservation strategies

According to the possibilist position, when confronted with any contradictory claim in fiction, the reader can simply argue it off by claiming that either (a) it's not really a contradiction (i.e., there is a plausible and convincing non-contradictory explanation of what is happening) or (b) that the contradiction is claimed but not really achieved (e.g., a case can be made that the conveyor of information is unreliable). Matravers (2014, 131) names these (a) the *reconciliation* and (b) the *rejection* strategies. In the same way, Johnny Truant, the narrator of *House of Leaves*, after he stumbles upon contradictory information in a manuscript he reads (concerning the location of the uncanny hallway that mysteriously appeared in the Navidson house), engages in the following interpretative process: “Maybe there's some underlying logic to the shift. Maybe it's a mistake. [Heck] if I know” (Danielewski 2000, 970). What is signaled here is a natural way of dealing with contradictions in fiction. Either such claims are simply

erroneous (they are *mistakes* that indicate the narrator's unreliability), or there's some possible and satisfying *underlying* explanation for the seeming contradiction. If someone wants to create a fictionally true violation of the LNC, he must eliminate the plausibility of both reading strategies. This seems to be a serious challenge for the impossibilist author.

(a) "Reconciliation" Strategies

Rhetorical (Pseudo-)Contradictions. Not every phrasal form of contradiction is genuinely contradictory. We should not take all such sentences at face value since they can be part of the metaphorical use of language one can often encounter in fictional discourse. When, for example, Agilulf in *The Nonexistent Knight* is described in a contradictory fashion—as "one who exists without existing" (Calvino 2012, 14)—we should be wary of understanding such a claim literally, especially if the text offers valuable clues for a non-literal reading. After carefully inspecting the novel, one would notice that the term "nonexistent" is contrasted with "possessing a body": being a "nonexistent" entity, Agilulf feels alone in "the realm of bodies" (Calvino 2012, 9). Devoid of physical substance, he doesn't know what it feels like to "shut one's eyes," so he is envious of "the faculty of sleep possessed by people who existed" (Calvino 2012, 8-9). The description of Agilulf as "non-existent" seems to belong to a figurative, hyperbolic use of language that doesn't commit us to genuine contradictions. It's an imprecise, poetically provocative way of saying that Agilulf is "disembodied," which then "scratches a different itch altogether, with different epistemic standards" (Xhignesse 2021, 3179).

"[W]hen you need to say something vividly," you should "say it with a contradiction" (Sorensen 2002, 353). If I were to describe Sherry Levine's 1981 piece of appropriation art *After Walker Evans* as *originally unoriginal*, such a claim would semantically mimic the basic logical form of contradiction ($p \wedge \sim p$), but it would not be one since there is a consistent meaning to it.⁵ These rhetorical pseudo-contradictions are catchy phrases, like oxymorons, and one only needs to "sharpen" and "precisify" a "vague

⁵ To claim that *After Walker Evans* is *unoriginal* suggests that Levine basically re-photographed and displayed Evans' 1935 work *Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife*. To describe it as *original* would mean that, unlike Evans, who was portraying "the

predication” (Horn 2018) for the sense of contradiction to dissipate. Thus, it seems that Alber is mistaken in claiming that (for example) the well-known phenomenon of the post-death narration (when the narrator is dead but nevertheless capable of telling a story) violates the LNC because such narrators “are alive [...] and not alive at the same time” (2019, 162). If we recall the influential Aristotle’s understanding of the LNC in *Metaphysics*, we can see that he mentions an important “qualification” (1005b 19-20) governing the principle: contradictory predicates cannot hold for the same subject “at the same time, and in the same respect” (as translated in Horn 2018). Hence, there’s no violation of the LNC if we assume that someone is alive and not alive in different respects (e.g., one can be physically *not alive* and “spiritually” *alive*). Thus, the first step in the possibilist argumentation would be to detect whether we are actually dealing with rhetorical (pseudo-)contradictions. In such cases, no violation of the LNC is achieved since contradictory claims are not affirmed in the same regard.

“*Slip-up*” *Contradictions*. An oft-repeated example of fictional contradiction concerns the “location of Watson’s old war wound” (Lewis 1978, 46) in Sherlock Holmes stories. Watson had only one wound, but some fictional accounts in the Holmes canon situate it on his shoulder and others on his leg. However, such contradictions are uninteresting since they are only incidentally part of fiction. They are authorial blunders that are merely unintentional interruptions in the fictional going-on. When Robinson Crusoe strips naked to swim to a shipwreck and then fills his pockets with the provisions he finds there, there’s no good reason to assume that Defoe’s novel describes a logically contradictory world in which one can be simultaneously naked and not naked. Such incidents are best understood as “slip-up[s] on the author’s [or the narrator’s] part” (Hanley 2004, 113). Thus, it would seem that Alber is mistaken when he assumes that *House of Leaves* has a “logically impossible [plotline]” (2016, 188). The contradiction regarding the position of the hallway could simply be attributed to the narrator’s misstep, which can suggest his unreliability. No contradictory state of affairs is thus generated but merely an ambiguity is created concerning the precise location of the hallway. Such

suffering of ordinary people during the depression in America’s Deep South” (Hudson Hick 2017, 128), Levine was dealing with a completely different issue of originality and authorship.

inconsistencies should be treated as “special case[s] of indeterminacy” (Hanley 2004, 117), not contradiction.

Lewis’ Method of Union. What about fictions like *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, “The Babysitter,” and *The Traps*? It seems that, in these texts, contradictory storylines are simultaneously enacted, not by chance, but quite deliberately. Lewis’ possibilist way of dealing with such fictions was to divide them into consistent segments: “[W]here we have an inconsistent fiction, there also we have several consistent fictions that may be extracted from it” (Lewis 1983, 277). Instead of reading, e.g., *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as one fiction with a contradictory pair of statements, we should take it as separate *fictions* in which contradictory statements are independently actualized. This is what Lewis calls *the method of union*: “ φ is true in the original fiction iff φ is true in some fragment” (1983, 277). It’s true that, in one segment, Charles and Sarah are married, and it’s true in another that they are not, but there’s no segment in which the conjunction of these claims is true. Even the narrator of Fowles’ novel explicitly says that he cannot make two separate endings simultaneously true in fiction: “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” (Fowles 2010, 347). Instead of claiming (like Alber has done) that the proceedings of the novel violate the LNC, one could merely say that we’re dealing here with a “forking-path” narrative that “develop[s] several possible storylines out of a common situation” (Ryan, Bell 2019, 23). The same seems to be the case with “The Babysitter.” The story is not a contradictory conjunction of exclusive options but a disjunction of diverse possible outcomes.⁶

⁶ The impression that “forking-path” narratives are contradictory is based on the erroneous idea that one fiction depicts one possible world. The very language we use to talk about fictional works, as Lewis (1978, 42) suggests, leads us to this slippery terrain: we are prone to sayings like “in the world of *The Great Gatsby*” or “in the world of *The Magic Mountain*,” etc. But there’s never one single world that exclusively belongs to any particular fiction. Every fiction is a draft of countless possibilities. In one world compatible with *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby has blue eyes, but in the other his eyes are green, etc. Fitzgerald’s novel (as far as I recall) remains silent on this issue and “is [essentially] partial in what it explicitly represents” (Berto, Jago 2019, 225). There are numerous possible worlds (with greater or lesser differences

In the case of *Traps*, the situation seems complicated by the fact that the author herself insists that the play behaves like “an impossible object” (Churchill 1985, 71). Even if by this she understands logical impossibility, the possibilist should not be troubled. For one, her remark is not part of the fiction itself (being in “Performance Notes,” it represents an extra-fictional commentary). One cannot establish fictional facts by subsequent extra-fictional calibrations. We can put this idea to a simple test: we are in the audience, watching *Traps*. In one scene, Alber and Syl are married, and in the other—they are not. There would be no single moment in which they are both married and not married. We would see merely a kaleidoscope of possibilities that follow one another. A rule of thumb here should be that if we can reject the contradictory reading of a fiction “without affecting the plot structure, then [the contradiction] does not belong to its real content” (Berčić 2021, 166).

(b) The “Rejection” Strategy

Root vs. Branch Contradictions. However, there are some contradictory fictional scenarios for which none of the abovementioned accommodation strategies works well. Let’s take “Sylvan’s Box” as an example. The proposition “The box was both full and empty” purports to be true in this particular fiction. It cannot be easily dismissed as a rhetorical (pseudo-)contradiction. Also, it cannot be conveniently brushed away as an authorial “slip-up” since the whole point of the story is to portray a violation of the LNC. The contradiction is intentional. Furthermore, Lewis’ method of union “does not work well in cases [like ‘Sylvan’s Box’] where the original fiction contains a single ‘root’ responsible for each branch of a contradiction”

between them) that correspond to Fitzgerald’s fiction. Thus, there’s no “unique world we can call the world of [*The Great Gatsby*]” since “[f]ictions are incomplete” (Berto, Jago 2019, 242), and necessarily so for it is impossible to produce a perfectly exhaustive fiction in which all particular details would be settled. See, Doležel 1998, 22. No storyworld corresponds to only one possible world since no storyworld is a singular world but a script for “a class of worlds” (Berto, Jago 2019, 242) that are compatible with it. In the case of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the way out of contradiction appears to be a straightforward one: in some possible worlds, Charles and Sarah get married, while in others, they don’t. The fiction encompasses and portrays these possibilities with no contradiction incurred.

(Proudfoot 2018, 99). We cannot divide the story into consistent segments without the whole plot structure being destroyed.

One can thus distinguish between two types of contradictory fictions. Let's describe them (following Proudfoot 2018) as fictions with *branch* contradictions and fictions with *root* contradictions.

(α) The term “branch” contradiction describes “a pair of statements of the form φ and not- φ ” (Varzi 2004, 95) in a single fiction. These are the fictions with contradictory segments. This is the case with all “forking-path” narratives where we have “the representation of logically incompatible situations (such as the various scenarios or plotlines)” (Alber 2019, 159). Such contradictions are “divisible” by Lewis’ method of union, and, as we have shown, “there is the opportunity to interpret [them] in an uninteresting way” (Sorensen 2002, 347). These “contradictions” are “venial” (Kroon, Voltoni 2019) since we can preserve the plot structure without committing ourselves to truthful violations of the LNC in fiction. There is no hermeneutical need to interpret the story in a contradictory fashion.

(β) The phrase “root contradiction,” on the other hand, does not describe a pair of exclusionary propositions but “a [single] statement of the form φ and not- φ ” (Varzi 2004, 95). When a genuine root contradiction appears, we are dealing with “fatally inconsistent fictions” (Hanley 2004, 113) since the contradiction is indivisible. There are no separate contradictory situations, but only one integral contradictory situation. We cannot divide it into consistent segments or read it convincingly as authorial mistake. This means that the price for eliminating such a contradiction from the story would be the “wholesale destruction of the [plot structure]” (García-Carpintero 2022, 319).

In the cases of such blatant contradictions, the possibilist cannot convincingly resort to reconciliation strategies. He would have to straightforwardly reject the possibility of such claims being true in fiction.

The Case for Unreliability. Let's start with something that seems like a truism: “It's true in every story that the story is told” (Hanley 2004, 118). That is, there typically is some narratorial agency that conveys fictional events. Such agency is called *the narrator*. Thus, for a fictional claim φ , we can introduce an operator that points out “the intensional context” of the claim: “According to S: φ ” (Varzi 2004, 97), where S is some narratorial

agency. “According to S: φ ” describes a “propositional attitude” (Fořt 2016, 34) like “Peter told me that φ ” or “According to Paul, φ .”

Let’s now state another well-known fact: “[T]he mere [...] utterance of [φ] does not suffice to make it true [in fiction]” (Xhignesse 2016, 153). This phenomenon is known as *narratorial unreliability*. Narrators can sometimes be mistaken, highly biased, or deceptive. For instance, Johnny Truant, the narrator of *House of Leaves*, is a drug addict with a distorted grasp of reality. One should be wary of taking anything he says at face value. Sometimes the best explanation of a fictional fact is not necessarily the one provided by the narrator.

Thus, the obvious possibilist strategy of dealing with the root contradiction in “Sylvan’s Box” would be to reject it on the grounds of narratorial unreliability and so preserve the LNC as a basic principle. If we rephrase the problematic proposition so that its reference is included, we get the following sentence: “According to the narrator of ‘Sylvan’s Box,’ there is a box that is both full and empty.” We are not dealing anymore with a contradictory fact, but merely with the narrator’s contradictory belief. The sentence is suddenly much less philosophically interesting since people claim and “believe all sorts of things” that “needn’t be true, or even reasonable” (Berto, Jago 2019, 235). The possibilist can thus argue that “Sylvan’s Box” is a possible fiction “where we are presented with unreliable [narrator] with inconsistent beliefs” (Nolan 2021, 18).

How do we know that we are dealing with unreliable narration? Some tell-tale signs are to be assessed “case by case” (Varzi 2004, 97). Regarding “Sylvan’s Box,” there are a few clues that can help us make a solid case for narratorial unreliability.

First of all, even if we ignore the fact that the narrator believes that there is a box that is both full and empty, there are other unaccounted inconsistencies in Priest’s fiction. We are told that there is nothing special about the box itself. “It was of brown cardboard of poor quality” (Priest 1997, 575). However, towards the end of the narration, the box (not just its content) starts to behave in a contradictory fashion without anyone being particularly puzzled by it: “I carried the box outside; Nick carried the box outside. I opened the car door; Nick picked up a spade and dug a hole. I put the box in the car; Nick put the box in the hole. I closed the door on the

box and locked it; Nick covered the box with dirt and stamped it down” (Priest 1997, 579). As readers, we can be puzzled by the main event. Something strange is happening inside the box that baffles the narrator and his companion into thinking that they have discovered a logically impossible object. But with the proliferation of contradictions in the last paragraph “without [any] plausible explanation supplied,” we “have gotten off train” (Hanley 2004, 125). The story appears to be not the narrator’s mimetic account of his experiences but a joke.

Furthermore, the narrator seems to be biased. Even before discovering the box, he was already a staunch believer in true contradictions. That was the subject of debate between the late Richard Sylvan and him: “When I first met Richard, we had disagreed over whether the actual world could contain contradictions. I thought that maybe it could” (Priest 1997, 577). Whatever was happening inside the box, the narrator was already predisposed to interpret it in one way rather than another. And the narrator’s account itself leaves some room for doubt about what has happened. He uses cautious language: “What I had discovered *seemed* [my emphasis] so unlikely, impossible even—just as the box said” (Priest 1997, 576).⁷

Whenever a first-person narrator says things that sound improbable (or even contradictory) or problematic in any way, we tend to shift our focus from what has been said to who is saying it. Since unreliability is always a latent possibility in the first-person accounts, such narrators often lack the means to establish a definite report that cannot be doubted.

By employing the so-called reconciliation strategies, the possibilist can demonstrate that the majority of fictions that have been usually regarded as contradictory do not actually violate the LNC. It appears that if we can

⁷ One could add that the narrator also employs language that signals fabulation, not the recounting of authentic facts that are taking place within the storyworld. His account is characterized by poetical literary exacerbations and is overtly adorned with figures of speech: “[I]t was the magic time of day, that time when the sun mercifully elects to hide for a few hours, and the roasted earth heaves a sigh of relief” (Priest 1997, 573). This seems to be an idiom one would use when deliberately producing a fictitious account. After all, “[made-up] stories are hardly ever told in the same way as factual ones, and fictionality can usually be detected in a blind test” (Ryan, Bell 2019, 16).

convincingly read (e.g.) *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in a consistent manner, then we have a good reason to believe that it's a consistent fiction. By preserving the consistency of plot structure, the possibilist approach has the additional "virtue of doxastic conservatism"⁸ since it allows us to keep the LNC as the basic law of logic. When it comes to fictions with branch contradictions, the possibilist interpretation simply appears to be more convincing than the impossibilist one. Thus, the only real candidates for contradictory fictions are those with root contradictions: when the narrator asserts a single proposition that explicitly violates the LNC. In such cases, the possibilist can point out the fact that even if fiction explicitly contains the assertion of the type $p \wedge \sim p$, this is still "a very long way from establishing that it is true in the story that $[p \wedge \sim p]$ " (Hanley 2004, 120). Due to the general prospect of narratorial unreliability, the most we can say about fictions like "Sylvan's Box" is that something puzzling has happened. But we are not obliged by the fictional content to take any further steps. It seems more plausible to suppose that the narrator is (for example) in a state of cognitive disarray than that the LNC has really been violated.

3. Impossibilist objections and ways forward

The Convention of Reliability. However, for impossibilists, the matter is far from settled. Their reply could take the following course. Let's suppose that the narrator of "Sylvan's Box" is indeed unreliable. After all, first-person narrators can more often than not be convincingly challenged by the unreliability charges. But what if we rewrite the story so that the narrator is no longer some (first-person) Australian philosopher but the third-person narrative agency, the one that cannot be identified with any of the characters? The impossibilist's argument runs as follows:

- (i) We can rewrite "Sylvan's Box" in such a manner that the claim "The box is both full and empty" is uttered in the third-person.
- (ii) All claims uttered in the third person are true (by convention).

⁸ I thank the anonymous *Organon F* reviewer for this formulation.

- (iii) Thus, it would be true in the fiction that “the box is both full and empty.”

Concerning (ii), it seems that “[t]he basic convention of [fiction] is that narrative sentences not produced by the characters are true” (Culler 2004, 27). The third-person utterances are generally understood not as someone’s opinions but as fictional facts. Third-person agency is not a person but a “narrating function (*Erzählfunktion*),” devoid of “gender, [...] name, [...] age or I” (Behrendt, Hansen 2011, 227). It seems to be a completely objective generator of fictional facts. If the possibilist somehow argues against (ii), by introducing the concept of third-person unreliability, “something that has been regarded as unimaginable” (Behrendt, Hansen 2011, 219-20), he would be attacking a major convention of fictional discourse, and his argumentation would, as the impossibilist contends, “smack of the *ad hoc*” (Xhignesse 2016, 152).⁹ In order to save fictional events from contradictions, the possibilist would be sacrificing our standard way of dealing with fiction.

The Possibilist Reply: Coding Error. What could be the possibilist answer here? One could argue that (ii) represents an oversimplification of the conventions governing narration. It’s generally true that we take pieces of information promulgated in the third person as fictional facts. However, this is not always the case. We need a more nuanced approach.

Imagine that you are engaged with a fiction narrated in the third person. The narratorial agency reveals certain facts (let’s say it’s a story about a ruthless politician who slanders his opponents and destroys their lives through fabricated scandals), and you accept them as true in that fiction. Everything is running smoothly until the third-person voice of the narrative describes the politician as “a sensitive man, overtly obsessed with ethical issues.” This seems obviously false. Maybe it’s meant ironically. But, could a non-personal narrative agency be capable of irony and sarcasm, or does this “flash [it] out as a character[-narrator]” (Behrendt, Hansen 2011, 222) after all? Suddenly, you want to rethink what’s going on in the fiction and who is narrating it, despite the apparent third-person voice. Maybe we are

⁹ The possibilist’s recourse to unreliability in the case of the third-person narration would ultimately lead to some sort of narrative solipsism (there would be no fictional facts we could assert beyond the existence of the narrator).

dealing here with the *ersatz* third-person narration.¹⁰ Or, it could be a case of “psycho-narration” (Behrendt, Hansen 2011, 236), the situation in which the third-person narrator merely conveys and mirrors the (potentially misguided) thoughts of the characters, not the objective facts (by omitting the attribution: “..., he thought”). We accept the factuality of the third-person narration only until we encounter something problematic and ambiguous that compels us to reassess the information that has been provided. The mere presence of the third-person voice doesn’t automatically mean that the story is narrated by some non-personal narrative agency that conveys information with utter authority.¹¹

Truth in fiction is not so much an alethic as it is a *pragmatic* concept. We take the narrated information as true in fiction until we have some pragmatic reason to doubt it.¹² It is an issue of “smoothness” of narration, not of the infallible narrative convention that automatically establishes random facts *ex opere operato*. As Hanley puts it, “judgments of truth in fiction [are] probable rather than certain” (2004, 116).¹³

¹⁰ This seems to be the case in Dinesen’s “The Sailor-Boy’s Tale,” a story that appears to be narrated in the third person until the last sentence where, as Behrendt and Hansen (2011, 236) note, we find clues that this could actually be the case of a covert first-person narration. Perhaps in order to feign objectivity or to distance himself from traumatic events, the first-person narrator may mimic the third-person narrative attitude.

¹¹ A similar line of reasoning can be employed in solving the so-called puzzle of imaginative resistance. See, Vujošević 2023.

¹² In third-person narratives, we may initially assume that the story is told by some non-personal, “objective” agency until we encounter something that prompts us to “personalize” the narrator (e.g., there is an obvious error, or an overtly personal or neurotic tone suddenly emerges in narration, etc.).

¹³ Generally, truth in fiction seems to be an aesthetically trivial concept, for it has little bearing on our standard engagements with fiction. For example, is Myrtle’s death in *The Great Gatsby* an accident or a premeditated act on Daisy’s part? There is no way to know for sure, and this indeterminacy even contributes to the aesthetic value of the novel. We cannot furnish conclusive evidence for much of the fictional happenings. The majority of great fictional works are games of interpretation where what is (really) true (in fiction) may remain radically elusive.

So, what is not running “smoothly” in “Sylvan’s Box” that make us hesitate to accept that “the box is both full and empty” as true in fiction, despite the fact that the story is now narrated in the third person?

Every fiction “presents areas of radical indeterminacy” (Ryan, Bell 2019, 10-11). Fictions do not provide all the information about their respective storyworlds: we never get to know, e.g., what Heathcliff was doing for three years after running away from Wuthering Heights. However, such “under-descriptions” are contingent. The authors could have filled these blanks if they wanted to. The problem with “Sylvan’s Box” is that the crucial event of the story must remain underdescribed.

Let’s imagine that Priest was making an indie film called “Sylvan’s Box,” and he wanted to present the discovery of a receptacle that is both full and empty. He could try to achieve this only in two ways: by some second-hand announcement (the audience never sees the actual content of the box, but merely observes the characters exclaiming in utter surprise: “The box is both full and empty!”) or by misrepresenting the content: for example, the audience sees a figurine in the box, flickering in and out of existence, “like a malfunctioning cloaking device” (Xhignesse 2021, 3180). In the first case, we are only provided with an indirect clue (the character’s testimony) that the box is “fempty,” but this “does not make the contradiction true [in fiction]” (Xhignesse 2021, 3181). What is going on remains hopelessly fuzzy. In the second case, we can claim that what characters describe as a contradiction is no contradiction at all. Priest simply cannot forge a fiction in which it would be plainly true that the box is both full and empty.

Now, someone could say that a proposition can be true in fiction even if it cannot be visually represented (or clearly perceptually imagined). There is no direct link between truth in fiction and visual representation. Priest offers the example of “a chiliagon (a regular 1000-sided figure)” (2016, 2659). One could even produce a story in which an immortal being creates a megagonic structure (an edifice with one million angles). We cannot clearly and distinctly imagine such a thing, but nevertheless, our general intuition is that such an event could still be true in fiction. What can be replied here is that it’s true that we cannot clearly imagine a megagon, but the imaginative impossibility is not structural here. The restriction is within

our mental capacities, not in the object as such. That is, I cannot clearly imagine a figure with one million sides, but I can still imagine it in a modular way. Instead of imagining a million angles, I imagine a figure with many, many angles. Such a figure serves as an imaginative model for the megagon (since it's not structurally dissimilar from it). It merely differs in the degree of completeness. However, there is no such a model for a box that is both full and empty. If I imagine the content of the box as flashing in and out of existence (like the digits on an alarm clock), I'm imagining something structurally different from simultaneous existence and non-existence. There's no imaginative model for contradictions.

However, the impossibilist could further argue that some fictional facts that cannot be imagined perceptually (even in a modular fashion) could still be true in fiction. One can distinguish between “two [kinds of] coding” (Berto, Jago 2019, 34) in fiction: perceptual and propositional. Perceptual representations are “characterized by reference to sensory perception” (Berto, Jago 2019, 34). They are “pictorial” (Berto, Jago 2019, 34), and they provide instructions on how to imagine something. An example of perceptual representation could be the crime scene in the Luriston Gardens in Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*. We have a detailed description of the room with the corpse lying on the floor. The event is perceptually coded. What is to be imagined is explicitly stipulated. One could make a film or a play out of these sensory pieces of information. But not all fictional facts are perceptual. There are propositional representations that deal with “abstract scenarios.” They are “amodal” since “they are disconnected from sensory modalities” (Berto, Jago 2019, 35). They lack any relevant perceptual stipulation. It seems that contradictory claims in fiction could belong only to the domain of propositional representation. That is, if we can imagine contradictions at all, we do so only on the propositional level since they come without any stipulation on how to perceptually imagine them. They are exclusively propositionally coded.¹⁴ But this is exactly the problem with “Sylvan's Box.”

¹⁴ Not everyone agrees with this. Priest seems to argue that we imagine and even perceive contradictions on a routine basis. For example, consider this simple scenario: While walking out of my apartment, for a split second I'm perfectly “symmetrically poised” (Priest 2004, 28) in the doorway so that my left foot is still inside the apartment while my right foot is in the hallway. Let's “freeze” this particular moment and

What's taking place in this fiction is a specific type of *coding error*. That contradictions could be imagined propositionally is beside the point in the case of "Sylvan's Box," since, in this fiction, we are invited to imagine the focal contradiction perceptually as a realized state of affairs in the story-world (because the contradiction is something that the characters feel, see, and touch). However, no instruction is offered (nor it could be adequately offered) on how to do so. The very invitation to imagine such a proposition is void, yet persistent (since we are dealing here with a sensory content). This creates a zone "of radical indeterminacy" (Ryan, Bell 2019, 10-11) concerning what is really going on in the fiction. All conceivable stipulations on how to imagine the contradictory proposition in "Sylvan's Box" would not be about the contradictory proposition but about some other (non-contradictory) state of affairs. One can produce a fiction about some

ask a simple question: "Am I in or not in the [apartment]?" (Priest 2004, 28). It seems that "I am both in and not in" (Priest 2004, 28). Seemingly, we are dealing with a perfectly imaginable yet contradictory situation. However, the possibilist need not be particularly troubled by the examples like this one. These scenarios are fundamentally different from the one outlined in "Sylvan's Box." The ambition of "Sylvan's Box" is to portray an "ineliminable contradictory [fictional fact]" (Mares 2004, 271). No reconciliation strategy works here. The contradiction cannot be eliminated from the story without rejecting the narrator's authority. The narrator offers a metaphysical claim: he came to believe that there are certain "aspects of the world [he inhabits] for which any accurate description will contain a true contradiction" (Mares 2004, 270). The box is empty and not empty "at the same time, and in the same respect" (Aristotle, as translated in Horn 2018). This is not the case with the doorway scenario since one can "re-describe [it] [...] consistently without sacrificing accuracy" (Mares 2004, 270), by (e.g.) offering some correct protocol-like report of the situation that avoids the contradictory formulation (my left foot is in the room and my right foot is in the hallway, etc.). In any case, it is not exactly true that while I am in the room, I am also not in the room "in the same respect" (which seems a necessary prerequisite for genuine contradictions). Ultimately, even if one accepts the (moderate) dialethic stance that some "semantic contradictions [...] are [...] 'true,' [...] or not necessarily false" (Grim 2004, 55), such as the Liar sentence or the examples offered by Mares (whose article was suggested to me by anonymous referee), and that "inconsistencies [...] may arise because of the relationship between language and the world" (Mares 2004, 265), this still does not entail "any painful metaphysical commitment" to such "untoward entities" (Mares 2004, 274) as empty boxes.

contradictory situation, but he will repeatedly fail to make it the undoubted fact in the story. There is a fatal incompleteness in such fictions, and the question of fictional truth cannot be properly settled.

4. “Radical indeterminacy” of impossible fictions

Should we reject the LNC in favor of the PPL? We’ve seen that the impossibilist argues so while drawing our attention to a plethora of works of fiction that seemingly contain contradictions as their essential elements. Readers engage with contradictory fictions all the time and seem to understand them.¹⁵ According to the impossibilist, we should take a dim view of the possibilist’s claim that the right way to read these stories has to be the one not intended by the authors and not pursued by the majority of ordinary readers. As Nolan points out, “[t]he main drawback of [the possibilist strategy] is that [it] often seems undermotivated by the texts and audience reception” (2021, 10).

However, there is one thing that may prevent someone from automatically accepting the impossibilist stance that there may be genuine violations of the LNC in fiction. According to the influential Lewisian understanding of “truth in fiction,” a proposition is true in fiction if it “[obtains] in a possible world [or a set of worlds]” (Currie 1990, 54). There are possible worlds where, for example, a reanimated outlandish corpse reads *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and recites, in eloquent remorse, passages from *Paradise Lost* over Victor Frankenstein’s dead body. However, it appears that if we concede that even logically contradictory propositions can be true in fiction, this would force us to “admit appropriately selected impossible worlds to the set of worlds that realize what is told in [...] a story” (Kroon, Voltolini 2019) and such a commitment to “impossible possible worlds” (Lewis 1983, 275) seems to be “for many a difficult pill to swallow” (Kroon, Voltolini 2019). One tempting alternative, for impossibilists, would be to simply abandon Lewis’ model of “truth in fiction” and consider some rival

¹⁵ Priest (2004, 35) even suggests that contradictory fictions (like “Sylvan’s Box”) would ring more consistent than some logically possible fiction in which the protagonist (for instance) randomly turns into a fried egg.

theories that seemingly retain the idea that a proposition can be “true in fiction” (which appears to be in accordance with how we generally talk about fiction) without subscribing to “the machinery of possible worlds” (Currie 1990, 147). Perhaps, there is a way to think about the contradictory claim in “Sylvan’s Box” as being fictionally true without having to grapple with what it would mean for some possible worlds to contain impossible objects like fempty boxes.

The Waltonian Model. Kendall Walton has proposed a pragmatic account of truth in fiction that is not dependent on possible world semantics. For Walton, a work of fiction “is a prop in a game of make-believe, where the function of the prop is to prescribe imaginings” (Kroon, Voltolini 2019). A proposition is true in fiction “if there is a prescription to the effect that it is to be imagined” (Walton 1990, 61).¹⁶ For instance, we can say that, in Charlotte Brontë’s novel, it is fictionally true that Jane Eyre is a strong-willed 19th-century English governess who knows French and has green eyes (since there’s a prescription to imagine these things). But it is not fictionally true that she is a coarse 18th-century coachman with hazel eyes. To imagine her as such would be an “unauthorized [move]” (Walton 1990, 60) in the game of make-believe.

While rejecting possible world semantics, Walton still employs the concept of fictional worlds, but in a pragmatic fashion. “Fictional worlds” are “associated with [...] cluster[s] of propositions” (Walton 1990, 64) that are true in a certain fiction (which simply means that such propositions carry the invitation to be imagined). Fictional worlds are not full-blown worlds in which all sorts of bizarre phenomena are taking place. To say that Graham¹⁷ and Nick discover a fempty box (in the fictional world of Priest’s story) does not commit us to “impossible possible worlds” where such an event would take place. Unlike possible worlds, fictional worlds “are sometimes impossible” (Walton 1990, 64) and they are not really worlds.

¹⁶ Walton is cautious not to equate imagining with mental imagery since “imagining can occur without [mental images]” (1990, 13).

¹⁷ I refer here to the fictional character-narrator of Priest’s story as Graham to distinguish him from the actual author, Graham Priest (who, presumably, doesn’t actually believe that he discovered a box that is both full and empty, in R. Sylvan’s house).

Considering the problem “impossible fictions” could pose for his account of truth in fiction, Walton suggests two solutions. First, he allows for the possibility that “contradictions can be imagined in [some] relevant sense” (Walton 1990, 64). He seems to suggest that, when we are dealing with a contradictory conjunction in fiction, we can understand it as involving “separate prescriptions to imagine p and to imagine not- p ” (Walton 1990, 64) in the game of make-believe. However, this won’t do since such an imagining would be a direct violation of what the contradictory fiction prescribes us to imagine. For example, “Sylvan’s Box” does not invite us to imagine that Graham and Nick first discover a box with a figurine in it (in t_1), and then (in t_2), they find out that the box is empty. In doing so, we would be imagining a completely different scenario (that doesn’t violate the LNC), and such a move seems “unauthorized” by the fiction in question.

Walton then briefly considers the possibility that contradictory propositions cannot be imagined. However, he adds that this would not affect his “understanding of fictionality” (Walton 1990, 64). He claims that there “can be prescriptions to imagine a contradiction even if doing so is not possible” (1990, 64). Kroon and Voltolini understand this passage as suggesting that contradictions can be imagined propositionally. Therefore, “what is at stake here is propositional imagining,” not imagination that “relies purely on mental imagery” (Kroon, Voltolini 2019). As readers, we are invited to propositionally imagine that Graham has discovered an object that violates the LNC (without perceptually imagining anything specific). This seems like a very convenient strategy: I imagine a non-contradictory (perceptual) situation described in the story (i.e., after opening a certain box, two people are claiming that it is both empty and non-empty), and then I add: “I perceptually imagine that what they are claiming is true in fiction.” However, here one encounters a similar problem as with the Lewisian model.

Let’s suppose that we are dealing with two fictional variants of “Sylvan’s Box” called SB_1 and SB_2 . Let’s further say that, in SB_1 , it is fictionally true that a contradictory object exists and is discovered by Graham and Nick. However, in SB_2 , they only *believe* that they’ve discovered such an object. These scenarios have to be radically different since SB_1 is logically inconsistent and SB_2 is perfectly consistent (after all, people do believe all sorts

of things). However, the basic plots of SB_1 and SB_2 seem indistinguishable. That is, what is stipulated to be imagined perceptually is identical in both stories. In both SB_1 and SB_2 , it is fictionally true (in Waltonian terms: prescribed to be imagined) that two friends discover a box, and that, upon opening it, they come to believe that they've found an object that violates the LNC. Their belief is not merely propositional. They are not simply considering some abstract semantic scenario, but are dealing with something that they can touch, see, and even move across the room. However, in both stories, they are radically unable to describe the object in any relevant detail. The narrator of "Sylvan's Box" admits this: "[I]t is impossible to explain what the perception of a contradiction, naked and brazen, is like" (Priest 1997, 576). If we try to imagine such an object perceptually, we'll end up imagining something non-contradictory: a flickering figurine, a translucent holographic image, etc. There can be no close-up of the object in either of the stories. SB_1 and SB_2 are identical in this regard.

However, the same perceptual coding leads to different prescriptions for propositional imagining in SB_1 and SB_2 . There is an additional prescription in SB_1 to (propositionally) imagine the characters' belief as being true in the story, while the most generous thing we can say for SB_2 is that it invites us only to imagine that the fiction remains undecidable in its crucial aspect. But what would warrant such a prescription in SB_1 ? The prescription to (propositionally) imagine a contradictory situation must be produced exclusively by some narratorial assertion since nothing else would do (there can be no further description of the contradictory situation in any relevant detail). However, as we have seen, narratorial assertions alone (even when they are uttered in the third-person) are not strong enough to produce an unavoidable imaginative prescription in the game of make-believe, so that if we are not acting by such a prescription, we are "misusing the work" (Walton 1990, 60).

The truth of contradictory fictions always depends solely upon the narrator's claims that cannot be backed up by any nuanced further elaboration. There is nothing in SB_1 that prescribes the acceptance of the impossible situation as true in fiction (in both Lewisian and Waltonian framework), except the narrator's assertion. But we've shown that one need not rely blindly on such authority. Valid imaginative engagement with fictions may

ignore such “blank” narratorial prescriptions. Such an assertion is the only difference between SB_1 and SB_2 . It is an additional, *phantom* quality of SB_1 that adds nothing relevant to the fictional content. It vacuously repeats the narrator’s claim from SB_2 (but, perhaps, in the third-person voice).

For example, imagine Charlotte Brontë writing *Jane Eyre* in the third person with a goal to establish the fictional fact that her character is a paragon of virtue and late-Georgian morality. To use the Waltonian idiom: she wants to create a “prescription to imagine” (Walton 1990, 139) such a thing (as fictionally true). She cannot adequately achieve this by merely stating this fact (even in the third-person voice) since, later on, she may exaggerate in descriptions of her heroine’s upright behavior so that the final impression is that Jane Eyre is not so much a nice, virtuous person, but an obnoxious and tedious character. Or she may subsequently hint, in portraying Jane, that she could be someone who merely uses the mask of virtue to achieve her own selfish goals, etc. What makes Jane Eyre a virtuous character is not a mere stipulation on the narrator’s part (even in the cases of third-person narration), but the general outlay of the story that requires some narrative skill to produce. But in the case of “Sylvan’s Box,” no relevant further elaboration is possible since such fictions are created around essentially indeterminate situations (something strange has happened, but we cannot be sure what). There is simply no narrative way to expand or resolve the case in the manner that Priest would want to. Rather than modifying theories of truth in fiction so that they can accommodate real-world violations of the LNC, it may be more propitious to simply abandon the venerable old notion of *divin’ artista*, the omnipotent Author who can make anything whatsoever true in his story “simply by fiat”¹⁸ (the idea that is currently known as the PPL).

5. Conclusion

We can say that SB_2 stands for Priest’s original fiction. The character-narrator obviously believes that he has discovered some contradictory object. This seems to be the most one can say about “Sylvan’s Box.” The

¹⁸ See (Liao 2016, 475).

author cannot upgrade SB₂ fiction to SB₁ by providing some additional pieces of information about the nature of the characters' impossible discovery. Priest (1997, 576) accepts this. One simply cannot expand the story in any relevant detail. The only promising strategy is to distance the assertion from the character-narrator and to convey it in a different narrative voice (as an objective fact in the story). But this maneuver rests on a misconception about what third-person narration really means. It's not a magical device that establishes fictional facts (or generates authentic imaginative prescriptions *ipso facto*).

The ongoing debate about logically impossible fictions is (to some extent) due to the assumption that it is easy to make something true in a story by merely stating it (through some narratorial agency). However, this is not always the case. "Sylvan's Box" is an example of "radically indeterminate" fiction. These are fictions that must remain fatally underdescribed. That is, no narrative agency can establish the contradictory fictional fact since such an event simply "cannot be described in adequate [and relevant] detail" (Ashline 1995, 222). "Sylvan's Box" thus remains radically inconclusive about what the characters have discovered inside the box. The story is centered not around a physically realized contradiction but rather a "blind spot" or an enigma (at best) of what has happened.

Fictions like "Sylvan's Box" are "interesting thought-experiment[s]" (Xhignesse 2021, 3183), but their existence is simply insufficient to prove that contradictions can be true in fiction. By constructing such fictions, one cannot prove that fictional possibility is broader than logical possibility (as it is classically understood). Such endeavors are based on an oversimplified view of truth in fiction and narrative conventions. As Xhignesse puts it, "Priest wants his readers to reflect on the possibility that the logic of fiction is paraconsistent. To get us to do so, he must first tell us to do so, but he needn't [and, in fact, he doesn't] succeed in actually making it so in the story we read" (2021, 3183).

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