Zoltán Vecsey: A representationalist account of literary characters. Part II: Representationalism
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Abstract

According to the artefactual theory of fiction, fictional characters are contingently existing abstract entities. One comparative advantage of artefactualism *over their rivals is* its conformity with our *pre-theoretic views about the* createdness of these entities. However, it is not entirely clear what it means to say that Sherlock Holmes, Anna Karenina and their likes are 'created abstracta'. It is argued in this paper that one simple way to answer this question is to explain the nature of fictional characters in terms of linguistic representation.
Keywords: fictional characters, artefactualism, reference, non-relational representation, linguistic data

1 Introduction

The first part of this study gave a relatively detailed review of the virtues of the artefactualist theory of literary characters. In this second part I will outline a representationalist variant of this theory. Section 2 introduces and analyses the notion of non-relational representation. On my view, without this notion one cannot properly understand what literary characters are. Finally, Section 3 draws some metatheoretical conclusions from the considerations presented in the first and second parts of this study.

2 Fundamentals of a representationalist account of literary characters

It would be certainly an interesting question of the historiography of the theory of fictionality why so many experts are reluctant to accept that literary characters are closely related, or perhaps identical, to abstract linguistic constructions. To pursue this question would take us too far afield. But we can characterize the current research situation with the help of some illustrative examples. In my view, the aversion to abstract linguistic constructions is a corollary of a broader theoretical standpoint which may be rightfully called a 'simple-minded account of realism'.

It is advisable to begin by quoting some relevant passages from the works of antirealists and then turn to the corresponding realist examples. Since the publication of his groundbreaking monograph *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990), Walton is widely acknowledged as one of the leading proponents of the antirealist theory of fiction. According to Walton, literary discourse is to be understood in its entirety as an overarching game of make-believe or pretense. Authors and readers are co-operating players in the same game of make-believe, so the state-

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ments which are made in the course of playing the game are not to be taken seriously. Pretend statements involve only pretend commitments: the players behave, verbally, as if the entities mentioned or described by them were existing things. But in actual fact, pretend statements do not express propositions at all and there is nothing to which the participants of the discourse could be ontologically committed. Therefore, from the Waltonian point of view, a statement which implies apparent commitment to a fictional entity should not be taken at face value. To claim otherwise is to disregard the rules of an ongoing game. Artefactualists who think that characters are created artefacts are guilty of making the same error. It is worth quoting Walton's opinion at length:

> Walt Disney did invent some things, certain animation techniques, for instance, and one can point out that a certain technique was invented by him. Committees, governments, and laws are cultural artifacts, and can be described as such. But to say that *Donald Duck* was "invented by Walt Disney" or that he "is a cultural artifact" is probably to say that there is no such thing, i.e. that Donald Duck-ish referring attempts fail. If Donald Duck is anything he is a *duck* (a talking duck); not an invention or a cultural artifact. Some concepts may be "empty;" the *concept* of Donald Duck (if there is such a thing) is one of them. But *Donald Duck* himself is not a concept. (Walton 2015: 103)

The quoted passage is a succinct summary of the critical attitude Walton had adopted towards fictional realism at numerous places in his oeuvre from the 1970s onwards. And as such it exemplifies the typical contradictory features of that attitude. First, Walton is aware that he cannot straightforwardly deny the existence of cultural artefacts. Indeed, it would be curious to suggest that such cultural inventions of the human mind as committees, governments, and laws are members of a natural kind. Second, he seems to be expressing his doubt concerning the artefactual status of fictional entities. Moreover, he seems to doubt that fictional entities have an ontology at all. In order to establish a categorical difference between the status of these groups of entities – that is, between committees, governments, etc., on the one hand, and fictional characters on the other –, Walton offers a metalinguistic analysis. According to this analysis, if a speaker makes an existential statement about a character c_N, she conveys the metalinguistic information that *N* cannot be employed in a referring use.

One problem with this analysis is that in utterances of the form '*N* is *F*' (where *F* is an existential predicate), the proper name *N* is typically used and not merely mentioned as the metalinguistic interpretation would require. To stick with the example of Donald Duck, it is implausible to claim that the utterer of the sentence 'Donald Duck is not real' wants to convey nothing else than ''Donald Duck' is not a referring name'. As regards its default semantic reading, 'is not real' is *not* a purely metalinguistic predicate. Imagine a cognitive psychologist who remarks that visual space is not real. Presumably, she is much more interested in the mental construction of the visible properties of our immediate environment than in the referential profile of the expression 'visual space'. If she wants to inform us of her own interests correctly, then she must use that expression instead of mentioning it. This and similar cases indicate that Walton errs in thinking that an existential predicate like 'is not real' is equivalent with its metalinguistic cognate 'is unable to refer'.

A further problem is that the metalinguistic analysis does not directly support Walton's distinction between genuine artefacts and fictional characters. Consider the following two statements:

(1) The American Nobel Committee was founded by Jacques Ferrand and Albert Einstein.

(2) Donald Duck was invented by Walt Disney.

Seen from the Waltonian perspective, the American Nobel Committee is an existing artefact. So the name 'American Nobel Committee' functions as an ordinary referring expression in (1). This is not true of Donald Duck (or better: *Donald Duck*), since there is no such artefact. But then how should we interpret (2) in which the name 'Donald Duck' seems to occupy a referring position with respect to the transitive predicate 'was invented'? As already said, Walton's proposal is that we should engage in a metalinguistic ascent. If this is done, then we can understand the utterer of (2) as attempting to express her doubt concerning the referential potential of the name 'Donald Duck'. That is, we can interpret (2) as a means for expressing a general metalinguistic thought according to which "Donald Duck-ish referring attempts fail".

If this were indeed the right approach to (2), then we would find ourselves in a very odd situation. We could easily say that there is a causal and/or historical relation between Jacques Ferrand, Albert Einstein and the American Nobel Committee, but we would be unable to say that there is a similar relation between Walt Disney and Donald Duck (or *Donald Duck*), because in the latter case we would be obliged to make a metalinguistic statement about our referring attempts. Although I have not gathered empirical evidence, I guess that ordinary speakers would draw a close analogue between (1) and (2). They would presumably agree that both statements can be viewed as true instances of the predicative schema 'something was founded/invented by someone'. If such speakers were asked about the origin of Donald Duck, they would answer that it was invented by Walt Disney. They would not feel pressure to talk about issues of reference at all. And for this reason, they would reject the Waltonian analysis as misleading.

Maybe I am wrong and ordinary speakers actually follow a metalinguistic strategy to set apart genuine artefacts from fictional characters. But now let us consider a second challenge for this analysis:

(3) Donald Duck and the American Nobel Committee are artefacts.

(3) would not pose any interpretative problem for artefactualists. They would say in a sober tone that Donald Duck and the American Nobel Committee are both products of the human mind and as such they are actually existing (abstract) entities. They would conclude, therefore, that (3) is to be regarded as a true statement. A Waltonian antirealist is in trouble, however, because she cannot provide a consistent reading of (3). While one component of the conjunctive subject (Donald Duck) suggests the need for a metalinguistic ascent, the other component (American Nobel Committee) calls for a literal reading. The possibility of a collective reading is blocked by this tension. Perhaps the solution would be to offer a distributive reading for (3). But in this case, the distributive reading would be the wholly unacceptable 'Donald Duck-ish referring attempts fail and the American Nobel Committee is an artefact'.

One may conclude from this that the Waltonian interpretation of the artefactualist theory is not wholly adequate. But what follows in the quoted passage is even more peculiar. Walton claims there that if there is such an entity as Donald Duck, then it must be a *talking duck*, not an artefact. I am not sure I know how to understand this claim. Perhaps Walton thinks that if a character *c* is described or portrayed in a text as belonging to a natural kind *K*, then *c* is either one of the *K*s, or it is nothing. This would explain why he excludes the possibility that Donald Duck is an artefact. (This would also explain why he denies the existence of characters. And he is certainly right about one thing: there are no talking ducks.) But it is misleading to suggest – if this is what Walton is suggesting – that characters cannot be artefacts because fictional prose works are typically not about abstract entities. We cannot detect a mismatch between the way a character is described and the way it exists. Even though Donald Duck is de-

scribed as being a talking duck, it does not follow that there must be a language-external entity that corresponds to the description. Walton seems to get this wrong when he says that the *concept* of Donald Duck (if there is such a concept) may be empty, but Donald Duck himself is not a concept. I my view, appreciators of Walt Disney's story may acquire and possess a Donald Duck-concept, provided that concepts are language-based entities; and, with certain provisos, we can say that this is an empty concept. But if we agree on that, then it is not clear to me what is the point in adding that Donald Duck *himself* is not a concept. What is the intended meaning of 'himself' in this context? Artefactualists and other abstract realists do not need to think that Donald Duck has the same identity and essence as real ducks in the backyard. The situation is the same as in the case of a toy duck. A toy duck is not a duck; it is a toy that *resembles* a duck. If Walton thinks otherwise, then he misconstrues the standpoint of his opponents.

The above-quoted Waltonian passage gives us an example of the phenomenon which I have called the simple-minded account of realism. Walton assumed that on the realist's view the way a character is described or represented differs from the way it exists. Note, however, that not only leading antirealists are of this opinion. Goodman (2004) is a convinced defender of the artefactualist theory, but what he says about this issue seems to be quite close in spirit to the interpretation offered by Walton. He writes:

> I think that as an author begins the storytelling process, and as she begins to regularly associate various predicates with various names, an entity gradually begins to take shape (so to speak) – an (abstract) entity that the name denotes (in some contexts) that exemplifies various properties-in-a-story. (Goodman 2004: 144)

Goodman expresses his agreement with the claim that characters are language-independent abstracta. He says that fictional names denote abstracta (in some contexts). Given Goodman's adherence to the artefactualist theory, the bracketed qualification is to be taken as referring to extra-fictional contexts. For example, seen from the perspective of literary criticism, Hamlet can be classified as a contingently existing abstract entity. In other contexts, contends Goodman, this very same entity exemplifies properties which are not typical of abstracta. Although Hamlet is an abstractum, it exemplifies properties typical of concreta in the story of the play *Hamlet*. That is, seen from the perspective of Shakespeare's story, Hamlet can be classified as a flesh-and-blood person. There is a further questionable point in the quoted sentence. It is said that in the course of the storytelling process an abstract entity gradually takes shape. The reference to the gradual nature of this process is of minor importance in the present context. The significant part of the sentence is that which suggests the language-external status of the originating entity. As other fellow artefactualists, Goodman holds that abstract fictional entities take shape due to the mental activities of their authors. This is one of the factors on which their existence necessarily depends. The storytelling process manifests itself in a set of sentence tokens which compose, in the end, a particular manuscript. This embodies a second kind of dependence factor. Goodman remarks, later is his study, that to bring into existence a dependent entity is merely a matter of bringing into existence its dependence factors. And this cannot be conceived otherwise than bringing into existence an entity which is dependent on but external to its dependence factors. This is precisely what the quoted sentence suggests.

There are other supporters of the artefactualists theory who seem to follow this line of reasoning. But instead of listing more examples of this thought-pattern, I would like to make some reflections on the lesson we can draw.

The first is that it is not quite clear why the simple-minded account of realism became so attractive for all participants of the debate. Perhaps the impetus behind this account is that un-

til now no one has attempted to provide *explicit* arguments why fictional entities cannot be identical to linguistic constructions. I know only of one such attempt. Thomasson (2015b: 38) claims that the view according to which propositions are linguistic entities entails that they are, in some sense, subjective. Since, on her view, propositions and fictional characters are equally minimal, I suspect that Thomasson thinks her verdict to be correct for characters too. I find this claim wanting because of the absence of a suggestion that would explain in what the alleged subjectivity of such publicly available linguistic entities as sentence tokens consists.

The second reflection is that, in spite of its popularity, the simple-minded account is untenable because it entails an unnecessary reduplication of the object of inquiry. Fictional entities are accessible to us by our reading experiences. The textual level of fictional prose works comprises all the entities at which our attention is directed. We are confronted with linguistic representations at this level, and we should not forget that these representations are full-fledged abstracta on their own. Therefore, if we want to know what kind of abstracta fictional characters, places and events are, it is better to focus on this basic level of literary discourse. Representations have a kind of explanatory priority in this respect. And as we recognize this, we must also recognize the unwarranted and redundant assumptions behind the talk which takes fictional entities to be self-standing cultural artefacts or other sorts of non-linguistic abstracta.

Evidently, it would be folly to try to define fictionalia in terms of linguistic representations without providing a sufficiently detailed explanation for the relevant concept of linguistic representation.

It is customary to say that fictional characters are described by their authors as having a certain set of properties. Sherlock Holmes is described by Conan Doyle as being, among other things, a clever detective and Tolstoy describes Anna Karenina as being, among other things, a passionate lover. For most theoretical purposes, this manner of speaking is harmless.

But when we are concerned with the way in which Holmes and Karenina exist, we have to proceed carefully. The problem with ‘describe’ is that it is a success verb. Success verbs like ‘know’ or ‘remember’ require that certain epistemic or semantic conditions be met. For example, we cannot know that Tilda Swinton is an actress without having successfully collected factual informations about her personality. We cannot remember that she acted in the movie *We Need to Talk About Kevin* without successfully reconstructing our past cinema experiences. In general, in order to know or remember that *o* is *F*, we must be related to *o* in an appropriate manner, where appropriate relatedness means an external condition which cannot be satisfied by reflection alone. Ditto for ‘describe’. When a witness wants to describe verbally the physical attributes of the person she saw at a robbery scene, she must successfully collect her past visual impressions. She may say that the person she had seen was taller than an average man, wore a black trousers with a green polo shirt, etc. Under such a circumstance, these descriptive phrases are used relationally. The witness thinks that there is a particular person who satisfies the applied descriptive predicates ‘taller than an average man’ and ‘wore a black trousers with a green polo shirt’. If she has been related to that person in an externally appropriate manner, then she is certainly right in this.

I hope it is clear from the discussion of the ontological status of artefacts thus far, that fictional characters cannot be described in this relational manner. Nevertheless, we may continue to use the ‘c_N is described in work *W*’ figure of speech to refer to the way c_N is given to us. When we say that the novel *A Study in Scarlet* describes Holmes as being a certain way, we merely emphasize that we are acquainted with that character by reading the novel. As attentive readers, we get to know that Holmes smokes a pipe, but it would be wrong to think that we are thereby externally related to a pipe-smoker. Such descriptive predicates as ‘pipe-

smoker' or 'clever detective' cannot be used with respect to Holmes relationally. It is obvious why. There are no abstract entities, of whatever kind, that could have properties like these.

Because of its limited applicability, the verb 'describe' does not entirely suit our present theoretical concerns. 'Describe' has some close synonyms which seem to exhibit the same problematic features. It might be said, alternatively, that a character c_N is *portrayed* in a work *W*. But 'portray' belongs to the same family of verbs as 'describe'. Used as a predicate, it implies relationality. Consider the following statement: Daniel Quinn is portrayed as being thirty-five years old in the novel *City of Glass*. As above, one possible reading of this statement is that the text of the novel informs us that a character, Daniel Quinn, is thirty-five years old. I think many of us would be willing to consider this as a natural and acceptable interpretation. On the second reading, the portrayal of the character is taken to establish an external relation to a thirty-five years old individual called Daniel Quinn. Again, this cannot be a correct interpretation because of the abstractness of the character. The same limitation in applicability holds for other candidate synonyms such as 'depict' and 'delineate'.

In this regard, 'represent' gains a significant advantage over 'describe' and its kindred verbs. On the one hand, 'represent' has a theoretical use similar to that of 'describe'. To say that c_N is *represented* in work *W* seems close to saying that c_N is given to us by the elements of the textual machinery of *W*. In the statement 'Holmes is described in the novel *A Study in Scarlet* as a clever detective', the verb 'described' can be replaced *salva sensu* by the verb 'represented'. On the other hand – and this is a particularly important point – 'represent' should not be necessarily conceived as a success verb. At the very least, it has a theoretical use where the standard epistemic and semantic conditions of success verbs are not operative.

Goodman (1968) was among the firsts to argue that 'represent' occasionally behaves as an unbreakable one-place predicate. He was concerned primarily with issues of pictorial representation, but his observations are relevant for the linguistic case too. Many artistic pictures represent existing objects, says Goodman, but there are also pictures that do not represent anything. A picture of a unicorn is one of these cases. Yet to say this sounds a bit paradoxical. What could it mean that a picture does not represent anything but it is a picture of a unicorn? If 'represent' is taken to be a two-place predicate with an argument place for objects, then the paradox cannot be resolved. We ought to talk about a particular object and attribute properties to it, when we want to talk about a representation. A way out is to recognize that a picture representing a unicorn is a unicorn-representing-picture, or, for short, a unicorn-picture, not a picture of or about a unicorn. This helps mitigate the paradoxical effects of the statement that although there are no unicorns, there are pictures which represent them.

An additional advantage of this observation is that it allows for distinguishing between different objectless or empty pictures. Neither a unicorn-picture nor a dragon-picture can represent objects, because there are no such objects as unicorns and dragons. But a well-informed interpreter would never mistake a unicorn-picture for a dragon-picture. Of course, in spite of their emptiness, these are different pictorial representations. As perceivers, we routinely sort distinct unicorn-pictures into one group; we are pretty sure that Raphael's painting *Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn* and the cover of *The Unicorn Coloring Book* contains one and the same mythological figure. The same holds for grouping dragon-pictures. We know very well what we are seeking when we search for dragon representing pictures.

The key point in Goodman's analysis is, nevertheless, that representations *of o* should be categorically distinguished from *o*-representations. If *R* is a representation *of o,* then *o* exists and *R* represents *o*. Let R_{TS} be a picture of Tilda Swinton. Then R_{TS} represents an actually existing individual. In talking about the relation between the picture and the individual, we use 'represent' as a success verb. That is, R_{TS} succeeds as a representation only if it is externally

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Argumentum 12 (2016), 333-350
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related to the relevant individual and it is related to that individual in an appropriate manner. But *R* may be an *o*-representation even if there is no such object as *o*. Let R_u be a unicorn picture. Then R_u counts as a unicorn-representation. In contrast to the previous case, 'represent' is used here as a one-place predicate. To be a (successful) unicorn-representation, R_u does not need to be related to any particular object. But one might then wonder in virtue of which is R_u a unicorn-representation at all. Why is it not instead a dragon-representation? Goodman would say, I think, that all that matters here is that R_u has the prototypical features which are characteristic of other unicorn-representations. That is, if R_u is picturing a horse-like animal with a large spiralling horn on its forehead, then it is probably a good candidate for being a unicorn-representation.

Whatever importance we may attribute to Goodman's conceptual apparatus, he was certainly not an early proponent of the artefactualist theory. Goodman repeatedly says that there are no unicorns and he also explicitly rejects the existence of fictional entities.[1] According to him, engagement in mythological pictures does not involve commitment to entities which have a distinctive ontological status. In this regard, his opinion is much closer to the standpoint of present-day antirealists. So, if we tried to apply his insight to literary works, we would be faced with a difficulty. Goodman claims that a unicorn-picture does not represent anything. It is a picture with null denotation. However, in spite of its emptiness, we recognize it *as* a unicorn-picture. Why? Because we *see* it as if it were a picture *of* a horse-like animal which has a large spiralling horn on its forehead. If we applied this approach to the literary case, we would get the following result. The proper name 'Sherlock Holmes' is an empty name that does not represent anything. It is a name with null denotation. In spite of this, we recognize sentences containing 'Holmes' *as* Holmes-representations. The question is, again, why this is so. Given what he said about empty pictures, Goodman's answer would be this: we take the sentence 'Holmes smokes a pipe' *as* a Holmes-representation because we *understand* it as if it were a representation *of* a person-like entity who (or which) smokes a pipe. Goodman cannot deny that the sentence 'Holmes smokes a pipe' appears to attribute a property to a person. But from his point of view, this is what it is: an appearance. Since he rejects the existence of Holmes, he must assume that 'Holmes' behaves in such sentences as if it were a name of a person-like entity. This extra assumption is needed because otherwise he could not say that we may collect all Holmes-representations into one single group. Holmes-representations must have some common features in virtue of which they are Holmes-representations and not, say, Karenina-representations.

This Goodmanian assumption is questionable for two reasons. First, it seems implausible to contend that readers of the novel *A Study in Scarlet* process and understand the name 'Holmes' as if it were designed to seemingly represent a person-like entity. Those who engage in the text are compelled to interpret this name as a conventional device for person representation, independently of whatever they think about the ontological status of Holmes. It is evident for everyone, I think, that 'Holmes' is used in a subject position in such a sentence as 'Holmes smokes a pipe'. And the property attributed to the subject mentioned in that sentence – i.e., the property of smoking a pipe – is clearly a property of persons. If you have reservations against this being called a personal property, then consider the sentence 'Holmes was certainly not a difficult man to live with'. Here, it is explicitly indicated that 'Holmes' is used as a person representation in the novel. The explanatory predicate 'man' dispels all doubts to the contrary. Given this, I find it hard to imagine why should we associate the textual occurrences of the name with such a curious thing as a person-like entity. Perceiving one-horned

[1] See Goodman (1968: 21, 22, 30).

horse-like figures is necessary for recognizing unicorn-representations, but one does not need to apprehend person-like entities for recognizing Holmes-representations. 'Holmes' is no less a person representation than an ordinary name like 'Swinton'. Which is not to say, of course, that 'Holmes' is a representation *of* a person. Common sense intuitions seem to converge on this point. Second, a person-like entity is not only a curious thing, but also an ontological monster. The term 'person', like other natural kind words, is often thought of as having vague application conditions. This is not particularly troubling for our present account, since we can understand the term in its most general sense, according to which persons are concrete human beings. Even though the boundaries of the term 'person' vary strongly between different metaphysical frameworks, this does not tell us much about the application conditions of the other term. But one thing is clear: person-like entities cannot be human beings, since 'Holmes' would then behave in Conan Doyle's novel as if it were a name of a human being and Goodman excludes this possibility. Nor can they be instances of a non-natural kind, for an analogous problem would then arise, namely that 'Holmes' would behave as if it were a name of an artefact. Goodman's scepticism concerning the existence of fictional entities excludes this possibility too. This does not mean that we should deny *tout court* the metaphysical possibility of person-like entities. The lesson is more specific to the ontology of literary works. I want merely to claim that in the context of a literary ontology which centres around the concept of representation we cannot have a clear idea of what person-like entities are. And so the analysis which reveals how "empty" artistic pictures work cannot be directly applied in the investigation of fictional prose works.

This is a drawback of Goodman's account. But he was surely right in stressing that for certain theoretical purposes 'represent' is analysable as an intransitive one-place predicate. Fortunately, there are alternative frameworks which utilize the Goodmanian distinction between cases of representations of *o* and cases of *o*-representations and to which we can turn in arguing for the non-relational nature of fictional representations.

One of these frameworks is elaborated by Burge in his *Origins of Objectivity* (2010). It is worth discussing briefly some passages of this book, for we find in them a comprehensive account of the phenomenon of representation. Burge interprets 'representation' as a generic term which covers various sorts of human intentionality. By being connected with psychological (i.e. intentional) states, the events of perception, cognition, and language use all include representations. The latter is of most interest to us here.

Linguistic representation has two subtypes: reference and indication. Reference, claims Burge, is both a relation between expression tokens and extra-linguistic entities, and a function of a mental state or event to establish the reference relation. Consider a conversational situation in which the participants talk about the habits of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Imagine that in this situation someone utters the sentence 'Arnold smokes a pipe'. By focusing on the relational aspect of reference, we may say that the token name 'Arnold' is related here to the person Arnold Schwarzenegger. On the other hand, in attending to the functional aspect of reference, we may say that the utterer of the sentence is engaged in reference by using the token name 'Arnold'. This picture might be familiar to many readers, since Burge's dual-aspect approach to reference corresponds well to the standard distinction between semantic reference and pragmatic reference.

In contrast to names and other singular expressions, predicates are not devices of reference. When it is used as a predicate, 'clever' does not refer to anything. Instead, it indicates the property of being clever. In general, predicates indicate properties which can be attributed to appropriate entities. Thus, reference and indication can be seen as performing a complementary function. Suppose someone utters the sentence 'Arnold is clever' in the above-mentioned

situation. Burge would say that in this sentence 'clever' functions to attribute what it indicates, that is, it attributes the property of being clever to the entity to which 'Arnold' refers. And given that 'Arnold' is used here to refer to the person Arnold Schwarzenegger, the sentence can be taken as stating that Arnold Schwarzenegger is clever. Again, this is broadly what standard theories of predicative statements contend.

On Burge's view, the primary function of linguistic representation is property attribution. A particular linguistic item represents something as being so-and-so, or as having such-and-such properties, if it represents something by an appropriate type of representation. In order to represent Arnold Schwarzenegger as being clever, speakers have to use tokens of the clever-type representation. Of course, 'clever-type representation' does not mean a representation that is clever. It is instead a representation type, individuated in terms of the predicate 'clever'.

The really interesting cases are those in which reference and indication come apart. We have mentioned earlier that scientific vocabularies may contain occasionally empty terms. For example, the expression 'phlogiston' was introduced into the chemical vocabulary of the 1700s without having a worldly referent. Phlogiston was characterized by its discoverer as a chemical substance which is released into the air on burning. But as it turned out shortly thereafter, the proposed theory was based on erroneous background assumptions. 'Phlogiston' was (and is) an empty term. Thus, by uttering the sentence 'phlogiston is released in burning' something is indicated (a release), but nothing is represented (because 'phlogiston' lacks a referent). But in spite of the fact that nothing is represented as phlogiston, the utterance involves a phlogiston-type of representation.

At this juncture, I can imagine an objection taking the following form. It is true that reference and indication must cooperate in successful representations. It is also true that scientists occasionally introduce into their theories empty terms, for various reasons. But the idea of empty representations is obscure, to say the least. If there is no referent for a term *t*, then *t* is empty, and empty terms are not representational devices in any sense of the word. So the claim that there is a *t*-type representation involves a kind of conceptual incoherence.

The objection can be averted, however, by pointing out that phlogiston-like terms may have representational content in spite of their emptiness. To see how this is possible we need to take a look at the constitutive functions of linguistic representations. One such function consists in individuating and tracking intentional states. When speakers utter sentences involving the name 'Arnold', they indicate a particular person as being a certain way. If Arnold is a concrete entity, utterances of 'Arnold is *F*', 'Arnold is F_1', 'Arnold is F_2', etc., attribute what they indicate. They represent Arnold as having the properties *F*, F_1, F_2, etc., even across different utterance contexts. Because of this, one can regard 'Arnold' and the set {*F*, F_1, F_2, …} as jointly individuating a type of intentional state. If certain contextual and pragmatic conditions are satisfied, an utterance involving 'Arnold' makes explicit that the speaker is in this type of state. Other speakers recognize this: they acknowledge that the communicative intentions of their conversational partners are directed towards one and the same entity. In coherently evolving conversations this piece of common knowledge remains stable and predictable.

One other constitutive function of linguistic representations is that they embody inferential capacities. Speakers may attribute many properties to an indicated entity, and a particular property may be attributed to an entity with using different predicates. As regards the properties of Arnold, speakers have many options. They may utter attributive sentences like 'Arnold is tall', 'Arnold is a pipe-smoker', and so forth. These are representations which are connected to each other by inferential and other logical or semantic relations. For example, from the

above two utterances, one can derive the conclusion that Arnold is a tall pipe-smoker. And similarly, if it turns out that Arnold can be represented as being taller than 180 cm, one can safely conclude that Arnold can be represented as being taller than 70 inches.

Speakers individuate and track both their own intentional states and the intentional states of others by referring and indicating. In Burges's jargon, a *t*-type state specifies an attribute *F* if and only if it represents *t* as being *F*.[2] And given that speakers may refer to and indicate *t* in a number of ways, *t* may be represented as being *F* in a number of ways. These ways of referring and indicating can be said to be the contents of linguistic representations.

Note that Burge's account of representational content follows from a functional analysis of referring and indicating. On this account, representational contents can be construed without mentioning the content-determining role of extra-linguistic factors. Of course, if *t* is not empty, *t*-type states represent *t* successfully, and the (representational) content of an utterance '*t* is *F*' can be evaluated as veridical. Note also that the functional analysis is insensitive to the differences between the semantic behaviour of non-empty terms and empty terms. While an utterance of 'Arnold is tall' may end up being a successful and veridical representation, utterances of 'Sherlock is tall' are doomed to be unsuccessful and not veridical. But the difference in successfulness and veridicality does not touch upon the functional similarity of these utterances. Both can be seen as fulfilling the function of individuating a certain type of representational state. And, a fortiori, both can be seen as conveying a certain type of representational content.

It is important to stress, again, that when we say that utterances involving empty terms are capable of conveying representational content, then we do not want to capture the specifications of content in an externalist manner. As Goodman already recognized, representations *of* objects, if successful, should be treated as possessing externally determined contents. *Object*-representations, on the other hand, can be successful even if they lack such kind of content determination. Now we are in a position to transfer this observation to the linguistic case. If *t* is an empty term, *t*-type states are representational and utterances involving *t* are to be thought of as *t*-representations. These empty states and empty utterances does not differ functionally from non-empty states and non-empty utterances. But in contrast to the latter, they convey representational content without being related to external representata. Instances of the phlogiston-type representation possess a kind of content that can enter in inferential, logical and semantic relations with other contents. We may say, for example, that the idea of phlogiston and the idea of ether are equally products of mistaken scientific theorizing. This is a familiar way of talking in which the empty terms 'phlogiston' and 'ether' are used in a contentful but non-relational manner.

Speakers individuate their own intentional states by engaging in acts of referring and indication. The representational content of these states seems to resemble meanings – at least in certain respects. Empty names cannot indicate entities, but this does not entail that such names lack representational content; quite the contrary: they represent, although non-relationally. Enthusiasts of detective novels easily recognize the difference between a Holmes-type representation and a Maigret-type representation. (You can try to deceive them, but you will end up losing.) Similarly, empty terms do not refer to entities, yet they are not completely devoid of meaning. Although 'phlogiston' and 'ether' have the same null extension, they surely differ in meaning. Consider the following pair of sentences: (a) 'Phlogiston was introduced by Georg Stahl', and (b) 'Ether was introduced by Georg Stahl'. I think it is clear that informed speakers would assent to (a), but dissent to (b). If this is so, then there

[2] See Burge (2010: 37).

must be a non-extensional aspect of meaning that can be made responsible for this attitudinal difference. Moreover, seen from the perspective of language use, representations and meanings have the same ontological standing. Both are publicly available and shareable abstract entities. And given their common sociocultural origin, both can be categorized as contingently existing artefacts. At the same time, meanings have some structural or behavioural features that representational contents seem to lack. Just to mention one, some indexical expressions are used in a token-reflexive way. When the first person pronoun 'I' is used in this way, it has the meaning 'the utterer of this token'. I believe that representations, be they relational or non-relational, cannot carry such token-reflexive contents because they are not decomposable along the character/content dimension that plays a fundamental role in the analysis of indexicals. For this and other related reasons, representations are not to be identified with meanings.

This is only a side issue, though, because the main point of interest here is a plausible definition of a notion of linguistic representation which does not implicitly involve a semantic (or epistemic) relation to represented entities. The above discussions have shown that Goodman's insight pertaining to the content of pictorial representations has a much wider application than he had originally conceived of it. As we have seen, thanks to Burge, 'represent' can be used as an intransitive predicate in the theory of mental states, and even in the theory of linguistic content. The lesson we can learn from the intransitive uses of this predicate is that referential failure does not necessarily entail representational failure. The relevant notion of representation may then be defined in the following way:

> *Non-Relational Linguistic Representation* (NRLR): A linguistic item, *t*, qualifies as a non-relational representation if and only if the following conditions are jointly satisfied: (i) tokens of *t* are capable of conveying representational content in utterances which purport to refer and indicate, (ii) *t* lacks a language-external representatum, and (iii) *t*-representations are publicly available and shareable entities.

Condition (i) is required in order to exclude extreme cases in which referential failure entails representational failure. Imagine that someone fills in the formula 'The ___is here' with closed eyes so that the result is 'The t*9C®™n is here'. Obviously, since the character sequence 't*9C®™n' has been typed in without a communicative intention, it will neither refer to an entity nor convey or express a representational content. Because of the threatening possibility of cases like this, it is reasonable to restrict our definition to such utterances where *t* has a chance to convey a representational content.

Satisfying condition (ii) ensures that *t*'s representational content is not of a relational kind. Utterances of *t* purport to refer to entities but are necessarily unsuccessful in that attempt.[3] Our definition must make it clear that this is so not because of some pragmatic error or other kind of communicative failure, but because *t* lacks a representatum.

The last condition, condition (iii), concerns the epistemic accessibility of *t*-representations. Notice that *t* is a vehicle type for constructing natural language representations. It is plausible to suppose that *t* is part of an internal code; perhaps it is an item in a mental lexicon with rich causal and computational connections, or it is a symbol in a language of thought with a compositional syntax and semantics. Acts of referring and indication involve tokens of such abstract vehicle types. Although utterances contain perceivable tokens of *t* (i.e., they make publicly available, and thus shareable, the type *t*), it is important to see that *t*-representations

[3] According to the apt remark of Burge, "[r]epresentation is rather like shooting. Some shots do not hit anything, but they remain shootings" (Burge 2010: 45).

themselves are not perceivable linguistic entities. Concrete particulars – acoustical signals in the air or ink marks on a sheet of paper – are not apt to be regarded as representations. Someone's admiring Holmes is not admiring acoustical signals or ink marks. The right thing to say is that uttered and written tokens serve as triggers for their corresponding mental items/symbols. I do not want to suggest that the complex problem posed by the type-token relationship is so easily solvable; but, for our present purposes, it is enough to note that tokens are needed to register that a particular speaker intends to convey a *t*-representation. When speakers produce and perceive utterances they register unique tokens which are unrepeatable spatiotemporal entities, but *t*-representations are registered at the type-level, and because of this they have to be categorized as repeatable abstract entities. Repeatability guarantees that the spatiotemporal contingency of utterances does not set limits to the epistemic accessibility of *t*-representations.

With (NRLR) at hand, we can now turn our critique of the simple-minded account of realism into a constructive proposal. The aim is not, of course, to rule out the artefactualist theory of fictional characters as completely misguided. I think that the Thomassonian approach is much more plausible and easier to defend than other realist approaches to characters. So my proposal is that we should rethink whether characters – and fictionalia in general – exist in the way Thomassonian artefactualists think they do. That is, we should rethink what does it *exactly* mean to say that fictional characters, places and events are created abstract artefacts. I contend, not surprisingly, that all of these entities are at bottom linguistic constructions to which we have epistemic access only via our ordinary reading experiences. If we take (NRLR) as a conceptual guide, we can provide a definite answer to the question concerning the nature of these linguistic constructions. The answer, in short, is that the individuals we found in our reading experiences and the events we apprehend in interpreting texts of literary fiction are nothing else than sets of non-relational representations.

3 Some closing remarks about the metatheoretical aspects of the proposal

Since our representational account of fictional characters is a linguistically motivated hypothesis, we should briefly reflect on the role of data on which our theoretical claims rest.

In recent years, Kertész and Rákosi have elaborated a metatheoretical model for linguistic research which is relevant in this regard (Kertész & Rákosi 2012, 2014a,b). Some parts of Kertész and Rákosi's work are especially enlightening for the present proposal, so it is worth reviewing the basic structure of their model.

The first thing to note is that Kertész and Rákosi conceive data as pieces of information.[4] But not all pieces of information can function as datum for a hypothesis. For them to play this role, it is essential that they possess a certain degree of plausibility when entering the process of theory development. This means that a given piece of information counts as a datum just in case it has a positive plausibility value originating from some *direct* source. In the case of direct sources, the plausibility value of the information in question has to be evaluated with respect to the reliability of the source. For instance, if one regards the theoretician's intuition as a highly reliable source of information, then intuitive judgements about linguistic expressions have to be assigned a relatively high plausibility value. Or, if one thinks of written corpora as having only a low degree of reliability, then one should attach low plausibility values to the

[4] In fact, they think that pieces of information are available for us typically in the form of statements but this precisification is not crucial here.

pieces of information that stem from this kind of source. In most areas of linguistic research, degrees of plausibility are measured and determined by convention. In order to improve the efficacy of their research, adherents of a particular trend or school often adopt a consensual view concerning the plausibility ranking of alternative data sources.

However, data may originate also from *indirect* sources. When a datum stems from an indirect source, its plausibility value is measured and determined on the basis of other pieces of information. Typically, this happens when data are generated by plausible inferences. At certain phases of theory development, the epistemic criteria for making sound logical inferences cannot be always fully satisfied. These are situations in which one ought to take into consideration some unformalisable features of the inferences one wishes to draw. One might consider, for example, the plausibility values of the premises of a particular inference and one might also weigh in the sources from which these values are drawn. In this way, one can make inferences that contain premises which have some intermediate plausibility value instead of being genuinely true or false. Conclusions of these "uncertain" inferences have the same features, that is, they are not genuinely true or false but only to a certain extent plausible. Thus, when one considers the conclusion of a plausible inference as a datum, then the plausibility value of that datum should be calculated on the basis of the plausibility values of the premises and other relevant properties of the inference.[5]

From this it follows that the notion of datum cannot be interpreted solely in terms of information content. According to Kertész and Rákosi's approach, the structure of data consists of two components: one of them is a piece of information, the other is a plausibility value which stems from a direct or indirect source.

Yet it is also worth noting that Kertész and Rákosi do not regard data as theory-independent and unquestionable starting points for the construction of linguistic models. Instead they hold that data are entities that are basically uncertain, fallible and revisable. They inherit these properties from the sources with which they are associated. Therefore, in contrast to standard truth conditional views, data are regarded here not as facts, but as more or less reliable "truth-candidates". Nevertheless, it is not wrong to say that data are in a certain sense 'given' like facts since they receive a plausibility value from direct sources, that is, their *initial* plausibility is judged not with the help of inferences constructed within an argumentation process but directly on the basis of the reliability of their source.[6]

Accordingly, for something to be a datum does not mean to have a stable, once-for-all status. Kertész and Rákosi argue for this in the following way:

> If the reliability of a data source is called into question, then the usability of this source as well as the plausibility of the statements originating from it have to be re-evaluated. This means that information concerning the reliability of the source and the relationship between the source and the statements stemming from it have to be integrated into the argumentation process. In this way the data stemming from this source will lose their data status (but not necessarily their plausibility). (Kertész & Rákosi 2012: 176)

The first sentence in the passage can be read as an explanation of why data may vary in their plausibility values. In principle, any argumentation process may be extended to take new informations into account. If they have been gathered from relevant sources and have positive plausibility values, these informations may function as new data for the development of a given theory. On the other hand, the newly acquired data may have a potential to call into ques-

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[5] The notion of *evidence* can be defined in terms of plausible inference: a datum is evidence with respect to some hypothesis if it is a premise of a plausible inference which makes that hypothesis plausible. For more on this, see Kertész & Rákosi (2012: 178–185) and (2014b: 45–46).

[6] Cf. Kertész & Rákosi (2012: 175).

tion the reliability of certain data sources already used in the process of argumentation. This might happen when a new datum affects directly and negatively the reliability of another source, or when it renders an extant data source irrelevant to the problem actually discussed. For these reasons, any piece of information may change its status and reliability as the process of research progresses. Seen from this metatheoretical perspective, linguistic theory development is a dynamic process in which pieces of information are – or can be – constantly re-evaluated with respect to their plausibility values.

What is then the function of data in linguistic theories? The answer Kertész and Rákosi provide to this question is that the function of data is to supply plausibility values to theories. When a given piece of information acquires the status of datum in a linguistic theory, it can be used to determine the plausibility of other pieces of information with the help of plausible inferences. This leads to cycles of argumentation where a particular information is often evaluated from different perspectives. Such argumentation cycles can also occur between rival theories either because they may judge the initial plausibility value of informational units differently, or because they may accept different forms of plausible inferences as legitimate.

Let us take stock. Kertész and Rákosi's metatheoretical model contains at least three insights that are pertinent to the topic of the present paper. These are the following:[7]

1) *The role of plausibility in linguistic theory development*. The linguistic model of plausibility reinterprets the standard notion of datum and regards it as an effective means of theory development. Although data may be thought of, in a certain sense, as given, they do not have such a secure epistemological status as facts. Quite the contrary, their basic property is their uncertainty. Apart from cases that one can justly call extreme, data do not constitute true starting points for theoretical reasoning. Instead, they are more or less reliable truth-candidates. The model interprets this type of uncertainty as plausibility. Accordingly, it can be claimed that the primary function of data is to introduce plausibility values into linguistic theories.

2) *Status and handling of data*. Data in linguistic theories are not only uncertain, they are also fallible and revisable. They are to be recognized as having a fallible status because any claim one can make about them can be disputed. This is a consequence of the fact that data are essentially theory- and problem-dependent. One can propose a hypothesis that assigns a positive plausibility value to a given piece of information, *pi*, if *pi* stems from a source which has been acknowledged to be reliable. An advocate of a rival hypothesis may reject this decision by arguing that the data source in question is not capable to make *pi* plausible. This does not necessarily lead to an impasse since both decisions can be revised by extending the debate with new pieces of information. If this has been done, one should set up an argumentation cycle in which old and new decisions can be evaluated in a coordinated manner. 'Coordination' is intended to mean here not only the summation of the actually available informational units but also the examination of their consistency. The final aim of this process is to elaborate a theoretical context where the reliability of the contested data sources can be compared so that a tentative resolution of the initial dispute can be achieved.

3) *Open-endedness*. Modelling data as uncertain, fallible and revisable has an implication that concerns the prospects and limitations of linguistic research in general. If linguistic research is to be thought of as a process in which data, plausible inferences and hypotheses are continuously re-evaluated, then object-scientific questions can never be answered in a conclusive

[7] Cf. Kertész & Rákosi (2012: 254-255) and (2014a: 5-7).

way. Or, to put this less powerfully, it seems that for *most* object-scientific questions only provisional answers can be offered. The metatheoretical model reveals that object-scientific problems have usually more than one acceptable solution. Overall consensus concerning research results is very rarely obtained since all disputants ought to check and revise their standpoint continuously through the re-evaluation process of plausible argumentation. To repeat, linguistic research does not start with genuinely true formulas and theorems from which sound inferences can be formed. In most cases, starting points are based on insecure epistemic ground. Strictly speaking, the opening arguments of linguistic theories are not true but merely candidates for being true. Even though obvious uncertainties are eliminated step by step as the research process progresses, one should always expect a certain amount of epistemic insecurity. Therefore, at a particular phase of the research, adherents of a given theory must take into consideration all available hypotheses and should choose the most plausible one among them. Here the model invites us to think about the most general and abstract features of linguistic theorizing. Given that uncertainty is understood as a pervasive phenomenon in theoretical reasoning, Kertész and Rákosi's approach requires a disengagement from the usual understanding of scientific progress. The most important implication is that the core idea of the model is incompatible with "the unreflected and absolutistic defence of particular theories and the unreflected and mechanical rejection of their rivals."[8] This understanding has to be replaced by another one which emphasizes the open-endedness of object-scientific debates. Although debates in semantics and pragmatics and in other areas improve permanently in their capacity to find reassuring answers to troubling questions but they rarely come to an endpoint. Note, however, that open-endedness should not be taken as excluding the possibility of theoretical progress in linguistics. Indeed, quite the opposite is the case. The fact that the vast majority of theoretical claims lack definitive justification has a positive impact on long-run knowledge growth because it motivates – or should motivate – everyone to involve more and more data into their research and thus to find more plausible solutions to the problems they encounter.

In the light of these metatheoretical considerations, I want to make some final remarks about our main topic. First note that two of the central notions of the above model – datum and plausibility – have also been used in the previous sections of this paper. This reveals that we have applied metatheoretical reflection in our argumentative practices even if only in a theoretically innocent or naive way. In their model, Kertész and Rákosi regard metatheoretical reflection not as a kind of higher-order reasoning but as an element of object-scientific argumentation. The argumentative style of the present paper seems to support their opinion. More importantly, many prominent works of the realism/antirealism debate seem to fit this model as well. Although experts rarely explicitly acknowledge the uncertainty, fallibility and revisability of their data, the careful manner with which they approach every question suggests that they are aware of the relevance of this epistemic factor. This is even more so in the case of plausibility. The term 'plausibility' is commonly used as if it were a tool for introducing epistemic rankings over individual hypotheses. To illustrate this, let us consider some characteristic passages from both sides of the debate.

It often happens that antirealists about fictional entities use 'plausibility' and 'plausible' for contrasting or ranking hypotheses. Here is a quote from Walton's book *Mimesis as Make-Believe*:

[8] Kertész & Rákosi (2014a: 7).

Zoltán Vecsey: A representationalist account of literary characters. Part II: Representationalism
Argumentum 12 (2016), 333-350
Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó

> Language may be essentially a means whereby people communicate with one another; hence the *plausibility* of basing a theory of language on actions of communicators, language users. To suppose that fiction is essentially a means of communication is no more *plausible* than to suppose it incapable of serving this purpose. (Walton 1990: 89, emphasis added)

Everett uses the adjective '(im)plausible' in his book *The Nonexistent* quite frequently.[9] Here is a typical example:

> I also argued that the most *intuitively plausible* identity criteria for fictional characters are not those we considered that were offered by various fictional realists but rather ones which see the identity or distinctness of fictional characters as being determined by what we are mandated to imagine when we engage with the relevant fictions. These criteria are *intuitively highly plausible* and seem to capture how we actually talk and think about fictional objects. (Everett 2013: 208, emphasis added)

In the above passages, both Walton and Everett use composite data sources. The content of their claims depends partly on theoretical considerations, and partly on common sense knowledge. Accordingly, the role of 'plausible' in their sentences consists in qualifying the reliability of these data sources. That is, 'plausible' functions here like a noun modifier or a sentence operator which shows that a particular claim which can be traced back to one data source is (much) more acceptable than its rival claim which can be traced back to a different source.

It is not too surprising, I think, that fictional realists apply a similar argumentative strategy in their works. Consider the following remarks from Thomasson's paper *Speaking of fictional characters*:

> Certainly it is *plausible* that, in writing a work of fiction, the fictionalizing discourse of the storyteller involves a pretense (shared with readers) that she is telling a true story about real people. It's also *plausible* that internal discourse by readers about the content of the story invokes the same pretense, and can be understood as discussing what is true according to the story (with the pretense obviating the need to explicitly state this prefix). (Thomasson 2003: 207, emphasis added)

Thomasson is not the only one to apply the adjective 'plausible' to the basic hypotheses of her theory. *In her paper Fictional realism and negative existentials,* von Solodkoff expresses her own realist view in the following way:

> Now, I take 'Fictional characters are unreal', 'Fictional characters are non-existent', 'Fictional characters are not real' and 'Fictional characters don't exist' to be four different ways to convey the same claim. As I noted earlier, this seems to be *plausible*, since ordinary speakers find it extremely natural to switch between claiming that something 'is not real' and claiming that that thing 'doesn't exist'. (von Solodkoff 2014: 346, emphasis added)

Note that both of these authors work with data that originate from a direct source. They use common sense intuitions for supporting their arguments: Thomasson's text refers to readers, von Solodkoff's text mentions ordinary speakers. 'Plausible' means in their usage that common sense intuition should be taken as highly reliable data source at a given phase of the argumentation.

Of course, trying to demonstrate a general phenomenon with randomly chosen examples may seem a little desperate. In response to this it can be said that direct allusions to plausibility occur in nearly all works of this kind. The examples could be easily multiplied: to talk about the plausibility of a claim or hypothesis is the norm rather than exception. And this is

[9] More precisely, the adjective '(im)plausible' has exactly 75 occurrences in the text, which means that it occurs, on average, at every third page of the book.

enough to show that the expressions '*p* is (highly, extremely, etc.) plausible' and 'it is (highly, extremely, etc.) plausible that' are not mere clichés of the language of object-scientific research.[10] Instead they are indicators which reveal that the participants of the realism/antirealism debate continuously weigh how reliable the data sources are from which they draw their informations. They also show that in order to compare rival hypotheses and theories and to elaborate alternative explanatory frameworks, researchers have to rely on some measure of reliability.

This is also true of the line of argumentation that has led us to the (NRLR)-based account of characters. We have regarded the common sense conception of fictionality as a data source with relatively high initial reliability. We then found that artefactualist views are better suited for our systematic purposes than antirealist theories. And, finally, we have tried to establish that our representationalist framework has numerous compelling advantages over all of the existing theories of fictional entities. Plausibility rankings played an often invisible but significant role at every turn of our argument. Individual claims and hypotheses were accepted only if (i) we tacitly assigned them a value which were drawn from a continuum of values between that of neutral plausibility (i.e. 0) and certainty (i.e. 1), and (ii) we assigned to their rival claims and hypotheses lower values. It would be interesting to see how the assigned plausibility values are connected to each other and how they fit into our overall representationalist framework. The detailed reconstruction of this assignment structure, however, must be the subject of another study.

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[10] The same holds for expressions that are based on the adjective 'implausible'.

Zoltán Vecsey: A representationalist account of literary characters. Part II: Representationalism
Argumentum 12 (2016), 333-350
Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó

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