Language Under Discussion

Contradictions in fiction: Structuralism vs. Jacques Derrida and deconstruction

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Abstract. The phenomenon of contradiction has been highlighted in recent decades by both postmodern art and deconstructionist philosophy. Deconstructionists seem most interested in contradictions generated by language and hence pervading all human life; they expose contradictions and proclaim their inevitable and devastating impact on human beings' epistemological efforts. Postmodern art, though sometimes expressing radical scepticism, seems less predictable and more versatile in its use of contradictions. This paper attempts to offer a structuralist study of contradiction in discourse in the context of fictional narratives. Three contemporary novels—*The Unconsoled* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel and *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski—have been selected for the study. The paper focuses on the uses of contradictions and, in particular, their contribution to the works' meaning and the process of interpretation. It appears that contradictions in fiction perform various meaningful tasks and, with rare exceptions, do not preclude the possibility of a consistent reading of the text. The second section of the paper brings into consideration deconstructionists' and Jacques Derrida's views on contradiction. While the uses of contradictions in postmodern fiction might supply an argument with which to oppose the epistemic scepticism advocated by deconstructionists, Derrida's original treatment of contradictions, related to his critique of logocentrism inscribed in language, might be impervious to this kind of argument. Indeed, Derrida's critique of language might partly undermine structuralist studies of contradictions; one should, however, remember that this critique rests ultimately on Derrida's own uncertain metaphysical assumptions.

Keywords: contradictions, structuralism, deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, postmodern fiction

Introduction

The present paper is part of a larger project aimed at a formalist-structuralist exploration of contradictions in art in general and postmodern fiction in particular: their definition, essential features, types, uses, criteria of significance and cognitive value. As far as I know, the subject has not been given this kind of systematic treatment as yet. The key purpose of the present study is to consider whether recognizing the presence and importance of contradictions in fiction need entail epistemic scepticism.[1] Deconstruction, according to the standard (simplistic) interpretation, maintains that all discourse, being fraught with contradictions, fails to convey any consistent message. This sceptical conclusion, however, might be too rash since contradictions present in postmodern fiction[2] do not seem to have the destructive effect. Indeed, the study of three postmodern novels, conducted below in the framework of the structuralist paradigm, seems to show that contradictions might effectively contribute to the work's meaning and cognitive potential. However, as I also try to explain, this line of reasoning is less successful when it comes to Jacques Derrida's position, as apparently he bases his view of language on metaphysical beliefs. Thus, demonstrating that many contradictions to be found in works of art might be meaningful and heuristically useful does not suffice to prove Derrida wrong. Although the essay concerns in the first place fiction, it bears important implications for reflection upon language. The study of artistic contradiction might help defend the general ability of language to successfully communicate meanings, as well as participate in cognitive experience, in spite of the contradictions that utterances of various kinds may contain.

The choice of the object of investigation (i.e. artistic contradictions) does not need much explaining. First, contemporary poetics is said to be based on contradictions. Many theoreticians of the novel are agreed on this: David Lodge believes that contradiction is one of the alternative principles of composition in postmodernist fiction (10–11), Linda Hutcheon sees postmodernism as "a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (3), and Douwe Fokkema lists logical impossibility as one of the basic strategies of postmodernist poetics (quoted in Brian McHale 7).[3] Further, contradictions constitute a challenge for the methodology of the humanities: they complicate the procedure of falsification, in which a contradiction is normally a signal of the researcher's error on the assumption that the object under investigation is free of contradictions.[4] They also pose a challenge to cognitive theories of art: it is unclear how an

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[1] Although contradictions may be encountered in various kinds of art, studies such as this one—focusing on one kind of art (in this case, contemporary prose narrative)—may also be of use. While some kinds of contradictions may be specific to a given kind of art, others may be widespread or even universal. One cannot automatically generalize the findings of such research but they certainly contribute to the general picture.

[2] *Nota bene*, deconstructionists do not recognize the distinction between artistic and non-artistic uses of language.

[3] Of course this is not to suggest that contradictions in art are a postmodern invention. Art, being in principle free, has always been open to contradictions, even when harmony was in vogue. Various constraints may be and have been laid upon art by political censorship, the artist's sense of decorum, the limits of the genre, convention and the like, but the logical principle of non-contradiction does not seem to have ever been one of them. However, even if contradictions have always been part of art, they have now become its dominant feature.

[4] The concept of falsification belongs to the Popperian model of science, reconstructed on the basis of the natural sciences. Whether this model, possibly with some reservations, is relevant to the humanities is an open question (I investigate this problem at length in Teske, "The Methodology"). Even so, it seems that many

artefact abounding in contradictions can perform cognitive functions, given that violation of the non-contradiction principle, as argued already by Aristotle and Duns Scotus, effectively undermines the rationality of discourse.[5] In short, the object of investigation seems to be a prominent phenomenon in contemporary culture and one which might have far-reaching consequences for scholarship.

The choice of the structuralist approach may, on the other hand, raise some doubts. Contradictions have recently received much attention from Jacques Derrida and other deconstructionists. The presence of contradictions in all kinds of discourse has led them, and poststructuralists in general, to question the view that a (literary) text is an artfully shaped coherent message to be retrieved by the reader in the process of interpretation. Instead of searching for the objective meaning of the text, they suggest that one should enjoy the text's multiple but fragmentary meanings, recognizing the previously marginalized contradictions. More to the point, Derrida and his followers question the structuralist approach, arguing that (1) the notion of structure lacks ultimate justification; (2) every text, because it uses language, contradicts itself and thus cancels its own message; and (3) the only attitude available to a scholar is that of an epistemic sceptic. This deconstructionist critique of structuralism is one of the reasons for undertaking the present study: a discussion of contradictions in fiction, i.e., in artefacts which make extensive use of language, might help decide whether structuralism has indeed been naively mistaken about the human ability to explore reality.

The term *structuralism* also needs some clarification. It is first of all a methodological approach initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, which, as Robert Scholes explains, assuming the objective reality and intelligibility of the world, analyses it in terms of structures and relations among their elements, searching for general laws, trying to integrate scientific knowledge about nature and culture (1–12). In the humanities, structuralism is thus an approach which assumes epistemic realism, adopts the scientific method and investigates cultural phenomena.[6] This interpretation of the structuralist approach is exemplified by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's study of narrative poetics (cf. also her discussion of the formalist-structuralist approach, Rimmon-Kenan 136–37) and should be distinguished from an interpretation that highlights the element of epistemic scepticism allegedly inherent in the structuralist theory of language.[7]

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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.

[5] This is so because the proposition: *p and ~ p* is identical with its negation *~ (p and ~ p),* as argued by Aristotle (this is Gutting's interpretation of Aristotle, 304; for a different interpretation see Robert Poczobut 25), and because *if (p and ~ p) then q,* as argued by Duns Scotus. (I elaborate on the consequences of contradictions present in art for cognitive theories of art and the methodology of the humanities in Teske, "Poznawcza").

[6] Unlike the majority of currently available approaches, structuralism thus construed does not place political objectives on its agenda and makes practically no ideological assumptions (other than those involved in the choice of rationalism).

[7] It is often argued nowadays that the sceptical view of cognition, related to the recognition of the auto-referential nature of language, though not fully recognized by structuralists, has its origin in the thought of Saussure and might be seen as part of structuralism. Norris, for example, discussing the linguist's contribution to epistemology, points out that his "insistence on the 'arbitrary' nature of the sign led to his undoing of the natural link that common sense assumes to exist between word and thing. Meanings are bound up, according to Saussure, in a system of relationship and difference that effectively determines our habits of thought and perception. Far from providing a 'window' on reality [...] language brings along with it a whole intricate

In the first part of my essay, adopting the structuralist framework, I want to focus on various uses of contradictions in contemporary fiction and show how they contribute to the text's meaning and its cognitive potential. By way of introduction, I briefly discuss three contemporary English-language novels, *The Unconsoled* (1995) by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Life of Pi* (2001) by Yann Martel, and *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski, all of which exemplify the postmodern convention and various uses of contradictions. On this basis, I try to list the major types of functions that contradictions perform there, indicating how they might contribute to the meaning of a given novel and/or the process of its interpretation. In the second part of my essay I try to view the results of my analysis in the context of poststructuralism, represented here by deconstruction in general and by Derrida in particular. This is also where the implications of the former analysis for the theory of language come into the foreground.

A definition of contradictions

For the sake of the present discussion I adopt the following definition: contradiction in art consists in the co-presence of mutually exclusive meanings. The meanings can be expressed explicitly (i.e. verbally), or by means of the work's fictional model of reality, or by the work's form, but in principle they are translatable into a conjunction of two mutually exclusive propositions. Artistic contradictions can be found, first and foremost, in artefacts themselves; however, contradictions obtaining between artefacts and the accepted model of reality (external to artefacts) may also be treated as part of the phenomenon of contradiction in art: the artist assumes that this model provides the context for the work's reception and thus in a way incorporates it into the work.[8] Alternatively, the latter contradictions might be treated as being located within aesthetic experience and ensuing in the process of interaction between the artefact and the mind of the recipient.

Here I list some more specific considerations concerning contradictions, following the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of the paper in order to make the subsequent discussion clearer.

Philosophers recognize various categories of contradictions; most important however are *logical contradictions* obtaining between propositions, one of which negates the other (e.g. *Life is fun* and *Life is not fun*) and *ontological contradictions* obtaining in reality when one state of affairs negates the other state of affairs (e.g. a ball which both is and is not red). A third common kind of contradiction is *psychological*, obtaining between a mental act and its negation (e.g. someone may both believe and not believe there is God). There is also *the principle of non-contradiction* (in various formulations—logical and ontological among them), which states that a conjunction of contradictory propositions is false (the logical version) and

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network of established significations". For Norris "[t]his basic *relativity* of thought and meaning [...] is the starting point of structuralist theory" (4–5).

    [8] One might argue that in art which employs the mode of fiction internal contradictions might also in some cases (i.e. when the fictional reality of a given artefact does not entail the rules of classical logic) involve a reference to external reality with its notion of contradiction and principle of non-contradiction. Be that as it may, I think it is possible to differentiate between a work of art that contains two mutually exclusive meanings (p and $\sim p$) and a work that contains one meaning (p) that is incompatible with the currently accepted model of reality (invoked in the work) containing the mutually exclusive meaning ($\sim p$).

that objects with contradictory properties (or contradictory states of affairs) do not exist (the ontological version). The rule of non-contradiction thus states that there are no true conjunctions of contradictory propositions and no real objects with contradictory properties.[9]

One may thus distinguish between contradictions in general and contradictions violating the non-contradiction principle in particular. This distinction may be illustrated using the novel *Thinks...* by David Lodge. If one character (Ralph Messenger) believes that the self is an illusion and another (Helen Reed) that it is not, we have a contradiction (contradictory beliefs). The principle of non-contradiction is not breached unless the implied author or narrator (some textual authority) gives his/her full support to both these beliefs, implying that they are both true and so is their conjunction (this does not seem to be the case in Lodge's novel). Thus for the violation of the principle of non-contradiction it is not enough that the two contradictory ideas be presented in the text: they must be presented in conjunction as true.

As can be seen, in defining *artistic contradictions*, I broaden the logical definition so as to approximate the common usage of the term in this field.[10] Thus, contradiction here means the relationship between any two propositions that *mutually exclude each other* (cannot both be true) and not only those which negate each other. Also, in the present research project, I am interested in contradictions in general, but especially in those which (seem to) violate the principle of non-contradiction. It is commonly assumed that this violation is impossible in reality[11] but it can take place in artificial constructs, especially those which employ the mode of fiction.

Contradictions can be constructed and can also be resolved. Resolution will be achieved if at least one contradictory element is cancelled or if contradictoriness between the two elements turns out to be merely apparent (some important factor or context previously missing is now added, *Life is fun* and *Life is not fun* might be replaced with *Most of the time life is fun* and *Life is not fun when you need to walk your dog and it is raining*). In the case of contradictions violating the principle of non-contradiction the recognition that the conjunction of the contradictory ideas is false, though this does not solve the contradiction,

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[9] This discussion is based on Poczobut (19–58).

[10] Lodge cites as an example of contradiction a sentence taken from Leonard Michael's work, "It is impossible to live with or without fiction" (10), Patricia Waugh illustrates the phenomenon with the alternative endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles and with metaphors suddenly becoming literal in Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (140). As can be seen, the term is at times taken very broadly. The common non-professional interpretation of contradiction, as Poczobut suggests, identifies it not with negation but with mutual exclusion (64–65).

[11] According to some philosophers, verbal paradoxes entailed mostly in statements concerning their own truth-value or ontological paradoxes involved, for instance, in the phenomenon of change might be exceptions to this rule. Graham Priest is a contemporary representative of this approach. He believes that some logical contradictions are true. "This sentence is false" is a case in point: the proposition is both true and false, both the proposition and its negation are true (Priest, "Logically Speaking"). Priest also believes that it is a mistake to assume that there are no true contradictions in the world; as he puts it in his short story "Sylvan's Box", there seems to be no reason why "existence should imply consistency" (577). Accordingly, the story entails a discovery of a cardboard box which at the same time is empty and contains a wooden figurine (575). Interestingly, Priest does not postulate epistemic scepticism as a consequence of accepting true or real contradictions; he does, however, recognize a need for a paraconsistent logic; i.e. a logic that can operate on contradictions ("Logically Speaking"; for a detailed discussion of Priest's standpoint see Poczobut 150–69, 371–91).

makes it comply with the principle. This resolution may take place in the artefact but may also be part of the recipient's aesthetic experience.

Some contradictions are contained within the artefact. Others operate between the artefact and the default model of reality assumed by the author in the artefact as a point of reference, identifiable with the currently adopted/dominant model with which the prospective recipient of the artefact will be conversant. The principle of non-contradiction, however, is only violated if the author clearly signals that he/she accepts as true both the belief expressed in the artefact and the default belief about the real world that serves as a point of reference (and such clarity might rarely be available).[12]

Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* may be used to illustrate this distinction. The book's protagonist is a young woman who is aware of her sexuality, unconcerned about moral issues, able and willing to take control of her life. This image of femininity contradicts the contemporary social stereotype of young women: innocent, weak and passive. Still, if Carter (or, more precisely, the implied author) does not accept the stereotypical perception of women, the principle of non-contradiction is not violated. *The Bloody Chamber* can also be taken to show that *contradictions may operate between various works of art* (e.g. between the traditional version of *Little Red Riding Hood* and Carter's "The Company of Wolves").

Finally, as regards the contradiction between the meaning implied by certain artistic forms and the accepted model of reality which can be found in various specific artistic conventions such as the two-dimensional presentation of three-dimensional reality in painting, speaking animals in fairy tales, verbal presentation of the private content of a character's consciousness by an external narrator and the like, it seems that they are treated as negligible in the act of reception. Thus, even though the wolf encountered by Little Red Riding Hood can speak, the reader will not be disturbed by this, will not try to guess the meaning hidden behind this contradiction, though s/he knows that wolves cannot speak.[13] Apparently, contradictions which are either part of art in general or part of well-established conventions lose their significance. The recipient notes them when identifying the convention, but thereafter focuses his/her attention elsewhere, as if only unconventional contradictions (the genderless narrator in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* or the contingent God in Samuel Beckett's *Watt*) are truly meaningful. *Nota bene*: the very convention of fiction involves a contradiction (stories which are not true are presented as if they were); we can speak of a breach of the non-contradiction principle only if the author both claims that the story is authentic (true) and indicates that it is not, i.e. in some kinds of metafiction. The standpoint presented here is merely a provisional answer to the complex question concerning the criteria of significance of artistic contradictions.

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[12] One might also consider the possibility of aesthetic experience entailing a violation of the principle of non-contradiction if the recipient of the artefact, consciously or not, combines the belief expressed in the artefact with a mutually exclusive belief that s/he holds.

[13] In general, speaking animals often inform the reader that the tale in which they feature belongs to the genre of the fairy tale, as well as vaguely suggesting that human beings are part of nature.

Major assumptions concerning art's cognitive function

It is assumed in the present paper that all artefacts, apart from an element of free creation, 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. (In recognizing the last two options and hence basically the omnipresence of the element of representation in art I follow Piotr Gutowski).

It is further assumed that by virtue of the information art conveys about its maker and his/her experience and interpretation of reality as well as by virtue of art's ability to occasion new experiences (supplement the recipients' matter-of-course life experience with new stimuli in new contexts, thus providing them with material for reflection and developing their imagination, sensibility, memory, etc.), art can be taken as part of the human cognitive endeavour. Its distinctive feature is its focus on exploring psychic experience. This exploration is typically individual: the subject examines him/herself by means of an artefact in an artistic experience occasioned by the artefact. Yet its results are not in principle subjective or otherwise relative; the aim of this exploration is to find objective truth, though this truth need not apply to, or be of interest to, other people.

Part I: Uses of contradiction in contemporary fiction (a structuralist approach)

The Unconsoled: Contradictions used to instruct the reader how to interpret the text

Ishiguro's novel tells of Ryder—allegedly a pianist of great renown and a man capable of bringing back the town's prosperity—who is in fact a confused and helpless neurotic driven by a desperate wish to reconcile his parents with each other, save the town from cultural degradation and please everybody (continually approached by various people, Ryder is unable to refuse their requests). The novel may be taken to demonstrate the illusory nature of human grasp on reality, which sometimes complies with one's wishes but more often develops in weird, unpredictable, absurd ways. It may also be taken to show how (neurotic) people, unaware of what they are doing, permanently try, and fail, to rescue their parents' mutual love. It may further be read as a variation on Derrida's ethics of the multiple conflicting responsibilities one has towards the Other, each of them absolute and overriding the other ones (cf. Gutting 308–17). Most of these meanings could hardly be available, were it not for the contradictions inherent in the book.

Consider the following passage:

> I was just starting to doze off when something suddenly made me open my eyes again and stare up at the ceiling. I went on scrutinising the ceiling for some time, then sat up on the bed and looked around, the sense of recognition growing stronger by the second. The room I was now in, I realised, was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt's house on the borders of England and Wales. I looked again around the room, then, lowering myself back down, stared once more at the ceiling. It had been recently re-plastered and re-painted, its dimensions had been enlarged, the cornices had been removed, the decorations around the light fitting had been entirely altered. But it was unmistakably the same ceiling I had so often stared up at from my narrow creaking bed of those days. (*The Unconsoled* 16)

Ryder realizes that the hotel room he is in is the bedroom in the house of his aunt, where he lived for some time with his parents. This, however, is impossible: two different locations cannot be the same location (the town in which the action of the book is set lies, as most critics agree, somewhere in Central or Eastern Europe, i.e. not on the borders of England and Wales).[14] Looking in particular at the ceiling above him, Ryder is certain of its identity with the other one, while noting that it has been completely redecorated, which means that any grounds for the recognition of the ceilings' identity have been obliterated. Contradiction obtains here between the novel's fictional reality (in particular, Ryder's experience) and the accepted model of reality, and suggests that either there is something out of order with Ryder's perception of space and logical thinking (he may be an unreliable focaliser and narrator whose reports are not truthful) or the novel should not be taken as offering a literal presentation of external reality.

Indeed, the novel abounds in such irregular experiences of place, time and people, conflicting with the reader's common-sense, which says that reality cannot rearrange itself at will, time passes at a by-and-large constant pace, one's closest family and friends do not normally impress one as total strangers. Critics have frequently noted this strangely distorted character of the novel's fictional reality (cf. e.g. A. Harris Fairbanks, or Brian Shaffer 97–103). All these contradictions may be taken to (1) indicate that the novel's reality is not meant as a model of empirical reality but an allegorical representation of Ryder's (human) subconscious or unconscious[15] and, more specifically, (2) reveal their conflicted and illogical nature.

Further, Ryder, who in the novel acts as the narrator and has on the whole direct access only to his own mind, sometimes gains insight into other characters' minds: Gustav's (e.g. Ryder knows of Gustav's worries concerning his grandson's anxious recognition of his mother's low spirits, *The Unconsoled* 13–14); Stephen's (e.g. Ryder knows the young man is troubled by a memory of an evening when Stephen's poor piano performance upset his mother, 65–71); Boris's (e.g. Ryder has a vision of Boris's fantasy in which together with his grandfather the boy fights against a gang of street thugs, 218–22); Brodsky's (e.g. Ryder "remembers" a disagreement between Miss Collins and Brodsky which he did not witness, 358–61). This otherwise incomprehensible telepathic ability (the accepted model of reality does not allow for the possibility that people have direct insight into other people's minds) might suggest that some characters are projections of Ryder, his alter egos, rather than characters in their own right.[16]

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[14] Cf. Natalie Reitano (364, 373) or Charlotte Innes (546). See also Richard Robinson's list of the countries (England included) identified in the text as foreign (108–09).

[15] Many critics have read the novel along these lines; cf. Fairbanks's analysis of the novel's "anomalies" and "abnormalities", which for him indicate that the story takes place in the dreamworld—a world that is like a dream but at the same time has the status of "the ultimate reality" (605–06); cf. also Gary Adelman's belief that "To display Ryder's interior life, Ishiguro combines the fantastic realism of a dream narrative with the staginess of a theatrical farce" (167), Barry Lewis' interpretation of the town in *The Unconsoled* as a "projection of Ryder's unconscious" (quoted in Fairbanks 605), or Robinson's interpretation of "the Eastwood error" (in the novel the actor is supposed to feature in *2001: A Space Odyssey*) as indicating, together with the unspecified setting, that the story takes place in "the fabulist and metaphorical domain" (108).

[16] Cf. Ishiguro: "The whole thing is supposed to take place in some strange world, where Ryder appropriates the people he encounters to work out parts of his life and his past. I was using dream as a model. So this is a biography of a person, but instead of using memory and flashback, you have him wandering about in this dream

Some other distortions of reality in the novel approximate the grotesque.[17] A case in point is the porters' code, which says that three suitcases should be carried in the hands and the fourth may be placed on the floor but that if the porter is elderly—two should be kept in the hands and one may rest on the floor (5–9). The porters' code is presented by Gustav as if it were a sensible, progressive innovation while being patently harmful and useless—an absurd way to complicate one's life in the name of a meaningless ritual. Similarly absurd is Ryder's concert for Brodsky's dead dog (356–62) or the operation in which the surgeon cuts off Brodsky's artificial leg without realizing the leg is a prosthesis (464). Such incidents, involving an exaggerated, comic distortion of the standard model of empirical reality (sometimes falling short of explicit contradiction), nicely capture the absurdity of human life, possibly eliciting the reader's half-hearted smile.

The reason why the above-mentioned contradictions in the novel cannot easily be dismissed by the reader, even though they do not violate the principle of non-contradiction,[18] is their omnipresence as well as heterogeneity (some seem explicable in terms of Ryder's faulty cognitive apparatus, while others—Ryder's ability to read other people's minds or the grotesque elements—seem to be controlled directly by the implied author).

Let me close the discussion of Ishiguro's novel with a comment on contradictions involved in the novel's ethical theme. Ryder may be taken as a portrait of each and every human being whose multiple responsibilities towards the Other cannot possibly all be fulfilled. For example, Fiona's request that Ryder should be her guest when she is visited by her friends, Inge and Trude, conflicts with Boris's request that Ryder should help him find the missing football player. This conflict in itself does not count as a contradiction. However, if the Other is everybody one encounters and the obligation one has towards every Other is absolute (as argued by Derrida), it is clear that in practice these obligations will all the time be mutually exclusive: to fulfil one will be to neglect another and yet all of them are imperative (the deontic principle of non-contradiction is here clearly violated). Human ethical situation is thus deplorable: people cannot possibly live up to the moral imperative which, according to Derrida, binds them. *The Unconsoled*, by means of Ryder's abortive struggle to help everybody, seems to bring this truth home to the reader. In other words, we deal here with conflicts in the realm of fictional reality which may be taken to indicate the self-contradictory nature of human moral obligations. The mechanism is quite different from the one discussed above with reference to the contradictions instructing the reader how to read the novel.[19]

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world where he bumps into earlier, or later, versions of himself. They're not literally so. They are to some extent other people [...]" (quoted in Fairbanks 607, cf. also Adelman's analysis of the novel's characters, 167).

[17] Cf. Shaffer, for whom the novel's dimension "at once absurdist and uncanny, dreamlike and tragicomic [...] recalls the work of Kafka and Beckett and [...] both parodies and stretches the conventions of prose fiction" (90).

[18] Consider the contradiction between Ryder's sense of heroic mission and his hopelessness, exemplified, among other things, by his initial determination and eventual failure to find Boris' lost football player, Ryder's belief in his omnipotence (revealed in his monologue) contradicts the implied author's conviction (illustrated by various incidents from Ryder's life) that humans, irrespective of how they feel, are subject in their actions to serious limitations. The two opinions are mutually exclusive but no one claims that they are both true, and most readers will probably conclude that Ryder's belief is erroneous.

[19] It is worth noting that this "ethical" contradiction involves normative statements rather than assertions of facts and so might require a non-standard definition of contradiction (in logic the two kinds of discourse are often treated differently).

To sum up, some contradictions in the book serve *to guide the reader's interpretation* of the text, preventing a literal and inviting an allegorical reading of the fictional reality. Others *contribute to the novel's themes*: the conflicted nature of the subconscious (or of the neurotic personality), as well as human ethical predicament. Still other contradictions (or quasi-contradictions) *produce a comic/absurd effect in the book.*

Life of Pi: Contradictions used to stage a thought experiment

Life of Pi is a novel about the rationality of theistic belief and, more generally, about epistemic criteria that help people make rational choices between competing beliefs. The novel seems to defend the theses that theism is rational (on pragmatic rather than epistemic grounds), and that atheism—in its choice of commitment—resembles faith, whereas agnosticism can be identified with dogmatic materialism and a passive attitude towards life (this thesis and the reinterpretation of the main concepts it involves contradict the standard approach and definitions). To encourage readers to consider the non-standard views, the novel engages them in an epistemic experiment, offering them two mutually exclusive versions of Pi's survival story, one of which (the imaginative version which the novel identifies with theism) additionally seems to contradict the common-sense view of empirical reality. The novel's use of contradictions is much more extensive but its discussion here will be limited to the experiment in question and its novelistic interpretation (I discuss the book's contradictions comprehensively in Teske, "*Life of Pi*").

The bulk of the novel is a 1st-person retrospective account of Pi's survival. The account is hard to believe: a 16-year-old boy survives 227 days drifting in the Pacific in a lifeboat all alone except for a Bengal tiger, whose name is Richard Parker. Other challenges to the reader's credulity include: an orang-utan floating on bananas, the accidental meeting in the middle of the ocean of two lifeboats "navigated" by two blind castaways, and a "predatory" island with carnivorous trees. Yet the novel's "author" (one of the narrators acting as if he were the author) claims that the story is based on facts. This impression of authenticity is strengthened by the descriptions, which are rich in detail, and the tone of the novel, which at times is close to semi-documentary. The readers are thus presented with an opportunity to test their will to believe. The majority will eventually, though perhaps regretfully, conclude that the story is "false" as it contradicts their knowledge of life.

Because the story of Pi's survival fails to satisfy the officials investigating the sinking of the ship, Pi offers an alternative version. Though there are multiple parallels between the two accounts (e.g. the hyena from the former corresponds to the cook from the latter), they exclude each other. The former shows Pi as a pious, righteous man; whereas in the latter, after the cook has murdered the sailor and Pi's mother, Pi murders the cook and triumphantly eats his heart and liver. The officials and the reader now face the choice, as Pi suggests, between belief (the original version) and scepticism (the alternative version). According to Pi, since neither of the stories is verifiable, and both fail to explain the mystery of the ship's sinking (both have equal explanatory power in this respect), one should feel free to believe "the better story", i.e. choose (theistic) belief. (As a matter of fact, Pi's advice may be questioned: a rational response to the situation in which one is presented with two conflicting accounts of equal epistemic status may well consist in concluding that at least one of them is

false, though neither need be true, and suspending one's judgment. Also, it is debatable whether the epistemic status of the two versions of Pi's story is really identical).

To sum up, the novel offers the readers an imaginative experiment. By participating in it and reflecting upon it, they may develop their awareness of themselves (of the criteria that help them choose their beliefs). The most prominent of the novel's contradictions (those between the former version of the story and common-sense knowledge as well as between the two versions of the story) are *part of the thought experiment*. Others, especially those obtaining between *Life of Pi*'s definitions of atheism, agnosticism, rationality and their standard definitions, *contribute to the novel's* epistemic *theme*: the reader may find them thought-provoking. *Nota bene*, none of these contradictions violates the principle of non-contradiction: the two mutually exclusive accounts of Pi's story are presented as a disjunction; and when the narrator's (or the implied author's) ideas contradict the common-sense model of reality or the dictionary definitions of certain words, no one claims that the conjunction of the mutually exclusive ideas is true. (To be precise, Pi lets the reader assume at first that the original version of his adventures is true and later explicitly claims that it is not impossible, but, even though the claim might for many readers appear highly controversial, their notion of what is possible being less liberal than Pi's, it does not entail a clear-cut violation of the non-contradiction principle).

House of Leaves: Contradictions used to weaken the author's responsibility for the book's message

Danielewski's novel, though fraught with contradictions, which often involve a breach of the principle of non-contradiction, may nonetheless, I think, be taken to convey a message, namely that telling oneself imaginary stories can help heal non-imaginary wounds; the terrifying awareness of one's ability to inflict damage may be relieved by nursing one's hope that people can care for each other. To find this message the reader must want it, otherwise it is not available: the book may just as well be read as nihilistic (cf. Will Slocombe's interpretation) or resistant to all interpretations by virtue of its omnipresent contradictions. Thus, like *Life of Pi* but on a more fundamental level, this novel too operates as a kind of experiment: the readers can experience their desire for meaning. Considering the novel's complex structure, length, and contradictions, the quest consumes much energy, yet the dramatic events, the likeable narrator and the troubling problem of evil may counterbalance the reader's wish to give up.

The following brief account of the book will exemplify some of the contradictions of which it consists. The story begins when John Truant visits the flat of a recently deceased man, Zampanò. Among the man's belongings, he finds piles of notes which, put together, amount to an academic monograph on documentary films by Will Navidson. This is odd since Zampanò had no chance to watch the films, having been blind when they first allegedly began to circulate.[20] Odder still, the films, Truant argues, do not really exist (*House of Leaves* xix–xx). Irrespective of their uncertain status, the films were originally meant to document the happy family life of Will, his partner, Karen Green, and their children. However, after it

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[20] As reported by Truant (*House of Leaves* xxi) and confirmed by Zampanò in his correspondence dating from 1978 (*House of Leaves*, Appendix D, 554).

transpires that their new house is bigger on the inside than the outside and hides a void, the films record perilous expeditions into the empty space. Zampanò's account of the films is annotated with Truant's footnotes telling the story of Truant's own life.

To find in the novel the message indicated above one needs to assume that John Truant is the real protagonist of the novel as well as the author of the Navidsons' story,[21] who attributes the story to Zampanò, a make-believe character (his name is borrowed from the motion picture *La Strada*[22]), perhaps hoping that the mystification will make the story more real and more effective. The stakes are high: Truant needs to persuade himself that even though his own mother tried to maim and kill him, his father died when Truant was still a child, and his foster father was a cruel sadist, he himself is not doomed to hurt others. So he tells himself the story of a happy family suddenly threatened by a void (an objective, so to speak, correlative of Truant's capacity for destruction). To be defeated, the void must be faced. This is what Will does, as well as Karen (when she goes searching for Will) and Truant (when he tells himself the story), and the readers (when they read it). Even though the ending of the story is ambiguous,[23] the reader may believe that Truant is doing his best, struggling to save himself from madness, following his insane mother's advice ("your words and only your words will heal your heart", *House of Leaves* 598). By choosing the optimistic interpretation, the reader may share with Truant this experience of opposing self-destruction.

In light of this interpretation many contradictions make sense. The most conspicuous ones (the blind man acting as an expert on films that do not exist; the house that is bigger on the inside than the outside because it contains a void, all of which violate the principle of non-contradiction) help convey the idea that *House of Leaves* is a record of Truant's experience and his attempt to come to terms with himself (rather than a horror story about the Navidsons' house). Other contradictions (e.g. the episode in which Truant in the bar has a chance to listen to songs based on his own book that seems still to be in progress, *House of Leaves* 512–14) apparently serve to undermine this interpretation.[24] If on the level of Truant (i.e. the top-most narrator) the contradictions of the text cannot be fully resolved,[25] one might

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[21] Critics consider this possibility, see, e.g. Natalie Hamilton (8–9).

[22] Cf. the critical note by Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, following their interview with Danielewski, concerning the character's name (Danielewski, "Haunted House" 125–26).

[23] Cf. the emotional ambiguity of the Navidsons' reunion (their happiness seems forced, 526–28) and Truant's metafictional trick (the episode in which he invents friends who allegedly help him regain sanity, then mocks the reader for taking them as real, 507–09). This trick reminds the reader of Truant's uncertain credentials and undermines the positive meaning of the ending of his own story. However, Truant excuses himself "[…] I wasn't trying to trick you. I was trying to trick myself […] I had to make something up to fill the disconcerting void. Had to" (*House of Leaves* 509)—this admission might do something to restore the reader's trust.

[24] The impact of this particular contradiction is not totally destructive as in another entry of his diary, Truant declines responsibility for the entry in which the scene in the bar is depicted (*House of Leaves* 515). Cf. also Slocombe's note: "Although Johnny Truant receives a copy of *House of Leaves* from a band […], this is not intrinsically paradoxical since the band reads the "Circle Round A Stone" first edition (the internet version). The chapter in which this occurs (ch. 21) did not appear in the original internet edition and so there is—in strict terms, at least—no paradox presented" (note 11, p. 108). Even so, such contradictions confuse the reader and complicate the process of interpreting the book.

[25] The contradiction that is most damaging to the above interpretation of the novel is constituted by a reference to Zampanò, of whose existence Pelafina (Truant's mother) could not know, included in one of her letters, discussed by N. Katherine Hayles: in the letter dated 5 April 1986 there is: "a semicoherent series of phrases encapsulated within dashes", which in the code established earlier between Pelafina and Truant reads as follows: "My dear Zampanò who did you lose?". As Hayles explains, "The intimation that Pelafina can speak

resort to the level of the implied author. The implied author should in that case be taken as responsible for projecting his experience (i.e. presumably the fear that because of the harm he has suffered he might be a dangerous man) on Truant and staging the whole mystification: himself telling the story of Truant, who tells the story of Zampanò, who tells the story of Will Navidson, who makes documentary films about the house in which two people hoped to be safe and happy, fought against a void and survived. Not killing them, the implied author gives himself the right to hope that he can control his will to destruction. Admittedly, this whole construction seems highly contrived and entails a hardly acceptable anthropomorphisation of the implied author.

Thus, some contradictions make the reader realize that the whole book might represent Truant's (or the implied author's) effort to nurse his hope that he need not be dangerous; others seem to prevent this reading. Taken together these contradictions in *House of Leaves* might be said to perform yet another function: shaping the readers' response to the text. They challenge the readers to accept the fact that they (together with the author) construct the meaning of this text; it is not ready-made for them. They may actually experience the effort demanded of them and, since the reading is so toilsome and demands that they ignore the note preceding the text, "This is not for you", those who persevere become emotionally implicated. When they reach the end of the book, it is too late for them to detach themselves from the story, its sorrow, and hope, by claiming that this is only a work of fiction. Thus Truant's (and/or the implied author's) effort to find some reassurance by means of story-telling is, with the help of the contradictions, partly transferred onto the reader.

Alternatively, given Pelafina's reference to Zampanò (cf. note 25 to the present essay), the book may be taken as self-negating. *House of Leaves*, by virtue of this contradiction, becomes then a rare example of a book which resists all interpretations (cancels its own message). The only message that still remains is that the meaning cannot be found unless one creates it in spite of the text's efforts to remain meaningless.[26]

Once again this discussion of the uses of contradictions in the novel—*to guide the readers' interpretation, frustrate their interpretive effort and manipulate them into taking responsibility*

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about Zampanò implies she may be the writer who creates both the old man's narrative and her son's commentary" (802). If Pelafina is the book's author, the novel can hardly be interpreted along the previously indicated lines—as the author's desperate attempt to defend one's faith in one's ability to protect the world against oneself; on the one hand, Pelafina does not seem perturbed by her potential for destruction, on the other, the reader has no reason to believe that any part of the book authored by her is meant to represent any reality: the whole mystification involving John Truant, Zampanò, the Navidsons does not seem to make much sense any more. *Nota bene*, considering how well the contradiction in question is hidden, most readers will miss it; only the extremely curious will have to confront the challenge.

[26] This argumentation does not seem conclusive. There are some ways of accounting for the puzzling reference to Zampanò in Pelafina's letter. One might, for example, assume that the letter (possibly also other letters—the readers' important source of information about Truant) was forged, but this means in effect that the readers have no steady ground on which to base their interpretation. Sergeiy Sandler in personal correspondence indicated to me two other possibilities: Pelafina might have prophetic powers and thus be aware of the presence of Zampanò in her son's future life (this explanation seems counter-intuitive as it introduces an element of magic into the frame narrative that otherwise seems to comply with the commonsensical view of reality), or her son might have decoded the strange sentence from his mother's letter (though it was not supposed to be coded) and used it later when inventing the story of the Navidsons. In light of both these explanations John Truant may well remain the narrative's author, the previous interpretation does not require any modification.

for the meaning they "find" in the text—does not exhaust the subject. No mention has been made of the contradictions that can be taken *to intimate the complexity of human life experience* (cf. the house that can be "unheimlich", *House of Leaves* 28) or *show the conflicted nature of the mind of a psychotic person* (cf. Pelafina's conviction that her attempt to kill her son, sparing him the pain of living, is an act of love, *House of Leaves* 630) or *contribute to the novel's epistemic investigation of the notions of interpretation, representation, meaning* and the like (cf. Zampanò's discussion of various mutually exclusive scholarly interpretations of the way Navidson films the mugs and sunflower seeds, note 113, *House of Leaves* 98–99),[27] or serve to *develop the metafictional theme of the novel*, i.e. the novel's concern with its own fictional status and with the notion of reality (Zampanò's name borrowed from Fellini's *La Strada* or the scene in which Navidson reads *House of Leaves*, 465–67, exemplify this kind of contradiction).[28]

To conclude, on the basis of this cursory discussion of the novels of Ishiguro, Martel and Danielewski it seems reasonable to argue that their numerous contradictions do not prevent the books from being meaningful. On the contrary, the contradictions enable the books to offer some of their meanings to their readers. Danielewski's novel might in this respect be an exception in so far as some of the novel's contradictions might be taken to prevent a coherent, overall reading of the text.

All this should not be taken to imply that the thesis that contradictions can generate meaning in art is entirely new. Brian G. Caraher, for example, interprets contradiction as "intimate conflict", "a conflicted yet generative principle of artistic, literary, and philosophical discourse" (14). There, he argues, it is a basic concept and "as such it indicates the conflicted and conflictual nature of philosophical thinking, aesthetic experience, and literary language. Contradiction does not cancel, undermine, or paralyze cognition and discourse but, instead, helps to constitute these activities in intriguing and sometimes disturbing perplexity" (1; cf. also the whole editorial introduction to the collection of essays concerning contradiction in art, 1–19). In his fairly critical review of the above book, Wendell V. Harris also recognizes the possible cognitive benefits of contradictions (336). In his opinion, "apparent" contradictions (he believes that as a rule they are not really "logical or factual") are "of considerable use in leading us to recognize the inadequacy of generalization in the face of the diversity of situations encountered and multitude of possible perspectives open to each individual" (342).[29] However, neither of these two authors attempts to recognize fully the presence of real contradictions in art and defend their cognitive value within the rationalist paradigm—which is the aim of the present paper.

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[27] This contradiction also contributes to the parody of scholarship—another major theme of the book.

[28] I adopt here Patricia Waugh's interpretation of metafiction.

[29] The range of the debate concerning the significance of contradictions and of the non-contradiction principle is of course much broader. Poczobut, in his historical survey, notes that while some philosophers have claimed that the principle is the foundation of all cognition (Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz or Immanuel Kant, to name but a few), others either assumed that with reference to certain objects such as God (Plato, Plotinus, Meister Eckhart), products of the human mind (Jan Łukasiewicz) or possible worlds (Nicolai Vasiliev) the principle should actually be suspended, or that contradictions rather than undermining rationality may, at least in some contexts, be seen as contributing to creative activity (late Wittgenstein). Most famous among advocates of contradictions is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who, having identified being with thought, interpreted contradiction as the principle of reality, life and change (Poczobut 11–58). Whether Hegel's theory truly involves a violation of the logical principle of non-contradiction is a matter of contention (cf. Trendelenburg, quoted in Poczobut 42–43).

Functions/uses of contradictions in postmodern fiction: An overview

On the basis of the above analysis of three postmodern novels, one can venture to make a tentative list of the uses of contradictions in fiction (by extension applicable perhaps also to other art forms). The names of the functions are provisional and the list is confined to uses related to the meaning of the work and the process of its interpretation, though even in this respect it does not presume to be complete. The uses in question may be divided into *thematic* (directly contributing to the novel's meaning) and *heuristic* (instructing the reader how to interpret the novel, indirectly related to the meaning the reader constructs in the process of reading). *Nota bene*, contradictions present in any artefact contribute to its aesthetic quality and thus also perform an *aesthetic function*, but this, being less easily definable and not so vitally related to the meaning and interpretation of the text, will not be discussed here any further.

Within *the thematic function* one can distinguish:

- *The specific thematic function*: some contradictions help develop the theme of the work. Typically they might appear in 1) representations of the neurotic or psychotic condition, or any intense emotional experience, 2) critiques of the absurdities of human social life (e.g. empty rituals), 3) explorations of epistemic problems (e.g. the right criteria when choosing one's beliefs), 4) presentation of other issues such as the concept of God.[30]

- *The general thematic function, i.e. the cognitive-scepticism function*: numerous unresolved contradictions, independent of their specific application, imply that human quest for knowledge is doomed, thus conveying a (radically) sceptical view of language, literature, art and human cognitive abilities.[31]

- *The metafictional function* is performed by contradictions which arise when fiction pretends to be real and at the same time exposes its own fictionality. Their aim (as typical of metafictional strategies in general, cf. Waugh) is to problematize the relation between fact and fiction and deconstruct other cultural constructs that seem firm, unquestionable, and autonomous in their existence, but are in fact artificial, contingent, and liable to modifications.[32]

Out of these thematic functions the second and third seem typical of postmodernist fiction, the first one can also be found in fiction prior to this convention.

Apart from contributing directly to the work's theme, contradictions also seem useful in shaping the readers' response, instructing them how to read the text, offering experiments.

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[30] Cf. the early postmodern novel by Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, in which Mr Knott, the God-figure, has no needs but needs to have no needs and needs a witness to his having no needs (Beckett 202–03).

[31] The same effect (expression of cognitive scepticism) might be attributed to the contradictions which arise when the artist questions the epistemic value of artistic means of expression/cognition such as language or fictional reality as a model, while using them in the artefact. The latter can be exemplified with the discussion of the documentary unreliability of digital photography in *House of Leaves* (141–45 in ch. 9, and the first paragraph of ch. 1) and the former with the repetitive failure of the characters in *The Unconsoled* to reach agreement on basic issues, though they speak with ease in an excessively sophisticated and polite style and at other times resort to establishing secret codes of communication (21–22).

[32] One might note that 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.

Also these contradictions, by participating in the process of the work's interpretation, contribute to the work's meaning. *The heuristic uses of contradictions* might be subdivided into the following categories:

- *The weak-assertion (reader-participation enhancement) function*: contradictions can make the text ambiguous and thus weaken the assertion made in the work or the author's authority as, confronted with two opposing ideas, the readers will have to think which, if any, idea to accept. In other words, they will be unable to rely on the author's opinion; simultaneously, these contradictions force the readers to share the responsibility for the message they reconstruct. They deprive the readers of the chance to find the message ready-made, conveniently enclosed in the book. The story's meaning, so to speak, is under such circumstances made partly of the readers' desire that the story should make sense.

- *The guiding function*: some contradictions may carry instructions for the readers (e.g. warning them against taking the unreliable narrator's words at face value, indicating that the text is not meant as a faithful one-to-one representation of external reality but an allegory or a parody, or suggesting that the text involves some mystification, etc).

- *The experimental function*: some contradictions participate in thought experiments offered by fiction.

- *The self-negation function*: this is performed by contradictions that effectively cancel the work's meaning.

- *The special-effect function* may be distinguished with reference to contradictions that significantly contribute to a specific aesthetic experience occasioned by the artefact (e.g. the comic effect or the uncanny effect).

Of these functions only the guiding and special-effect functions seem to have been in use for a long time. The others are by and large typical of postmodern fiction.

To sum up, some contradictions serve thematic functions: they problematize the difference between fact and fiction, express cognitive scepticism, show the complexity/absurdities of the human mind and life experience, exemplify various epistemic problems, etc. Others perform heuristic functions: they direct the readers in the process of interpretation, force them to accept responsibility for the resulting interpretation, help stage thought experiments or produce special effects. Among heuristic functions there is also the self-negating function (contradictions depriving the text of intelligibility). All artistic contradictions also perform the aesthetic function participating in the work's aesthetic effect.

It follows that contradictions need not make a work of art unintelligible, this being only one of their functions; they need not proclaim the total failure of human epistemic ambitions either—the failure occurs when contradictions, especially those which violate the principle of non-contradiction, appear in great numbers and remain unresolved. On the contrary, contradictions may perform various "meaning-related" functions, either contributing directly to the work's meaning or shaping the recipient's response and thus assisting in the process

of the work's interpretation.[33] This at least is how a structuralist might interpret the uses of contradictions in postmodern fiction.

It is now time to consider briefly how this kind of study relates to Jacques Derrida and deconstruction since it is deconstructionists that have highlighted the phenomenon of contradiction in modern times.

Part II: The structuralist study of contradictions in postmodern fiction vs. deconstruction & Jacques Derrida

In his introduction to literary theory Peter Barry explains that the deconstructionist "looks for evidence of gaps, breaks, fissures and discontinuities of all kinds" (72) so as to "show that what had looked like unity and coherence actually contains contradictions and conflicts which the text cannot stabilize and contain" (77). As a result of such treatment, "all poems tend to emerge as angst-ridden, fissured enactments of linguistic and other forms of indeterminacy" (77; Barry speaks of poems but presumably the same applies to other genres of literature). The deconstructive method in this radical and perhaps slightly simplistic formulation implies scepticism: texts fail to convey meanings, people fail to communicate, reality remains unintelligible (cf. 63–66). This scepticism undermines literary studies themselves, as the belief that every discourse necessarily contradicts itself defies the whole project of scholarship.

Barry seems to imply that the deconstructionist approach is one-sided (77, 79). Indeed, a comprehensive approach to a literary text would entail recognizing both its contradictions and coherences. Further, deconstructionists seem to exaggerate the destructive impact of contradictions on the epistemic potential of language. In certain epistemic contexts contradictions may indeed threaten rationality (this is true especially about deductive systems), but in others they may well be innocuous or even beneficial (e.g. when serving as a signal of error in the procedure of falsification). Also, it seems advisable to be sensitive to contradictions but detecting them everywhere might be counterproductive. That contradictions inherent in a work of art need not negate its meaning, that indeed they may well act as one more meaningful strategy of the work (cf. the analyses presented above) does not prove that language is trustworthy but might at least indicate that further reflection on the subject is needed; the sceptical conclusions seem hasty.

Deconstruction as presented above should not be identified with Jacques Derrida's thought, even though it has its origin there. Derrida's treatment of contradictions is much

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[33] The survey of the functions performed by contradictions presented above also helps explain why, even if art is taken as part of human cognitive efforts, contradictions need not have here the damaging effect that they have in scholarship. They may be used to generate new experiences, ask questions, instruct the reader how to approach the text, and the like. This is so because art, unlike academic discourse, is not a logically constructed system of propositions intended to capture human knowledge (i.e. a system consisting of presumably true and justified beliefs). There, indeed, contradiction is a sign of error, and to tolerate a contradiction is to renounce rationality. This difference seems related to the dual context of discovery and justification first identified by Hans Reichenbach (Jutta Schickore, "Scientific Discovery"). It is the context of justification which demands criticism and logical purity; the context of discovery, by contrast, allows for considerable freedom also in science (cf. Popper: "there is no such thing as a logical method of having new ideas, or a logical reconstruction of this process. My view may be expressed by saying that every discovery contains 'an irrational element', or 'a creative intuition', in Bergson's sense", 8–9). Art seems to confront the recipient with new ideas and experiences; it functions by and large in terms of the context of discovery (which need not imply that the context of justification is totally missing, cf. John 333–35).

more complex. This is so because contradictions for him do not originate in the endemic conflict between figurative and literal uses of language or in the difference between its assertive and performative uses, but, as Gary Gutting explains, in the mistaken metaphysics Derrida calls "logocentric" (291–94). Further, as Gutting convincingly argues, Derrida does not question the notion of truth, the value of rationality, the need for interpretations, the possibility of cognition, or the need to respect the basic rules of logic—thus he cannot be taken to represent radical scepticism (304–08).

Below, I try firstly to present in outline Derrida's standpoint on the matter of contradictions and then indicate its implications for the structuralist treatment of artefacts. Indeed what is at issue here is not only art but also language and their cognitive potential. On Derrida's account:

- The traditional logocentric metaphysics, which is inscribed in language and consists in viewing reality in bi-polar, mutually exclusive terms, is wrong.[34] In particular, this tradition erroneously perceives presence and meaning as positive, takes the existence of the transcendent signified—whether identified with God, consciousness or discourse—for granted, and assumes that reason has direct (unmediated by language) contact with meaning (Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology" 19, 21–22, 28–32; "Structure, Sign and Play" 109–10).[35]

- Logocentric metaphysics inscribed in language is the reason why any attempt to speak of reality produces contradictions; contradictions are not part of reality, they reflect the inadequacy of language to describe reality, Gutting explains (306).

- Exposing contradictions inherent in philosophical or literary texts or in language as such is a way of demonstrating the shortcomings of logocentrism (Gutting 294–95, 306).

- In place of logocentrism, Derrida offers his own metaphysics based on the notions of *différance,* free play, supplement and trace.[36] His theory is not supposed to define the structure of reality, structure being but a form of cognition (apparently comparable with Kantian categories of the understanding such as causality);[37] it tries to respond to the free play of multiple, indeterminate, dynamic elements/meanings generated by

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[34] Cf. Gutting's reconstruction of the main tenets of logocentrism as defined by Derrida: 1) "the basic elements of thought and language are pairs of opposing concepts, such as presence/absence, truth/falsity, being/nothingness, same/other, one/many, male/female, hot/cold", 2) "the opposing pairs are regarded as exclusive logical alternatives, governed by the principle of identity (A=A) and non-contradiction (nothing is both A and not-A)", 3) "each fundamental pair is asymmetrical in the sense that one term has in some crucial sense priority over the other" (293–94).

[35] As Norris suggests, for Derrida the belief that "reason can somehow dispense with language and arrive at a pure, self-authenticating truth or method" is "the ruling illusion of Western metaphysics" (Norris 19).

[36] *Différance* is a crucial concept but difficult to explain. As its author claims, *différance* evades comprehension and articulation, and is not a concept. In "classical language" it would, however, amount to "the origin or production of differences and the differences between differences, the *play* [*jeu*] of differences" (279) within a signifying system. It is the play of differences which constitutes both the signifiers and the signifieds; so that *différance* can also be called "the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general" ("Différance" 285–86; cf. also "Semiology and Grammatology" 19–20, 26–29).

[37] Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" (esp. 108–12). Unlike Kant, Derrida believes that the category of structure has served to satisfy the human need for reassurance ("Structure, Sign and Play" 109); its *raison d'être* seems existential rather than epistemic. Derrida contrasts structure with *différance*: the latter is "the generative movement in the play of differences" and as such "incompatible with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric motifs in the concept of *structure*" ("Semiology and Grammatology" 27).

différance. Everything, all reality, like a text, requires interpretation (nothing is directly accessible to cognition); the signified is entangled in the signifier—the transcendent signified does not exist (Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" 110, 121–22).

The main implications of Derrida's thought for literary studies (and structuralist treatment of contradictions in particular) as well as for any use of "classical language" can be presented as follows:

- Derrida's treatment of contradictions is comprehensible only in the context of his metaphysical ideas. Otherwise his way of reading texts (whether philosophical or literary), which consists in detecting contradictions, bringing out the text's multiple meanings, giving priority to their free play over unequivocal significance, amounts to listing inconsistencies in other people's writings.

- Derrida's metaphysics may be either wrong or right (of course, the same uncertainty applies to logocentrism, i.e. the classical metaphysics).

- If Derrida is right, then contradictions should be reinterpreted. To say that something simultaneously is and is not—is no longer to commit a logical error; it is to show that "being" is gradable, that something can both be and not be, though this condition cannot be expressed in any language we know (see Gutting 306). Contrasting features (good/bad; feminine/masculine; present/absent) should not be viewed as mutually exclusive and resulting in contradictory statements if predicated about one and the same object; they are mutually dependent. Thus, in light of Derridean theory, some contradictions *de facto* disappear (they are merely linguistically induced illusions), but some may remain (it should not be taken for granted that all artistic contradictions are "metaphysical"[38]). Also, Derrida's deconstruction does not deconstruct the logical rules of non-contradiction or identity, so that the project of investigating contradictions in art, even if Derrida's metaphysics is right, is not *per se* nonsensical. Simultaneously, if Derrida is right, language cannot be trusted. It can still be used for cognitive purposes more or less in the way Derrida uses it, that is, all the time ingeniously trying to escape language's metaphysical burden.

- If Derrida is wrong (and this is also a possibility worth considering), there is no need to reinterpret contradictions and no need to try to outsmart language when one wants to make a sensible statement.

- There is no way in which one might verify metaphysical theories, and ways of falsifying them are highly limited (metaphysical theories only rarely can be confronted with empirical data). Derrida's theory seems additionally resistant to falsification. As a metaphysical theory concerned with the most fundamental issues, it cannot easily be confronted with other metaphysical theories; its falsification could presumably consist only in disclosing the theory's internal inconsistency. But even this does not seem feasible: falsification of this kind could only be conducted in language, whose epistemic credentials Derrida calls into question. Incidentally, it is

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[38] 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.

not to be taken for granted that Derrida has conclusively shown that logocentrism is wrong; at most he has shown that it lacks ultimate foundation and that in some texts it leads to contradictions.

- Whether Derrida is right or wrong, it seems legitimate to use the category of structure when examining culture. Irrespective of whether structure is merely a form of cognition (Derrida's point) or a property of autonomous reality, artefacts (and other elements of culture), being made by people, can safely be presumed to be organized/equipped in structures by their creators (who have the category of structure at their disposal). If so, the application of the structuralist approach in the humanities is well justified.[39] *Nota bene*, the element of structure present in artefacts does not need to exclude the possibility of the simultaneous ongoing process of free play of meanings.

- Even if the question of the truth value of Derrida's metaphysics cannot be resolved, his contribution remains valuable: he asked important questions, brought the phenomenon of contradiction in discourse into the limelight, re-awakened the awareness that at the very foundation of rationality lies its irrational choice, and he convincingly argued that language and various cognitive procedures (interpretation, logical reasoning) are fallible and should be taken as such, no matter how well they seem to serve our purposes.[40]

Conclusion

To sum up, these are the three approaches to contradictions considered in the present paper:
- Deconstructionist exposition of contradictions that pervade all discourse, negate its potential meaning and thus lead to epistemic failure.
- Jacques Derrida's metaphysics, in light of which contradictions result from the mistaken logocentric view of reality (inherent in language) and reveal its fallaciousness.
- Structuralist exploration of contradictions and their contribution to the text's (artefact's) meaning, whether direct (thematic function) or indirect (heuristic function), which allows for the possibility that contradictions may render a work unintelligible, but which does not reduce their function to self-negation.

I hope to have shown that contradictions in works of postmodern art can be interpreted as contributing to art's meaning, both directly and indirectly (instructing the reader, shaping the act of the work's reception) and that they need not automatically prevent art from meaning anything at all, thereby justifying cognitive scepticism, as suggested by some poststructuralists. When discussing postmodern art one should not, however, fail to note that

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[39] If structures are made by human beings, then exploring them means exploring the human mind (in particular its forms of cognition). If structures are part of autonomous reality as well as part of the human cognitive faculty, then no such restrictions as to the object of examination obtain.

[40] Derrida is not the first philosopher to have questioned the cognitive potential of language. Other philosophers who voiced scepticism in this respect include Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger or the late Wittgenstein. I focus my attention on Derrida because, on the one hand, he appears to be the most radical and influential at the moment and, on the other, his critique is to a large extent based on his interpretation of contradictions, which is relevant to my subject.

some of its methods and aims—struggling for intellectual freedom by exposing contradictions inherent in notions that make our culture—are often not so very different from the method of deconstructionists. In Hutcheon's words, "Wilfully contradictory, then, postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within" (xiii). Thus *Life of Pi* might be said to subvert the notion of atheism, demonstrating that atheism, defined as the belief that there is no God, is a faith like theism; *The Unconsoled* seems to problematize the notion of one's obligation towards the Other by suggesting the absolute obligation towards innumerable Others fails to appreciate human beings' finite resources; *House of Leaves* in a way "deconstructs" the notions of representation and interpretation.

I also hope to have shown that the structuralist approach to artistic contradictions may be seen as competitive with the poststructuralist approach because it is not self-undermining. At the same time, it seems fair to admit that, like Derrida's thought, structuralism is grounded in metaphysics; in particular, it makes the following metaphysical assumptions: reality (culture included) exists and can be investigated (i.e. it is not in principle unintelligible) and language, the basic rules of logic, and the category of structure can be used for that purpose.[41] Like Derrida's metaphysics, these ideas cannot be proved or disproved, though the spectacular progress of science (the natural sciences to be precise) based on the same assumptions, seems to speak in their favour. Although reality need not be homogenous, and research methods effective in one realm (nature) need not be effective in another (culture), considering that human cognitive faculties and the choice of alternative methods seem limited, the example of the natural sciences should not be ignored.

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[41] The list of the ideological implications of structuralism may be more extensive. For Scholes, for example, structuralism entails among others a belief in some kind of transcendent "master system which sets the pattern for all the others" (182), relativism, and a recognition of the value of love (168–200).

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About the author

Joanna Klara Teske, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Institute of English Studies at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. She is the author of *Philosophy in Fiction* (2008) and many articles on contemporary fiction, the methodology of the humanities, and cognitive theory of art. In her current research she focuses on the subject of contradictions in postmodern fiction as well as the contemporary novel's contribution to human efforts at exploring consciousness. Joanna Teske is also an author of fiction and a publisher.

A Cognitive-Stylistic Response to Contradictions

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Abstract: Teske's paper places structuralist emphasis on the meaningfulness of contradictions and explores how these contradictions may affect readers' processes of interpretation in postmodern fiction. While I agree with Teske's analysis of the function of contradictions in the experience of reading postmodern fiction, I introduce a cognitive-stylistic perspective which complements Teske's structuralist exploration of contradictions. I provide a linguistic analysis of a passage from *The Unconsoled* to demonstrate the usefulness of this complementary approach. I also consider how drawing on theoretical elements from cognitive stylistics as well as empirical approaches such as reader response may be useful in expanding Teske's innovative analysis of contradictions.

Keywords: Cognitive stylistics, contradictions, narratology, reader response

This discussion note offers insight from a cognitive-stylistic perspective. Cognitive stylistics is a discipline that draws from cognitive science, cognitive linguistics, and literary studies to analyse texts. My primary focus is on Teske's (2015) analysis of postmodern fiction. While I agree with Teske's structuralist emphasis on the meaningfulness of contradictions, I suggest that a cognitive-stylistic approach grounded in linguistic evidence would complement Teske's analysis.

Teske's paper explores the uses of contradictions in postmodern fiction and their influence on the works' meanings and readers' processes of interpretation. Citing that radical deconstructionism may lead to discounting meaning created by contradictions in fictional works, Teske claims that adopting a structuralist approach will allow this meaning to emerge. The results of Teske's analysis suggest that contradictions serve many meaningful purposes and generally do not prevent a reliable interpretation of the text. The second half of her paper focuses on deconstructionists' and Jacques Derrida's views on contradiction. Teske argues

that the meaningful functions of contradictions in postmodern fiction may offer an opposition to deconstructionists' epistemic scepticism, that is, that art has no meaning at all. Finally, she compares and contrasts the structuralist approach with the Derridian (n.b. not the same as deconstructionist) view of contradictions. She notes that structuralism shares aspects of the Derridian account of contradictions, such as the metaphysical assumption of reality.

Teske notes that she makes a major assumption concerning art's cognitive function, which is that art models external or internal reality, and that it focuses on exploring the 'psychic experience' (7). As a cognitive stylistician, I agree with Teske that 'art can be taken as part of the human cognitive endeavour' (7). As exemplified through the words of literary critic I.A. Richards—'A book is a machine to think with' (1924:1)—literature can be seen as an extension of our human senses and cognitive faculties. Therefore, I share Teske's stance that the reader's cognitive interpretation and cooperation plays a big role in meaning creation. Readers are not passive vessels into which the text is poured; reading is a negotiate process. Thus, to discuss art's cognitive function, and a reader's experience of that function, a more in-depth discussion of cognition as a scientific concept is necessary. Cognitive stylistics draws on cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics to explain the ordinary workings of language and the human mind. Adding elements from these fields such as the theory of attention or embodiment theory (see Stockwell 2009; Maiese 2011) to ground Teske's claims about cognition could help make her study of contradictions even more systematic. Furthermore, although Teske considers the general responses of readers to these postmodern texts, she does not sufficiently explore the text itself, that is, its linguistic features. I argue that to have a holistic view of a work, you must consider 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. Although Teske's consideration of the overall plot and themes of the three novels is very thorough and usefully constitutes her list of the functions of contradictions, there is very little direct textual analysis.

Teske's lists of the functions of contradictions are useful, but as a cognitive stylistician, I feel that her analysis would be complemented by linguistic analysis of textual examples. Teske claims that contradictions trigger responses in readers, but these contradictions necessarily arise from the language of the text. The addition of a rigorous linguistic analysis that is transparent and replicable would strengthen Teske's already systematic approach to exploring the meaning-making potential of contradictions. While Teske's structuralist account has successfully explained *what* the contradictions mean, perhaps tying contradictions to specific stylistic features could help explain *why* and *how* a reader arrives at a certain interpretation.[1] In Teske's discussion of *The Unconsoled* (Ishiguro 1995), she touches upon several stylistic and narratological concerns, such as deixis, focalisation, and narrator reliability. Identifying the exact linguistic feature that gives rise to each stylistic effect might help provide objectivity to the analysis. For example, consider again this passage:

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[1] As postmodern fiction is known for its deviant use of stylistic features, it has received a lot of attention in cognitive stylistics. See, for example, Hidalgo-Downing's (2000) analysis of negation in *Catch-22*, Gibbon's (2012) study of multimodality in *House of Leaves*, and Whiteley's (2010; 2016) analysis of reader responses to *The Unconsoled*.

> I was just starting to doze off when something suddenly made me open my eyes again and stare up at the ceiling. I went on scrutinising the ceiling for some time, then sat up on the bed and looked around, the sense of recognition growing stronger by the second. *The room I was now in, I realised, was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt's house on the borders of England and Wales.* I looked again around the room, then, lowering myself back down, stared once more at the ceiling. (*The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro 2005 [1995]: 16, my emphasis)

Considering the stylistic features of this passage, a few things are apparent. Firstly, the presence of the personal pronoun 'I' already creates the possibility of an unreliable narrator because he is able to trick the reader by withholding information or outright lying (Short 1996: 257–8).[2] Secondly, the use of deictic elements such as the temporal, proximal adverb 'now', coupled with the use of the distal past tense ('was', 'realised') and the adjective phrase ('that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents [...] on the borders of England and Wales') help to create a contradictory feel. Not only is the tense conflicting (now vs. two years ago), the location is as well (hotel room in Europe vs. bedroom in aunt's house in Wales). These linguistic features reinforce what Teske indicates as the 'irregular experiences of place, time and people, conflicting with the reader's common sense' (8) that are found throughout the novel.

I think that Teske's innovative study of contradictions in postmodern fiction yielded some very interesting results. Her detailed lists of thematic functions of contradictions and heuristic uses of contradictions could be useful checklists for future explorations of contradictions in fiction. Furthermore, Teske mentions the aesthetic function of contradictions but does not expand on this concept, which she notes is 'less easily definable and not so vitally related to the meaning and interpretation of the text' (15). An exploration of the aesthetic function of contradictions would be useful to consider in terms of the reader's experience because aesthetics often affects readers' emotional responses to texts, and possibly their interpretations (see Stockwell 2009). Although the aesthetic function of contradictions has not been extensively considered to my knowledge, explorations of aesthetic and emotional responses to literary texts is a current area of research (see van Peer et al. 2007; Stockwell 2009, 2013, 2015; Whiteley 2011). Teske offers reader interpretations from literary critics to support her claims of the uses of contradictions; however, it would be interesting and worthwhile to pursue reader response studies that focus on untrained, or at least lesser trained readers, from sources such as *Goodreads* or local books clubs, which would be in line with current research in cognitive stylistics (e.g. Peplow et al. 2015; for a reader response study of *The Unconsoled*, see Whiteley 2010, chapter 6) and would provide a broader idea of reader responses to contradictions in postmodern fiction. Overall, I found Teske's analysis to be intriguing. This discussion note has aimed to introduce the complementary

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[2] While not all I-narrators are necessarily unreliable, the nature of first-person narration always makes unreliability a possibility. Considering the example of *The Unconsoled*, there is a strong probability of an unreliable narrator due to the presence of the I-narrator mixed with inconsistent tense, deixis, and locations. It should be noted that possible unreliability is not the only effect of first-person narration– this type of narration can cause a personal relationship between the reader and the I-narrator, which leads to sympathy on the reader's part (see, for example, Leech and Short's (2007:213) analysis of first-person narration in *Lolita, Jane Eyre,* and *A Clockwork Orange*).

cognitive-stylistic approach to suggest a linguistic element to Teske's valuable structuralist analysis.

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Using contradictions: When multiple wrongs make right

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Abstract. As noted by Teske, 2015, contradictions are used intentionally and systematically to convey various types of meaning in works of narrative fiction. I consider ways in which these strategies might also contribute to guiding (or misguiding) readers through narratives and some possible aesthetic considerations toward the uses of contradictions in fiction. It is also suggested that evaluations of the applications of contradictions and other rhetorical strategies for conveying meaning and/or aesthetics in narrative could lead toward a clearer understanding of what makes a given text literary or not.

Keywords: Logic, contradiction, aesthetics, narratology, cognition, reader

In her work, "Contradictions in Fiction: Structuralism vs. Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction", Teske (2015) made the intriguing claim that the strategies for which various types of contradictions are used in fiction could be used to help defend language's ability to communicate meaning, an ability that has been dismissed by major philosophers such as Derrida. In defense of this claim, she notes that in works of fiction that overtly make use of contradictions, the contradictions can be used for multiple meaning-communicative purposes, including to note the complexities of the human experience, to guide and sometimes manipulate readers' interpretation(s), to contribute to themes in the fictional works, or to produce various artistic effects. The fact that contradictions appear to be used intentionally and systematically to communicate various types and levels of meaning strongly supports her claim. What I wish to focus on here are the artistic effects, and whether this material can be used to make a case for literariness or non-literariness, and if so, how, with the goal of raising some questions that might lead to further discussion.

One of the possible artistic effects is logical. In *Life of Pi*, for example, as Teske notes, the contradiction is not presented as a contradiction but as a disjunction: a choice of A or not-A

(the existence or non-existence of God). In basic logic, such a disjunction is not at all a contradiction but a tautology, a logical structure that is always consistent (or true or valid, depending on how one uses those terms). However, in order to present an actual tautology, the disjunctive elements must cover all of the relevant possibilities, such as zero and non-zero. There cannot be another value possible: A and not-A must be both mutually exclusive and exhaustive. The disjunction presented in *Life of Pi* does not exhaust the possibilities and is therefore not a tautological disjunction; indeed, given the range of material available in the narrative, any number of explanations could be proposed for the general narrative outline. In what ways might logical structures contribute to the artistry of narratives? At least in the case of *Life of Pi*, it might be that leaving the disjunction without exclusivity and exhaustiveness provides readers with an opportunity to consider what is omitted and to consider why that material has been omitted, allowing both the information that is there and the information that is not there to contribute to the narrative, more overtly than omitted material might otherwise.

The strategy in *Life of Pi* therefore calls into question the possibility of literariness, of the better-ness or worse-ness of certain texts (although this is not a universally standard definition of literariness, I use it here in order to emphasize the idea that the task of determining what is or is not literature, and why, and how, remains an open investigation). Given a narrative outline such as man-against-nature (or more broadly, individual-against-context) or boy-meets-girl, what difference would it make that the details be provided in one way or another, or provided at all? Perhaps the message of *Life of Pi* is in effect that the narrative outline as such is all there is, or that providing narrative substance beyond that outline is an entirely arbitrary exercise. Such a possible meaning would return the interpretive task to the realm of deconstructionism, because the novel's attempts to be literary in fact undermine the possibility of literariness.

Another possible artistic effect is cognitive: requiring readers to contribute actively to the construction of the narrative. In this case, contradiction might not be the only or perhaps even a preferable strategy for communicating meaning; it is possible that in not being mutually exclusive and exhaustive, the narrative allows for greater reader involvement in the narrative, as readers attempt to determine what might be missing and why. For example, in *Burmese Days*, by George Orwell, which does not use contradiction as an overt strategy, the spatial description of the locations of the novel require readers to engage in the construction of a model of those locations as the novel provides descriptions and withholds certain information that can be inferred given what has already been provided (Perkins, 2013). Perhaps Orwell's conversational, dialogistic strategy, could be more effective for guiding readers' conceptualizations of novelistic material, at least some of them, in which case, any novel using contradictions to provide such guidance or manipulation is thereby less literary than a novel that uses turn-taking type strategies. On the other hand, 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. Whether or not it is possible, or even necessary, to determine how contradictions and dialogistic strategies relate to guiding readers through a narrative remains an open question.

Both are clearly tools that competent and great writers have used, and it is likely that individual and cultural preferences, both on the part of authors and readers, are aspects of any evaluation that is possible.

A third possible artistic effect is aesthetic as such, creating and communicating beauty (Chafe, 2012, following an extensive tradition beginning at least with Plato). Chafe has suggested a range of standards for determining beauty, but whether those apply differently in different cultures or different genres remains an open question. Contradictions might not be the only or perhaps preferred strategy for communicating beauty in narrative discourse (indeed, many of Teske's examples move more toward an aesthetics of the sublime in the Kantian sense), or it is possible that different types of contradictions are more or less beautiful than other types of contradictions (maybe logical contradictions are prettier than ontological contradictions, for example), depending on additional factors, such as cultural patterns, the demands of an era, or even individual preferences, which would leave some room for the well-known subjectivity of judgments regarding beauty. Using contradictions in narrative discourse could work similarly to the ways in which cubism works for visual art, by providing more than one perspective on a subject in a single work of art, or narrative discourse in this case.

Teske's examination of the uses of contradiction to communicate meaning in narrative discourse is an intriguing start on an issue that has generally been polarized into dismissals of the possibility of meaning (Derrida) or lack of consideration for contradiction as a strategy in narrative discourse. Teske's work therefore begins to fill a large gap in the available scholarship. Many questions remain, including whether and how the use of contradictions to convey meaning could be applied to create or identify more or less aesthetically valuable works of narrative discourse.

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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

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

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[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 truth[2] 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

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[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.

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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*: $[(p \rightarrow q) \land \sim q] \rightarrow \sim p$.[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.

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[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-mediated[6] and therefore so is human artistic activity, whether verbal or non-verbal; the argument presented above is invalid.

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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

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[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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