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The Power of Lies

"Things are not as we see them but as we remember them", wrote the Spanish novelist and playwright Valle Inclán. He was undoubtedly referring to the way things are in literature, that spurious world which acquires a precarious sense of reality through the persuasive powers of the good writer and a certain readiness to accept on the part of the good reader.

For almost every writer, memory is the starting point of the imagination; it is the springboard which precipitates it on its indeterminate journey towards fictions. In creative literature, that which emanates from the memory and that which is invented are so inextricably interwoven that it is often quite impossible even for the author to distinguish one from the other; and although he may claim otherwise, he knows that any attempt to recuperate lost time through a work of literature can never be more than mere pretence, a work of fiction in which memories merge into fantasies and vice versa.

That is why literature is the domain *par excellence* of ambiguity. It is always subjective; it deals in half truths, relative truths, literary truths which frequently constitute flagrant historical inaccuracies or even lies. Although the almost cinematographic description of the battle of Waterloo which features in *Les Misérables* may exalt us, we are aware that this was a contest fought and won by Victor Hugo, and not the one lost by Napoleon. Or — to cite a Valencian medieval classic which has just celebrated its fifth hundredth birthday — the conquest of England by the Moors described in *Tirant to Blanc* is totally convincing, and no one would think of questioning its credibility with the petty argument that historically no Moorish army ever crossed the English Channel.

The reconstruction of the past through literature is almost always misleading in terms of historical objectivity. Literary truth is one thing, historical truth another. But, although it may be full of fabrication — or for that very reason — literature presents us with a side of history which cannot be found in history books. For literature does not lie gratuitously— all its deceits, devices, and hyperbole only serve to express those deep-seated and disturbing truths which only come to light in this oblique way.

When Johannot Martorell relates in *Tirant to Blanc* that a Princess had such white skin that one could see the wine going down her throat, he is telling us something technically impossible, and yet, captivated by the

author's magic, we accept it as an incontrovertible truth because, in the simulated world of the novel (unlike what happens in real life), excess is never the exception, always the rule. Nothing appears excessive if everything is.

In *Tirant*, for instance, there are apocalyptic battles fought with a punctilious sense of ritual, and the exploits of the hero who, single-handed, routs the mob and literally ravages half Christendom and the whole of Islam. There are comic rituals too, as demonstrated by that pious and lustful character who kisses women three times on the mouth in homage to the Holy Trinity. Everywhere we find excess — as with war, love too has generally cataclysmic consequences. Tirant, when he sees Carmesina's swelling breasts for the first time in the half-light of the funeral chamber becomes nothing less than cataleptic, collapsing on a bed where he remains without sleeping or eating or uttering a single word for several days. When he finally recovers, it is as if he were learning to speak again. The first words he stammers out are: "Yo amo". "I am in love".

These fictitious events do not tell us what the Valencians were really like at the end of the 15th century, but how they would have liked to have been and what they would have liked to have done; they do not depict the characters of flesh and blood who actually lived in those terrible times, but merely ghosts that haunted them. It is their insatiable appetites, their fears and cravings, their grudges, which are brought to life. In a successful work of fiction it is the individual's experience of an age which comes to life, and that is why novels, although, when compared with history, they may be full of fabrication, none the less communicate to us certain transitory, evanescent truths which always defy purely scientific descriptions of reality. Only literature has the powers and techniques at its disposal to distill the delicate elixir of life: the truth that lies hidden at the heart of the human imagination.

Let us examine a concrete example of all this, in Latin America. As you probably know, the novel was forbidden in the Spanish colonies during the Inquisition. The Inquisitors considered this literary genre, the novel, to be as dangerous for the spiritual faith of the Indians as for the moral and political behaviour of society, and, of course, they were absolutely right. We novelists must be grateful to the Spanish Inquisition for having discovered before any critic did the inevitably subversive nature of fiction. The prohibition included reading and publishing novels in the colonies. There was no way to naturally avoid a great number of novels being smuggled into our countries; and we know, for example, that the first copies of *Don Quixote* entered America hidden in barrels of wine. We can only dream with envy about what kind of experience it was in those times in Spanish America to read a novel — a sinful adventure in which for the sake

of abandoning yourself to an imaginary world you had to be prepared to face prison and humiliation.

Novels were not published in Spanish America until after the wars of independence. The first, *El periquillo sarniento* (*The Itching Parrot*), appeared in Mexico in 1816. Although for three centuries the novel was banned, the goal of the Inquisitors — a society free from influence of fiction — was not achieved. They did not realize that the realm of fiction was larger and deeper than that of the novel. Nor could they imagine that the appetite for lies, that is, for escaping objective reality through illusions, was so powerful and so deeply rooted in the human spirit that, once the novel could not be used to satisfy it, all other disciplines and genres in which ideas could freely flow would be used as a substitute — history, religion, poetry, science, art, speeches, journalism, and the daily habits of the people. Thus by repressing and censoring the literary genre specifically invented to give the necessity of lying a place in the city, the Inquisitors achieved the exact opposite of their intentions.

We are still victims in Latin America of what we could call the revenge of the novel. We still have great difficulty in our countries differentiating between fiction and reality. We are traditionally accustomed to mixing them in such a way that this is probably one of the reasons why we are so impractical and inept in political matters, for instance. But some good also came from this novelization of our whole life. Books like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Cortázar's short stories, and Isabel Allende's or Roa Bastos' novels would not have been possible otherwise.

As a matter of fact, the tradition from which this kind of literature sprang, in which we are exposed to a world totally reconstructed and subverted by fantasy, started in Latin America before the prohibition of the novel, with the first written texts of our literature: the chronicles of the conquest and discovery. They constitute a very special literary genre.

History and literature, truth and falsehood, reality and fiction mingle in these texts in a way that is often inextricable. The thin demarcation line that separates one from the other frequently fades away so that both worlds are entwined in a completeness which the more ambiguous it is the more seductive it becomes, because the likely and the unlikely in it seem to be part of the same substance. Right in the middle of the most cruel battle, the Virgin appears, who, taking the believer's side, charges against the unlucky pagans. The shipwrecked conquistador, Pedro Serrano, on a tiny island in the Caribbean, actually lives out the story of Robinson Crusoe that a novelist invented centuries later. The Amazons of Greek mythology became materialized by the banks of the river baptized with their arrows, one arrow landing in Fray Gaspar de Carvajal's buttocks, the man who meticulously narrated this event. Is that episode more fabulous than

another, probably historically correct, in which the poor soldier, Manso de Leguizamo, loses in one night of dice-playing the solid gold wall of the Temple of the Sun in Cuzco that was given to him in the spoils of war? Or more fabulous perhaps than the unutterable outrages always committed with a smile by the rebel Francisco de Carvajal, that octogenarian devil of the Andes who merrily began to sing "Oh mother, my poor little curly hairs the wind is taking them away one by one", as he was being taken to the gallows, where he was to be quartered, beheaded, and burned?

The chronicle, a hermaphrodite genre, is distilling fiction into life all the time as in Borges' tale "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius". Does this mean that its testimony must be challenged from a historical point of view and accepted only as literature? Not at all. Its exaggerations and fantasies often reveal more about the reality of the era than its truths. Astonishing miracles from time to time enliven the tedious pages of the *Crónica moralizada*, the exemplary chronicle of Father Calancha, sulphurous outrages come from the male and female demons, fastidiously catechized in the Indian Villages by the extirpators of idolaters like Father Arriaga, to justify the devastations of idols, amulets, handicrafts, and tombs. This teaches more about the innocence, fanaticism, and stupidity of the time than the wisest of treatises.

As long as one knows how to read them, everything is contained in these pages written sometimes by men who hardly knew how to write and who were impelled by the unusual nature of contemporary events to try to communicate and register them for posterity, thanks to an intuition of the privilege they enjoyed, that of being the witnesses and actors of events that were changing the world. As they wrote under the passion of recently lived experience, they often related things that to us seem like naïve or cynical fantasies. For the people of the time, this was not so; they were phantoms that credulity, surprise, fear, and hatred had endowed with a solidity and vitality often more powerful than beings made of flesh and blood.

There is nothing deceptive about the deceits of literature; at least, there shouldn't be. Only simpletons who believe that literature must be objectively faithful to life and as dependent on reality as history is, might think so. There is no deception, because when we open a work of fiction, we adjust our minds to participate in a performance where we know very well that the extent to which we are moved or bored will depend exclusively on the narrator's talent to captivate us and draw us into the world of his imagination — making us accept and experience his lies as if they were the truth — and not on his ability to reproduce faithfully what actually happened.

These well-defined boundaries between literature and history — between literary truth and historical truth — are a prerogative of open societies. There they exist side by side, independently and in their own right,

although complementing each other in a Utopian attempt to encompass the whole of life. And perhaps the most effective proof of an open society, in the sense Karl Popper used the term, is when the following occurs: when literature and history co-exist autonomously without either encroaching on the territory or usurping the role of the other.

In closed societies the exact opposite occurs. And perhaps the best way of defining a closed society would be to say that in such a society, history and fiction have ceased to be two separate entities; they have become muddled up, each taking the other's place and swapping identities as at a masked ball.

In a closed society the authorities not only assume the right to control men's actions, what they do and what they say. They also aim to control their imagination, their dreams and aspirations — and, of course, their memory. In a closed society, sooner or later the past becomes subject to a sort of manipulation specially designed to justify the present. The official version of history, the only one tolerated, is the setting for those extraordinary *volte-faces* made famous by the Soviet Encyclopaedia in pre-Gorbachov times. Protagonists appear and disappear without trace according to whether they have been redeemed or purged by the authorities; and the exploits of past heroes and villains alter, with every new edition, in sign, valency, and substance in accordance with the requirements of the dictatorial élite of the moment. This is a practice which modern totalitarianism has perfected but not invented; it dates back as far as the dawn of civilization, which, let us not forget, until relatively recently was always despotic and dictatorial.

To organize the collective memory, to turn history into an instrument of the government whose role it is to legitimise whoever is in power and find alibis for their crimes, is a temptation inherent in all authority. Totalitarian states can make it a reality. In the past countless civilizations put it into practice.

Take my ancient compatriots, the Incas, for example. They effected it in a brutal and theatrical manner. When the Emperor died, not only did his wives and concubines die with him, but also the court intellectuals who were known as *Amautas* or wise men. Their talents were essentially applied to performing the following little conjuring trick: creating history out of fiction. The new Inca would come to power with a brand new court of *Amautas* responsible for renewing the official records, revising the past, by bringing it up-to-date so to speak, so that all the accomplishments, conquests, feats of engineering or architecture, etc., which were previously attributed to his predecessor, would from now on be transferred to the new Emperor's personal record of achievements. Gradually his predecessors would be forgotten — lost in oblivion.

The Incas knew how to put the past to good use, turning it into literature, so that it could contribute towards the stabilisation of the present, the ultimate ideal of any dictatorship. They prohibited personal accounts of what happened because they had, by definition, to be at odds with an official account which was of necessity coherent and irrefutable. The result is that the Inca Empire is a society without a history, at least without any anecdotal history; for no one has been able to reconstruct with any degree of reliability a past which has been so systematically dressed up and undressed like a professional striptease artist.

In a closed society history becomes steeped in fiction, and so it actually becomes a work of fiction, because it is constantly being written and rewritten to serve religious orthodoxy or contemporary political theory; or, even more crudely, in accordance with the whims of the ruling power.

At the same time, a strict system of censorship is usually introduced so that imaginative literature is kept within narrow limits, so that its subjective truths do not contradict or cast aspersions on the official version of history, but rather popularise and illustrate it. The difference between historical truth and literary truth disappears and the two become fused into a sort of hybrid which imbues history with a sense of unreality and empties fiction of any mystery, originality, or spirit of non-conformity it may have towards the establishment.

I am talking, of course, of written history. Is lived history a different matter? What are the similarities and antagonisms between the real history and the faked history which fiction is? In Karl Popper's conception, lived history has no order, logic, meaning, and above all, no rational direction that sociologists, economists or ideologists could scientifically detect in advance. Historians organize history; they make it coherent and intelligible, through the use of points of view and interpretations that are always partial, provisional, and ultimately as subjective as the artistic constructions. Whoever believes that one of the functions of social sciences is to "predict" the future, to "foretell" history is the victim of an illusion, for this objective is unattainable.

What, then, is history? A multiple and permanent improvisation, an animated chaos to which historians give an appearance of order, an almost infinite contradictory proliferation of events that social sciences, to understand them, reduced to arbitrary schemes, syntheses and courses that always turn out to be a very pale version and even a caricature of the real history, that vertiginous totality of human activity always extending beyond the rational and intellectual attempts of understanding. Popper does not reject history books nor does he deny that knowledge of the past can enrich men and better equip them to face the future. He asks us to bear in mind that all written history is partial and arbitrary for it reflects solely

one atom of that unfinished universe that is our social task and social experience, that "whole" continuously making and remaking itself that does not exhaust itself in the political, economic, cultural, institutional, religious, and so on, but embraces all the manifestations of human reality, without exception. This history, the only real, total one, cannot be comprised and described by human knowledge.

What we understand by history, says Popper, is generally the history of power politics, which is nothing but "the history of international crime and mass murders (including, it is true, some of the attempts to suppress them)". The record of conquests, crimes, and other acts of violence committed by *caudillos* and despots whom books have turned into heroes cannot but give a pale idea of the integral experience of those who suffered or enjoyed the events, and of the effects and reverberations that the actions of each culture, society, civilization had on its contemporaries and had collectively on communities that followed. If the history of humanity is a vast current of development and progress with meanders, regressions and stagnations (a thesis Popper does not refute), it cannot, in any case, be embraced in its infinite diversity and complexity.

Those who have tried to uncover, in this endless disorder, certain laws to which this human development would be tied — Popper calls them "the historicists" — have perpetrated what for the author of *The Open Society and its Enemies* is perhaps the greatest crime a politician or intellectual can commit (not an artist, for whom this is a legitimate right): they have created an "unreal construction", an artificial entelechy aspiring to present itself as scientific truth when it is just an act of faith, a magical or metaphysical proposal. Naturally, not all theories of the "historicists" are equivalent. Some, like Marx's, have greater subtlety and weight than, say, Arnold Toynbee's (who reduced the history of mankind to twenty-one civilizations, no more, no less). But all of them belong to the realm of fiction, not of science.

Popper's concept of written history is identical to what has always been my idea of the novel: that it is an arbitrary organization of human reality that protects men from the anguish produced by their intuition of the world, of life, as a vast disorder.

Any novel, to possess persuasive power, must impose itself on the reader's conscience as a convincing, ordered construction, an organized and intelligible world, whose parts are linked to each other inside a harmonic system, a "whole" which relates and sublimates them. What we call the genius of Tolstoi, Henry James, Proust, Faulkner, does not only arise from the vigour of their characters, the morose psychology, the subtle or labyrinthic prose, the powerful imagination, but also, from the architectonic coherence of their fictitious worlds, the way they seem so solid and

well constructed. That rigorous and intelligible order, where life follows a logical and inevitable path, where all the manifestations of the human race are available, seduces us because it reassures us: unconsciously we superimpose it on the real world and this one, then, temporarily ceases to be vertigo, disorder, bottomless absurdity and chaos, multiple confusion, and becomes coherent, rational and ordered, granting us back that confidence which man only with great difficulty resigns himself to giving up: that of knowing what he is, where he is, and above all, where he is going.

It is not by chance that the moments of novelistic apogee have preceded the great historical upheavals, that the most fertile times for fiction are those when the collective and ideological "consensus" crumbles or is overturned, for it is then the common man feels lost, without solid ground under his feet, and takes refuge in fiction — in the coherence and order of the fictitious world — from dispersion and confusion, that insecurity and sum of unknowns life has become. Nor is it by chance that it is those societies undergoing the most acute social, institutional and moral disintegration which have given birth to the most strict, rigorous, organized and logical narrative "orders": those of writers like Sade, Kafka, Proust, Joyce, Dostojewski and Tolstoy. Those constructions, where the free will is radically exercised, are imaginative transgressions of the limits imposed by the human condition — symbolic decisions — and secretly constitute (as do Herodotus' *Nine Books of History*, Michelet's *History of the French Revolution*, or Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, those prodigies of erudition, ambition, good prose and fantasy) testimonies of the blind terror created in men by the suspicion that their destiny is a "feat of freedom". They also attest to the formidable intellectual creations with which, at different times, in different ways, they have tried to deny it. Fortunately, the fear of admitting their condition of free beings has not only produced tyrants, totalitarian philosophies, dogmatic religions, "historicism", but also, great novels.

Lies are, then, indispensable in human life. Mankind couldn't cope with existence without them. They provide order when life seems a chaos and they permit us to extend vicariously the limits of our condition through the lives of the heroes of the fictions we invent to enrich the real world with the colours of our desires and imagination. But for lies to accomplish this positive and benign function it is essential for us to be able to identify them for what they are, and not to take them for objective truths. Otherwise they could be extremely negative and destructive.

To condemn history to tell lies and literature to propagate facts specially concocted by the authorities is no obstacle to the scientific or technological development of a country or the establishment of certain social justice. For example, it seems to have been proved that the Inca period — an extra-

ordinary achievement for its time and for ours — put an end to hunger: everyone in the Empire had enough to eat. And modern totalitarian societies have placed great impetus on education, medicine, sport, and employment, making them accessible to the majority of the people, something which open societies, despite their widespread prosperity, have not yet succeeded in doing, for the price of the freedom they enjoyed is paid for sometimes by enormous inequalities of wealth — and even worse — inequalities of opportunity amongst their members.

But when a State, in its zeal to control and decide everything, deprives human beings of the right to create freely and believe whatever lies they choose to believe, when it appropriates that right and exercises it like a monopoly through its historians or censors — as the Incas did through their *Amautas* — one of the great nerve centres of life is destroyed. And men and women suffer a sort of mutilation which impoverishes their existence even when their basic needs are taken care of.

Because the real world, the material world, has never been adequate, and never will be, to fulfill human desires. And without that essential dissatisfaction with life which is both exacerbated and at the same time assuaged by the lies of literature, there can never be any genuine progress.

The gift of the imagination with which we are all endowed is a diabolic one. It constantly opens up the abyss between what we are and what we would like to be, between what we have and what we covet.

But it has also produced an ingenious and gentle palliative to relieve the pain of the inevitable breach between our boundless desires and our practical limitations: fiction. Thanks to fiction we can grow and diversify without losing our basic identities. We can immerse ourselves in it, proliferate, living out many more lives than the ones we have, and many more than we would be able to were we to remain confined to reality without ever venturing out of the prison of history.

Men cannot live by truth alone; they also need lies — those they invent of their accord, not those foisted on them by others; those that emerge undisguised, not those that insinuate themselves through the trappings of history. Fiction enriches life, complements it, and offers fleeting compensation for man's tragic condition: that of always wanting and dreaming of more than he can realistically attain.

When literature is allowed to supply this alternative life, unimpeded, without any constraints except the limitations of the creator, then it extends the range of human experience by adding that dimension to it which nourishes our inner life — that intangible, elusive yet invaluable one we experience only vicariously.

It is a right we must defend without shame. Because to play a game of lies, as the author of a work of fiction does with his reader — lies writers

invent according to their own personal demons — is a way of asserting individual sovereignty and defending it when it is threatened. It is a way of preserving one's own sphere of freedom, a bastion beyond the control of the authorities, protected from the interference of others, inside which we are truly the masters of our own destinies.

And from that freedom other freedoms are born. Those private havens, the subjective truths of literature, give historical truth, their counterpart, a viable existence and a function of its own: that of recovering an important part — but only a part — of our past. ... those moments of glory and wretchedness we share with others in our capacity as ordinary human beings. And there is no substitute for historical truth— it is indispensable if we are to know what we were and what we may become in terms of human society. But what we are as individuals, what we wanted to be and could not really be and therefore had to be in our dreams and imaginations — that secret side of our history — only literature can relate. That is why Balzac remarked that fiction was "the private history of nations".

By its very existence, it is a terrible indictment of life under any regime or ideology: a flagrant testimony of the inadequacies, the inability of such systems to fulfill us ... and therefore a permanent antidote to all authority that attempts to keep men content and compliant. The lies of literature, if they are allowed to flourish freely, are proof to us that this never was the case. And they are a permanent source of intrigue which ensures that it never will in the future.