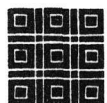


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The Truth of Fiction



PICASSO once pronounced that all art was false. Since the West gave him credit for something like 90 percent of its twentieth-century artistic achievement, Picasso no doubt felt free to say whatever he liked on the matter! Even so, I believe he was merely drawing attention in the exaggerated manner of seers and prophets to the important but simple fact that art cannot be a carbon copy of life; and thus, in that specific sense, cannot be “true.” And if not true, it must therefore be false!

But if art may dispense with the constraining exactitude of literal truth, it does acquire in return incalculable powers of persuasion in the imagination. Which was why a single can-

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vas, *Guernica*, by Picasso himself could so frighten the state machinery of Spanish fascism. For how could a mere painting on canvas exercise such awe unless in some way it accorded with, or had a disquieting relationship to, recognizable reality? Unless, in other words, it spoke a kind of truth?

In his “Memorial Verses,” Matthew Arnold put these words into the mouth of the poet and philosopher Goethe:

The end is everywhere
Art still has truth, take refuge there.¹

Placed in that grand, apocalyptic setting, art and whatever truth is claimed for it are bound to become unduly remote.

Actually, art is man’s constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence *through his imagination*. For practical considerations, I shall limit myself to just one of the forms he has fashioned out of his experience with language—the art of fiction.

In his brilliant essay *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode defines fiction simply as “something we know does not exist but which helps us to make sense of, and move in, the world.”² Defining it in this practical way does prepare us not for one but for many varieties of fiction. Kermode himself draws attention to some of them, for example the mathematical fiction of “infinity plus one” which does not exist and yet facilitates the solution of certain problems in pure mathematics; or the legal fiction in certain legal systems which holds that when a man and his wife die at the same time the law, in pursuit of equity, will pretend that the woman dies before her husband, so that excessive hardship may not be brought upon their estate.

In other words, we invent different fictions to help us out

of particular problems we encounter in living. But of course these problems are not always as specific and clear-cut, or indeed as consciously perceived, as the lawyer's or the mathematician's formulations. When two very young children say to each other, "Let us pretend . . ." and begin to act such roles as father and mother they are obviously creating a fiction for a less definite, more spontaneous and, I dare say, more profound purpose.

What is the nature of this purpose? I don't think anyone can say for certain. All that we do know is that judging from the evidence of man's fiction-making in all places and at all times he must surely have an inescapable need for that activity. No one has yet come upon the slightest evidence that any human group now or in the past managed to dispense with the need to make fictions.

Given the great gulf between being and knowing, between his essence and existence, man has no choice really but to make and believe in some fiction or other. Perhaps the ultimate judgement on a man is not whether he acquiesces to a fiction but rather what *kind* of fiction will persuade him into that acquiescence, that willing suspension of disbelief which Coleridge spoke about or that "experimental submission," to quote I. A. Richards.

However, we must not overlook the carefulness displayed by both Coleridge and Richards in their choice of words; and for a very good reason. Coleridge's disbelief is only *suspended*, not abolished, and will presumably return at the appropriate moment; and Richards's submission is experimental, not definitive or permanent.

It is important to stress this point because man makes not only fictions to which he gives guarded or temporary acquiescence like the pretending games of healthy children; he has

the capacity also to create fictions that demand and indeed impose upon him absolute and unconditional obedience. I will shortly return to this, but first of all let me extend what I have said about man's desire for fictions to include the question of his capacity. Man's desire for fictions goes with his ability for making them, just as his need for language is inseparable from his capacity for speech. If man only had the need to speak but lacked his peculiar speech organs, he could not have invented language. For all we know, other animals in the jungle might be in just as much need to talk to one another as man ever was and might have become just as eloquent had they been endowed with the elaborate apparatus for giving expression to that need. And certainly no one would suggest that the mute is silent because he has no need to speak or nothing to say. If we apply the same reasoning to man's propensity for fictions we can see that his need to create them would not adequately explain their existence; there must also be an effective apparatus.

This equipment, I suggest, is man's imagination. For just as man is a tool-making animal and has recreated his natural world with his tools, so is he a fiction-making animal and refashions his imaginative landscape with his fictions.

All attempts to define man neatly must fail because of his complexity. Man is a rational animal; man is a political animal; man is a tool-making animal, man is etc., etc. If you ask me I will add that man is a questioning animal, a highly curious animal. Given his mental and imaginative capacities this curiosity is only to be expected. Man finds himself caught, as it were, in a tiny glow-worm of consciousness. Behind him is the impenetrable darkness of his origin, and before him is another deep obscurity into which he seems headed. What is shrouded by those darknesses? What is the

meaning of this tiny, intervening spot of light which is his earthly existence? In the face of these mysteries man's capacities are at once immense and severely circumscribed. His knowledge though impressive and expanding will never in all likelihood match what he needs to know. Not even the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of all his species will suffice. The ultimate questions will in all probability remain.

In the 1950s a Nigerian microbiologist, Dr. Sanya Onabamiro, published a book which he entitled, with great perspicacity, *Why Our Children Die*, echoing what must have been one of the most poignant and heartrending questions asked by our ancestors down the millennia. Why do our children die? Being a modern scientist Dr. Onabamiro gave appropriate twentieth-century answers: disease, undernourishment and ignorance. Every reasonable person will accept that this "scientific" answer is more satisfactory than answers we might be given from other quarters. For example, a witch doctor might tell us that our children die because they are bewitched; because someone else in the family has offended a god or, in some other secret way, erred. Some years ago I watched the pitiful spectacle of an emaciated little child brought out and sat on a mat in the midst of the desperate *habitués* of a prayer-house while the prophetess with maniacal authority pronounced it possessed by the devil and ordered its parents to fast for seven days.

The point of these examples is to suggest two things: first, the richness, the sheer prodigality, of man's inventiveness in creating aetiological fictions; second, that not all his fictions are equally useful or desirable.

But first of all I must explain my temerity in thus appearing to lump together under the general rubric of fictions the cool, methodical and altogether marvellous procedures of

modern medicine with the erratic "visions" of a religious psychopath. In all truth, the two ought never to be mentioned in the same breath. And yet they share, however remotely it may seem, the same need of man to explain and alleviate his intolerable condition. And they both make use of theories of disease—the germ theory, on the one hand, and the theory of diabolical possession, on the other. And theories are no more than fictions which help us to make sense of experience and which are subject to disconfirmation when their explanations are no longer adequate. There is no doubt, for instance, that scientists in the twenty-first and later centuries will look at some of the most cherished scientific notions of our day with the same amused indulgence that we show towards the fumbings of past generations.

And yet we can say, indeed we must say, that the insights given by Dr. Onabamiro into the problem of high infant mortality, however incomplete future generations may find them, are infinitely more helpful to us than the diagnosis of a half-mad religious fanatic. In conclusion, there are fictions that help and fictions that hinder. For simplicity, let us call them beneficent and malignant fictions.

What is it then about fictions—good or bad—that makes them so appealing? Why does man have to take leave of reality in order to ease his passage through the real world? What lies behind this apparent paradox? Why is the imagination so powerful that it lures us so constantly away from the animal existence that our physical senses will impose on us?

Let me frame these questions somewhat differently so that we may not fly off at a tangent and get lost altogether in the heady clouds of abstraction.

Why does Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* offer us a better, stronger and more memorable insight into the

problem of excess than all the sermons and editorials we have heard and read, or will hear and read, on the same subject?

The reason is that while editorials and other preachments may tell us all about excess, Tutuola performs the miracle of transforming us into active participants in a powerful drama of the imagination in which excess in all its guises takes on flesh and blood. Afterwards we can no longer act as hearers only of the word; we are initiates; we have made our visit; we have encountered ourselves in the Drinkard in much the same way as the Drinkard has encountered himself in the course of a corrective quest—albeit unknowingly—in that preposterous clump of unpleasantness that is his own son, the half-bodied baby. The encounter like much else in the novel is made unforgettable for us because of Tutuola's inventiveness not only in revealing the variety of human faces that excess may wear, but also in his deft exploration of the moral and philosophical consequences of breaching, through greed, the law of reciprocity which informs like a gravitational force the seemingly aberratic motions of his bizarre, fictive universe.

This self-encounter which I consider the major source of the potency and success of beneficent fictions may be defined also as imaginative identification. Things are then not merely happening before us; they are happening, by the power and force of imaginative identification, to us. We not only see; we *suffer* alongside the hero and are branded with the same mark of "punishment and poverty," to use Tutuola's familiar phrase.

Thus, without having to undergo personally the ordeals which the Drinkard has to suffer in atonement for his idleness and lack of self-control we become, through an act of our imagination, beneficiaries of his regenerative adventure.

That we are able to do this is one of the greatest boons to our reflective humanity—the capacity to experience *directly* the highway on which we are embarked and also, *vicariously*, "the road not taken," as Robert Frost might say.

Given our questioning nature the end of which is discovery, and given our existential limitations especially the vastness of our ignorance, one can begin to appreciate the immeasurable blessing that our imagination could confer on us. It is a truism and a cliché that experience is the best teacher; it is even arguable whether we can truly *know* anything which we have not personally experienced. But our imagination can narrow the existential gap by giving us in a wide range of human situations the closest approximation to experience that we are ever likely to get, and sometimes the safest too, as anyone who has travelled on Nigerian roads can tell you! For it is hardly desirable to be run over by a car in order to *know* that automobiles are dangerous. We can learn from that battered corpse by the roadside; not simply by observing it but by creating the chastening fiction *that we are it*, that the corpse of another man is *not*, as an Igbo proverb would have it, a log of wood, but ourselves. (Except that on further reflection that proverb is not in fact the outrageous thing I have just said. Another man's corpse *seems to us* like a log of wood, is what it says—a rather different matter and a very sad reflection on our impaired imagination, on our malfunctioning powers of identification with the plight of our fellows.)

Life is short and art is long, said the ancients. We can mitigate the brevity of the one with the longevity of the other. This is why human societies have always attempted to sustain their cultural values by carefully preserved oral or written literatures which provide for them and their posterity

Mistaken
distinction
146 history,
poetry

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a short cut now and again to the benefits of actual experience. What about history, you might ask, does it not vouchsafe the same enlightenment? The lessons of history are important, of course. But think how many aeons of history will be needed to distil the wisdom of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. And in any case, what great solace can many of us recent colonials derive from an effective history which is so nasty, British and short?

For a society to function smoothly and effectively its members must share certain basic tenets of belief and norms of behaviour. There must be a reasonable degree of consensus on what is meant by virtue and vice; there must be some agreement on the attributes of a hero, on what constitutes the heroic act. Different societies will not hold identical ideas on these questions in every part of the world or at every time in history. And yet, in spite of local and historical variations, we do not know of any society which has survived and flourished on totally arbitrary notions of good and evil, or of the heroic and the cowardly. Our very humanity seems to be committed to a distinction between these pairs however fuzzy the line may sometimes appear. But a society, like an individual, can sicken or become unhinged mentally, as in the phenomenon of mass hysteria which is well known. There are, of course, quieter and less dramatic symptoms of social pathology. Vulgar ostentation, callousness, disorderliness, filth and shoddiness are clear signs of disease. What is the cure? More exhortations? I think not.

The great virtue of literary fiction is that it is able by engaging our imagination to lead us "to discovery and recognition by an unexpected and instructive route,"³ in the words of Kermode. It helps us locate again the line between the heroic and the cowardly when it seems most shadowy and

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elusive, and it does this by forcing us to encounter the heroic and the cowardly in our own psyche.

How often do we hear people say, "Oh I don't have the time to read novels," implying that fiction is frivolous? They would generally add—lest you consider them illiterate—that they read histories or biographies, which they presume to be more appropriate to serious-minded adults. Such people are to be pitied; they are like a six-cylinder car which says: Oh, I can manage all right on three sparking-plugs, thank you very much. Well, it can manage somehow but it will sound like an asthmatic motorcycle!

The life of the imagination is a vital element of our total nature. If we starve it or pollute it the quality of our life is depressed or soiled.

We must not, however, celebrate the beauties of imagination and the beneficent fictions that are spun in its golden looms without mentioning the terrible danger to which it can be exposed.

Belief in superior and inferior races; belief that some people who live across our frontiers or speak a different language from ourselves are the cause of all the trouble in the world, or that our own particular group or class or caste has a right to certain things which are denied to others; the belief that men are superior to women, and so on—all are fictions generated by the imagination. What then makes them different from the beneficent fiction for which I am making rather large claims? One might reply: By their fruits, ye shall know them. Logically that may be a good answer, but strategically it is inadequate. For it might imply that Hitler should first commit genocide before we can conclude that racism is a horrendous evil, or that South Africa should go up in flames to confirm it. So we must find a criterion with an alarm

system that screams red whenever we begin to spin virulent fictions.

Such an early-warning system is ready to hand and really quite simple. You remember the example of the children at play, how they preface their little drama by saying, "Let us pretend." What distinguishes beneficent fiction from such malignant cousins as racism is that the first never forgets that it is fiction and the other never knows that it is. Literary fiction does not ask us to believe, for instance, that the Palm-Wine Drinkard actually drank one hundred and fifty kegs of palm wine every morning and seventy-five kegs in the evening, that he underwent the adventure so vividly described in the novel or indeed that he even existed. And yet reading the novel explains so much to us and affects radically the way we perceive the world thereafter.

Malignant fictions like racial superiority, on the other hand, never say, "Let us pretend." They assert their fictions as a proven fact and a way of life. Holders of such fictions are really like lunatics, for while a sane person might act a play now and again, a madman lives it permanently. Some people would describe malignant fictions as myths, but I find no justification for soiling the reputation of myths in that way. I would prefer to call malignant fictions by their proper name, which is superstitions. But whatever we call them, it is essential to draw a clear distinction between beneficent fiction and any arbitrary nonsense emanating from a sick imagination. Watching a magician and marvelling at his sleight of hand and management of optical tricks is something quite different from seeing him and *believing* that his powers derive from midnight visits to cemeteries or from reading the Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses. Beneficent fiction operates

within the bounds of imagination; superstition breaks the bounds and ravages the real world.

We are totally wrong when we imagine that self-centredness is smart. It is actually very stupid, an indication that we lack enough imagination to recreate in ourselves the thoughts that must go on in the minds of others, especially those we dispossess. A person who is insensitive to the suffering of his fellows is that way because he lacks the imaginative power to get under the skin of another human being and see the world through eyes other than his own. History and fiction are replete with instances of correlation between indifference and lack of imagination. Think of the aristocratic lady who was driving home to her estate one winter evening and saw through the shutterless windows of a wretched hut a boy shivering in rags.

Moved to pity, she said to her coachman, "Remark that hut, for as soon as I get home I must send warm things to that poor boy."

When she got home and sat in front of a huge, crackling fire her coachman came to her and said, "Madam, about the poor boy . . ."

"Oh, but it's nice and warm again," she replied.

Think of the Queen of France before the French Revolution who was told that the people had no bread to eat and she said, "Well, let them eat cake." It is generally thought that she was a heartless monster. More likely she was only a pathetic, stupid woman who genuinely believed that if people were out of bread they should be able to manage with cake until they could stock up again.

Privilege, you see, is one of the great adversaries of the imagination; it spreads a thick layer of adipose tissue over our sensitivity.

We see the same deadening of consciousness all around us today at all levels—personal, communal, national and international. Not so long ago I saw a startling sight right under a multi-million-*naira* flyover in Lagos. A beggar was crouching in the middle of the road scooping something into a bowl while furious cars dodged him on all sides. As we got close I realized that the brownish-white stuff he was collecting was not pure sand but a mixture of sand and salt. A salt bag must have fallen out of a van and broken there and he had come on the scene rather late. The friend driving me said, "This is one Nigerian whom the oil boom missed." I could not get over the gigantic, almost crude, irony of that scene: the multi-million-dollar modern bridge overhead, a beggar defying instant death to scoop sand into a bowl for his soup. I recalled a poem I had just received for the *Okike* magazine, "The Romance of Beggars":

We want risk capital
Not beggars
Social overhead capital
Not a begging bowl
Don't rattle it
Don't rattle your begging bowl in
this economy.

Later, in another sequence of the same poem, a hot-blooded beggar, living as many do in Lagos, prehistorically in concrete caves below modern bridges, gives out this invitation:

Come here into the hollow of my conscience
I will show you a thing or two
I will show you the heat of my love.
You know what?

I can give you babies too
Real leaders of tomorrow
Right here under the bridge
I can give you real leaders of thought.

I don't think that elegant Miss Nigeria will have the imagination or conscience to explore the possibilities of that encounter. She will dodge the rude beggar and speed away in her expensive car to a sterile assignation with her bloated Mr. Overhead Capital.

No, indifference to suffering is not clever at all. The late Hannah Arendt showed real perceptiveness when she called her study of the psychology of totalitarianism *The Banality of Evil*.

Imaginative identification is the opposite of indifference; it is human connectedness at its most intimate. It is one step better than the golden rule: Do unto others . . . Our sense of that link is the great social cement that really holds, and it will manifest itself in fellow-feeling, justice and fair play. My theory of the uses of fiction is that beneficent fiction calls into full life our total range of imaginative faculties and gives us a heightened sense of our personal, social and human reality. One thing that worries one above all else in the frenetic materialism that pervades our contemporary life is that as a species we may be losing the Open Sesame to the *mundo* of fiction—that ability to say "Let us pretend" like grace before our act; and to say "Our revels now are ended" like a benediction when we have finished—and yet to draw from this insubstantial pageant essential insights and wisdoms for making our way in the real world. The supple articulation of our imagination seems, alas, to be hardening rapidly into the sclerotic rigidity of literal-mindedness and material concerns.

An English friend, a marvellous raconteur at dinner, had just told a group of us of an anxious flight he and his wife recently made from the Far East when it occurred to his wife to ask him, by the way, if he had taken out flight insurance on that trip. "Oh yes," he replied blithely, "if the plane had crashed we would have been the richest couple in the cemetery." A few days later I repeated the joke to a doctor friend, who retorted promptly and unsmilingly that the money would have been paid to their next of kin. I thought: Oh my God, what a fate to befall the descendants of those incomparable fabulists who made our great oral traditions!

And I began to think of that other and far more serious experience which I had. I wrote a social satire called *A Man of the People*, which was published in January 1966, as fate would have it, two days after Nigeria's first military coup. Because the novel ends also with a military coup a certain degree of surprise and conjecture and, I might add, admiration was inevitable among my readers. What was not inevitable, however, was the theory which grew apparently during the civil war in certain quarters that because I wrote the novel I must have been one of the planners of the military coup. Long after the civil war I was questioned rather closely on this matter after I had given a lecture in one of our universities. Rather annoyed, I asked my questioner if he had read the book and he said vaguely yes. Did he remember, I asked him then, that before the coup in my story there was first a blatant rigging of an election, civil commotion in the land, murder and arson, which happened to be paralleled also by similar events in Nigeria before the January coup. Was he suggesting that I too planned those upheavals in Ibadan and elsewhere? Did he remember that my story specifically mentions a counter-coup, a prophecy which, alas,

was also fulfilled in Nigeria in July 1966. Was he suggesting that I sat in on the planning of that as well? In general, did he think that a group of dissident army officers planning to overthrow their government would invite a novelist to sit in on their plot, go back to their barracks and wait for two years while the novelist wrote up the book, had it edited and produced by his publishers, and only then spring into action and effect their coup to coincide with the book's publication? Such a theory might have been excusable in 1966 for the armed soldiers who had gone in search of me first to my office and then, fortunately, to a house I had already vacated. How could they know that the offending book had taken two years to write and publish? But a university teacher in 1977!

This lengthy personal anecdote would not be necessary if it did not show more clearly than almost anything I have direct experience of how easy it is for us to short-circuit the power of our imagination by our own act of will. For when a desperate man wishes to believe something however bizarre or stupid, nobody can stop him. He will discover in his imagination a willing and enthusiastic accomplice. Together they will weave the necessary fiction which will then bind him securely to his cherished intention.

The fiction which imaginative literature offers us is not like that. It does not enslave; it liberates the mind of man. Its truth is not like the canons of an orthodoxy or the irrationality of prejudice and superstition. It begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and humane conscience.

(
Herald
Fraser