University of Windsor
Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive | OSSA 12: Evidence, Persuasion & Diversity

Jun 3rd, 8:01 AM - 8:01 AM

Commentary on Guillermo Sierra Catalán's "Fictional Claims"

Stephen Pender
University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive

Part of the Intellectual History Commons, and the Philosophy Commons

Pender, Stephen, "Commentary on Guillermo Sierra Catalán's "Fictional Claims"" (2020). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 5.
https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA12/Wednesday/5

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Commentary on Guillermo Sierra Catalán's "Fictional Claims"

STEPHEN PENDER
English
University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario
Canada N9B 3P4
spender@uwindsor.ca

Guillermo Sierra Catalán's rich, engaging paper, "Acquisition of Knowledge through Narrative in Argumentative Processes," opens up a world of suasion and supposition, verisimilitude and verity, and does so adeptly, using the tools and concepts of contemporary argumentation theory. He makes a strong case for the ways in which fictional narratives function as reasons and arguments, arouse passion and action, and enlist even as they test a whole array of inferential capacities. But is narrative fiction — or fiction in general — in any sense a kind of proof? Do forms of argument, of proof-making, borrow means and method from narrative, fictive or non-fictive?[1] Sierra Catalán's answers turn on whether or not we share his view that narrative fiction as a form of testimony, a term that derives from *testimonium*, *testis* or 'witness,' and *-monium*, cousin to -ment in English, denoting an instrument of action (*OED*, s.v.). To 'bear witness,' *tesāri*, is to attest, to offer attestation, to 'test' in the sense of attempt, prove, essay. Testimony is a form of proof (see, for example, Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 5.11.36ff.) and, since Aristotle, proof is the heart of rhetoric.

With its focus on addressees, Sierra Catalán makes room for quotidian, everyday testimony—"a pure first-rate kind of knowledge" to which we appeal frequently and persistently (pp. 1-2)—as a form of epistemology alongside perception and memory, induction and introspection. This kind of evidence he terms "natural" as opposed to legal, formal testimony (p. 2). Both are concerned with content, with information conveyed via address, and thus testimony's natural home is the actual, the verifiable, and the probable. Fiction, I would argue, is nestled, somewhat uncomfortably, between "daily life circumstances" and the severity of a law court—the alembic of testimony before it migrated into early science (see Shapiro, 2002). Sierra Catalán concedes this point, but does so by claiming that, for it to achieve "equivalence" with testimony, narrative fiction must simply convey information (p. 2). There seems to me a feint here, for Sierra Catalán claims that fiction can offer knowledge but nothing about its epistemic capacity is "specifically fictional" (p. 2); in other words, as knowledge-producing discourse, fiction courts the same value as any kind of testimony, including non-fiction. In this argument, fiction's 'making strange,' its *ostrenanie*, its language and narrative forms, its "representational means," are either redundant or insipid, superfluous or wan. In order to press fiction into epistemic service it must be denuded and re-naturalised. Late in the essay, Sierra Catalán attempts a recovery by arguing that, because of its connative and aesthetic dimensions or "merits," a "literary narrative a source of *more* pieces of knowledge than a non-literary one" (p. 10, my emphasis). More is more, then: But what precisely are the epistemic effects of these 'merits'? To this question, Sierra Catalán answers 'imagination,' *phantasia*, a notoriously

[1] I am aware of the long-standing, and ongoing, philosophical debates about these questions, spurred by Lewis (1978). Replies to his paper are legion. My purpose here is to briefly inquire into the relationships between rhetoric and proof, fiction and narrative.

antinomian faculty, which functions powerfully but fallibly, at least in the intellectual history I study.

Early in his robust argument, Sierra Catalán avers that:

> the point of fiction is to imagine, that is, to know (or pretend to know, or act as if one is knowing) certain things about a possible world, different from the real one. So, it is reasonable to understand fiction narrative (a narrative about a possible world) as the representation of a narrative about the real world — that is, the representation of testimony. ... [I have] shown that the epistemic values associated with testimonies — non-fiction narratives — and representations of testimonies — fiction narratives — coincide. (p. 3, slightly amended)

This 'coincidence' of fictive and non-fictive narratives is founded on the "reliability" of the text or discourse: Sierra Catalán relies on the "commonly accepted assumption that the more correct a claim is, the more accurate is the representation of the world it offers and, consequently, the more knowledge about the real world it generates" (pp. 4-5, 8, 9). This sleight riles: Fiction only has a claim on the world insofar as it is "accurate." Accuracy trumps plausibility, verisimilitude, even fantasy? The claim neuters itself, and is further diminished by Sierra Catalán's reliance on the notion of "internal coherence," borrowed from Walter Fisher, that fails to illuminate any one of a number of famous avant garde or 'experimental' narrative or quasi-narrative works of fiction (pp. 6-7). One might quibble, too, that much contemporary, especially popular, fiction has little truck with accuracy, especially when it comes to the filigree complexity of feeling, or to building equitable fictive spaces for negotiating ethical strictures with the fustian, messy, and sometimes amoral behaviour of its characters or of actual people. One might point to E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) for only the most famous recent example (it withers on every single page, and miscarries spectacularly to offer anything like 'accuracy'); and I certainly would not take Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy* (1958), as brilliant as it is, as a spur to action or a model of practice, even for a 'possible world.' The rebarbative satire of the eighteenth century evidences the relationship between history and style: but what have we to learn about 'possible worlds' from Alexander Pope's highly redacted burlesques of forgotten members of parliament? Christopher Hill (1989, p. 23) reports that a translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667; 1674) was one of the most popular books amongst the peasant soldiers in the tsar's armies during the Russo-Japanese war, 1905-1906. What can one make of that? Assertions about what and how fiction and popular fiction are consumed are necessarily vexed, provisional, as Q. D. Leavis' *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) demonstrated almost a hundred years ago.

Sierra Catalán quotes Garcia-Carpintero to the effect that 'communicative intention' aims to "put an intended audience in a position to make believe (imagine) ... [a] proposition" (p. 3). What is such a 'position'? To my mind, it stipulates two conditions: the possibility of *enargeia*, or vividly presenting one's subject matter, and the notion that a single mental faculty is devoted to evaluating both the true and the verisimilar. Both notions are Aristotelian in origin, but were taken up with verve by his Roman followers and by countless early modern theorists of poetry, fiction, narrative, and the sermon. *Enargeia* and its cognate terms, *illustratio*, *hypotyposis*, *repraesentatio*, and *evidentia*, denote vividness of description, so that a subject, a narrative, an argument appear to unfold, actively, before-the-eyes, of an audience or a judge. As Quintilian put it, using the trope *enargeia* "makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual

scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence" (6.2.32; cf. 8.3.61). Often confused with *energeia* in early modern discourse, *enargeia* enables a rhetor to make the absent present, the present estranged—which is in fact a common definition of rhetoric itself. Francis Bacon's conception of the discipline, for example, rests on its relationship to images received by the senses or conjured by the imagination: "the end of rhetoric is to fill the imagination with observations and images, to second reason, and not to oppress it" (*Works*, 4.455-456). The subject of rhetoric is "Imaginative or Insinuative Reason" (3.383). Precisely this capacity is one of the stipulations of Sierra Catalán's position. It is not new.

The other substratum that undergirds his argument is, I think, the relationship between truth and fiction, rhetoric and proof—in fact he mentions rhetoric and "rhetorical devices" (p. 7). 'Artistic method,' *technique*, is concerned with proof, as Aristotle writes: since demonstration in the mutable, suasive world, in which 'things might be otherwise,' is, in part, enthymemic, the most adept at persuasion are those who are "best able to see from what materials, and how, a syllogism arises." But there is a caveat: this holds true only "if he grasps what sort of things an enthymeme is concerned with and what differences it has from a logical syllogism." Why? It "belongs to the same capacity both to see the true and what resembles the true, and at the same time humans have a natural disposition for the true and to a large extent hit on the truth: thus, an ability to aim at commonly held opinions is a characteristic of one who also has a similar ability in regard to the truth" (1355a3ff.). Truth and fiction share a home. This ability or capacity is similar to the faculty of those who can 'see' (the term is close to 'imagine' and to 'theorise') to make resonant metaphors: such figures 'strike' people, surprise them, and bring things "more intimately before our eyes" (*Rhetoric*, 1404a10-12, 1405a37-b10). To know or pretend to know by imagining depends on a rhetorical capacity, on the ability to winnow or to confect the true from the verisimilar, on making and remaking images: "the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars" (*Poetics*, 1457b7ff., 1459a5-8). A figure that arouses emotion, vividly, that makes the absent present, that redescribes the familiar, is fiction's claim to knowledge or at least to means for inferring, inducing, and securing knowledge.

But there is another way of envisioning this contention. In a series of lectures delivered in 1995, the historican Carlo Ginzburg reasserted the central of both proof and narrative to historical inquiry. 'Narrative history,' he insists, underwrites "every form of historical research and writing," shifting our attention in order to "explore the mutual interaction between empirical data and narrative constraints *within the process of research itself*. Many years ago," he continues, "Lucien Febvre remarked that historical evidence speaks only if properly addressed." This form of address—and Sierra Catalán is concerned with address—means recognising that narratives mediate and shape, structure and disclose questions asked of evidence as well as the ways in which evidence is collected, discarded, interpreted, and written. These, of course, are questions of proof, at the "fundamental core" not only of historical inquiry but of rhetoric. Narrative gives shape to argument, one might claim, for "narrative models" intervene "at every stage of research, creating both roadblocks and possibilities." Such constructions, *narrative* constructions, are far from incompatible with proof or, as Ginzburg insists, with desire and imagination, "without which there is no research" (1999, pp. 103, 101, 50, 25). Sierra Catalán's argument inverted, then: non-fiction must use one of the tools of fiction to organise, substantiate,

and represent its claims.

Sierra Catalán is right to focus on inference and imagination as sustaining both reasons and arguments, particularly in fictive, narrative discourse, but I would add additional capacities: we infer and build, find satisfying and frustrating, the possible worlds that fiction and non-fiction, and the shifting boundaries between them, hold on offer. Our reasonings in response to a text's arguments are not only provisional, intensified, modified, or jettisoned as we proceed. They are also free. As Sartre wrote in 1949, all literary work is an "appeal" to the freedom of readers to collaborate in the production of the text. That production is uneven because, for the reader, "all is to do and all is already done; the work exists only at the exact level of his capacities; while he reads and creates, he knows that he can always go further in his reading, can always create more profoundly, and thus the work seems to him as inexhaustible and opaque as things." Sartre insists on a "pact" of generosity and trust between writers and readers, disclosed by the "dialectical going-and-coming" that is reading itself, its mooted expectations and demands by both figures, at "the highest pitch." This appeal is ethical: "my freedom, by revealing itself, reveals the freedom of the other." If fiction speaks to possible worlds, as it must, if fiction is moored to questions of probability, even fidelity and accuracy, is it often is, these worlds entail not only freedom, but a form of moral commitment: "You are perfectly free to leave that book on the table. But if you open it, you assume responsibility for it" (1988, pp. 54, 61-62, 66). I return, then, as riposte, this form of basic knowledge, to use his terms, and of commitment and responsibility, in Sartre's, to Guillermo Sierra Catalán.

References

Ginzburg, C. (1999). *History, Rhetoric, Proof: the Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

Hill, C. (1989). Milton and the English Revolution. In Geoffrey A. Hosking and George F. Cushing (eds.), *Perspectives on Literature and Society in Eastern and Western Europe.* (pp. 23-36). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lewis, D. (1978). Truth in Fiction. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, 37-46.

Sartre, J.P. (1988). Why Write? In *What is Literature?*, various trans. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Shapiro, B.J. (2002). Testimony in Seventeenth-Century English Natural Philosophy: Legal Origins and Early Development. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 33, 243-263.