TRUTH IN THE TALES OF THE ODYSSEY

BY

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Alfred Hitchcock outraged viewers and critics with his film *Stagefright* by telling them a visual lie. When the main character tells of his actions at the time of the murder, Hitchcock shows us in a flashback the events described in the man’s narrative. At the end of the film we learn that this man is himself the murderer and that his story was a lie. While we can forgive him for his fabrication—that’s what murderers are expected to do—we have no mercy for his accomplice, the director, who has deliberately and with malice aforethought misled the unsuspecting audience by his convincing cinematographic representation of something that did not actually happen. It would not be soothing to point out to the indignantly that nothing in the film ‘actually’ happened, that the whole hour and a half, in fact, was a fiction. Nor would such logic be entirely sound. We would be poor interpreters of fiction indeed if we could not make a distinction between what ‘really’ happens in a fictional world and a false version of events. It makes sense to talk of truth in fiction, but the ontological status of a lie in fiction is not as clear-cut as its counterpart in real life. When we are dealing with a fiction such as the *Odyssey* that includes characters’ stories with variable truth-values, we need to confront this issue of truth and falsehood in fiction and determine what it means to say that a story within a story is a lie.

The question of truth in fiction has been addressed by theorists of literary semantics, most notably Lubomir Doležel. In his theory


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of authenticity in narrative, Doležel postulates that what is true in a fictional world can be determined only by the rule of authentication. In a narrative, such as the Odyssey, comprised solely of speech acts by an anonymous third-person narrator and those by characters, his basic principle is simple: “Motifs introduced in the speech act of the anonymous Er-form narrators are eo ipso authentic while those introduced in the speech acts of the narrative agents are non-authentic” (1980: 12). The third-person narrator constructs the fictional world and therefore carries, by convention, sole authentication authority. Such a narrator’s statements establish the set of narrative facts of the fictional world against which we measure the truth-value of non-authentic statements by characters within the constructed world (or by readers who, though standing outside the fictional world, can make true or false statements about it). When we hear the implausible news, for example, that Gregor Samsa woke up one morning and found himself transformed into a giant insect, we know for a certainty that this metamorphosis is a fact in Kafka’s fictional world because the narrator’s words are eo ipso factual. If a character, on the other hand, were to make even the most innocuous statement, we cannot accept it as absolute truth without testing its agreement with the narrative facts established by the third-person narrator. Don Quixote claims that the building they are approaching is a castle while Sancho Panza insists it is an inn. We know for a fact that Sancho is right and Quixote is wrong.


2) The two first-person references in the proem (1.1, 10) do not make the *Odyssey* a first-person narrative. The invocation of the Muse, if anything, grants ultimate authentication authority to the divine repository of narrative.

3) Doležel makes a point of distinguishing his approach from Martínez-Bonati’s, which “assigns to the narrator’s statements truth-values. In contrast, my approach is based on the claim that the narrator’s statements cannot be assigned truth-values, since they do not refer to a world but rather construct a world” (1980: 13). Doležel’s distinction is important in defining “the fundamental difference between a mimetic and a possible-world semantics of narrative fiction” (13). Characters’ statements, however, can be assigned truth-values according to their agreement with the fictional facts established by the third-person narrator.