Varieties of metafictions

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The contemporary analytic philosophy of fiction is built upon one fundamental distinction between so-called fictional (or internal) and metafictional (or external) statements, i.e. statements which are true in the fiction or about it. It is true in the fiction (but not in reality) that "Victor Frankenstein created a monster". By contrast, the statement "Mary Shelley created Frankenstein's monster" is not true in the fiction, but it is a truth about the novel. The distinction generalises to non-linguistic fictions, so philosophers often talk of perspectives, internal or external to the fiction (see Kripke 1973 and Walton 1990 for seminal studies, and Garcia-Carpintero 2019 for a useful review of the philosophical literature). However, complications do occur… Indeed, some fictions are non-standard in that some characters are fictional characters in the fiction. In "The Comforters" by Muriel Spark (1957), Caroline Rose discovers that she is the leading character of a novel, to the other characters' disarray. If we focus on the statement "Caroline Rose is a fictional character", it seems to be both true in "The Comforters" and true in the real world. It is a true fictional and metafictional statement. This overlap in what is true in and about the fiction can in fact be shown to be characteristic of metafictions. Philosophically, a metafiction is a fiction which fictionalises (part of) its metafictional perspective.

Metafictions are fictions which "acknowledge their own fictionality" (Friend 2007: 12). So metafictions appear to be complicated cases which combine the ordinary narrative structure with a reflexive element (see Ommundsen 1993 for a useful overview, and Polvinen 2023 for a recent contribution). Within narratology proper, metafictions are usually seen as a special case of metalepsis. This technical term denotes any transgression between narrative levels. It is indeed tempting to construe metafictions as those metaleptic fictions that (make as if to) flout the distinction between fiction and reality, typically having fictional characters or real authors cross the boundary. How to interpret this so-called "transgressive" aspect of metafictions is controversial (see Genette 2004, and Schaeffer 2005 for seminal studies, and Lavocat 2020 for a useful guide into the literature on metalepsis).

Interestingly, both literatures presuppose that metafictions are "abnormal" or "malfunctioning" fictions, where the narrative structure go wrong. From this vantage point, metafictions are interesting to study just like it is interesting to study, say, a software containing bugs: one learns a lot about software design when debugging them. Similarly, explaining "what goes wrong" in a metafiction helps understanding the structure of "normal" fictions. Now, narrative structures are sophisticated structures, and so there are many different ways it can go astray. As a consequence of this viewpoint, one can systematically engineer collapsing narrative structures and provide a systematic typology of possible metafictions. A second fruitful consequence of this approach consists in opening some space for degrees of metafictionality: narrative structure can become more or less stable as a result of metafictional tweaking. It is, I argue, highly relevant for a series of much discussed cases labelled as "unnatural narratives": e.g., non-accidentally inconsistent fictions, narrator-less fictions, 2nd person narrations, auto-fictions, rhetorical metalepsis, etc.

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