

The Day and the Not-Day: On Possible Worlds and Freedom (Some Foundational Considerations)

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Abstract

This paper is divided into 1. Possible Worlds: An Approach Reading Doležel's *Heterocosmica*; 2. Freedom as a Constituent and Horizon of Possible Worlds. Agreeing with Doležel's formulation that fictional worlds of literature are incomplete, I proceed to plead for a semiotic pragmatics within a historical epistemology and to foreground the PW's story, while doubting the usefulness of his modalities. Inescapably, a story and its PW need to be approached syntagmatically and paradigmatically (Jakobson). Part 2 aims to give some orienting suggestions about what does freedom do for understanding PWs, and what do PWs do for understanding freedom. The PWs of "word art" include a vision of limits, a possible self-rule within them; they are clearly and openly probes; and finally they are suffused with potential power and yet radical. As all arts, they are akin to phronesis, practical wisdom that discusses right choices – that is, freedom and creativity, Whitman's "I was thinking the day most splendid, till I saw what the not-day exhibited".

Keywords

Doležel, Epistemology, Possible Worlds' story, Practical wisdom, Freedom

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I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

Emily Dickinson

Why talk about the salvational possibilities in imagining different worlds? Obviously because in our present chaos, which is of secular duration but has become palpable in 2020-2021, only the most ignorant and prejudiced will not yearn for a radical transformation of our *koinos kosmos* (Heraclites), our murderous empirical world. Beyond the ruling common-sense fakely blaring from all our TV sets and internet media, we desperately need paths out, richly varied but all radically alternate and egalitarian.

The term itself of “possible world” was popularised by Leibniz, which raised to a general axiological dignity the mentions in Latin and Renaissance literature to other worlds, and indeed to worlds upside down, as well as the newly reachable overseas worlds. Arts, as also sciences and some other pursuits, say liberatory politics, can create and enlarge our un-

derstanding, they are kindred branches of worldmaking, though with different strictures. The worlds of art or fiction, which offer a wealth of most useful *exempla* and cognitive positions, indeed of Possible Worlds (further PW), are at the back of my discussion here.

My paper is in two parts which have a common final goal but do not follow each other in a linear fashion, though I hope they converge. The first part is an approach on how to talk mediated by an approach to Doležel; part two wishes to see how our talk necessarily enmeshes with the horizons of freedom – or war and slavery.

1. Possible Worlds: An Approach Reading Doležel

One should not be reduced to (*sich bescheiden*) what is the case...

T. W. Adorno

1.0. I propose to begin this first part by approaching the context and discussing the text of perhaps the most ambitious early theory of PW, Lubomir Doležel's *Heterocosmica* begun in the mid-1970s (roughly synchronous with the work of Thomas Pavel and Umberto Eco that I am in this essay with regret omitting). I shall be taking from Doležel's broad sweep only a very few points I here need and without commenting many formulations that I suspect are by now useless leads in it. However, it should be remembered that his shoreless book was not only a great pioneer but that it also meticulously digests the copious logico-philosophical literature on PWs up to him as well as contains rich mini-insights that make it still useful. I proceed by attempting to subsume them into what we need today. A Possible World is a provisional totality that has a defined space-time and agents and is comparable to the reader's pragmatic world – that is, to the addressee's dominant system of conceptions thereof: all else is open. Possible Worlds in logical semantics (à la Kripke, or the Eco-type semiotic theory often following logics) are maximally comprehensive and fully furnished, and therefore usually have to be very small and only fit for "introspective", professionally limited purposes¹. While such discussions may be stimulating when they – at their best – introduce to our agenda

¹ I argue this at length in "A Little Liberatory Introduction to Talking About Knowledge" (2022). Apologies for much self-citing, a ploy for preventing this essay to grow wildly.

necessity, knowledge, perception, and belief (cfr. Hintikka 1989: 42-56), these are rarely treated as entirely historical and I would refuse them as a general tool. The reason is simple: «Fictional worlds of literature [and other arts, DS] are incomplete» (Doležel 1988: 22). The structures of a PW are in any story or argument largely borrowed from the addressee's empirical life, on pain of the text's becoming unreadable; or: the presuppositions of dominant ideological ways of understanding everyday reality are retained in narratives, unless explicitly modified by new propositions. Rather than pertaining to logic and/or linguistics², a useful Possible World is *epistemological*: its meaning can only be grasped by treating it as modelled on the reader's world, yet significantly different from it. The possible cognitive increment lies in the difference and the applicability thereof, direct or very indirect, to that common world. "Understanding" means both to see X as "such a something" and "to understand each other" (cfr. Simon 1995: 10, and most Wittgenstein 1988). All art and all planning deal implicitly with Possible Worlds. This is foregrounded in Science Fiction or Five-Year Plans (or sorry capitalist and etatist travesties thereof).

1.1. Doležel kicks off with the vexed initial problem usually called *reference*, that is, fiction's constitutive and strong relationship to "reality" or "actuality" (a common-sense term, left debilitatingly undiscussed by him): «[This] book sees a bidirectional exchange: in one direction, in constructing fictional worlds, the poetic imagination works with "material" drawn from actuality; in the opposite direction, fictional constructs deeply influence our imaging and understanding» (Doležel 1998: ix). He refuses as useless both Bertrand Russell's and Ferdinand de Saussure's stances: Russell sees fictional entities as "empty" (lacking reference to reality) and fictional sentences as false; Saussure laudably insists on language as active but only internally, between signifier and signified, and he «thus made sense independent of the structures of the world» (*ibid.*: 5, see also 2-3). Doležel then reviews "mimetic" criticism whose best representative was Erich Auerbach, who is faulted for insufficient theoretical clarity (*ibid.*: 6-8). This is true, and the book's title of *Mimesis* has not proved very fortunate; nonetheless, Doležel forgets that this intelligent version of Weimar's

² See on PWs in linguistics the excellent caveats by Rieser (1989). Furthermore, the frequent quest by philosophers for a foundational and infallible belief, most famously in Descartes, is a lay remnant on the monotheistic foundation in God, still embraced by Leibniz.

pop-Marxism, without politics but deeply imbued with historical change, is in its actual analyses – most clearly in his expanded essay “Figura”, an approach to allegory in Dante – one Great Ancestor of what we need. I would add that the return from fictional world into our everyday normative environment, sometimes called World 0, may be used in a variety of ways, from delight of distancing, through learning about unknown matters and relationships, to a comparative estrangement of the reader’s dominant norms (cfr. on estrangement Suvin 2017 and Suvin 2020).

Beside Auerbachian historical stylistics, the second strand we need is a reinvented pragmatic criticism that would insist on the “sign-user” axis but treat the implied user as an inevitably fully historical one, which means that she reads any proposition against the implied norm of the dominant societal – or indeed class – imaginary encyclopedia (cfr. for this most useful term Eco *Lector*)³. When these two strands are integrated, there emerges a strong but allegorical reference, which is in the Euro-Mediterranean tradition clearest in the parables of rabbi Yehoshua, as related in the “synoptic troika” of the Christian New Testament. When one fuses these approaches with the third necessary strand of a full pragmatics, one gets a sufficient initial toolkit for talking about PWs (which I call parabolical criticism). It can both safeguard artistic autonomy and understand contradictory history, while giving the interested reader tools to intervene into it.

However, since a semiotic *pragmatics* is in normal lit. crit. rather neglected, I shall here briefly sketch it (all references for this paragraph are in Suvin 1988). Semiotics was defined by Charles Morris as the domain of relationships between the signs and their interpreters that clarifies the conditions under which something is taken as a sign. From Peirce – who

³ I cannot in this essay connect parabolical criticism properly to game-playing. One would have to factor in also late Wittgenstein’s language games, and his proceeding by strictly inductive exempla as possibly converging fragments. Two major theoreticians that do not employ the term of PW but have decisive insights for it are Bertolt Brecht and Yuriy Lotman, nor can the general (not mathematical) model theory be slighted. There are several probably necessary large domains I cannot deal with in an introductory essay. One, to which my debts are large and obvious, is implication, that is, presupposition vs. position (cfr. Suvin 1988: 5 and *passim*). Another is, as I mention later, semiotics in general. Both of them are implied in my stance. A third one is emotions in narrative. Neither do I deal with the crucial historical subdivisions of fiction into historical ideal-types as, for ex., the genres and the discursive traditions within the general economy of social discourse. An excuse may be that Doležel too rather slightes all of these.

held that both our interests and our experience of objects were extra-semiotic – G.H. Mead, and Karl Bühler, through Bakhtin/Voloshinov, Morris, Rudolf Carnap, and the Warsaw School, to many later scholars, pragmatics has in linguistics and philosophy not only been slowly growing into an independent discipline on a par with syntactics (the relationships between the signs and their formally possible combinations) and with semantics (in this sense, the relations between the lexemes or signs and the entities they designate). Further, there are since the mid-20th Century strong arguments that pragmatics is an overarching complement of both semantics and syntactics. For just one huge example, the indispensable notions of situation, presupposition, and context find in pragmatics their methodological home (see Haraway 1988 and much Sartre for the first notion, and for the latter two Stalnaker 1984, also Suvin 2022 and the references in it to Goodman and Prieto). The basic – and to any materialist unexceptionable – argument for it is that an existent or event (word, text, shape, change, action, etc.) becomes a sign only in a *signifying situation*; it has no “natural” meaning outside of it. In signifying presentation, nature’s entities – including people – become *thinkable* (7: 115), subject to meaning and finally to critique⁴. Signifying is *a relation between signs and their users*; a user can take something to be a sign only as it is spatio-temporally concrete and localized, and as it relates to the user’s stance (and potentially to action); both the concrete localization and the user’s disposition are always socio-historical. Furthermore, they postulate a reality organized not only around signs but also around agents, in the double sense of psychophysical personality and of a socialized, collectively representative subject. The entry of potentially acting subjects reintroduces acceptance and choice, temporal genesis and mutation, a possibility of negation, and even meaningfulness, into the frozen constraints of syntax. It also re-grounds semantics: one cannot tell the meaning of most words without observing how the word is used, and what effects it seems to have on our behavior. All words have a pragmatic value based on an implicit classification that follows the kind of interest which they evoke, the advantages or inconveniences, pleasures or suffer-

⁴ Let me add that Peirce’s – and Eco’s – *abduction* is a favourite approach of mine. I believe with Nietzsche and many others (including to my mind the later Wittgenstein) there can be no coherent talk without a figurative or metaphorical trope. Peirce’s politics were also more clairvoyant than usual, he remarkably predicted that the 20th century «shall surely see the deluge-tempest burst upon the social order – to clean up a world as deep in ruin as that greed-philosophy has long plunged it into guilt» (Peirce 1931-1935: 292).

ings, which they suggest. Thus, each and every semantic presupposition is also a pragmatic one (though the contrary does not obtain). Language is a space for rehearsing action, though a spacious home and only sometimes a simple threshold. Since all situations deal, however indirectly, with relationships between people in particular spacetimes, *history determines meaning*. In class history, this leads to class interests, correlative to varying horizons and stances, determining the strategic heights of meaning.

1.2. Doležel's rich section "Starter Terms I" (Doležel 1998: 31-134) identify the necessary narratological terms to talk about a Possible World. I would object to his ranking the PW above the "story" (Aristotle *mythos*) as a fossil remnant of modal logics and say instead that in all longer writing there is no PW without an implicit or explicit "story", to be then further differentiated along the lines first broached in Russia 1915-1929 (Jakobson, Propp, Tomashevsky, Eikhenbaum, Balukhatiy...) and much elaborated later. As different from Doležel, I propose the following founding terms: A PW is constituted by the semantic categories of *events*, *existents*, and *chronotopes*. Events are meaningful changes, existents are differentiated into those who can and cannot initiate actions as meaningful change – that is, *agent*⁵ and *objects*. Events, existents, and chronotopes or spacetimes (cfr. Suvin 1989) interact and function as a story. As to the narrative agents, they perform transitive actions that modify the "story" and its PW; as I posed in Suvin 1988, the agents will in fiction be some historically possible *views of animate and active entities*, masquerading often as actual or imaginary people. However, gods, talking animals, allegorical notions or disembodied narrative voices plus points of view are also fabular transpositions and creations of possible relationships between people. The image-clusters of agential constellations (see much more on the three agential levels of actants, types, and characters in Suvin 1985) can be decoded and transposed back into relationships between historical groups of people – in significant cases, with an increment in understanding and a possibility of intervening into them.

⁵ A full definition of narrative agents from Suvin 1988 is: *all nouns or nominal syntagms that can be imagined as independent entities potentially able to carry out independent action*. Beyond the paradigmatic division into three levels that I mention in the text, agents have specific weights in the unfolding of the story. This definition is paradigmatic and should be of use in syntagmatic analysis. I reluctantly leave out here the fascinating subject of interferences between agents and the well-known but perhaps undertheorised narrative voices plus points of view.

Doležel sets a great store by his narrative *modalities* (Doležel 1998: 113-118) but I doubt their necessity as a constraining “narrative grammar”. His alethic, deontic, axiological, and epistemic systems are taken from modal logics and Greimas, and I find the pertinence of both sources dubious (see on Greimas Suvin 1988). No doubt, PWs could at times and in part be analysed as to who are the bearers of what kind of truth, permission-obligation, good or bad values, and/or knowledge-belief, but this is often overridden by the events, agents, objects, chronotopes, and then the flow of the story; thus, the modalities’ status of an obligatory tool has to my knowledge not been proved in critical practice. Furthermore, “modes” different from Doležel’s have been proposed by a host of authors, e.g. Seymour Chatman, Gérard Genette, Helmut Bonheim, and Monika Fludernik, not to mention old or new rhetorics. Finally, offshoots of modal logic are as a rule static and do not consider the strong “possibility” and “it ain’t necessarily so” aspect of PWs (while Eco and Pavel do). If we ought to apply in literary criticism all the complications we absolutely need but no more, those which are useless for a particular set of or indeed for most narratives ought not to be obligatory.

For one weighty objection about the organising principles of storytelling: when surveying world dramaturgy, mainly Euro-American and East Asian (in Suvin 1994), I found that there were two such horizons: *conflict* and *revelation*: they merrily mix all four of Doležel’s modes... Both are deeply complicit with dominant mega-ideologies of people’s relations with each other: revelation with a religious horizon, and conflict with a polemical or Hobbesian one, the former surviving underground when God died (cfr. on conflict also Doležel 108-10). No doubt, these are dominants that allow for secondary contamination in any particular case, from the Athenian tragedy to a wide range of novels and TV serials.

Despite all this, when Doležel descends to particulars he is often very stimulating, for me most so in his “saturation function” distinction (1998: 181-198) between homogenous and heterogenous fictional worlds: representatives of the latter, incorporating a subworld of transcendent power, range convincingly from mythologies to Kafka and Belyi. Our further use of this fertile opposition is devoutly to be wished for.

I conclude that this book is today both a rich source of particulars insights and to my mind irretrievably ambiguous in its central approach, which is still extra-diegetic.

1.3. Finally, analytically there are two inescapable ways to approach a story and its PW, which Roman Jakobson calls *syntagmatic* and *paradig-*

matic. His analysis wishes to be strictly linguistic, based on words with fixed denotations, which is also his limit since texts operate on the hyperphrastic level not dealt with by linguistics – to begin with, with interplay between denotations and connotations, and see Doležel's above stricture on Saussure (from whom the dichotomy is inherited). Nonetheless, I think Jakobson succeeded to transform Frege's somewhat ad hoc dichotomy between manifest sense and final meaning into two much richer, structural descriptive levels. The words of a text obviously form a manifest surface unfolding from beginning to end (*what the reader reads*), but then, in order to be grasped as a meaningful whole, the texts can only be seen as a presuppositional latent deep structure, a unitary pattern or shape (*Gestalt*) akin to a spatial scheme (*how the reader understands*). There remains the organisational problem of art criticism in general: how to believably convey two full levels of, say, a normally rich novel in a normally agile essay (my most developed attempt at such an essay, about 1984, found it needed nearer to 10.000 than to 5.000 words – see Suvin 2021).

True, there may be shortcuts such as the exemplary approach, using a syntagmatic section of the flow as clue or metaphor for its paradigmatic character. This is what Doležel does in his examples, and it is a proof just how risky these shortcuts remain.

2. Freedom as a Constituent and Horizon of Possible Worlds

The philosophical problem is the position of *Widerspruch*
[contradiction] in civic life.
Ludwig Wittgenstein

2.0. I ask in this part: What does freedom do for understanding PWs, and What do PWs do for understanding freedom. I can only give some orienting suggestions about both.

Both of these themes hinge on the weight of our empirically accepted common sense and norms that are very often dominated, limited, and heavily disfigured by what Rancière calls "police", in all its meanings but centrally focussed on violent power and its legitimation; a contrary vector is his "politics", centrally focussed on emancipation of people. This opposition is deeply complicit with the delimitation of what is visible and audible, thus thinkable, in any situation. The encounter and clash of these

two tendencies or horizons constitutes the main event behind our daily events in class society. Such binary opposition and contradiction can be seen in many cognitive variants of accepting vs. changing normative borders of the possible, for ex. in linguistics as rule-governed vs. rule-changing, or in Merleau-Ponty's brilliant account of *parole parlée* vs. *parole parlante* (1945: 229; see also his unfinished Merleau-Ponty 1988).

For heavily unfavourable situations such as the present historical moment, comparable to the terminal illness of a body, a PW in which a new experimental operation might save the body's life is clearly in the patient's interests, for the choice is between painful dying and a possibility of new life. This is a version of Pascal's wager about belief in God – that what one might gain by believing it is enormous, compared to what one might lose by disbelieving it – translated into the politics of the human species.

2.1. I contend that the notion and image of PWs is of the same family as that of the arts (and the sciences). For one thing, in both there is no such animal as a "complete picture": space, time, and interests always enforce strong choices in what to show and stress and thus varying distances between user and used. Freedom and knowledge – understanding, cognition – were always twins: if you aren't free, you can't have knowledge, and if you don't know, you won't be free (even to properly drive in a nail). The particular imaginative notion of a world as a unit changeable in space-time can perhaps be arrived at in various converging ways, but surely the arts, here represented by "word art", are the most clear, consistent, and accessible way. Its PWs have added riches. First, they include a vision of *limits*, which mean also a possible autochtony, self-rule within those limits. Second, the worlds of "literature" are not only interpretable but always already an interpretation, and moreover clearly and openly such (as opposed to religious texts and horizons). Third, they are consubstantial to emotions of potential power and yet radical danger, for a world can also be well or badly lost, misread, forgotten or suppressed. The image is one of a globe or planet for a "watcher of the skies, when a new planet swims into his ken" (as Keats said of reading Homer), and the seeing needs a sun of sense. Furthermore, such a world only subsists by constant self-scavenging and mutating of its parts and levels, a death in life and life in death... A Possible World is a calyx of all beauty and yet also of all dissent and deviation, an icy flame and permanent contradiction. One cannot say whether a world is in arts more actuality or potentiality: it wavers.

A specific feature of such PWs – as of many other practices not readily expressible in merely conceptual form – is that they necessarily infuse

“knowing-that” with “knowing-how”, which also involves certain facets of emotion or feeling. The knowing-how is inextricably enmeshed with bodily practices and subject to the pull of what Aristotle called “aim as cause” (*causa finalis*), so that “because” in it means “in order that” rather than merely “was in linear time caused by”. Here, a whole discussion at least suggesting possible uses and variants of causality is needed – for one thing, I would reject monocausality. Yet I agree with the tradition starting in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* that philosophy is knowledge of truth, and that «we do not know a truth without knowing its cause» (Book A, 993b 19-20 and 23-4); though we would have today to delimit more accurately what could be meant by “truth” or any synonym. But any useful epistemology is lobotomised without figuring in a complex and variable causality.

Finally, arts are akin to and in feedback with *phronesis*, practical wisdom, that among other matters reveals how virtue in political communities functions through right choices – that is, through *freedom* (cfr. Vernant 1982, and Carr 1987: 354).

2.2. Literature may boomerang into reality. Example: “Dear Liberty” in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* translates the French revolutionary term of *liberté chérie*, where freedom enables security and order. The strategic insight here seems to be that the method of great poetry – say in modern Europe from Shelley, Pushkin, Heine, and Rimbaud on, and of prose writing too – if you wish *its epistemic principle, is freedom as possibility of things being otherwise*; this is to be understood by means of the interaction of what is being said and how it is being said, a consubstantiality of theme and stance. Further, there is no innocent eye. Every reading will establish its own, value-laden meaning out of the text’s sense; every reading is a denial (suppression) of other readings, meanings, and values. Any “positive” act is also the negation of a negation; any truth a denial of opposed “untruths”. Yet it is then a concatenation of choices interfering with the reader’s received opinion, putting Rancière’s salvational politics into the policing of ruling certainties. Collective and singular human freedom is today our salvational horizon and Supreme Good, as opposed to the mass killing under both capitalist war and capitalist peace as “the continuation of politics by other means” (Clausewitz).

Imagination cannot be reduced to what logicians want, since it is chock-full of pressing contingencies in warding off threats to survival and happiness. In particular, if poetic freedom is a historically situated, political experience of the sensual, it is necessarily also a swerve from and against the *doxa*, in favour of fresh cognition or true novums (cfr. Suvin 2021). As I

have elsewhere argued, this freedom is intimately melded with knowledge or cognition. The work of narrative art and poetry gives shape and voice to previously uncognised, mute and non-articulated, categories of being (in that strictly notional sense, the final sediment of all fiction and art is the thesaurus and the encyclopedia). All shaping and articulation entails the suppression of alternative shapings and articulations for the relationships it refers to.

To the contrary, common-sense understanding includes much that has in the past truly been liberating politics but has retained only a few impoverished slogans from its heroic ages (the embattled liberal and communist ones) when its sense flowed in feedback with human senses. As an extraordinary passage by Simmel has it, «the intellect is egalitarian and as it were communist», for its contents are both generally communicable and, if correct, generally shareable «by every sufficiently educated mind (*Geist*) [... so that] they exclude private property» (Simmel 1989: 603); he is probably echoing, with more prudence in more complexly alienated times, Plato's equally astounding proposition in *Meno* that any slave boy is capable of understanding geometry. This points to the only proper communism, well identified in the Italian labour-movement song *Bandiera rossa* (Carlo Tuzzi, 1908) as «il comunismo e la libertà» – communism and/as freedom. The downfall of emancipatory politics and understanding in the communist tradition came when freedom was backgrounded for violent power and permanent openness for clerical closure. This entailed the dominion of lying and brainwashing, often approaching more total saturation than in pre-fascist capitalism (cfr. Suvin 2015). It leaves the presently unfolding surveillance society without efficient opponents.

Freedom is also the necessary condition for its best offspring, creativity. In Whitman the open possibility of the world has a “procreant urge”:

I was thinking the day most splendid, till I saw what the not-day exhibited;

I was thinking this globe enough, till there sprang out so noiseless around me myriads of other globes. (*Night on the Prairies*)

To create means to educe something that wasn't there before, a kind of a novum. And in written art, it may have a chance to endure.

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