

Literature and Language between Fiction and non Fiction: a Matter of Commitment. An interview with John Searle

John Searle

(by Angela Condello and Tiziano Toracca)

The idea to ask John Searle what he thinks about fiction, reality and truth as they relate to literature stems from a growing and common interest that we have developed for issues that transversally cross literature, social sciences, and philosophy. Such issues – fiction, reality, truth – are now widespread and recurring also in public discourse since they concern language and forms of communication.

If many of the questions might sound unsophisticated, simple and straightforward, it is because they aim for unsophisticated, simple and straightforward answers. The themes in discussion are indeed broad and could have become confusing. From this perspective, we appreciated Searle's choice to have the answers preceded by some preliminary remarks and distinctions. He writes a sort of short handbook – following the analytic tradition of philosophy. He makes few theoretical statements in order to clarify questions that might appear difficult. When we question the nature of literary objects, when we wonder about the difference between Napoleon and the Napoleon described by Tolstoj, or when we think of the function Don Quixote has or would have (considering that he did not exist historically), or when we wonder if and how literary fiction influences our perception of the world – what appears simple becomes indeed difficult because it concerns the basic relationship between language and reality.

Searle's answers highlight the basic questions at stake in the relationship between language and reality. In particular, Searle seems to have a very clear idea of the difference between fiction and non-fiction. He insists that the distinction lies in the amount of truth involved in the discourse and consequently in the *commitment* of the subject that talks or writes. Different degrees of commitment produce, he claims, different forms of fictionality.

The interview touches upon a broad range of theoretical and critical issues. Other ideas Searle addresses seem to be particularly relevant. Firstly, the semantic added value produced by literary fiction – namely, the reason why Don Quixote has a relationship with truth: in serious works of literature, he argues, the author wishes to convey more than the actual semantic content of the sentence uttered. Therefore, the speech acts

involved in a work of fiction are intended to convey something non-fictional even when the non-fictional is not explicitly represented in the text. Secondly, the idea that literature does not need to make use of a specific type of language (may it be more or less figurative). Figuralità for Searle is the distinction between word and meaning: it is a special case of the general distinction between word and sentence meaning, on the one hand, and speaker meaning on the other. Furthermore, other interesting ideas that emerge from the interview concern the relationship between literature and experience (specifically the capacity of literature to affect sensibility and perception) and illustrate an interesting understanding of the idea of classics built on his theory about collective intentionality that should be investigated more. Searle claims, moreover, that literature helps to create the very reality that it represents through an intermix of fiction and non-fiction: the literature about love is partly constitutive of what it is to fall in love. Love, as many other emotions, is partly constituted by linguistic representations of its existence.

Although Searle has been working on speech acts, truth and language since the beginning of his career, these answers are unique within his work. He had never focused so directly on the links between philosophy of language and literature (he often refers to precise sources: Flaubert, Dostoevskij, Tolstoj, Coetzee). For this reason and because of the relevance of the issues involved, we think it would be important to broaden this debate in order to involve other intellectuals that have worked on the intersection between the fields of literature and language on the one side, and the concepts of fiction, reality, and truth on the other.

This interview has been realized partly through an email exchange and partly via Skype.

We are deeply grateful to John Searle for his kindness and for the passion he demonstrated in answering our questions.

(Angela Condello and Tiziano Toracca)

John Searle: I am grateful for these thoughtful questions. It will be much easier to answer them if I first make a few theoretical statements about some central linguistic distinctions. Some of the questions seem very difficult but if you get the theoretical relations right between fiction and nonfiction, literature and non-literature, literal and figurative, use and mention at the beginning of the investigation I think the questions become much easier.

Contrast the following two texts:

(1) There was once a sweet little maid, much beloved by everybody, but most of all by her grandmother, who never knew how to make enough of her. Once she sent her a little riding hood of red velvet, and as it was very becoming to her, and she never wore anything else, people called her Little Red Riding Hood. (Grimm's Fairy Tales, incipit of *Little Red Riding Hood*).

(2) Dalia Carmeli, who drives a trolley downtown Miami, voted for Donald J. Trump on Election Day. A week later, she stopped in to see the enrollment counselor who will help her sign up for another year of health insurance under the Affordable Care Act. (A. Goodnough, *Many in Florida Count on Obama's Health Law, Even Amid Talk of Its Demise*, «New York Times», November 26, 2016, p. 1).

It is clear to anybody who is a master of our culture and understands English, that the first of these passages is fictional, it is part of a fictional story, and the second is non fictional, it is part of a newspaper report. What are the things we could say about these from a philosophical and semantic point of view?

1. Pedants among us, and I am one, will point out that the first text conflates use and mention. The expression “Little Red Riding Hood” can be used to refer to Little Red Riding Hood. The first occurrence of the expression here is not used to refer but rather the expression is itself presented and discussed. Standard textbook accounts mistakenly say that the expression itself does not occur in the quoted portion of the sentence but rather its proper name occurs. The idea is, that by putting quotation marks around a word, an entirely new word is created, the proper name of the original. I think this view is ridiculous to the point of being preposterous. This is a common, but unintelligent, mistake. The actual correct description is to say, the expression occurs twice in the first sentence of this paragraph. Once it is talked about, as is shown by the use of quotation marks, and once it is used to refer to Little Red Riding Hood. In the sentence, “Little Red Riding Hood” refers to Little Red Riding Hood, you see the same name twice. No proper names of words or other expressions occur in this sentence. This is misleadingly described as the distinction between “use and mention”. This is misleading because it suggests that, when the word occurs in quotes, it is mentioned rather than presented.

2. The valid distinction between literal and figurative uses of words has no bearing on the fiction – nonfiction distinction. The words in both the fictional and non-fictional sentences can be used literally or metaphorically. There is nothing essentially metaphorical or figurative about fictional discourse. Metaphors occur with the same semantic status in fiction and non-fiction. The distinction between fictional discourse and non-fictional discourse is quite different from the distinction between figurative and non-figurative. To speak metaphorically, we can say the two distinctions, literal-figurative and non-fiction-fiction, cut across each other.

3. An obvious difference between the two texts is that the normal commitments of making an assertion are present in the second case but not in the first. We can ask the author of the «New York Times» article, how do you know? Or, what is your evidence? But we cannot ask the author of Little Red Riding Hood, or ask the Brothers Grimm, how do you know there actually was such a person, how do you know she wore a red cap, etc. This is an essential point. Though the utterances of the sentences are quite literal, all the same, the commitments are quite different.

4. Because the words mean the same, and yet the commitments are different, we have an apparent paradox. In general, the commitments you make in an utterance are a function of the meaning – both the sentence meaning and the speaker meaning. In the case of fiction, the sentence meaning and the speaker meaning can be the same as non-fiction. There is no sentence of English that could not occur in a work of fiction. Then, how do we account for the different commitments? The answer I propose is that, in a fictional text, the author does not simply perform the speech acts encoded in the literal meaning of the sentences, but rather, he performs a much weaker version of the speech acts. I put this by saying, in fictional discourse, these are *pretended* assertions, not *serious* assertions. This is shown by the fact that you cannot hold the author responsible in a way that you can for serious assertions. The previous terminology might seem tendentious because by contrasting “pretended” with “serious” I might give the mistaken impression that I regard works of fictional literature as somehow not serious, but frivolous or superficial. I do not think that at all. I think some of the most profound texts in the history of the human race are in works of great fictional literature. Furthermore, the word “pretend” can be misleading because, of course, in one sense the speaker is pretending to make an assertion, but in another sense, he is not pretending at all to write a novel, or a poem, or a work of serious literature. The sense in which the speech act is “pretended” is that the speaker actually utters sentences of English but without performing the speech act that is literally encoded in those sentences. The utterance of the sentences is not pretended. It is real. The performance of the corresponding speech acts is not real. It is pretended. The sense in which the utterances are “non-serious” is that the commitments that are normally undertaken by the literal utterance of such sentences are not undertaken in the fictional case. A common way of pretending to perform a higher order act is to actually perform the lower order act. So when the performers in the opera, *Il Trovatore*, have a battle, they only pretend to have a battle. They only pretend to be fighting each other, but they actually do wave swords in the air and they hit the other sides’ swords with their swords. The hitting of the swords is real, the battle is pretended. The pretense of fighting a

battle is carried out by way of actually performing the lower order act, and this is what happens in fictional discourse. The utterance of the sentence is not pretended, it is real. The performance of the corresponding speech act is not real, it is pretended. So, the use of both “pretended” and “non-serious” can lead to misunderstandings. I have thought long and hard about this and I cannot find a better terminology in English for marking the distinctions I want to make. But it is easy to remove the misunderstandings that can be generated by the use of these terms, and with those misunderstandings removed I think and we can say that *works of fictional discourse are pretended speech acts, not serious speech acts.*

5. Within a work of fiction, there can be some portions that are fictional and others that are non-fictional. To take a famous case, in Tolstoj’s *War and Peace* the love affair between Pierre and Natasha is entirely fictional. There never existed such people, and Tolstoj is not committed to their existence. But the account of the battle between the Russian army and the French army at Borodino is intended to refer to a real battle that occurred in history. If no such battle ever occurred Tolstoj was mistaken.

So we need at least the following distinctions.

(1) *The distinction between fiction and literature.* Not all fiction is literature and not all literature is fictional. To categorize something as literature is to give it a certain honorific status but to categorize it as fictional is to describe the intentions with which it was produced. Roughly speaking literature is in the eye of the beholder. Fiction is in the intentions of the author.

(2) *The distinction between real references to real objects and fictional references to objects and characters in fiction.* By pretending to refer to a real object an author can create a fictional object; but once an author has created a fictional object by such pretended acts of reference to a real object, we who are not the author can then really refer to a fictional object. So when Flaubert says Madame Bovary was unhappy, he is pretending to make a statement about a real person and to refer to that person, and thereby he, is in fact, continuing the creation of a fictional person. But when we say that Madame Bovary is one of Flaubert’s greatest creations we are making a real reference to a fictional person. In addition to real references to real objects and pretended references to real objects, which create fictional objects, we need a category of real references to fictional objects.

With all of this in mind, we can now address the questions.

Angela Condello - Tiziano Toracca: *What kind of objects are literary objects (e.g. things and subjects described in novels, poems and other literary forms)?*

John R. Searle: There are different kinds of objects referred to in works of literature.

Let us take the pure fictional cases first. There never existed in real life a person such as Madame Bovary. On the other hand, she does exist in fiction. How is this possible? By pretending to refer to a real person, Madame Bovary, the author creates a fictional person. By pretending to refer to a real object, the author creates a fictional object. We, who are not the author, can then refer to the fictional object, and there really is such a fictional object as Madame Bovary, that is to say, there really is a work of fiction about Madame Bovary, even though Madame Bovary never existed in real life. So we need to contrast real references to real objects, as when I refer to Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, and fictional references to fictional objects. For example, Flaubert refers to Madame Bovary. Then, because Flaubert creates a fictional person by pretending to refer to a real person, I really can refer to a fictional person by saying, for example, Madame Bovary is one of Flaubert's most powerfully described characters.

John Searle

AC-TT: *What is the difference, in terms of literary ontology, between the Napoleon in Borodino and the Napoleon in Borodino described in War and Peace by Tolstoj?*

JS: The test for what the author is committed to is what counts as a mistake. Now, if the account of the Battle of Borodino is mistaken, then that is an error on the part of Tolstoj because it is clear that he intended this to be a correct account. Why? He is very anxious to show that the Russian Muzik, General Kutuzov, who is a simple Russian peasant general, is vastly superior to the sophisticated smarty pants Frenchman from Paris. This is not a fictional account, rather it is within a work of fiction, a non-fictional account by Tolstoj of the military significance of the Battle of Borodino and the relative merit of the two generals. In that respect, it differs dramatically from the account of Pierre and Natasha. Neither Pierre nor Natasha ever existed. They are fictional characters. Tolstoj cannot be mistaken about them because there is nothing to be mistaken about and he is not committed to the existence of something he can be mistaken about. He can be mistaken about the Battle of Borodino because it was an actual historical battle that took place, and his text makes commitments to the existence and features of such a battle.

For a long time, people thought that Tolstoj was wrong about the superiority of Kutuzov over Napoleon, but some recent studies that I have seen reviewed (published in the «New York Times») suggested that Kutuzov and the other Russians were better generals than they were

generally given credit for and they, in fact, did a superior job to Napoleon from a purely military point of view.

AC-TT: *The Latin word ‘fingere’ meant both ‘to give shape’, ‘to imagine’, and ‘to tell lies’. What is the difference between “false” and “imaginary” according to you?*

JS: The difference between false and imaginary is strictly *a matter of what one is committed to*. When one makes an assertion, a serious assertion of a non-fictional kind, one is committed to the truth of what one says. So if what one says is false, and one knows it is false, one is lying. But in the passage I quoted from Grimm’s fairytales there are no lies. An exercise of the imagination is neither true nor false unless it is intended as such and in which case, the extent to which the speaker is lying is the extent to which his utterance is subject to the criticism that it is deliberately false.

AC-TT: *Don Quixote does not exist: then what is his function? What is the relationship between such a character and truth? How would you define the type of truth constructed by a novelist?*

JS: Typically, *in serious works of literature*, that is to say, in serious utterances of non-serious texts, *the author wishes to convey more than the actual semantic content of the sentence uttered*. So the pretended speech acts of a work of fiction are typically intended to convey something non-fictional even though the non-fictional may not be explicitly represented in the text. Sometimes, in realistic works of fiction, commitments are made as to how the world described in the work of fiction really is like the real world. I think of James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* series, a paradigm of realistic fiction of the nineteen thirties. Farrell attempts to describe in some detail, what life was like for poor Irish Catholics in the Chicago of that era. Again, the crucial test is, what counts as a mistake. When he recounts the death of Studs Lonigan, it is not something that he cannot be mistaken on because Lonigan never existed. But his account of the general life of the Irish Catholics in Chicago is intended to convey what the life was actually like, and there, he can be mistaken or not mistaken. So within the work of fiction, within the fictional texts, there are commitments made that are non-fictional, that are serious commitments to truth even though they may not be explicitly represented in the text. Much of the literary point of the fictional text is to convey the non-fictional message.

AC-TT: *Literature makes a specific use of language and ontology. What do you think about this claim?*

JS: The claim is mistaken if it suggests that there is only one specific use of language and ontology in literature. There are quite a large variety of different uses. Some of the utterances in a fictional text may be

straightforward non-fictional utterances and intended as such. And again, the criterion, to repeat, is what counts as a mistake. If the author got it wrong and we know that he was committed to a truth then the commitment is one that he failed to satisfy. So, literary uses of language vary enormously, and it would take a text on the theory of literature to expound all those differences. I will not attempt to do that here. The ontology, however, varies. The ontology may be all the way from a total fantasy where there is no commitment to how things are in real life to brutally realistic fiction where the author is committed to representing a certain type of state of affairs. To take examples, a Dadaist author once wrote, «Bits of green duration flutter flutter in my room». This is pure fantasy and I am not even sure it is meaningful, though one can give a metaphorical interpretation. Guillaume Apollinaire wrote, «Sous le Pont Mirabeau coule la Seine». This is a straightforward truth and Apollinaire intended it as such. That is, he is committed to its truth as is shown by the fact that if le pont Mirabeau never crossed the Seine he would have been mistaken.

AC-TT: *How can literary fiction have an impact on our perception of reality?*

JS: Works of literature affect our perception of reality in all sorts of ways and I will only list a few of them. For intellectuals of my generation much of our conception of human relations and the dramatic categories in which we had our experiences and our ability to make moral discriminations depended on our experience of great works of literature. In reading such works one does not just read *about* something, one *participates* in a totally different set of experiences. To take but one small example, I think my life would have been totally different if I had never read Dostoevsky. I think especially of the four great novels but some of the smaller works such as *Notes from Underground* are also very powerful. I could not easily summarize what one gets from such works but it would include at least the following. By becoming imaginatively involved in the lives of Dostoevsky's people one expands one's own sensibility in ways that are not possible just by stating a theory. One has to have the experiences. Of the four great novels, my favorite is *The Idiot*. I did not fully appreciate *The Devils* until I lived through the 1960s where the sensibility that Dostoevsky described in *The Devils* was everywhere. I know that many people think *The Brothers Karamazov* is the best of the four but it is not a view I share. My admiration for it is so great, however, that I read it aloud to my children (TV was very carefully rationed when they were young so a nightly reading of passages from Dostoevsky and lots of other authors had to do duty for TV. My children became as obsessed with the characters as I am. I cheated slightly and left out the passage of the death of father Zossima because it's boring

and less important than the rest of the book). Oddly enough though it's probably the most famous of the four I think *Crime and Punishment* is the weakest.

My response to Hemingway, for example, is totally different from Dostoevsky. Whereas Tolstoj, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and Turgenev describe a reality that is truly foreign to me, Hemingway speaks my language and articulates my sensibility. I'm as comfortable with Hemingway as I am with my clothes. I never detected any unusual stylistic effect of Hemingway. The style and the sensibility are completely familiar and comfortable. I naturally think the way Hemingway writes, though of course he is a great stylist and I am not.

Another author with a stunning effect on me is Kafka. He seems to me a completely realistic author once you make the imaginative shift that the text requires. Max Brod thinks that *The Castle* is a religious metaphor. That seems to be totally mistaken. The novel gives a completely realistic account of dealing with bureaucratic structures. *The Metamorphosis* and *In the Penal Colony* are just as realistic, though the initial imaginative shift required is larger. I am reluctant to talk about the French because they have meant so much to me. But just to cite one example I think the best novel ever written is *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Why? Flaubert has a total intellectual grip on the material and unlike most of his other work, the novel is non-judgmental. He simply describes things as they are.

AC-TT: *Some novels are classic. What is the relationship between such a judgment and your idea of collective intentionality?*

JS: I said earlier that the distinction between fiction and literature was in part that something is literature only in the eye of the beholder. The author decides whether or not his work is fictional by the intention with which he produces it. To say that it is "literature" means to assign an honorific status. A special additional honorific status is assigned to "classics". T.S. Eliot wrote a famous article *What is a Classic?*. Nowadays I do not think many of us find it an especially interesting question. Granted that something is literature is only observer relative; then something is a classic only if it meets certain standards within the already demarcated literary field. The acceptance of something as a classic does require collective intentionality because a large number of people has to share the assessment that it is a classic or its status as such will not survive. It is interesting to see how judgments change. Two authors who were once regarded as classics are now out of fashion. The whole idea that there can be fashions in such matters ought to make us nervous about the validity of the categories. But Aldous Huxley and Thomas Mann, in their different ways, have lost the stature in English speaking countries that they had fifty years ago. I could tell you why they now seem less powerful than Joyce,

Proust, or Kafka but I would have to concede that they did not always seem second class relative to such superstars.

To answer your question directly: we could say that in order that something be accepted as a classic there has to be some kind of collective intentionality.

AC-TT: *Are literary objects intentional objects? What is the role played by intentionality in representing, or in standing in for Emma Bovary and her world?*

JS: Some mental states that purport to refer, fail to refer. Suppose that I think that the Devil has horns, and suppose I also think the Donald Trump wears shoes. Now in the first belief about the Devil, my belief purports to refer to the Devil. But suppose the Devil does not exist, then what is the object of the belief? I want to say that, in such a case, the belief has no object. The belief purports to refer but fails to refer because there is no such object. So the first belief contrasts with the second because the second belief really does refer to Donald Trump. Some philosophers, in fact quite a few, have found it awkward to say that the first belief has no object at all so they postulate that it has a very special kind of object called an “intentional object”. I think this is a mistake and it is a very serious mistake. If you make this mistake you are forced to say that, in the second case, my belief also has an intentional object, in addition to the actual physical object of Donald Trump. That seems to be an obvious mistake. In the first case, the belief has no object and, in the second case, it does have an object.

The belief in intentional objects is an instance of a more general, and common, confusion between content and object. Both beliefs have a content, that the Devil has horns in the first case, and that Trump has shoes in the second case. But the first belief, unlike the second, simply does not have an object. The fact that the belief has a content does not imply that it must have an object. Every belief has a content. It could not be a belief if it had no content at all. But beliefs with the content will have an object only if there is something, typically independent of the belief, that satisfies the condition set by the belief for something to be its object. In the first case, there exists no object matching the expression ‘the Devil’, and in the second case there is an object matching the expression ‘Donald Trump’. Hence, there is an object in the second case and no object in the first case.

If we are going to use the notion of an “intentional object” at all – it seems to me – the only reasonable usage is to say that intentional object is just an ordinary object that a belief or a speech act happens to be about. So there is no special class of intentional objects.

AC-TT: *Would you say that some literary works represent reality better than others? Why?*

JS: The answer to this question depends on what counts as “representing reality” because, unless we are clear about that, we cannot be clear about what it would be to do it better in one case than in another. What is it, after all, to “represent reality”? For the purposes of this discussion, let us assume that reality is not problematic; of course it is immensely problematic for many issues in philosophy, but for present purposes, we will just say reality is that which exists independently of our representations and it is in virtue of reality and how it is that our representations can be true or false, accurate or inaccurate, adequate or inadequate, and otherwise subject to the various semantic assessments that we make of representations. Again, we will think of representations of those things which can be paradigmatically true or false. There are other forms of assessment, such as misleading, adequate, inadequate, superficial, profound, etc. But truth and falsity are basic categories and the others are usually explained in terms of variations in truth and falsity. So we might rephrase the question by asking, are there literary works that give a truer account of reality than others do? This, we have at least to some extent, domesticated the question of what is it to represent reality better or worse.

Once we have framed the question this way, then it seems to be clear that there are different degrees of success in which literary works represent reality. Again, to work on the question, let us take a non-literary example and something that is non-problematic. Take maps for instance. Maps represent territories where the territory exists independently of the map. Some maps are more accurate than others and thus represent reality better. Though, now, we have to introduce another category, and that is the category of “better for what purpose” because, of course, some maps could be immensely useful if I want to drive from Berkeley to Sacramento and others would be hopeless if, for example, they were giving a representation of every speck of dust along the way. So, “better” or “worse” is going to be relative to some purpose. Now, in what respect are literary works like maps, and in another respect, not like maps? Well, the most obvious respect in which literary works are not like maps as we have seen over and over in this discussion is that the commitment in the typical fictional work is not like the commitment in a map. A map is like a statement, it says this is how things are in reality. A literary work does not typically say that, at least as far as the literal semantic content is concerned. The literary work, such as *Madame Bovary*, can give an accurate account and representation of reality even though there never existed a Madame Bovary and the tragic adventures that she had did not occur to any woman named ‘Madame Emma Bovary’. There is another consideration we have to make, and that is, in the case of the map and the territory, the territory exists completely independently of any map, or

even of any activity of mapping. Now, oddly enough, in the case of human reality and its literary and otherwise representation, that is not really the case. There are many points at which the representation and the reality interlock. I want to give some examples. La Rochefoucauld says famously that very few people would ever fall in love if they never read about it. Nowadays we would have to add “saw it on television, on videos, or in the movies”. Now that is a very interesting claim, and I am pretty sure it is right, but what it implies, whether or not La Rochefoucauld intended it, is that the narrative is, in some way, constitutive of the reality that you cannot really in the full sense “fall in love” if you are not aware of certain sorts of representation. *The representation and the reality intermix*. How exactly? Well, that would take a far more detailed account than I can give in this discussion, but at least this much, the participants in a love affair, to some extent, see themselves as carrying out a scenario which they have already seen represented in literary works. So this is a case where the literature helps to create the very reality that it represents. The literature about love is partly constitutive of what it is to fall in love. And this, I think, is true of emotional states generally. Though, of course, love is the classic example.

To take the example of a work I mentioned earlier, *L'Éducation Sentimentale*, the loving relationship between Frédéric Moreau and Madame Arnoux can only exist because Frédéric Moreau has a series of beliefs about what it is to be in love and what constitutes having a deep and profound love. Madame Arnoux, for the most part, is totally unaware of this and really only marginally aware of Frédéric Moreau's existence. Now the literary work represents reality in this case, but the reality is of a type of love affair, not a particular instance. There is no particular instance and the type of love affair in question does not exist independently of such works as the work of literature in question, but it is in part permeated by literary representations.

Many emotions only exist because they are partly constituted by linguistic representations of their existence. One way to see this is to ask yourself, what sorts of emotions can my dog have? He is a pre-linguistic animal and there is no question that he can be attached and even love other dogs and human beings, but he cannot have a love affair of the type that humans have. Furthermore, though he can be jealous and even envious of other dogs, and he can certainly be angry, frightened, and nervous; he cannot, for example, suffer the angst of post-industrial man under late capitalism. Emotions like that require more than his repertoire can allow because such emotions require linguistic representation. And again, though the linguistic representation *need not be* in a work of fictional literature, it *can be* in a work of fictional literature.

AC-TT: *We know that you are a passionate reader of authors such as Svevo, Proust, and Coetzee. Did they contribute in the formation and/or evolution of some of your ideas and intuitions?*

JS: I will not discuss all three but we will concentrate on Coetzee, who seems to be one of the most interesting and one of the best, maybe the very best, of living contemporary authors. The novels vary enormously in their style and subject matter. *Elizabeth Costello*, for example, is pretty much a series of lectures on literature in the disguise of an account of a woman professor, Elizabeth Costello. The novel that he is probably most famous for, namely, *Disgrace*, I think, is a disappointment. It starts out to be a fairly conventional novel about a professor who is falsely accused of sexual harassment, but it ends up to be a somewhat disappointing account of the race relations in South Africa after the end of Apartheid. I did not think it was a great book, though I am prepared to be argued. A much more interesting book to me is his most recent, *The Childhood of Jesus*. This is the most recent book of his that I have read and I thought it was fascinating. The successor, *The Schooldays of Jesus* at the time of this writing has not yet been published. When it is published, I will read it. The reviews that I have seen of the book seem to me to miss the point entirely. The point is made explicit in the title. We are to think of this as a story of a child who is much like Jesus in the contemporary era. His parents in the book are not his real parents and he appears to be an unusual child. I think this lends credibility to my interpretation of the title. So when the child is asking about truth, at the end he says, "I am the truth". That seems to me, a very Christ-like utterance even though, in the context of the book, it is completely innocent and without vanity. There are other books of Coetzee that are less impressive. *The Diary of a Bad Year*, I thought, was a rather good conventional novel. It is apparently autobiographical and, as a person, he exasperates me because the character of the novel does not take advantage of the wonderful erotic and romantic opportunities that are made available to him. He appears to be a bit of a turkey when it comes to human relationships. I think the fact that Coetzee lives in Adelaide, which is a boring place, even by Australian standards, is revealing of his personal inclinations. He could easily live in London, Paris, New York, San Francisco, or Cape Town for that matter, but he chooses Adelaide, which may be one of the most boring cities in the world and I hope it enables him to write even greater books. I admire him enormously, though I have to admit, he exasperates me. I thought *Waiting for the Barbarians* was a powerful book, but in the end, I thought it was a failure.

AC-TT: *How would you define figurality? Why are figures of speech necessary in language and what are they exactly?*

JS: Figurality is a special case of the general distinction between word and sentence meaning, on the one hand, and speaker meaning on the other. The words and sentences in metaphors maintain exactly their literal meaning. There is no such thing as a metaphorical word or sentence meaning. The words and sentences in metaphors do not change their meaning. If they did, they would cease to be metaphors and would have acquired a new meaning. However, typically in a metaphor, the speaker means something different from, or in addition to, what the word or sentence means. So when the speaker says, «Sally is a block of ice», he does not mean that Sally is composed of H₂O molecules, but he utters a sentence with the metaphorical speaker meaning that Sally is unemotional and unresponsive. Of course, metaphors carry much more than that because they involve a comparison. We are invited to see Sally *as if* she were a block of ice. Philosophers often talk as if metaphors are the main or only example of figurative utterance, but of course there are a lot of other occurrences where the word is used in a way that it departs from its literal meaning even though it continues to keep its literal word or sentence meaning, it can be the speaker meaning departs from that. So in a metonymy, the reporters say, «the White House today announced that...», they do not mean that the White House actually spoke, they mean the inhabitants of the White House, the occupants of the White House, or the people who speak on behalf of the White House spoke. This is completely harmless, but it is important to give an accurate theory of figurative meaning and the key to understanding it is to see that all figurative meaning is a special case of speaker meaning that the words and sentences in metaphor metonymy and synecdoche do not change their literal meaning at all. If they did, it would cease to be a metaphor, etc., what we call a new literal meaning.

Indeed something very much like this happens with dead metaphors. The word “dead” in “dead metaphor” has clearly become a dead metaphor, as in, the leg of the table or the head of the philosophy department. These are words that have now acquired a new literal meaning because the metaphor no longer carries the original literal meaning.

AC-TT: *Would you agree with the statement according to which literature has a performative force that can create new realities?*

JS: The word ‘performative’ has to be used very carefully. Austin and subsequent writers as myself gave a fairly precise definition. *A performative utterance is one where the utterance creates the reality described by the main verb.* So if I say, «I promise to come and see you», then that creates a promise by the very verb I uttered. Promise is a performative verb and the utterance is a performative utterance. In that sense, works of fiction are not performatives. It is a metaphor to say they are performatives. Maybe it is a

useful metaphor. Works of fiction do typically create a reality in a way I have tried to describe in answers to earlier questions. They create the fictional world, but the fictional world is not to be confused with the real world, rather, the fictional world, as a fictional world, becomes part of the real world.

AC-TT: *How would you define the difference between Frankenstein (a completely fantastic character), Gregor Samsa (a fictional but realistic character), and Henry VIII (a historical character that really existed)?*

JS: These three examples illustrate the distinctions that I was making between *degrees of commitment in fictionality*. Frankenstein is a purely imaginary character, and within certain very general laws of nature, the author can attribute to him any traits that he likes. He can attribute to Frankenstein super strength powers. I am not at all sure that it would work if he had attributed to Frankenstein the ability to fly, like superman, but within such very general limits, Frankenstein is a purely imaginary character. In the case of Gregor Samsa, however, Gregor is a very realistic character who happens to have been transformed into an insect, so he is a very special kind of realistic character. His psychology has to remain realistic even in spite of the ridiculous and fantastic changes to his body. Henry VIII, on the other hand, is a straight forward historical figure, and as such, in characterizing him, we are committed to an historical truth. The distinctions that I just made have important logical consequences. In the case of real life characters like Henry VIII, the law of excluded middle applies: propositions are either true or false. So if the question arises, did Henry VIII ever suffer from measles, I have no idea what the answer to that question is. But the point is, it has to have a true or false answer. Either he had measles or he did not have measles, leaving out marginal cases for the moment. But in the case of fictional characters, the law of excluded middle does not apply. If it does not say in the story whether or not Gregor Samsa had measles, or if Frankenstein had measles, then the question does not arise and it is neither true nor false. So there are logical consequences of a logical kind about the reality of the characters. For real life characters, the law of excluded middle applies, but for fictional characters, it does not apply. Fictional characters, in this effect, are like dreams. If I say I met a woman in my dream, and somebody asks me if she was of Russian origin, if that was not part of the dream, then there is no answer to the questions, it is neither yes or no. But if I meet a woman in real life, then the question, was she of Russian origin, must have a yes or no answer, it must have an answer to it. So the law of excluded middle, again, does not apply to dream characters because dreams are a creation of the human mind just as fictional characters are creations of the human mind.

AC-TT: *What is the relationship between the real world and an imagined world?*

JS: Different degrees of realism define different sorts of fictional genres. These range all the way from total realistic fiction to science fiction fantasies. The degree to which an author is committed, as we have seen over and over in these discussions, is marked by what counts as a mistake. So in Sherlock Holmes, for example, if Holmes and Watson go from their apartment on Baker Street to Paddington Station by a route which is geographically impossible, suppose they go by way of Horton–Cum-Studley, we know that Holmes made a mistake because, to that extent, he is committed to certain geographical actualities and possibilities in England of the time. On the other hand, in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, there is a subplot concerning the passage of Billy Pilgrim to the invisible planet of Tralfamadore in a micro second. This is not a mistake on Vonnegut's part because he has inserted a science fiction subplot into the main story line of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Now the niceties which we bring to bear on such issues are quite interesting. The address of Sherlock Holmes is 221B Baker Street, but there is no such address. Legions of tourists try to find 221B Baker Street without success because there is no such place. Does this count as a mistake on the part of Conan Doyle? I think it clearly does not. He is committed to a type of realism about possibilities, but this does not commit him to any actuality of such and such an apartment number. There could have been a 221B Baker Street, and that is really all he needs. If Holmes and Watson have an apartment on the moon, then that is out of the question. That would not be a possible location in the structure of the fiction, but the fact that they have an apartment which actually does not exist in the real London is not a mistake. *So the degree to which an author is committed to how things are in the real world is, as I suggested earlier in the discussion on Tolstoj and the Battle of Borodino, a matter of what counts as getting it right or getting a mistake.*

Fascinating cases are where genres are mixed, as in the case I mention of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The description of the bombing of Dresden and the actual experiences in the prison camps are intended to be completely realistic. There is no science fiction fantasy involved here at all, but the science fiction element is deliberately introduced and we the readers sense immediately that the normal commitments of realistic fiction are being abandoned in this part of the novel.