

METAPHOR AND FICTION

The aim of this paper is to discuss the intricate relation between metaphorical expressions and fictional discourse. The relevance of this relation is imposed by the fact that metaphors are generally acknowledged as the main characteristic of poetic discourse, a fact which points out their functional analogy, an analogous decline from what is considered as the standard way of speaking. Showing this analogy therefore implies drawing a line of distinction between them and what they are opposed to, namely discussing the relation between metaphorical and literal, fictional and non-fictional. Such a discussion resides on a well-known and widely exposed dualism of art and science, and reflects the most general semantical, epistemological and ontological problems raised by the realist — antirealist struggle.

The problem of metaphorical and fictional discourse appears thus on three levels:

a — *semantical level*: the question whether statements that include metaphorical expressions and statements about fictional entities have any meaning, and if they do — what do they refer to and in what way?

b — *epistemological level*: the question whether these statements have any truth value, and if they do — can they be regarded as true statements about reality, i. e. do they have any cognitive import?

c — *ontological level*: the question about their ontological commitment — in case such statements are taken to be referential and bearers of truth value, what kind of ontology do they imply?

If we consider ontology as the most fundamental philosophical discipline, as the basis of any semantical or epistemological position, these questions could also be put the other way round, namely, we could ask — in what way does a certain ontology determine the semantical and epistemological values of metaphorical and fictional statements? In our discussion we are going to follow this course of argumentation. We intend to show possible accounts of metaphorical and fictional discourse starting from a strict realist line, going step by step through possible deviations from a strict realist position, finally ending in an antirealist one.

Metaphorical and fictional discourses surely present no problem for Meinong's type of *ontological universalism*. In the universe of uncompleted objects where the predicate of existence is treated as being equal to other predicates, metaphorical predication and statements about nonexistent entities do not imply any special semantical or epistemological categories. Such an ontological position seems therefore to be irrelevant for our discussion about metaphors and fiction as a semantical and epistemological problem.

Metaphorical and fictional discourse present a problem for the *realist* who believes in the universe of distinct objects, with their corresponding properties and relations, that is recognized as such by our cognitive capacities, confirmed by scientific research, and adequately reflected in our language. In the realist camp where meaning is primarily based on objective reference, scientific discourse is regarded as a paradigm case of meaningful and true discourse about reality. Realist semantics is rooted in reference — denotation of classes of things, events, instances or characteristics. The possibility of objective reference, the link between language and reality, guarantees significance and truth value of our statements, enables us to speak of what there is. On the other hand, this link enables the evaluation of our discourse, differentiation between meaningful and meaningless, the true and the false.

If we stick to the *tractarian* type of semantics, nothing can be said on what there is not, or if it is said, it cannot be but meaningless or false. From this point of view justification of metaphorical and fictional discourse seems in principle impossible, or rather — as the occurrence of such a discourse cannot be denied, its justification is sought in its negative aspect, it is understood as a decline from what is considered to be meaningful and true. Thus, metaphors and fiction are paired with meaningless expressions such as »the round triangle« or with patent falsehood. As metaphors and fiction, as well as art in general, speak of objectively nonexistent properties or entities, they can have no cognitive import and may at the most be appreciated for their non-cognitive functions, such as — entertainment, expression and arousing of feelings, decoration, etc.

Although some contemporary philosophers, devout supporters of the consistent realist theory of meaning,<sup>1</sup> still deny semantical and epistemological dimensions to metaphorical and fictional discourse, most of them find it no longer fruitful to maintain such an exclusive view. If metaphorical and fictional discourse is not to be simply rejected as meaningless or false, if we admit that it may convey some true information — its reference should not seem doubtful. As according to literal interpretation, metaphorical expressions combine logically inconsistent features and objects, whereas fiction tells us of only imaginary persons, creatures, places or events, any objective reference and cognitive import such a discourse might have — must be reached by some indirect means. The efforts of the realists who try to give a more plausible account of metaphorical and fictional discourse, are therefore directed towards the search for syntactic, semantic or pragmatic tools that could explain metaphorical and fictional reference without disturbing the literal realist semantic model. These efforts can be traced as 'theory of reformulation', 'theory of paraphrase', and 'theory of hypothetical truth'.

<sup>1</sup> Here we are referring primarily to D. Davidson, in: Donald Davidson: »What Metaphors Mean«, *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1978, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 31—49.

### 1) *Theory of reformulation*

One of the simplest tricks how a metaphorical statement that is patently false can be turned into a potentially true statement is to consider metaphor as an elliptical simile. By reformulating metaphor into a corresponding simile, metaphorical meaning turns into the literal meaning of the expanded statement that likens two entities in respect to certain common features. If no features are mentioned, such a statement is trivially true, because everything is like everything else in a certain respect. On the other hand, if the common feature is defined, the statement is potentially true.

An analogue procedure regarding fictional discourse is Russell's theory of definite descriptions, suggesting that statements which refer to nonexistent entities should be considered as shortened versions of identity independent statements. By decomposing a statement that cannot be considered as referential because it implies the existence of nonexistent things or properties, we turn it into an open sentence with no singular terms and hence, without any ontological commitment. Thus, statements, which were rejected by the realist as meaningless and having no truth value, turn into logically operative sentences.

Nevertheless, such formal tricks do not represent but a formal solution. Although metaphors and fiction which had been treated as outcasts, were finally accepted within the frames of logically analysable, potentially true discourse, in the final analysis they prove to be trivial, false or semantically dubious.

Turning a metaphorical expression into a corresponding simile does not but rename the problem. As N. Goodman points out<sup>2</sup> — if a simile says that a person and a picture are alike in being sad, in the case of the person »sad« is attributed literally, whereas in the case of the picture it is attributed metaphorically, so the problem of metaphorical attribution remains. Analogously — the reformulation of a sentence about Pegasus into a statement about an unidentified entity »x« that has the property of »being a horse« and the one of »having wings« does not make this sentence true. However, formal acceptance is only the first deviation from the first renouncement of the strict realist line.

### 2) *Theory of paraphrase*

The most common realist account of the meaning of metaphorical and fictional discourse is the idea that metaphors and fiction refer to reality indirectly. Whereas the theory of reformulation simply extended metaphors to similes and fictional statements to false existential statements, the theory of paraphrase acknowledges metaphors and fiction as specific kinds of discourse, as possible ways of conveying true information about reality. This information, however, is the very information of their paraphrase. The paraphrase of a metaphor, or a fictional statement is what is actually said, semantics should only expose the indirect way this interpretation is reached. Thus, in accordance with the colloquial definition of metaphor as »saying one thing and meaning another«, as well as with the colloquial interpretation of a work of fiction that tries to discover the »hidden message« of its author, philosophers try to secure

<sup>2</sup> Nelson Goodman: *Languages of Art*, The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Indianapolis—New York—Kansas City 1968, p. 77.

the means for their adequate interpretation. Metaphors and fiction can be considered not only potentially but actually true if we are able to translate the coded information they convey into plain, referential discourse. Literal incompatibility, semantic vagueness, the ambiguity of metaphorical and fictional discourse *are* to be understood as pointers to another direction, they represent an obstacle which directs our attention elsewhere. The task of the interpreter is to follow this direction, the task of the theoretician is to explain how this change of direction takes place.

An illustration of the theory of paraphrase can be found in Searle's account of metaphorical and fictional discourse. Distinguishing the meaning of the sentence from the speaker's utterance meaning, Searle shifts the problem of interpretation of metaphorical and fictional discourse from the domain of semantics to the domain of pragmatics. Leaving the realist semantic model undisturbed, an interpretation of such a discourse is reached by following rules of illocution, conventions of utterance shared by the speaker and the hearer. Such shared strategies enable the recipient to distinguish indirect metaphorical reference from the direct literal one, 'serious' reference of nonfictional discourse from 'nonserious' reference of fiction. In the case of metaphor, the hearer is lead by pragmatic principles to another literal term, or to terms that constitute the intended meaning of the utterance, in the case of fiction, the interpreter is lead by »extralinguistic, nonsemantic conventions that break the connection between words and the world«,<sup>3</sup> thus recognizing fictional statements as pretended illocutions.

The cognitive value of metaphorical statements is reached by establishing their indirect literal reference, whereas in the case of fiction »the 'message', or the 'messages' are conveyed by the text but are not in the text.«<sup>4</sup> According to the theory of paraphrase, it is the paraphrase of metaphors and fiction that establishes their relation to reality and becomes the real bearer of their truth value and ontological commitments.

Metaphors and fiction can be understood as true discourse about reality only conditionally and indirectly, namely to the extent to which they are paraphrasable. Such an acceptance of metaphorical and fictional discourse results in fact in their annulment. If metaphors and fiction are not recognized as having any cognitive import different from the cognitive import of their paraphrase it become difficult to argue why do we use them at all, why do we choose the roundabout way of referring instead of the direct one.

### 3) *Theory of hypothetical truth*

An attempt to recognize the specific cognitive value of metaphorical and fictional statements without leaving the realist ground resulted in the idea that they could be treated as hypothetical statements about reality. The important role that metaphors play in science, as well as the overlapping of science with science-fiction, inspired philosophers, who were apt to admit the cognitive function of imagination, to pair metaphors and fiction with hypothesis.

Analogous to the use of models, metaphors and fiction represent hypothetical constructions that play an important heuristic role in our processes of

<sup>3</sup> John R. Searle: *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1979, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> John R. Searle, *ibid.*, p. 74.

knowledge acquisition. Generated by the cognitive power of imagination, metaphors and fiction inspire new interpretations of reality that may some day be confirmed by experience and proved to be true.

By making us »understand one thing in terms of another«,<sup>5</sup> metaphors represent a kind of »paradigm switch« that provokes new insights into reality, whereas fictional imaginary constructions have a chance to be realized, or discovered as existent; fiction may turn to history. Treating metaphorical and fictional statements as hypothetical statements turns them into logically operative counterfactual statements, ruled by the logic of possible worlds. Although the theory of hypothetical truth does not consider metaphors and fiction as being ontologically creative, it recognizes them as epistemologically creative. By influencing the expansion of our knowledge, metaphors and fiction change our view of reality, in which case we may recognize them as not only indirectly referring to what had been known before, but as directly referring to something newly discovered. In case a hypothetical statement is proved by experience to be true, it turns into true discourse about reality, metaphorical and fictional discourse thus becoming plain referential discourse about existent entities.

The theory of hypothetical truth is the highest point of approval of metaphorical and fictional discourse within the frames of realist ontology. Claiming that metaphors and fiction were not only epistemologically but ontologically productive as well, implies the abandonment of the realist ground. Making another step would lead us to the *antirealist position* which the author of this paper is mostly prone to accept.

If the concept of reality is but a construction of the human mind, a function of our cognitive capacities, there should not be a type, but a token difference between the real and the fictional, literal and metaphorical. Realist semantics, epistemology, and ontology are governed by the model of scientific discourse out of which they derive their concepts of meaning, truth and reality. Having been judged from this point of view, metaphors and fiction obviously have no chance but to seem semantically, epistemologically and ontologically dubious. Indeed, scientific and poetic discourse are two different models of reality, ruled by different conventions, but, from an antirealist point of view, they should not be considered but as two possible models, neither of them containing the absolute truth. Difference in their degree of accurateness results from the difference of their function, the difference of their use. If we claim, according to the late Wittgenstein, that limits of what we call »reality«, »meaning« and »truth« are limits posed by our conventions, we may recognize metaphors and fiction as creative means of expanding those limits. »Although metaphors are not 'literally true', there is no reason to suppose that truth has to be literal.«<sup>6</sup> Although fiction is but a construction of our imagination, there is no reason to suppose that reality is more than an analogue construction. According to the antirealist semantical, epistemological and ontological position, metaphors and fiction may be considered as meaningful, directly referring, directly influencing not only our global conceptual schemes, but worldmaking as well.

<sup>5</sup> Definition of metaphor given by G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, in: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: *Metaphors We Live By*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Binkley: »On the Truth and Probity of Metaphor«, *The Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1974, p. 178.