Review of Anthony Everett, *The Nonexistent*, Oxford University Press, 2013

Catharine Abell

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The Nonexistent comprises a defense of fictional anti-realism: the view that there are no such things as fictional characters, or any of the other objects that feature in works of fiction, but cannot be found in the real world. In the first half of the book, Everett develops and defends his own pretense theoretic account of thought and talk that appears to be about fictional objects. The second half is devoted to the detailed criticism of various forms of realism about fictional objects.

The fictional anti-realist needs to explain our seeming ability to refer to fictional objects in the absence of such things. One strategy is to explain away apparent reference to fictional objects by denying the referential theory of names, according to which the semantic contribution a name makes to a sentence containing it is its referent. However, Everett assumes that proper names are devices of direct reference, and defends instead the Waltonian view that our thought and talk of fictional objects occurs within the scope of a pretense. While it is not true in reality that there are fictional objects, he argues, it is true according to the games of make-believe in which we engage when we think and talk about fictional objects that there are such things. Accordingly, sentences containing fictional names express incomplete or gappy propositions and can be neither true nor false, although they may count as true according to the pretense in which we engage when we utter them.

Everett claims that we sometimes take such sentences to express true propositions, not just because they count as true according to our pretense, but because they may convey accurate information about the real world. He claims that our games of make-believe featuring fictional objects are governed by principles of generation which mandate certain imaginings in response to certain real world states of affairs. Just as a children's game of mud pies may be governed by a principle of generation according to which, if one is holding a glob of mud containing two stones, one is to imagine that one is holding a pie containing two raisins, so too a work of fiction may be governed by principles of generation which mandate, for example, that if the work contains a fictional name, one is to imagine that there is a bearer of that name, and that it possesses the properties the work appears to ascribe to it. In virtue of these principles of generation, Everett argues, one can use a claim made within the scope of a pretense, such as "Elizabeth loathes Mr Darcy", to convey the real world information that one is engaged in a pretense according to which there is a person called Emma who loathes a person called Mr Darcy, or that the work of fiction one is reading is such as to mandate this pretense. The fact that the real world information thereby conveyed may be perfectly accurate, Everett thinks, helps explain our intuition that certain gappy propositions expressed by sentences containing fictional names are true.

Talk apparently about fictional objects is involved in a variety of different kinds of discourse. Sometimes we adopt a perspective internal to a fiction and talk as if

things are as it describes them as being, as when I say "Elizabeth loathes Mr Darcy". At other times, however, we adopt a perspective external to that fiction, and treat fictional characters as characters rather than people, as when I say "Jane Austen created the character of Elizabeth Bennett". While it seems plausible to claim that I am engaged in pretense when I utter sentences of the former type, it is much less obvious that this is the case when I utter utterances of the latter type. Nevertheless, Everett claims, both claims are made within the scope of a pretense, although the pretenses at issue are distinct. Whereas utterances from an internal perspective occur within the scope of the base pretense for a fiction, utterances from an external perspective occur within the scope of an *extended* pretense. This extends the base pretense with further principles of generation that mandate, for example, that if an author is the first to produce a work of fiction the base pretense for which mandates imagining that there is a certain object, where there is in fact no such thing, then that author counts as creating a fictional object.

This view is very similar to that proposed by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis as Make Believe*. It is commonly objected to Walton's view that "pretend" is an intentional view, such that, in order to pretend to do something, one must intend to pretend to do it, but that we are not aware of pretending when we engage in fictional object talk from an external perspective. Everett deflects this objection by offering an account of pretense according to which what is distinctive about an imaginative mental state is not its phenomenology but its functional role. While certain episodes of imagination may have a characteristic phenomenology, he argues, this phenomenology is not essential to the imagination, but is rather a feature of those imaginings that are under our voluntary, creative control. Because the extended pretense in which I engage when I think of Elizabeth Bennett as a fictional character is not under my voluntary, creative control, but is instead externally guided by the facts about Jane Austen's fiction making activities and the operative principles of generation, I take it, we should not expect it to share the phenomenological features of other, more creative imaginings.

Everett does not offer any answer to the question of what determines which principles of generation govern any particular pretense. He claims that this question will be answered by an adequate account of the constraints on an acceptable interpretation of a work of fiction. Nevertheless, he assumes, firstly, that in some cases there will be more than one acceptable interpretation of a fiction and, secondly, that there are objective facts of the matter concerning which interpretations of a work of fiction are acceptable.

In the second half of the book, Everett seeks to demonstrate the superiority of the pretense theoretic account to realist alternatives by identifying problems for realist accounts of fictional objects; arguing that extant realist accounts do not have the resources to solve them; and attempting to show that the pretense theoretic account either avoids these problems altogether or can readily solve them. The discussion here is detailed and often laborious, but the upshot is a comprehensive set of arguments against fictional realism that any adequate realist account must be capable of undermining. These arguments do valuable

work in forwarding the debate by, for example, focusing attention on thought about fictional objects, rather than just talk about them. As Everett points out, it is implausible to hold, as many realists do, that fictional characters are bought into existence only in authors' acts of writing or filming works of fiction since this would leave them with no way explaining the apparent truth of claims such as "Jane Austen imagined Elizabeth Bennett long before she wrote about her."

Nevertheless, Everett ultimately fails to subject his own account to the high standards of evaluation to which he holds its realist rivals. For example, he argues that the most plausible way for realists to individuate fictional characters is by appeal to the properties ascribed to them by the works in which they appear. However, he argues that because there may be more than one different acceptable interpretation of a work, governed by different principles of generation, and thus ascribing different properties to a given character, the realist has no way of explaining what makes it the same character that appears in each interpretation. However, a problem for the pretense theorists lurks here, too. Everett must claim that we take them to be the same because we engage in an extended pretense according to which they are one and the same character. But what principles of generation govern this pretense? Do they extend the set of principles governing the base pretense of just one of these interpretations? If so, which? Or do they somehow incorporate and extend the principles governing each of the base pretenses? If so, how is this possible in light of the incompatibility of the two interpretations? Everett does not address any of these questions.

This particular problem is indicative of a more general problem with Everett's account. As he is at pains to emphasize, fictional object discourse is not limited to the internal and external forms of discourse described above, but also includes – in addition to inter-interpretational discourse – inter-fictional discourse, such as "If Elizabeth Bennett and Emma Woodhouse were to meet, they would not like one another", and discourse which mixes both the internal and external perspectives, such as "The character of Holmes is a detective." The pretense theorist can supposedly accommodate the intuitive truth or falsity of all these kinds of discourse by taking them to be uttered as part of different extended pretenses according to which they are either true or false. This requires pretenses to be individuated fairly finely, in order to accommodate both the apparent truth of "The character of Holmes is a detective" and the apparent falsity of "Holmes is both a fictional character and a detective." But in order to accommodate the communicative function of such discourse, the pretense theorist must explain how it is possible for interlocutors to latch on to the same extended pretense. This requires both that it be an objective matter which principles of generation govern any particular utterance, and that features of the discourse or context make the relevant principles salient. But what secures the objectivity of relevant principles of generation? While I am happy to concede that there are objective matters concerning which principles of generation constrain the base pretense of a work of fiction, it is much less clear that extended pretenses are governed by objective principles. Moreover, even if it can be shown that they are, which features of discourse and/or context make the relevant principles salient?

Everett has vanishingly little to say on these issues. This is a significant lacuna in his account. Whereas what we can believe in a given situation is subject to significant external constraints, there are very few constraints on what we can imagine in a specific context. Consequently, it is incumbent on Everett to show how pretense can be externally guided so as to do the work he is asking it to do. Furthermore, he needs to do more to show that what few constraints there are on the imagination do not prevent it from doing this work. As discussion of the phenomenon of imaginative resistance makes clear, there are some things we find difficult, and arguably impossible to imagine. For example, some claim that we cannot imagine the impossible. If this is right, it is a significant problem for Everett's account. He can explain the apparent truth of some sentences uttered in mixed fictional object discourse as being due partly to their truth according to an extended pretense only if we are able to imagine something being simultaneously a fictional character and a detective, and it is not obvious that we can.

This book makes a valuable contribution to the debate between realists and anti-realists about fictional objects. Realists in particular will need to respond carefully to the many criticisms he levels against the best developed realist accounts currently on offer. Ultimately, however, although his functional account of the imagination assuaged some of my worries about the pretense theoretic approach, he did not do enough to convince me of its superiority.