

The cognitive value of contradictions—Revision

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Abstract. The text consists of brief responses to the two discussion notes: “A Cognitive-Stylistic Response to Contradictions” by Lizzie Stewart-Shaw and “Using contradictions: When multiple wrongs make right” by Marla Perkins and some comments on the author’s original publication “Contradictions in Fiction...”. The text concerns contradictions in art (especially postmodern fiction) and touches upon such issues as the communicative potential of artistic contradictions, their literary and aesthetic aspects, or the possibility of using them to manipulate the reader. Attached at the end is a brief synopsis of *Contradictions in Art: The Case of Postmodern Fiction*—a book recently published by the author, which addresses the issue of artistic contradictions in greater detail.

Keywords: contradiction, aesthetics, literariness, manipulation, communication, art, fiction

Before responding to the two discussion notes to my text (Teske, “Contradictions in Fiction: Structuralism vs. Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction”)—“A Cognitive-Stylistic Response to Contradictions” by Lizzie Stewart-Shaw and “Using contradictions: When multiple wrongs make right” by Marla Perkins—I would like to express my gratitude to both the authors for their helpful comments and advice and to the editors of *Language Under Discussion* for this opportunity to reconsider my original publication. In what follows I first respond to the two notes in the order in which they were published, and then try to clarify and correct these statements from my article which now, over a year later, I perceive as either vague or mistaken.

In her comment, Lizzie Stewart-Shaw argues that the discussion of contradictions in literary texts and, more precisely, the structuralist study of narrative contradictions, might be developed within the framework of cognitive stylistics and, more generally, cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology. I whole-heartedly agree. A close linguistic examination

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of postmodern fiction may indeed help understand how readers interpret contradictions they encounter in such texts. Further reflection on “cognition as a scientific concept” (25), especially with reference to art, is by all means needed. Introducing elements of reader-response criticism into the study of contradictions and, in particular, observing how non-scholarly (“untrained” or “lesser trained”) readers react to textual contradictions (26) will certainly benefit the project. Likewise a deeper examination of the aesthetic aspect of contradictions, recommended also by Marla Perkins, may help understand the phenomenon (though such examination should, I think, be conducted in the context of a comprehensive explanation of the role that aesthetic values play in art considered as a mode of cognition, which at the moment seems missing).

Two specific statements made by Stewart-Shaw seem to me problematic. Firstly, Stewart-Shaw suggests that in my text I claim that “structuralism shares aspects of the Derridean account of contradictions, such as the metaphysical assumption of reality” (25). Perhaps my statement was not clear enough. What I intended to note in the relevant part of my text is that structuralism, like deconstruction, makes some metaphysical assumptions. As regards the specific content of these assumptions, the two approaches stand, I believe, worlds apart. Indeed, the main structuralist assumptions (the objective reality and intelligibility of the world, or its structural character), for Derrida, are part of the metaphysical burden inherent in language, which falsifies our experience of reality (cf. also the relevant passages in the original publication, “Contradictions in Fiction” 3, 18–19, 21). Secondly, when advocating “a holistic view of a work”, Stewart-Shaw recommends that “the context (the reader’s background knowledge, emotions, location at time of reading, etc.), the text itself (words on a page, including their semantic, phonetic, and syntactic features), and how these elements interact to constitute the reader’s experience” be taken into account (25). It seems to me that within a holistic approach to interpretation, one might consider recognizing, apart from the text and the context, also the text’s reader and author. But these are minor issues; with all Stewart-Shaw’s main points—her recommendations as to how the study of narrative contradictions should be developed—I fully agree.

The text by Marla Perkins raises in turn a number of important issues relevant to the subject of artistic contradictions such as their communicative value, the possibility of using them to manipulate the reader, their impact on the literariness of the text of which they are a part and their contribution to its aesthetic value. I would like to briefly comment on these issues as by and large I neglected them in my original publication.

As regards their communicative value, I entirely agree that contradictions, to cite Perkins, “might not be the only or perhaps even a preferable strategy for communicating meaning” (29), even though I simultaneously believe that they belong to art’s basic cognitive strategies, next perhaps to the strategy of indefiniteness, whose benefits Perkins emphasizes. In fact, in chapter 4 of my book, *Contradictions in Art: The Case of Postmodern Fiction*, I place the two—contradiction and indefiniteness—together as generating the most serious complications for the interpretation of artefacts. They thereby place the highest demand on the reader; by evoking anxiety and a sense of confusion, they urge him or her to participate in (re-)constructing the meanings and values of the text. The risk of misinterpretation may well be considerable when an artefact employs contradictions and hence its communicative value is reduced (or negated if the multiplicity or complexity of contradictions makes the text

unintelligible), but the work's ability to engage the reader may well be enhanced: contradictions are among the most intriguing and thought-provoking artistic strategies. As Perkins notes, "given the ways in which contradictions require readers to determine the ways in which the contradictions are used and to resolve the contradictions, perhaps, according to their own understandings of the text(s), perhaps giving so much interpretive responsibility to readers is more effective for some literary purposes than the more straightforward guidance provided by authors such as Orwell" (29). In short, the possible loss in the text's communicative value resulting from its contradictions may perhaps be compensated by the increase in the text's cognitive potential.

With reference to the risk of manipulation, apparently all artistic techniques, contradictions included, because they convey ideas in intricate and oblique ways and usually appeal not only to the recipient's reason but also to his or her emotions, can be used with manipulative intent. Such uses may be especially successful when the recipient is uninformed (i.e. unaware of art's communicative strategies) and the artist is competent. The artists' highest imperative—that they be faithful to their inner voice (famously formulated in such terms by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* 99, 103)—seems to be one possible safeguard against such deceitful practices, while the recipient's artistic education and critical approach is clearly another.

As for the question of what makes a text literary, it is, I think, its artistic character. Art may, I believe, be taken to consist in people sharing their life (real and imaginary) experience in an original material form (i.e. values and meanings conceived in the artist's mind are objectified—made available to other human beings—in a material object whose form is innovative).¹ The experience art evokes is in principle "open", unlike the experience evoked in other realms of culture where the primary effect is usually clearly defined from the start as informing (e.g. the mass media), entertaining (e.g. the show industry), teaching control over one's body and mind (e.g. Yoga training) and the like. In art, if there is any expected primary effect, it is that of mental contact with another human being and with oneself via the artefact produced by the artist. Accordingly, the value of the aesthetic experience does not hang entirely on its specific content and is only to some extent controlled by the artist (being defined also by the artefact, the recipient and the context). It is this artistic quality that distinguishes novels, short stories, or epic poems, in general, art whose primary medium is language (in contrast with e.g. music whose medium is sound) from newspaper reports or everyday gossip, in general, other uses of language. Contradictions, conceived of as an important cognitive strategy of art, need not threaten the literary (i.e. artistic) quality of the text of which they are a part; on the contrary, they help create it.

The above interpretation of the text's literariness is vaguely related to the question of the aesthetic value of contradictions. In particular, it explains how one can conceive of the artistic

¹ Theory of art is a very broad and continuously debated subject. The approach I very briefly present in the paragraph is a synthesis of the work of various authors (Ewa Borowiecka, John Dewey, Denis Dutton, Stanisław Ossowski, Karl R. Popper, Władysław Tatarkiewicz, Amie L. Thomasson and many others). Because their ideas do not appear here in their original form, I cannot easily refer the reader to the relevant literature. I devote chapter 2 of *Contradictions in Art* to a detailed discussion of art and its cognitive potential. This is also where the reader will find detailed information about the authors whose work, for lack of space, cannot be properly documented here.

character of contradictions inherent in works of literature, without, however, referring to their aesthetic quality. In light of the cognitive theory of art, which constitutes the theoretical background for the treatment of contradictions presented here, and which perceives art as above all, though not exclusively, a cognitive endeavour, it is truth, not beauty or any other aesthetic category, that is the topmost quality desirable in art. This truth² may be contained in the artefact (when the ideas a given artefact presents or intimates are true) or it may be located in the recipients' experience (when reflecting on their response to the artefact, they come to understand themselves and others better, i.e. they come to hold more accurate beliefs about themselves and other people). This growth in awareness of oneself and others might be art's most important contribution to human life. Accordingly, the question how art's cognitive potential adds to its aesthetic value should better be reversed and read as follows: how does art's aesthetic value add to its cognitive potential? Presumably, this aesthetic value may enhance an artefact's attractiveness, give extra emotional appeal to its theme, help the recipient remain engaged when the act of reception requires much prolonged attention, but it no longer appears to be an aim in itself. Clearly, this course of reasoning does not explain exactly how aesthetic values might be interpreted; neither does it provide any answers to the specific questions of whether contradictions can be beautiful (or exhibit any other aesthetic property), or how they might contribute to the aesthetic value of an artefact of which they are a part. All these questions, however, appear to lose their previous urgency in the cognitive context.

Finally, concluding my response to Marla Perkins' discussion note, I would like to clarify how I understand the use of some contradictions in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* as well as explain how I view the extent of this text's indefiniteness and literariness. In the novel, the contradictory beliefs that God exists and that God does not exist are presented in disjunction (no one in the novel claims that the two beliefs in question are both true) so, although they are contradictory in the strict logical sense (i.e. they mutually exclude and complement each other), clearly no violation of the principle of contradiction is involved. Basically, the same applies to Pi's two reports on his survival: *I travelled on the boat only with a tiger* and *I travelled on the boat only with the cannibal chef*. These two statements are also presented in disjunction (no one claims that they are both true) and so the colloquial counterpart of the principle of non-contradiction is not breached. Since the reports are contradictory only in the colloquial, not strictly logical sense (i.e. they mutually exclude but do not complement each other), the classical non-contradiction principle does not apply to them; one can only speak of its colloquial counterpart ("of two mutually exclusive propositions one or both are false").³

While I agree that indefiniteness is a crucial element in art, I do not think that the story of Pi is a case in point, i.e. that it is a highly indefinite artwork. Martel's construction of the tale seems most carefully designed to serve the purpose of demonstrating how in our choice of epistemic beliefs we often do and indeed should consider pragmatic reasons, especially if epistemic ones are missing; thus—the tale quite unequivocally says—we should choose the

² I use the term *truth* along the classical correspondence definition. Popper argued that in science truth is the regulative idea, even though the criterion of truth is unavailable. Within the cognitive theory of art presented here, truth in art appears to function in an analogical way.

³ For a discussion of the difference between the strict logical and colloquial notions of contradiction, see Hołówka (esp. 104–05), Poczobut (64–65, 69), cf. also Johnstone (35).

tiger-version of Pi's tale and, more importantly, theistic belief. Further, I would not say that *Life of Pi* "calls into question the possibility of literariness" (Perkins 29) or that the book indicates that "the narrative outline as such is all there is, or that providing narrative substance beyond that outline is an entirely arbitrary exercise" (29). The narrative outline seems to me as arbitrary as its fully elaborated version—the degree of arbitrariness is high in each case because the book employs the mode of fiction. But there is a limit to this arbitrariness and it is determined by the text's intention to represent extra-artefactual reality (the fictional mode retains the possibility of representation while granting the artist extensive liberty). All the above, however, are marginal issues; in general, as in the case of Lizzie Stewart-Shaw's guidelines as to what approaches might help develop the project, I find Marla Perkins' list of questions that deserve further attention in the context of narrative contradictions most helpful.

I would like to take this opportunity to clarify and in some cases correct some statements from my original publication. Most importantly, I no longer perceive my argument that defending the cognitive potential of art containing contradictions might help defend the cognitive potential of language containing contradictions as entirely successful. Apparently, the primary reason why contradictions are not epistemically harmful in art is that art operates by and large in the context of discovery, not justification. This means that art focuses on generating new ideas and experiences, and offering them for the recipient's consideration; art is engaged to a much lesser extent in their critical assessment and, in particular, in the assessment of their truth-value. Meanwhile, a proper scholarly or philosophical discourse, if it aspires to be scientific, should focus on the context of justification. In science (taken broadly, i.e. the humanities and philosophy included), how one argues in favour of the claims one makes is more important than what claims one is making. Such an argument should be clear and consistent (free of contradictions). The defence of artistic contradictions is thus valid with reference to non-artistic uses of language only insofar as they too are meant to stir the recipients' imagination, provoke them, invite them to pursue experimental lines of reasoning (e.g. entailing counterfactuals) and the like. Obviously, in non-artistic texts contradictions may also fulfil other important functions—be part of the falsification procedure or part of the phenomenon under consideration (as in the case of Derrida's interpretation of the relation between language and reality). Still, in principle in the area of scholarly investigations, most authors agree that it is important that discourse should be free of contradictions.

The remaining comments follow the order in which the relevant issues appear in "Contradictions in Fiction".

In footnote 3, I suggest that the logical principle of non-contradiction does not seem to have ever been a constraint placed on art (Teske, "Contradictions in Fiction" 2), but apparently there are some scholars (e.g. Umberto Eco, Witold Marciszewski and David Lewis) who disapprove of ontological contradictions in fictional worlds, which might perhaps be interpreted as such a constraint (cf. Teske, *Contradictions in Art* 37, 100–01).

When defining what I understand by structuralism in the humanities, I refer to the *scientific method* (Teske, "Contradictions in Fiction" 3) but fail to explain how I understand

it. I understand it broadly as respecting so-called empirical data and the rules of classical logic as well as assessing the value of any thesis/theory first of all with reference to its justification and resistance to testing (i.e. attempts at its falsification). In other words, I basically adopt the approach represented by Karl R. Popper (though he might place resistance to testing before justification) and more recently recommended, for example, by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont in the “Intermezzo: Epistemic Relativism in the Philosophy of Science” and the Epilogue to their book.⁴

In footnote 4, I argue that “scholars investigating culture, whether consciously or not, take advantage of the procedure of falsification when examining the internal consistency of their hypotheses or confronting them with new empirical data, previously adopted theories of considerable epistemic status, etc.” (Teske, “Contradictions in Fiction” 2–3). This is hardly a correct statement. The term *falsification* has several meanings, two of which are relevant here—one strict and one broad. The broad meaning, to be found in dictionaries of the English language, is *to prove false, disprove*. The strict meaning is *to prove a theory false by confronting a hypothesis derived from this theory with empirical evidence*; the method is based on the argument form called *modus tollendo tollens*: $[(p \rightarrow q) \wedge \sim q] \rightarrow \sim p$.⁵ In the humanities, as elsewhere, scholars assess the value of their theories in a variety of ways. Empirically testing justifiable statements derived from theories under examination is only one such method. (Scholars can also assess the value of their theories by, for example, checking whether these are internally consistent or consistent with other theories of high epistemic status, examining their explanatory and predictive powers, analytical productivity, or simplicity). The two epistemic activities—proving that a theory (or any statement) is false and proving that a theory is false by empirically testing its verifiable consequents—have not been properly differentiated in my original text.

When defining contradictions in art as “co-presence of mutually exclusive meanings” which, regardless of how they are expressed in the artefact, should be “translatable into a conjunction of two mutually exclusive propositions” (Teske, “Contradictions in Fiction” 4), I make an important tacit assumption which should be explicitly stated. I assume, namely, that art is capable of conveying meanings, some of which may be paraphrased as propositions, i.e. statements bearing truth value. (The truth value is essential because the relation of mutual exclusion with reference to two meanings consists in the impossibility of the two meanings being true). To be able to differentiate between artistic contradictions which do and which do not break the principle of non-contradiction (or, more precisely, its colloquial counterpart), it is further necessary to assume that these propositions take the form of either a supposition or an assertion. Only if the two mutually exclusive propositions are asserted (i.e. presented as true), is the principle broken.

⁴ In the Epilogue they define the scientific method “understood broadly as a respect for empirical evidence and for logic” (203), as well as argue that one of “the natural sciences’ methodological principles” is “to evaluate the validity of a proposition on the basis of the facts and reasoning supporting it [. . .]” (188).

⁵ Cf. e.g. the following two sentences from Józef M. Bocheński’s *The Methods of Contemporary Thought*: “A statement is verifiable if it can be verified or falsified, that is, if it is *possible* to show that it is true or false” (55, *to falsify a statement* means here *to demonstrate that it is false*), and “Falsification is logically valid, but confirmation on the other hand is never conclusive. In this case, as has already been pointed out, the inference from consequent to antecedent does not hold logically; whereas the inference from the negation of the consequent to the negation of the antecedent is based on a law of logic and is universally valid” (94, here *to falsify* means *to infer from the negation of the consequent to the negation of the antecedent*).

Speaking of artistic contradictions (defined as conjoined mutually exclusive meanings inherent in works of art or obtaining between their meanings and the default model of reality which constitutes the works' original context), I discuss the sub-group of contradictions which violate the principle of non-contradictions (Teske, "Contradictions in Fiction" 4–5). It is naturally possible to isolate this subgroup but very few artistic contradictions will belong there, while what I really meant was the subgroup of artistic contradictions asserted as true (i.e. the subgroup of contradictions consisting of two mutually-exclusive propositions, conjoined and presented as true). In other words, having defined artistic contradictions in colloquial (rather than strict logical) terms, I should have consistently made it clear that the most conspicuous artistic contradictions are those which break the colloquial counterpart of the logical non-contradiction principle.

When presenting the outline of the cognitive theory of art, which provides the theoretical basis for my discussion of artistic contradictions, I assume that all artefacts entail an element of representation "in that, whether intentionally or not, they model or to some extent reflect, or at the very least carry traces of, either external or internal (i.e. psychic) reality, the mind's forms of cognition and the artistic process of creation included" (Teske, "Contradictions in Fiction" 7). I should have differentiated here between *representation* of extra-artefactual reality, whose aim is to produce a likeness of this reality (or its fragment), which is in principle intentional and which might be missing from some artefacts, and *reference* to extra-artefactual reality, which consists in marking a connection with this reality, which does not have to be intentional and which seems to be inevitable in art.

Twice in my original publication I use the term *manipulation*. I use it the first time when summarising the heuristic functions of contradictions which can be found in *House of Leaves*—they are used, among others, to "*frustrate their [the readers'] interpretive efforts and manipulate them into taking responsibility for the meaning they 'find' in the text*" (13–14). The second time I use the word when explaining one of the uses of metafiction—"metafiction (metafictional contradictions) may serve a further heuristic function if read as the author's attempt to avoid manipulating the readers by disclosing to them the secrets of the artistic workshop" (Teske, "Contradictions in Fiction" 15, footnote 32). In the former case, the word with its overtone of abuse might not be a fortunate one, *put them in the position where they need to take responsibility* was the intended meaning of the phrase "manipulate them into taking responsibility". But, as I stated above, I think that art (artists to be precise) can be manipulative; in particular, art can prompt its recipients to adopt certain beliefs or perform certain actions without appealing to their reason, without properly justifying the relevant beliefs and actions, by means of techniques which make these beliefs and actions appear (emotionally) attractive. Metafictional art can help readers stay on guard against this kind of manipulation by disclosing some such techniques (cf. the latter reference to manipulation in my text). Incidentally, artistic contradictions do not appear to be more dangerous, i.e. more likely to be used with manipulative intent, than other artistic techniques.

Speaking of the metafictional function of contradictions and referring to Patricia Waugh, I note that it sometimes entails "problematiz[ing] the relation between fact and fiction and deconstruct[ing] other cultural constructs that seem firm, unquestionable, and autonomous in their existence, but are in fact artificial [. . .]" (Teske, "Contradictions in Fiction" 15). I should also have noted that such metafictional contradictions may be used to explore the

ability of the human mind to create reality by inventing meanings and values. In other words, by means of contradictions postmodern fiction can and does demonstrate both that what seems real may be fictional and that what appears to be fiction may be real.

Discussing the heuristic uses of contradictions, I note that they may perform the experimental function when being part of “thought experiments” (Teske, “Contradictions in Fiction” 16). I now think that the experiments in question should better be called *artistic experiments*, and treated as *sui generis* experiments (different from both the scientific and the philosophical variety). In particular, *thought experiments* are usually restricted to hypothetical or counterfactual thinking, whereas experiments that can be staged in art (cf. the example of Martel’s *Life of Pi*) may be far more complex and often entail some imaginative vicarious experience on the part of the recipient (cf. *Contradictions in Art* 59–62).

Twice in my text I suggest that for Derrida *structure* resembles Kant’s categories of the understanding, i.e. it somehow organizes human experience (Teske, “Contradictions in Fiction” 18, 20). However, for Kant the categories of the understanding, though they cannot give us any insight into things in themselves, make our cognition of the phenomenal world possible. Apparently, *structure* fails to perform an analogical cognitive function for Derrida; insofar as it results in a mistaken view of reality, it should perhaps be called a category of misconception.

In the sentence “the same uncertainty [the uncertainty as to its truth or falsehood] applies to logocentrism, i.e. the classical metaphysics [. . .]” I equate logocentrism with classical metaphysics (Teske, “Contradictions in Fiction” 19). This was my attempt to be fair, adopt Derrida’s point of view and admit that all metaphysical assumptions are very much uncertain as regards their truth value. But taking into account that Derrida’s interpretation of classical metaphysics is only one of many interpretations, I would now prefer to make a clear distinction between logocentrism (i.e. Derrida’s interpretation of classical metaphysics) and classical metaphysics as such; naturally, in each case some (uncertain) metaphysical assumptions are involved.

In footnote 38, I suggest that “Even if the arts are essentially language-like (as it is sometimes argued), in so far as they are non-verbal, they need not be permeated with the same metaphysics that supposedly pervades all natural languages” and therefore artistic contradictions need not be automatically reinterpreted as “linguistically induced illusions” even if Derrida were correct about language and its logocentric bias (Teske, “Contradictions in Fiction” 19). But I now realize that in Derrida’s opinion all human experience is language-mediated⁶ and therefore so is human artistic activity, whether verbal or non-verbal; the argument presented above is invalid.

In September 2016, I published a book titled *Contradictions in Art: The Case of Postmodern Fiction*. My original publication in *Language Under Discussion* constitutes the core of chapter 8 of this book, however, the section devoted to the deconstructionist approach to contradictions in discourse in the book is expanded and includes discussions of passages

⁶ Cf. “Without language [. . .] would we in fact have experience in anything other than a brute physiological sense? Derrida’s view suggests that the answer is no, so that we never achieve any knowledge or meaning apart from the play of differences that constitutes language” (Gutting 302).

taken from Jacques Derrida's and Paul de Man's writings on Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau, i.e. passages which exemplify the deconstructionist treatment of textual contradictions. Compared with the article, the book also contains a much more detailed presentation of the cognitive theory of art (chapter 2), a more extensive discussion of the definition, properties and kinds of artistic and, in particular, narrative contradictions (chapters 3 and 6), some considerations about the impact of artistic contradictions on the process of interpreting and studying art (chapter 4), a comparative study of the uses that realist, modernist and postmodern texts make of narrative contradictions (chapter 7) and some additional analyses of the uses of contradictions in diverse thematic contexts in selected postmodern novels (chapter 9). Additionally, two chapters try to offer a (representative rather than complete) survey of critical texts on artistic contradictions in general (chapter 1) and on contradictions in postmodern fiction in particular (chapter 5). All in all, in the book, I attempt to offer the reader a more comprehensive approach to the issue of artistic contradictions, their postmodern narrative uses and importance for culture. Though the discussions are more detailed, the number of analysed books much higher, and many side issues, omitted in the article, properly covered, even this book-length study cannot aspire to exhaust the subject.

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