Living with Anna Karenina
On the Ontology of Literary Characters

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I.
Anna: An Introduction

In Chapter XXII of Part II in *Anna Karenina*, Vronsky visits Anna on the morning before his ill fated participation in the steeplechase. Anna knows she is pregnant and equivocates over letting Vronsky in on her secret. Her uncertainty grows out of much more than a concern for Vronsky's state of mind before the race.

> Just now when he entered she was wondering why, for others, Betsy for instance (of whose secret relations with Tushkevich she knew), it was all easy, while for her it was so tormenting. For certain reasons this thought troubled her more particularly to-day. She inquired about the races. Vronsky answered her, and noticing that she was excited, in order to distract her thoughts began giving her in a very matter-of-fact way particulars of the preparations for the races.
> "Shall I tell him or not?", she thought, looking at his calm, caressing eyes. "He is so happy, so full of his races, that he won't understand it properly, won't understand the importance of the event for us."
> "But you have not told me what you were thinking about when I came in", he said, breaking off his narration.
> She did not answer, but, slightly bowing her head, looked at him from under her brows questioningly, her eyes shining from under their long lashes. Her hand, toying with a leaf that she had pulled off, trembled. He noticed this, and his face assumed that submissive, slavishly-devoted expression that had such an effect on Anna.[1]

Anna cannot take her passion for Vronsky lightly, cannot see their love as a socially-tolerated, innocuous fling. Her unease over whether or not to tell Vronsky of her condition manifests itself in myriad subtle ways, perhaps most tellingly in the twisting of the leaf in her hand, a link between Anna's character and the pat-

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1. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 2nd ed., trans. George Gibain (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970), 171.

terns of nature that animate her, a sensuous symbol of their mutual defoliation. Anna, as we know, does decide to inform Vronsky of her pregnancy, and the misunderstandings and misapprehensions that ensue between the lovers at that point foreshadow their disjunction in the rest of the narrative.

When thinking about Anna Karenina as the principal character in this story, we may find ourselves interested in her not only as a figure in the events of the novel *Anna Karenina*, a figure faced with passions, demons and dilemmas, but also as an entity in the world beyond the novel itself, a phenomenon or thing among us. Who, or what, *is* Anna Karenina? What sort of being does she possess?

What we shall do in this paper is sketch a theory of certain kinds of fictional entities; what we shall call literary characters. In order to see more clearly the topic we are addressing, we shall look briefly at a few non-technical assumptions about the existence of fictional characters and then examine some of the dominant philosophical views put forward on the nature of fictional entities. Some of these views do give characters a status outside the fictional context, but even so they fail to take into account a distinction we see as a pivotal one, namely, that between the fictional and the literary. Thus, in considering the ontological status of literary characters from "strong" or artistically-accomplished texts, we look not only to their emotional and cognitive resonance within different types of cultural discourse but also to the creative virtuosity of the text's author as manifested in the aesthetic integrity of his product. We suggest that these factors, taken together, provide a matrix for determining what sort of existence literary characters possess.

II.
Pre-theoretical Intuitions about Literary Characters

Often it has been pointed out that our common sense gives us two clues in regard to the nature of fictional characters. On one hand, we are willing to give Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky a being or an existence of some kind, but on the other we deny their reality and, by the same token, their existence. We have strong emotions for Anna; she is, in whatever sense, vividly present to us while reading Tolstoy's novel, and she may play a role in our lives—via the discourse that has been going on about her—even if we have never read the novel. But in the end we may feel that Anna and Vronsky are only fictions, and whatever is fictional does not, by definition, exist. It is tempting to abandon the former intuition, and give Anna only "fictional existence". Anna is a product of imagination and can never enter our world.

But the first intuition is persistent; it is difficult to eliminate it. Perhaps its persistence stems from facts about our social reality. It certainly is true that Anna has a role to play in the lives of many people. Not only literary scholars, perhaps not even primarily scholars, but ordinary people interested in literature take a keen interest in Anna and Vronsky. Possibly it is the case that fictional entities, or some of them, have reality of some sort in our world.

The novelist and essayist Jeanette Winterson notes that

> strong texts work along the borders of our minds and alter what already exists. They could not do this if they merely reflected what already exists. Of course, strong texts tend to become so familiar, even to people who have not read them, that they become a part of what exists, at least a distort of them does.[2]

Insofar as Winterson observes the social dimension of certain works, she makes an implicit distinction between what she calls "strong texts", those texts that alter the world by virtue of their cultural ubiquity, and other, less strong texts.

Winterson claims that strong texts have a cultural impact to the extent that even persons who have not read the originating texts can identify and converse about their contents and characters. As remarked earlier, this appears to be true. We need not have read *Don Quixote* to grasp his status as an entity of value in our culture. Indeed, our very understanding of the adjective "quixotic" presupposes just such a grasp. The fictional character of Don Quixote, at some level, transcends the narrative context which gave birth to him and becomes a referent not only in literary criticism but in everyday discourse as well. Dracula might constitute another such entity, having made his way from fiction through to film, television, vampire sagas and the occasional fancy dress or Halloween costume.

It may thus be possible to maintain and develop Winterson's distinction between strong and other sorts of texts, in that we refer to these strong, socially-prominent texts as "literary" works, while reserving the descriptive term of "fiction" for those non-factual texts that do not possess or acquire such strength. Within works of literature, some *characters* possess a particularly powerful cultural resonance. Thus, these "merely" fictional characters, because of their high literary quality, gain a status in our social reality. Anna Karenina is one such character: she has grown out of the fictional context indicated by Tolstoy and reached an existence comparable to certain other kinds of cultural entities. It is due to the

2. Jeanette Winterson, "Writer, Reader, Words", in Winterson, *Art (Objects): Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1996), 26.

existence of Anna Karenina as a cultural entity that we have the kind of intuitions about her that we have pointed out. As a cultural entity Anna is capable of playing the role she actually does play in our life world.

The assertions of literary scholars and critics lend credence to this point. Consider this passage from the close of "Anna Karenina", an essay by the scholar and critic John Bayley. Bayley has been contemplating Tolstoy's achievement, the creation of Anna and her fictional universe, by noting the difference in quality and kind between Tolstoy's earlier, more labored drafts of the novel and the final product.

> In the completed *Anna* there are [...] only people. Their full realisation by Tolstoy deprives of all relevance all the novelist's willed conceptions and plottings, all the dramatist's confrontations and planned crises. For the last time in Tolstoy's art the work comes clean away from its shapings and intentions, as the statue from the marble... Its final self no longer seems to belong to Tolstoy, nor to be capable of being affected by him. The characters "do what it is in their nature to do": they are invulnerable to the author's power of choice. Unthinkable for Anna to contemplate an affair with Yashvin, or for Karenin to visit her and urge her to return to him—unthinkable because such elements of the accidental and unpredictable would send them back to the tentative beginnings of Tolstoy's process, from which our knowledge of them, as people, has so completely emancipated them.[3]

Bayley makes something of a radical claim for Tolstoy in this final analysis: in moving away from his initial attempts at deliberate control and giving in to something like the process of artistic vision, Tolstoy achieves a paradoxical effect—the resonance of a character beyond the narrative context through which she was created. Yet Bayley does not imply that Anna walks among us, conjured out of fiction by a vague artistic alchemy.[4] In referring to Tolstoy's characters as people, Bayley

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3. John Bayley, "Anna Karenina", in Harold Bloom, ed., *Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 31–32.

4. We know that Tolstoy read Schopenhauer extensively during the summer before he began writing *Anna Karenina*. (See Donna Tussing Orwin, *Tolstoy's Art and Thought, 1847–1880*.) One approach to Bayley's claims would then be to interpret Tolstoy's art as a move away from a *willed* deliberation of character and towards a more perceptual expression of what he drew directly from life itself. For Schopenhauer, "the intention with which the poet sets our imagination in motion is to reveal to us the Ideas, in other words, to show in example what life is, what the world is. For this the first condition is that he himself should have known it" (Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, trans. E. F. J. Payne, Third Book, ch. xxxvii, 425). In leaving an earlier, mannered attitude towards his characters behind him, Tolstoy allowed himself to create more robust entities from the pool of his experience. On this reading, Bayley might be seen

attributes a kind of autonomy to them and in so doing acknowledges the artistry of their creator as a necessary condition of their ontological singularity. In some instances it certainly is only a *façon de parler* to refer to fictional entities as we might refer to real people; and it is easy to cite cases in which the references to fictional beings can be translated into expressions without any ontological commitments. But Bayley and Winterson refer, rather, to a phenomenological fact about fictional entities, and this fact cannot be explained away by linguistic analysis.

People maintain intimate bonds with fictional entities and psychologically treat such entities as if they existed in the world.[5] In addition, overt references to entities like Anna occur as natural and common in ordinary discourse.[6] Many philosophers, recognizing this, take care to acknowledge our pre-theoretical intuitions about the existence of fictional characters, even when their own approaches to the ontological status of such fictions involve quite terse invocations of logic.[7] While none of us believes that Anna Karenina occupies a place in space and time in the exact manner of living human beings, we nevertheless impute some sort of existence or being to her whenever we speak of or even think about her story as we know it. As Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen remark in their recent book *Truth, Fiction and Literature*: "in one sense, in spite of its paradoxical appearance, we can say that fictional characters exist. In fact there are many usages that make that assumption explicit."[8] The status of this existence, however, has a complex and controversial place in the discipline of philosophy.

III.
Theoretical Models: The Ontology of Fictions
Roughly speaking, theories on fictional entities could be divided into three categories. There are views which give fictional entities a genuine ontological status:

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to advance a Schopenhaurian account of artistic achievement, where vivid and memorable works of literature emerge from and return to the details of life itself rather than from any intricate fancies of the author's imagination. This interpretation, however, while supported by historical facts relevant to Tolstoy's writing of the novel, nevertheless remains an ontologically less probing analysis of Bayley's original claim.

5. Kendall Walton, "How Remote Are Fictional Worlds from the Real World?", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXXVII (1979), 11–23.

6. Ibid., 14–15.

7. Terence Parsons, "A Meinongian Analysis of Fictional Objects", *Grazer philosophische Studien* 1 (1975), 77.

8. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 99.

characters are "theoretical entities of literary criticism"[9] or "sets of properties iden-
tified by descriptions under the convention of story-telling".[10] On these concep-
tions, literary characters exist in the very same world as we do. Obviously they do
not exist as persons, but as abstract or linguistic entities. There is a second class of
theories which also gives characters an ontological status but not one that occupies
a place in the world in which we live: non-lifeworld ontologies include characters
as "person-kinds" existing in the ideal world of kinds, properties and relations,[11]
or creatures living in other possible worlds,[12] or "intentional objects".[13] The Mei-
nongian theories could also be subsumed under this heading. Although the point
in Meinong's theory of objects is the independence of *Sein* and *Sosein*, being and
being such-and-such—that there "are" objects that do not exist, i.e. objects pos-
sessing other properties but not that of being or existence—it can be argued that,
even in the realm of non-existent objects, we must operate with another kind of
concept of being, whether it is "subsistence" or some related concept.[14]

The third category consists of theories denying that there is an ontological is-
sue to be discussed; fictional entities raise semantic and pragmatic questions, not
ontological ones. Perhaps the most well-known and widely discussed is Kendall
Walton's theory of fiction as make-believe. Fiction is a game of make-believe; no
fictional entities exist outside the fictional context. Beyond Walton, a fictional
context has most often been defined by reference to the stance of the author. An
author, or more generally a "fictioneer",[15] puts on display a set of propositions
for the consideration of his readers. His stance is not assertive; he is not lying when
writing about fictions. Walton, however, is advancing another view. He thinks fic-
tionality cannot be defined through an author's stance, or even more generally

9. Peter van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977), 299–
308, 302; and idem, "Fiction and Metaphysics", *Philosophy and Literature* 7 (1983), 67–77.

10. Peter Lamarque, "Fiction and Reality", in Peter Lamarque, ed., *Philosophy and Fiction: Es-
says in Literary Aesthetics* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983). 52–72, 69.

11. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 144–149.

12. David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978), 37–46; Tho-
mas Pavel, "Ontological Issues in Poetics: Speech Acts and Fictional Worlds", *Journal of Aesthet-
ics and Art Criticism* XL (1981), 167–178; Robert Howell, "Fictional Objects: How They Are and
How They Aren't", *Poetics* 8 (1979), 129–177.

13. Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George G. Grabowic (Evanston: North-
western University Press, 1973), 362–363.

14. Parsons, "A Meinongian Analysis of Fictional Objects".

15. We have borrowed the term from Wolsterstoff, *Works and Worlds of Art*, 107.

through an artist's stance. For Walton, the field of fictionality is much broader and depends finally on the function that a set of propositions gets on the receiving end. The reader, in the case of literature, decides what is fiction and what is not. If a set of propositions ends in a reader's "game of make-believe", we have an instance of fiction.

For our purposes it is useful to look more closely at theories from the first and third categories. We are interested in the problem of what kind of a status certain fictional characters possess in *our* world. Even if it could be argued persuasively that we must, for whatever reason, give fictions an existence in a world other than the one we inhabit, the problem of fictions entering our world would not have been addressed. Besides, and more importantly, most views mentioned neglect what for us is of utmost importance—value in literature. Many of the philosophical theories on fictions are first and foremost technical exercises adapting a philosophical theory into the realm of fiction. They do not address fictions that stand as human aesthetic achievements, do not talk about taking literary considerations into account.

As we have said, our concern is not so much fiction *as* fiction. Rather, we focus on fictional entities after their transformation into cultural beings. We want to show that traditional accounts of fiction have not addressed the issue at all; philosophers have mainly considered the problem as a sub-issue of a more general question—the problem of non-existence. In these treatments, specific types of questions are raised: when we talk "about" non-existents, to what kinds of objects are we referring? To put the problem in another way, avoiding possible ontological commitments: how should expressions about non-existents be analyzed? We are not going to enter into this discussion within the confines of this paper but rather we attempt to show that even those philosophical theories addressing the ontology of fiction have neglected issues arising from the specific *literary* nature of literary fictions. Most philosophers have not addressed the distinction between fiction and literature or the issues that stem from the literary quality some fictional works possess.

Thus, it is not relevant here to reiterate all the possible solutions to fictional entities qua fictional entities. It seems obvious that theories in the second category of the brief classification above (non-lifeworld ontologies) are not of much use for the purposes set out here. Many of them are philosophically well-developed and technically sound, and in this sense acceptable, but do not address the issue we raise. To clarify the literary nature of literary fictions, we shall rely primarily on two views, Walton's and Lamarque's. Both views are fairly well-known

and have been developed and frequently discussed during the last twenty years. They also represent different theory-types and serve our purposes in this way as well.

Let us start with Walton's analysis. He presents his theory as a general account of all representational arts. Whether pictorial, verbal, fictional and non-fictional representations fall under the same category is itself a controversial issue,[16] but that does not concern us here. Here we examine Walton's theory of literary fictions. Walton falls neatly into line with the traditional analytic way of addressing semantic issues—he wants to eliminate, through paraphrase, the apparent references in our ordinary discourse about fictional entities. The concept he uses for this is "pretense".

> "Pretending to do something" is best understood in terms of participation in a game of make-believe. To pretend to bathe a baby or point to a ship is to behave so as to make it fictional of oneself in a game of make-believe that one bathes a baby or points to a ship.[17]

A speaker "fictionalizes" himself when talking about Anna Karenina, entering a game of make-believe in which the propositions indicated by Tolstoy are props.

Our dealings with Anna always take place in the world of fiction. Walton's well-known views on our emotional encounters with fictional entities stress the point.

> In some cases the pretense interpretation applies with no strain at all. Tears come to the eyes of a reader of *Anna Karenina* as he learns of Anna's suicide, and he mumbles to himself, "Oh no! Poor Anna, she didn't deserve that fate." Fictionally he mourns Anna's death and laments the circumstances that led to it.[18]

Basically the same analysis goes for all kinds of statements, including those put forward by scholars. Contrary to Peter van Inwagen, Walton thinks he does not

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16. David Novitz, "Critical Discussion on *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*", *Philosophy and Literature* 15 (1991), 118–128, 122–123.

17. Kendall Walton, "Do We Need Fictional Entities? Notes Towards a Theory", in Rudolf Haller, ed., *Aesthetics: Proceedings of the Eighth International Wittgenstein Symposium*, part I (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1984), 179–192, 180. Cf. his *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), ch. 10: "Doing without Fictitious Entities".

18. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 392.

have to postulate a special class of entities as reference points about which literary scholars make statements. But both Walton and van Inwagen take for granted that "the axiom of existence" is in force when we are dealing with fictions.[19]

Although Walton claims the activity of the author to be irrelevant for the understanding of fiction, an analogous analysis invoking pretense from the author's point of view has been given by a number of philosophers. As a matter of fact, John Searle uses the very same word, "pretend", to describe an author's speech acts.[20] An author is not asserting anything when writing about fictional characters; he would be lying if he did. Similar analyses have been put forward, for example, by Richard Ohmann, Monroe C. Beardsley and Charles Crittenden.[21] Gilbert Ryle's classic account of imagination also points in this direction.[22] We are not claiming that all these theorists stand for the same view; considerable disagreements in many philosophically important issues remain among them. What we are saying, rather, is that all these accounts try to reduce the ontological issue to a pragmatic one. They think that the question is not about the ontology of characters but about how we use language. Even though one would not postulate a special "fictive use of language",[23] one would still assume that it is possible to avoid ontological commitments by reference, for example, to a shared set of background beliefs,[24] or conventions, or a fictive stance, which originates the context within which the discussion on fictional entities can take place.

We argue that literary characters are in a completely different category than favored examples of non-existents such as the "present King of France" or "the

19. This is John Searle's formulation of the axiom: "Whatever is referred to must exist". John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 77. For a critical discussion, see Joseph Margolis, "The Axiom of Existence: Reductio ad Absurdum," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 15 (1977), 91–99.

20. John Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Philosophy of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 65.

21. Richard Ohmann, "Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature", *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 4 (1971), 1–19; Monroe C. Beardsley, "Fiction as Representation", *Synthese* 46 (1981), 291–313; Charles Crittenden, *Unreality: The Metaphysics of Fictional Objects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 78–105; Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1–51.

22. Gilbert Ryle, "Imaginary Objects", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume XII (1933), 18–43.

23. Richard Gale, "The Fictive Use of Language", *Philosophy* 46 (1971), 324–340.

24. Charles Crittenden, "Thinking about Non-Being", *Inquiry* 16 (1973), 290–312; Joseph Margolis, "Fiction and Existence", *Grazer philosophische Studien* 19 (1983), 179–203.

round square". The tradition of discussion about fictional entities has grown out from the Russellian bedrock and has, to a large extent, remained faithful to it. This is fine—so far as it goes. But fictional pieces of literature are not arbitrary examples for philosophically intriguing semantic problems. They are products of literary skills which sometimes create entities reaching far beyond those limits that traditional analytic approaches can accommodate. To us it seems that the Frege–Russell—and to some extent the Meinong—line has prevented philosophers from taking into consideration issues that stem from the "artistry" of literary works.

Before going more deeply into the position we want to advance, we shall briefly study Lamarque's Fregean theory. As we have seen above, Lamarque's stand is bold insofar as he acknowledges that fictional entities have an existence in our reality. But their existence is, again, of a rather technical sort. Lamarque's Anna Karenina is a linguistic entity, consisting of a set of propositions, or properties.

> Fictional characters [...] do not exist in the real world as persons. They are fictional-persons or persons-in-a-story... As characters, though, they can be said to exist, but only as *abstract* entities, that is, as concepts or sets of properties. What in a fictional world are persons are merely characters or abstract entities in the real world. [...] The persons do not exist but the characters do.[25]

As an entity of this kind Anna Karenina can exert influence on our lives. For example, the emotional effect Anna has is based on this set which gives us, in Lamarque's view, thought-contents, or mental representations, and they are the immediate cause of our emotions.[26] So when we feel pity for Anna Karenina, the object of our emotion is the thought derived from the propositional content with which Anna Karenina can be identified as a character.[27] The difference from Walton is clear, and Lamarque himself compares his own conception with that of Walton. We no longer move in the field of imaginary or make-believe. Anna has entered our world, and though she cannot act in the way real people do, she has a role to play.

There are nevertheless objections that can be raised against Lamarque's account of the emotional impact of fictional entities. One may wonder whether the idea

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25. Lamarque, "Fiction and Reality", 60; See also Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, 87.

26. Peter Lamarque, "How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21 (1981), 291–304, 296.

27. Lamarque's theory is more subtle, but we cannot go into all details here; see ibid., 301.

of thought-contents being the cause of emotions clears away the "paradox of fiction" at all. That we react and respond to entities we know to be non-existent—at least in the sense that they do not have a spatio-temporal existence—is paradoxical. But is the dilemma solved by saying that there is something real causing our emotions: thought-contents? "The thought and the emotion *are* real", Lamarque emphatically states.[28] But again, for the purposes of this paper, this is a minor issue. There is something more important which deserves a fuller account.

In their collaboratory effort Lamarque and Olsen make a distinction between fiction and literature. Interestingly enough, they define fiction purely descriptively by reference to the fictive stance, fictive utterance and prevailing conventions in our literary culture.[29] This does not mean, however, that works of fiction never possess any value. In Lamarque and Olsen's view, many fictional pieces are valuable—they can be entertaining or instructive—but there is no necessary connection between fiction and value (445–449). The notion of literature is essentially different; it is inherently an evaluative concept. The prevailing values of literature can be seen in the corpus of pieces we regard as classics: "there exists [...] a canon of literature, a great tradition, that embodies the values of the practice. The concept of literature is defined by the values which the works of the tradition embody" (450).

One could say that Lamarque and Olsen have the elements for the ontology of the literary character—they give fictional characters a genuine ontological status in the world in which we lead our lives as persons, and they also emphasize the importance of value in literature. But they do not take the step of attributing value properties to fictional characters as such. In our view, literary characters have come into existence because they exhibit properties that are of perennial interest from the human point of view. Thanks to these features, people take interest in the characters and take them to be constituents in the life world to which they themselves belong.

In placing their emphasis on the constitutive power of the author's linguistic act, Lamarque and Olsen do not deny the role of artistry in the creation of enduring fictional entities.

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28. Ibid., 302.

29. Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, 268–288, 445. Further references to this work are found in the text.

And this linguistic act might itself be the product of highly original (inspired, etc.) feats of imagination. Normally readers would never, without the aid of an author's fictive utterances, have the opportunity to make-believe that a person of just *this* kind exists (note that we do not give much credit for creativity to a writer who describes only stereotypical characters).

    Once a character has been introduced in a fiction it can become an object of general reflection. (100–101)

A distinction arises here between stereotypical characters and characters who are the products of feats of original imagination. If we assume Anna Karenina to be a character of the latter sort, the product of a refined and observant imaginative sensibility, then several issues press themselves upon us, not the least of which is the question of what Lamarque and Olsen call "the application of the fictional to the real" (101).

    For Lamarque and Olsen, literary value emerges as a result of artistic treatments of perennial human themes, where such treatments succeed through the use of both creativity and mimesis (449). These perennial, enduring themes (as opposed to merely topical or fashionable themes) are not *found in* literature so much as *elicited from* it: appreciative discourse operating within literary criticism and theory locates the successful development of perennial themes in the accomplished manipulation of literary form. Lamarque and Olsen include diction, metaphor, symbol, description of setting, parallels, contrasts, features of structure and points of view among the elements of literary form. They also include what they call "presentation of character" (436). This is puzzling, however, since nothing in their treatment of *either* what they refer to as the literary stance *or* the ontological status of fictions suggests the manner in which the two can effectively be brought together to explain the enduring, or perennial, relevance of a character like Anna Karenina.

    If Anna's ontological status locates itself entirely within that set of properties relevant to her within the fictive utterance,[30] and if in descriptions as property sets

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    30. This is by no means an uncontroversial view: philosophers and literary theorists have criticized the reduction of character to definite description. Casteñeda, for example, notes that while we "can adopt a reductionistic view and consider such a status as ultimately built into our linguistic habits in that those possible objects of thought are equated with possible definite descriptions we can frame given the language we possess". It is also possible to construe character through what he calls a phenomenal ontology. See Hector-Neri Casteñeda, "Fiction and Reality: Their Fundamental Connections", *Poetics* 8 (1979), 31–62, 49; also Casteñeda, *Thinking, Language, and Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), ch. 11: "Fiction and Reality: Ontological Questions about Literary Experience". In a different context, Uri Margolin queries the

there are no "formal features, semantic or syntactic, that define them as fictional or literary—indeed there are no inherently fictional or literary features of texts or discourse" (440)—then we must conclude that while literary practice as characterized by Lamarque and Olsen may be able to establish the literary value of entire fictional texts through their formal treatments of perennial themes, it cannot similarly establish the literary value of particular characters; for there is no *logical* mechanism from within sets of properties as descriptions to move from fictional to literary being.

Even if we assume that the complete set of Anna's properties has not yet been discovered or elicited—in other words, that literary criticism always has more work to do in identifying all of Anna's constitutive properties—we can say nothing about why Anna might possess a different order of being from a stereotypical character, given that she is no more than a set of characterizing properties assembled (however imaginatively) for our attention. Discussions involving *how* those properties have been assembled, *how* they emerge from and make use of the narrative context, belong outside of definite description as such.

Although their theory shows a much-needed sophistication with respect to consideration of literary quality, Lamarque and Olsen do not focus on the cultural significance of literary characters as such. They do give credit to literary works; the concept of value is baked into the concept of literature. But they do not take into account the possibility of characters rising above mere fictionality due to the artistic quality of these characters. As we shall demonstrate in the following sections, Anna Karenina is a paradigmatic example of a character exemplifying features and dilemmas that are of continual human interest.

IV.
Character and Discourse: The Culturalization of Fiction
Given the complexity and richness of theories about the ontological status of fictional objects, it may appear puzzling that we have chosen to locate our discussion of literary characters beyond or near the borders of those theories. Yet we take several cues from ideas introduced in those theories, the most central of which

practice of equating a character's ontological status with the reduction to verbal descriptions: "As an element of the constructed narrative world, 'character' is a general semiotic element, independent of any particular verbal expression and ontologically different from it. Like all elements of the narrative deep structure, it must be designated by linguistic expressions in order to be communicated but it cannot be reduced to them." See Uri Margolin, "Characterization in Narrative: Some Theoretical Prolegomena", *Neophilologus* 67 (1983), 1–14, 7.

remains Lamarque and Olsen's recognition of a split between the descriptive concept of fiction and the evaluative concept of literature. Two other considerations of importance for our sketch of literary characters as cultural entities are the ontological significance of intersecting and overlapping forms of discourse as they occur empirically in society, and the capacity of such intersections and overlappings to render a literary character somewhat autonomous with regard to its originating narrative.

Hector-Neri Casteñeda has developed an extensive and sophisticated system to establish the metaphysical foundations of literary characters. Alluding to their autonomy, he reminds us that in any investigation of a character's ontological status, "there is [...] a *culturalization of fiction* as a crucial datum that must be taken into account".[31] While Casteñeda conducts his analysis in a different manner than we do here, we nevertheless concur with his intuitions about culture as a factor in the investigation of a literary character's ontology. The power of the process of culturalization to transform mere fictions into literary entities does, we argue, have ontological significance. What then constitutes this culturalization? One way to begin takes account of references to fictional characters in general, beyond the explicit scope of their original narratives.

Wolfgang Iser in his book *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* remarks that intertextual fields of reference give rise to occasions where the hero of a novel can step over the boundaries of his original context and appear as a figure in other discourses.[32] Sherlock Holmes might thus emerge as a character in a story by someone other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, for example,[33] or a fictional detective from one author's work might make a guest appearance in or be alluded to by the fictional work of another author.[34] Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die in the context of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but gain Lazarus-like viability in Tom Stoppard's play (and subsequent film), *Rosencrantz and Guilden-*

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31. Casteñeda, "Fiction and Reality", 44.

32. Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 9.

33. This point is made by Parsons in "A Meinongian Analysis of Fictional Objects", 79. Parsons carefully begins with what he calls our pretheoretic intuitions about the existence of fictional objects, though his own analysis remains firmly rooted in the sorts of analyses inaugurated and developed within analytical philosophy of language.

34. For example, George V. Higgins alludes to Robert B. Parker's fictional detective Spenser in one of his own works, *Kennedy for the Defense*.

stern Are Dead. In cinema, certainly, the import and export of fictional characters from one filmic work to another serve as hallmarks of allusive comedy.[35]

Perhaps it would be possible to maintain, however, that such crossing of boundaries—the importation of fictional characters from a particular novel into another fictional context—indicates only that fictional characters can jump ship between and among their own kind, in other words, in obviously fictional contexts. Van Inwagen takes such thinking a step further when he configures fictional characters as "theoretical entities" of a literary criticism and asserts that such entities are never the subjects of non-literary discourse. Whether appearing in other fictional contexts or serving as objects of scrutiny for literary theorists and critics, the theoretical entities of literary criticism have their existence in, and only in, the discourse arising in relation to the practices surrounding literature itself.[36] Van Inwagen's theory introduces, among many other things, the assumption that only those characters who earn focused or sustained critical attention evolve into these theoretical entities. We see here the germ of a theory that privileges the status of the literary over and above that of the merely fictional.

But such a notion remains problematic on many counts, not the least of which is the *evaluative* connotation of the concept of "literary", the implications of which we return to in a moment. A more immediate concern about the existence of fictional characters in general (and the usages that make our assumptions about them explicit) is whether or not their existence confines itself to literary discourse in the sense of those discussions arising directly in relation to the production, appreciation and evaluation of fictional and other textual narratives. Can we hold literary discourse solely responsible for the constitution of characters such as Anna?

While it may be the case that fictional characters gather some of their social momentum from professional or critical discourse surrounding their creation and appreciation, evidence suggests that van Inwagen's conception of them as "theoretical entities" imposes artificial limitations on the viability of characters like Anna. Fictional characters appear as referents in different sorts of discourse, casual as well as scholarly and professional, and so making explicit use of literary discourse does not necessarily answer the question about the ontological status

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35. A recent instance of the comic device of importing a fictional character from one film into another is the cameo appearance of the advanced cyborg character (presented as a traffic cop on a motorcycle) from the film *Terminator II: Judgment Day* in the satirical movie *Wayne's World*.

36. van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction", 303.

possessed by fictional characters. A more intensive investigation *of* the existence and intersection of characters with diverse discourses is required.

In fact Anna Karenina *is* more than either a set of (well-assembled) characterizing properties (*à la* Lamarque) or a theoretical entity built up through the bulk of self-consciously literary discussions referring to her (van Inwagen). It may be granted that self-consciously literary discourse of the sort promoted by van Inwagen has a great deal to do with the emergence of literary characters as beings in their own right, especially as a vehicle for introducing the existence of such characters and their narratives to the wider public at large. But it would be a category mistake to limit the being of such characters solely to the support of literary discourse as a special mode of treatment.

A narrative and its characters may initially be the darlings of literary critics and scholars and receive a great deal of attention from them in the early stages surrounding their production. Through time, however, such entities can fade from view and fall away from the frequency with which they were initially invoked. When such fading occurs, what then constitutes the ontological status of fictional characters? Do they continue to exist but as pale shadows of their former selves? Van Inwagen's theory can offer no clear answer, or at the very least must acknowledge a fluctuating intensity of existence dependent upon the critical fashions of the times.

Suppose we extend the idea of "literary discourse" to include not only scholarly and critical treatments of character but also popular and social discussions about those treatments ("Did you read Amis's review of Barnes? Shocking!"). We still retain the problem of tying the ontological status of literary fictions to the self-conscious institution of literature interpretation and evaluation. Yet readers do not confine their understanding or appreciation of characters like Anna to her role in erudite or reflective analyses, and this is a crucial fact for any theory that proposes to clarify the ontological status of fictional and literary characters. Through time and across types and levels of discourse, entities like Anna continue to be known, felt and reflected upon in ways that raise their being *beyond* that of mere fictionality. Partially as a function of her endurance through a diverse array of discourses and partially through a considerable expanse of time (the location of such discourse), Anna as a strong product of literary imagination becomes a cultural entity, a being capable of direct and untheoretical reference.

Kendall Walton and those sharing his position might object that any invocation of Anna, any appreciation of her at all, occurs only when we extend ourselves into the fictional world through a process of participation in make-believe, thus

in some sense allowing ourselves to become fictional. This seems counterintuitive as a solution to the problem of a particular character's ontological status beyond our direct engagement with their narrative contexts. For example, while it may be the case that a person allows him or herself to enter a fictional world while engaged in the reading of Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*—many readers know and relish the experience of being consumed by the world of a book they cannot put down—it is by no means clear that a person extends back into a fictional world of make-believe each time he or she contemplates the situation of a particular character from that novel. *Anna Karenina* remains for many readers the sort of novel that bears revisitation, not only in the form of multiple readings but also in the habit of reflection and ordinary discussion.

If a woman contemplates her own predicament, in which she maintains a bond of marriage with one man yet loves and seeks the company of another, she may find herself reflecting on her situation through the experiences and lessons taken from Anna's consumption by her single-minded passion for Vronsky. Furthermore, such a woman may share her misgivings with a friend or acquaintance and these misgivings can take the form of direct reference to Anna and the situation through which she lived.[37] While no philosophically astute reader believes for a moment that Anna's story really happened or even that it serves as a direct, perceptive analog for real life, such awareness does not preclude there being an actual entity—Anna Karenina—to which persons can refer in everyday discourse. The capacity to make such references and to have it understood that they can be meaningful beyond the intentional act of engaging in literary criticism, suggests the existence of entities whose ontological status outstrips the context of make-believe through which they initially entered the world.

Not every fictional character achieves such a status, of course. In this we return to the distinction between the fictional as a descriptive category and the literary as an evaluative term. Characters such as Anna attain literary status and it is possible to propose a structure within which such transformations between the fictional and the literary take place, and to show why such transformations demand

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37. Note that we do not, however tempting the segue presenting itself may be, switch over here into a discussion of whether or not literary fiction embodies truths, or propositions about the world that can be tested for truth or falsity. We neither define fiction as a series of pretenses involving assertions nor do we argue that such definitions are relevant to any understanding of a character's ontological status. Referring to Anna Karenina's dissolution in personal and casual conversation commits one to no particular theory about the truth status of propositions, either implied or explicit, emerging from fictions.

a different account of literary ontology than has hitherto been operative in the dominant approaches to the subject. This efficacy of some literary characters— their power through aesthetic, emotional and cognitive dimensions of human life to have an impact on the lives and discourse of human beings—allows them to become what we are calling "cultural entities", entities whose existence is neither so abstruse nor so abstract as some of the discussion that has traditionally surrounded the ontological status of fictional or non-existent objects.

V.
Multivalence and the Emergence of Literary Characters

The literary creator as an artist, like other artists, arranges his materials using the formal tools and devices of his medium. In the case of literature, the artist arranges patterns of concepts in syntactically-conventional styles in order to achieve a kind of semantic originality. If we wish to argue, as we do, that Anna Karenina is not merely a fictional entity but rather achieves the status of a literary character, then in forwarding such a claim we make an implicit assertion about Tolstoy's artistic achievement. Such judgments form one sort of discourse surrounding and involving the character of Anna Karenina, a discourse concerned with the illumination of a text's aesthetic integrity.

Let us return to our initial passage from *Anna Karenina*, where we find Anna equivocating over whether or not to inform Vronsky of her pregnancy. Approaching the passage from the aesthetic point of view, we might focus on the leaf in Anna's hand as a densely-coded signifier, a subtly chosen symbol of her predicament throughout the novel. Anna, as we know, presents a figure of animation throughout the narrative. This animate quality ties her (and to some degree her brother) more fixedly than others to patterns of the natural world and simultaneously makes full integration with the patterns of society difficult. In nervously fingering the leaf she has torn from a tree, Anna indicates her complicity with the process of defoliation: Anna, like the nutrient-starved, detached leaves of autumn trees, will slowly be cut off from the society that sustains her, will feel the life-giving sap dry up as she falls into mad isolation. Not only this, though, for the leaf in Anna's hand has not fallen but been torn from its tree, and by Anna herself. In taking up seriously with Vronsky, Anna removes herself from the approval needed to sustain herself socially, as a woman, in nineteenth-century Russia.

Much more can be said about this reading of our passage but our point in offering it is not to justify the choice of Anna as a literary character but rather to illustrate one pattern of discourse through which literary characters become es-

tablished as singular ontological entities. When an artist creates a superior narrative and within it a superior character, such as Tolstoy has done with Anna, the narrative and character bear multiple revisitations in deference to the virtuosity with which the artist has presented his creation. As the site of such multiple visitations, characters become the focus of what we might think of as a "density of discourses". And this density of discourses, we argue, constitutes the literary character of Anna Karenina as an entity in the world.

Such discourses spring up around issues both within and beyond Tolstoy's narrative itself. Anna does emerge clearly through our contemplation of her as an embodiment of various "life experiences" presented in the novel, as an object of aesthetic interest, but her existence cannot be limited to this. Another form of discourse that we often recognize as being of importance in the ontological establishment of the literary character is that involving the emotive aspects derived from the exploits of such characters. This can, nevertheless, function on two levels, one quite different than the other.

The first level runs parallel to what Walton has theorized as the state of make-believe, where a reader engaged with the events and situations presented by a narrative enters into such engagement in a self-consciously fictional way. Taking up the fictive stance, one extends oneself into the fictional world and allows oneself, through the attitude of make-believe, to feel and consider emotions as whipped up by the narrative.[38] Thus can we experience a quasi-anxiety along with Anna as she frets over whether or not to talk about the pregnancy with Vronsky. We can sense her urgency as the moment saturates itself with implications for their future together: will this former playboy take the birth of a child seriously? Will he still love Anna or discard her cruelly? What will pregnancy do to her body as an object of physical attraction for him? Will she still have the same allure, her only power since she must forfeit the bond with society? We can *feel* a semblance of these things as we work through the narrative, even if we have read it previously.

But this idea of multiple readings points towards a second tier of emotion and discourse as we unravel the constitution of characters like Anna. Referring back to our earlier example, it is entirely conceivable for a woman, herself caught in a bind not dissimilar to that known by Anna, to draw thoughts of Anna into her mind in a non-ironic, non-fictive manner. In reflecting on her own situation such a woman may sense an encroaching familiarity even as the dilemma, for her, is

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38. Walton himself draws on Tolstoy in using a reader's possible response to Anna's suicide as an example of entry into make-believe. See discussion, Section II of this article.

new. In following the formal leads set down in the work by Tolstoy, the woman already knows Anna's life through herself, as a force that helped to create Anna. In the process of imaginative participation with literary works, the reader's own stance becomes one point of understanding with regard to character. Such understanding need not stop with the reading, though, for our woman may discuss her predicament with others, invoking Anna as a parallel and making her own state of mind understood. In such instances, one harnesses emotive dimensions of human being-in-the-world through allusions to literary characters and in so doing uses characters as portals to more efficacious communication with others. This second-tier sense of emotion in discourse does not, as with make-believe, rely upon a modal shift into a fictional world. Rather, in alluding to and drawing upon the experiences of literary characters in everyday discourse, we extend what is fictional back to ourselves to convey what feels mute and subjective. Literary characters as conduits for communication about lived emotive experience emerge as such, again, through density of discourse, through shared participation in our talk of cultural entities.

We might also recognize that literary characters take shape in the world not only by being objects of aesthetic or emotive reflection and discussion but also through their serving as models of knowledge in and about the world. When speaking of knowledge we do not here digress to a discussion of fictional entities as purveyors of truth claims and propositions—such has been done elsewhere and to great effect—but rather we highlight the use to which everyday discourse puts literary characters in isolating points of reflection about the human condition.

Anna, again: the equivocation scene with Vronsky holds more for us than for her, for we know after many readings what comes of them both, of their baby, their lives. Anna knows she should hold back from disrupting Vronsky's peace of mind before the race but even at this stage in her progression we see clearly, in Leibnizian fashion, what she cannot—the threat his casual interests pose to her solipsistic notion of love. Similarly, Vronsky perceives Anna's agitation but avoids addressing it, initially, by paternalistically drawing her attention to descriptive details of preparations for the race. We encounter Anna not only as an agent facing a difficult choice but also as a figure whose drastic downfall we know. She provides ample material for the exercise of extended and penetrating cognition. Indeed, she just *is* the forms of such cognition, a multivalent entity woven and layered together through time from the text into discourse.

The texture of Anna's life, its dilemmas, can be appreciated here in a manner that irradiates the hollows of our own. It is customary, within discussions of fic-

tional characters as non-existent entities, to suppose that such characters are incomplete by virtue of their defiance of the completeness theorem. In these discussions, Anna neither has nor does not have a mole on her back. She confounds the law of excluded middle and corrupts herself out of existence by refusing to conform to the norms of exemplification. Such a view, consistent with the rules and applications of logic to non-existent entities, cannot properly clarify the power of Anna as a literary character. Yes, as a mere fiction she is "incomplete"; but another sort of incompleteness gives a fuller sense of Anna as a cultural entity. The incompleteness of Anna and others like her, literary characters constituted by their being sites in a dense web of multiple discourses, stems instead from the degree to which discourse about them cannot be exhausted.

Like other great works of art, the products of feats of highly original imagination, Anna can be revisited as a source of aesthetic, emotional and cognitive value innumerous times and in countless ways. Again, as a work of art, as an entity, Anna achieves cultural multivalence. In this she reminds us of Kant's aesthetical ideas, which evolve trains of thought that cannot be completed. Anna and entities like her come into being not only by the authorial act of creating a fictional entity but more properly through the dense and multiple modes of discourse that emerge *in response to* that authorial act, to superior works of art.

Many literary works exemplify the complexity of human relationships. *Anna Karenina* is the prime example of a piece developing extremely intricate situations, and most of them gather, needless to say, around Anna Karenina. Anna Karenina as a character is the focal point of different kinds of bonds—she is defined by the normal family ties—husband, child, relatives—friendship with other people, and her liaison with Vronsky. A great variety of the different modes of being-together defines her character, starting from the affectionate and fairly straight-forward ties of mother and child to the many-faceted bonds between a woman and a man, which are not only demarcated by the two persons involved but to a great extent by the gazes of others. While reading the novel we see the development of these relationships and, by the same token, changes in the character of Anna Karenina. She exists in these relations; her nature is in them.

Anna Karenina's situation is certainly much more perplexing than those in which many of her admirers find themselves, but it is not alien in the sense that we could not see its relevance for our own ties and relations. Each of us is defined by different modes of being-together, and some of them we find operative in the main figure of Tolstoy's novel. As just pointed out, it is easy to understand Anna's applicability from a female perspective, but it is by no means far-fetched to trans-

late at least some of the insights Anna incorporates to the male point of view. The modes of being-together are certainly different depending on gender, but they are analogous enough to discern the implications. And in the end, there are themes we have called, following Lamarque and Olsen, "perennial"—love, passion, loyalty, and friendship, just to name a few—which are exemplified in Anna's character and which are of general human interest.

Anna Karenina as a literary character, as an entity to which we are related in our present life world, owes her position in that world partially to the complexity of the relations of being-together she so aptly demonstrates. In the discussion of fictional entities, therefore, a distinction must be made between mere fictions, whose ontology remains rooted in the arguments surrounding the syntactical and semantic status of non-existent entities, and literary characters, whose kinship and consonance with other great works of art engender patterns of discourse too complex to name but whose power to harness attention through discourse raises them into figures, real figures, for reference in the world. In figures like this the cognitive, emotional, and the aesthetic come neatly together and constitute the efficacy, the capturing power, of Anna Karenina. These qualities raise Anna above the ordinary and make her an exciting companion with whom to live.