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Eleonora Orlando

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Files for Fiction

Eleonora Orlando¹

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Abstract In this essay, I appeal to the mental file approach in order to give an anti-realist semantic analysis of statements containing fictional names. I claim that fictive and parafictive uses of them express conceptual, though not general, propositions constituted by mental files, anchored in the conceptual world of the corresponding fictional story. Moreover, by positing a referential shift determined by the presence of a simulative referential intention characteristic of those uses, it is possible to take them to be true with respect to those conceptual worlds. As for metafictive uses, since they are grounded on mixed intentions, they are considered to express hybrid propositions, partly conceptual and partly referential.

Keywords Mental files · Fictional names · Anti-realism · Two-level semantics · Singular thought · Conceptual proposition

In this essay, I appeal to the mental file approach in order to give a semantic analysis of statements containing fictional names, in their fictive, parafictive, and metafictive uses. In part 1, I clarify what files are taken to be on that approach, namely, mental representation tokens paradigmatically directly related to external individuals. Part 2 puts forward the possibility of giving files a generic semantic role to play, as the senses or modes of presentation of singular terms in natural language, within the framework of what may be deemed a two-level semantic version of the mental file approach. Part 3 introduces the main semantic problem posed by the use of fictional names, that is, the one of accounting for the content and truth-value of utterances involving names that *prima facie* do not refer to anything, which is followed by a brief presentation of the main kinds of answers to that problem, classified as either realist or anti-realist. The theoretical landscape is thus construed in terms of a dilemma: the realist horn involves taking fictional names to be referential expressions at the cost of dangerously increasing the ontological commitment (with the introduction of nonexistent, merely possible, or

✉ Eleonora Orlando
orlando.eleo@gmail.com

¹ Universidad de Buenos Aires / CONICET, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina

peculiarly abstract entities), whereas the anti-realist one succeeds in avoiding the ontological increase at the cost of sacrificing the referential character of fictional names. Finally, in part 4, I propose a solution to the dilemma in terms of the abovementioned semantic framework, which manages to keep both a reasonable ontological economy and the desired referential profile of fictional names. The proposed solution is based on the acceptance of the following two main claims: (i) a mental file can be opened in the absence of a particular individual correlated with it or, in other words, the theory cannot include any kind of strong acquaintance constraint, and (ii) fictional statements, in all their uses (fictive, parafictive, and metafictional) introduce an oblique context, in the Fregean sense of the term, namely, a sentential context in which expressions do not have their customary referents but they refer to their usual senses; what prompts the referential shift in fiction is the presence not of a certain kind of expression (like a verb of propositional attitude), though, but of a peculiar kind of intention, a simulative one.

1 What are Mental Files?

Mental files are a new way of conceiving of individual and indexical or demonstrative concepts. A mental file is a mental representation (ontologically, a mental particular) that “stores” information (and misinformation) concerning a particular individual under a certain label, which can be updated on the occasion of each new encounter with the particular in question.¹ Mental files are relationally, as opposed to satisfactorily, individuated: in a paradigmatic case, whereas a descriptive concept selects an individual by virtue of the fact that it satisfies a certain description (satisfactorily), a mental file does it by virtue of the fact that it is directly related to it (relationally). The kinds of relations between a mental file and the corresponding individual include perception, memory, testimony, and the historical chains of communication underlying the use of proper names: though being different ways of conveying information, they are jointly referred to by means of the global term ‘acquaintance’.^{2 3} So, the two main features of a mental file are (i) its aptitude for bundling information/misinformation and (ii) the ascription of the bundled information/misinformation to a particular individual, which is taken to be the causal source of the file.

At the ontological level of the architecture of the mind (which I will not be mostly concerned with in this essay), two things may be distinguished, though. On the one hand, there are the individual concepts or files, with their corresponding “storage” of information, mostly in the form of descriptive concepts. On the other hand, probably in the different propositional attitude “boxes”, there are the thoughts, among which the so-called ‘singular’ ones are constituted by files and descriptive concepts. To put an example, there is, on the one hand, the PLATO file, containing a list of descriptive concepts such as PHILOSOPHER, SOCRATES’ DISCIPLE, AUTHOR OF *THE REPUBLIC*, BORN IN

¹ As must be clear, the approach shares the ontological commitment to mental representations that was characteristic of the old Representational Theory of the Mind, defended by Fodor in most of his books. See, for instance, Fodor (1990).

² This is supposed to suggest the Classical Russellian contrast between *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge by description*: someone opens a file by virtue of being *acquainted with* a particular, as opposed to getting to it by grasping properties that it uniquely possesses, that is, by description. For the distinction, see Russell (1912).

³ Recanati (2012) calls those relations ‘epistemically rewarding’.

PERSIA, TEACHER OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT, CONTEMPORARY OF VIRGIL, ETC., and, on the other, a structured singular thought such as PLATO IS A PHILOSOPHER.^{4 5} According to the different versions of what might be considered a mental file approach (Perry 2001; Jeshion 2009 and 2010; Korta and Perry 2011; Friend 2011; Recanati 2012; Salis 2013; Crimmins and Perry 1989 and Crimmins 1992 serving as antecedents), singular thoughts, in the sense of thoughts with a singular content, are thus (partly) constituted by mental files paradigmatically anchored in particular individuals; they are clearly different from general thoughts, made up entirely out of descriptive concepts.

Files have thus been put to work in defense of Singularism and against Descriptivism, namely, the general view that both thought and language have devices for singular reference. According to this, on the one hand, by deploying mental files one is able to entertain singular thoughts, namely, thoughts about particular individuals; on the other, in using genuinely singular terms, namely, referential expressions like proper names and indexicals, one is able to express singular propositions, that is, propositions constituted by particular individuals or object-dependent ones. Files have been then taken to be the mental counterparts of (genuinely, that is, not merely syntactically) singular terms.⁶ Moreover, files have been thought to play a key role in accounting for differences in cognitive significance between co-referential terms.⁷ This in turn may lead one to think that files can be *semantically* linked to singular terms. Embracing Singularism is compatible with adopting a more-than-one-level semantics.⁸ I would like to suggest that files may play a central role in one of those levels—in as far as they could be taken to be the *senses* or *modes of presentation* of natural language singular terms.⁹

⁴ In this paper both files and descriptive concepts are conventionally designated by words in capital letters, as it is usually the case with mental representations.

⁵ The relation between files and descriptive concepts, on the one hand, and the singular thoughts constituted by them, on the other, is not always clear enough. I would say that it is the occurrence or tokening of thoughts that determine the distribution of descriptive concepts among the different files. For instance, it is the occurrence of the thought PLATO IS A PHILOSOPHER in the minds of many competent users of 'Plato' that makes the descriptive concept PHILOSOPHER appear in their respective PLATO files. For an interesting analysis of this point, as much as some strong criticisms of the mental file approach, see Losada (2015).

⁶ From now on, I will take the parenthetical qualification for granted.

⁷ This is also the case with mental representations, regarded as vehicles, in Fodor's latest theory of content (1990).

⁸ Consider, for instance, the following fragment by Recanati: "The idea of 'directness' turns out to be ambiguous. 'Direct reference' can mean that the only meaning or content of a representation is its reference, to the exclusion of any sense or mode of presentation, as in Russell's one-level semantics; or it can mean, as in singularist frameworks, that the subject is directly acquainted with the object in experience and does not think of it descriptively as the instantiator of such and such property. The two ideas are clearly independent, and it was a mistake on Russell's part to argue from Singularism to the rejection of Frege's two-level approach. I call it a major mistake because I think Russell's one-level semantics is what killed Singularism by letting it succumb to cognitive significance objections" (2012: 16).

⁹ An interesting question is whether there might be also files for certain general terms that, far from being descriptive, can be taken to have a semantic profile similar to singular ones; in particular, I am thinking of natural kind general terms (like 'water', 'gold', etc.), which, according to Kripke (1972) and some other authors (see, for instance, Devitt 2005), are rigid expressions. If that were the case, the above conception of mental files should be slightly modified, so as to comprise the senses of non-descriptive, rigid general terms, which cannot be associated with descriptive concepts. Not only individual concepts but also a special kind of general, though non-descriptive, concepts would then qualify as files. However, in this essay, I will only be concerned with singular terms, more specifically, with proper names.

2 A Semantic Role for Mental Files

Along the lines suggested above, files may be taken to be a constitutive component of the semantic content of singular terms.¹⁰ To put the example of a standard proper name such as ‘Plato’, it can be taken to have two different semantic properties: (i) *the property of referring to an individual*, Plato, a person living in the Fourth Century B.C., and (ii) *the property of expressing a sense or mode of presentation*, the abovementioned PLATO file, an individual concept or mental representation common to all speakers who are competent with the name (namely, each competent speaker has a different representation-token of the same type). As explained, the PLATO file stores the information/misinformation about Plato that is available to a competent user of the name, hence, something that may vary from speaker to speaker. It is important to take into account, though, that it is the storing file, as opposed to the stored information/misinformation, that plays the relevant semantic role: that is why the file can be taken to be of the same type across different competent speakers. In other terms, what is shared by all of them is an individual *concept-type* (by virtue of each of them having one of its instances, namely, a corresponding *concept-token*), even if they do not usually share the accompanying *conception*, that is, the set of descriptive characteristics that happen to be related to the individual concept at stake by each competent speaker (in the case of the PLATO file, the accompanying conception can be thought to be determined by either {PHILOSOPHER, SOCRATES’ DISCIPLE, AUTHOR OF *THE REPUBLIC*, BORN IN PERSIA}, {AUTHOR OF MANY PHILOSOPHY BOOKS, TEACHER OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT, FOUNDER OF THE ACADEMY, CONTEMPORARY OF VIRGIL}, or infinitely many other sets).¹¹

Now, on the grounds of the double semantic contribution made by names, an utterance of a statement like (1)

(1) Plato was a philosopher

turns out *to be associated with* two different kinds of propositions:¹²

- (i) *a typically singular proposition*, constituted by Plato and the property of being a philosopher;
- (ii) *a conceptual, though not general, proposition*, constituted by the PLATO file and the descriptive concept PHILOSOPHER, namely, the previously mentioned thought PLATO IS A PHILOSOPHER (which may be the object of different propositional attitudes, such as belief, doubt, desire, etc., however this fact is to be

¹⁰ Although Recanati (2012) takes files to play the role of a non-referential component of meaning (broadly understood), he regards them as constitutive not of the content of singular terms but of what he calls ‘their psychological characters’.

¹¹ It should be taken into account that even if files do not have a descriptive nature, they can play the same role descriptive contents do, since they serve to distinguish between co-referential names like ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’: the former is related to the HESPERUS file whereas the latter is related to the PHOSPHORUS file, which involve different historical chains of communication leading to the same object (more on this below). In this respect, I agree with Salis’ defense of the historical account as opposed to the informational one (Salis 2013). I owe this important clarification to a comment made by an anonymous referee for this journal.

¹² Alternatively, I would say that an utterance of (1) *expresses* two different propositions.

represented: maybe, for instance, by taking the thought to simultaneously belong in different propositional attitudes “boxes”).¹³

Notice that the conceptual proposition can be taken to be, in a certain sense, also *singular*: its peculiar singularity, which I would characterise as ‘conceptual singularity’, is due to the fact that the PLATO file, which is grounded on or directly related to Plato, is part of it. Since files are not descriptive in nature, going conceptual does not amount to going general (as emphasised before, files are not linked to the individuals they are on by means of connoting a set of properties that can be truly ascribed to them).

In other terms, any use of (1) might be taken to be associated with two propositional contents: (i) the *referential* content and (ii) the *conceptual* content, constituted by the corresponding *singular* thought.¹⁴

As must be clear, it is the referential content that is determinant of the corresponding truth-value: what matters to truth or falsity in this case is how things were with Plato himself. Given that Plato had as a matter of fact the property of being a philosopher, the thought constituted by the PLATO file and the descriptive concept PHILOSOPHER is true, as much as any utterance of the statement in question; conversely, if Plato had not had that property, both the thought and the utterance would have been false. In other words, there is a fact in the world, namely, the fact that Plato was a philosopher, that determines a conceptual fact, namely, the true thought PLATO IS A PHILOSOPHER, and a true utterance expressing that thought. Truth depends on the obtaining of some external or real conditions: it is only the referential content that is relevant to semantic evaluation.

The clearly Fregean overtones notwithstanding, it may be worth pointing out that there are many aspects of this proposal that involve a departure from a Fregean semantics (Frege 1892 and 1918/19). First, senses are taken to be not abstract entities but individual concepts or mental representations; in particular, the senses of singular terms are taken to be a kind of concepts that are cashed out in terms of mental files, whereas the senses of other expressions, such as definite descriptions and descriptive general terms, are considered to be descriptive concepts.¹⁵ Second, and precisely in as

¹³ The conceptual propositions expressed by utterances of sentences containing proper names, like (1) in the main text, are constituted by structures of files (or individual concepts) and descriptive concepts, namely, singular thoughts and, consequently, they are *complex mental representation-tokens* that can be classified into types, according to their corresponding components. In other words, these propositions inherit their mental *status* from the mental *status* of their respective components, that is, files and descriptive concepts. I call them ‘conceptual’ precisely because they are made out of (different kinds of) concepts. I owe this clarification to a worry put forward by a referee for this journal.

¹⁴ Therefore, my proposal will be, though different, akin to the so-called ‘pluri-propositionalist approach’ defended by Perry (2001), according to which every utterance can be associated with various kinds of contents. More specifically, my distinction between two kinds of content is akin to Perry’s distinction between *referential* or *official* content and *intentional* or *network* content. One difference seems to be that Perry takes the network underlying the use of a singular term to be a constitutive part of the file on the object referred to by the term at stake. See Perry (2001: chapter 8). As is known, Perry also adds at least a third kind of content, the *reflexive* content. See also Korta and Perry (2011) and Corazza (2014).

¹⁵ Of course, as far as indexicals are concerned, this needs considerable elaboration. With regard to them, their senses or modes of presentation are indexical concepts. They would constitute a level of content corresponding not to Perry’s intentional content but to his *reflexive* content (2001). See also Recanati (2012: 166–174) for an interesting distinction between the linguistic and the psychological mode of presentation of ‘I’.

far as they are cashed out in terms of files, the senses of singular terms are not construed as descriptive: they are a kind of non-descriptive senses.¹⁶ Third, and precisely because they are conceived of as non-descriptive, those senses do not determine referents but the other way around (paradigmatically, referents are the causal source of senses). Fourth, and precisely because of the essential role ascribed to referents, a referential level of propositional content has been added to the typically Fregean conceptual level.

3 The Problem of Fiction

A characteristic feature of fiction is the use of names and general terms that are *prima facie* empty. Rather than (1), in fiction, it is statements such as

- (2) Her son's image took Anna immediately out of the desperate condition in which she had been before (extracted from *Anna Karenina*, by Leo Tolstoy)
- and
- (3) Anna fell in love with Vronsky

that are used, where 'Anna' and 'Vronsky' do not refer to individuals out there in the world. How can our utterances of such statements have any kind of content, as they intuitively seem to utterance? Do they have truth conditions? How can they be truth-evaluable, if at all?

It is important to take into account that the uses of (2) and (3) that can be taken to make them intuitively true are the *fictive* use of (2) and the *parafictive* use of (3), namely, those in which one intends to say something about what happens in a certain fictional story: in the former case, from within the framework of a certain narrative of that story while in the latter, from outside. In contrast, in their more unusual *metafictive* uses, which make them clearly false, one intends to say something about the real world. The metafictional use is appropriate for statements such as

- (4) Anna Karenina is a literary character

that is, those ascribing, to a fictional character, features that are not introduced in the corresponding fictional narrative -in the case at hand, the novel *Anna Karenina*.¹⁷

¹⁶ It is fair to point out that Dummett had already interpreted Frege to the effect that not all senses must be thought to be descriptive, since there are non-descriptive ways of recognising objects. See, for instance: "What is important about Frege's theory is that a proper name, if it is to be considered as having a determinate sense, must have associated with it a specific criterion for recognising a given object as the referent of the name; the referent of the name, if any, is whatever object satisfies that criterion. Sometimes the criterion may be capable of being conveyed by means of a definite description, in other cases not" (1973: 110). Also: "All that is necessary, in order that the senses of two names which have the same referent should differ is that we should have a different way of recognising an object as the referent of each of the two names: there is no reason to suppose that the means by which we effect such a recognition should be expressible by means of a definite description or any other complex singular term. Other writers may perhaps have maintained this: but there is no ground to impute any such thesis to Frege" (1973: 97-8).

¹⁷ Bonomi (2008) makes a similar distinction among *textual*, *paratextual* and *metatextual* uses.

Then, coming back to the aforementioned problem: how is it possible to take different utterances of that kind of statements to have a specific content and be either true or false, given that in making them one seems to be talking about nothing (since neither Anna Karenina nor Vronsky are real people)? The two main ways of dealing with this basic problem can be deemed as realist and anti-realist. On the one hand, realist proposals have appealed to an increase in ontological commitment: from Meinong to abstractism, the idea has been positing a special kind of entities for fictional names to refer to (and fictional general terms to apply to). As is known, there are three different groups of theories: (i) Meinong (1904) and the neo-Meinongians (Parsons 1980 and 1982) have introduced *nonexistent but concrete* objects, (ii) the possibilists (Lewis 1978), *existent but nonactual, merely possible* objects and (iii) the abstractists (Kripke 2011 and 2013; Salmon 1998 and 2002; Thomasson 1999; Predelli 2002), *actual but abstract* objects; all three kinds of *sui generis* entities are regarded as the ontological correlates of fictional terms. Accordingly, realists can take utterances of (2), (3), and (4) to express singular propositions (partly) constituted by the fictional entity Anna Karenina (however differently construed that entity might be on each view). An interesting aspect of the realist approach is that fictional names, like non-fictional ones, can thus be conceived of as devices of singular reference.¹⁸

On the other hand, anti-realist proposals, unwilling to increase the ontological commitment, have usually claimed that statements like the above ones need to be paraphrased away so that the fictional names in them cease to occur in characteristically referential positions. A typical example is Walton's proposal, according to which (2), for instance, is to be understood along the lines of (2')

- (2') There is an authorised game of make-believe originated by *Anna Karenina* in which saying (2) is making a true assertion

Setting aside many interesting details about this specific approach, I would like to point out a feature that it shares with most anti-realist proposals: the paraphrase is taken to express a *general* proposition (to the effect that there is a certain game of make-believe), namely, not a singular proposition concerning Anna; strictly speaking, any fictive use of (2) expresses no proposition at all, though its paraphrase is considered to be true.¹⁹ With regard to the intuitively true metafictional use of (4), a similar explanation is given: the only difference is

¹⁸ As pointed out by an anonymous referee, that path is not the one chosen by *all* the previously mentioned proposals: Lewis does not take fictional names to be rigid designators (or, for that matter, any kind of device of singular reference), since he takes them to designate, in each world, the individual who happens to satisfy the corresponding fictional description in that world, hence someone who may vary across worlds. However, I have classified him as a realist (not of a Meinongian kind, though) because he regards the individual in question (or, more strictly speaking, the set of its counterparts) as an *existent but merely possible* object (non-rigidly designated by the fictional name at stake).

¹⁹ What makes (2') true is the fact that it is fictional in an authorised game of make-believe, the one generated by *Anna Karenina*, that saying (2) is making a true assertion. Although competent speakers think in terms of (2), (2') makes explicit the state of affairs that they are saying to occur when uttering (2) –that is why Walton claims that (2') gives the truth conditions for (2). Those are cases in which competent speakers pretend to express a proposition when in fact they are expressing no proposition at all because there is no such thing (since, in turn, there is no Anna). Fictionally, (2) expresses a true proposition. What is expressed is the proposition that in uttering those words, in pretending one is asserting something, one is speaking truly within a certain *game*. See Walton (1990).

that the game of make-believe at stake is not an authorised one, originated in Tolstoy's novel, but an extension of it determined by an appreciator's interaction with the novel, hence a game called 'unofficial'. Accordingly, what is given up is a *general* theory of reference for names: fictional statements get reinterpreted in a way so that the fictional names in them cannot be taken to be referential expressions, namely, singular terms.²⁰

Therefore, there seems to be *the following dilemma*: either (i) one interprets uses of fictional statements like (2), (3), and (4) as expressing singular propositions at the cost of a controversial increase in ontology or (ii) one paraphrases them away so that they turn out to be semantically equivalent to utterances expressing general propositions, at the cost of sacrificing their *prima facie* singularity, namely, the intuition that they are about particular individuals.

4 Accounting for Fiction from a Two-Level Mental File Approach

Is there a way out of the above dilemma? In other words, *is it possible to keep the prima facie singularity of statements like (2), (3), or (4) without increasing the ontological commitment?* I think that adopting a two-level semantic version of the mental file approach may allow for that possibility. The first point to be established is the possibility that utterances of statements like (2), (3), and (4) express, as much as (1), singular thoughts, namely, conceptual propositions constituted by files and descriptive concepts. From my perspective, if any utterance of (1) can be taken to express a singular thought, then the same should hold for the likes of (2), (3), and (4). I will argue that such a claim becomes plausible once any kind of *strong acquaintance constraint*, for which there are no independent grounds, is rejected. Secondly, I will propose to consider that fictional statements introduce an oblique context, namely, a sentential context in which expressions do not have their customary referents but refer to their customary senses; the obliquity is introduced by the presence of a simulative intention that is characteristic of fictive, parafictive and, to a certain extent, also metafictional uses of fictional statements. This involves applying (a variant of) the Fregean thesis of the systematic referential shift according to the kind of sentential context at stake.

4.1 Against Strong Acquaintance

Mental file theorists can be classified into two main groups: on the one hand, there are those who want to impose what I will call 'a strong acquaintance constraint' (Evans 1982; Salmon 1986), while, on the other hand, some others do not (Perry 2001; Jeshion 2009 and 2010; Friend 2011; Recanati 2012; Salis 2013). In my view, such a constraint should be avoided since 'acquaintance' is understood in broad terms, namely, as before mentioned, as a relation through which a subject receives information from a particular object, which is supposed to encompass perception, memory, testimony and historical

²⁰ For other anti-realist accounts, different from Walton's, see, for instance, Yablo (2001) and Sainsbury (2005; Sainsbury 2010a, b).

chains of communication. Now, these are very different kinds of relations: whereas perception, memory and testimony seem to require both a non-descriptive epistemic component and the effective existence of a correlated object, this is not the case with historical chains of communication. These allow for files to get opened *in the absence of a non-descriptive epistemic relation to a particular object*, namely, they do not involve what may be called ‘very strong acquaintance’.

VERY STRONG ACQUAINTANCE: to open a mental file, it is necessary to bear a non-descriptive epistemic relation to a particular object.

As is known, historical chains of communication have been basically put forward to account for the transmission of reference among the different members of a linguistic community across time and through different linguistic communities. If we stick to Kripke’s original proposal and some of its main developments, the mechanism of reference transmission or *reference borrowing* is mostly *causal*, which means that it does not require the presence of an epistemic component.²¹ Historical chains are not, in most cases, epistemic conveyers of information; they are different in this respect from perception, memory and testimony (namely, the other sources of singular thought mentioned by mental file theorists). Although Kripke explicitly says that he will not provide us with either necessary or sufficient conditions for someone to take part or adequately insert in a historical chain, the suggestion is that having the same referential intention as the person from whom the expression was borrowed is enough. A competent user might lack any ability to identify the object referred to, be it perceptual or descriptive. So, *if the adequate insertion in a historical chain of communication is taken to be one of the sources of singular thought, the possibility of the existence of files associated with natural language names whose referents are not the object of a non-descriptive epistemic relation should be taken on board, namely, one should reject VERY STRONG ACQUAINTANCE.*²²

Now, is it possible to put forward a less but still strong acquaintance constraint according to which, even if a late user of a name, in Evans’ terms, *a consumer*, may lack any kind of epistemic relation to the object referred to, there must have been a non-descriptive epistemic relation at the beginning of the chain, when *producers* are involved, and so there must have been an object at that initial stage? That would amount to imposing the following constraint:

STRONG ACQUAINTANCE: to open a mental file by inserting in a historical chain of communication, someone at the beginning of the chain must have borne a non-descriptive epistemic relation to an object.²³

²¹ See Kripke (1972) and, for instance, Devitt (1981), Devitt and Sterelny (1987).

²² Evans (1982: chapter 4) clearly defends the need to include a very strong acquaintance constraint on singular thought, which is introduced in the form of the so-called ‘Russell’s Principle’: according to it, a subject cannot make a judgment about a particular object unless she has discriminating knowledge of it, namely, a capacity to distinguish the object of her judgment from any other. Setting aside the fact that it is not completely clear what having discriminating knowledge may amount to in each case, it is clear that the principle involves the proposal of a strong epistemic constraint, which led Evans to give up the idea that historical chains of communication are in general a source of singular thought: according to him, someone may be competent in the use of a name but, at the same time, if she lacks the required discriminating knowledge of the referent, she will be completely unable to entertain a singular thought about it.

²³ This is tantamount to what Jeshion calls the ‘Standar-Standar on Acquaintance’: “One can be acquainted with an object O only by perception, memory, and communication chains. To have a singular thought about O, *someone in one’s linguistic community* must have perceived O” (2010: 106, my emphasis).

Would that work? I do not think so since, as also well-known, historical chains of communication do not require perception to get off the ground: they can be originated even if there is no initial act of perception involved. According to Kripke's seminal work, the mechanism of *reference fixing* can be: (i) purely causal, (ii) mixed, that is, causal-descriptive, or (iii) *purely descriptive*. The first case is the paradigmatic one: there is a causal relation to an object underlying an act of perception, by virtue of which the name gets grounded on the object in question, which originates a naming practice. The second case, also pretty common, is exemplified by Kripke with the different baptisms of Venus: in one of them, 'Hesperus' is bestowed on the planet by means of a causal relation underlying an act of perception and the simultaneous use of a description, 'the evening star' (or something equivalent to it), that was thought to select it even if in fact it did not, since Venus is not a star; at any rate, reference fixing descriptions do not have to be true of the object they are used to pick out as the referent of the accompanying name. Let's then move to the problematic third case, which is exemplified by Kripke with the baptism of Neptune: what anchors 'Neptune' in Neptune is a description, entertained by Le Verrier, along the lines of 'the planet that causes perturbations in Uranus' orbit'. But knowledge by description cannot be taken to satisfy STRONG ACQUAINTANCE.

Closely related to this point, historical chains theorists' are surely willing to cover the introduction of names for abstract objects, especially mathematical ones, in whose case the grounding cannot be expected to depend on perception. What would the relevant epistemic relation be in such cases? If we do not want to go descriptive, the only remaining option seems to be intellectual intuition (or something along those lines). It is not clear whether that kind of relation can be considered to comply with STRONG ACQUAINTANCE.²⁴

Of course, the hardest cases are those in which not only is there no perceptual link at the baptism but also no object whatsoever to be perceived (or, for that matter, described). Kripke (2011 and 2013) countenances the possibility of a historical chain to get started even when there is nothing whatsoever being named or talked about in the case of the introduction of fictional names by the creators of fiction. He claims that authors, when introducing names for their fictional characters, are merely *pretending* to name real people, while there is nobody they could be related to. Even if, afterwards, at a later stage, those fictional characters start playing the role of the corresponding (abstract) referents, at an early stage, pretense gives rise to an empty naming practice. Likewise, Donnellan (1974) considers instances of historical chains ending up in what he calls 'a block' namely, certain events that preclude a referent being identified, such as hallucinations, mistakes or non-uniqueness. Along these same lines, Sainsbury (2005) claims that a baptism can be successful in originating a naming practice even if it fails to introduce an object: those are cases where there is reference (namely, an expression with a referential function is involved) without a referent. Devitt and Sterelny (1987) and Devitt (1996) seem to be endorsing a similar claim: in their framework, the singular, non-descriptive content involved

²⁴ According to Russell (1912), that is indeed the case, though: acquaintance involves, paradigmatically, perception and intellectual intuition of abstract objects like universals, numbers, Fregean thoughts, etc.

in empty uses is constituted by the causal networks themselves, which are taken to play the role of senses.²⁵ Therefore, *if one wants to stick to the thesis that the competent use of proper names in natural language is in general one of the main sources of the tokening of mental files and the corresponding entertaining of singular thoughts, one has better give up both VERY STRONG ACQUAINTANCE and STRONG ACQUAINTANCE.*²⁶ Moreover, I do not think that STRONG ACQUAINTANCE can be taken to work as a *normative constraint* (Recanati 2012), for instance, in the way truth is thought to be the norm for assertion. According to this analogy, whereas the norm of truth allows for assertions that are false (an even for some that do not aim at truth), the norm of acquaintance allows for thoughts that are *only putatively* or *purportedly* singular. From my perspective, if historical chains of communication are taken on board as one of the main sources of singular thought, lack of acquaintance should be deemed compatible with the presence of full-fledged singular thought.

These considerations motivate a restatement of the characterisation of mental files offered at the beginning of this essay: a mental file is a mental representation that, *in the paradigmatic cases*, stores information (and misinformation) concerning a particular individual under a certain label. Anyway, the two main features of a mental file mentioned at the beginning of this essay still hold: (i) its aptitude for bundling information/misinformation and (ii) the ascription of the bundled information/misinformation to an alleged particular individual, which is considered to be the causal source of the file. Accordingly, a singular thought is a thought

²⁵ Among the mental file theorists, Perry (2001: chapter 7) maintains that there are different ways in which a notion may lack an origin, namely, there can be a misperception of an object or a mistake but a notion can also be freely created, as it happens with fiction: in such cases, there will be a network without an origin. Recanati (2012: 128) claims that in those cases where there is no object to be perceived at the baptism, cases of descriptive or empty names, one can still open a mental file “and put oneself in a position to entertain a singular thought” in relation to the uses of such names. This is complemented with a distinction between singular thought *vehicle* and singular thought *content*, which provides us with a way of telling apart Neptune cases from fictional ones: in the former, in which there is a right expectation of a perceptual relation to take place in the future, there is still a singular thought content involved; whereas in the latter, in which there is no room for an expectation of the likes, there can only be singular thought in the sense of vehicle –namely, there is a mental vehicle for a singular thought content without that content (2012: 133). Be that as it may, from Recanati’s point of view, being adequately inserted in a historical chain of communication constitutes a good reason to open a mental file *vehicle*, even when the chain at stake does not end at a particular object. Moreover, Jeshion (2010: 129–138) claims that singular thoughts are basically constrained by a *significance condition*: aside from any kind of acquaintance relation, a significant role played by a certain individual in our psychological lives (our knowledge, affective states, interests, emotions) is a sufficient reason for entertaining a singular thought about it –which includes cases where the individual in question is not real but still plays a strong motivational role with respect to our projects and plans. As for Friend (2011), she thinks that the semantic content of fictional names can be explained in terms of their associated notion networks, which are in turn construed in terms of Perry’s concept of *network content* –even if those networks end up at a block, the very networks themselves are contributed to the truth-conditions of the corresponding utterances.

²⁶ A caveat: is the position defended an instance of the so-called ‘semantic instrumentalism’? I am not sure on this point: it depends on what semantic instrumentalism is taken to amount to. If it involves the possibility of having a singular thought just by coining a name or using a demonstrative/indexical for an object one is thinking about descriptively, I think the answer must be negative. What I have argued for so far is the possibility of successfully thinking singularly about an object one is not strongly acquainted with, including the extreme case in which there is no object to have any kind of relation to, which may be standardly allowed by adequately inserting in a historical chain of communication –not just by coining a name or using a demonstrative/indexical, and not certainly if we think of the corresponding object descriptively. Moreover, as forcefully argued by Jeshion (2010), there seems to be cognitive constraints for the introduction of natural language names, which go beyond the possession of the corresponding semantic intentions.

entertained as a consequence of *taking some information flow to come directly from a particular object*, even if the object at stake does not exist. In a nutshell, *thinking singularly involves an object-directed but not necessarily an object-involving mental activity*.^{27 28}

In the light of this, within the present framework, any use of (2), (3), and (4) could be taken to express a conceptual, though not general, proposition (partly) constituted by a mental file. But this amounts to a position according to which, although they have a conceptual content, there can be no reading that makes them either true or false, since semantic evaluation depends on what happens to objects in the real, external world, and there are none in the cases at hand. In the previous terms, there is no referential content involved. What I think that should be added is thus an application of the Fregean thesis of the systematic referential shift determined by the kind of sentential context involved (Frege 1892).

4.2 Fictional Contexts as Oblique

As explained above, a standard name like 'Plato' can be taken to have two different semantic properties: the property of referring to an individual, Plato, and the property of expressing a sense or mode of presentation, the abovementioned PLATO file. In contrast, a fictional name like 'Anna Karenina', while expressing a sense or mode of presentation, seems not to refer to anybody. The proposal is then to take it to refer *obliquely*, that is, to refer to its sense or mode of presentation, namely, the ANNA file. In general, fictional names can be taken to involve an oblique context, in which they do not have their customary referents but *refer to what they usually express*.²⁹ The intuitive basis for this claim is that statements like (2), (3), and (4) can be interpreted as having as subject matter not anybody belonging in the external world but *something that has been created by an author's imagination, the character of Anna Karenina*. To put it in slightly different words, in general, our referential intention in using a fictional name can be construed as being oriented towards *something* not real (in the sense of belonging in the external world) but *purely conceptual*.^{30 31}

²⁷ As should be clear from the discussion on acquaintance, I am taking for granted that the alleged particular object that might be missing is a concrete object, belonging in the external world. As will turn out, in a more general sense of the word 'object' (encompassing mental files or individual concepts), there will be objects involved in the historical chains of communication associated with fictional names.

²⁸ As suggested in a previous footnote, I think that one may want to extend the present account to natural kind general terms, given that they are also related to external objects by means of historical chains of communication. If that is so, some fictional general terms, such as 'unicorns', 'mermaids', etc., grounded on fictional species, should also be taken to express mental files that are not directly related to sets of individuals.

²⁹ The present proposal is then clearly different from other ones put forward in the mental file framework, since most of them agree on taking fictional names to lack referents or be empty, that is, to involve a historical chain of communication or a notion network ending at a block. See, in particular, the following fragment by Friend: "(1) [Gregor Samsa has been changed into a beetle] does not express a complete proposition. *At the level of referential content it expresses at most a gappy proposition*. Nonetheless, because Nabokov's use of "Gregor Samsa" constitutes participation in the Gregor-network, we can provide truth-conditions for (1) by appeal to that network" (2011: 207, my emphasis).

³⁰ Perry may be thought to hold a similar position regarding identity statements that are *a posteriori* true when claiming: "Perhaps the referential content is the default candidate for what is said, but in certain circumstances *other levels of content can be*, as I will put it, *raised to subject matter*" (2001: 121-122, my emphasis).

³¹ On a different basis (namely, Frege's thesis that existence is a second-order predicate, that is, a property that is not ascribed to individuals but to individual concepts), Church (1956) held a similar thesis concerning negative existentials. Now, it seems arbitrary to think that whereas "Anna Karenina does not exist" is about an individual concept, this is not the case with (2), which is thought to be about nothing. It seems more intuitive to say that both are about an individual concept, in the terms suggested in the present essay, the ANNA file.

The general picture is the following one: a literary artwork might be taken to be an abstract entity of some sort, a set of sentence-types associated with a set of conceptual proposition-types, namely, propositions constituted by (different kinds of) concepts, mental files and descriptive concepts, or, in other words, (different kinds of) thought-types.³² I would like to call that set of thought-types 'the conceptual world of the (corresponding) fiction'. Accordingly, a literary artwork might be identified with a set of sentence-types expressing the conceptual world of the corresponding fiction. In reading a literary artwork, one gets to causally interact with sentence-types (most probably, through causally interacting with their instances on a printed exemplar or an electronic copy) and, as a consequence of that, one ends up acquiring mental tokens of the corresponding thought-types, which in turn had been originally tokened in the author's mind. To go on with the previous example, *Anna Karenina* is constituted by a set of sentence-types expressing a set of thought-types, the conceptual world of *Anna Karenina*, which was originally tokened in Tolstoy's mind and subsequently tokened in his different readers' minds.

Now, the previous point can be rendered as follows. In making a fictive use of a statement, one is not genuinely asserting anything, in the sense of doing a speech act that is oriented towards the real world; moreover, there seems to be an intention to pretend, simulate or make as if one were asserting something about the real world when in fact one is addressing the conceptual world of a fiction. Back to the example, in fictively uttering (2), one pretends, simulates or makes as if one were asserting something about a real person but does not really do so, since one is talking about the main character of Tolstoy's novel. What determines the referential shift characteristic of fictive uses is thus not the presence of a certain kind of grammatical item (such as a psychological verb or a modal operator) but the presence of a certain kind of intention, which might be called 'simulative'.³³ It is worth pointing out that Frege has not set forth a clear criterion for identifying oblique contexts: he has just given the examples of indirect speech and direct quotation, introduced, respectively, by psychological verbs and quotation marks. So, the presence of a peculiar referential intention may be an alternative way of originating obliquity.

In fictive uses, the underlying intention seems to be not only to talk about a character but also to replicate what the literary artwork's author has written about it. If that is so, what matters for their truth is not whether a certain real individual has as a matter of fact a certain property but whether *a certain mental file or individual concept is ascribed a certain descriptive concept in the conceptual world of a certain fiction*. In terms of our example, to assess the fictive use of (2), hereby repeated,

³² Howell (2002) argues that this kind of characterisation of a literary artwork is not general enough because there are some that do not involve a fixed set of sentences or text, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. I think that there is no need to come up with a *completely general* characterisation: one that covered a considerable number of cases would be enough.

³³ Some authors, the defendants of the so-called 'Speech Act Theories of Fiction' (for instance, Searle 1975; Currie 1985 and 1990), think that the kind of intention in question gives rise to a new kind of *illocutionary force*, characteristic of fictive utterances. I do not want to take a stance on this issue, which is open to different problems. See Predelli (ms) for various criticisms to different versions of that idea.

- (2) Her son's image took Anna immediately out of the desperate condition in which she had been before

it is necessary to ponder whether the descriptive concept BEING TAKEN IMMEDIATELY OUT OF THE DESPERATE CONDITION IN WHICH ANNA HAD BEEN BEFORE BY HER SON'S IMAGE is ascribed to the ANNA file in the conceptual world of *Anna Karenina* or, in other terms, whether the thought-type HER SON'S IMAGE TOOK ANNA IMMEDIATELY OUT OF THE DESPERATE CONDITION IN WHICH SHE HAD BEEN BEFORE is part of the conceptual world of *Anna Karenina*.³⁴ The fact that this is the case is what makes any fictive use of (2) intuitively true. There is then only one propositional content associated with any fictive use of (2), and it is a purely conceptual one, constituted by a mental file and a descriptive concept. Clearly, what I have called 'the conceptual world of a fiction' has a normative role to play as far as fictive uses are concerned.

What about parafictive uses? I think they can be taken to be similar to fictive ones: they involve not a genuine but a pretended or simulated assertion, under the hypothesis that the world of the fictional story is real. The truth-value of a parafictive use of (3), repeated below,

- (3) Anna fell in love with Vronsky

must be established in relation to not the external world but the conceptual world of the fiction. There is a difference with respect to fictive uses to be noticed, though: the relational concept FALLING IN LOVE WITH VRONSKY is not ascribed to the ANNA file in the conceptual world of Tolstoy's novel; in other words, the conceptual world of *Anna Karenina* does not include the thought-type ANNA FELL IN LOVE WITH VRONSKY (since, of course, the novel does not contain (3) among its sentence-types). However, that thought corresponds to a sentence-type that can be used to describe that world from outside, namely, from the perspective of a reader who wants to convey the fictional facts in her own words rather than by means of replicating the author's words. Accordingly, the parafictive interpretation of (3) will come out true if and only if the ascription of the relational concept FALLING IN LOVE WITH VRONSKY to the ANNA file *accords with* the fictional facts originally described in the novel, or, in other terms, gives rise to a correct description of those facts.

Finally, metafictional uses are more complex than both fictive and parafictive ones, since the underlying intentions are *mixed* ones: on the one hand, there is *an intention to refer to a character* (and, to that extent, a certain simulation is involved, since reference is strictly a relation to something in the real world); on the other, however, there is also *an accompanying intention to make a genuine assertion about it*, namely, a speech act that is oriented towards the real world. Accordingly, metafictional uses are not to be assessed with respect to the conceptual world of the corresponding fiction. It may then be possible

³⁴ As explained before concerning the relation between files and thoughts, it seems to be the tokening of the thought HER SON'S IMAGE TOOK ANNA IMMEDIATELY OUT OF THE DESPERATE CONDITION IN WHICH SHE HAD BEEN BEFORE, belonging in the conceptual world of *Anna Karenina*, that makes the descriptive concept BEING TAKEN IMMEDIATELY OUT OF THE DESPERATE CONDITION IN WHICH ANNA HAD BEEN BEFORE BY HER SON'S IMAGE appear in the ANNA files of their readers (and not the other way around).

to say that the referential shift only affects the fictional name but not the predicate; it is a *partial* referential shift. As an example,

(4) Anna Karenina is a literary character

expresses a thought-type constituted by a mental file, the ANNA file, and a *property*, being a literary character, which is part of not the conceptual world of the novel but the conceptual world of literary theory. In other terms, the predicate does not express a descriptive concept ascribed to the ANNA file according to the conceptual world of the fiction, as it happens in fictive and parafictive uses. Therefore, the proposition associated with any metafictional use of (4) seems to be a *hybrid* one, that is, one that is neither purely conceptual nor purely referential. Accordingly, to evaluate (4) on its metafictional interpretation, it is necessary to consider whether *the property* of being a literary character is ascribed or not to the ANNA file, independently of the conceptual world of *Anna Karenina*; in other words, whether the thought-type ANNA KARENINA IS A LITERARY CHARACTER belongs in, for instance, some *corpus* of literary beliefs.³⁵

Before finishing, I would like to briefly address a final issue: what about the so-called ‘indirect senses’? As must be remembered, according to Frege (1892), no term can refer directly; so, in oblique contexts, terms refer to their customary senses *by means of the expression of a new kind of senses*, the indirect ones. Indirect senses are supposed to be modes of presentation of modes of presentation, which would turn, in the present framework, into mental files for mental files. So, for instance, in uttering (2), one would be referring to the ANNA file and thereby expressing another file for it, that is, the ANNA FILE file (an individual concept of the individual concept ANNA). But this may open an infinite regress, since one may want to refer to that new file, and in that case one should do it by means of the expression of another file, which also should be referred to by means of the expression of another, and so on. I would like to make the following suggestion. The Fregean positing of indirect senses might be thought to be grounded on the fact that senses were taken to be abstract entities, which need to be grasped in order for them to refer to external or, in general, extra-linguistic objects. But, since files are mental representations, one may think that counting on an ANNA file is enough for someone to be able to refer to it, namely, to have a thought which is at the same time *constituted by the file and about it*.³⁶ In a nutshell, the lingo-semantic thesis is that the fictional name refers not to an object but to an individual

³⁵ It may be helpful to contrast this use with the metafictional use of (2): to assess it, it would be necessary to consider whether *the property* of being taken out of the desperate condition in which Anna had been before by her son's image is ascribed to the ANNA file, which is not the case, since what is ascribed to that file is *the descriptive concept* BEING TAKEN OUT OF THE DESPERATE CONDITION IN WHICH ANNA HAD BEEN BEFORE BY HER SON'S IMAGE, not the property, which either does not exist or cannot be instantiated by a file.

³⁶ Perry seems to be making a similar point when saying: “A person's notions are things for which, like any other things in the world, he can have indefinitely many modes of presentation. But one can get by without modes of presentation of them just fine, except when doing philosophy. *Unlike things in the world, the cognitive effects of one's beliefs and notions on the person does not depend on the modes of presentation he has on them, but on the fact that they are his.* Their influence on his cognition is due to being part of the cognitive apparatus, not in virtue of having an effect *via* modes of presentation on the cognitive apparatus” (2001: 183, my emphasis).

concept, namely, a mental file. The psycho-semantic consequence seems to be that the mental file at stake refers to itself; in the mental realm, when there is nothing external one is thinking about, the difference between vehicle and content gets blurred.

5 Concluding Remarks

In this essay I have argued for the general thesis that adopting a two-level semantics, according to which the senses or modes of presentation of names are understood in terms of mental files, allows for a solution to the main problem introduced by fictional names. From this point of view, it is possible to consider that fictive uses of statements like (2) and parafictive uses of statements like (3) express conceptual, though not general, propositions (*singular-conceptual* ones), constituted by mental files, anchored in the conceptual world of *Anna Karenina*. This involves defending the thesis that it is possible to open mental files in the absence of external objects. Moreover, by positing a referential shift determined by the presence of a simulative referential intention, it is possible to take those uses to be true, even if just with respect to the conceptual world of the fiction - and, insofar, to be not genuine but pretended assertions. As for metafictional uses, I take them to express hybrid propositions, partly conceptual and partly referential, since they are grounded on mixed intentions: on the one hand, they involve an intention to refer to a literary character (that is, an intention to pretend to refer, given that reference is, by definition, a relation to an external object), but, on the other hand, they also involve an intention to predicate something (namely, not a concept but a property external to the conceptual world of the fiction) of the character at stake. The proposed referential shift is only partial, affecting the name but not the predicate: genuine assertions can then take place, which could turn out to be, as in the metafictional use of (4), true with respect to literary theory or, at any rate, a set of thought-types that is external to the conceptual world of *Anna Karenina*.

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