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# Novel Assertions: A Reply to Mahon

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*In a recent paper, James Edwin Mahon (2019) argues that literary artworks—novels in particular—never lie because they do not assert. In this discussion note, I reject Mahon’s conclusion that novels never lie. I argue that a central premiss in his argument—that novels do not contain assertions—is false. Mahon’s account underdetermines the content of literary works; novels have rich layers of content and can contain what I call ‘profound’ assertions, and ‘background’ assertions. I submit that Mahon therefore fails to establish that novels never lie.*

## 1. Introduction

The question of whether or how artworks can lie has recently gathered momentum, and has important consequences for theories of art interpretation and the nature of lying itself.<sup>1</sup> The main difficulty is that artworks, while communicative in many ways, are not ordinary objects of communication. They are rich systems of representation and hold complex relationships with their makers and audiences. This causes problems when exploring how artworks, visual and linguistic, might be deceptive in ways similar to ordinary speech, within which lies normally reside.

And there has been resistance to the thought that works of art can lie. In a recent paper, James Edwin Mahon argues that literary artworks—specifically novels—never lie because they do not assert. His argument is composed of two directions. The first is that if something is a literary work of any kind then it isn’t a lie. The second is that if something is a lie, then it’s not a literary work of any kind. Being a literary work and being a lie, Mahon argues, are mutually exclusive categories (2019, p. 324). The crucial premisses at work are that a lie is a kind of assertion, and novels do not contain assertions.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Cooke (2019), Viebahn (2019a), and Dixon (2020).

In this paper I reject Mahon's conclusion that novels never lie by arguing that a central premiss—that novels are not the kinds of things that contain assertions—is false. The reason for this is that Mahon's account underdetermines the nature of the content present in literary works such as novels. Once we acknowledge their rich layers of content, we see that novels can contain what I call 'profound' assertions, and 'background' assertions. Thus, it is possible for novels to lie. Mahon, therefore, currently fails to establish that novels never lie.

I will focus on the first direction of Mahon's argument; that novels can never be lies. As for the second direction, namely, that lies can never be novels (or literary works in general), I take it that if my argument is sound, then this second claim is also falsified. For, if a novel can indeed assert, and so be the kind of thing that can lie, this entails that something's being a lie doesn't automatically disqualify it from being part of a literary work, (or perhaps even from being a literary work itself). *Contra* Mahon, it is not the case that being a literary work and being a lie are mutually exclusive states of affairs.

## 2. Novels Never Lie Because They Do Not Assert

According to Mahon, it is 'impossible for works of fiction—in particular, novels—to be lies'. This is because novels 'do not contain any assertions', and this is the case even if the works are non-historical novels passing themselves off as historical novels, secret *romans à clef*, or pseudo-gossip-lit novels (2019, p. 323). The central reason that even these potential deceptive works are not instances of *lies* is that they still do not contain robust assertions.

For Mahon, lies are kinds of assertions, where the speaker asserts something she believes to be false (or, she makes an 'untruthful' assertion insofar as it is believed false even if it turns out to be true), with an intention to deceive the hearer (2019, pp. 323–324). For the purposes of this paper, I will not dispute this definition. Rather, I shall show that even on Mahon's terms of what lying is, and what assertion is, the crucial premiss which does the heavy lifting in Mahon's argument is false. To start, we need to get a clear understanding of what assertion is; at least, how Mahon characterizes it.

First, assertion is a speech act, which Mahon defines in terms of a 'norm of accuracy'; assertions are statements that may be faulted for being false, where the speaker will be rightly subjected to correction if what she says is false (2019, p. 324). We can see why this appears to immediately rule out works of fiction. Like acting on stage, the novel writer will make many statements, but these statements do not amount to assertions because they are not subject to correction if they do turn out to be false. The writer shouldn't be faulted for speaking falsely about what a certain person did at a certain time within a fictional story.

Second, and closely related, is Mahon's claim that assertions appearing in textual pieces amount to statements that 'affirm' the existence of the relevant things presented prior to the existence of the text. Drawing on Robert Scholes (1980), Mahon observes that a statement in a written work is an assertion if by the statement the writer 'affirms that the events, people, etc., depicted in the work did occur or exist prior to the existence of the text'. In contrast to writers of history, 'the writer of fiction does not affirm that the events, persons, etc., depicted in the work did occur or exist prior to the existence of the text'. When George Eliot wrote that '... a linen-weaver, named

Silas Marner, worked at his vocation in a stone cottage ... near the village of Raveloe' (Eliot, 1861, p. 10), this was untrue; there was no Silas Marner. So, Mahon argues, 'nothing stated in the novel counts as an assertion' (Mahon, 2019, p. 326).

When dealing with prefaces in novels, Mahon does acknowledge that works of fiction can convey important truths, but claims that these are still not assertions. Mahon rejects that prefaces in novels, such as those used by Daniel Defoe in his (1719) *Robinson Crusoe*, are affirmations that the depicted persons and events occurred or existed beyond the text. He suggests that authors like Defoe were concerned not with genuinely affirming that such people and events existed, but rather used the preface to manage surrounding literary prejudices. During this time, it was surmised that only works that were factual or historical, and not 'romances' or 'fables', were capable of conveying any 'distinctive kind of truth' (Latham, 2009, p. 26). But Defoe believed that novels could tell important truths: 'morally serious and ethically legitimate' ones (Mahon, 2019, pp. 326–327). So, Mahon proposes that Defoe used the preface device not as a signal that his story was a work of 'History'—as a series of serious assertions—but rather to express an intention for his work to be taken seriously as conveying morally serious truths. To do this he had to present his novel as a 'history of facts' in a preface, even if it was in fact a novel. So, such prefaces are not genuine instances of affirmation, but 'fake' ones (Mahon, 2019, p. 329).

This may get us around the problem of prefaces, but what should we make of these truths that Defoe was concerned with? Could *these* not be assertions? Mahon claims that such content in works of literature such as 'power corrupts even well-meaning people', and 'that human civilization is fragile'<sup>2</sup> are merely 'inferred' from the surrounding untruthful statements in the novel, and so are not assertions (2019, p. 328).

This suggests a third relevant feature of assertion. As well as being governed by a norm of accuracy and functioning as 'affirmations' that the described people and events existed, assertions according to Mahon are explicit—not implicit—statements. And any profound truths conveyed by novels are inferred from the surrounding content, and so not asserted. And indeed, this aligns with definitions of lying which distinguish it from misleading. The falsehood in a lie is explicitly stated in the form of 'what is said' by the sentence, and misleading involves conveying this falsehood via some pragmatic mechanism such as presupposition (Saul, 2012, p. 5).<sup>3</sup> So, the reason that the 'moral truths' in Defoe's literary works are not assertions is that they are implied or conveyed, and not explicitly stated.

So, we can tease out three defining characteristics of assertion on which Mahon relies. An assertion is a statement which:

1. is subject to a norm of accuracy (it may be faulted for being false);

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<sup>2</sup> Mahon claims that these might be truths 'inferred' from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* respectively (2019, p. 328).

<sup>3</sup> 'What is said' roughly amounts to the expressed proposition(s) which is closely related to the sentence structure (Saul, 2012, p. 68).

2. in a text, must affirm that the depicted persons and events occurred or existed prior to the existence of the text;<sup>4</sup>

3. is explicit, that is, forms ‘what is said’, not implied, by the uttered/written sentence.<sup>5,6</sup>

We can now see the model of assertion which Mahon uses when he claims that novels do not contain assertions. This is so even for literary works using prefaces, which Mahon claims are not actual affirmations but fake ones—presumably such cases fall short of conditions (i) and (ii). And this is so even for literary works that could be conceived as ‘intentionally deceptive’, such as the secret *roman à clef* (a *roman à clef* passing itself off as *not* a *roman à clef*), or the non-historical historical novel (a non-historical novel passing itself off as a historical novel). These latter kinds of deceptive works are still not lies:

because, again, they do not contain any assertions, and hence, do not contain any untruthful assertions even if their authors intend to deceive their readers with their non-assertoric untruthful statements. *The very fact that a statement is occurring in a novel makes the statement not an assertion* (Mahon, 2019, p. 332, my emphasis).

While these literary works might be intentionally deceptive, they do not contain assertions (and so not lies) presumably because they do not contain statements which possess the three characteristics above.

So, given that lying is a kind of assertion, novels never lie because they are not the kinds of things that perform assertions. I will not here dispute Mahon’s claims that assertion is not present in the form of a preface, nor in the peculiar cases of secret *romans à clef* or nonhistorical historical novels. Rather, we can find assertions in perfectly ordinary, straightforward works of fiction, which I turn to now.

### 3. Novel Assertions

Mahon’s argument that novels do not assert concerns what we could call ‘descriptive’ content; the ‘events, persons, etc., depicted in the work’. However, first, this does not capture all there is to many novels. It leaves out another pervasive type of content: those deeper or profound messages in a novel. And second, even the descriptive type of content that Mahon considers can indeed be asserted; via those statements which form part of what philosophers have called the ‘background’.

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<sup>4</sup> (ii) might just be a text-specific manifestation of (i). For the sake of clarity, I present it as a separate condition concerning literary works in particular.

<sup>5</sup> This condition as it relates to lying, however, has recently been criticized: Viebahn (2019b) argues that we can lie with presuppositions. For the purposes of my reply, however, I will work with Mahon’s conception of lies and assertion.

<sup>6</sup> Mahon presents these conditions as necessary for assertion. It is unclear whether they are also sufficient. But given that my reply is based on Mahon’s own account of assertion, I take this question of sufficiency to be beyond the scope of my response.

### *Profound assertions*

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), on one level, simply tells the story about the social circles of nineteenth-century St Petersburg, centring on an extra-marital affair between Anna and Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky. But this synopsis concerning persons and events underdetermines what the novel is about. It is also about the nature of betrayal, gender inequality, and nineteenth-century Russian social norms. Underneath (or above) the described or depicted events and people in this fictional world are profound messages about infidelity and love.

Works of art have layers of meaning like this, and philosophers have noted how written fiction in particular can convey such deep truths. Authors (and artists) tend to use a particular linguistic or pictorial language, or 'strategy', in order to express a 'thesis' (Carroll, 2001, pp. 166–170). We might characterize these types of content as 'descriptive' vs. 'moral' (Korsmeyer, 1985), or belonging to the 'subject' level versus forming 'a perspective ... that informs the subject matter and moves beyond the immediate events portrayed' (Lamarque, 2009, p. 150).<sup>7</sup>

It is these kinds of truths that Mahon notes when discussing the Defoe preface case, such as 'human civilization is fragile'. Presumably, Mahon agrees that novels can convey such truths; the issue is that these statements are apparently not *assertions*. And the seeming reason Mahon gives for why they are not assertions is that they are implicitly conveyed and not explicitly expressed.

It is correct that many of these kinds of messages within novels, about morality and human nature, are implied by the text, normally through a variety of literary and aesthetic devices. However, we can easily find works of fiction that contain these kinds of statements, which *do* look and behave like assertions. Some novels appear to affirm, explicitly, that some content is the case prior to the existence of the text, where this content is bound by a norm of accuracy. Consider the following statements from *Anna Karenina* (1878):

And when we love people so, we love them for what they are, not for what we wish they were (p. 593).

If you expect perfection, you will never be satisfied (p. 648).

Consider also the following from George Eliot's (1871) *Middlemarch*:

Pride helps us; and pride is not a bad thing when it only urges us to hide our own hurts—not to hurt others (p. 51).

... it is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view (p. 54).

... for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs (p. 688).

And using Mahon's example, Defoe's (1719) *Robinson Crusoe*:

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<sup>7</sup> I explore in more detail these layers of artwork meaning in my (2020).

... fear of danger is ten thousand times more terrifying than danger itself, when apparent to the eyes; and we find the burden of anxiety greater, by much, than the evil which we are anxious about (p. 147).

... we never see the true state of our condition till it is illustrated to us by its contraries, nor know how to value what we enjoy, but by the want of it (p. 129).

In these examples, the author is either speaking directly to the reader or reflecting on the situations described in the fictional world presented (as in the quotes from *Middlemarch*), or speaking through a character (as in the quotes from *Robinson Crusoe* and *Anna Karenina*). There is a myriad of ways that an author can express such messages; perhaps through an omniscient narrator or first-person limited style, or by using authorial intrusion, vignette, or via author surrogate. Whatever literary device the author might use to express such statements, what is important for our purposes is that these statements are explicit, affirmed to be the case outside the text, and governed by a norm of accuracy.

First, they are explicit statements. Their content is given by ‘what is said’ by straightforward declarative sentences, and not conveyed implicitly via pragmatic mechanisms such as metaphor or implicature. Second, the authors appear to affirm that the content in these statements ‘occurs’ or ‘exists’ prior to the existence of the text. That is, the statements are about the actual (real) world as well as the fictional world.

And third, the statements could plausibly be governed by a norm of accuracy, and known to be so by authors. How such a norm relates to literary art is complex, and I don’t want to oversimplify this. However, there are at least two reasons to think that such a norm often applies to literary works, and to the three novels I consider in particular.

It is widely agreed that many literary works are taken to be sources of moral knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Many of us value art in general for its communication of truths about the human condition and moral reality. Engaging the reader’s imagination and emotions in a story can teach us what something is *like* by providing ‘acquaintance’ with facts (Carroll, 2000, p. 363). For example, by reading *Anna Karenina*, I might learn about the complex nature of infidelity, and the unequal societal reactions involved; enriching my ability to make moral judgements on such situations in the real world. And readers of *Middlemarch* and *Robinson Crusoe* will gain knowledge about the limitations of ideal virtue and aspects of Christianity respectively.

Another related reason can be found in moral criticism and the debate about an artwork’s moral properties interacting with its aesthetic properties.<sup>9</sup> We fault novels (morally, and perhaps aesthetically too) for expressing problematic messages, especially false moral claims. For example, the Marquis de Sade’s erotica is criticized for its peddling of immoral perspectives, such as ‘rape is an erotic act’. Part of the reason such literature makes us recoil and even respond with censorship is that we tend to believe that literature should not convey dangerous falsehoods. Indeed, *Robinson*

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Nussbaum (1990).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Gaut (2007).

*Crusoe* has been criticized for its colonialist and white supremacist undertones (Stam and Spence, 1983). If this work ultimately expresses an immoral perspective, many will deem this a flaw; its disobedience of a norm of accuracy by expressing morally false claims partly explains this. And if we assume that *Anna Karenina* and *Middlemarch* ultimately express morally good perspectives, this partially explains what we value about them as cultural objects. We would fault them if deep down they presented moral falsehoods.

These reasons (I'm sure there are many more) suggest that in many contexts where we consume novels, a norm of accuracy applies.<sup>10</sup> It is reasonable to expect some truths from the work; not at the level of described characters and all events, but at the profound level where these more interesting statements reside. In such cases it is appropriate to fault the novel for being inaccurate. If an author knowingly wrote a novel to be consumed in a context where the truth should be told in this profound way, then many of their statements would be assertions. If the author believes that these assertions are false, then these will be lies.

I concede that these 'profound' assertions in literature are somewhat different to everyday assertions, because of their grandiosity and prose-style. But they are explicit statements which are affirmed beyond the text, and are frequently governed by a norm of accuracy. They may be unusual sounding, but are assertions nonetheless.

### *Background assertions*

As well as profound assertions in novels, philosophers have noted how fictions play out against what David Lewis called a 'background' of facts and beliefs (1978).<sup>11</sup> This backdrop of 'purported fact' consists of 'propositions which (whether implicit or explicit) are true in the fiction, and [purport to be] true in the world as well' (Langton and West, 1999, p. 316).<sup>12</sup> For example, authors frequently set their stories in real life locations and historical periods, aiming for verisimilitude or to present the readers with important facts that form the backbone of the fiction. And it is widely agreed that readers can discover genuine truths from fiction in this way.<sup>13</sup> As Gregory Currie notes:

There is truth—literal truth—in fiction, since most fictional stories play out against a background of fact. We can learn from that background of fact, as the reader of Patrick O'Brien will learn a good deal about Nelson's navy, and the reader of Hilary Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety* will learn about revolutionary France (Currie, 1995, p. 250).

Such background information is presented as fact, but much of it will be implicit. For instance, because the Sherlock Holmes stories play out against real life Victorian and Edwardian London, it is part of the background of this fiction that Baker Street is closer to Paddington than Waterloo,

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<sup>10</sup>See my Dixon (2020) for an analysis of how such a norm can interact with a work of art.

<sup>11</sup> More precisely, Lewis (1978, p. 44) treats 'background' as the collection of beliefs that are overt in the author's community.

<sup>12</sup> Langton and West (1999) argue that fictional pornography plays out against this background, and some pornography can contain false (and harmful) background presuppositions such as 'Women enjoy rape', which are misrepresented as fact.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Friend (2006).

although this is never explicitly stated (Lewis, 1978, p. 41). And moreover, unless the work belongs to a fantasy genre, the laws of physics will also apply, again, tucked away in the background.

However, background content is often given explicitly by the author. Just a quick glance at a historical novel will reveal background content which is brought to the foreground, so to speak. For instance, consider these statements from Heather Morris's (2018) *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, a novel based on the memories of a Holocaust survivor:

... Jews in small towns were being rounded up and transported to work for the Germans. ... Jews were no longer allowed to work and ... their businesses had been confiscated (p. 7).

[The poster] demanded that each Jewish family hand over a child aged eighteen or older to work for the German government. ... The poster warned in bold type that if any family had such a child and did not surrender them, the whole family would be taken to a concentration camp (p. 8).

And from Hilary Mantel's (2009) *Wolf Hall*:

The cardinal's [Thomas Wolsey's] project: having obtained the Pope's permission, he means to amalgamate some thirty small, ill-run monastic foundations with larger ones, and to divert the income of these foundations—decayed, but often very ancient—into revenue for the two colleges he is founding: Cardinal College, at Oxford, and a college in his home town of Ipswich ... (p. 20).

In the year 1516 a daughter was born, the Princess Mary, small but vigorous. The year following, the queen [Katherine of Aragon] miscarried a male child. Another small princess lived only a few days; her name would have been Elizabeth, after the king's own mother (p. 81).

These statements, which form part of the (purported) factual backdrop of a fictional story, look and behave like assertions. First, they are explicit. Their content is formed by 'what is said' by declarative sentences, and it is not conveyed implicitly. Second, the author affirms that the content of these statements is the case outside of the text; they are intended by the author (and known by the reader to be so intended) to describe the actual world as well as the fictional world.

And third, the statements are plausibly governed by a norm of accuracy; they would be faulted for being false. For instance, while *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is a work of fiction—it presents conversations and events merely inspired by a survivor's memories—it is about events during the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> So, readers reasonably expect that important details about the concentration camps and the historical events leading up to and surrounding the character's deportation, are to be accurate. For instance, Morris presumably knows that her readers would be disappointed if it turned out to be false that Jewish people's businesses were confiscated during this time. And indeed, there has been a recent backlash against this novel for being inaccurate in precisely this way. The Auschwitz Memorial Research Center has criticized the work for incorrectly presenting historical

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<sup>14</sup>I'd like to thank my mother Alison Dixon for bringing this novel to my attention while writing the article.



details, such as relevant locations in the story, and details about the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps (such as gassing methods, the use of penicillin, and the Polish train stations on the main character's journey to Auschwitz) (Witek-Malicka, 2018).

Similar expectations surround *Wolf Hall*. While it is ultimately a work of fiction—presenting conversations and events that certainly did not happen—it is set during a wellknown turbulent period of British history leading up to the English Reformation with Henry VIII's split from Rome. Given this, it would be known to Mantel that her readers reasonably expect important background details about this period to be accurate, such as Thomas Wolsey's projects, and Katherine of Aragon's pregnancies. Indeed, rich background makes a fictional story all the more immersive.

No doubt there are other literary genres that assert their background in this way. With historical fiction in particular, a certain amount of artistic licence is permitted when presenting the subject matter. But a norm governing this genre is that such licence should not significantly deviate from the established, real world history that forms the fiction's backdrop. Substantial deviation from reality would put the work in a different genre, such as fantasy or magical realism.

In summary, these statements are assertions, at least, on the picture of assertion that Mahon uses.

#### 4. Conclusion

Mahon's conclusion that novels never lie rests on a false premiss, namely that 'nothing stated in the novel counts as an assertion'. Mahon considers content that comprises the 'events, people, etc., depicted in the work', but this underdetermines the content in many works of literature. Novels frequently contain profound assertions about the nature of (moral) reality, and they contain background assertions; a backdrop of purported fact against which the story is told.

If novels can assert in these ways, then it is possible for them to lie in these ways, too. An assertion about human nature could turn out to be believed false by the author, so the novel could tell 'profound lies'. And a background assertion which is presented as fact could also be believed false by the author, so the novel could tell 'background lies' (making the authors 'background liars', to borrow a term from Langton and West, 1999).

The variety of authorial voice and literary devices employed to assert something raise important questions once we accept the possibility that novels can lie. For example, it might be more difficult to lie through a character, for the author might be merely *entertaining* the claim via the character who asserts it as being the case. Perhaps statements made via author intrusion, as per George Eliot's style, have a better chance at being full-blooded assertions (and so potentially lies), for in these cases the author is speaking more directly to the reader. Moreover, unreliable narrators will likely complicate things, precisely because they flout the norm of accuracy—perhaps some such narrators are 'bullshitters' rather than liars. Furthermore, the ethical properties of these lies in novels may differ—we might fault authors who lie via authorial intrusion more so than those who lie via their characters.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising these important points.

This suggests a complex picture of lies in novels; a picture which deserves more attention than I can give here. But what I hope to have shown is that lies in novels are certainly not impossible, as Mahon claims. The statements within fictions that I've offered possess the three characteristics that Mahon uses to buttress his account of assertion. So, the burden of proof is to now show that these are in fact not assertions, or that the literary works which contain them are in fact not novels.<sup>16</sup>

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