

# Possible-World Theories and the Two Fictional Worlds of More's *Utopia*: How Much (and How) Can We Apply?

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The logic behind the notion of Possible Worlds is remarkable for its simplicity: «our actual world is surrounded by an infinity of other possible worlds» (Bradley, Swartz, 1979: 2). The significance of this idea in formal logic is spectacular: the concept of «actual world» should be revised, or included in a superior category (in a «global world», or universe) in order to deal effectively with the issues of meaning and reference of non-existent objects. At least more effectively, we might say, than traditional logic, based on a one-world frame, because this traditional model was extremely indulgent with the notion of «actual world», and at the same time too intolerant with the referential capacity of fictional discourse, or of discourse containing non-actual entities<sup>1</sup>. As Lubomir Doležel comments, in this traditional model «the sole legitimate mode of existence is actual existence; the actual (real) world is the one and only universe of discourse» (1989: 222): consequently all attempts to deal with non-factual but perfectly conceivable, possible ideas, beings, states, actions and processes could only be effected with considerable difficulty, when not with open admission of incapacity. Doležel himself (1989: 222-228) has shown that in the end all different attempts cannot avoid important contradictions or special concessions (Russell's «empty terms», Frege's «pure sense», Saussure's «self-referentiality», and «prototypes»).

With the possible-worlds model frame, the mimetic commitment of logic is softened: the actual world, which is just another cultural construct (Eco, 1989: 343), is said to «exist» at approximately the same level<sup>2</sup> as myriads of other possible worlds already generated by our culture and constantly produced by the imagination of every individual. What is achieved with this strategic decision is a release of formal constraints to deal with imaginary constructs and hypotheses: although it should be reminded, as Umberto Eco does, that «Possible Worlds are cultural constructs but not every cultural construct is a Possible World» (1989: 346), formal logicians are allowed to analyse and evaluate events that have not happened by generating imaginary worlds in which those events *have happened*, and also imagine distinctive rules prevailing in those worlds. What is achieved, at least, is that the idea of a true proposition about Sherlock Holmes is not so embarrassing (Pavel, 1986) for logicians, because there is a formal mechanism to manage it.

All this may not sound revolutionary enough for those used to working with literary fictions, but some practical applications are more pertinent: provided some conditions are met<sup>3</sup>, all uses of discourse reflecting non-actual states of affairs can be described *as worlds*; this applies to all uses of discourse, not only those formulated in the «actual» world, but also, thanks to a principle of recursive embedding, to states of affairs which are non-actual as perceived by non-actual individuals. A Possible World can be prescribed to

explain every individual's «world-creating and/or world-representing acts as forming beliefs, wishing, dreaming, making forecasts, and inventing stories» (Ryan, 1985: 722). For instance two «semantically unhomogeneous» (Dole žel, 1989: 234) worlds can be postulated to explain the different opinions and reactions of two individuals concerning the same section of the «actual» world, simply by identifying the different rules prevailing in each individual's «*domain*». If we adopt a relativistic, possibilistic stance the notion of semantic unhomogeneity can be conceivable in the actual world: Umberto Eco (1989: 344-5) uses this formal possibility to explain something as simple as a typical commentary in everyday life: when X says that he thought his friend's boat was «bigger than that», X's *world of imagination* contains an object which is different from the object of the *actual world*. In literary fictions, however, the idea looks more prominent: Thomas G. Pavel's notion of «narrative domain» (1980: 105), derived from Possible Worlds, is applied to describe the plot movements of some English Renaissance dramas. Marie-Laure Ryan (1986: 723) shows with an example that comedies of errors are based on making the mutually incompatible knowledge-worlds of characters clash: lists of every character's assumptions (worlds) can be made, and differences explain errors in a precise way.

The application of Possible Worlds to literary fictions should eliminate confusion due to lack of analytical tools: we must concede that method and organization are two positive qualities of these analyses. Perhaps they look less satisfactory if we think that sometimes the preliminary issues addressed (truth value, authenticity, ontological status, phenomenology of reading) are apparently less compelling for specialists in literary fictions than for logicians. Another initial obstacle is that sometimes these analyses look too technical and mathematical: those complex sequences of formulae and matrices may be perceived as too demanding.

Although these obstacles are comparatively trivial, they reflect some transcendental problems. The passage from Possible Worlds Semantics to a Theory of Literary Fictions based on the former, and from that literary-theoretical level to practical applications is far from automatic or mechanical. The first passage cannot be dealt with extensively here, and only a quick glance of the second will be offered. To finish with the first passage let me say that prestigious scholars (L. Dole žel, 1989. T. Pavel, 1989. Umberto Eco, 1989) have assessed the specific conditions of the incorporation of Possible Worlds into Literary Studies, in order to avoid frivolous appropriations. In general they raise many reservations and doubts, as shown in these three aspects:

- a) L. Dole žel (1989: 228-237) specified which three concrete principles of the Possible Worlds model can be useful, and which three qualities are peculiar of fictional worlds.<sup>4</sup>
- b) Approaches to literary fictions, specially those based on Pragmatics have gone further (and faster) than Logic; for instance by granting the possibility of inclusion of «impossible» worlds in this model.
- c) Third, Umberto Eco warns against the tendency to consider the «Possible Worlds» label a synonym or stylistic variant of fictional worlds: not only because «one must distinguish between technical and metaphorical approaches» (1989: 343), but because a specific purpose must be served.<sup>5</sup>

Let us concentrate now on two concrete applications of these theoretical distinctions - the typologies of worlds proposed by Marie-Laure Ryan and Tomás Albaladejo. The main reason for considering them is that they seem to give clear, precise indications on how to identify and organize different ontologies in fictional texts. Instinct says that they could adapt to More's *Utopia*, but it will also say that only in a «weak» or loose

sense:

- a) Marie-Laure Ryan's purpose in «*The Modal Structure of Narrative Universes* (1985) is to offer: a set of systematic and reasonably mechanical procedures for organizing narrative information, locating conflicts, advancing explanations for the behavior of characters, and reducing the text to its most important components. (1985: 754)

Ryan's modal system, «nourished» by several authors (she lists Bremond, Todorov, Eco, Vaina, Pavel and Doležel 1985: 719), is made of rules prescribing the relations among worlds, of transitions between states, and precise instructions ... she even imagines a computer programme performing all these activities. However, the most relevant section here is her distinction of a set of narrative universes:

There is always a privileged *actual world* or *factual domain* (1), to which all characters relate as we all relate to «reality». All other possible worlds are *relative* (2), and they «exist through a mental act of a character» (1985: 720). There are three categories of relative worlds:

– *Representations of the Actual World* (2.1), which allow three kinds: *Epistemic or Knowledge-Worlds* (K-Worlds, 2.1.1), which contain all propositions representing the beliefs and knowledge of characters. *Hypothetical Extensions of K-Worlds* (2.1.2) represent a character's view of possible (future) courses of events and obviously respect the natural laws of the factual domain. *Intention-Worlds* (I-Worlds, 2.1.3) are created when a character commits himself to reaching a certain target by following a certain course of action.

– *Ideal Model Worlds* (2.2) represent the narrative universe as it ought to be. Again, three kinds can be identified: in *Wish-Worlds* (W-Worlds, 2.2.1) various states of affairs and actions are ranked according to their degree of desirability. If we apply «coefficients of desirability» (1985: 727) a range of flexibility is allowed: Ryan considers and supports logically and pragmatically *Consistent W-Worlds* (2.2.1.1), with «stable, well-defined, and realistic desires» (1985: 728), but a lifting of constraints would give rise to impossible *Chimeric W-Worlds* (2.2.1.2). The propositions of *Worlds of Moral Values* (M-Worlds) specify what characters consider good or bad for all the members of a specific group. In *Obligation-Worlds* (O-Worlds, 2.2.3) individuals receive values from the group, and are built on a deontic system.

– Finally, *Alternate Universes* (2.3) are more complete and substantial: For Ryan (1985: 730),

These creations comprise dreams, hallucinations, fantasies, games of pretense, fictions read or composed by the characters, and worlds created through counterfactual statements. Unlike epistemic and model-worlds, these alternate universes are not planets revolving around the actual world of the narrative system, but systems in themselves.

These alternate universes are special because despite their more radical otherness they are still relevant in the actual domain, because «they may assume an epistemic or model function with respect to this world and its surrounding system» (1985: 730).<sup>6</sup>

A detailed list and analysis of this complete range of labels cannot be attempted here, but the possible correspondences of these labels with *Utopia* are obvious: a superficial estimate shows that we can easily identify propositions of the first and third types (where England and Antwerp are narratorial factual domains, and Utopia, obviously, an alternate universe claimed to be factual by its teller Raphael. This still leaves many indeterminate areas, both in the text and in the chart: the conversation held in Peter Giles' garden modulates Raphael's account to such extent that almost all the varieties of groups

2.1 and 2.2 are applicable.

The only obstacle, and a serious one, has to do with one quality of the model that should be reconsidered: the worlds characterized in this modal system should be segregated from the practical-personal sphere privileged by Ryan, and adapted to the social -hypothetical- theoretical function dominant in the conversation held by Morus and Raphael. Of course this estimate of the worlds of *Utopia* should be carried out begging Umberto Eco's benevolence and forgiveness, because what I am sketching is a basically metaphorical, not to say superficial, use of labels, but my point is that the reason is not superficial: with the fictional worlds of More's *Utopia* in mind that slightly «metaphorical» appropriation of the theory is the only possible one, because all notations and distinctions of theory are based on a specific conception of fiction and plot, one in which the basic ingredients are *events acted by individuals*, and not *social ideas discussed in a dialogue*. In other words, Ryan's approach is too factual to accommodate a technical, «mechanical» application of her typology to *Utopia*. This is clearly seen if we consider her «dynamic» presentation of the concept of narrative plot, too clearly split into states and events put in order, where «a narrative plot is a temporal succession of different states of affairs mediated by events» (1985: 717)<sup>7</sup>, and where event is defined as «a process leading to a change of truth value of a state proposition, and forming a possible answer to the question “and then what happened?”» (1985: 717-8). The only systematic way of overcoming the difficulties raised by this unacknowledged specialization of Ryan's typology is to adapt it to the special hierarchy of the action/discussion dichotomy revealed in *Utopia*; another, less systematic solution, is precisely the one suggested here - a free metaphorical play with these productive labels, and perhaps a revision of Morean scholarship, to play at translating well-known distinctions into this metalanguage without indulging in too many technicalities, and to learn from the experience of reconsidering our knowledge of it.

- b) The steps of Tomás Albaladejo's exercise in generation of worlds (*Teoría de los mundos posibles y macroestructura narrativa*, 1986; *Semántica de la narración: la ficción realista*, 1992), are equivalent to Ryan's and consequently our assessment of the applicability of his model parallels previous commentaries. Perhaps the most important difference is that the application of the theory of Possible Worlds is realized through the postulation of a set of world-models, based on their closeness to reality, and so relative worlds lose prominence:

Las estructuras de conjunto referencial ficcionales son realidades ficcionales que construyen los autores de acuerdo con los modelos de mundo. En función de su relación con la realidad pueden distinguirse varios tipos de modelo de mundo... (1992: 52)<sup>8</sup>

Type I is the world-model of reality («instrucciones que corresponden a reglas propias de la realidad efectiva», 1992: 52); Type II is the world-model which is fictional but likely («instrucciones que no son propias de la realidad efectiva, con la que, sin embargo, mantienen una relación de semejanza», 1992: 52); type III is the world-model which is fictional but unlikely («instrucciones que son distintas de la realidad efectiva y que no son semejantes a ésta, de tal manera que proyectan seres, estados, procesos, acciones e ideas que ni son ni pueden ser parte de la realidad efectiva», 1992: 53)<sup>9</sup>.

Again, the instinctive application of this classification to the worlds of *Utopia* is obvious, with a gradual movement from «reality» to «realistic fiction», and then to «fantastic» fiction. However, if we want the application not to be an unacknowledged frivolous appropriation, we have to look for the problems raised, and not all of them are caused by the lack of accuracy of Albaladejo's reality-based, realism-based

distinctions; in *Utopia*, as so many Morean scholars have shown, Thomas More messes up domains. First, the access from a reality-variant to a supernumerary realm (Margolin, 1990) is carefully and confusingly modulated (Blaim, 1983); second, if we try to follow Albaladejo's classification the status of the world of the conversation between Hythlodæus and Morus remains an extremely problematic issue: What type is the world of Peter Giles' garden? Is it so realistic? Let us remember that there are many fictional communities in Book I together with historical instances (Kuon, 1985); in what sense can we decree the impossibility of Utopia? In what sense can we speak of the worlds of the enclosed garden of Book I (Rebhorn, 1976) and Utopia as different layers of reality? The very determination of the kind of world acting as what Albaladejo calls «mundo articulario» (1992: 51)<sup>10</sup>, becomes a difficult decision: for instance, it is not clear to what extent Raphael's account of England can be taken as «mundo articulario».

To conclude this assessment with a logic similar to the one employed in my previous commentaries on Ryan's model, the appropriation/application of this theoretical typology has to be metaphorical, but failure to apply mechanically does not imply that it cannot be fruitful. I would complement these classificatory statements of theoreticians, which are often made from top to bottom without acknowledging that some narrative genres are implicitly favoured, with a demand of distinctive Possible Worlds-related rules for works like *Utopia*, for works that give specific instructions on the kind of reality they represent:

Literary texts are semiotic mechanisms for the construction of alternative text worlds. Such constructed [kinds of] worlds possess their own underlying regularities and laws, be they ontological, epistemological, deontic, or axiological. It is only with respect to such textual world-constituting laws that one can formulate the significance (for a specific text world) of human actions and settings, be it moral, psychological, or ideological. (Margolin, 1989: 14).

It should only be added to this that some of the «underlying structures and laws» of text worlds are provided by the model of reality shared by specimens of the same genre. When dealing with alternate universes Marie-Laure Ryan exemplifies it with *Don Quijote*: «the novels read by Don Quixote or by Emma Bovary are selected by these characters as models of the world in which they wish to live» (1985: 730); we should add, as José María Pozuelo shows in his *Poética de la ficción* (1993) that Don Quijote decides to measure the verisimilitude of events, even of his own experience and behaviour, by applying criteria of possibility and decorum inferred from the audience's genre-based, text-based expectations. In the indeterminate world of Morus and Hythlodæus something not too different happens: the quality and the conditions of possibility of the world they «make» depend on the genre and the text they are producing, and on the textual world in which they exist.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> By referential capacity I mean being able to assign a definite truth value to statements specifying properties of objects. It is evident that when non-existent objects (unicorns) appear in language a one-world, realistic model frame cannot decide what statements about them are true, or better, invalidates the proposition.

<sup>2</sup> It is extremely difficult to avoid granting the actual world, or some consensus reality (that of the Encyclopedia Britannica for Eco, 1989: 343) a privileged status. Doležel (1989: 229) speaks of the two versions, «actualist» and

«possibilist», of possible-worlds semantics.

<sup>3</sup> For U. Eco (1989: 343) there are five technical conditions: the first one calls for some initial consistence («if p is true then non-p is false»); the rest specify the necessity of individuals with properties, laws governing those properties, the possibility of changes of properties of individuals, and the necessity of making an explicit decision concerning the ontological status of Possible Worlds (as real states of affairs or as cultural or «semiotic products»).

<sup>4</sup> The first three rules are: 1) Fictional worlds are sets of possible states of affairs; 2) The set of fictional worlds is unlimited and maximally varied; 3) Fictional worlds are accessible from the actual world. The specific qualities are: 1) Fictional worlds of literature are incomplete; 2) Many fictional worlds of literature are semantically unhomogeneous; 3) Fictional worlds of literature are constructs of textual activity.

<sup>5</sup> It is useful to use the notion of PW ... when one refers to a state of affairs, but only if one needs to compare at least two alternative states of affairs. The theory is useful when one asks what would have happened if Julius Caesar did not cross the Rubicon, or whether or not Dumas' Richelieu is similar to the real. If on the contrary one says that Donald Duck is an invention by Disney and that we have few chances to meet him on the Fifth Avenue, one certainly says that Donald Duck belongs to a world of phantasy but no specific Possible Worlds Theory is requested in order to discover or to prove such a triviality. (Eco, 1989: 344)

<sup>6</sup> Tomás Albaladejo's presentation is less taxonomical (1992: 51):

El mundo que es el referente del texto está dividido en tantos mundos (submundos al estar incluidos en mundos) como personas forman parte del mismo, y cada uno de éstos está a su vez dividido en diversos (sub)mundos: el submundo real efectivo, el submundo conocido, el submundo deseado, el submundo temido, el submundo soñado, el submundo fingido, etc., de un mundo de persona, configurados por la realidad efectiva, los conocimientos,... de éste.

<sup>7</sup> A fictional text can be summarised by filling retrospectively narrative matrices like this (1985: 717):

SP1	+	+	+	+	–				
SP2	i	i	i	–	+				
SP3	i	i	–	+	–				
SP4	–	+	+	+	+				
etc.	t0	EP1	t1	EP2	t2	EP3	t3	EP4	t4

<sup>8</sup> It is not a coincidence that Cesare Segre (1985: 253-4) links the notion of utopia to that of world-model:

Cada obra literaria, pero en particular las de carácter fantástico, pone en pie un mundo posible, distinto del de la experiencia (...) La literatura narrativa no hace sino elaborar modelos de la vida humana (...). Los diferentes tipos de ficción se pueden catalogar a partir de los tipos de papel asumibles por un «modelo»: modelo que puede describir la vida humana, puede interpretarla con voluntarias deformaciones y exageraciones, puede ofrecer una alternativa fantástica o proponer una reorganización sustitutiva (la utopía)

<sup>9</sup> The following step, beyond the scope of this analysis, is a list of seven rules prescribing the combinations between fictional worlds belonging to these three types and the hierarchies resulting from combinations of these (called «ley the máximos semánticos»); finally he enumerates five rules called «restricciones de la ley de máximos semánticos».

<sup>10</sup> Among all the possible worlds which the reader is invited to take into consideration, one receives the special status of being *the* actual world by virtue of the author's decision to make it pass as such. (Ryan 1985:720)

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