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Lies that Tell the Truth: The paradox of art and creative writing

Simon Leys

THE MONTHLY | THE MONTHLY ESSAYS | NOVEMBER 2007 | ADD A COMMENT

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In art truth is suggested by false means.

- *Edgar Degas*

Truth is only believed when someone has invented it well.

- *George Santayana*

To think clearly in human terms you have to be impelled by a poem.

- *Les Murray*

This essay was originally an address to the annual conference of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, where its title, at the request of the organisers, was changed to 'Historical and Other Truths' - which was deemed more appropriate for such a serious audience. For judges are supposed to be serious: indeed, don't they wear wigs and gowns to convince us - and remind themselves - of their seriousness? Serious people have little time for any form of fiction. With such a flippant title, my talk was not likely to attract many listeners. Still, the change left me slightly uneasy - since, strictly speaking, I am not a historian - and I am glad, in this magazine article, to be able now to relinquish the false advertisement of which I was somehow guilty.

My article carries three epigraphs. Most lectures, addresses - and magazine articles - are usually forgettable. Epigraphs should be memorable. My readers will naturally forget this article, but they should remember the epigraphs. The first one is by a painter, the second one by a philosopher, the third one by a poet.

Painters, philosophers, poets, creative writers - and also inventors and scientists - all reach truth by taking imaginative shortcuts. Let us consider some of these.

Plato's dialogues remain the cornerstone of all Western philosophy. Very often what we find at their core is not discursive reasoning but various myths - short philosophical parables. Myth is the oldest and richest form of fiction. It performs an essential function: "what myth communicates is not truth but



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reality; truth is always about something - reality is what truth is about" (CS Lewis).

At roughly the same time as Plato in the West, ancient Taoist thinkers in China also expressed their ideas in imaginative form. On the subject that occupies us here - how do our minds reach truth - there is one tale in Lieh Tzu that seems illuminating and fundamental.

In the time of the Warring States, horses were very important for military reasons. The feudal lords employed the services of experts to find good ones. Best of all was the super-horse (*ch'ien-li ma*), an animal which could run a thousand miles a day without leaving tracks and without raising dust. Super-horses were most sought after, but they were also very rare and hard to detect. Hence the need for highly specialised experts; most famous among these was a man called Po-lo. Eventually Po-lo became too old to pursue his field trips prospecting for super-horses. Thus his employer, the Duke of Ch'in, asked him if he could recommend another expert to carry on with this task. "Yes," said Po-lo, "I have a friend, a pedlar of firewood in the market, who is quite a connoisseur of horses." Following Po-lo's advice, the duke dispatched this man on a mission to find a super-horse. Three months later, the man returned and reported to the duke: "I have found one; it is in such-and-such a place; it's a brown mare." The duke sent his people to fetch the animal, which proved to be a black stallion. The duke was not happy and summoned Po-lo: "That friend of yours - he does not seem to be much of an expert: he could not even get the animal's sex and colour right!" On hearing this, Po-lo was amazed:

Fantastic! He is even better than myself, a hundred, a thousand times better than myself! What he perceives is the innermost nature of the animal. He looks for and sees what he needs to see. He ignores what he does not need to see. Not distracted by external appearances, he goes straight to the inner essence. The way he judges horses shows that he should be judge of more important things than horses.

And, needless to say, this particular animal proved to be a super-horse indeed, a horse that could run a thousand miles a day without leaving tracks and without raising dust.

In reflecting on the ways by which our minds apprehend truth, you may feel that a 2300-year-old Chinese parable is of only limited relevance. But if so, let us consider something closer to hand: the mental processes followed by modern Western science.

Claude Bernard, the great pathologist whose research and discoveries were of momentous importance in the development of modern medical science, one day entered the lecture hall where he was going to teach and noticed something peculiar: various trays were on a table, containing different human organs; on one of these trays, flies had gathered. A common mind would have made a common observation, perhaps deploring a lack of cleanliness in the room or instructing the janitor to keep the windows shut. But Bernard's was not a common mind: he observed that the flies had gathered on the tray which contained livers - and he thought, There must be sugar there. And he discovered the glycogenic function of the liver - a discovery that proved decisive for the understanding and treatment of diabetes.

I found this anecdote not in any history of medical science, but in the diaries of the greatest modern French poet, Paul Claudel. And Claudel commented: "This mental process is identical to that of *poetical* writing ... The impelling motion is the same. Which shows that the primary source of scientific thought is not reasoning, but the precise verification of an association *originally supplied by the imagination*."

Note that when I refer to 'poetry', I am taking this word in its most

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fundamental sense. Samuel Johnson, in his monumental dictionary of the English language, assigns three definitions to the word 'poet', in decreasing order of importance: first, "an inventor"; second, "an author of fiction"; and last, "a writer of poems".

Truth is grasped by an imaginative leap. This applies not only to scientific thinking but also to philosophical thought. When I was a naive young student in the first year of university, our Arts course included the study of philosophy - a prospect that excited me much at first, though I was soon disappointed by the mediocrity of our lecturer. However, through family acquaintances I had the good fortune to know personally an eminent philosopher of our time, who happened to be also a kind and generous man. On my request, he drafted for me a list of basic readings: one handwritten page with bibliographic references of a selection of classic texts, modern works, histories of philosophy and introductions to philosophy. I treasured this document; yet, over the years, wandering round the world, I misplaced it and, like many other treasures, eventually lost it. Now, half a century later, I have long forgotten the actual items on the list. What I still remember is the postscript the great philosopher had inscribed at the bottom of that page - I remember it vividly because, at the time, I did not understand it and it puzzled me. The postscript said (underlined), "Most important of all, don't forget: do read a lot of novels." When I first read this note, as an immature student, it shocked me. Somehow it did not sound serious enough. For, naively, we tend to confuse what is *serious* with what is *deep*. (In the editorial pages of our newspapers, leading articles are serious, while cartoons are funny; yet quite often the cartoon is deep and the leader is vapid.) It took me a long time to appreciate the full wisdom of my philosopher's advice; now I frequently encounter echoes of it. Theodore Dalrymple (the GP who writes a witty and perceptive column in the *Spectator*) once observed that, between two medical practitioners with identical qualifications, he would rather trust the one who reads Chekhov. To which I would add: if I commit a crime, I wish I could be judged by a judge who has read Simenon.

Men of action - people who are totally involved in tackling what they believe to be real life - tend to dismiss poetry and all forms of creative writing as a frivolous distraction. Our great Polar explorer Mawson wrote in a letter to his wife some instructions concerning their children's education. He insisted that they should not waste their time reading novels, but should instead acquire factual information from books of history and biography.

This view - quite prevalent, actually - that there is an essential difference between works of imagination on the one hand, and records of facts and events on the other, is very naive. At a certain depth or a certain level of quality, all writings tend to be creative writing, for they all partake of the same essence: poetry.

History (contrary to the common view) does not record events. It merely records echoes of events - which is a very different thing - and, in doing this, it must rely on imagination as much as on memory. Memory by itself can only accumulate data, pointlessly and meaninglessly. Remember Jorge Luis Borges's philosophical parable 'Funes the Memorious'. Funes is a young man who, falling on his head from a horse, becomes strangely crippled: his memory hyper-develops, he is deprived of any ability to forget, he remembers everything; his mind becomes a monstrous garbage dump cluttered and clogged with irrelevant data, a gigantic heap of unrelated images and disconnected instants; he cannot evacuate any fragment of past experiences, however trifling. This relentless capacity for absolute and continuous recollection is a curse; it excludes all possibility of thought. For thinking requires space in which to forget, to select, to delete and to isolate what is significant. If you cannot discard any item from the memory store, you cannot *abstract* and generalise. But without abstraction and generalisation, there can be no thought.

The historian does not merely record; he edits, he omits, he judges, he interprets, he reorganises, he composes. His mission is nothing less than "to

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render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth manifold and one, underlying its every aspect". Yet this quote is not from a historian discussing history writing; it is from a novelist on the art of fiction: it is the famous beginning of Joseph Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, a true manifesto of the novelist's mission.

The fact is, these two arts - history writing and fiction writing - originating both in poetry, involve similar activities and mobilise the same faculties: memory and imagination; and this is why it could rightly be said that the novelist is the historian of the present and the historian the novelist of the past. Both must invent the truth.

Here we can open a parenthesis on Manning Clark's case, recently discussed in these pages. At the end of his life, Clark movingly evoked his eye-witness memories of the Kristallnacht in Nazi Germany. A researcher lately discovered, however, that contrary to what Clark said, he was not in Germany at the time. Though I do not think that in general Clark was a sound and reliable *historian* (yet he certainly was an inspiring *teacher*, which is quite a different thing and no less praiseworthy), it is not on the basis of this sort of evidence that we should put his credibility into question: since his perception of this particular event was accurate, whether he personally witnessed it or not seems fairly irrelevant. The real problem is that, on events he actually witnessed - such as Whitlam's dismissal, for instance - his account could be highly fanciful. (I have in mind Clark's description of a "crucified" Whitlam and a populace on the edge of a bloody revolution. Like Clark, I was living in Canberra at the time; I have no such recollections.) What disturbs me is not that Clark had a vivid imagination - which, for a historian, I would rather consider a valuable asset - but that he lacked *judgement*; and this, to borrow one of his favourite expressions, may have been his fatal flaw.

Of course, accuracy of data is the pre-condition of any historical work. But in the end, what determines the quality of a historian is the quality of his judgement. Two historians may be in possession of the same data; what distinguishes them is what they make of their common information. For example, on the subject of convict Australia, Robert Hughes gathered a wealth of material which he presented in his *Fatal Shore* in a vivid and highly readable style. On the basis of that same information, however, Geoffrey Blainey drew a conclusion that is radically different - and much more convincing. Hughes had likened convict Australia to the Gulag Archipelago of the Soviet Union, but Blainey pointed out that whereas the Soviet Gulag was a totally sterile machine designed solely to crush and destroy its inmates, in Australia, out of a convict system that was also brutal and ferocious, a number of individuals emerged full of vigour and ambition, who rose to become some of their country's richest citizens. In turn, they soon generated a dynamic society and, eventually, a vibrant young democracy. What matters most in the end is how the historian *reads* events - and this is where his judgement is put to the test.

To reach the truth of the past, historians must overcome specific obstacles: they have to gather information that is not always readily available. In this sense, they must master the methods of a specialised discipline.

But to understand the truth of the present time, right in front of us, is not the preserve of historians; it is our common task. How do we usually cope with it? Not too well, it seems.

Let us consider just two examples - still quite close to us, and of colossal dimensions. The twentieth century was a hideous century, filled with horrors on a gigantic scale. In sheer magnitude, the terror perpetrated by modern totalitarianisms was unprecedented. It developed essentially in two varieties: Stalinist and Hitlerian.

When we read the writings of Soviet and East European dissidents and exiles, we are struck by one recurrent theme: their amazement, indignation and anger in the face of the stupidity, ignorance and indifference of Western opinion and

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especially of the Western intelligentsia, which remained largely incapable of registering the reality of their predicament. And yet the Western countries were spending huge resources, both to gather intelligence and to develop scholarly research on the communist world - all to very little avail. Robert Conquest, one of the very few Sovietologists who was clear-sighted from the start, experienced acute frustration in his attempts to share and communicate his knowledge. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, his publisher proposed to reissue a collection of his earlier essays and asked him what title he would suggest. Conquest thought for one second and said, "How about 'I Told You So, Fucking Fools'?"

Interestingly enough, the name of one writer appears again and again in the writings of the dissidents from the communist world - they pay homage to him as the only author who fully perceived the concrete reality of their condition, down to its very sounds and smells - and this is George Orwell. Aleksander Nekrich summed up this view: "Orwell is the only Western writer who really understood the essential nature of the Soviet world." Czeslaw Milosz and many others made similar assessments. And yet, *1984* is a work of fiction - an imaginary projection set in the future of England.

The Western incapacity to grasp the Soviet reality and all its Asian variants was not a failure of information (which was always plentiful); it was a *failure of imagination*.

The horrors of the Nazi regime have long been fully documented: the criminals have been defeated and sentenced; the victims, survivors, witnesses have spoken; the historians have gathered evidence and passed judgement. Full light has been cast upon this entire era. The records fill entire libraries.

In all this huge literature, however, I would wish to single out one small book, extraordinary because of its very ordinariness: the pre-war memoir of a young Berliner, Raimund Pretzel, who chose to leave his country in 1938 on purely moral grounds. Written under the pen name of Sebastian Haffner, it carries a fittingly modest and unassuming title: *Geschichte eines Deutschen* (Story of a German), which was badly translated for the English edition as *Defying Hitler*. It was published posthumously only a few years ago by the author's son, who discovered the manuscript in his father's papers.

The author was a well-educated young man; the son of a magistrate, he himself was entering that same career; his future prospects were secure; he loved his friends, his city, his culture, his language. Yet, like all his compatriots, he witnessed Hitler's ascent. He had no privileged information; simply, like any other intellectual, he read the newspapers, followed the news, discussed current affairs with friends and colleagues. He clearly felt that, together with the rest of the country, he was being progressively sucked into a poisonous swamp. To ensure a reasonably smooth and trouble-free existence, small compromises were constantly required - nothing difficult nor particularly dramatic; everyone else, to a various extent, was similarly involved. Yet the sum total of these fairly banal, daily surrenders eroded the integrity of each individual. Haffner himself was never forced into participating in any extreme situation, was never confronted with atrocities, never personally witnessed dramatic events or political crimes. Simply, he found himself softly enveloped into the all-pervasive moral degradation of an entire society. Experiencing nothing more than what all his compatriots were experiencing, he faced the inescapable truth. Since he was lucky enough to have no family responsibilities, he was free to abandon his beloved surroundings and to forsake the chance of a brilliant career: he went into voluntary exile, first to France and then England - *to save his soul*. His short (unfinished), clear-sighted and sober memoir raises one terrifying question: all that Haffner knew at the time, many millions of people around him knew equally well. Why was there only one Haffner?

Earlier on, I suggested that artists and creative writers actually develop alternative modes of access to truth - all the shortcuts afforded by inspired imagination. Please do not misunderstand me: if I suggest that there are

alternative approaches to truth, I do not mean that there are alternative truths. Truth is not relative; by nature it is within the reach of everyone, it is plain and obvious - sometimes even painfully so. Haffner's example illustrates it well.

At the time of the Dreyfus Affair - the most shameful miscarriage of justice in French modern history - one of the eminent personalities who came to Dreyfus's defence was a most unlikely figure. Maréchal Lyautey, being an aristocrat, monarchist, Catholic, third-generation military man, seemed naturally to belong to the other side - the side of rightist, anti-Semitic, clerical, militaro-chauvinistic bigots. He became a supporter of Dreyfus (who was falsely convicted of the crime of treason) for only one reason: he himself had integrity. The pro-Dreyfus committee gathered to discuss what to call itself; most members suggested the name Alliance for Justice. "No," said Lyautey. "We must call it *Alliance for Truth*." And he was right, for one can honestly hesitate on what is *just* (since justice must always take into account complex and contradictory factors), but one cannot hesitate on what is *true*.

Which brings me to my conclusion. My conclusion is in fact my unspoken starting point. When I was first invited to speak on the subject of truth, it was a few days before Easter. During the successive days of the Christian Holy Week, we read in church the four Gospel narratives of the two last days in the life of Christ. These narratives each contain a passage on the trial of Jesus in front of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate; the concept of truth appears there in a brief dialogue between judge and accused. It is a well-known passage; at that time, it struck me in a very special way.

The High Priests and the Sanhedrin had arrested Jesus, and they interrogated him. In conclusion, they decided that he should be put to death for blasphemy. But they were now colonial subjects of the Roman Empire: they had lost the power to pronounce and carry out death sentences. Only the Roman governor possessed such authority.

Thus they bring Jesus to Pilate. Pilate finds himself in a predicament. First, there is the problem inherent to his position: he is both head of the executive and head of the judiciary. As supreme ruler, he is concerned with issues of public order and security; as supreme judge, he should ensure that the demands of justice are being met. Then there is his own personal situation: the Jews naturally see him for what he is - an odious foreign oppressor. And he distrusts and dislikes these quarrelsome and incomprehensible natives who give him endless trouble. During his tenure, twice already there have been severe disturbances; the governor handled them badly - he was even denounced in Rome. He cannot afford another incident. And this time, he fears a trap.

The Jewish leaders present themselves as loyal subjects of Caesar. They accuse Jesus of being a rebel, a political agitator who tells the people not to pay taxes and who challenges Caesar's authority by claiming that he himself is a king. Now, if Pilate does not condemn him, Pilate himself would be disloyal to Caesar.

Pilate interrogates Jesus. Naturally, he finds Jesus' notion of a spiritual kingdom quite fanciful, but it seems also harmless enough. The accused appears to be neither violent nor fanatic; he has poise; he is articulate. Pilate is impressed by his calm dignity, and it quickly becomes obvious to him that Jesus is entirely innocent of all the crimes of which he has been accused. Pilate repeats it several times: "I can find no fault in this man." But the mob demands his death, and the Gospel adds that, hearing their shouts, "Pilate was more afraid than ever." Pilate is scared: he does not want to have, once again, a riot on his hands. Should this happen, it would be the end of his career.

In the course of his interrogation, as Pilate questions Jesus on his activities, Jesus replies: "What I came into the world for, is to bear witness of the truth. Whoever belongs to the truth, listens to my voice." To which Pilate retorts: "The truth! But what is the truth?" He is an educated and sophisticated Roman; he has seen the world and read the philosophers; unlike this simple

man, this provincial carpenter from Galilee, he knows that there are many gods and many creeds under the sun ...

However, beware! Whenever people wonder 'What is the truth?' usually it is because the truth is just under their nose - but it would be very inconvenient to acknowledge it. And thus, against his own better judgement, Pilate yields to the will of the crowd and lets Jesus be crucified.

Pilate's problem was not how to ascertain Jesus' innocence. This was easy enough: it was obvious. No, the real problem was that, in the end - like all of us, most of the time - he found it more expedient to wash his hands of the truth.

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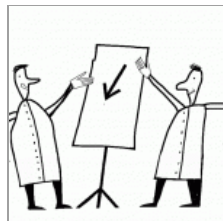
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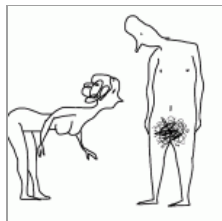
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