October 7, 1984

Is Fiction the Art of Living?

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EVER since I wrote my first short story, people have asked if what I wrote 'was true.' Though my replies sometimes satisfy their curiosity, I am left each time, no matter how sincere my answer, with a nagging sense of having said something that's not quite on target.

Whether novels are accurate or false is as important to certain people as whether they're good or bad, and many readers, consciously or unconsciously, link the two together. The Spanish Inquisitors, for example, prohibited novels from being published or imported in the Hispano-American colonies, claiming that those nonsensical, absurd books - untruthful, that is - could be harmful to the spiritual health of the Indians. Thus, for 300 years, Hispano-Americans read only contraband works of fiction, and the first novel published as such in Spanish America did not appear until after Independence (1816, in Mexico). The Holy Office, in banning not only specific works but a literary genre in general, established what in its eyes was a law without exception: novels always lie, they all present a false view of life. Some years ago, I wrote a piece ridiculing those arbitrary fanatics. I now believe that the Spanish Inquisitors were the first to understand - before critics and even novelists - the nature of fiction and its subversive tendencies. Text:

In fact, novels do lie - they can't help doing so - but that's only one part of the story. The other is that, through lying, they express a curious truth, which can only be expressed in a veiled and concealed fashion, masquerading as what it is not. This statement has the ring of gibberish. But actually it's quite simple. Men are not content with their lot and nearly all - rich or poor, brilliant or mediocre, famous or obscure - would like to have a life different from the one they lead. To (cunningly) appease this appetite, fiction was born. It is written and read to provide human beings with lives they're unresigned to not having. The germ of every novel contains an element of non-resignation and desire.

Does this mean that a novel is synonymous with unreality? That Conrad's introspective pirates, Proust's languid aristocrats, Kafka's anonymous, beleaguered little men and the erudite metaphysical characters in Borges's stories arouse or move us because they have nothing to do with us, and because it's impossible to identify their experiences with ours? Not at all. One must proceed cautiously, for this road - of truth and falsehood in the realm of fiction - is riddled with traps and any enticing oasis is usually a mirage.

What does it mean to say that a novel always lies? Not what the officers and cadets believed at the Leonicio Prado Military Academy where - seemingly, at least - my first novel, 'The Time of the Hero,' takes place, and where it was burned, accused of slandering the institution. Not what my first wife thought after having read another of my novels, 'Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter,' which she incorrectly construed as a portrait of herself, and which led her to publish a book purporting to restore the truth that had been altered by fiction. Both stories, of course, contain more inventions, deviations and exaggerations than memories, and at no point in writing them did I seek to be literally faithful to certain persons and events prior to and extraneous to the novel. In both instances, as in everything I've written, I began with experiences still vivid in my memory and stimulating to my imagination and then fantasized something that is an extremely unfaithful reflection of that material.
NOVELS aren't written to recount life but to transform it by adding something to it. In the novellas of the French writer Restif de la Bertonne, reality is as photographic as can be, a cataloguing of 18th-century French customs. And yet, within that utterly painstaking enumeration of customs, where everything resembles real life, there is something else, different, minimal and revolutionary - the fact that in this world men don't fall in love with women for the purity of their features, the grace of their body, their spiritual endowments etc. but exclusively for the beauty of their feet.

All novelists, less crudely, less explicitly and also less consciously, remake reality - embellishing it or diminishing it - as did the prodigious Restif with delightful ingenuousness. These subtle, or crude, additions to life - wherein the novelist materializes his obsessions - constitute the originality of a work of fiction. Its profundity depends on how fully it expresses a general need, and the number of readers, through time and space, who can identify their own obscure, haunting demons with those contraband infiltrations of life. Could I, in those novels of mine, have attempted an exact correlation with actual memories? Of course. But even if I had accomplished that tedious feat of simply narrating actual events and describing people whose biographies fit their models like a glove, my novels would not thereby have been any less truthful or untruthful than they are.

Anecdote is not what essentially determines the truth or falsehood of a work of fiction, but rather the idea that it be not lived but written, that it be made up of words and not live experiences. Events translated into words undergo a profound modification. The actuality - the gory battle I participated in, the Gothic profile of the girl I loved - that's one thing, whereas the signs that describe it are countless. By selecting some and discarding others, the novelist favors one and kills off infinite other possibilities or versions of what he's describing. The novelist therefore changes nature, what describes becomes what is described.

I am referring here only to the case of the realistic writer, that sect, school or tradition to which I belong, whose novels relate events that readers can recognize as plausible from their own experience of reality. It might, in fact, appear that the connection between reality and fiction isn't even an issue for the novelist of a fantastic vein, who describes irreconcilable and clearly nonexistent worlds. Actually, it is an issue, but in another way. The 'unreality' of fantastic literature becomes, for the reader, a symbol or allegory, in other words, a representation of realities, of experiences he can identify as being possible in life. What is important is this - the 'realistic' or 'fantastic' nature of an anecdote is not what marks the boundary line between truth and falsehood in fiction.

Along with this first modification - the imprint of words in events - there is another, no less fundamental: that of time. Real life flows without pause, lacks order, is chaotic, each story merging with all stories and hence never having a beginning or ending. Life in a work of fiction is a simulation in which that dizzying disorder achieves order, organization, cause and effect, beginning and end. The scope of a novel isn't determined merely by the language in which it's written but also by its temporal scheme, the manner in which existence transpires within it - its pauses and accelerations and the chronological perspective employed by the narrator to describe that narrated time.

Though there is a distance between words and events, there is always an abyss between real time and fictional time. Novelistic time is a device created to attain certain psychological effects. In it, the past can be subsequent to the present - effect preceding cause - as in the Alejo Carpentier story, 'Journey to the Seed,' which begins with the death of an old man and continues until his conception within the maternal womb. Or it can merely be a remote past that never actually dissolves into the recent past, the point from which the narrator is narrating, as in most classical novels. Or it can be an eternal present without either past or future, as in Samuel Beckett's fictional works. Or a labyrinth in which past, present and future coexist, annihilating each other, as in Faulkner's 'The Sound and the Fury.'

Novels have a beginning and an end and, even in the loosest and most disjointed ones, life takes on a discernible meaning, for we are presented with a perspective never provided by the real life in which we're immersed. This order is an invention, an addition of the novelist, that dissembler who appears to recreate life when, in fact, he is rectifying it. Fiction betrays life, sometimes subtly, sometimes brutally,
encapsulating it in a weft of words that reduce it in scale and place it within the reader's reach. Thus the reader can judge it, understand it and, above all, live it with an impunity not granted him in real life.

What difference is there, then, between a work of fiction and a journalistic report or a history book? Aren't they too compose of words? And don't they, within the artificial time of the account, encapsulate that shoreless torrent, real time? It's a question of opposing systems in the approach to what is real: the novel rebels against life and transgresses it, other genres are unceasingly its slave. The notion of truthfulness or deception functions differently in both instances. In journalism or history, it hinges on the correlation between what is written and the corresponding reality: the closer it is the truer, and the further away, the falser. To say that Michelet's 'History of the French Revolution' or Prescott's 'Conquest of Peru' is 'novelistic' is a criticism, an insinuation that they lack seriousness. Documenting the historical errors of 'War and Peace' with respect to the Napoleonic Wars would be a waste of time - the truth of the novel doesn't depend on facts.

On what, then, does it depend? On its own persuasive powers, on the sheer communicative strength of its fantasy, on the skill of its magic. Every good novel tells the truth and every bad novel lies. For a novel 'to tell the truth' means to make the reader experience an illusion, and 'to lie' means to be unable to accomplish that trickery. The novel, thus, is an amoral genre, or rather, its ethic is sui generis, one in which truth and falsehood are exclusively esthetic concepts.

My foregoing remarks might suggest that fiction is a gratuitous fabrication, a juggling devoid of transcendence. On the contrary, wild as it may be, fiction's roots are submerged in human experience, from which it derives sustenance and which it in turn nourishes. A recurrent theme in the history of fiction is the risk incurred in taking what novels say literally, in believing that life is the way novelists describe it to be. Books on chivalry addle Don Quixote's brain and set him on the road to spearing windmills, and Emma Bovary's tragedy would not have occurred if Flaubert's character had not attempted to be like th heroines of the romantic novels she reads.

By believing that reality is like fiction, Alonso Quijano and Emma Bovary undergo terrible upheavals. Do we condemn them for that? No, their stories move and awe us; that impossible determination to live fiction seems to personify for us an idealistic attitude that honors the species. To want to be different from the way one is is the human aspiration par excellence. It has engendered the best and worst in recorded history. Including works of fiction.

When we read novels, we aren't only who we are but, in addition, we are the bewitched beings into whose midst the novelist transfers us. The transfer is a metamorphosis - the asphyxiating constriction of our lives opens up and we sally forth to be others, to have vicarious experiences which fiction converts into our own. A wondrous dream, a fantasy incarnate, fiction completes us, mutilated beings burdened with the awful dichotomy of having only one life and the ability to desire a thousand. This gap between real life and the desires and fantasies demanding that it be richer and more varied is the realm of fiction.

At the heart of all fictional work there burns a protest. Their authors created them since they were unable to live them, and their readers (and believers) encounter in these phantom creatures the faces and adventures needed to enhance their own lives. That is the truth expressed by the lies in fiction - the lies that we ourselves are, the lies that console us and make up for our longings and frustrations. How trustworthy then is the testimony of a novel on the very society that produced it? Were those men really that way? They were, in the sense that that was how they wanted to be, how they envisioned themselves loving, suffering and rejoicing. Those lies do not document their lives but rather their driving demons - the dreams that intoxicated them and made the lives they led more tolerable. An era is not populated merely by flesh and blood creatures, but also by the phantom creatures into which they are transformed in order to break the barriers that confine them.

THE lies in novels are not gratuitous - they fill in the insufficiencies of life. Thus, when life seems full and absolute, and men, out of an all-consuming faith, are resigned to their destinies, novels perform no service
at all. Religious cultures produce poetry and theater, not novels. Fiction is an art of societies in which faith is undergoing some sort of crisis, in which it's necessary to believe in something, in which the unitarian, trusting and absolute vision has been supplanted by a shattered one and an uncertainty about the world we inhabit and the afterworld.

Every novel, aside from being amoral, harbors at its core a certain skepticism. When religious culture enters into crisis, life seems divested of any binding schemes, dogma and precepts and turns into chaos. That is the optimum moment for fiction. Its artificial orders offer refuge, security and the free release of those appetites and fears that real life incites and can not gratify or exorcise. Fiction is a temporary substitute for life. The return to reality is almost a brutal impoverishment, corroboration that we are less than we dreamed. Which means that fiction, by spurring the imagination, both temporarily assuages human dissatisfaction and simultaneously incites it.

The Spanish Inquisition understood the danger. Leading lives through fiction that one does not live in reality is a source of anxiety, a maladjustment to existence that can turn into rebelliousness, an unsubmissive attitude toward the establishment. One can well understand why regimes that seek to exercise total control over life mistrust works of fiction and subject them to censorship. Emerging from one's own self, being another, even in illusion, is a way of being less a slave and of experiencing the risks of freedom.

*This article was translated by Toby Talbot.*