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**Possible Worlds Literary Theory and the Gospel Narratives:
Truth, Reference, and the Reading Experience**

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Abstract

This thesis is an experimental application of possible worlds literary theory to the four Gospel narratives found in the Bible. I argue that modelling the Gospel narratives as “possible worlds” enables the questions about reference, genre, and ontology to be revisited in a productive way. While the Gospels have typically been understood by narrative critics as being self-referential, a possible worlds model promotes a more holistic approach which takes into consideration the claims that these narratives make on the actual world of reality. To ignore these claims, I argue, is to misinterpret the function of biblical narrative. Once we understand the Gospels as autonomous modal systems, the “textual actual world” (the centre of the modal system) offers a place where readers can recenter to and “actualise” the possible states of affairs represented by the narrator. In this way, the sender’s instructions are not transgressed, and successful narrative communication can take place. Upon de-immersion, however, it is also possible to consider the compatibility of the four worlds projected by the text with the reader’s native world. Accordingly, in this thesis I suggest that modelling the Gospel narratives as possible worlds allows for a clearer definition of the type of worlds the Gospels project, as well as offering a sophisticated theory of reference that is fitting with how readers both intuitively and critically engage with texts.

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Introduction

The polarising image of Donald Trump clutching an open Bible, thanking evangelical Christians for their loyal support—along with the ensuing promise to “never let them down”¹—is not simply a reminder of the Bible’s continuing relevance in political and social discourse. It signifies the remarkable claim on reality an ancient literary text still achieves. Literary theorist (among other things) Erich Auerbach elicits a similar point in communicating his understanding of biblical narrative: “Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history” (1946: 15). This is a book that does more than linger in the public imagination; it stakes a claim on this world; telling a story of the beginning, the Divine, and of the end. In the centre of this book are four narratives that tell of this divine being taking flesh; of his dying and conquering death; four narratives that are known formally as the Gospels. They represent perhaps the most influential stories in human history, at the very least containing the account of the person “Time Magazine” labelled the most influential figure of all history (Skiena 2013): Jesus Christ. While the claims made within these narratives are rightly the concern of theologians and biblical critics proper (that is, those operating within seminaries or departments dedicated to religious studies), they are also literary texts. As Brian Boyd points out, “religious ideas derive their power less from doctrine than from stories” (Corballis’ paraphrase (2017: 111, see also Boyd 2009), and there is no special dispensation by which these stories exert meaning. Their surprisingly successful claim on reality, then, is not

¹ This video was posted on Donald Trump’s Facebook page on the 30th Jan. 2016; (<https://www.facebook.com/DonaldTrump/videos/10156583412010725/>).

simply the concern of theologians but is the necessary subject of investigation within English departments. Trump's use of scripture, in other words, cannot just be written off by literary theorists as a position of (somewhat ostensible) belief; it is the subject of those same reading and interpretive principles well established and readily applied to other historical and fictional texts. Therein lies the concern of this thesis. How is it that issues of truth and reference should be approached by the modern reader of the Gospels, regardless of their belief system?

For the majority of history, there have been two primary camps in biblical criticism: those, typically operating from within a religious context, who regard the Gospels as special revelation and accordingly the true historical record of the actual past; and those who regard it as largely fictitious/mythical: a collection of interesting stories that may or may not contain real historical characters but whose claim to reality, particularly those claims that are theological in nature, are false. In recent years, this binary has been at once broken down and partially propagated by a number of different schools of thought: by literary theorists, who regard the text as literature, and do not consider the claim it makes on actual history (Kermode 1982; Alter 1981); and by certain historians, biblical critics, and certain schools of literary criticism who posit that the Gospels should be understood as an example of ancient history which existed somewhere between the modern binaries of truth and fiction (Elliot 2011; Person 2016; Osborne 2005). One of the key issues at stake here is how readers should approach the issue of reference. Should we assume that the Gospels refer to actual world entities? Or should they be understood as self-referential in a way similar to how fiction is often understood? Or a mix? This question is closely related to the genre and ontology of these narratives: are they historical or fictional texts? Do they exist as actualised states of affairs do? And finally, what is the process, regardless of their fictionality, by which we determine the truth of their claim on history? This thesis, however, it should be noted, is not concerned with what elements of the Gospels are historically accurate; it

is concerned with the process by which readers find meaning, interpret reference, and apply truth-valuations to narratives. My search, then, is not for a model that isolates certain aspects of literary meaning (e.g. rhetorical effect), but can encompass text, world, author, and reader.

None of the above questions are new. There are, in fact, very few narrative models and literary modes of analysis that have not been applied to the Gospel narratives at some point: structuralist (Crossan 1974; Patte 1974), post-structuralist (Moore 1992; Elliot 2011), pragmatic (Fowler 2001), performative (Shiner 2003), formalist criticism (Rhoads 1982), and so on, have all been extensively mapped onto these narratives in order to better understand their message. Possible worlds literary theory, in this regard, is rare: it has yet to be applied in any detail to the Gospels.² In short, possible worlds provides a model through which to better understand non-actualised states of affairs. It suggests that narratives – both fictional and non-fictional—represent exactly this: possible states of affairs. These non-actualised states of affairs, however, are not simply contained within the discourse that represents them; they exist as possible worlds. Literary meaning, in this regard, is not encapsulated within the precise language a sender chooses to represent their narrative message but is a product of the relationships between worlds—both within the textual system that a possible world represents, as well as between the textual system and the actual world of reality. It is a theory, in other words, that is pointed towards those continuing areas of polarisation in Gospel criticism in which the four narratives are either regarded as fictional, and therefore largely irrelevant to the actual world, or historical, and therefore granted truth-valuations—but often at the expense of considering literary meaning.

² Douglas Estes's (2008) application of possible worlds is the most comprehensive to this point but this is only in regard to temporality in John and is contained within one chapter.

This thesis applies possible worlds theory to reconsider the questions raised by the Gospels outlined above: questions of truth, reference, genre, and ontology. I will argue that modelling the Gospel narratives as autonomous modal systems—that is, as four possible worlds (the exact use of the technical language will be clarified in Chapter Two)—allows for a clear definition of the type of worlds the Gospels project, as well as offering a sophisticated understanding of reading that fits with how readers intuitively experience texts and, on a theoretical level, a productive method of interpreting reference. While the majority of biblical critics focus on either the narrative message (the “what”) or the narrative form and rhetoric (the “how”), my application of a possible worlds model promotes a model of reading that can encompass both of these aspects, and indeed, demonstrate that they necessarily resist separation. This intervention comes not out of a belief that other narrative approaches are “wrong,” so to speak (I will, however, point out areas of disagreement along the way), but rather, it is an affirmation of Whitney Shiner’s suggestion that “narrative criticism has misperceived the nature of the Gospel narratives” (1995:3). This is a criticism, for Scott Elliot, “less of the method than of the models used by narrative critics in their reading of the Gospels” (2011: 7). A possible worlds model, particularly in regard to those issues pertaining to truth and reference, may be better suited to clarify, as well as answer, these continuing areas of confusion and contention. I do not consider this model as offering the perfect solution in any way. As Richard Walsh rightly suggests, “The ultimate objective is not, of course – cannot be – to instate a superior model of an object of study (narrative), but to characterise the parameters of the communicative process of narrative creation and reception...” (4). Accordingly, my goal is to consider these issues through a fresh lens, namely, that provided by possible worlds literary theory.

The method I have chosen is interdisciplinary in nature. It draws primarily on two distinct fields: literary theory and biblical studies. Of course, the literary theory I draw on is also

not straightforward: the possible worlds literary model is itself adapted from philosophical and logical conceptions of possible worlds (the relationship between the logical and literary models will be considered in Chapter Two). The insights this model offers are also narratological in nature, providing the necessary conceptual tools to assess the structure and various types of narrative discourse. Biblical studies is no less broad. Drawing on linguistics, hermeneutics, historical research, and literary criticism, it has an intimidating two-thousand-year long history (longer if you include early Jewish scholarship) in which, it can appear, no stone has been left unturned. The religious aspect of these texts cannot also be overlooked. To write about the Gospel narratives is always to engage with/in theological discourse. Any comment on these narratives carries the potential of influencing how a great number of people understand reality. Accordingly, I wish to place this project firmly within the realms of narrative criticism and reception theory. Where I address theoretical areas outside of these disciplines, it is done only to better my own intervention in narrative and biblical criticism. Any theological implications remain implications and not an intended attack on or affirmation of anyone's belief system. Moreover, my method is theoretical in nature. While I will examine case-studies found within these narratives, as well as a brief reading in which I apply a possible worlds model to an excerpt from the Fourth Gospel, these are only provided to support my critical-theoretical arguments. My project, most simply put, is the application of a specific theoretical literary model, namely possible worlds literary theory, to four biblical narratives. While there remain limitations in the possible worlds model, both as a theoretical approach and in its relevance to the Gospels, it offers an avenue forward to address a number of issues that narrative critics face, and, to be even more optimistic, may provide a way of conceptualising (as well as reading) these narratives that will be beneficial for all readers—both “everyday” and “critical”.

My argument is divided into three chapters. In Chapter One I will locate my project within the wider body of biblical criticism, as well as discussing the shortcomings of traditional narrative approaches to the Gospels in regard to issues of reference, genre, and ontology. In doing so, I will first survey the three most common methods of biblical criticism: “traditional” criticism (that which has been most commonly practiced within seminaries and churches), historical criticism, and, most recently, literary/narrative criticism. As this thesis is literary-critical in nature, this survey will be broader than those which are found within biblical criticism proper (in which a greater level of biblical literacy is assumed), while also placing a great deal of emphasis on literary criticism. In the second half of Chapter One, I will provide a more focused survey of how the “world” metaphor has been employed in narrative criticism of the Gospels. It will be demonstrated that there remains a high level of confusion and disagreement over the fictionality of the Gospels, as well as the associated questions of reference.

In Chapter Two I will outline both the logical and literary conceptions of possible worlds theory, demonstrating the possible worlds model’s applicability to both fictional and non-fictional texts. It will quickly become evident that the possible worlds literary criticism is not a unified body of work with a singular application but a diverse assembly of theoretical insights. Moreover, critics working under the possible worlds banner have primarily applied its insights to fictional worlds, a category that the Gospel narratives do not fit comfortably into. Accordingly, in Chapter Two, after outlining the theoretical advantages of a possible worlds approach to literary theory in general, I will consider which elements of the possible worlds model are relevant to both fictional and non-fictional worlds. In doing so, I will lay the necessary theoretical groundwork for the application of the model.

In Chapter Three, I will apply the possible worlds literary model to the four Gospel narratives. In doing so, I will first consider the theoretical benefits, as well as define exactly what

is implied, when the semantic domains of these narratives are conceptualised as “storyworlds.” I will also evaluate whether the Gospels project four possible discursive representations of one storyworld or four individual storyworlds that are possible representations of one actualised state of affairs. While narrative criticism typically seeks to isolate these worlds from each other, highlighting the rhetorical strategies found within individual discourses, traditional and historical criticism has sought ways to harmonise the four accounts. I will argue that it is necessary to consider the four storyworlds as autonomous in order to best analyse their individual structures and narrative dynamics. However, I will also demonstrate that a reader’s experience and reconstruction of these worlds will not (and should not) be considered independently. I will then consider the type of storyworlds the Gospels project, demonstrating that there are some central elements to our understanding of reference and the process of interpretation which are genre dependent. Drawing on Marie-Laure Ryan’s possible worlds inspired intensional and interlocutionary theory of fictionality, as well as Lubomír Doležel’s comprehensive account of the possible worlds of fiction and history (2010), I will argue that the Gospels should be understood as projecting historical worlds. It will then be possible to evaluate the ways in which readers reconstruct and imaginatively recenter to the storyworlds of the Gospels. I will outline a two-phase reading process which considers both the location of the textual reference world and the process by which readers should measure the truth of those claims the four narratives make on reality. To finish, I will briefly consider the implications of this approach to the goal of interpretation.

It is worth pausing here, before I begin the argument proper, to outline some important assumptions I make that I do not have the time to defend. Firstly, I take the Gospels to be literature. They are not “just fiction” or “just historical,” but are literary texts rightly the subject of literary analysis. There is a wealth of material on this topic, and I do not feel it is worth

repeating the various arguments here outside of the fact that this work is situated within the framework that accepts the Gospels into the literary canon (Kermode 1982; Norton 2000; Estes 2008; Fewell 2016). The second assumption I make is that the Gospels are narratives. A more comprehensive study may pause to define narrative and subsequently defend this claim; I am of the belief that there is not a definition which excludes the Gospels from being considered as narrative.

Anyone who has worked with possible worlds theory or in biblical criticism will be aware that this work cannot be exhaustive. Both fields are broad, involve insights from a number of disciplines, and are at times extremely esoteric. It is necessary then, at least before others do so, to point out the considerable limitations of this work—some self-imposed, some inevitable. The first among these are the logical, semantic, and linguistic limitations. Arthur Gibson, in *Biblical Semantic Logic: A Preliminary Analysis*, comprehensively outlines and critiques the logico-semantic issues surrounding the linguistic analysis of biblical texts. Of course, my work, in its literary focus and inevitable linguistic and logical assumptions, would come under his critique at a number of turns—most notably in my lack of consideration of linguistic semantics proper. However, I consider my work somewhat separate from Gibson’s as his method centres on logic and linguistics, and his goal is to clarify biblical semantics as a theory and as a practice. My goal, on the other-hand, is literary and reader-orientated. The specific linguistic limitations are also worth mentioning here. In Frank Kermode’s introduction to *Genesis of Secrecy*, he notes how the linguistic requirement for studying the bible is “formidable”, and he quickly admits to having “no Aramaic or Hebrew, only enough Greek, and German so enfeebled that whenever possible I use translations” (ix). My own situation is the same, minus the German, and “enough Greek” perhaps being more generous than it is to Kermode. Accordingly, I only employ Greek when necessary and use English translations of all other original languages. If the English translation

can satisfactorily get across the intended meaning, then unnecessary complication will be avoided (the NRSV will be the standard English translation I draw on and the *UBS Greek New Testament* will be used when Greek is required). Finally, the sheer number of texts dedicated to biblical criticism are too many for any one project to deal with—let alone one that is interdisciplinary and has a limited word-count. Consequently, as will soon be evident, I have chosen a small selection of key texts that each represent one important element of Gospel criticism (e.g. Kermode's *Genesis of Secrecy* for poststructuralist criticism³ and Robert Fowler's *Let the Reader Understand* for reader-response criticism). The same—but to a lesser extent—is true of my use of possible worlds literature. Ryan, as mentioned, is the central possible worlds theorist upon which the majority of my own application is based. I do not see these limitations, however, as prohibiting my wider goal. The primary focus of this thesis, as mentioned, is not to take aim at other critics and theorists work but to apply a possible worlds model—somewhat experimentally—to demonstrate the theoretical advantages it offers to issues of reference, genre, ontology, and reception to the four Gospel narratives.

³ While this example may appear idiosyncratic, the publication of *Genesis of Secrecy* represented a key turning point in the history of Gospel criticism. While not always forthrightly poststructuralist, it was the first text to apply a number of the now well-known poststructuralist doctrines to a Gospel.

Chapter One: Biblical Criticism and the Gospel Narratives

Biblical criticism has a long and varied history. There was disagreement within churches, seminaries, and religious departments even before the Bible was deemed a necessary subject of “secular” scholarship. As this thesis seeks to contribute to this diverse body of criticism, it is necessary in Chapter One to both locate my argument within this corpus, as well as demonstrate the shortcomings that my thesis seeks to address. To do so, I will broadly outline the three major approaches to biblical criticism in history: “traditional” criticism, historical criticism, and literary criticism. Once these more general approaches have been outlined, it will then be possible to narrow my focus to consider how narrative criticism of the Gospels, itself a subset of literary criticism, has engaged with “world” language, as well as the associated issues of reference, genre, and ontology. It will become clear that there is confusion over the use of the terms “storyworld” and “narrative world” within narrative criticism, as well as an incoherent and often contradictory interpretation of the Gospels’ fictionality (or lack thereof).

1.1. Traditional Criticism

Alvin Plantinga, himself a prominent theologian and analytical philosopher, explains that those who have pursued “serious and scholarly” study of the Bible in history (a list which Plantinga regards as “maximally impressive,” including names such as, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Karl Barth) “begin from the idea that Scripture is indeed divinely inspired (however exactly they understand this claim)” and “then try to ascertain the Lord’s teaching in the whole of Scripture or (more likely) a given bit” (19). This general approach to Scripture has formed the

basis of “traditional criticism” in history and remains the most common lens through which the Bible is read in Christian churches today.

It logically follows that if one believes the Bible to be inspired (this is the idea that the biblical text is not a purely human creation, but rather that God played an active role in its formation), there is an assumption of textual infallibility. Biblical history trumps any other historical source; biblical morality, ethics, and, for the sake of simplicity, “truth”, as far as we can interpret it, trumps any belief system or text that postulates something contrary. Consequently, the task of the reader is not to interrogate whether the text is historically correct or which parts of it contain truth, but only to decipher what God is trying to say to the reader. It is this enterprise, that Plantinga labels “traditional biblical commentary” (25).

To stay with Plantinga a little longer, he suggests that there are (at least) three main features that are displayed by this traditional approach to the Bible (25-26). Firstly, as alluded to above, Scripture is a revelation from God that is authoritative and trustworthy. The example he provides is a comparison between the reception of Plato’s works and the Bible. With Plato, once the necessary interpretive process of an ancient text has been undertaken and we agree on what it is Plato meant, we then go on to evaluate both the truth of what he is saying and the strength of his argument. However, such questions are not asked by the traditional biblical commentator. If a reader is convinced of the teaching of a given biblical passage, they do not then ask whether this is true or whether there is a sufficient case for this position; it is the true revelation of God, plain and simple (25). A brief survey of church history confirms this as the dominant view, even if each scholar/school of criticism has their own nuanced interpretation of how one defines the authority and infallibility of Scripture.⁴

⁴ Two famous examples from church history who were strong on this matter were Augustine and Calvin. Calvin in

Secondly, there is an assumption that the principal author of Scripture is God himself. The telling implication of this is that the Bible is then treated as a coherent text with a singular, unified purpose, as opposed to an assortment of varying texts written over approximately 1500 years. As Plantinga explains, this allows the reader to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture (25). Parts of the Old Testament can be interpreted in light of the New, and difficult Pauline passages can be interpreted in conversation with the Gospel narratives. Augustine, often considered the founding father of traditional biblical interpretation, suggested this as early as the fifth century. He instructs that “One should proceed to explore and analyse the obscure passages, by taking examples from the more obvious parts to illuminate obscure expressions and by using evidence of indisputable passages to remove the uncertainty of ambiguous ones” (*On Christian Teaching* 2.9.14). The textual world of the Bible, in other words, is always coherent. If at some point it is not, we as the reader just need to work harder.

Thirdly, given that the principal author of the text is God, one cannot always determine the meaning of a passage based on ascertaining what the human author had in mind (26). As I.H. Marshall notes, for traditional Christians this does not legitimise reading the book of John through the lens of twentieth century existentialism to find a hidden meaning, but rather, it is the acceptance of a *sensus plenior* in scripture, that is, a deeper meaning present in a text given through Divine inspiration that the human author may have been unconscious of (16). The example that Plantinga provides is the way in which Isaiah’s suffering servant prophecy (Isaiah 61:1-2) is almost universally applied to Jesus’ death on the cross, despite the fact that Isaiah would not have

particular asserted that “The full authority which they [the scriptures] obtain with the faithful proceeds from no other consideration than that they are persuaded that they proceeded from heaven, as if God had been heard giving utterance to them” (Qtd. in Packer 103).

had this in mind at the time of writing (26). It is this third feature of traditional biblical commentary that is most debatable. While a number of traditional biblical commentators may approach the text in this way, others, whom are just as traditional (in their complete agreement with the first two of Plantinga's statements), would suggest that a division cannot be made between the author's intention and God's intention, as the author was under the complete inspiration of God.⁵ However, what is important to note here is that underpinning both views, and almost every other view of traditional criticism, is a belief in a divine unifying truth present in the text. For these commentators and readers, the same logos that brings order and meaning to creation can be found in the textual world of the Bible (if only we spend enough time and effort to uncover it).⁶ A number of complex and diverse methods for understanding exactly what it is God (as the author) is saying in the text have been formed, and are still being formed, under this mindset. Consequently, how one precisely understands the concepts of "divine inspiration," "inerrancy," "infallibility," and the agency of the human writers in the formation of the text can differ considerably between each critic.

What is important for this project, however, is the way in which these critics generally understand the relationship between the world of the text, the actual world, and the world of the reader, which is relatively uniform. When it is believed that the biblical text is inspired in the traditional sense, that is, that God is the principle author of the text and his message was reliably recorded through the human writers, it logically follows that the Gospel narratives are an (or

⁵ For example, an excerpt from The Southern Baptist Convention's statement of faith reads, "(the Bible) has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter" ("The Baptist Faith and Message").

⁶ It is worth noting that a number of traditional scholars believe that there is a divine truth in Scripture but suggest that finding it may never be possible due to the fallibility of humans.

potentially even “the”) authoritative account of the actual first century world. When we come across the term “world” used in traditional commentaries, then, there is an assumption that the textual world and the actual world are inseparable. Consequently, traditional biblical criticism engages in what Norman Peterson labels the “referential fallacy,” which “consists of thinking about this (narrative) world as though it were a direct representation of the real world, overlooking the conceptual autonomy of the narrative world” (40). While literary critics use “world” language metaphorically to refer to texts, the term “world” is used literally in this framework. Or, in literary terms, we might say that it is being used metonymically, in which phrases such as “the world of the Gospels,” can be understood as a metonym for the real world that the Gospels seek to represent (even if the traditional critic would deny this label). My critique of this position is rooted in ontology. A possible worlds model acknowledges that textual worlds, even if they seek to represent actualised states of affairs, exist in the realm of possibility; they are possible worlds. In traditional models, the text is understood as a direct representation of the actual past. Its truths exist as we exist. When the complexities involved in the production literary meaning are taken into consideration, as well as the more obvious fact that there are four, at points, contradictory narratives, this understanding of texts appears too simplistic. A possible worlds model, in this regard, offers a necessary corrective, and one that will be elaborated on in Chapter Three.

1.1.2. Historical Criticism

In traditional criticism, many of the inconsistent historical elements of biblical narratives were smoothed over or explained away.⁷ After the Reformation largely freed biblical interpretation

⁷ For example, Augustine demonstrated that all four Gospels, when placed side by side carefully (with a little creative

from its former ecclesial clutches (by virtue of *sola scriptura*), and the Enlightenment venerated reason as the legitimiser of beliefs, ideologies, and claims to truth, an environment was created in which a new approach to interpreting the Bible could emerge (Law 25). Consequently, a number of scholars in the eighteenth century allowed themselves to question the historical trustworthiness of the Bible without attachment to any conventional paradigm of biblical authority or infallibility.

Anthony Thiselton locates the beginning of this paradigm shift with writers such as Semler, who fought to free New Testament criticism from any manipulation of historical evidence (12)⁸ and De Wette, who was the first scholar to radically re-write the history of Israelite religion (see Bartholomew 3). Importantly, De Wette went so far as to suggest that a critical approach to the Old Testament offered little authentic history (Bartholomew 3). It was in this period that Hermann S. Reimarus in his posthumously published *Fragments*, explicitly claimed, in the words of Thiselton, “that every hint of supernatural or other-worldly agency in the NT represented an addition imposed by sheer illusion” (14). Accordingly, for Reimarus, the apostles and evangelists were manipulative and frauds who falsified events in order to promote their own Christian theology (Thiselton 14-15). These scholars were the first in a long line of critics who would revisit Scripture through the lens of rational historical research. A paradigm shift, in other words, had taken place. The Bible’s immunity from external secular criticism and methods of research had come to an end; instead of having the final authority over historical events, it was now subject to the scrutiny of secular historical study.⁹

exegesis), are not contradictory in any way (despite this clearly being not the case).

⁸ For Semler, “The most important factor in hermeneutical skill is that one both know the linguistic range of the Bible quite surely and exactly, and also distinguish the historical circumstances of a biblical discourse and be able to reconstruct them” (qtd. in Thiselton 12).

⁹ It is worth noting that the Bible never had complete immunity against external secular critics, and equally, neither did all those still operating within the church believe that they had to take the work of De Wette etc. into account. A

The primary goal of historical criticism is not to uncover the immutable divine message in the text, but to understand the historical ‘sense’ of Scripture. Law suggests five ‘senses’ that historical criticism was/is primarily concerned with: the original sense (an uncovering of the process by which the final textual form was established), the intended sense (identifying the intention of the original author, as well as those communities that adapted and transmitted the text); the historical sense (reconstructing the original context of formation); the literal sense (an attempt to study the text outside of ecclesial control and a priori assumptions); and the plain sense (a textual focus which does not draw on external theologies and interpretive paradigms of the church) (14-20). The common trend evident throughout these five senses is the elevation of rationalism over inspiration. This means that when an investigation leads to the discovery of inaccuracies in Scripture, it is Scripture that is declared inaccurate, not the interpreter or the research. For example, the places where the four Gospels offer conflicting accounts of an event are emphasised to demonstrate the influence of the author’s (as well as the communities that transmitted them) ideology in their formation. Moreover, when a historical discrepancy is found (such as Luke’s statement that Quirinius’ was governor of Syria when Augustus held his census despite Josephus recording that Quirinius’ governorship and census took place in 6 CE, several years after Jesus’ birth [Law 3]), it is not the ancient historian who is considered mistaken, but the biblical author.

Importantly, however, historical criticism does not reject the possibility of Divine influence or authorship, but simply places it aside as largely irrelevant to their inquiry. There is a methodological indifference as opposed to an inherent incompatibility (see Law 23). It is for this reason that a number of more traditional scholars have been able to incorporate the methods of

level of immunity, in fact, still largely exists today.

historical criticism into their wider framework of approaching the Bible without having to reject their foundational values. Plantinga even concedes that “we [traditional scholars] are indebted to historical-biblical criticism; it has enabled us to learn a great deal about the Bible we otherwise might not have known” (27). Subsequently, the most prominent methods of interpretation that emerged from historical criticism are still actively used by critics across a wide range of traditions.

As Bartholomew notes, these methods—biblical source criticism, form criticism, traditional criticism and redaction criticism (5)—are important elements of biblical criticism regardless of one’s interpretive stance. Important critics such as I.H. Marshall, C.E.B. Cranfield, and N.T. Wright, are amongst those who have employed these techniques to develop a “moderate, believing New Testament criticism” (5). But this is not to say that these methods are only being used within the church. Others, such as those involved in the Jesus Seminar, an organisation which seeks to demarcate those parts of the Jesus story presented in the Gospels that are historical from those that are not, have recently employed these techniques (and many more) liberally, denying any traditional sense of inspiration or authority (the Jesus Seminar, for example, confidently concluded that Jesus did not rise from the dead). All of this to say what Edgar Krentz confirmed forty years ago: “We cannot escape historical-critical study of the Bible” (3). Even its most passionate critics who disagree with its wider de-centralisation of biblical authority and Divine authorship, cannot deny its ubiquity.

Perhaps the biggest change that historical criticism brought about in biblical interpretation, at least for the purposes of this project, was, as Gene Tucker observes in his editors Foreword to Krentz’ text, “establishing a certain distance between interpreter and text” (v). “The biblical documents emerge in such analysis,” he writes, “as words from another world, the history and culture of ancient Israel and the early church” (v). The accessibility, in other words, between the world of the text and the present world of the reader is complicated by

historical criticism. Importantly, it is acknowledged that the various states of affairs represented in the text are not assumed to be identical with the history of the actual world. However, despite distinguishing between the actual world and the world of the text, there are a number of other limitations in this approach to scripture at which both post-modern and literary scholars (as well as the aforementioned traditional scholars) have taken aim at. The central critique of historical criticism in this thesis is the lack of a coherent literary model to accompany the separation of the actual world and the textual world. Without any conception of a referential frame, this means, in effect, that the textual and actual worlds are never actually separated. Historical criticism, despite ostensibly seeming otherwise, is culpable of Peterson's referential fallacy. The textual worlds are still simply forced into one "actual" world where any elements of the textual worlds that do not fit with the historical critic's conception of the actual world are deemed not to "exist." The narratives themselves are fragmented into pieces and even those states of affairs in the Bible which are deemed to be historical inevitably change shape (this claim will be elaborated on in Chapter Three). While I endorse the need to consider the accuracy of the textual worlds of the Gospels with respect to an external reference world at some point in the process of reception, literary meaning cannot simply be reduced to considering the truth-values of propositions (as the historical method presupposes). A possible worlds model, in this regard, promotes a model of reading that allows for a holistic approach to literary meaning, as well as consideration of what can be labelled the "text-external referential function."

1.1.3. The Literary Turn

In the last fifty years, biblical criticism has undergone perhaps its biggest paradigm shift to date. While it has been possible to identify and summarise the major threads of traditional and

historical criticism, this latest turn resists such singularity. No one term has been settled on to summarise what has taken place in the last fifty years; a point Thiselton confirms when he characterises this latest change by a “methodological pluralism” (10). Historical-criticism saw the slow move of biblical criticism from being almost exclusively undertaken inside the Church or Christian seminaries to becoming the subject of scrutiny in secular universities; over the last half-century, this shift has continued across departments. Philosophers, psychologists, psychoanalysts, linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, narratologists, and literary theorists, as well as scientists of almost every capacity, have brought their knowledge and varying methods to biblical criticism in some capacity. While it is impossible to offer one starting point that sparked this paradigm shift, it is possible to argue that the literary turn of the second half of the twentieth century has been the most influential factor in producing the changes we have observed. As this is also the most relevant aspect to my project, it will take up the majority of my attention for the remainder of this section.

The considerable changes literary criticism underwent in the mid-twentieth were reflected in biblical criticism—if only a few years behind. In fact, a number of important thinkers applied their trade to both disciplines. Foremost amongst these was Roland Barthes, whose structural analysis of Acts 10-11 in 1969 was, according to Stephen Moore, the first encounter between narrative theory and biblical criticism (34). Other French structuralists in this period followed suit, which saw a number of essays published in the 1970s that sought to analyse the Bible through the then popular structuralist lens (see Moore 34). This represented a dramatic change to how the Bible was approached as a text: as was normal in structuralism, the Bible was studied on a purely textual level without consideration of the historical and theological factors (factors that former approaches deemed necessary for valid interpretation). The textual world was isolated from any sense of the actual, whether that be the first century historical world of its

formation, or the contemporary world in which it was being read. Moreover, the Bible was being considered purely as literature, apart from any other spiritual or religious identities it achieved elsewhere.

This change in approach, however, would only become popularised in the 1980s, most notably through the work of Robert Alter. Rather than being influenced by French structuralism, Alter, an American, largely employed (employs) the interpretive tools offered by New Criticism. The introduction to his and Frank Kermode's work *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1990), a collection of essays published five years after his own seminal text *The Art of Biblical Literature*, offers a summary of their intended purpose for the text which aptly demonstrates their literary approach:

The Bible, considered as a book, achieves its effects by means no different from those generally employed by written language. This is true whatever our reasons for attributing value to it – as the report of God's action in history, as the founding text of a religion or religions, as a guide to ethics, as evidence about people and societies in the remote past, and so on. Indeed literary analysis must come first, for unless we have a sound understanding of what the text is doing and saying, it will not be of much value in other respects. (2)

Importantly, both Kermode's and Alter's approach to literary analysis is achieved through "secular"¹⁰ methods (see Alter and Kermode 2).¹¹ The goal, then, particularly for Alter (Kermode moves past strict American New Criticism in *Genesis of Secrecy*) and for a number of scholars in that period, was nearly identical to that of secular New Critics: that is, to demonstrate the aesthetic and formal features of the text (as opposed to uncover spiritual truths or historical accuracy). Accordingly, in the *Art of Biblical Fiction*, Alter asserts that "prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative" (24).

While Alter only dealt with Old Testament narratives, a number of New Testament works were published in a similar vein in this period, most notably David Rhoads and Donald Michie's *Mark as Story* (1982) and Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1983),¹² as well as a number of other important general texts such as Norman Peterson's *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (1978). Importantly, in David Rhoads 1982 article "Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark," we find the first use of the phrase "narrative criticism." He defined it as "an approach" that investigates "the formal features of narrative in the texts of the Gospels, features which include aspects of the story-world of the narrative and the rhetorical techniques employed to tell the story" (411-412). Equally important is his use of the term "storyworld", as it best indicates the central change that took place in the initial stages of the literary turn (at least for the purposes of my inquiry). The Gospel narratives were no longer considered simply the true story

¹⁰ By this I mean that his methods are outside of any of the traditional methods established in that period within churches or seminaries. In saying this, the sacred/secular divide is largely arbitrary as there has always been a sharing of ideas between strictly Christian biblical criticism and the rest of the arts (e.g. the massive influence Augustine's principles of biblical interpretation has had on literary criticism in general).

¹¹ In an article Alter recently wrote about Kermode's biblical scholarship, he tells how Kermode repeatedly made it clear that he approached the Bible as a secular critic, adding further that, in this regard, he and Kermode had a common language ("Frank Kermode's Literary Bible" 81).

¹² For a more exhaustive list of works published in this period see Moore 28-29.

of Jesus and his followers (traditional approach), nor were they considered as some form of historical record that had to be interrogated through a scientific method (as per the historical criticism). Rather, they were treated first and foremost as stories. However, these scholars' optimism surrounding the critics' ability to artfully discover the meaning of a text through literary analysis appeared to have an expiry date.

After a book about the interpretation of the Gospel of Mark, Kermode's final sombre words are telling:

World and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them, aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability, knowing that they may be narratives only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermetic tricks. Hot for secrets, our only conversation may be with guardians who know less and see less than we can; and our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut on us (*Genesis of Secrecy* 145).

Whereas Alter's analysis of biblical narrative was infused with a sense of excitement about the reader's ability to find meaning, as was the analysis of many of his contemporaries, Kermode's application of secular literary criticism demonstrated the vicissitudes of the interpretive process. In this respect, Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy* acted as a forerunner for biblical poststructuralist and postmodern criticism—methods that were already prevalent in wider literary criticism and soon to take centre stage in biblical criticism.

The autonomy of texts assumed by structuralists and new critics was challenged by the postmodern idea that no reading is ideologically neutral or context-free. In the 1980s, Stanley

Fish suggested that there is no ‘objective’ work of literature; it is rather just an assortment of accounts of the text that have been or will be given (see Eagleton 74). Moreover, he argued that the true writer is the reader (Eagleton 74), which, if accepted by biblical critics, would completely undermine both traditional and historical paradigms of interpretation. Importantly, the inherent unity of the biblical text was also challenged in this paradigm. In the last of her trilogy on biblical narrative, Miekele Bal argued that “coherence is a readerly act, rather than a textual feature, but that the impulse to project coherence on a semiotic object is unavoidable” (254). This represented a dramatic change in how the interpretive process was undertaken as the goal changed from discovering how the formal features fit together to artfully create meaning to interrogating how the reader experiences and co-creates the text. It is also worth briefly noting that Bal openly asserts in this work that she seeks to develop a feminist method of interpretation of ancient texts (2), which also highlights another important trend of postmodern and poststructuralist literary studies that was in vogue in this period.¹³

These changes are reflected in a number of works on the Gospel narratives,¹⁴ most prominently in Robert Fowler’s *Let the Reader Understand: Reader Response Criticism of the Gospel of Mark* (1991) which tellingly exclaims on the first page of the book, “Despite appearances, this book is not about the Gospel of Mark. Rather it is a book about the reader’s experience of reading the Gospel of Mark” (1). Fowler even comments that he “learned this strategy especially from the early reader-response criticism of Stanley Fish” (1), revealing the ever-narrowing gap

¹³ As writing was demonstrated to be a political act and inevitably ideological, a number of feminist works were written that critiqued patriarchal aspects of biblical texts. Phillis Trible’s *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978) and Rosemary Ruether’s *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983) are two (of many) examples from this period.

¹⁴ See Jeffrey Lloyd Staley’s *The Print’s First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* (1988); and more recently Mark Allan Powell’s *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (2001).

between secular and biblical criticism. In his introduction, Fowler explains that unlike “the philological-historical critic who seeks the world behind the Gospels, the world that produced the Gospels,” he wishes to explore “the world that lies in front of the biblical texts—the world I live in and the world in which readers have always lived, the world of the reception of the Gospels” (2). Consequently, the relationship between the textual world of Gospel narratives and the world of the contemporary reader continued to grow increasingly complex.

On a purely textual level, poststructuralism’s effects on biblical criticism only complicated this relationship further as critics’ faith in the stability of language faltered. Derrida, and the many who drew on his work in a similar period, effectively unveiled the endless web of meaning encapsulated in signs and signifiers. It was demonstrated that even if one can have access to a text that accurately represents the actual biblical world, objectively decoding the exact meaning of this text remains out of reach. Accordingly, the historical method was also challenged by postmodernism and poststructuralism. In 1978 Hayden White claimed that “historical texts are literary artefacts” (qtd. in Doležel vii), meaning that reading history requires a similar process to reading fiction. History, in other words, was not immune from the deconstruction noted above, and neither was it immune to the ideological influence of its writers, transmitters, and readers. In light of this, the historical method’s overriding purpose of interpreting the biblical text primarily through accurate historical research appeared devastatingly naïve.

Out of these changes poured the methodological pluralism mentioned at the beginning of this section. Truth found in texts could be considered fluid, and the Bible could be “deconstructed” to reveal multiple contradictory meanings. In this way, interpretation came to be understood as a political act, and the access to any objectively true reading of a text became, not only out of reach, but also outside of the goal of interpretation. This general approach also encouraged the introduction (and proliferation) of feminist criticism, postcolonial criticism,

psychoanalytical criticism, eco-criticism (and so on), which all sought to analyse material from biblical narratives that were either marginalised or overlooked as not important to “what the Bible has to say”. However, these insights did not come at the expense of conventional models of criticism. Traditional criticism and historical criticism have been challenged by the insights of modern literary theory, but nevertheless are still practiced widely in seminaries and churches. Interestingly enough, postclassical narratology, one of the most recent developments of literary theory that has been applied to the biblical narrative (and within the parameters of which my work technically fits), demonstrates a willingness to place value on more traditional values such as objective truth and an appreciation of the distinction between fictional and historical discourse. As these more recent literary approaches exemplify, literary criticism of the Bible is in no way linear. It is a dynamic field drawing on insights from the past as it continues to grow and diversify. It evades, in other words, a simple conclusion regarding its use of reference and world language.

1.2. Narrative Criticism of the Gospels: Reference, Genre, and the “World”

Metaphor

The three broad trends of biblical criticism have now been outlined. While each method has its own general understanding of the relationship between world and text, it is within literary criticism that this relationship is the most complex. In order to gain clarity on this issue, as well as locate my thesis within this field, it is now necessary to narrow my focus to evaluate those forms of criticism which fit within the parameters of “narrative criticism.” It is these schools of thought—formalism, reader-orientated criticism, poststructuralism, and post-classical narratology—in which the relationship between world and text is most clearly evident in literary criticism. It is

also in these areas where the shortcomings—in terms of reference, ontology, genre, and world language—are most evident, as I will make clear in this section.

David Rhoads, in the same article in which he first coined the term “narrative criticism” (in regard to the Gospel narratives), tellingly explains his (and others) recently established literary method: “Embracing the literary approach to the Markan narrative has involved for me two major shifts of perspective: one a shift from fragmentation to wholeness, the other from history to fiction” (412). The first of these was revisited that very decade with Kermode’s poststructuralist-leaning *Genesis of Secrecy*, closely followed by a wave of deconstructive and reader-response criticism; the second still appears alive today, if only with more nuance.

While Rhoads was the first to formally introduce the term “narrative criticism”, Norman Peterson was one of the first practitioners of modern narrative criticism. In his seminal text, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (1978), he employs Murray Krieger’s “text as windows, text as mirrors, texts as both” metaphor to evaluate biblical criticism’s understanding of a text’s relationship with the “real world” (24-25). In Peterson’s view, the historical-critical method—which had then dominated biblical scholarship for a hundred years—adopted the “text as window” approach, which, like nineteenth century literary critics, approached texts as though they were “windows” on an external meaning. However, in a moment of remarkable foresight, Peterson claimed that biblical criticism was about to enter into a stage of understanding texts as “mirrors”¹⁵—a stage already well-established in literary criticism under Anglo-American New Criticism—in which the meanings of texts are “locked up”. In other words, texts are considered as closed systems, and the key to opening them lies only within the texts and in their comparison

¹⁵ This is separate from the way this metaphor has been used to express the subjectivity of the reading process, i.e. as the text being a mirror of our own bias.

to the wider network of literature. Peterson warns against either pole, and himself employs narrative criticism in order to “lay some groundwork for a literary criticism that will stand in service of the historical criticism of biblical texts” (10-11). The method he proposes is to consider the internal world of the narrative (text as mirror) in order to interpret the historical meaning beyond the text (text as window). To accomplish this, drawing on Roman Jakobson’s communication model,¹⁶ he suggests the need to consider the text as producing an autonomous “narrative world,” what he defines as “the sum of propositions a narrative implies or expresses about its actors and their actions in time and space” (40). It is in this world, Peterson claims, that we need locate the “referential function”. The aforementioned “referential fallacy”,¹⁷ for Peterson, “consists of thinking about this (narrative) world as though it were a direct representation of the real world, overlooking the conceptual autonomy of the narrative world” (40). While this represented a telling contribution to literary criticism of the Gospels, the exact nature of the narrative world still remained largely undefined. Peterson openly regards the Gospel narratives as non-fiction and is ultimately concerned with how the narrative world can inform our knowledge of the actual historical world. Accordingly, his definition of the narrative world only concerns propositions about actors and their actions in time and space; omitted is any content that is not expressly propositional, for example, modalised statements,¹⁸ character

¹⁶ In truth, Peterson relates Jakobson’s comments on the referential function to his understanding of signs, which are not in fact systematically connected to his communication model (this connection Peterson makes himself). I hope, however, I can be permitted this generalisation.

¹⁷ For this terminology Peterson draws on Umberto Eco’s “referential fallacy,” which, according to Peterson, “consists of construing the signifier alone as the sign and as referring directly to the real-world object, without consideration of the signified” (39; Eco 1976: 58-66.).

¹⁸ An example of this is Jesus’ conditional proposition in Mark 8:3: “If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way...”

motivations, parables, etc.¹⁹ In modelling the narrative world as an autonomous modal system, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, actualised and non-actualised states of affairs within the textual world can be differentiated. Moreover, as Ryan argues, the tension between the possible worlds within the “narrative world” (as Peterson terms it), are central to narrative structure and literary meaning (particularly in their driving of the plot) (1991: 124-147).

Rhoads, drawing on the work of Peterson while also notably transgressing the parameters he set, solves this impasse by construing the narrative worlds of the Gospels as fictional. Like Peterson, he claims that “The shift to grasping the autonomy of the storyworld is of fundamental importance” (413). While Peterson argues for the introduction of a narrative world for semiotic reasons, taking as his target historical critics who uncritically assume a direct relationship from text to world, Rhoads’ reasoning is more logical and pragmatic, suggesting that historical approaches “fragment the text” (413). In searching to locate certain narrative events in their historical context outside of the text (as had been the task of redaction, source, and other historical criticisms), the narrativity is broken into pieces and the narrative itself has been sidelined in favour of historical research. In contrast, narrative criticism “brackets these historical questions and looks at the closed universe of the story-world” (413). This focus on taking the world as a fictional whole allowed a shift in paradigm regarding the reading experience, as Rhoads explains: “When we see the narrative as containing a closed and self-sufficient world,

¹⁹ It is worth noting that this distinction between propositional and non-propositional content, as well as the different functions of propositions, are important issues, and have been discussed in detail by James Barr (1961), Kevin Vanhoozer (1986) and a number of other critics. These technical issues, however, are linguistic and semantic in nature, and while they do have repercussions for narrative criticism (as evidenced above), they remain outside the scope of this work which is concerned with literary theory, and more specifically, narrative criticism. Accordingly, the focus in this discussion remains on (the far broader) narrative semantics.

with its own integrity, its own past and future, its own set of values, its own universe of meaning, we are able to enter the marvellous world of this story” (414). The fictional world, in other words, allows for the immersion of the reader, that is, in Ryan’s terms, the process of “fictional recentering” (this will be elaborated on in Chapter Two) to take place. Consequently, the narrative world, unlike for Peterson, is experienced as a whole. While this represents another paradigm change for biblical critics, it also comes dangerously close to Peterson’s warning of treating the text as “mirror”.

Interestingly, Rhoads, despite his claim of treating the Gospels as fictional, ends up in a similar place to Peterson. He suggests that his treatment of the narrative as a “world-in-itself” in no way means that the Markan narrative (but again, his comments can be applied to all four Gospels) does not reflect real historical events or draw on sources rooted in history. At this point, then, we have to wonder what exactly he means by his treatment of the Gospels as “fiction.” Thankfully, he clarifies: “by ‘fiction’ I mean to suggest that in the end the narrative world of the story is a literary creation of the author and has an *autonomous integrity*, quite apart from any resemblances to the real world of Jesus’ or Mark’s time, in much the same way as DaVinci’s portrait of Mona Lisa exists independently as a vision of life quite apart from any resemblance or nonresemblance to the model who posed for it” (413). Fictionality, in this regard, is equated with narrativization. One would assume, then, that Rhoads interprets the Gospels as self-referential; if the state of affairs they project exist independently of any real-world resemblances, this appears a safe assumption. However, this at no stage stops Rhoads making inferences about the historical reality behind the text. Accordingly, as Scott Elliot demonstrates, “The method implicitly (and often quite openly) contradicts itself in that regard and fails to adhere to its own guidelines” (2011: 20). In the conclusion of his article, Rhoads confirms this confusion by begging a question (among others) for future critics who will pick up his work: “How do we move from the story-

world to the real world, to aid in the historical reconstruction of Mark's time or of Jesus' time?"

This is indeed a great question, and one that I seek to evaluate in the remainder of this work, but it is one Rhoads should have considered prior to uncritically engaging in this move himself. In his 2004 book, *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel*, written twenty years later, a very similar methodology is still posited, with the added assertion of the need to draw on cultural anthropology and historiography in order to better understand the narrative. It is clear that the Gospels are a special form of fictional world according to Rhoads and a number of other Gospel critics. What is clear in the work of both Peterson and Rhoads is that the narrative worlds are never actually treated in isolation; ontologically, they remain within a one-world model. I am not offering a critique of Rhoads' or Peterson's interpretation of the text here, but rather pointing out a confusion of terms and concepts—a place of confusion where possible worlds semantics can offer clarity.

Elliot more recently (2016) confirms that a confusion of method still exists in narrative criticism of the Gospel of Mark (but similar methodology manifests itself across all four of the Gospel narratives). He generalises the narrative method as follows: "In sum, narrative critics of Mark have maintained a threefold emphasis on (1) taking the furnished work both as a whole and as a "world-in-itself", (2) making clear distinction between story and discourse, and (3) attempting to occupy the position of the ideal reader" (300). It is numbers two and three that have been dealt with in the most depth by literary critics; the idea of taking Mark as a "world-in-itself," as Elliot himself points out, has remained a muddy issue. Despite the claim of treating the Gospel of Mark as "self-referential," he explains that narrative critics nevertheless, as we have just observed in Rhoads, "seem no less intent on laying hold of what they perceive to be a clear and specific textual referent – that is, an historical actuality behind the narrative, whether it be an essentialised character or an author's intended message" (300). Elsewhere, he claims more

forthrightly that “despite their (narrative critics) stated interest in the ‘world of the text’, narrative critics go beyond the discourse” (2011: 6). These critics, according to Elliot, “mimetically interpret” (as per Mieke Bel’s conception of this phrase) “according to assumptions about what would happen in real life rather than confining themselves to ‘purely semiotic criticism,’ which takes into account only the narrative signs provided” (6). This is a similar critique to that offered by Robert Fowler, who, as a reader-response critic, argued that literary criticism of Mark has remained on the “mimetic axis” (as opposed to the “rhetorical axis”) despite the change of method.²⁰

What narrative criticism has accomplished, then, is to flip the method of traditional critics on its head. Instead of using the Gospel narratives to recreate the “real history” of first century Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, literary critics employ historical research to enable a better reading of the narratives presented in the text—as evidenced in Rhoads more recent call for a greater emphasis to be placed on researching the ancient context through historiography and anthropology. However, as Fowler has suggested, a focus on the referential function of language, as opposed to the rhetoric or pragmatic, remains. What is evident again is that narrative critics rarely treat the texts as autonomous narrative worlds or as fictional, even if they claim to do so. This confusion is a symptom of a certain lack of nuance in their use of the “world” metaphor, particularly that of the storyworld, as a well as a failure to sufficiently define what type of discourse they are dealing with; that is, fictional or non-fictional.

²⁰ While structuralism (and we could also add new criticism and formalism) is “concerned with code more than context, language more than information, syntactics more than semantics,” it has remained on “the mimetic axis of representation” (57). Also worth noting is that the phrase “mimetic axis” is drawn from Paul Hernadi’s communication model “Compass for Critics” (see Hernadi 1976; Fowler 54-55).

1.2.2. Reader-Orientated criticism

While narrative criticism failed to deliver on defining the type and nature of the Gospels, reader orientated criticism, in this regard, provides a point of difference—even if their answer was to sideline these issues as unimportant to their goal. As already alluded to, Fowler, in his well-known *Let the Reader Understand: Reader Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*, boils criticism of Mark down to two modes: referential criticism and reader-orientated criticism. It is Fowler's belief that many biblical critics, narrative or otherwise, have been in the habit of asking, "To what historical or theological referents does the text point?", while simultaneously, and unconsciously, engaging in a pragmatic and reader-orientated method. For Fowler, "the pragmatics of the Gospel has asserted itself in spite of critical approaches designed to bypass pragmatics in favour of semantics" (53). Accordingly, and quite rightly, he concludes that it is time to explore the pragmatics of Mark's Gospel through reader-response criticism (53). The referential frame (i.e. "narrative world"), in this regard, becomes surplus to requirement. He explains:

We could say that the Gospel is not so much designed to construct its own world as it is designed to construct its own reader; it is not designed so much to say something about its implied world as it is to do something to its implied reader; the narrative does not strive to convey meaning as referential content as much as it strives to achieve communion with its audience by means of a forceful event that takes place through time. (57)

Interestingly, Fowler does not reject the concept of "narrative world" altogether, or completely disregard the need for criticism which considers the referential function of the narrative; it is simply just not required in his audience-orientated method. In other words, he manages to side-

step the fiction/non-fiction debate, as well as a number of referential issues. My goal is to re-introduce these elements without minimising the value of the pragmatic insights made by Fowler.

One of the greatest benefits of reader-orientated criticism, as well as those theories which regard the Gospels as fiction, is the renewed emphasis on the reading experience. Not only did it allow an entry point for both secular and religious literary critics to analyse and interpret the narratives (e.g. character, plot, setting, etc.) without having to make referential claims (even if they often did), it also legitimised reading techniques typically reserved for imaginative literature. Rhoads himself notes this paradigm change himself, explaining that “when we see the narrative as containing a closed and self-sufficient world, with its own integrity, its own past and future, its own set of values, its own universe of meaning, we are able to enter the marvellous world of this story” (Rhoads 414). When we consider how influential the Gospels remain in the lives of their readers, this aspect of narrative criticism cannot be ignored. The goal, then, as noted above, is to employ a model of reading that gives the necessary consideration to the reading experience without overlooking the referential function of the narrative. Of course, I will argue that Ryan’s two-phase reading process inspired by the possible worlds model accomplishes exactly this.

1.2.3. Poststructuralist Criticism

Poststructuralist criticism represents a complete change of paradigm. It not only sidelines the world metaphor and issues of reference, it dismisses them completely. Frank Kermode, a literary theorist of note in his own right and perhaps the most well-read literary critic of the Gospels in his time (along with Rhoads), provides us with an apt example of this approach in his seminal *Genesis of Secrecy*. Unlike Rhoads, his goal is not interpretation itself, although this inevitably takes place within the text, but rather to interpret the interpretations; that is, to consider the act of

interpretation itself through the lens of his extensive literary knowledge. As noted, what is decisively different about his conclusions is the extreme lack of positivism regarding the interpreters ability to unlock meaning—historical or otherwise. In a similar fashion to Peterson (but with a very different result), he argues that “Events exist only as texts, already to that extent interpreted”; and, accordingly, “We can, indeed, no longer assume that we have the capacity to make value-free statements about history, or suppose that there is some special dispensation whereby the signs that constitute an historical text have reference to events in the world” (107). Chapter five of *Genesis of Secrecy* is titled “What Precisely are the Facts?”, and, quite fittingly, the question remains unanswered.²¹ However, he does consider the process by which we define what is fictional versus what is factual. His answer is one we are now all familiar with: it is handed down by convention and a product of the authorities of a given institution (107-108). He thereby labels the Gospels at one point “interpretive fictions”, although never quite follows through in treating them completely in this manner—this would be done by the more forthright poststructuralist critics who followed. That is not to say that Kermode himself was not a poststructuralist. He (tellingly) quotes Barthes to again reinforce the idea of the inability to escape, or overcome, the text: “the fact can exist only linguistically, as a term in a discourse,” although “we behave as if it were a simple reproduction of something or other on another plane of existence altogether, some *extra-structural ‘reality’*” (117; italics mine). The final chapter is titled “The Unfollowable World,” and finally Kermode edges into the well-known poststructuralist position that “all is text”. In this model, world and text are conflated, and the “world” metaphor

²¹ The introductory comments of this section are telling: “If so many causes act in concert to ensure that texts are from the beginning and sometimes indeterminately studded with interpretations; and if these texts in their very nature demand further interpretation and yet resist it, what should we expect when the document in question denies its own opacity by claiming to be a transparent account of the recognisable world?” (101).

for narrative texts can be dispensed with. There need not be a referential frame where the referential function of the content can be located as all is located within the actual world, which is as impenetrable as the books we read. The non-fiction/fiction divide becomes largely arbitrary as texts become non-referential—they refer to nothing but the sign itself. Kermode, however, is fully aware that “such a view of history-writing, suitably refined for philosophers and semiologists, might be generally acceptable; but once more we have to remember how difficult it is to behave as if it were correct” (119). In this way, he acknowledges the gap between theory and practice in poststructuralist criticism, and still distances himself from those who “seek to liberate texts from all historical constraint by a process of ‘deconstruction’” (126). Rather, he considers it his goal to reverse the typical hierarchy of focusing on “what is written about” instead of “what is written” (119)—even if this ultimately results in disappointment.

While this literature review has so far largely pointed out how narrative critics of the Gospels have not given the necessary attention to their understanding of issues surrounding ontology, genre, reference, and the “world” metaphor, there are notable exceptions—namely, Elliot’s *Reconfiguring Mark’s Jesus: Narrative Criticism After Poststructuralism*. He explains his position clearly, writing: “It is the history taking place within and alongside these texts, as opposed to that which is behind them, reflected in them, or represented by them, which one supposedly discovers once the layers of interpretation and perspective have been properly peeled away to reveal the truth underneath” (7).²² In clarifying how he perceives the Gospel genre then, he states at the outset that he is not suggesting Mark (the Gospel which he analyses) is “merely fiction,” nor “true fiction”, nor is he even undertaking the “Bible as literature approach” (7). Instead, he chooses to

²² Elliot’s use of the term “supposedly” in this sentence is indicative of the direction in which he is heading – e.g. a poststructuralist conception of the relationship between text and history. While he outlines a better way for narrative critics to approach the issue of history, he cannot offer any certainty regarding the outcome.

use the word “narrative” to refer to the Gospels in order to avoid these pitfalls.²³ Narrative, however, for Elliot (who after all is working from a poststructuralist position), “is scarred with traces of decisions regarding selection, arrangement, and interpretations of causality and the underlying relationship between ‘facts’—all of which are integral aspects of narrative” (9). Having started to deconstruct the binary between history and fiction, he then makes one of his central claims that in the Hellenistic world fiction refers not just to something made-up, but “occupies a space between truth and falsehood” (13). He, accordingly, understands “fiction” in this way, and chooses to read Mark alongside the ancient novel through the lens of poststructuralist theory. This claim that ancient historical narratives do not fit into contemporary models of truth and fiction has become increasingly common (See Osborne 2005 and Person 2016), and it is one that needs to be taken seriously. However, if fictionality is defined in pragmatic terms as opposed to referential (as will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two), there is no need to be so cautious of contemporary labels. I will argue that fictionality is not dependent on whether the entities within a narrative have referents in the actual world, but rather on the attitude towards the discourse of both the sender and receiver. Elliot’s work, however, cannot be dispensed with so easily. It represents a more moderate poststructuralism that, while dispensing with the referential frame, approaches the text with a greater sense of optimism than that of poststructuralists like Kermode. A more comprehensive study would be obliged to give far greater time to evaluating his position.

1.2.4. Postclassical Narratology

²³ In his mind, fiction is “too heavily laden with ideological valuation,” and typically understood as synonymous with “falsehood” (9).

Postclassical narratology, as mentioned, represents the most recent narrative approach applied to Gospel criticism, and importantly, it offers a level of holism that is rarely found elsewhere. David Herman proposed the term in 1999 in order to group the various approaches to textual analysis that seek to transcend classical narrative criticism (see Herman 1999), which, according to Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, “has been reproached for its scientificity, anthropomorphism, disregard for context, and gender blindness” (450). Six new angles were subsequently identified by Herman: the feminist; the psychological; the cognitive; the philosophical (informed by possible worlds theory); the rhetorical; and the postmodern (see L. Herman and Vervaeck 450). As this long list suggests, postclassical narratology is marked by its holistic approach, seeking to give the necessary time to both the historical and sociocultural context, as well as formal and “structuralist” features of the text. While a number of the texts noted above could also be loosely placed under this title, one important work that has recently analysed the Gospel of Mark through a postclassical lens is worthy of further attention,²⁴ namely, Kirsten Marie Hartvigsen’s *Prepare the Way of the Lord: Towards a Cognitive Poetic Analysis of Audience Involvement with Characters and Events in the Markan World* (2012). In this text, Hartvigsen provides a thorough application of cognitive poetic theories to the Gospel of Mark, even including a full commentary on the text from this perspective. Her aim is to unveil the experience the text has upon the reader, or in the case of the ancient world (which was predominantly an oral culture), the listener. Importantly, she notes that her analysis of involvement with the world described in the Gospel is based on two interconnected aspects: “1. Textual features which facilitate involvement with Markan characters and events. 2. Mental representations or constructions which correspond to these features” (3).

²⁴ A third important postclassical work that will be discussed in a later section is Elliot Scott’s *Reconfiguring Mark’s Jesus: Narrative Criticism after Poststructuralism* (2011).

Moreover, she further explains that “the interrelationship between these two aspects characterises all parts and levels of my analysis” (3). To accomplish this, she draws on narratology and linguistics (to analyse point one), and cognitive psychology and discourse analysis (to analyse point two) (3). As is evident, this is an approach that seeks a level of holism in its method, neither dismissing contextual factors (as seen in her desire to discover how original audiences both listened to and received the text) or overlooking the literary and linguistic features of the text.

In specific regards to her literary analysis, Hartvigsen writes that “all aspects of the literary character of the Gospel of Mark are important, but the fact that the Gospel is regarded as a prose narrative, constituting its own conceptual world, is given most attention” (4).

Conceptually, then, the textual world is treated on its own terms, as is the case with Structuralist and New Critical approaches. She later explains that this approach does not assume anything about the author’s intention to accurately represent the persons, places, and events in the text, but rather, the fact that these elements are embedded in a narrative automatically turns them into characters, events, and settings (24). Accordingly, she notes that her study will not refer to the text-external world or comment on the “text-external referential function” of the textual features (24). In this regard, Hartvigsen’s work, despite its holism, is still lacking. While it is impossible to outline exactly how the text-external referential function will operate for each reader (as each reader will bring their own idea of what is true and what is not in the actual world), it is possible to provide theoretical parameters within which this process can take place.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, each interpretive paradigm employs a referential frame differently. Traditional critics make no distinction between the textual (or conceptual) world and the

historical world of its formation; divine inspiration trumps contradictory historical analysis and certain elements of secular literary criticism. Accordingly, the accessibility between the world of the reader and the ancient worlds of both the text and history is far greater than any other paradigm (as long as they stick to a reliable exegetical method and employ the right hermeneutic(s), they believe it is possible to gain an accurate understanding of both the true historical narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, as well as what it is that God wishes to impart through the text to the modern reader). Historical criticism places the textual world under a microscope, subjecting it to a rationalist method that distinguishes between the actual historical world and the world recorded in the text. However, once the events in the Gospel narrative have been categorised as true, false, or something in between, that narrative also becomes accessible to the modern reader in a way similar to that of traditional criticism. Both traditional criticism and historical criticism, in other words, understand the text to be referring to real-world entities; that is, the "reference world"—as possible worlds theory labels it—is located in the actual world of reality. Literary critics sought to correct this, and in doing so treated the textual world as self-referential, regarding it like they would any other fictional narrative. The actual historical world or, in Hartvigsen's phrasing, the extra-textual world, in this regard, becomes close to irrelevant.

As I have further shown, postmodernism and poststructuralism offer another necessary corrective, demonstrating firstly that language is not as "trustworthy" as once believed, and secondly, that ideological bias is unavoidable. While this upset the positivism that new critics had around their ability to find coherence and meaning in the text (and so further separated the world of the reader and the world of the text), it also promoted a renewed emphasis on the need for historical research (even if this was predominantly done to unveil the power structures that influenced the texts formation). Reader-orientated criticism similarly demonstrates that the act of reading can never be isolated from context, and moreover, that the reader will always play a part

in constructing the textual world. However, generally speaking, these developments only blurred the lines between “worlds” and most contemporary scholars are content to either treat the text as inspired, and therefore accessible, or as purely narrative, and therefore as having no bearing on anything outside of the text (as is evident in Hartvigsen’s approach), which of course does not prevent certain narrative theorists making real-world applications (and so confusing their method). While postclassical narratology has sought to remedy these polarised approaches through its more holistic methods, these are yet to be utilised by biblical criticism (as far as I am aware) to argue for a more sophisticated theory of reference that encompasses both the textual worlds and the actual world.

In the two chapters that follow, I will demonstrate how the application of a possible worlds model to the Gospel narratives can inspire a theory of reference broad enough to account for the various ways in which readers can apply truth-values to the propositional content of these narratives. My motivation for doing this, as noted in the introduction, is that I believe these narratives communicate a message; a message which has played an important role in the history of Western Civilisation and remains relevant to a great number of communities and individuals in the twenty-first century. These narratives, as Peterson simply claims, are “about something” (38), and to forget this historical fact is to misinterpret the function of biblical narrative. Issues of reference, then, are vitally important not just to traditional and historical critics, but to narrative critics also. In other words, understanding both the way in which the Gospels communicate their message and the processes by which readers can reconstruct the state of affairs they represent should not simply be left to those working within religious departments. Again, I want to emphasise that I am in no way minimising the role of traditional narrative criticism. The insights gained from studying the Gospels through more conventional modes of narrative analysis (e.g. analysis relating to characterisation, plotting, narrative structure, focalisation, and so on) are vital

in understanding how these messages are communicated. Moreover, the insights offered by reader-response critics are essential in understanding the effect of the rhetorical strategies employed by the Gospel writers (consciously and unconsciously). Yet as I have shown, these narrative issues are not isolated from, nor should be undertaken independent of, a wider model which considers the function of these narratives. How reference is interpreted and truth-valuations are applied, as will be demonstrated, differs according to whether these narratives are considered historical or fictional. This appears, at least in regard to referential issues, as self-evident: a narrative critic who understands Harry Potter as having an historical counterpart in the actual world would understand the narrative very differently to most narrative critics. To simply state, as Rhoads does, that he intends to consider these narratives as fictional without considering the extensive implications of such a claim, is a naïve, and potentially misleading, practice. In other words, issues of reference, ontology, and genre should not be overlooked, and their under-theorisation in Gospel criticism is something I take a step towards correcting in this thesis.

Chapter Two: The Possible Worlds of Logic, Language, and Literary Theory

As I walked in the dark through the tunnels and tunnels of books, I could not help being overcome by a sense of sadness. I couldn't help thinking that if I, by pure chance, had found a whole universe in a single unknown book, buried in the endless necropolis, tens of thousands more would remain unexplained, forgotten forever. I felt myself surrounded by millions of abandoned pages, by worlds and souls without an owner sinking in an ocean of darkness, while the world that throbbed outside the library seemed to be losing its memory, day after day, unknowingly, feeling all the wiser the more it forgot. (78)

- Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*.

The innumerable worlds in the Milky Way, *words*.

- Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (italics original).

In Chapter One, I suggested that the application of a possible worlds model would solve, or at the very least bring clarity to, a number of the shortcomings that I outlined in regard to reference, genre, and ontology. The possible worlds model itself, however, has yet to been defined in any detail. As possible worlds is, in fact, a complex and diverse body of theory—as opposed to a unified model which possible worlds theorists agree upon—defining this body of thought is necessary to understanding my application of the model. Accordingly, in this chapter I will outline both the logical and philosophical roots of possible worlds theory, as well as examine the way in which it has been most commonly adapted as a literary model. What will quickly become evident, however, is that possible worlds literary theory has been primarily employed to

consider issues of fictionality, truth, and reference in response to fictional texts. It is even at times, as Bohumil Fort's recent book *Fictional Worlds* (2016) exemplifies, treated as almost synonymous with fictional worlds theory. Yet the Gospels, as I will briefly argue in part in Chapter Two (and more comprehensively in Chapter Three), do not easily fit into this category. According to the definition of fictionality provided by David Lewis and Marie-Laure Ryan, they, in fact, represent non-fictional texts—despite the majority of narrative theorists suggesting otherwise. It is necessary in Chapter Two, then (once I have broadly outlined the model), to consider whether possible worlds theory is relevant to narrative texts in general (as opposed to just fictional texts). I will demonstrate how the theory of reference possible worlds inspires, as well as the associated process of imaginative recentering, are applicable to both fictional and non-fictional worlds—which, of course, makes them relevant tools in the analysis of the Gospel narratives. While I will often sideline direct reference to the Gospels in this chapter as I enter the theoretical web of possible worlds theory, this is done to lay the groundwork for my application of the model to the Gospels in Chapter Three. As no possible worlds theorist has applied possible worlds theory to non-fictional texts to consider issues of truth and reference beyond sentence-long excerpts, this groundwork is a necessary prerequisite to the final application.

2.1. Possible Worlds in Logic and Philosophy

The concept of possible worlds was first proposed in the seventeenth century by rationalist philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to defend the act of God's creation (Bell and Ryan (forthcoming: 3). For Leibniz, all possible worlds were considered by God before he chose the best one to be actualised. As this suggests, this theory was initially a metaphysical conception in which possible worlds have a “transcendental existence,” residing in God's mind awaiting

discovery (Doležel 1998: 14). While the conception of possible worlds that was revived in the second half of the twentieth century by logicians little resembles Leibniz’s theological understanding, the idea that our actual world is only one of an infinity possible worlds proved to be extremely beneficial to philosophy, and particularly modal logic (Semino 1999: 58). These possible worlds no longer dwell in the divine mind but are best considered as, in Plantinga’s words, “*a way things could have been*” (1974:44). A possible world, Plantinga continues, is “*a possible state of affairs* of some kind” (44).

The basic premise behind introducing possible worlds to logic was to create a semantic system that encompassed “modal operators”—words expressing modal attitudes such as necessity, possibility, and belief (Fort 13). It became apparent that a one-world model, where the actual world provides the only frame of reference, could not satisfactorily deal with the modal properties of possible truth, possible falsity, necessary truth, and necessary falsity (Semino 58). Without expanding the frame of reference for logical discourse to include non-actual states of affairs, propositions can only be true or false in the actual world (Semino 58). Fiction, for example, is simply considered false (or in a state of limbo as neither false nor true (Semino 61)) in a one-world frame as it does not have a concrete point of reference in the actual world. Accordingly, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Jaako Hintikka, Alvin Plantinga, and others, developed the formal theory of possible worlds (or what is often referred to as possible worlds semantics) to solve these and other similar logical problems (Bell and Ryan 4; Ryan 1991: 3).

As alluded to above, the basis of this theory, in Ryan’s words, is “the idea that reality — conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists physically—is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds” (Living Handbook 2013). In other words, the frame of reference of logical discourse is expanded to include an infinite number of possible alternatives to the actual world (Semino 59). When modelled, this universe is hierarchically

structured with one element situated at the centre, with all other elements functioning in opposition to the central element (Ryan 2005: 446). It is this central element that is understood as the “actual” world, while the rest are possible worlds (446). As such, there must always be a state of affairs being actualised to which alternative states of affairs, interpreted as possible worlds, can be defined in relation (Ronen 1994: 49).²⁵ Worth noting here (for its later importance to storyworlds) is that for modal logicians, the “real” universe, that is, the world we inhabit, is considered as only an optional world of reference (Ronen 64). While there is always a central privileged element in a set of worlds, no ontological difference between this central element and the other members of this set is required (Ronen 64). Accordingly, “actual” becomes in Lewis’ terms, “indexical”; that is, as Ronen explains, it “depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance” (64). Importantly for storyworlds (the exact use of this term I will outline in Chapter Three, but for now it can be considered as synonymous to “textual world” or “narrative world”), actuality can then be applied to possible worlds and their inhabitants (64). If we assume storyworlds to constitute autonomous modal universes (an assumption I will later defend), then it is possible to define what modal logicians call “accessibility relations” between various actualised and non-actualised states of affairs within the storyworld itself.

The best-known formal model of this system is Kripke’s M-model, which is best described by Michael J. Loux (see Ryan 1991:):

A M-model is an ordered triple (G, K, R) , where K is a set of objects, G is one of the objects belonging to K , and R is a relation defined over the members of K . Intuitively, Kripke tells us, we are to think of K as the set of all possible worlds; G is to be thought of

²⁵ What divides the realm of the actual and the realm of the possible will be discussed in the following section.

as the actual world; and R represents a relation which Kripke calls *relative possibility* and others *accessibility*. (1979:21)

Simply put, this model allows necessity and possibility to be logically defined (Bell and Ryan 5). It is beneficial to think of possible worlds at this point as sets of propositions (Fort 30). By quantifying over the notion of world, it is possible to consider the truth-values of individual propositions for each possible world (5). A proposition is considered possibly true if it is true in at least one world.²⁶ That is to say, if in at least one world that is accessible to the central element (the actual world) of the set (or universe) a proposition is true, then we can assign the proposition the truth-value of “possibly true”. A proposition is necessarily true if it is true in all worlds.²⁷ And finally, a proposition is necessarily false (impossible) if it is false in all worlds.²⁸ (See Semino 59; Bradley and Swartz 13-24; Bell and Ryan 5). In the logic of possible worlds then, as Girle notes, “a statement is true-in-a-world rather than just true” (qtd in Fort 31), a distinction which has important implications for its application to textual worlds.

²⁶ For example, the proposition “Winston Peters became the prime minister of New Zealand after the 2017 general election” is possibly true because although it is false in our actual world, it may be true in another set of state of affairs. Equally, the proposition “Jacinda Ardern became the prime-minister of NZ in 2017” is also possibly true for although it is true in our world, it may be false in another state of affairs (that is to say, including among the set of possible worlds in which Ardern was elected into government is the actual world).

²⁷ For example, the proposition “Ardern became prime-minister in 2017 or it is not the case that Ardern became prime-minister in 2017” is true in all possible worlds.

²⁸ For example, “Ardern became prime-minister in 2017 and it is also the case that Ardern did not become prime-minister in 2017.” However, as with the previous example, there is nothing inconsistent about each of these facts taken individually; that is to say, we can say that in a certain state of affairs each of those facts could be possible. Accordingly, as Ryan explains, it is possible to conclude that the only impossible and necessary propositions are mathematical (such as “ $2+2=4$ ” as a necessary truth) or analytical (such as “bachelors are unmarried”) as a necessary truth, and vice versa for a necessarily false proposition) (1991:32-33).

Another element of this model that is important to its application to texts, is that it allows for the accessibility relations between possible worlds to be defined. This is typically determined by the truth-valuations assigned to individual propositions within worlds (Fort 31), as described above. As Chihara explains, “The accessibility relation between worlds is used to express the idea of a world being possible relative to a world. To say that world u is possible relative to world v (or that u is accessible from v) is to say that every proposition true in u is possible in v ” (qtd in Fort 31). It is worth noting here that for a world to be possible, it has to be accessible to another world in its set.²⁹ As Bradley and Schwartz note, conceivability and possibility are not the same thing despite the considerable amount of overlap (3).³⁰ That is to say, not all non-actualised states of affairs are possible worlds. The difference between possible and impossible worlds, that is, worlds that are accessible versus those that are inaccessible to the central element, is typically defined by whether a state of affairs obeys the logical laws of non-contradiction and the excluded middle (Ryan 1991: 31). Worlds, in other words, cannot contain propositions that are both true and false at the same time (for example, a character cannot be blind but also see). Accordingly, possible worlds may have larger or smaller inventory of objects than the actual world (the example Semino provides is a world containing an earth with two moons or, alternatively, no moon at all), or different sets of attributes or properties (e.g. a purple Eiffel Tower) (Semino 60). However, Ryan explains that the logical interpretation of accessibility relations is not sufficient for a theory of fictional genres (32). A fictional text may intentionally break the law of non-contradiction (as is

²⁹ As Ronen explains, Kripke introduces accessibility and possibility as equivalent concepts (61).

³⁰ Bradley and Schwartz explain firstly that just because something is inconceivable does not make it impossible (e.g. our ancestors thought it inconceivable that the earth was anything but flat). Secondly, they continue, our ability to conceive of a certain state of affairs does not imply their possibility (e.g. mathematician’s efforts to square a circle, despite its now proved impossibility) (3).

common in postmodern texts), yet no literary theorist would want, in Ryan's words, "the embarrassment of speaking about the impossible possible worlds of fiction" (32). As readers, we still want to regard these texts as accessible worlds. Accordingly, Ryan suggests nine types of accessibility relations through which to determine the accessibility between the actual world and the textual world. A postmodern text, for example, may transgress (G) logical compatibility but still retain a number of the other types of accessibility relations, allowing us to still speak of the textual world as a possible world. This enables Ryan to determine the semantic differences of texts between genres, which has, in turn, resulted in her well-known semantic typology of fiction.

Generally speaking, aside from Ryan's broader definition of accessibility, all of the above has been widely accepted within analytical logic (of course, there are higher degrees of nuance in which disagreements take place). That is to say, the value of possible worlds theory for defining the semantics of modal operators is accepted. However, the metaphysical and ontological questions still remain as to what exactly we are talking about when we discuss possible worlds. Are they real, or in any way observable? Or better put, what differentiates, if anything, the actual world from the infinite possible worlds? While possible worlds semantics of logic is neutral on the nature of possible worlds (Martin 114), the above questions become pertinent when we consider the implication of possible worlds semantics for philosophy and literary theory. As Doložel notes, outside formal logic, the model cannot preserve ontological innocence (13). Various interpretations of what constitutes possible worlds and what distinguishes the actual world from its possible satellites have been posited (Bell and Ryan 7). Ronen explains these interpretations in terms of varying degrees of realism, identifying three major positions: modal realism, moderate realism, and anti-realism (21-24).

According to modal realism, all modal possibilities, as well as the actual world, are in Ronen's words, "equally realised in some logical space where they possess a physical existence"

(22). In other words, modal realism does not ontologically distinguish between the actual world and the merely possible ones (Bell and Ryan 8). As David Lewis, the major proponent of this view, explains, possible worlds differ "not in kind, but only in what goes on at them. Our actual world is only one world among others. We call it alone actual not because it differs in kind from all the rest, but because it is the world we inhabit" (qtd. in Stalnaker 67). As already alluded to above, for Lewis actuality becomes an indexical term where inhabitants of each world see their universe as the actual one (Ronen 22). In this regard, as Ryan explains, we have to distinguish between the terms "actual" and "real". To be "actual" means "to exist in the world from which I speak" (1991: 18). Alternative possible worlds cannot then be actual for me, Ryan continues, "since I consider them from another planet in the universe of possibilities" (18). Accordingly, it is possible to speak of unactualised possible worlds and unactualised possibilities (18). However, these unactualised possible worlds are still considered real in modal realism in that they exist absolutely, and every possibility is realised in some world (18).

Moderate realism is a somewhat broader position, with some versions labelled "actualism" also being considered under this term (such as those held by Plantinga, Rescher, and Stalnaker). In this interpretation, possible worlds are viewed as components of the actual world (22). The actual world is considered a complex structure that is inclusive of both its actual elements and its possible elements, that is, in other words, its non-actualised possibilities (22). Possible worlds exist then as mental constructs, non-obtaining states, sets of propositions, or as abstract entities (22-23). Under this heading we could also include Umberto Eco's well-known interpretation of possible worlds in which he understands them as "cultural constructs" (1990: 66). What is important to note is that the scholars who subscribe to moderate realism in its various nuances, distinguish between the actual state of affairs from possible states of affairs, except without the ontologically radical claim that these possibilities literally exist (23).

The anti-realist position, as per the name, refuses any form of actuality to possible worlds (23). Accordingly, possible worlds are refused any explanatory power and any relevance to questions of being and existence (23). As Ronen explains, the most common argument for the anti-realist position involves the claim that a belief in possible worlds is misguided because it necessarily assumes the existence of an actual world against which possible worlds are interpreted (23). The assumption that an anti-realist view of possible worlds is therefore typically a part of a general anti-realist philosophical position in which there is no way to qualify the real or the actual in relation to possible worlds (23). This view is similar to modal realism in that both choose not to differentiate ontologically between the actual world and possible worlds, however, metaphysically they represent the exact opposite position: modal realism attributes to all worlds a concrete existence, while for an anti-realist they are attributed to none (23-24).

It is this last position that offers the least to those of us wanting to conceive of textual worlds as possible worlds. An anti-realist view does not allow us to speak of the textual world as being a possible world in its own right, which provides a number of issues for literary theorists. Not only does the referential problem of finding truth in fictional statements arise again, but it also precludes the possibility of defining truth conditions and accessibility relations between textual worlds and the real world, as well as within the textual universe itself. Accordingly, Ryan draws on both modal realism and a more moderate-realism to define the possible worlds of texts. Lewis' indexical approach is beneficial for literary theorists because, as already alluded to, it ascribes to the textual world its own modal system in which at the centre is the "actual" world. As will be discussed further in the next section, this in many ways mirrors a reader's experience of the textual world when they redefine what they take as "actual" for the duration of the reading process (e.g. we don't question why Harry can move objects with a wooden stick during our reading experience of *Harry Potter*). However, Ryan also suggests that we also objectively know

that the possible worlds of fiction have a different ontological status than our actual world (1991: 21). For example, Rowling can create and give life to Harry Potter, but Harry could never in turn create Rowling. One is flesh and blood, the other a semiotic construct made of language (see Ryan 21 for similar example).³¹ Accordingly, Ryan draws on Nicholas Rescher's position that possible worlds are mental constructs in conjunction with Lewis' approach. She explains,

Rescher's position may account for what we know objectively about fictional worlds, but the indexical theory of David Lewis offers a much more accurate explanation of the way we relate to these worlds. Once we become immersed in fiction, the characters become real for us, and the world they live in momentarily takes the place of the actual world. (21)

While Ronen suggests that the various philosophical positions on the ontological and metaphysical nature of possible worlds problematizes the use of this theory outside of the bounds of logic (and in doing so subsequently offers a critique of literary theorists' use of possible worlds semantics), Ryan's approach, taking into consideration both the reading experience and the ontological status of literary phenomena, is one that I accept as valid, and importantly, one that I will draw upon in my own application of this theory.

In support of my above statement, it is worth briefly mentioning that the benefits of possible worlds semantics beyond modal logic were quickly recognised by a diverse range of disciplines. As Doležel explains, "for various cognitive aims various kinds of possible worlds can

³¹ Doležel makes a similar point, arguing that fictional worlds and their constituents are "non-actualised possibles", as they are ontologically different from actual persons, events, and places (1998: 16).

be stipulated”: possible worlds of logical semantics are “interpretive models”; possible worlds of philosophy are “coherent cosmologies”; possible worlds of religion are usually given the form of “cosmological narratives”; possible worlds of natural science are “alternative designs of the universe”; possible worlds of historiography are “counterfactual scenarios”; possible worlds of action theory envisage “possible courses”; and, finally, possible worlds of fiction can be considered “artefacts” produced by aesthetic activities (poetry, music, mythology, storytelling, painting, cinema, and so on) (1998: 14-15). It has been convincingly demonstrated in all of the above fields that there is enough room within possible worlds theory for it to have a broad range of uses across a number of disciplines, even if this transfer is predominantly metaphorical. In Bell and Ryan’s words, “If it weren’t for their intrinsic interdisciplinary adaptability, convincingly demonstrated in the Nobel symposium *Possible Worlds in Humanities, Arts and Sciences* held in 1986, PWs would be confined to the relative obscurity of formal logic, the most esoteric domain of philosophy” (10).

As has been demonstrated, possible worlds literary theory has a complex logical foundation. While some scholars suggest that this exposes the fragility of the literary model (as per Ronen’s (1993) scepticism about a number of the literary applications), I argued, and will continue to argue for the remainder of this chapter, that possible worlds remains a theoretically tenable and highly beneficial body of literary theory. I affirm, in other words, Ryan’s and Doležel’s (among others) use of the logical model and will consequently draw heavily on their conclusions in my own application of the model to the Gospel narratives.

2.1.2. Language as Universal Medium versus Language as Calculus

In accepting the relevance of possible worlds semantics to literary theory, as well as the associated many-worlds ontology, I have already implicitly accepted that language can be understood as a “calculus” (Hintikka 1989: 52). As will become clear, my application of possible worlds is dependent on the viability of conceiving of language in this way. If there is only “one legitimate universe of discourse,” as Doležel puts it (1998:2) and language is consequently understood as what Hintikka labels a “universal medium” (1989: 52), suggesting there are four independent possible textual worlds that represent one allegedly actualised state of affairs is theoretically untenable. Consequently, in this section I will offer a brief explication of the theoretical benefits of understanding language as a calculus, demonstrating its practical advantages in considering issues of reference, genre, and ontology.

“By the conception of language as a universal medium,” Hintikka explains, “I mean the idea that we cannot in the last analysis escape our language and as it were look at it and its logic from the outside” (53). As Martin, a key theorist in applying Hintikka’s ideas to literary theory (and to whose work I am largely indebted to in this section), clarifies, this is not in the sense that everyone necessarily shares the same logical or linguistic structures, but “that language is a medium of communication and thought entirely inescapable” (28). It is not simply that one cannot get outside language so as to speak about it; there is no outside at all, and if there were, to draw on Martin’s phrasing again, “there would be no means of expressing what one would find ‘out there,’ if there were an ‘out there’ to be found” (Martin 28). Hintikka traces this conception of language as a universal medium to important theorists such as Frege, Wittgenstein, Quine and Russell in the analytic tradition, and places it as an important part of the philosophical positions of, among others, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer (54).

Important to the widespread acceptance of language as a universal medium in the literary tradition is Saussure’s claim that the sign forges its linkages not according to a fixed order

of word and world, but according to an arbitrary relationship of signifier and signified (Martin 16). The two are only connected in human convention; the signified is therefore never a self-sufficient or self-defined meaning, but, in Martin's explanation, "a single node in an entire network of differences" (16). "In language," Saussure famously concludes, "there are only differences, and no positive terms" (1959:120). When these ideas are taken to their logical extreme in Derrida's notion of *différance* in which "there are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces" (qtd. in Martin 24) there becomes "nothing outside the text" (1974: 158). As Christian Thorne clarifies, this does not mean "there are unknowable objects outside of text", but rather, and more emphatically, "there are outside of text no objects for us to know" (2012: 273). In both structuralism and poststructuralism, as represented here by Saussure and Derrida, language becomes an inescapable medium. We are trapped, as Jameson famously phrases, in the "prison-house of language" (1972). Within one-world semantics, such conclusions seem almost unavoidable. As poststructuralist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains: "We know no world that is not organised as a language, we operate with no other consciousness but one structured as a language—languages that we cannot possess, for we are operated by those languages as well. The category of language, then, embraces the categories of world and consciousness even as it is determined by them" (Qtd in Martin 28).

One of the central limitations of one-world semantics is that it precludes any chance of meta-language, that is, language about language (Martin 66).³² Within a one-world model, as Hintikka posits, "the semantics of our language is inexpressible, and cannot be theorised about in language" (53). In poststructuralism, we see this in the extreme as the rejection of metalanguage

³² Martin (66-67) lists seven aspects of the meaning of the term "metalanguage" that is far more comprehensive than my definition; however, for the sake of brevity, my shorthand "language about language" will have to suffice.

becomes explicit. Lyotard, among others, posits that language games can never be about language games because they are just more language games (Martin 68). As Martin explains about the poststructuralist position, “a speaker who attempts to explain the meaning of a sentence really says nothing about the sentence, but instead creates another sentence with its own new meaning” and, moreover, “the operation of *différance* or dissemination ensure that the two differ” (68). The implications of this conception of language for literary theory are substantial. As Bell and Ryan rightly point out, if semantics cannot be theorised in language, the meaning of literary texts cannot be paraphrased and interpretation becomes a betrayal (2). Equally, if the value of words can only be determined by other words in the system, literary texts cannot refer to anything in the world but only language itself. The result is that “the only mode of reading respectful of literary meaning consists tracing the ‘play of language,’ a play consisting of the internal relations between the elements of the textual system” (Bell and Ryan 2).

The implications of one-world semantics to questions of truth and reference are the most telling. Bell and Ryan tellingly conclude that if conceptions of reality are regarded as language constructs, these questions become void altogether (2). If all texts exist on the same plain, facts in Barthes’ words, “can only have a linguistic existence” (qtd. in Bell and Ryan 2). Whether a text claims to contain truth about reality becomes irrelevant, and as a result, a science text-book cannot be, at least theoretically, differentiated from a novel (the method of discourse typology I use to define the function and structure of the Gospel narratives in Chapter Three, in other words, would be considered irrelevant to textual criticism from this perspective). In terms of the question of reference, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate reality, that is, what we experience as the actual world, from textual worlds. There simply is no place for us to step outside language to evaluate the meaning of language itself. Even within a one-world semantics that posits a language-independent reality, as could be ascribed to a number of theorists in the

analytical tradition, formalism, and New Criticism (and perhaps less radical structuralism), there still remains a problem of how to define the truth-values of fictional propositions, and equally, statements about fiction. Measured only against the one world we inhabit, fiction has no point of reference and consequently becomes false or indeterminate. Bertrand Russell, for example, asserts that there is “only one world, the ‘real’ world” and it “is the very essence of fiction that only the thoughts, feelings, etc., in Shakespeare and his readers are real, and there is not, additional to them, an objective Hamlet” (1919: 170). Accordingly, he posits that all fictional terms lack reference, all fictional sentences are false, and ascribes fictional entities to the same domain as non-existent entities (such as impossible objects, e.g. square circles) (Russell 169-170; Doležel 1998: 2). In terms of truth-values, we cannot then distinguish between the statements “Harry Potter is the embodiment of sacrificial love” and “Harry Potter is a hateful coward” because neither refer to anything in the actual world. Fiction, in this regard, becomes just an artefact of history; an interesting relic that, at best, is aesthetically pleasing. These limitations are striking, particularly when we approach the Gospel narratives in which it is both important to discuss the intersection between fiction and history within the texts, as well as consider the meaning of the text for readers beyond simply the play of language.

As an alternative to the above, Hintikka promotes a possible worlds semantics in which we can conceive of language as a calculus. The use of the term “calculus”, it must be first clarified, does not indicate, in Hintikka’s words, “that language would be a meaningless *jeu de caractères*” (what Martin describes as a mere manipulation of symbols or an intralingual game [74]), but rather that “the operative word highlights the thesis that language is freely re-interpretable like a calculus” (54). In this conception, you can, so to speak, “stop your language and step off” (Hintikka 54). In less metaphorical terms, Hintikka clarifies, this means that “you can discuss the semantics of your language and even vary systematically its interpretation” (54).

Language, in other words, is not fixed to one field of discourse or one domain of reference, but rather is treated as an abstract calculus whose content and domain of application can be varied (Martin 79). Language can talk not only about this world, as Martin explains, but about any number of possible worlds (79). Offering support for this conception of language is human beings' ability to communicate outside of purely linguistic terms. Hintikka draws on the non-verbal meaning-games surrounding counting which are, in his eyes, "the most non-verbally specific meaning games in which we participate" (qtd. in Martin 74). The non-verbal symbolism occurring as we count on fingers or toes does not require linguistic markers, which, as Martin notes, explains the ease by which we learn number words in foreign, and in some extreme cases, entirely unknown, languages (74). Language, accordingly, is not unalterably tied to its semantic relations, but is a reinterpretable calculus. This, of course, does not "solve" every problem language presents, nor does it offer a response at every turn to single-world models; rather, it is a broad way of interpreting language that is theoretically applicable across a diverse range of fields.

Two important implications of understanding language as calculus (noted first by Bell and Ryan 2-3) are worth noting for their importance to literary theory. Firstly, metalanguage is possible. Language can reflect on both language and language world-relations (Martin 79). The limits of our language are not the boundary markers of the limits of our world (79), but rather, we can analyse language in a meaningful way that does not slip into a form of solipsism (where language is bound to one domain) or relativism (where language only has meaning relative to itself). Secondly, it is possible to interpret statements with respect to a variety of fields of reference or universes of discourse (Bell and Ryan 3). "If we call these fields "worlds," Bell and Ryan explain, this "presupposes the existences of multiple worlds, with respect to which the truth of propositions can be evaluated. A given proposition—such as "dragons exist"—may thus be false in one world and true in another" (3). Through expanding the one-world model to "a universe

composed of a plurality of distinct worlds” (which is, as will be remembered, the foundation of possible worlds semantics), the questions of truth and reference—particularly in regard to fictional texts—are no longer off-limits. We can step outside the world of which we are apart and discuss non-actualised propositions on their own terms. As per Lewis’ indexical approach to possible worlds semantics, the “actual” world can be re-centred to the centre of a textual universe, and accordingly, there is a new domain of reference by which to measure the truth-values of propositions. For literary and narrative theory, as Bell and Ryan conclude, the rejection of a one-world model in which language is the universal medium in favour of a possible worlds semantics in which language is understood as calculus is “nothing less than a paradigm change” (3).³³ As I have demonstrated, this paradigm change is vital to my application of possible worlds to the Gospel narratives.

2.2. Possible Worlds Literary Theory

Having now outlined the possible worlds semantics of logic and philosophy, it is now possible to consider its various applications to literary theory. As already noted, possible worlds literary is far from singular, and has been applied to a wide range of literary issues, most notably those areas which relate to fiction and reference, genre theory, narrative semantics, and reception theory. Accordingly, in this section I will limit myself to considering the ways in which possible worlds semantics has been most commonly employed in literary theory, that is, in relation fictional worlds. Only once I have outlined these areas will I consider those elements of possible worlds

³³ It is worth noting, however, that this paradigm change is only relevant to some. As Moore points out, “Theory in the twenty-first century thus far is marked by a turn away from *language*, the preeminent preoccupation of classic poststructuralism, which is simultaneously a turn towards the *non-human* (epitomised by materiality and animality) and *affect* (emotion but also sensation and still more diffuse states)” (2017).

theory relevant to both fictional and non-fictional texts, and subsequently lay the groundwork for my own application of the possible worlds model to the Gospel narratives. To begin, I will outline the theoretical advantages of introducing a many-worlds ontology to understanding fictional reference, which will enable, in turn, the presentation of a possible worlds inspired theory of fiction.

2.2.2. Truth in Fiction: The “Referential Frame”

Possible worlds of logic and philosophy has been most effectively employed in literary theory to better understand the nature, and existence, of fictional worlds.³⁴ As will be remembered, a many-worlds ontology opens up a new frame of reference that legitimises the existence of non-actualised states of affairs. If fictional texts can be understood as producing a specific type of possible world (as a specific type of non-actualised states of affairs themselves), what is most commonly referred to as a “fictional world,” then a new avenue is opened by which to judge the truth-values of fictional statements, and, in turn, better define fictionality in general. This is what Bohumil Fort is referring to when he suggests that, “the main profit fictional worlds semantics gains from logical possible worlds is the referential frame” (45). While I run the risk of repeating myself here, in possible worlds literary semantics the domain of reference shifts from the actual world of reality (as per traditional extensional logic), to the actual world of the fictional text. This, of course, is an acceptance of Lewis’ indexical understanding of actuality in which the “actual

³⁴ Ronen, one of the strongest critics of the possible worlds/literary theory cross-disciplinary transfer, comments that “the clearest manifestation of their productivity lies in the changes possible worlds have generated in the theoretical understanding of fictionality” (75). Gorman more recently confirms that possible worlds inspired theories of fiction (there is some variance) have still yet to find any strong objection, and their failure to gain universal acceptance may have something to do with the elaborate metaphysical apparatus they involve (166).

world” is a relative term, and accordingly can be “playfully relocated” (Bell and Ryan 23).

Fictional entities can then logically be granted existence, even if this existence differs ontologically (in that they remain non-actualised), and statements about fiction can be granted truth-values other than simply false or indeterminate.

2.2.3. Theory of Fiction

With the introduction of the referential frame provided by the concept of fictional worlds, Lewis developed a possible worlds inspired definition of fiction. While the vast majority of fictional texts are intuitively understood as such, a precise definition of “fiction” has eluded both literary theorists and logicians (see Gorman 163). This, of course, becomes a particularly pressing issue when the text in question represents a story whose fictionality cannot be deciphered intuitively (or whose intuitive status differs from person to person) or contains individual sentences that are seemingly true but exist in what many regard as a fictional text, and vice-versa. The Gospel narratives provide an apt example of both of these trends. They resist any intuitive definition of fictionality, mixing events and entities many consider to be historical with supernatural agents and miracles. The fact that history is divided over whether these supernatural elements are historically accurate only complicates the matter further. The various semantic theories of fiction that have been most commonly held in literary history have struggled to account convincingly for hybrid stories like the Gospels that contain both real and fictional entities, and equally, have not offered a logical basis for how readers experience stories as fiction that fits with what is intuitively known to be true (Gorman 165-166). A possible worlds definition of fictionality, in this regard, seeks to explain the fictional transaction between sender and receiver, as well as offer logical guidelines through which the fictionality of texts can be defined. While the exact definition of

fictionality differs even amongst possible worlds theorists, Lewis' approach is the most well-known, and it is foundational to Ryan's understanding of these issues. This definition, in its simplest form (as provided by Bell and Ryan's paraphrase of Lewis), is as follows: a fiction is "a story told as true of a world (or worlds) other than AW (the actual world)" (19). Three aspects of this definition are worth considering here as they are particularly relevant to my application of this theory of fiction in Chapter Three.

Firstly, this possible worlds definition of fictionality depends on an illocutionary and intensional approach (Ryan 1991: 13-30). By illocutionary, I allude to how the term has been used in speech-act theory, particularly by Searle, referring to the idea that stories are a transaction between sender and receiver that are performed with a certain force or intent. The sender's attitude toward their discourse, in this regard, is more important in defining fictionality than whether the content of their message is "true" or "false." The term intensional will be defined in full in Chapter Three, but for now, very broadly, it can be considered as putting emphasis on *how* the story is told, or better, the *meaning* behind the way in which the story is told (in standard extensional logic, *what* is represented is valued over *how* it is represented). While there remain obvious formulae and narrative devices that internally suggest the fictionality of a text, such as "once upon a time", these are secondary to the fictional status of the world which is dependent on the sender (Bell and Ryan 19). As Ryan asserts, the fictional text is not regarded fictional because of its intrinsic properties, "but because of the gesture through which it came into being and is offered to the reader" (1991:16). This is in contrast to what Ryan labels "referential" definitions of fictionality; that is, those theories that define fictionality based on the entities to which it refers. If an entity has no point of reference in the actual world, it is imaginary, and therefore denied existence: it is fiction. Fiction, in this regard, can be understood simply as discourse about imaginary objects (Ryan 1991: 15). Similarly, if a textual proposition is false in

the actual world, it is considered fictional. Within this framework, a story is considered fiction “when it departs through at least one property from the actual world” (Ryan 1991: 15). However, from this perspective, errors and lies, as well as embellishments and exaggerations, would be identified as fiction (15). All of these elements are common in narratives of personal experience and historical narratives, and some of them can also be found in blatantly non-fictional texts such as science textbooks. As these genres locate their narratives (and in the case of textbooks, facts) in the actual world of reality, they would remain non-fiction in Lewis’ approach, and their errors or lies would be considered exactly that—as errors or lies about the actual world. It is briefly worth mentioning that while this represents Ryan and Lewis’ perspective, other possible worlds theorists, most notably Pavel, have also taken into account the role of the reader’s knowledge and beliefs, with the latter concluding that what constitutes fiction in society at one point may change as the level of knowledge increases (Pavel 1986). Referring to Greek mythology, which once was considered non-fiction, that is, written as true of the actual world, he explains that “when a mythological system gradually loses its grip on a society, the ancient gods and heroes start to be perceived as fictional characters” (1986: 41). However, as Ryan rightly observes, if a text’s fictionality can change with time then the referential definition has been implicitly accepted (1991: 76). Fictionality now depends on whether an entity is culturally accepted as existing in the real world, as opposed to Ryan’s approach which regards the fictional gesture as a permanent feature in the transaction between sender/receiver. To accept the referential definition, as will be discussed in the following paragraph in further detail, not only worlds, but even individual sentences, would have to be split into parts as an attempt is made to decide which entities in a story still exist in the actual world and which do not.

Accordingly, the second element of a possible worlds definition is that fictionality is regarded as a property of the world, rather than as a feature of individual statements or entities

(Semino 66; Pavel 1986: 42) (as it is in the case with Searle's illocutionary theory of fiction).³⁵

This approach becomes necessary when we consider worlds with hybrid ontologies in which historical individuals and other "real" entities from our actual world appear within the story. As Ryan asks, "if objects are inherently fictional or real... how can the invented Sherlock Holmes live on the geographically real Baker Street?" (1991:15). Again, as per above, referential theories are forced to split worlds, and even certain sentences, as some objects have a point of reference in the real world, while others do not. From this perspective, the task of logically defining the fictionality of a text quickly becomes completely unreasonable. As Doležel explains, "A mimetic view that presents fictional persons as a mixed bag of "real people" and "purely fictitious characters" leads to serious theoretical difficulties, analytical confusions, and naïve critical practice" (1998: 18). When semantic domains are considered as a whole, however, every entity within that domain is considered fictional. Readers may draw on their knowledge of real entities in their interpretation of fictional worlds, but this does not change the status of the entities within text. As Ryan explains in reference to Lewis' work, "The world of the Sherlock Holmes stories is not created by a mixture of fictional and nonfictional statements, but by a fully fictional discourse that describes a possible world linked to the actual world through many common features (or counterpart relations)" (2008, pp. n/a). A reader, then, can imagine Baker Street as they have experienced it in their actual world, but that does not change the status of Baker Street found in Sherlock Holmes.

³⁵ John Searle, for example, claims that (in Semino's paraphrase), "in practice, works of fiction are made up of a mixture of serious and pretended illocutions, depending on whether or not the author believes them to be true and intends them to be taken as such" (Semino 66; Searle 1975). This inevitably leads to logical and ontological fragmentation as some sentences or entities within a story are "true" or "non-fiction," while others are still regarded as fiction (see Ryan 1991: 65; Semino 66).

Thirdly, this definition of fictionality is grounded on the idea that fictional worlds are autonomous modal systems (possible worlds) that run parallel to the actual world of reality. An important feature of fiction is that it is “told as true,” despite the fact the author and/or the reader knows the events did not take place in the actual world. This fact is mirrored in the reader’s experience of the text. Through the process of what Ryan labels “fictional recentering”, a reader recenters what they regard as “actual” to the “actual world” of the text for the duration of the reading process. “Once we become immersed in a fiction,” she explains, “the characters become real for us, and the world they live in momentarily takes the place of the actual world” (1991:21). Accordingly, the reader experiences the fictional world as true regardless of whether the entities or statements within that world are true or not in the actual world. This accounts for how readers almost universally experience characters as “real”, often forming emotional ties or at least emotional responses to fictional entities (Bell and Ryan 20). Fictional worlds, in other words, are more than just textual constructs; they are furnished with characters and places that we can experience, at least for the duration of the reading process, as real. However, there always remains an ontological distinction between the two domains. Ryan’s model of fictional recentering simultaneously employs Lewis’ indexical theory of actuality, in which the actual world is a relative concept, and Rescher’s mentalism, in which possible worlds are regarded as mental constructs or non-obtaining states of affairs. In this way, despite a reader relocating their “actual world” for the duration of the reading process, it is still recognised that there is an ontological difference between the world in which texts are physically being read and the world of the text, which remains non-actualised.³⁶ I will argue shortly that this idea of fictional

³⁶ In logical terms, Bell and Ryan propose a more precise definition of fictionality that describes this process: “Here at our world w_1 we have a fiction f , told in an act a of world-making; at some other world w_2 we have an act a' of making statements within and about w_2 and/or other worlds; the discourses uttered in a and a' match word for word, and the words have the same meaning” (21).

recentering is a concept, despite its name, relevant to non-fictional texts, and is therefore a necessary consideration in evaluating how readers experience the Gospel narratives.

It is first worth briefly digressing here, however, to note that the idea of fictional recentering not only finds resonance intuitively with how readers experience fictional worlds, but also has found considerable support within cognitive psychology. Richard Gerrig, in his still relevant *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Act of Reading*, employs the metaphors of transportation and performance to explain a reader's experience of (what he labels) "narrative worlds" (1993). So compelling is the human experience of narratives, Gerrig argues, that psychologically we are "transported" to another world where we, in turn, "perform" the narrative in the act of reading (1-24). Deictic Shift Theory confirms a similar idea. In this approach to narrative, story-telling is understood to involve "a shift of deictic centres whereby narrators prompt their interlocutors to relocate from the **HERE** and **NOW** of the act of narration to other space-time coordinates – namely, those defining the perspective from which the events of the story are recounted" (Herman 271). Importantly, a possible worlds approach to recentering is able to incorporate these ideas within its wider logical framework. At no point are they mutually exclusive, rather, possible worlds effectively provides a logical-semantic perspective that offers important foundations for these cognitive theories (and, equally, cognitive theories provide further support for a logical understanding of recentering).

2.2.4. Principle of Minimum Departure

Once accepted, this idea of recentering has important implications for the interpretation of texts, the most pressing being how a reader "re-constructs" the world. That is, to ask the questions: if a shift has taken place so that the actual world of the text has become the actual world of the

reader, what are the processes by which readers mentally construct this textual world? And, equally, what are the interpretive guidelines by which the reader can make judgements about this world? Thankfully, Lewis' definition of fiction is also aided by a guide of how to interpret fictional worlds. Through adapting his analysis of truth conditions for counterfactual statements to the case of truth in fiction, Lewis proposes the rule (in Bell and Ryan's paraphrase): "in imagining fictional worlds, do not make gratuitous changes from the actual world" (see Bell and Ryan 20). Ryan adapts Lewis' logic (the precise method through which she incorporates Lewis' logical understanding of counterfactuals to come to this principle is beyond consideration here) to derive her now well known "principle of minimum departure." She explains:

...we can derive a law of primary importance for the phenomenology of reading. This law – to which I shall refer to as the principle of minimum departure – states that we construe the central world of a textual universe in the same way we reconstrue the alternate possible worlds of nonfactual statements: as conforming as far as possible to our representation of AW. We will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text. (Ryan 1991: 51)

Through this principle, readers are able to form reasonably complete representations of worlds created through discourse (52). Not every magical creature in Harry Potter is described in detail, but when Rowling describes a thestral as having the appearance of a skeletal winged horse, we, by virtue of the principle of minimum departure, assume the existence of a creature that has all of the features of a horse in the real world, including the relevant level of consciousness etc., until otherwise clarified. By virtue of this principle, we furnish worlds, so to speak, reconstructing them so as to experience them more fully. The gaps in the fictional world are regarded as withdrawn

information, as opposed to an ontological deficiency or incompleteness of the world itself (53). Of course, readers fill gaps (often quite liberally as reception theories have demonstrated) without knowledge of this principle; accordingly, the principle of minimal departure seeks to explain in logical terms how it is readers experience fictional worlds. However, it also provides a criterion by which factual and interpretive statements about fiction can be legitimised, even if the antecedent and/or consequent cannot be explicitly located within the discourse. Without such a principle, there would be such strict semantic guidelines as to what can be logically inferred from discourse that the number of statements we could make confidently about fictional worlds would be extremely limited (52).³⁷ For example, if I was to suggest (along with a number of critics) that in Hemingway's "The Big Two Hearted River," Nick Adams is trying to make sense of the world through his meticulous actions after being traumatised in the war, I have immediately made the assumption that Nick Adams, despite being a fictional entity, would have the same psychological response to trauma than that of a human in the actual world. In other words, readers who agree with this interpretation would accept this statement of a person in the actual world about whom they had similar information (51). This is an interpretive judgement that has its foundations set upon Ryan's principle.

It is worth noting here that the principle of minimum departure, when actually applied by readers, is far messier than it has been so far defined. To this point, the "real world" or "actual world of our reality" has been referred to as a singular entity. Of course, this is not the case. A

³⁷ Ryan's example provides the best explanation of these limitations: "The reader of a fiction containing the sentence "Babar the King of the elephants went to a restaurant" would be entitled to reconstrue the proposition "at time *t* Babar was at a restaurant," but not draw the pragmatic inference: "Babar was hungry, and he went to the restaurant to eat." To come to this conclusion, we must assume that in the world of Babar, where elephants have kings and are able to talk, they are attracted to restaurants for the same reasons we are" (1991:52).

culture, community, or even individual's perception of what constitutes the "real world" will differ according to their time, place, language, and various other influences. Ronen critiques Ryan on this issue, suggesting her view assumes that "the actual world is an unproblematic and stable reference world" (69). For Ronen, possible worlds cannot be used to determine accessibility between reality and fictional worlds—only within and between fictional worlds themselves (70). She explains that in philosophy and logic no possible world is singled out as a stable reference point (as the "real world" is in the literary application); rather, "an actual world is another compossible system with no privileged status over other possibilities" (71). Accordingly, for Ronen, the principle of minimum departure, which for her presupposes an unproblematic and privileged "real world", does not constitute a viable application of the philosophical notion of possible worlds. Ryan herself, however, is not unaware of this problem, and notes how the principle of minimum departure is reliant on "the reader's experience of reality" (54).³⁸ As a consequence, she includes a section labelled "minimum departure and intertextuality," which demonstrates that "the functioning of minimal departure depends as much on intertextual relations as the functioning of intertextuality relies on minimum departure" (1991: 54). In short, she suggests (a) that minimum departure permits the choice of not only the real world, but also that of a textual universe as a frame of reference, and (b) that we can reconstrue the domains of the real world for which we lack information as the closest possible to the world of a certain fiction (54). These comments obviously assume a reference world that is not wholly stable. These insights are particularly relevant to Gospel criticism as the centrality of these four narratives in

³⁸ Elsewhere she notes that there are not only disagreements in the real world over physical laws (e.g. miracles/ghosts), but also over the inventory of the real world and the properties of its members (1991: 46).

Western culture ensures that they are never read without some prior expectation or knowledge about the states of affairs they project.

2.3. Possible Worlds Beyond Fiction

All of the theoretical insights above have so far been either about, or applied to, fictional worlds. While I will outline in detail exactly what type of worlds the Gospels project in Chapter Three, it is clear, as per Ryan's theory of fictionality, that they are not fictional worlds. As narratives told as true of the actual world of reality, regardless of how accurate or inaccurate their representations are, they are best understood as projecting some form of non-fictional textual world. Accordingly, it is now necessary to consider what elements of possible worlds theory are relevant to both fictional and non-fictional texts, and, in doing so, lay the necessary groundwork for the application of the possible worlds model in Chapter Three.

In this regard, Thomas Martin is the best starting point, as he too suggests in *Poiesis and Possible Worlds* (2004) that the possible worlds model can be utilised beyond fictional worlds. After his in-depth analysis of linguistic and semantic models, Martin resolutely concludes Part Two of his book with what he labels "a qualified theory of possible worlds for literature" (115-119) that moves beyond the fiction/non-fiction divide. He openly states that his proposal does not controvert the work of Pavel, Ryan, Eco, Lewis, and so on, but yet wishes to raise one significant objection: the too close identification of the category 'fiction' with the category of literature (124). He explains: "While one can appreciate the benefits of aligning literature with fiction, too many exceptions come to mind" (124). Four of these exceptions, of course, are the Gospel narratives. Fictional worlds, in Martin's conception (drawing on the above theorists), are autonomous in the sense that they have their own modal structure that runs parallel to the actual world in which

they were created, however, they are not completely autonomous because they share “either overtly or through the model directedness of language, many shadow worlds of words” (126).

“The main point,” Martin writes, is that

rather than being reductions, possible worlds are expansions. They represent the way the world might be (or even may be). As such they not only appear in our literature, but are always present in our cognitive mapping and ordinary language, finding their way into our time-related discourse, ethical discourse, scientific discourse, and counterfactual discourse, to name a few. (126, italics Martin’s)

While this is not the occasion to elaborate on all of the ways in which possible worlds may or may not manifest themselves, it is clear that worlds created by discourse can take a number of forms, many of which will share properties with fictional worlds. In other words, possible worlds theory is not only relevant to the study of fictional worlds but is also capable of defining and describing a wide range of literary worlds. It is worth quoting Semino at length here as she eloquently argues a similar position to that of Martin:

I believe that fictionality and literariness need to be considered as separate properties, which, however, show considerable overlap in their specific instantiations... I would therefore argue that a central property of literature is a potential for what Ryan calls ‘fictional recentering’, and that this potential is often, but not necessarily, realised by individual genres and texts. As a consequence, the notion of possible worlds as developed within the semantics of fictionality is relevant to the study of literary text worlds, even if

some of these worlds are intended as factual representations of the actual world and need to be treated as such. (70)

What Semino achieves is to disentangle the notion of recentering from purely fictional discourse. Literature, for Semino, is marked by whether or not it has the potential for the recentering process to take place, and this activity is far from confined to fiction. Historical narratives encourage the reader to temporarily inhabit another world, as do, to draw on an example from media, certain documentaries which employ narrative structures to best achieve their goal, whatever that may be. Importantly, Ryan herself has updated her thinking on this matter, now considering all narrative texts capable of producing storyworlds, with the recentering process being dependent not on a text's status as fiction but whether a reader is immersed in the story—a process not exclusive to fiction (2017). How exactly the process of recentering changes when reading literary texts that are non-fictional will be further discussed in my own application of this aspect of possible worlds theory in Chapter Three. Important to recognise now is simply the viability of “imaginative recentering”³⁹ (instead of “fictional recentering”) to fictional, as well as non-fictional, worlds.

2.3.2 Accessibility Relations and Genre Theory

³⁹ Another expression that can be incorporated into this discussion is “ontological recentering.” However, there is no clear evidence that non-fictional texts encourage ontological recentering in the same way as fictional texts. As fictional worlds are imaginary they always require the reader to modify their idea of what “exists” to align with the textual world, whereas with non-fictional worlds, as representation of actualised states of affairs, this is not always a requirement. While I would argue that ontological recentering still takes place in the reading of non-fictional worlds, this is not the occasion for a detailed defence of this position, and so the more accepted “imaginative recentering” will suffice.

While the process of recentering has not always been accepted in regard to non-fictional texts, possible worlds theory has been employed to account for the different types of literary worlds that texts project (Bell and Ryan 24), as well as to define the internal structure of textual worlds, neither of which are fiction/nonfiction dependent. In Chapter Three, I will be defining the type of worlds the Gospels project, as well as regularly referring to their internal structure. As such, it is now necessary to outline a possible worlds theory of genre and a possible worlds inspired narrative semantics. A consideration of genre theory is particularly urgent in the context of my wider objective of applying this model to the Gospel narratives, since, due to the varying belief-systems attached to their narrative message, the Gospels can frustrate certain elements of this theory.

The basic premise of a possible worlds inspired theory of genre is that textual worlds can be more or less accessible from the actual world. In other words, different texts require the reader to travel varying distances from their native system of reality when undertaking the process of fictional recentering, e.g. a fantasy novel that contains only mythical creatures and is set in another dimension can be understood as making the reader travel further than that of a realist text. The “closer” a text is to the reader’s native system, the more accessible the world is. Ryan (who is herself building on the work in this area done by Maître (1983) and Traill (1991)) adapts the logical concept of “accessibility relations”⁴⁰ to determine how far it is that readers have to travel to a given world. She proposes a typology of accessibility relations for literature by means

⁴⁰ The phrase “accessibility relation” is drawn from modal logic. In the possible worlds of logic, the accessibility relation refers to the accessibility between worlds in a system of reality and is typically determined by whether a world obeys the laws of noncontradiction and the excluded middle (i.e. “a proposition must be true or false, and not both at the same time”) (Ryan 1991: 31). Ryan, however, as noted already, suggests that this logical definition is not broad enough for fiction, and thus expands the limits of accessibility in her own typology accessibility relations (1991: 32).

of which it is possible to assess the compatibility of a given textual world to the actual one (1991: 31-47). These are (in decreasing order of stringency): (A) identity of properties; (B) identity of inventory; (C) compatibility of inventory; (D) chronological compatibility; (E) physical compatibility; (F) taxonomic compatibility; (G) logical compatibility; (H) analytical compatibility; and (I) linguistic capability (1991: 32-33). Through identifying which of these properties a text fulfils in relation to the actual world, it is possible to determine a text's "accessibility." Non-fictional texts, for example, will always seek to fulfil all ten of these accessibility relations as they seek to represent the actual world as accurately as possible (Bell and Ryan 26). One of the key practical advantages of this approach is that it can be used to promote a theory of genre. Attributes typical of certain genres make worlds more or less compatible with the actual world. For example, true fiction attempts to be compatible across every category, while the existence of non-existent entities such as unicorns or talking animals, immediately disqualifies worlds in this genre from categories C and E. It thus becomes possible to define particular genres by their accessibility relations.

Where this grows increasingly complicated is in those areas in which personal belief or cultural acceptance changes that which we consider to be compatible with the actual world. I do not believe there is anyone alive (or at least no one I know) that believes the world of Harry Potter is compatible across every category; it is culturally accepted that there is not a secret society of wizards who have successfully remained hidden for hundreds of years. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, however, poses a tougher example. In the history of Western thought, more scholars have understood this event found in the Gospel narratives to be (C) physically compatible with their native system of reality than not compatible (and the same can be said of the general population). In a study done by Pew Research Centre in 2017, 80% of Americans still believe in God and 56% profess to believe in the God of the Bible. What are we to do with

these numbers? Doležel simply states that “in historical worlds events cannot be assigned to divine agency,” (2010: 35) and therefore, it seems, cannot be considered non-fictional. According to this logic, historical texts that transgress C (physical compatibility) must be received as fiction; historical texts only contain “natural” agents (35). This will be discussed further in Chapter Three as I seek to define the storyworlds of the Gospels, but for now, even from a completely secular standpoint, it is reasonable to question the boundaries of this clear line Doležel has drawn. Is it right, we may ask, to disregard large portions of the population that believe that the natural world is indeed infused with something of the supernatural?

At the heart of the issue is whether accessibility relations influence the fictionality of a text. While, as Ryan herself notes, there is obviously a clear relation between fictionality and the strength of the relations between the actual world and a textual world (e.g. fantasy worlds are both fictional worlds and incompatible across a number of categories) (1991: 46), it is non-fictional texts that do not accurately represent the actual world—as well as fictional texts that do—that force us to separate these two elements. For example, when readers receive a text that they perceive to be non-fiction, the breaking of any of the accessibility relations is considered to be either deceit or error. A historical text that breaks (E) physical or (F) taxonomic compatibility because it fabricated a miraculous event or misidentified a species which does not exist does not suddenly become a fictional text. Equally, fiction often represents events from the actual world with a high degree of accuracy, but this does not mean the storyworld can be considered non-fictional. As such, Ryan resolutely concludes that, “The question of fictionality is decided neither by the semantic properties of the textual universe nor by the stylistic properties of the text, but is settled a priori as part of our generic expectations. We regard a text as fiction when we know its genre, and we know that genre is governed by the rules of the fictional game. And we enter into

this game when our concern for the textual system of reality momentarily displaces our existential concern for the affairs of our system” (1991: 47).

Texts themselves, as Ryan alludes to in the above quote, do not hold some inherent quality of fictionality. It is rather a pragmatic issue, “not a matter about what the text is about, but how the text is used” (Ryan 2008). The sender of the text either constructs the storyworld to be, in their minds, an accurate representation of events in the actual world (non-fiction) or as an imagined state of affairs (fiction). The initial function of the storyworld, including the location of its reference world, is fixed in this way. However, the receiver may transgress the invitation from the sender, and receive a text told as true of the actual world as fiction, and vice versa. They, in other words, can refuse to enter into the fictional game when asked to, or enter it and read a non-fictional text for its aesthetic quality despite the sender’s intention. Our generic expectations that typically govern how we receive texts (the exception being when we intentionally disregard these expectations to read a text another way) may or may not transgress the function of a storyworld. While this will be discussed further in specific regard to the Gospels in Chapter Three, important to recognise now is the centrality of the reader’s awareness about whether they are accepting or transgressing the invitation of the sender. If a reader, unaware of a text’s genre, receives a historical novel as true, there is a high possibility of unwittingly ascribing the wrong truth-values to the facts represented in the text (and vice versa). Accordingly, understanding the type of a given textual world is an extremely important aspect of “successful” narrative communication. Discourse typology, in other words, is a necessary endeavour that has often been sidelined in narrative criticism of the Gospels.

2.3.3. Narrative Semantics

Having considered the external relationships between the actual world and textual worlds, it is now possible to elaborate on the internal structure of the semantic universe projected by the text; that is, the internal life of storyworlds. While all of the above loosely contributes to the processes by which we find meaning in narrative texts, I will now demonstrate that possible worlds theory can also inspire a comprehensive narrative semantics.

The concept of narrative semantics is predicated upon the assumption that finding meaning in narrative, in a semantic sense, is different to how one finds meaning in other forms of discourse (Frawley and Herman 362). In other words, if narrative as a form of discourse is understood as nothing more than a series of temporally connected statements and propositions, conventional linguistic semantics would be all that is required to find meaning in the text. However, if narrative has the ability to capture our imagination, transport our consciousnesses to new environments, and offer us a picture of reality different to our own, then analysing how narratives communicate meaning through identifying their structure and movement is a valuable goal. A possible worlds semantics, of course, presupposes the ability of narrative texts to project worlds. When narrative is understood in this way, narrative semantics, as Ryan further explains, “is rooted in an exploration of the world-making activity through which we interact with and try to shape the world we regard as actual” (1991: 110).

In a possible worlds model, the narrative universe is understood as an autonomous modal system. As in the actual world—where our experience of reality does not simply consist of actualised phenomena but is influenced by a whole range of non-actualised states of affairs—so storyworlds are complex systems of possible worlds. Characters not only have their own mental model of the (textual) world, but they also wish, plan, and have rules which interact and often conflict with other character’s non-actualised domains. Moreover, as is the case with real-world events, narrative events can only be fully understood in relation to, and in contrast with, virtual

events that might have taken place in another state of affairs (Bell and Ryan 22).⁴¹ While not every mental activity produces a possible world,⁴² possible worlds semantics rightly suggests that storyworlds are far from ontologically homogenous; they have their own actual domains surrounded by satellites of possible worlds (Bell and Ryan 22).

It therefore becomes necessary to separate what is “actual” within a storyworld versus what is “non-actual”. In a possible worlds model, the “textual actual world” (TAW) is formed out of the external/physical facts the narrator asserts as true (Ryan, *Living Narratology*).⁴³ Separate from the TAW, though often identical, is the “textual reference world” (TRW), which is to be understood as “the world for which the text claims facts; the world in which the propositions asserted by the text are to be valued” (Ryan 1991: vii). When considering what facts are true of the TAW they are, of course, measured against the TRW as opposed to the actual world of reality. Every storyworld has its own TRW, however, within non-fiction it is also necessary (when considering truth-values) to consider the factual claims of the narrative against the actual reference world of reality (i.e. the actual world). It is also worth noting that the TAW may be homogeneous or have a split ontology (Ryan 1991: 114). While Ryan lists a number of ways in

⁴¹ Bell and Ryan explain: “For instance, when people plan an action, they must consider (a) what will happen if the action is taken and succeeds; (b) what will happen if the action is taken and fails; and (3) what will happen if no action is taken and events follow their predictable course” (23).

⁴² Possible worlds are, as Ryan explains, “built from the various collected materials of the mind” (Ryan 1991: 111). Mental activity can be separated into two primary types of elements: those which contain “truth-value” and “fact-defining” propositions and those which do not (111). It is the former of these two by which possible worlds are projected.

⁴³ This becomes problematic in the case of unreliable narrators or first-person narrators in which the reader is required to separate personal belief statements with factual ones (whether that is possible is a discussion for another time), however, with third-person reliable narrators this is a relatively straightforward process. In fictional worlds with unreliable narrators, there may be a gap between the TAW (the narrative facts true of this world), and the narrator’s projection of this world (what Ryan labels the narratorial actual world) (Ryan 1991: 113).

which this occurs,⁴⁴ Doležel provides the most comprehensive example in his analysis of mythical worlds. For Doležel, the structure of the (conventional) mythological world is dyadic in which there is a sharp boundary that separates the supernatural and natural domains (1998: 185-186). The relationship between these two domains is asymmetrical: the supernatural beings have free accessibility and power over humans, while humans rely on knowledge of the supernatural through divine revelation or (often self-appointed) human informers (187). In this regard, the Gospel narratives could be considered complex mythological worlds in which a, or even *the*, divine being has entered the natural domain in order to provide further access and knowledge to the supernatural domain.

Surrounding this textual actual world are a number of non-actualised possible worlds that are formed out of characters' private worlds. Ryan identifies three different types of private worlds: the K-world (knowledge world), W-world (wish world), and O-world (obligation world) (1991: 111). It is not worth detailing exactly how these worlds function as their application to the Gospel narratives is beyond the scope of this project, however, understanding how this system of worlds is integral to a wider narrative semantics is briefly worth noting. The dynamic interactions between these various worlds can be understood as one of two plot-drivers within a narrative (the other being accidents) (Bell and Ryan 23). Characters seeking to align their K-worlds and W-worlds with the TAW are often moved to action; when these private worlds (particularly O-worlds) differ from TAW, conflict is created, and so on.⁴⁵ Moreover, how we find meaning in

⁴⁴ Ryan's examples are: "the division between the sacred and profane, as in medieval mystery plays, the realm of the dead and the realm of the living, as in ghost stories, the familiar and the uncanny, or more generally the natural and supernatural, as in fantastic tales" (Ryan 1991:114).

⁴⁵ "PW theory," as Ryan explains, "thus models narrative dynamics as the movement of individual worlds within the global narrative universe" (Ryan, *Living Handbook*).

narratives as readers is also fundamentally linked to how we understand the ontological divisions of the modal universe within the text. Ryan convincingly demonstrates that,

Trying to establish what holds as fact in the actual domain of the narrative universe, distinguishing the factual and physical from the possible and virtual located in the mental representations of characters, and building an image of these mental representations as a way to grasp the human significance of physical events and actions are some of the most fundamental of the cognitive operations that lead to the construction of narrative meaning. (Ryan, *Living Narratology*)

In regard to my own application of a possible worlds model to the Gospel narratives, what is important to note here is that regardless of whether a narrative is considered fiction or non-fiction, understanding narratives as projecting textual worlds, which are themselves modal universes, is a tenable and highly beneficial way in which to model narratives. Equally important is this model's ability to explain how it is readers find meaning in the text. This is why I find it necessary, regardless of whatever historical claims the Gospels may or may not make, and which of these claims may or may not be accurate in the actual world, to understand the four narratives as modal universes and undertake an analysis of these narratives through the lens of possible worlds theory.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have advanced my broader aim of applying possible worlds theory to the Gospels by providing an overview of the various ways in which the logical model of possible

worlds has been utilised in literary theory. In doing so, I have demonstrated that the literary model is relevant to a wider range of texts than often given credit for. Through drawing on Elliot and Semino, I more specifically argued that the process of “imaginative recentering”—more commonly known as “fictional recentering”—is applicable to both fictional and non-fictional textual worlds, a fact particularly relevant to my application of possible worlds to the Gospels. I have also shown how the Gospels can frustrate a straightforward application of genre theory which, in turn, only reinforces the value of pragmatic definitions of fictionality (in contrast to the waning value of the more common referential definitions). Finally, I provided a broad outline of the internal structure of storyworlds that only further unveiled the relevance of a possible worlds model to all narrative texts. As has been made clear, the possible worlds model, despite its complexity, has provided an effective solution to a number of the referential and ontological problems traditional models have faced. In Chapter One I demonstrated that these are the very same issues in which there remains a high amount of confusion and disagreement in Gospel criticism. Having proven the viability of applying a possible worlds model to the Gospel narratives in this chapter, it is now possible to move on to this thesis’ third chapter where I will demonstrate the theoretical and practical benefits of modelling the Gospel narratives in precisely this way.

Chapter Three: The Possible Worlds of the Gospels

But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

- John 21:25 (NRSV)

In Chapter One I exposed the need for a better model through which to understand issues of reference, genre, and ontology in relation to the Gospel narratives. In Chapter Two I demonstrated both how a possible worlds literary model has provided effective theoretical solutions to these very issues (although not in direct application to the Gospels), as well as the model's applicability to non-fictional texts. In Chapter Three I will finally fulfil the primary goal of this thesis to apply the possible worlds model to the four Gospel narratives. As the Gospels do not comfortably fit the criteria of fictional worlds, as argued in Chapter Two, this will require first outlining the terminology by which I will refer to the textual worlds projected by the Gospels. In this regard, I will argue that the term "storyworld" is the most holistic term by which to label the semantic domain of the four narratives. With this considered, I will then define more precisely what type of storyworlds the Gospels represent, evaluating whether it is still possible to approach them as fictional worlds, or if "historical" or "mythical" worlds are more accurate descriptions of their function. In doing so, I will also outline the key differences, in terms of reference and truth-valuations, that exist between each world-type, and in doing so reiterate the necessity of discourse typology. With this defined, I will then turn my attention to the reader, considering the process by which readers imaginatively recenter to the TAWs of the Gospels and

reconstruct the storyworlds. At this stage, I will also provide both guidelines for the Gospels' reception by drawing on the principle of minimum departure, as well as argue for a holistic two-phase reading process that takes into consideration both the sender's instructions and the application of truth-values. This will also be accompanied by a short example drawn from the Gospel of John that demonstrates what this reading process can look like when practised. Finally, while I will resist entering into the complex fields of hermeneutics and interpretation proper, I will offer brief guidelines about a possible worlds inspired goal for interpretation.

Before I engage with any of the above, however, it is first necessary to reiterate one of my central arguments upon which all of my future arguments are predicated; that is, that the Gospels can be understood as constituting specific kinds of textual, possible worlds—or better, modal systems containing sets of possible worlds, complete with their own “textual actual world” at the centre. The four Gospel narratives contain four possible states of affairs. While some events in these narratives may be unanimously considered as being actualised in history, this is secondary to the primary issue that the ancient past exists in a different mode of being to the present, that is, in the realm of possibility. One of the things that makes these narratives so interesting is that there are four textual representations of an allegedly actualised state of affairs that are communicated through a narrative mode of discourse. Whether a reader receives these narratives as fiction or history, they remain possible worlds. While elements of this argument have already been defended in part in chapters One and Two and will be defended more fully in the remainder of Chapter Three, its fundamental importance to my thesis makes it essential that it be made clear at the beginning of this chapter.

3.1. Gospels as Storyworlds

So far in this thesis, there have been various expressions used, by myself and others, to represent the worlds that the Gospels project, as well as to represent textual worlds in general. Norman Peterson introduced “narrative world,” which was understood as nothing more than a referential frame; David Rhoads employed the term “storyworld,” which is now the most accepted term that narrative critics use to refer to the semantic domain of the Gospels (and literary texts in general); and possible worlds theory, in understanding textual worlds as entire modal universes, introduced a whole set of terms by which to understand worlds that texts project (these were outlined in 2.3.2). There is little consensus about how all of this language is related, with each theorist appearing to use the various expressions differently as they best see fit. David Herman, for example, draws on possible worlds language in citing Marie-Laure Ryan’s understanding of recentering in his own work on storyworlds, but then is content to discard this language, using “storyworld” instead in a way that is close to synonymous with what possible worlds theory labels the textual actual world (TAW) (or perhaps even the entire textual universe at certain points) (2009b: 114). There is also the added confusion of the function of textual worlds often being included in their title, e.g. fictional worlds, historical worlds, and mythical worlds. In order to avoid any further confusion in this thesis, for the remainder of Chapter Three I will use the term “storyworld” to refer to the entire textual universe of each Gospel narrative. My primary motivation for this choice is that this term is already incorporated in existing Gospel criticism. While I will understand the term storyworld through the lens of possible worlds theory—i.e. as a modal universe with its own TAW and surrounding possible satellite worlds—at a broad level my work can still be connected to the work of Rhoads and others who have used world terminology in a similar way. It will also allow me to clearly demonstrate the advantages of understanding the storyworlds of the Gospels through the lens of possible worlds theory (as opposed to “storyworlds” just being used as a convenient term that separates the text from the actual world).

Another advantage of the term “storyworld” is its neutrality. While I will argue the need to further define what type of worlds the Gospels represent in this chapter, for those who disagree with my assertion that the narratives are non-fictional, “storyworld” remains a relevant term (whereas “historical world” would not). Finally, the term “storyworld” has already been clearly defined in literary theory, most prominently through the foundational work of David Herman (2002). As such, this term grants an entry point into another body of theory that can, and will, be drawn on in my own consideration of the possible worlds of the Gospels. In the section that follows, I will firstly outline the importance of “world” language to the Gospel narratives in general before arguing for the benefits of understanding the Gospels as projecting storyworlds. I will demonstrate that conceptualising the semantic domain in this way—as storyworlds informed by possible worlds theory—promotes a better theory of reference, as well as offering a holistic understanding of how readers find literary meaning in texts. In turn, these insights will allow me to consider whether the Gospels represent one or four storyworlds—an area of continual debate between traditional and narrative critics.

3.1.2. The “World” Metaphor and the Gospels

As my wider aim in this thesis of demonstrating the benefits of applying a possible worlds model to the Gospels is predicated on the fact that the Gospel narratives project worlds, it is necessary to pause in this section to consider more generally what the “text as world” metaphor implies in regard to the Gospels. John 21:25, in this regard, is a telling place to turn. The verse with which I began this chapter is unsettling to both traditional and narrative critics alike:⁴⁶ “But there are also

⁴⁶ Narrative critics deal only with the text therefore this passage poses something of a difficulty as it suggests there are elements to this narrative left untold. In contrast, traditional critics, seeking historical truth, may find it unsettling

many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25). John, in other words, assumes that there is a reality behind that which he chooses to represent through his discourse, a fact true of all four Gospels. They each propose an image of a world that exists independently of their discursive representation.⁴⁷ In other words, a textual world is being constructed with specific building blocks, and the reader only has direct access to those elements the narrator chooses to reveal. There are gaps, inevitably, as the Johannine narrator openly admits. This is not unique to the Gospels, nor to texts that only seek to represent historical states of affairs. One of the telling elements of fiction is the choice of material: Virginia Woolf tells of only one day, with flashbacks of the past admittedly, in *Mrs Dalloway*; James Joyce recalls the whole youth of Stephen in *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*; and J.K. Rowling tells of one year of Harry’s life per novel. As Petri Merenlahti suggests in building towards his own understanding of the narrative gaps in Mark, “Every narrative is a selective reduction of reality” (68). However, there is always the assumption from both the sender and the receiver that things are taking place behind, besides, and in the minds of characters beyond that which is being focalised; that is, there is a reality that has been “reduced.” Narrative, then, is always more than the sum of its words. This is what Michael Corballis recently expressed when he noted that “The basis of stories is the mental journeys we are able to make into other places, other times, and other minds, often into realms that are pure fantasy. Although language is critical to the telling of stories, it is distinct from the stories themselves” (Corballis 56). Narratives, simply put, tell a story about something, and to conceive of the semantic space where this “something” takes place as having no existence beyond

that there are aspects of Jesus and his ministry that we can never have access to as readers.

⁴⁷ In even proposing this as a potential reality, I am assuming there is a reality that exists beyond language, i.e. there is an assumption of a many-worlds ontology.

words on a page seems unnecessarily reductive; neither does it seem consistent with how readers experience texts who get lost in immersion and imagine states of affairs that go far beyond that which the discourse chooses to focalise. In fact, forming mental images of the non-actualised states of affairs and making inferences that move beyond that which is explicitly represented in the discourse are processes fundamental to the reader's ability to find meaning in narratives.⁴⁸ As Herman posits, "Mapping words (or other kinds of semiotic cues) onto worlds is a fundamental – perhaps *the* fundamental – requirement for narrative sense-making" (2009b: 105).

Given the above fact that authors and readers assume a reality behind narrative discourse, the issue at hand is how best to label, or better, conceptualise, the semantic domain of the text; that is, the "nonenumerable, fuzzy-bordered, occasionally chaotic set of meanings that is projected by (or read into) any given sequence of signs" (62). When we conceptualise this domain as a "world," we make an assumption that these "fuzzy-bordered" sets of meanings form a coherent whole. The comparison this metaphor makes is between textual worlds and the actual world of reality—which is the one we live in, experience, and try make sense of through our own always limited lens. The textual world metaphor is therefore an affirmation of connected entities and persons, of environments that can be experienced through immersion, of a degree of independence that exists outside of the actual world in which it was produced but is also always limited by the narrator (see Ryan 2010: 61-63). It is ultimately an affirmation of a many-worlds ontology:

⁴⁸ For example, if a narrative begins with a forty-six-year old woman eating breakfast the reader immediately makes a number of inferences not strictly recorded within the discourse; namely, that the woman only minutes earlier was making breakfast, and for that matter, had been alive for forty-six years previous to that day, and so on.

In the metaphor of the text as world, the text is apprehended as a window on something that exists outside language and extends in time and space well beyond the window frame. To speak of a textual world means to draw a distinction between a realm of language—made of names, definite descriptions, sentences, and propositions—and an extralinguistic realm of characters, objects, facts, and states of affairs serving as referents to the linguistic expressions. (63)

Employing the “world” metaphor to identify the semantic domain of texts is therefore a good representation of how it is readers intuitively experience texts, as well as a theoretical tool that enables the text to be analysed through the lens of a many-worlds ontology.

3.1. 3. The Applicability and Advantages of the Storyworld Metaphor

With these advantages of the world metaphor considered, the importance of understanding the Gospel narratives as projecting “storyworlds” is hard to overstate. Conceptualising the semantic domain of the four narratives in this way offers the reader (a) a referential frame (the logical and semantic advantages of which have been considerably outlined in Chapter Two) and (b) a space for the reader to imaginatively relocate (what we identified in Chapter Two as “fictional recentering”) which allows, as Ryan suggests, “a mode of reading based on imagining, visualizing and mentally simulating the action, rather than being limited to the propositional content of sentences” (37). Both (a) and (b) are integral to my aim of working towards a solution to the referential issues the Gospels pose, as well as to my later attempt to introduce a holistic, two-phase model of reading.

Yet while I have emphasised moving beyond the level of discourse to the level of worlds, it is also important to note that narrative discourse (that is, the writer's use of language) is not to be forgotten. Storyworlds can only be reconstructed (and subsequently interpreted) on the sender's "instructions" and the best way to interpret these instructions is through the mode of analysis provided by narrative criticism. In other words, the claim that readers can "go beyond" that which the discourse represents in no way diminishes the need to consider the various literary and narrative techniques through which writers construct storyworlds. As this is a fact overlooked by a number of traditional and historical Gospel critics, this emphasis on narrativity can constitute (c), the third theoretical benefit of conceptualising the semantic domain as a storyworld.

While the benefits of employing the "storyworld" metaphor to narratives have been briefly noted above and will be considered in more depth shortly, it is worth pausing here to reiterate the potential of the Gospels to be considered as projecting storyworlds. Through the lens of possible worlds literary theory, the only precondition for a text to be considered as a "world" is whether it is open to the process of recentering. In other words, can a given text project a textual universe complete with a textual actual world at the centre in which readers can relocate, and in doing so temporarily make it their own "actual world" (as per the indexical nature of actuality)? This TAW is established through what Ryan labels "mimetic statements"—that is, "utterance acts making singular existential claims, stating facts rather than opinions, proposing an image of a world existing independently from the discourse that describes it, and meant to be valued as either true or false in this world" (1991: 259). The Gospel narratives certainly meet these criteria. All four narrators consistently make "singular existential claims" throughout their narratives, introducing cast-members, assigning them attributes (e.g. Jesus as Messiah), and placing them in

an actualised setting (first-century Israel). An actual world is established that can be differentiated from character's private worlds and non-actualised states of affairs like the parables.

In working towards a better understanding of where the domain of reference should be located in the Gospels, the notion of the textual actual world is pivotal. It is this notion, in fact, that allows the possible worlds interpretation of reference to be so effective. As entities can be considered as “existing” in the TAW, textual entities can successfully refer regardless of whether they exist in the actual world of reality. This, as will be recalled, was the reason Norman Peterson first introduced the term “narrative world” to Gospel criticism, and his reasoning is still relevant. Without such a frame, we are left with three unattractive options: (a) immediately making the actual world of reality the reference world, which necessitates the fragmenting of the narrative as we decide verse by verse which propositions are historically true, as well as succumbing to Peterson's “referential fallacy” which allows textual entities to refer directly to the real-world object without consideration of the other factors involved in the production of literary meaning; (b) treat the narrative as self-referential, similar to how fiction has been treated in structuralism and formalism; or (c) finally do away with referential considerations altogether by solely engaging in a pragmatic or symbolic reading of the narrative. A possible worlds model is not so limited and provides a level of holism that Peterson's concept of “narrative world” was unable to achieve.

In this regard, a central advantage of employing the concept of storyworld—at least when understood through the lens of the possible worlds model—is that it provides the theoretical apparatus to demarcate the different aspects of the world the text projects. The “narrative world” Peterson refers to—which he (as noted in Chapter Two) defines as “the sum of propositions a narrative implies or expresses about its actors and their actions in time and space” (40)—is limited to only what possible worlds theory identifies as the “textual actual world.” In a possible worlds model, however, as mentioned in Chapter Two, it is possible to speak of a “textual

reference world” which can be considered in isolation from the TAW (this is particularly relevant in the case of unreliable narrators). The advantage of possible worlds in this regard is that it can incorporate into its model the possibility of multiple reference worlds. Every storyworld has a TAW and a TRW, regardless of its fictional status (this is tantamount to saying that there is always a world to which the TAW refers to, even if the entities that make up this reality do not exist in the actual world of reality). The TRW of non-fictional worlds is identical to the TAW when the reader is imaginatively recentered, but upon de-immersion the TRW can be switched to that of the actual world of reality which necessitates their separation. In this way, the state of affairs projected by the storyworld can be subjected to truth-valuation. When I consider the process by which readers of the Gospels should best apply truth-values in their reception of these narratives later in this chapter, this concept of multiple reference worlds will form an essential component of my argument.

Finally, beyond promoting a more nuanced understanding of reference, the separation of TAW and TRW also prevents the “mixed bag” approach discussed in Chapter Two: that is, considering certain elements of one narrative fictional and others non-fictional. Anthony Thiselton’s *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* is a seminal text in biblical criticism, yet in the introduction he already demonstrates his willingness to accept a referential definition of fictionality when he writes that certain biblical texts have ‘mixed modes’ where portions function as fiction. Certain parables found in the Gospel narratives, he suggests, exemplify this (1992: 26). This “mixed bag” approach, as Doležal labels it, often requires two different semantics for different characters within the same text, which is theoretically untenable (1998: 233). The entire process of imaginative recentering, as well as the reading process in general, unravels if one is consistently has to change from one mode of interpretation to another. In possible worlds semantics, the parables exist in the storyworld as non-actualised possible worlds; that is, they

“exist” in the same way that the rest of the narrative does. Through the introduction of multiple reference worlds, in other words, the TAW can remain whole, even as we assess the truth-values of its propositional content.

3.1.4. Four Storyworlds or One?

While the discussion of reference so far in this chapter has centred around storyworld, singular, what makes the Gospels such an interesting object of an investigation for narrative theorists interested in issues pertaining to fictionality, reference, and truth-valuation is that there are four representations that seek to represent one allegedly actualised state of affairs. These exist side by side in the same book, each provide their own (sometimes contradictory) version of events, and each have their own purpose for communicating their message. This inevitably raises the question of whether there are four discursive representations of one storyworld (that itself is a representation of the actual historical world) or four storyworlds that project four possible representations of the actual historical world of reality. Stated in more traditional terms, is there a common story/fabula between these narratives that exists independently of the individual discourses/sjužets. The repercussions of this choice will obviously affect how the processes of imaginative recentering and world re-construction are understood, as well as where the reader locates the reference world. At the heart of this issue—at least in terms of possible worlds semantics—is the question of how it is readers find meaning in and subsequently reconstruct worlds. It is necessary to consider the extent to which the individual “blueprints” for world construction that each storyworld provide (to borrow Herman’s language (2009b: 106)) determine the structure of the storyworld, as well as which elements of world-construction are not

tied to the specific context of each narrative discourse. Fort explains the issue at hand in regard to fictional worlds, but his question is equally relevant to non-fictional storyworlds:

If we accept the assumption based on the communicative model that a fictional world exists due to the semantic energy generated by a fictional text and is re-constructed by a creative act of reading, a crucial question has to be asked: What is the connection between the structure of a fictional text and the fictional world based on the text; in other words, how is a fictional world's structure determined by the structure of the primary fictional text? (59)

Answers to this question have been theorised across a wide range of fields, so I will restrict my discussion here to Doležel's and Fort's applications of the semantic concepts of "extension" and "intension" to possible worlds literary theory. Both of these concepts have a long history in logic and semantics, and a thorough consideration of their precise meaning and relevance to Gospel criticism, or even possible worlds theory in general, is not possible here. Consequently, my aim here is to only broadly outline the relevance of these two concepts to the reception and reconstruction of textual worlds. My argument, despite the ostensible complexity, is relatively simple. If literary meaning is only subject to understanding what the text refers to (extensional meaning), then it seems viable to approach the Gospels as representing one storyworld. However, if literary meaning is also tied to the specific texture of the narrative (intensional meaning), then it would appear necessary to approach the Gospels as representing four individual storyworlds.

To begin this inquiry, it is worth noting that meaning, in the semantic sense, is a product of both extension (an adaptation of Frege's concept of "reference") and intension (Frege's "sense"). Expressions have both intensional and extensional meaning components that can only

be separated for the purpose of analysis (Fort 62). This should be kept in mind as I now provide a brief overview of extension, before turning my attention to intension. The “extension” of an expression, as John Saeed explains, “is the set of things which could possibly be the referent⁴⁹ of that expression” (26). In the context of worlds, the term extension is understood as “a set of individuals to which the expression refers in a world” (Fort 60). The form of the expression, in extensional semantics, is left completely unexamined (Fort 60).⁵⁰ This means that it is possible to paraphrase the extensional meaning of an expression, or even a text (which occurs every time a plot summary of a narrative is written) (Doležel 1998: 136). In terms of narratives, as Fort explains, the ultimate framework for the extensional meaning is located in the reality to which the narrative refers, that is, the storyworld (or more precisely, the textual actual world of the storyworld) (60). Storyworlds, as concrete constellations of states of affairs that are non-actualised in the actual world (Ronen 51),⁵¹ are extensional entities. As Doležel explains, “their constituents, shapes, and structures are not tied to the wording of the constructing fictional text but are fixed by paraphrasing, by a translation of the original texture into extensional representations” (143). Writers, Doležel speculates, conceive of this extensional structure of a storyworld first, “inventing the story, individuating the acting persons in their properties and relationships, setting them in landscapes and cityscapes” (143). In the case of the Gospel narratives, this is certainly the case (as they seek to provide a representation of reality). When we summarise or re-tell the “story” of the

⁴⁹ In case there was any lingering confusion surrounding the word referent, Saeed further explains that “We use the term referent of an expression for the thing picked out by uttering the expression in a particular context” (27).

⁵⁰ The most common example employed by those wishing to explain the term extension is sentences that refer to the same object but are composed differently. For example, expressions like “Morning Star” and “Evening Star” have the same extensional meaning as they both refer to the same object (Venus) (see Fort 59).

⁵¹ Of course, the Gospel narratives may or may not be actualised in the actual world. However, as per the introduction to this section, it is necessary to, at least initially, conceive of the Gospel narratives as non-actualised as they exist in a different mode of being to the present.

Gospel narratives (the events that occur and the agents involved), we are expressing this extensional structure of the storyworlds. The fact that the extensional structure of these narratives can be paraphrased—i.e. is not indelibly tied to the exact wording of the narrative—further reinforces the need for conceptualising the semantic domain as a storyworld. It recognises that there is a reality behind the choice of words of the narrator that is actualised within the storyworld (and that, in the case of the Gospel narratives, may or may not be actualised in the real world of reality).

Intensional meaning, on the other hand, as Fort explains, “is connected with the form of a linguistic representation of an expression” (61). Intension is defined by Carnap as “the designative meaning component” (Qtd. in Fort 36). In other words, if the extension of a term is the set of objects it refers to, the intension of this term would be its dictionary definition, or better, what this term means in a given context. What frustrates simply equating intensional meaning with dictionary definitions is that, in natural languages (languages that have naturally developed, e.g. English), intensional meaning is “expressive and non-neutral” (Fort 61). Natural languages, as Saeed explains, “communicate interpretations between speakers and hearers” (286). For example, if a couple were to go on a day trip together to Waiheke Island and, that evening, each individually slur their way through a re-telling of their days to a friend (in Auckland, Waiheke and wine have the same extension), the extensional meaning of their stories would be identical—it would contain the same set of extensions—however, the intensional meaning would almost definitely differ. Each storyteller will have different attitudes towards the propositions they are expressing and might also desire a different response from their audience which will affect their choice of language. “Intensional meaning in natural language,” as Fort explains, “fully depends on the use of individually chosen linguistic means that the narrator adopts for their relationship to the described reality and the purpose of the narration” (62).

Accordingly, the titles “Messiah” and “Son of Man” that are both found in the Gospel narratives have the same extensional meaning—in that the extension of the expression picks out the same referent (Jesus)—but have a different intensional meaning as their theological implications vary. Of course, in terms of narrative, this means that intensional meaning cannot be captured in a plot summary or commentary. As Doležel posits, “Being fully determined by its texture, intensional meaning is affected by any textual change; it is nonparaphrasable, it slips through the net of “interpretants”, it is lost in retelling. Any paraphrasing, any interpretation destroys the intensional meaning in the process of destroying the original texture” (1998: 138).

While the above section may appear like an esoteric digression, it has provided the platform to further clarify the process by which readers of the Gospels find meaning in and reconstruct the storyworlds, which, of course, is a central concern of the possible worlds literary model. It is now possible to reassert, along with Fort, that “a narrative text obtains two meaning components, the extensional and the intensional, which both relate to the world generated by the text and participate in the final shape of the world constructed” (63). The four storyworlds of the Gospels are no different: in understanding how readers reconstruct the storyworlds, both meaning components need to be considered. As noted, the writers of the Gospels conceived of the extensional structure of the storyworlds first before giving the narratives their “intensional shape” through their use of language (as Doležel labels it (143)), but the opposite is true of those receiving the worlds. Doležel explains that “readers are presented first with the intensional structuring, since they access the fictional world through the text’s texture; by information or formalised paraphrasing they translate the texture into extensional representations and thus reconstruct the extensional world structure and its parts—story, character portraits, landscapes, and cityscapes” (143). In a semantic sense, this is the process by which words produce worlds.

While different bodies of criticism put different emphases on these two meaning components,⁵² it is evident that both are fundamental to a reader's experience of the narrative.

As already mentioned, whether the Gospels are understood as projecting four storyworlds or one is extremely influential on our interpretation of reference, as well as the processes of imaginative recentering and world construction—all three of which are pivotal to my application of possible worlds theory. Now that it has been made clear that the intensional structure—that which cannot be paraphrased and is bound by the context of the message—is both different for all four narratives and an essential component in the formation of literary meaning, it appears that the Gospels will each project an individual storyworld that that needs to be considered in isolation. This is immediately evident at the beginning of each Gospel. Matthew begins with a genealogy (highlighting the Jewish and Kingly lineage of Jesus the Messiah); Mark begins with a prophecy and then jumps into his narrative with Jesus as an adult; Luke begins with an address by the author to the recipient, Theophilus, outlining (and defending) his desire to present a historical account; and John begins with a theological monologue about the dual nature of Jesus.

⁵² Traditionally, Gospel criticism has more commonly overlooked the intensional structure of the Gospel narratives than those elements pertaining to the extensional. As Vanhoozer explains, evangelical and historical critics often assume a theory of meaning as reference whereby propositional content is isolated from the context in which it is spoken (64). Similarly, Thiselton suggests seven semantic errors that New Testament criticism had made in the past, numbers five and six of which are supposing “meaning always turns on the relationship between a word and the object to which it *refers*” and “that the basic kind of language-use to be investigated... is the *declarative proposition* or statement” (*Semantics and New Testament Interpretation*: 76, italics his). Accordingly, the emphasis, as Max Black comments, has been on “words rather than speech-acts in context” (qtd. in Thiselton 76). In Fort's terms, the focus has been put on “what entities and events are narrated (what is narrated)” (what Fort identifies as the extensional structure), as opposed to “how it is narrated” (intensional structure) (98). More recently, analysing the extensional structure of the narratives has been overlooked by narrative critics in favour of considering the specific ways in which each Gospel author represents their narrative. Perhaps the greatest evidence of this is the sheer number of works dedicated solely to one Gospel (usually Mark, as is the case with Kermode, Rhoads, Peterson, and Elliot) with little discussion of any of the other three storyworlds.

Understanding the context and purpose of each of these writer's utterances, which, generally speaking, diverge within the first chapter of each book, is an essential aspect of literary meaning. Doležel goes to great lengths in *Heterocosmica* to explain through reference to "intensional functions" how it is a reader moves "from the fictional text's texture to the fictional world" (139).⁵³ While it is beyond the scope of this project to consider exactly how this process functions in relation to the construction and reconstruction of the storyworlds of the Gospels, the fact remains that the intensional and extensional structure of textual worlds cannot be wholly separated. The intensional shape of each of these worlds, in other words, differs, and to try to squash all four stories into one storyworld is to forget that meaning is not simply found in understanding *what* events and entities are narrated, but also in *how* they are narrated (Fort 98; see footnote fifty-two).⁵⁴ This is what Herman is referring to when he notes storyworlds are "more than reconstructed timelines and inventories of existents" (570). Storyworlds, for Herman,

⁵³ The two functions Doležel considers in depth are the authentication function (which governs "existence") and the saturation function (which governs the worlds density).

⁵⁴ One example demonstrating the importance of this interpretive maxim is worth considering. In 1993, the Jesus Seminar published four translations of the Gospel narratives which colour coded the text in order to unveil the historicity of certain passages (see *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*). This project eventually culminated in *The Gospel of Jesus: According to the Jesus Seminar* (1999), a book which has extracted the allegedly historically reliable passages from the five Gospel narratives (they include the Gospel of Thomas in their canon) in order to present one historically accurate Gospel. Textual meaning, for these critics, was found only in the extensional structure of the narrative. The Jesus Seminar, however, have to be given some credit for following the historical-critical method to its logical end. Once we dispense with a world-frame or textual semantics that suggests meaning is not simply a product of reference, the Gospels can be reduced to informative content about the past. "Interpretation," if the term still qualifies, then only requires that every proposition be individually judged on its historicity against external evidence. No consideration is given to the function of the propositional content within the narrative, nor the context in which the propositions are asserted. The narrativity, in other words, is taken away from the narrative. What the Jesus Seminar provide us with, then, is a poor paraphrase of the extensional structure of these four narratives.

are “mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and imaginative response” (Herman 570).

However, even if the extensional structure of storyworlds are not independent of the intensional structure, they remain extensional entities. And while the extensional structure of these worlds differ (as they can only be accessed through the intensional shape each writer gives to their narrative), the set of individuals and properties to which the narratives refer, as well as their spatio-temporal location, are almost identical. This is because, of course, all four narratives seek to represent one state of affairs they understood to be actualised in history. The result is that we can gain a reasonable understanding of the extensional structure of all four Gospel narratives having read only one of them, just as we can gain access to the extensional structure of a fictional world through a plot summary of a novel that we have never opened (Fort 61). While theoretically it is necessary to understand the four storyworlds as existing independently, it is naïve to think that the reader will ever abide by this rule. Therein lies the importance of considering all four worlds together, even for narrative critics who typically place the emphasis on texture over issues of reference. Pavel finds support for this from a cognitive perspective: “Our memory seems mostly to register facts and characters, and even when we do remember isolated lines, we usually select gnomic and aphoristic passages, as if an irrepressible referential instinct presses us to go beyond the textual medium” (1986: 73–74). This “natural propensity to register essential elements and to disregard circumstantial information” (as Pavel labels it elsewhere (1984: 74)), in other words, means that, while intensional meaning is crucial in the process of reconstruction, the mental models that readers hold onto are primarily extensional in nature. The implication of this fact, of course, is that when readers approach the same general extensional structure between storyworlds—e.g. the four storyworlds of the Gospels—we can assume there will be little separation in the world’s reconstruction. The extension of the referent,

in other words, will not typically be differentiated, or at least there will be considerable crossover in how it is this entity is conceptualised. While it remains necessary for Gospel critics to consider the Gospel narratives as projecting four independent storyworlds, it also needs to be recognised that such independence will necessarily be transgressed in the Gospels' reception.

I do not have the time here to individually consider the extensional structures of each narrative and, in turn, the level of accessibility between these worlds (see Ryan's "accessibility relations" in Chapter Two). Rather, my goal has been simply to define and defend my use of the term storyworld in relation to the Gospel narratives, which necessitated a discussion of their semantic relationships to each other. However, it is worth briefly pausing to consider one example of how reference may function between worlds. The most obvious of which is the protagonist of all four narratives: Jesus. From what we have considered above, it is possible to assert that the character of Jesus has the same extension across all four narratives: the alleged historical Jesus which the narratives seek to represent. However, as already mentioned, the intensional meaning of expressions that refer to Jesus differ not only between storyworlds, but within them also. When Jesus is referred to as the "Son of Man," the humanness of Jesus is being emphasised, and the converse is true when he is referred to by the expression "Son of God." However, while the "intensional shape" may differ between narratives, this in no way prevents the reader from assuming that Jesus has the same extension across all four storyworlds. Even narrative critics who only deal with one book and accordingly talk of the "Markan" or "Johannine" Jesus, and so on, are still typically referring to different elements of the same character.

In terms of possible worlds theory, there are two ways of conceiving of this phenomenon. The four individual textual representations of Jesus can either exist as "counterparts" or as possessing "transworld identity" (Bell 2016: 18). If we subscribe to Lewis' "concretist" conception

of possible worlds, the individuals that populate these worlds are concrete, which means that no two same individuals can exist simultaneously in two different worlds. From this perspective, the four Jesus' are counterparts, existing independently of one another. If we consider possible worlds as mental constructions, however, then possible worlds are understood as representing the way things might have been. Consequently, four possible representations of one individual can exist simultaneously. From this perspective, the four Jesus' would possess what "abstractionists" (those who consider possible worlds as abstractions/mental constructs) label "transworld identity" (Bell 16). Up to this point, there have been no theoretical issues in following Ryan's model of "mixing" the concretist (Lewis's model) and abstractionist schools of thought (Rescher's mentalism); a choice, however, now presents itself. In non-fictional narratives, particularly in narratives that seek to represent the same event, transworld identity appears more theoretically tenable; there is an actualised state of affairs that is represented through a possible world. Importantly, this is also more fitting with how readers intuitively read texts. This does not change the fact that each storyworld has its own reference world that readers subscribe to when they imaginatively recenter (which is identical to the TAW); however, it does allow for the fact that the reader's reconstruction of this world is not done in isolation from the other four narratives. The Gospels present four possible representations of the same Jesus and there is no reason why a reader will not form mental models of a Jesus drawn from all four accounts—no matter which narrative they are reading at the time.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ On this one occasion we may draw a distinction between the everyday reader and the critic; those who have studied the four portraits of Jesus may have four mental representations of Jesus that they keep separate. However, how much they in fact keep these separate is certainly up for debate, as those who have studied how intertextuality functions have demonstrated. However, even if critics manage to keep these portraits separate they undoubtedly apply the same extension to the four textual representations of Jesus—otherwise they could be talking about four unrelated characters named Jesus (and I am yet to read of anyone who does this).

There is much more that could be said about storyworlds, particularly in regard to the specific ways in which readers construct mental models from a cognitive perspective (see Herman 2002; 2009b: 118-136), but what I hope to have demonstrated above is how a possible worlds inspired understanding of storyworlds enables a sophisticated theoretical solution to a number of the referential concerns Gospel critics face. Moreover, I have also demonstrated how it is readers find literary meaning within these worlds, which further enabled a clear definition of the relationship between the four storyworlds. They exist, as demonstrated, independently of each other as four possible representations of an actualised state of affairs, yet, through their extensional structures, will inevitably demonstrate considerable overlap in their reconstruction. These findings suggest that it is beneficial, even for narrative critics, to consider the entities within the storyworlds in parallel with each other. Assuming that all narrative meaning is contained within each individual discourse is unnecessarily reductive and not fitting with how readers intuitively read texts.

Another area on which I have not elaborated is the relationship between story and discourse. Strictly speaking, the concepts of extensional and intensional structure are independent of these two concepts; the former relates to textual semantics and semiotics (how it is readers find meaning in the text), the latter is the concern of narrative criticism proper that investigates how writers organise and communicate a story through an always limited discourse (see Herman 2009b: 118). In this regard, the introduction of the concept of storyworld assumes that discourse is a “form of comprehension” (Louis O. Mink qtd. by Ryan 1991: 264). Narrative is, as John K. Adams asserts, “an act of explanation: the narrator picks out and links together past (or imaginary) events in order to explain or account for what happened” (1989: 149). Ryan’s defines narrative in a similar way through the language of a possible worlds model: “Being narrative means: bringing a universe to life, and conveying to the reader the sense that at the centre of this

universe resides an actual world where individuals exist and where events take place...” (1991: 259). Storyworlds provide the conceptual space by which we can move beyond that which is only represented in the discourse to mentally reconstruct the story that is taking place in and behind the specific elements of the story the narrator has focalised. As Herman posits, storyworlds “refer to the world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative” (106); they not only are “mental models of the situations and events being recounted—of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner” but are also “blueprints”—narrative artefacts through which readers reconstruct textual worlds” (Herman 107).

3.2. Fictional, Mythical, and Historical Worlds

Now that I have outlined the need for the concept of “storyworlds” in Gospel criticism, it is necessary to more precisely define what kind of worlds the Gospels project. As I will demonstrate, certain elements of the possible worlds model, particularly in relation to truth-valuations, vary depending on world-type. Moreover, successful narrative communication requires the reader understands the function of the storyworld they are receiving. Before I engage with these issues, however, it is beneficial to revisit and further argue for the importance of a possible worlds definition of fiction. In this regard, Ryan suggests two possible answers to the question of what constitutes fictionality: “to be fictional is a mode of being, an ontological status specific to certain entities; or a mode of speaking, an intent constitutive of a type of communicative act. A definition of fiction based on the first possibility generates what I shall call a referential theory, while a

definition based on the second leads to an intensional theory,⁵⁶ involving a phenomenological and illocutionary approach” (1991: 13). It is the latter that she firmly argues is necessary when considering the way in which fictionality is ascribed to texts, the reasons for which I have generally outlined in Chapter Two. What needs further emphasis here is the way in which fictionality is understood as a pragmatic concept.

Discourse never exists in a vacuum; there is also a sender who has some degree of intention, and, if the communicative act is to be completed, a receiver, one who attempts to find meaning in the discourse. The fictionality of discourse is dependent on both the sender’s and receiver’s attitude towards it: if the sender’s intent is to represent reality and this is recognised by the receiver, this discourse is non-fictional, even if the sender unconsciously (or consciously if they lied) made an error. This is a point Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh have made so convincingly clear in their recently published “Ten Theses about Fictionality.” They explain:

The crucial point is that fictionality attaches to the communicative act, not the object of representation: in uses of fictionality outside of generic fictions, a sender does not transform nonfictional subject matter into something fictional but rather adopts a distinct communicative stance, inviting the audience to recognize that she has temporarily stopped conforming to the constraints of referentiality and actuality in order to accomplish some rhetorical end. (65)

⁵⁶ The meaning of this phrase should now be clear: an intensional theory of fictionality is based on intensional meaning, which is in contrast to referential theories which only consider whether textual entities have real-world extensions.

Fiction, to adopt Walton's terminology, is a "game" we are invited to play (1993). It is a pragmatic concept; one readers, viewers, and listeners apply before opening/watching the text or hearing the discourse. Fiction can be understood, then, as an acknowledgement of a sender's intent, an acceptance of an invitation to adopt a different attitude to a given discourse than we do for non-fictional discourse. To acknowledge any discourse as fiction is to acknowledge a "distinct communicative stance" on the part of the sender. And as is the case with all communication, the most beneficial meaning is found when there is a mutual understanding, or cooperation, between sender and receiver. While receivers can do as they wish with discourse, "there is a marked difference in the rhetorical exchange between sender and receiver in cases in which the intention and the ascription are well matched and cases in which they are not" (66). For example, if, after jubilantly exclaiming that Donald Trump is the Messiah, my sarcasm was not acknowledged by those listening, I would in no way consider this successful communication. Nielsen et al.'s seventh thesis is that fictive communicative intent entails a different attitude toward the communicated information than that of nonfictive discourse (67), and if this attitude is not also ascribed by the receiver, then, at least in my particular case, there is a risk of disastrous miscommunication.

While Nielsen et al.'s theses are applicable to all fictional discourse, very similar conclusions can be drawn in regard to strictly narrative communication. As explained in Chapter Two, both Lewis and Ryan, drawing on possible worlds semantics, define fiction as a story/narrative told of a world other than their actual one. As per Nielsen et al.'s seventh thesis, the writer of a fiction, while perhaps offering truth of a different kind (moral, ethical, artistic), has a different attitude towards the state of affairs they create than that of someone who tells a story true of the actual world. If the receiver is not aware of the attitude of the author's communicative intent, then there is the high possibility of granting truth-valuations that are completely unwarranted. As Nielsen et al. quite simply declare, "There is a large difference between reading

with the assumption that a story is fictive and reading with the assumption that the story is not fictive” (65). For a narrative to be communicated effectively, fictional worlds and non-fictional worlds have to be distinguished. Accordingly, one of the necessary goals of the reader is to understand the intention behind the discourse in order to minimise miscommunication.⁵⁷ The exact ways in which the reading process changes based on the fictionality of the text will be discussed in the following section, but it is evident that evaluating whether the Gospels should be received as fictional, historical, or mythical worlds is a necessary enterprise, and one to which few narrative theorists have paid the necessary attention to (e.g. Rhoads’ uncritical use of the term “fiction”).

Having demonstrated how important understanding the type of discourse is to the reception process, as well as outlining the advantages of a possible worlds inspired, pragmatic definition of fictionality, it is now time to evaluate what type of world/s the Gospels project. In this regard, Doležel’s most recent work, *The Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage*, offers a framework through which the issue of “world-type” can be analysed. As per the title, Doležel employs possible worlds semantics to consider the relationship between fictional and historical worlds. While his primary goal is to refute “the postmodern challenge to the integrity of history” in which the traditional boundary between fictional and historical narrative is erased (15),⁵⁸ Doležel also provides clarity about what constitutes fictional, mythical, and historical

⁵⁷ This, of course, is in direct opposition to poststructuralist theory (most notably Roland Barthes “The Death of the Author”). While a full explanation of why I am disregarding poststructural insights on this matter is beyond the scope of this work, my reasons centre on my belief that narratives communicate messages which readers should endeavour to understand. This necessitates the receiver taking author intention into consideration.

⁵⁸ This “postmodern challenge,” a challenge laid down by the likes of Roland Barthes and Hayden White, centres on the idea that all narrative is fictional; as Doležel summarises White’s equation: “emplotment is a literary operation; literature is fiction; therefore history is equivalent to fiction making” (21).

worlds. In achieving my task of showing how possible worlds theory can positively contribute to Gospel criticism—particularly in regards to genre, reference, ontology, and reception, it is beneficial to consider Doležel’s insights here in greater detail.

One of Doležel’s earliest assumptions is especially relevant to this present study: both fictional and historical texts project possible worlds that can be distinguished and analysed through the lens of possible worlds semantics. This is a claim he spends little time defending: “the only worlds,” he explains, “that human language is capable of creating or producing are possible worlds” (30). Without a divine language that perfectly “hooks onto reality” (30), we must be content with states of affairs that exist in degrees of possibility. This is not the denial of an actual past or an affirmation of the extreme constructivist position of postmodern historiography, but rather, as Braudel writes, constitutes the simple claim that history can be understood as “the total of all possible histories” (qtd. in Doležel 33). Representations of the past can be therefore understood as “partial models of the past in the form of possible worlds” (34).⁵⁹ The four storyworlds of the Gospels are exactly this: partial models of the past that take the form of possible worlds. The question that we can rightly ask then is: considering both fictional and historical worlds take the form of possible worlds, how can we differentiate between them?

Doležel asserts that on the level of the discourse there is no fundamental difference between fiction and history (viii); both exist as texts which inevitably suffer “from the incurable

⁵⁹ It is worth noting that this conception of history has also found acceptance outside of purely literary responses to ancient narratives. For example, Ian Ruffell and Lisa Irene Hau, in their introduction to *Truth and History in the Ancient Past*, write: “Another way in which truth has been tackled is with the notion of possible worlds that have emerged from modal logic. These have been used to tackle a variety of discourses (or propositions) that are relevant to the problem of historical truth, including counterfactuals and fiction. Truth no longer becomes a monolithic concept; rather we can talk of truth as referring to sets of possible worlds —worlds that are historically true, fictionally true, and so on. This raises the prospect of the distinction between historical and other types of worlds as one of degree of possibility rather than a binary truth or falsehood” (16).

malaise of signs, from their inability to pass from meaning to the world” (28). As already noted above by Ryan and Nielsen et al., there is nothing inherent within a text that marks it as fictional or historical discourse; there is no special textual dispensation by which historical discourse latches on to reality. While Nielsen et al.’s response is to consider fiction through the lens of rhetoric as a pragmatic concept, Doležel’s (which is very similar to Ryan’s) is to move from the level of discourse to the level of worlds (28). In this way, Doležel is able to distinguish between *poiesis*—the process by which fictional worlds are brought into being, and *noiesis*—the process by which historical worlds do the same. *Poiesis* is an act of “creation”: “through writing a text the author creates a fictional world that was not available prior to this act” (41). *Noiesis*, on the other hand, is an act of knowledge acquisition: historical texts “construct historical worlds as models of the actual world” (42). One of the key differences between these two types of worlds is their truth-conditions (41). Fictional worlds are exempt from truth-valuation: we do not ask whether Rowling lied about Ron having red hair or whether it is true that Harry Potter survived his altercation with Voldemort—there was no Ron or Harry or Voldemort prior to Rowling’s act of *poiesis*.⁶⁰ Historical worlds, however, are constrained by truth-valuation. The world they seek to represent exists independently of its representation (Doležel 41-42). The second key difference between these two types of world formation is the special illocutionary character of worlds formed through *poiesis* (42). Fictional texts, as Doležel explains, are performative: “they call possible worlds into fictional existence” (42). As has been previously discussed, fictional worlds have their own “actual world”; it is a performative act which brings this world into being. Historical texts, on the other hand, are constative rather than performative. As acts of *noiesis*, they describe “a world that pre-existed the act of representation” (42). At first, this appears no

⁶⁰ It is necessarily true, however, that Ron has red hair *within* the storyworld of *Harry Potter*.

different, at least at a pragmatic level, from Nielsen et al.'s view: the intention behind the sending/creating of the discourse/world remains the central indicator of fictionality. This in itself is true. However, Doležel explains that the key difference, beyond the referential and linguistic advantages, is the “modelling” aspect (43). Through understanding historical and fictional texts as possible worlds, mental models of certain states of affairs are projected, the cognitive advantages of which Eco explains: “We explore the plurality of possibilities to find out a suitable model for realia” (qtd. in Doležel 43). Diverse historical worlds can model the same event or period, and historians construct these worlds “with the hope that their possible worlds ‘might be true’” (43).

Having outlined the differences between worlds at the level of discourse, Doležel also demonstrates the differences between fictional and historical worlds in their function and global structure. The functional differences have, to some extent, been outlined above, but Doležel's succinct definition of function is worth reiterating: “fictional worlds are imaginary alternatives of the actual world; historical worlds are cognitive models of the actual past” (33). Structurally, this allows fiction makers to call into existence any conceivable world (35). Physically impossible worlds prove no restraint to the fiction maker, nor even, as certain postmodern authors have demonstrated, logically “impossible” worlds. Historical worlds, however, are bound to be “physically possible”—even if this is, to some extent, a relative concept—and logically possible. Impossible worlds will never suffice for historical worlds as they seek to represent the actual, and anything that has been actualised in the actual world of reality is considered possible. Closely related to this is Doležel's third point of difference: agential constellations. Simply put, as Doležel explains, “the cast of agents in the historical world is determined by the set of agents involved in the reconstructed past event(s)” (36). Historical worlds are always inhabited by possible counterparts of real-world people; fiction, when writers choose to include portrayals of real world

persons in their cast of agents, may also populate their world with possible counterparts (36). However, in terms of trans-world identity, there are some key differences: fictional counterparts can be changed in whatever way the fiction maker desires (genre dependent, of course); in historical worlds verisimilitude is a necessary goal. The final difference that Doležel considers is the ways in which incompleteness is treated. Incompleteness, of course, is a necessary part of every storyworld: every detail of a world can never be recorded. In some sense, as Doležel argues, gaps in fictional worlds can never be filled: there is no reality behind the text. While this is undoubtedly true at the level of discourse, I argue, in contrast to Doležel, that through adhering to the principle of minimum departure, readers are able to project “complete” worlds. Gaps are filled by readers through their experience of storyworlds: while certain elements are focalised, readers assume a continuing reality behind that in the foreground. The key difference between historical and fictional worlds, then, is an epistemic one (which is something Doležel notes): it is possible to “fill” the gaps of historical worlds through actual world knowledge, which is obviously not the case with fictional worlds. However, historical worlds are still bound by the intensional shape that the sender gives the narrative through the precise language choices. While some historical worlds have a greater or lesser degree of input from the narrator, the Gospels are certainly narratives in which there is a high degree of narrator involvement, as evidenced in the Markan narrative when Jesus walks on water (see footnote 78). In this regard, the “gaps” in the Gospels function very similarly to gaps in traditional fictional worlds.

Considering all of the above, it has become increasingly clear that the Gospels project historical worlds. That is to say, the storyworlds of the Gospels should be understood as having the function and global structure of historical worlds. Or again, more simply, the storyworlds of the Gospels are historical worlds. These narratives were undoubtedly intended to be a representation of the actual world: that is a universally accepted fact about the Gospel narratives

and one I do not feel required to defend. Only in the last fifty years—out of two thousand years of “Gospel criticism”—have they been referred to as fiction, and this only when authorial intent was removed from the paradigm. The Gospels are acts of *noiesis*: they are possible models of the actual world and the actors that populate these worlds are possible counterparts of real-world individuals. At the level of discourse—I have in mind the ten theses of fictionality asserted by Nielsen et al.—the Gospels represent non-fictional texts; at the level of worlds—I have in mind the work of Doležel, Ryan, and Lewis—the Gospels project historical worlds. This does not mean that these worlds now obtain a special property by which they can latch onto reality (as Norman’s “referential fallacy” reminds us), neither is the status as non-fictional/historical an essential property of the narrative itself; rather, it is an indication of both how it is the worlds were constructed, and how it is the receiver should understand their purpose, global structure, and truth-valuations.

Yet, having established that the Gospels are historical worlds, there remains one “elephant in the room” that needs addressing. What do we do with miracles? Claims of divinity? And, most pivotal to all four narrative arcs, the resurrection of Jesus? The supernatural claims of the Gospels are seemingly at odds with the title “historical worlds.” Doležel, as noted in the previous section, asserts that “historical worlds are worlds of natural agents” (35) and even claims more forthrightly that “In historical worlds events cannot be assigned to divine agency (even if the historian is a believer)” (35). For Doležel, the boundary between history and mythology lies exactly here. In mythological worlds, supernatural beings are integral to the makeup of the world and contribute to the story’s action (35); in historical worlds, every event must be physically possible in the natural world. Where this gets complex, however, is that mythological worlds, by Doležel’s definition, are formed through *noiesis*—creators of mythological worlds are, at the time of writing, making an attempt to model the actual world. Of course, this has the potential to

undermine many of Doležel's points made above about the differences between historical and fictional worlds, and so Doležel makes the concession that his strict guidelines for historical worlds is only "correct with regard to relatively recent occidental history (perhaps since Voltaire)" (135).⁶¹ He explains: "Representations of the past that included supernatural worlds were common in some past periods of our culture and still are in some other cultures, but today they appear to us as mythological, not historical, worlds" (135). Mythological, pragmatically, is equal to fictional; the change of function and truth-conditions assure of us this.

There are a number of areas in which Doležel's position on this matter seems flawed. The relativity of what is considered physically possible has already been noted and need not be mentioned again except to reiterate that there is still far from uniformity in regard to what is physically possible (even within the modern West), and, accordingly, Doležel's strict guidelines about "divine agency" are highly questionable. What is more telling is the contradiction in Doležel's position that seemingly slips by unnoticed. Initially, Doležel claims that there is nothing inherent within a discourse that makes a world fictional, and that it is only when we move to the level of worlds, which are governed by the acts of *noiesis* and *poiesis*, that conclusive differences can be located. Yet, at the same time, he is willing to treat texts formed through *noiesis* as fictional based on what is identified within the discourse. One possible response to this contradiction is that when Doležel posits that there is no difference at the level of discourse between these types of worlds, he is referring purely to the form and type of language used, not to the entities the language seeks to represent. Even if I were to concede this ground, the issue remains that Doležel has implicitly accepted a referential theory of fiction. Fictionality, in this regard, is no longer

⁶¹ His reasoning is that "In contemporary occidental culture secularity is a defining feature of historical representation" (135).

found within the parameters of a communicative act but is dependent on whether the entities in a possible world can successfully refer to entities in the actual world of reality. If this is accepted, then what then do we do with worlds that have a mixture of fictive and non-fictive entities? This is exactly the “mixed bag” approach that Doležel himself identifies and discredits, and one that I critiqued in Chapter Two.

The chance of miscommunication between sender and receiver also increases substantially in Doležel’s approach. In fact, it would encourage, if we were to apply his approach to the Gospel narratives, a direct transgression from the receiver. While transgressing the sender’s intent is totally legitimate when done self-consciously for a specific purpose, as will be discussed shortly, to make this a rule, as Doležel has done, appears to warrant/encourage the misidentification of discourse. This is especially relevant to the Gospel narratives which were first oral narratives spoken to a specific audience with a specific intention (see Shiner 2003), and many of whose modern “listeners” still regard as representations of the actual world. There is an implied trust between sender and receiver, speaker and audience, that should not be transgressed lightly, even if we believe the message of the sender to contain errors or falsities.⁶² Accordingly, I

⁶² Much more could be said on the requirement for readers to align themselves with the sender’s intention, and indeed, it is a far more nuanced issue than I perhaps have made it out to be due to the limited space. There inevitably remain fictional signposts which typically align with the sender’s intent and therefore remain possible indicators of fictionality. The same can be said of certain features within non-fictional texts. For example, the beginning of the Gospel of Luke reads: “Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (1:1-4). This dedication acts as a guide for the reader that what follows is an historical account of Jesus’ life. However, just as fictional signposts can deceive (there is no reason why a non-fictional narrative cannot begin with “once upon a time”) so this dedication could be part of a fictional narrative, employed by the author as a rhetorical technique. Accordingly, it is still necessary for intention to govern fictionality.

agree with Nielsen et al. when they conclude that “Myths may or may not describe actual events, but from our perspective what matters is whether they are intended to describe actual events. If they are so intended, then they are nonfictional, and if they are not so intended, they are fictional...” (65). It is possible now to reassert with confidence that the Gospels have the function and global structure of historical worlds, and their truth-values should be considered in the manner appropriate to this type of world.

3.3. Reconstructing the Gospel Narratives: Towards a Phenomenology of Reading

Earlier I affirmed Nielsen et al.’s assertion that “There is a large difference between reading with the assumption that a story is fictive and reading with the assumption that the story is not fictive.” It is now necessary to consider how exactly these two different assumptions affect the reading of the Gospel narratives. In doing so, I will suggest a two-phase method of reading that is consistent with the interpretation of truth and reference appropriate for historical worlds, as well as being consistent with the ways in which readers find meaning in and reconstruct storyworlds. To begin this section it is worth quoting Alan Palmer who broadly explains the reading process from a possible worlds perspective:

Within possible worlds theory, reading—and therefore access to the storyworld—has three elements: the source domain, the real world in which the text is being processed by the reader; the target domain, the storyworld that constitutes the output of the reader’s processing; and the system of textual features that triggers various kinds of reader-held real-world knowledge in a way that projects the reader from source domain to target domain.” (34)

Assessing how these three elements interact, particularly in relation to certain kinds of worlds, is foundational to any phenomenology of reading. Having now identified the Gospels as historical worlds, I will demonstrate in this section how all three of these elements can be taken into consideration in the two-phase model of reading I propose.

As the first phase of this reading model requires that readers recenter, it is necessary to first reiterate the importance and viability of the process of imaginative recentering to both fictional and non-fictional texts. In this regard, it is worth stating again that a central element of possible worlds literary theory is that storyworlds are extensional entities (Fort 63; Doležel 1998: 139). Storyworlds exist behind and beyond that which the author strictly creates in the text. As Doležel notes, there is a level of freedom as we translate the original texture into extensional representations.⁶³ Ryan argues most strongly for the process by which readers go beyond the strict intensional structure of a text: “Both fictional and nonfictional mimetic texts invite the reader to imagine a world and to imagine it as a physical, autonomous reality furnished with palpable objects and populated by flesh and blood individuals. (How could a world be imagined otherwise?)” (2010: 64). Sven Birkerts confirms something similar from outside the confines of a possible worlds model: “When we are reading a novel we don’t, obviously, recall the preceding sentences and paragraphs... For reading is a conversion, a turning of codes into contents. What we hold onto are impressions and images, the overall structures of sense, that we have derived from the words” (97). Possible worlds theory asserts that this conversion of codes into contents

⁶³ The exact level of freedom is outlined in depth by Doležel in *Heterocosmica* (1998) through the consideration of intensional functions. The level of complexity involved in Doležel’s analysis is too high for a simple explanation here; but what is important to note is, in Ryan’s words, “The reader passes from the intensional to the extensional narrative world by assuming the existence of an “intensional function” that links referring expressions to fictional existents” (*Living Narratology*); Ryan is explaining Doležel’s position in this instance rather than her own).

occurs from the “inside,” so to speak. It is when the reader is immersed, when they have imaginatively recentered themselves in a new “actual world,” that they can construct and experience a world beyond that which is explicitly represented through language. The processes of world construction and imaginative recentering, in other words, are essential parts of reading.

While much of the above is widely accepted in relation to fictional worlds—which quite obviously encourage/require a level of imagination from the reader—the point I wish to (repeatedly) emphasise is that these processes cut across the fiction/non-fiction divide. Historical worlds are not just a compendium of facts that have some special semantic property by which they give meaning to the reader; they too, are open to imaginative recentering and require that we conceptualise the semantic domain in a very similar way—cognitively speaking—as we do with fictional worlds. As Brian Boyd has very recently suggested in reference to the work of philosopher Derek Matravers, we need imagination to understand factual narrative as much as fiction (2017: page no. n/a).⁶⁴ This movement from intension to extension is a necessary part of the way in which readers find meaning in the text, and it is one that requires the reader to imaginatively project/mentally model a storyworld. As an important part of both fictional and historical literary criticism, this is a necessary consideration in working towards a phenomenology of reading. As Ryan resolutely concludes: “Whether textual worlds function as imaginary counterparts or as models of the real world, the reader mentally constructs them as environments

⁶⁴In reference to the work of linguist Daniel Dor, Boyd further suggests that we even require imagination to understand language (2017: page no. n/a.). This is a similar point that William Frawley makes about all human communication: “When one person talks to another, words do not come out of the speaker’s mouth as packages full of direct report on facts, which the hearer then opens up to discover the fully packaged meaning inside,” rather, the hearer “*constructs a model* of what the speaker is thought to have said. People understand each other and communicate not by direct conveyance at all, but by broadcasting signals, which themselves evoke mental models” (23). To think that we can find meaning in historical narratives without some level of imagination and evocation of mental models appears somewhat naïve.

that stretch in space, exist in time, and serve as habitats for a population of animate agents. These three dimensions correspond to what have long been recognized as the three basic components of narrative grammar: setting, plot, and characters” (2012: 78). The exact way in which we understand this process of imaginative recentering and world reconstruction, however, differs between fiction and non-fiction, and this relates to the location of the reference world.

3.3.2. The Two-Phase Model for Reading

The varying movement of the reference world between fictional worlds and historical worlds is reflected in the different reading processes relevant to each type of world. In fiction, as I showed in Chapter Two, readers recenter to the actual world of the text through the process of immersion. During this period, the reference world is located within the wider storyworld and is identical to the textual actual world. Both are formed of the narrative facts which the narrator has affirmed as true of the storyworld. In this way, it is possible to grant statements about fiction with truth-valuations, e.g. it is true that Ron has red hair and, conversely, it is false that Ron has brown hair. After the process of de-immersion in which the reader relocates back to the actual world of reality, the reader of fiction brings back previously unknown information, e.g. that Ron, in the world of *Harry Potter*, has red hair. However, as Doležel has made very clear, these narrative facts are exempt from truth-valuations in the actual world. This does not exempt the return of moral, aesthetic, or some form of artistic truth, but these are different from the logical or factual truth Doležel is referring to.

In non-fiction, however, there is a two-step process by which the reader constructs and evaluates the text. Ryan explains: “in nonfiction we can distinguish two moments: (1) one in which the reader constructs the text (i.e. becomes engaged imaginatively in the representation),

and (2) one in which the reader evaluates the text (i.e. distances himself from the image, takes it apart, and assesses the accuracy of its individual statements with respect to the reference world). In the first phase, the reader contemplates the textual world from the inside in, and in the second, from the outside in” (2015: 74). The first step is the reading of the text in which the process of imaginative recentering takes place. The reader temporarily inhabits the modal system of the narrative and constructs a mental model of the storyworld. As per above, this is a necessary element of meaning making for the reader in which the semantic domain moves from a “nonenumerable, fuzzy-bordered, occasionally chaotic set of meanings” (Ryan 1991: 62), to being conceptualised extensionally as a storyworld. For the duration of this process of recentering, as is the case in fictional worlds, the reference world and the actual world of the text are identical, and subsequently, all statements asserted as true by the narrator are initially accepted as true by the reader. Interestingly, as Ryan notes, “in nonfiction, the narrative actual world is what the speaker tells us to be the case, regardless of whether the narrator is right or wrong; but in fiction, the actual facts potentially conflict with the narrator’s declarations” (Ryan 1991: 113). In other words, what the narrator tells as true in the discourse is true in the TAW. Lies or tampering with facts is of course a possibility, but this is not the same unreliability as is referred to in fictional worlds in which a personal narrator may misrepresent the facts of the TAW (113); rather, the lies become part of the historical world projected by that particular text (as do errors). As the narrator in historical worlds is always assumed to represent the views of the actual author (and is also typically considered a counterpart of the author), there is no way around this fact. Accordingly, in the first stage of the reading process, the entire world is considered entirely “historical” without exception.

This stage of reading is both particularly relevant to the Gospels and the part most overlooked in Gospel criticism.⁶⁵ What makes this stage so urgently required in Gospel criticism is the importance of supernatural events to all four storyworlds. It is tempting to immediately regard miraculous events and supernatural claims as fictive, as has been done by a number of historical critics (most notably the Jesus Seminar). However, this would not only fragment the storyworld (as per Doležel's critique of the "mixed bag" approach) but also prevent the appropriate emphasis being put on the rhetorical/narrativizing strategies of the author. In historical worlds, as noted, the facts of the actual textual world are established by the narrator, and once we question this, the whole foundation of the textual actual world—indeed, the entire storyworld—is at risk. For example, if in our first reading we reject the assertions of the narrators that Jesus is the Messiah—as has already been discussed in relations to Mark's Gospel but is also asserted as being necessarily true of Jesus in all four storyworlds (Mat. 1:1; Luke 1:32; John 1:14)—the way in which we model the rest of the narratives will change substantially. Suddenly these narratives are not about a sacrificial messiah who unjustly suffers at the hands of an empire and his fellow Jews only to triumphantly resurrect and ascend to heaven, but about a character who now could be a whole range of things, including a liar, a fool, or someone whom the narrator misrepresents. In these cases, the narrative has fundamentally changed, and a new state of affairs has been projected. Colonising the narrative based on our experience of the actual world of reality—tantamount to an audience member telling a speaker "I know better" in the middle of a story—is the wrong starting point in our reconstruction and modelling of the storyworld. Only after we have experienced the rhetoric of the narrator and reconstructed the

⁶⁵ This is an affirmation of Leif Hongisto's claim that "It is the mental state of that experiential encounter with a textual or oral artefact, preceding analysis, that is most overlooked in (biblical) scholarship, and which I find worth examining" (23).

storyworld accordingly, can we then start to make judgements about whether there are elements within this historical world that are more or less possible than others in relation to the actual world of reality.

Two advantages of incorporating imaginative recentering to the world of the Gospels in the reception process are now clear. Firstly, recentering encourages a mode of reading which allows the reader to satisfy, in Pavel's words, the "irrepressible referential instinct presses us to go beyond the textual medium" (1986: 73–74). As the reader temporarily inhabits the storyworld, making the TAW their own AW for the duration of reading, the "codes," in Birkerts' terms, can be turned into "contents" (Birkerts 97). Secondly, the process of imaginatively recentering ensures the narrative remains a coherent storyworld (rather than a series of individual propositions that are considered in isolation), which is essential if we want to take the narrativity of the text into consideration. Gospel critics have typically chosen one side of these two elements to focus on. Pragmatic theories, as exemplified in Robert Fowler's reader-response criticism, eschew reference to focus on the rhetorical aspect of the text. Formalist and new critical approaches, conversely, as can be observed in the work of Rhoads, do something similar in choosing to view the text as fiction. The inevitable confusion comes when critics who have identified the text as fiction then attempt to speak about the text-external referential function. The incoherence of this method has, of course, been demonstrated in both my own and Elliot's analysis of Rhoads' work (Elliot 2011). On the other hand, more traditional historically-minded approaches have put an overwhelming emphasis on the referential aspect of the Gospel narratives through their modelling of the text, to the extent that the rhetorical aspects of the texts are completely overlooked. By moving from the level of discourse to worlds, particularly when this is understood through the lens of possible worlds theory, we have a model which appears to be the least deductive.

Before moving to consider phase two of the reading process in which I will further demonstrate the advantages of modelling the Gospels through the lens of possible worlds theory, it is worth pausing to consider how it is the principle of minimum departure—a principle Ryan describes as being of “primary importance for the phenomenology of reading” (51)—functions in application to historical worlds. This principle, as outlined in Chapter Two, states that we construe the central world of a textual universe (TAW) as conforming as far as possible to our representation of our native world (Ryan 1991: 51). This means, as Ryan explains, “we will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text” (51). By virtue of this principle, we (a) can form reasonably comprehensive constructions of storyworlds and (b) can legitimise statements about states of affairs not explicitly referred to in the text. This principle is predicated on the fact that the construction of storyworlds must necessarily—and always does—go beyond what is simply provided by textual propositions. As Brian Boyd confidently asserts: “We know... that our minds readily confabulate—fill in gaps in our understanding of events with the first plausible gap-fillers that come to mind, rather than leave holes in the fabric of a story” (pp. n/a). This process refers to both gaps in the plot of the story, as well as the visual and psychological characteristics of the entities within it.

In the context of the reception of the Gospels, it is vital that we recognise every reader will bring their own encyclopaedic knowledge, as well as their own experience of the actual word, to the text. As we move beyond what is explicitly recorded by the text, the reconstruction of storyworlds never occurs *ex nihilo*. Every individual has their own culturally-dependent, subjective experience of reality through the lens by which they will reconstruct the Gospels.⁶⁶ The principle

⁶⁶ Important to recognise, as has been noted in Chapter Two, is that this process does not exclude intertextuality.

of minimum departure, in this regard, is not only an interpretive principle, but one that characterises the everyday reader's experience of storyworlds. This is most obviously seen in visual representations of the Gospel narratives where considerable inferences have to be made; namely, the appearance of Jesus. A number of American children's Bibles have become well-known for their depictions of the "white Jesus,"⁶⁷ a phenomenon now condemned through the lens of power and race (e.g. put most crudely, Jesus was perfect so he must be white). While there is no doubt truth in this critique, we can also identify this misrepresentation as an incorrect application of the principle of minimum departure. When we imagine a non-actualised entity, we depart as minimally as possible from our actual world, which in the case of white American Bible illustrators meant that Jesus was as white as they were. Of course, this is an incorrect application because the principle has overridden the facts of the storyworld. Once we are informed by the narrator that the story is taking place in Israel (what now appears to the modern reader as first-century Israel), we should conceptualise the characters as being consistent with those narrative facts. This aspect of minimal departure is the same in both fictional and non-fictional narratives.

Where historical and fictional worlds differ in regard to this principle is the higher level of "completeness" in historical worlds. Both fictional and historical worlds are necessarily

Each individual will have their own encyclopaedic knowledge drawn from a range of texts and experiences that will influence their construction of the storyworlds of the Gospels. As a reader-response critic, Fowler explains this in the strongest of terms: "Even with the powers of criticism, we cannot magically work our way back through the centuries of reading history to recapture the experience of the first flesh-and-blood readers of the Gospels.... We never read the text itself, only the history of the reading of the text. The choice is either to read the history of reading with sensitivity and imagination, which is the vocation of Steiner's "critic," or to be read by the history of reading, which is the fate of the 'reader'"(Fowler 263). Intertextuality through the lens of the principle of minimum departure is not so extreme, suggesting that the text itself can be reconstructed (i.e. "read") but that this process will always be influenced by "the history of reading" to which Fowler refers.

⁶⁷ An example of this is Jane Werner Watson and Jerry Smath's *The Story of Jesus* which, amazingly, was republished as recently as 2002.

ontologically incomplete; we can never have full access as readers to that which is not explicitly recorded by the narrator. Ronen explains, however, that “in nonfictional contexts one can assume that, ontologically speaking, the perspectival arrangement of a world remains hypothetically independent of the very elements this arrangement makes accessible” (177). Fictional worlds, in contrast, are far more restrictive in what can and cannot be inferred by the reader. As acts of *poiesis* their function is not to represent the actual world, which means that there is far more potential for the storyworld to digress logically, physically, typologically, and so on, from the actual world. For example, if a fictional narrative begins with a first-person narrator explaining their purpose for writing down the story, we, at first, assume this to be a human narrator—we depart as minimally as possible from the actual world. We could find out in the following chapter, however, that this disembodied “I” is actually a three headed alien who has come to earth to learn about human politics. In contrast, when the author of Luke writes in the first person at the beginning of the third Gospel we do not only assume that this is a human, but that there is also a “transworld identity” between the actual author and the textual narrator. The narrator of the Gospel is a possible representation of his actual self. In historical worlds, minimum departure allows us to correctly infer this fact. This same logic is also relevant on a macro level. As Ronen alludes to above, the reader can have far more confidence in applying the principle of minimum departure in populating and constructing non-fictional storyworlds as he/she is able to conceptualise every aspect of the world as being identical to our own unless told otherwise. In the Gospel narratives, this means being able to construct the world with reference to all of our encyclopaedic knowledge of first-century Israel. Of course, by the same token, the existence of extra-textual sources about the world that this storyworld seeks to represent requires that we update our construction of the storyworld when we come across new information about the state of affairs in first-century Israel. The central importance of the principle of minimum

departure in terms of Gospel criticism is that it allows us to assign truth-valuations to propositions about the storyworld that are not strictly found within the text. Making such comments, of course, is the common practice of commentators, critics, and preachers.

Having outlined phase one of the reading process (in which the need for imaginative recentering was demonstrated), as well as showing how the principle of minimum departure provides guidelines for reading in this first phase, I will now turn my attention to phase two. It is in this phase of the reading process where the historicity of the represented states of affairs are finally take into account. As historical worlds aim to provide a representation of the actual world, their statements/propositions are also necessarily the subject of truth-valuation.⁶⁸ Important to note, however, is that the second part of the reading process is not completely isolated from the first: we bring back our mental models of the storyworld to the actual world. The second stage further “concretises”—to borrow Ingarden and Iser’s language (see Martin 94-95)—the possible worlds found in the text. Accordingly, conceptualising of the semantic domain as a storyworld is still, as I have argued, an invaluable part of narrative criticism, and the mental models we form of this world in the first stage of reading remain a critical element of how meaning is found in the text. Stage two is simply the process by which the reader, after recentering back to their native system, considers the historicity of the storyworld against their knowledge of the actual world of reality. The reference world, in other words, returns to the reader’s native actual world. Through extra-textual research, the reader begins the process of assigning varying degrees of probability to

⁶⁸ This is a functional difference as opposed to an ontological one. As Ryan explains: “The difference between fiction and nonfiction is not a matter of displaying the image of a world versus displaying this world itself, since both project a world image” (2015: 64). It is, rather, “a matter of the function ascribed to the image. In one case, contemplating the textual world is an end in itself, while in the other, the textual world must be evaluated in terms of its accuracy with respect to an external reference world known to the reader through other channels of information” (64).

the state of affairs projected by the text. As acts of *noiesis*, this is a necessary part of the reception of historical worlds.⁶⁹

In regard to this process of truth-valuation, it is important to consider the ontological implications of understanding historical worlds as constellations of possible worlds. Doležel explains that “In possible-world semantics truth-valuation does not lead to a final, metaphysical Truth. Rather, its function is pragmatic, one could almost say practical... Truth-valuation is a never-ending process” (Doležel 43). In relation to the four Gospel narratives, this is a particularly relevant observation. Nearly two-thousand years old, there is a limited amount of surviving historical material that critics can draw on to assess the storyworld against the actual reference world. It is impossible to work through the four Gospels proposition by proposition, fact by fact, and make definitive judgements on their historicity. This is precisely why we need to understand the four worlds, even upon de-immersion, as four storyworlds whose states of affairs exist in degrees of possibility. While we can single out propositions to compare with external evidence, we cannot change the shape of these storyworlds with confidence. Neither, even upon de-immersion, can we assume that narrative meaning can exist in isolation from the narrativity of the text. It is important to recognise that a narrator has singled out certain events to represent for a reason, and to disregard one of these events from the narrative is to potentially change the intensional, or even extensional, shape of the world. For example, if Jesus is declared to have not risen from the dead, his character changes shape in all four narratives (is he a liar? A false prophet? A fool? A good man murdered unjustly?), and a shadow is cast over the trustworthiness of the characters who “witnessed” the resurrection, not to mention the trustworthiness of the

⁶⁹ As Doležel posits, “There is simply no knowledge to be had if we do not postulate the distinction between true and false statements, between genuine artefacts and facts, between telling the truth and lying, between sincerity and deception” (2010: 43).

narrators themselves. The storyworlds, in other words, cannot be fragmented lightly. Therein again lies the advantage of working in degrees of possibility as opposed to definite truth-judgements. It is also in this second stage of reading that we can place the four storyworlds beside one another to try gain a more holistic picture of the actual historical world. Where the narratives align we may assign a higher degree of possibility to that event and where there are contradictions we may have a higher level of scepticism of historical accuracy.

It is worth briefly digressing here to note here that it may have been assumed that the first stage of reading relates to the “everyday” or “naïve” reader and the second relates to criticism proper. This is not the case. Critics who are aware of the original languages, the socio-political and geographical realities of first-century Israel, and of the various rhetorical devices that the sender has employed to construct their narrative message will still necessarily mentally map these words onto a storyworld; the difference is that these readers are more equipped to follow the sender’s instructions. Their reconstruction of the world will inevitably be more accurate, as will be their truth-valuations in the second stage of reading (however, this is not guaranteed as there remain a number of propositions in the Gospels that cannot be subjected to definitive truth-valuations). In other words, the process by which readers of all types find meaning and interpret the textual signs provided by the sender do not differ; both, I have argued, should be understood in the context of constructing and reconstructing storyworlds.

The theoretical benefits of step one of a possible worlds inspired model for reading are, as has been noted, primarily referential and semantic; the primary benefit of step two is one related to ontology. It assures that the historical worlds of the Gospels are understood as existing in a different state of being than that of the actual world of reality. It also posits that historical worlds, as well as individual events within these worlds, exist in different degrees of possibility. This encourages a level of humility in our truth-valuations. However, despite the obvious benefits, the

greatest weakness of this reading model is also found in step two: after my considerable emphasis on narrative wholeness and the necessity of narratives having a distinct structure that requires its own semantics, fragmentation is impossible to avoid completely. What do we do with these narratives if we decide that every supernatural event did not happen in the actual world? Break them into pieces removing events one by one? There is no easy answer to this question, and that is why many read the Gospels simply for pleasure without worrying about issues of reference. While offering a cheap answer is not my goal, I will speculate that reader awareness is perhaps key to forming some sort of response. If readers are aware of how disregarding the miracles will affect both the extensional and intensional (the second of which is being transgressed) structure of the storyworld, including the ensuing interpretive complications that come through doing so, then the fragmentation of the narrative can take place in a “responsible” way.

Despite these limitations, this two-step process remains an attractive option for those who still value some form of “referential reading”—which I take to be a necessary part of the interpretive process (particularly in constructing historical worlds). The narrators of the Gospels communicate a message about what they take to be an actualised state of affairs; to ignore this is to misunderstand that nature and function of the Gospels (as well as to ignore their impact on history). Moreover, it also takes into account the distinction between historical and fictional worlds. As Ryan explains, “The distinction of a moment of construction from a moment of evaluation avoids two pitfalls frequently encountered in discourse typology: denying any difference in the mode of reading appropriate to fiction and nonfiction, and treating these two modes as incommensurable experiences” (2010: 75). The reading process outlined above, in other words, allows us to still value the processes of reading and criticism usually associated with fiction (e.g. valuing rhetorical features, reading imaginatively, and putting emphasis on the narrativity of the text), while also allowing a sophisticated interpretation of reference that seeks to

both grapple with the author's intention for the world they constructed, as well as consider this textual world against the actual reference world of the reader's native system.

Having demonstrated the referential and ontological advantages of applying a possible worlds model to the Gospel narratives, particularly in regard to their reception, it is worth pausing here to note that a more comprehensive study would now be obliged to do three things that exceed the parameters of this present project. Firstly, interact with the various other reception and reader-orientated theories of reading, evaluating both where they challenge, as well as positively contribute to the model proposed above.⁷⁰ The principle of minimum departure is a beneficial starting point in considering how it is readers reconstruct storyworlds but, in order to move beyond general principles, a number of other cognitive and literary models need to be considered.⁷¹ Moreover, we could also draw on Doležel's "intensional functions" to further investigate how it is readers of the Gospels form extensional models of these worlds at a textual level. Secondly, it is possible to move beyond my own generalised terminology of "degrees of possibility" between the actual world and the worlds of the Gospels to consider the accessibility relations between both the four storyworlds themselves, as well as between the four storyworlds and the actual world. The often-fragile metaphorical transfer between the logical and philosophical possible worlds model and the literary model has already been noted in Chapter Two; my generalised idea of "degrees of possibility," while not completely my own (see Ruffell

⁷⁰ I have in mind, as a starting point, the work of Umberto Eco (particularly *Role of the Reader* (1979) in which Eco incorporates possible worlds semantics into his understanding of the reading process); Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser, who both understand the reading process phenomenologically, so to speak (particularly relevant is Iser's "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach"), and David Gerrig (1993) and David Herman (1999; 2009a; 2009b), who analyse the concepts of recentering and world creation from a cognitive perspective. In specific relation to the Gospels, Robert Fowler's *Let the Reader Understand* is the obvious starting point for the further consideration of reader-oriented theories.

⁷¹ For example, situation models, deixic shift theory, and psychological models such as Gerrig's (1993).

and Hau 2016), pushes this transfer to its very limits. Grounding it in the logical criteria provided by the concept of accessibility relations (fourteen of which have been suggested by Ryan) would be an extremely beneficial endeavour. Thirdly, the internal worlds of the Gospels have not been considered. A comprehensive application of narrative semantics in which the modal structures of the textual universes are considered in detail would aid this discussion considerably, while also providing further insight into the narrative dynamics of the Gospels. Douglas Estes has already demonstrated the presence of two temporal possible worlds existing within the storyworld of John but notes himself how “he barely scratched the surface of epistemological knowledge across narrative worlds” (249). I affirm his resulting suggestion that “we need further research into more exacting methods of trans-world referentiality for the Fourth Gospel as well as other Biblical narratives” (259).

While all of the above is worthy of attention, my goal—in the limited space allocated—has been to consider the model at a macro level in order to lay the theoretical groundwork for future applications. What I have demonstrated is the need to understand the Gospel narratives as either fictional or historical. This is due to the functional and structural differences between these types of worlds which in turn greatly affect the reading process and criteria for truth-valuations. It is worth now, in light of all of the above (not simply the two-phase reading process), to provide one brief example of what the mode of reading I have suggested may look like when practised. To do so, I will draw on the beginning of the Gospel of John. My choice to consider the opening verses of one of the narratives is not arbitrary. Story openings act, in Herman’s determination, “as prompts for worldmaking” (2009b: 112); they are, in other words, the typical entry point into a storyworld. Unlike fiction, however, the Gospels are not often read chronologically from beginning to end. The principles I allude to below, accordingly, are applicable to the reading process no matter what the starting point. Also worth mentioning is that my example represents

my current understanding of the text; I will draw, for example, on the original Greek. For everyday readers, of course, this may happen in the second stage of reading as they perhaps consult commentaries. Accordingly, the central element I wish to exemplify in this reading is how to incorporate a possible worlds model of the text into the reading process, not to highlight specific interpretive results (this is not to say that specific results are not important at another stage of the interpretive process). Moreover, I also hope to demonstrate the textual cues offered by the narrator through which the storyworld is evoked for all readers—“everyday” and “critical” alike.

3.3.3. Reading John 1

John 1:1-2 reads, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος). This narrative begins with the referring expression: “In the beginning.” Story openings that include noun phrases with definite articles such as this one immediately suggest/should evoke a storyworld that the reader must imaginatively recenter to if they are going to interpret these expressions properly (Paul Werth 1999:56; Herman 2009b: 114). Accordingly, “In the beginning,” is not immediately assumed to be referring to the beginning of the actual world, but the beginning of a possible state of affairs; it is, in other words, the beginning of the storyworld. However, as this is a historical world (an understanding applied pragmatically before reading the narrative), the storyworld is currently the same in its form and structure as our native system; by virtue of the principle of minimum departure, and the higher levels of confidence we gain from knowing the writer constructed this world as an act of *noiesis*, there is no reason not to imagine this world, extensionally speaking (i.e. populated with the same entities etc.), as the same as the

actual historical one (unless, of course, a reader understands the world having a “beginning” as changing this structure). Moreover, through the process of intertextuality, it can be inferred that “in the beginning” is not completely independent of the beginning of the wider canon of scripture which begins with the same three words (these comments pertain to my own reading but will be relevant to all those who have read the Bible). Accordingly, it is not unreasonable, or a transgression of the principle of minimum of departure, to infer that this world will show similarities in its extensional and ontological structure to that of the storyworlds found in the Old Testament.

As the sentence progresses, however, the shape of this world needs modification: in the beginning of this world was “the Word”, and this Word was with God⁷²—who is presumably also present at “the beginning”—and moreover, this Word “was God.” Very shortly this “Word” will be identified as the character Jesus; that is to say, the extensional meaning of these initial verses will become clear as the narrative progresses. The intensional meaning, however, is found in the precise term John uses to represent Jesus (it cannot be paraphrased or substituted). In Greek, this word is *logos* (λόγος), a term not fully captured by the English translation. The intensional shape given to Jesus in this regard relates to a divine wisdom; an intelligible presence that was with God at the beginning, and was God. Both the extensional and intensional structure of this world are unfolding as I/the reader imaginatively maps words onto the storyworld. In verse fourteen, the narrator tells us that “the *logos* became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.” This *logos* is identified as human and God, and in the following verse will finally be given the proper name Jesus, which officially grants the Johannine Jesus transworld identity with the other

⁷² It is also worth noting that I have already inferred this God – through the process of intertextuality - to be the same God present in Genesis 1, the monotheistic Creator God who is a central character of the Old Testament.

three possible representations of Jesus found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Note also that John used the first-person pronoun “we”. As I understand this as an historical world, I immediately make the assumption that this textual “we” is linked through transworld identity to the real-world “John” and his contemporaries.

Importantly, I do not at any point in this reading doubt the narrator’s propositions about this world. If I read this historical narrative “traditionally,” so to speak, I could question how the narrator knows the inner life of God, or, for that matter, who or what was present at the beginning of the world (or even if there was a formal beginning). The narrators of the Gospels, as Petri Merenlahti notes, are “very much like the God they proclaim” (68). They tell of perspectives they have no right to know and make their own moral judgements on certain events or attitudes.⁷³ However, it is the sender who has authority over the storyworld, and to understand the message he is communicating, I, in the reconstruction of this world, consider every proposition he makes as true of this world. The world I imaginatively reconstruct is built on his instructions. To not do so would be extremely frustrating to the reading process, and, as Doležel notes in relation to “mixed bag” approaches, theoretically untenable as it would require two different semantics for different entities within the same text (1998: 233). Furthermore, as the reference world and the TAW are identical at this stage of the reading process, I am aware that the Johannine Jesus is not necessarily a counterpart of the historical Jesus. That is to say, I am not consciously considering the textual Jesus’s relationship to any external representations of Jesus,

⁷³ A good example of a single scene where both of these elements are evidenced is in the Markan narrator’s account of Jesus walking on the water (Fowler 217; Merenlahti 68). The scene begins with the narrator’s third person perspective on the whole scene (6:47), then moves to Jesus’ perspective of the unfolding events, including his intentions (6:48), before finally giving his own (the narrator’s) moral judgement on the matter (6:52).

even as my image of this character is influenced by extra-textual sources that I have already read by virtue of the principle of minimum departure.

Once this world has taken shape—preferably after reading the whole narrative but I will pause here after the first section for sake of brevity—it is then possible to consider the truth-values of the propositional content in respect to the actual world of reality. As I have argued (along with Doležel) however, these truth-valuations do not represent metaphysical truth, and the propositional content of these storyworlds should be understood as existing in degrees of possibility. If someone was to believe in God, then this storyworld is far more accessible from their native system of reality and would exist in their minds in a higher degree of possibility. An atheist, on the other hand, may out rightly declare that the proposition that God and Jesus existed together in the beginning is false, placing this possible world at a greater “distance” from their native system (it still remains accessible, logically speaking, as the storyworlds are not impossible worlds—in any sense of that expression). This reading above is obviously broad and does not take into account the various other models (deixic shift theory, situation models, Gerrig’s transportation metaphor, and so on) that can be incorporated into an understanding of how readers reconstruct worlds. What I have demonstrated are some of the textual cues that enable the reader to form mental models of storyworlds and understand the processes by which reference can be interpreted and truth-values assigned.

3.4. The Goal of Interpretation

To finish this project’s attempt to demonstrate the value of a possible worlds model to Gospel criticism, it is now worth briefly considering some of the interpretive implications of applying this model to the Gospel narratives. It is worth noting up front that, strictly speaking, this project has

little to say about interpretation proper. The guidelines for reading and truth-valuation that I have outlined (e.g. the principle of minimum departure), while having the potential to be understood as interpretive principles, should be primarily considered within the parameters of semantics and theories of reception. However, interpretive implications are impossible to completely ignore. When we make referential judgements, such as that Jesus has transworld identity across the four Gospels and exists as a possible representation of an actualised Jesus—this will undoubtedly affect ensuing interpretive judgements about his actions within the text. Indeed, understanding the storyworlds of the Gospels as historical worlds is an interpretive act in and of itself (in that it seeks to interpret the intended function of the texts), and this act, of course, has further interpretive and theological implications. However, to consider such implications at any level of depth requires branching away from semantics and narratology to enter into the complex fields of hermeneutics, theology, and biblical interpretation (this is not to say, however, that all five of these fields are in any way mutually exclusive).⁷⁴ Accordingly, in this final section I only wish to demonstrate the openness of a possible worlds model to incorporating a broad range of interpretive positions. To conclude, I will also briefly consider what interpreters should make their goal when considering the Gospels through the lens of a possible worlds model.

One of the great advantages of modelling the Gospels through the lens of possible worlds theory, is its flexibility. “Far from announcing the reader’s death, or the end of all interpretation,” Thomas Martin writes about the possible worlds literary model, “this approach offers a way to sort out different kinds of reading and the varieties of meaning. Here may reside

⁷⁴ In this regard, Anthony Thiselton’s *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (1992) and Kevin Vanhoozer’s *Is There a Meaning in this Text?: the Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (1998) are two seminal texts that connect these fields. They not only outline the core issues of this present study, but also evaluate the complex processes of interpretation and assigning theological (as well as symbolic, aesthetic, and so on) meaning to the narratives.

its greatest metatheoretic promise” (151). Thus far, we have considered the Gospels as projecting historical worlds but, as already discussed, this is a status based on function rather than ontology. While a possible worlds model may promote this decision (as the Gospels are formed as acts of *noiesis* rather than *poiesis*), it does not require it. It is possible to receive these worlds as fictional and change their truth-conditions (as well as interpret them) accordingly. This would be an example of what Ryan labels as receiving a text in the opposite mode (2015: 74). She observes that it is possible to read fiction as non-fiction when, after de-immersing ourselves, we consciously change the reference world to assess how accurate the text represents real-world events. Equally, we can read non-fiction as fiction when we stop caring about whether the narrative represents truth, and instead read it for pleasure (74). Martin extends this logic to suggest that certain elements of worlds can be focalised depending on the reader or critic’s intention (152). The storyworlds of the Gospels, in other words, are open to sociological, political, ecological, feminist readings, and so on. Nothing within the possible worlds model inhibits isolating certain elements of the storyworlds in the second stage of reading to achieve a specific interpretive goal. The advantage of a possible worlds model, as Martin noted above, is that it provides a way to “sort out” these different approaches.

In regard to the Gospels, two broad approaches can be observed: those which transgress the sender’s invitation and regard the text as fiction, and those which accept the invitation and regard it as non-fiction. The first group can be broken into sub-categories of those who read purely for aesthetic pleasure or those who once de-immersed, despite considering the text fiction, look for real-world archetypes, as psychologists tend to do (e.g. Carl Jung (2012)), or overlaps with real-world history (we could place Rhoads’ method of narrative criticism and Kermode’s poststructuralist literary criticism in this category, although the latter would no doubt reject being placed on one side of a fiction/non-fiction binary). Reader-orientated critics who view the text

solely through a pragmatic lens can also, at least functionally, be placed in this category. However, as Ryan notes, the possible worlds model is one that can be utilised by reader-response critics (she, in fact, expresses her surprise that it has not been taken up by more of them). Accordingly, if a reader-response critic chooses to evaluate the rhetoric of the Gospels in order to demonstrate the different way the speaker's words can be reconstructed by the readers into coherent storyworlds (with the implication that the narrator was attempting to represent that actual world), then the storyworld can still be considered historical. The second group (those who have accepted the invitation) can also be divided into two major sub-groups: those who believe that the text, typically from a faith-standpoint, is largely, or wholly, an accurate record of history, and those who assess its historicity in degrees of possibility, open to the fact that the narratives may offer a biased or mistaken account of the events that took place. This second group also can contain those methods of criticism which apply a certain hermeneutic to the storyworld, such as political and feminist criticism. Equally, however, a critic employing one of these specific hermeneutics may also treat the Gospels as fictional worlds if they understand the narratives as self-referential.

While all of the above can be understood within the framework of a possible worlds model, the first goal of the reader and critic should be to align themselves with the sender's intention. Doležel explains:

The text-processing activities involve many different skills and depend on many variables, such as the type of reader, the style and purpose of his or her reading, and so on. But possible worlds semantics insists that the world is constructed by its author and the reader's role is to reconstruct it. The text that was composed by the writer's labours is a

set of instructions for the reader, according to which the world reconstruction proceeds.”
(Doležel 21)

As has been demonstrated, there are some key differences between how we receive and interpret these worlds based on whether we consider them acts of *poiesis* or *noiesis*. To immediately transgress the sender’s intention to represent the actual world is one that prevents the effectiveness of the communicative act and the ensuing interpretive judgements about what different aspects of that communicative act could mean. It is, as Doležel notes above, to disregard the “set of instructions” from the writer. Vanhoozer rightly suggests that “what the interpreter seeks to understand—whether in a text, a work of art, a piece of music, or in any other kind of meaningful action—is what the agent did, and why. Biblical interpreters, similarly, seek understanding of communicative action fixed by writing” (1998: 234). One of the core goals of interpretation then, at least within a possible worlds model, is to understand the nature of the storyworld that the sender has constructed and reconstruct it as accurately as possible in order that we can participate effectively in the communication taking place. We can then isolate certain elements of this world to ask why it is there and what meaning it could have in regard to a modern audience. This does not mean, however, that interpretations that disregard issues of reference or author intention are wrong. Jung’s archetypes are not wrong; neither are those who read the text for pleasure and make literary interpretations based on aesthetic value. But what a possible worlds model offers us is a framework in which we can be made aware as to where the storyworlds of the Gospels are being read and interpreted in a different mode to which they were intended. This, in fact, (as I have already suggested) is perhaps the key. Awareness of when we are transgressing the sender’s intent is required, I would argue, if one wants to approach these narratives as fictional worlds. Acknowledgement that their goal of interpretation has changed

from understanding what the sender has been communicating through their narrative to reading for a specific symbol, or archetype, or so on, is necessary. When the implications of this change of mode are left unacknowledged, the range of “correct” interpretations increase exponentially as the structure and function of the worlds are left open to whatever a reader/critic may desire. Narratives, as I have already quoted Norman Peterson saying (but it is worth repeating), are “about something” (38); it is the first task of the interpreter to understand what that something is.

Conclusion

I began this project by claiming that the Gospels contain a message that remains influential in contemporary political and social discourse; that is to say, the possible states of affairs that the four Gospel narratives represent continue to have influence on the actualised states of affairs of which every human is a part. My critique of the vast majority of narrative criticism of the Gospels rests on its failure to recognise the “referential claims” these texts make. While they need not be the focus, they should never be ignored. To do so is to misunderstand the nature and function of the Gospels. Conversely, I critiqued traditional criticism and historical criticism for only focusing on the referential nature of these narratives: the fact that the Gospels constitute a specific type of discourse is overlooked as meaning becomes equated with identifying the referents of textual entities in the actual historical world. My goal, accordingly, was to model the Gospels in a way that allowed their claims on the actual world to be taken seriously in the reception process (i.e. not simply declaring the narratives as self-referential) in a way that does not also exclude consideration of the narrative structure and rhetorical elements of the discourse. Possible worlds, I have argued, while having its own limitations, has offered a more productive way, in Walsh’s words, “to characterise the parameters of the communicative process of narrative creation and reception” (4).

In doing so, I demonstrated the advantages of conceptualising the semantic domains of the Gospels as storyworlds (when understood through the lens of possible worlds theory). Considering the semantic domain of the Gospels as projecting autonomous modal systems, allows us to introduce the concept of the textual actual world; that is, a place where the reader can locate the textual entities and facts of the storyworld. It also allows for the introduction of multiple reference worlds in respect to which the reader can assess the content of these

narratives. Most importantly to the reception of these worlds, the storyworld offers a place for readers to imaginatively recenter, temporarily exchanging their own “actual world” for the textual one. This, as was argued in reference to extensional and intensional semantics, is paramount to a reader’s reconstruction of these worlds. Once a reader imaginatively recenters, they accept the narrator’s statements as true and form a mental model of this world accordingly.

In terms of the function and global structure of the world, I argued that discourse typology remains an important endeavour for Gospel critics of every capacity. In terms of reference, truth-valuation, and the process of reception, the fictional status of these worlds has considerable implications. Through reference to the work of Doležel, I was able to demonstrate that the Gospels project historical worlds; however, I also noted how this is not an ontological status but rather one that is applied within the parameters of the communicative process. The attitude towards the discourse of both the sender and receiver is what determines the fictionality of a text, and successful communication occurs when the receiver aligns their attitude with the sender. With this identified, it was then possible to outline a two-phase possible worlds inspired mode of reading which gave necessary consideration to both the process of imaginative recentering and world reconstruction, as well as the need to consider the compatibility of these worlds with the actual world of reality.

The interpretive goal that underpins this whole reading process is one of successful communication. This requires that both the function and the mode of discourse are considered in the reading and interpretive process. As Herman posits, “Narrative is a mode of representation that is situated in—and must be interpreted in light of—a specific discourse context or occasion for telling” (2009b: 37). This goal is broad and heavily theoretical; accordingly, as has been evident, this work is far from exhaustive. As such, my aim has been to provide an initial, and at times experimental, application of a possible worlds model to the Gospel narratives in the hope

that a number of the lingering issues around reference, genre, and ontology—particularly in regard to the process of reception—may be understood in a more constructive and holistic way. The suggestions I have made, then, I offer in the hope that others—or my future self—can draw on the foundations laid here to more thoroughly consider the different ways in which possible worlds literary theory can positively contribute to Gospel criticism. I have at least, I believe, demonstrated the possibility of that.

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