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THE FICTION OF FACT, THE FACT OF FICTION

«Truth is stranger than fiction». — Proverb
«And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true». — A. E. Housman

The prior presumption in distinguishing fact from fiction is a world in which the doing (*factum*) of the one and the devising (*fictio*) of the other can be distinguished. To those who heed the skeptic's argument that the existence of so-called external reality cannot be proved, we may concede the point and deny the inference. It need only be held that as far as anything is knowable — that is, as we *can* know — we assume, and others seem to assume also, that the distinction is empirical, useful, and valid. If we are all deluded in such matters, we shall go on acting as if we are not, and even the skeptic cannot prove that we think otherwise or, for that matter, that the world does *not* exist.

It must be confessed that there are dangers in unreflective use of the distinction. The equivalence in contemporary English between fiction and the novel makes no sense since, as a performed art, drama alone is necessarily fictional¹. And there is no reason why a narrative poem or a lyric should not be fictional. People assume different things: that literature is fictional (the western view); or that literature is factual (the east Asian view). Of course the sophisticated know that some conventions are taken to signal an exception to one or the other, and that given writing may be assigned different status at different times. It is difficult to believe that the biblical Song of Songs was originally a fiction for the allegory of God's love of Israel or of Christ for his Church. But there remains a gulf between, on the one hand, interpreters who hold that the Song of Songs is made up of factual epithalamia and those who hold it to be a matter of fact about Christ and his Church and, on the other hand, those who hold the Song to be a series of fictional lyrics or a fictional allegory. The real locus of interpretive issue need not be between literalness or allegory but between factuality and fictionality in the meaning posited to be meant. Centuries of Chinese criticism have been devoted to the need of allegorizing into fact.

In the west, the shift in status of something from fiction to fact has been, however, relatively rare². The opposite shift, from fact to supposed or nominal fiction,

is far more frequent, not only when Gibbon is read as literature rather than as history but as metaphysical doubt and intellectual exhaustion dissolve the confidence of writers, and as consumerism finally becomes obsessive with intellectuals pretending to despise it — tendencies often known as postmodernism. When there is so much noise, who can hear quiet fact? When the prizes go to the sparkling and the gilded, who bothers with the effort to labor over tarnishable sterling silver?

The preferences are not universal. The sixteenth-century Chinese story, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, is widely known to be based on a history, *Sanguoji*. An eighteenth-century scholar declared that «it is seven parts fact and three parts fiction»³. The declaration has been contested since it was made, and it seems rather ridiculous to judge a story factual or fictional to the nearest ten per cent. Yet the declaration is useful precisely because «this kind of statistical argument has nothing to do with the literariness of a text»⁴. A narrative may be thirteen or ninety-three per cent factual and still be literary. And in politics as well as in advertizing fiction may predominate in what is taken (not to mention what is given) as fact. For that matter, works presumed dominantly fictional may be read for facts, and students of antiquity everywhere draw on all writing extant, including the fictional, as sources of presumed facts.

Clearly much depends on the cognitive act of presumption that something is factual or fictional, along with subsequent confirmation and disconfirmation. Seeing or hearing that something is in verse rather than prose immediately excites, at least in westerners, presumptions of fiction. Conventionally Petrarchan lyrics are likely to be thought more naturally fictional than satires naming historical individuals. Similarly that confined to a private sphere is apt to be apprehended as fictional whereas that featuring public affairs and historical events is likely to be assumed be factual. So far are such decisions *mental* actions that either is easily discardable when contrary evidence is discovered.

For example, Horace's epodes are agreed to fall somewhere between his odes and satires. The odes are expected to be more lyric and personal, the satires more prosaic chats (sermones) than songs and more akin to worlds assumed by the poet and others. Yet the epodes vary widely. The fifth is clearly (we say) fictional: in it witches curse and devise incantations. The ninth, however, is directed to Maecenas in celebration of the defeat of Cleopatra (Antony is not mentioned) at the Battle of Actium. Even the odes confirm and disconfirm expectations of lyric fiction (or lyric fact). There is the surprisingly sympathetic Cleopatra ode (1:37) to remind us of the ninth epode. On the other hand, few are likely to take factually what is said about Pyrrha the tease (1:5). Because the provable facts are so scanty, large interpretations can be based on meager evidence, that is, on what may be fiction taken as fact, or the reverse. Surely (who has any proof, however?) there is fact in the propempticon to Virgil setting off for Greece (1:5). But to Horace and his Roman readers, and to us, what is the status of the famous conversion ode (1:34), in which the seemingly counterfactual evidence — thunder in a clear sky — becomes the superstitious basis for Horace to think seriously?

Important principles are involved. One might be termed the inevitability of the fictional in sustained presentation of the factual, or, more simply the inevitable presence of the fictional in factual accounts⁵. The most general reason for our reliance on fiction to arrive at an account deemed true is the desire of the human mind to order, to discover pattern, to explain — even where the information logically or evidentially does not allow it. In that sense, fiction fulfills desires that insufficient fact arouses.

The role played by our needs and desires is evident in reading historical or biographical as well as more dominantly literary writing. One chief human concern in finding an account intelligible is adequacy of correspondence between causes and effects. In terms of individuals, causation is a matter of motivation, often one of the last things knowable from, given by, the historical records. Without adequate account of motivation, the known facts about a person seem contradictory, trivial, or meaningless. Some possibilities can be ruled out by inferences from ancillary facts: teachers in Rome were commonly slaves or freedmen, as were actors, although one was higher socially than the other. For a Julia, marrying Horace (son of a freedman) with his high social connections was very different from marrying an actor, and different motives would be required to make either plausible.

Curiously enough, an account of Julia's action may seem probable and even true only when the meager facts have been administered sufficient explanations, some manifestly based on not clearly relevant fact and some manifestly fictional. If all we knew was that the Julia who married Horace was from an old family, a widow, and three years older than he, then a historian could give great plausibility to interpretations of the relatedness of the facts. Doing so would require fictionalizing according to ancillary Roman facts and according to facts about the mores today of historians and readers, even if those were contrary to the Roman. An account of the kind would be read, whereas the bare facts about Julia would never be told alone. Presuming as much, the fictionalizing would be taken as evidence of truth, and even the soberest lover of fact would sooner accept the fictional but plausible account than one adducing as reasons for Julia's actions important facts unconnected with it. Roman public debt, relations with Gaul, the proportion of slaves to citizens, gladiators then popular, marriage practices three centuries earlier — any of these might bear on Julia, but in the absence of factual connection would seem less persuasively true than a shrewd fictional (made-up) account.

Fictions may play important roles that go undetected precisely because they satisfy the human need to make sense of facts, whether or not the facts make sense by themselves. If they do not, sense will be made of them. And if to one person they make sense of one kind, another person may prefer to discover sense of a different nature. Let us seek examples in historical writings.

Professional historians esteem what they term «archival history», that is, accounts rich in recovered evidence. We may suppose a history of the French Revolution abounding in statistics, reliant on speeches, letters, and diaries of participants,

carefully annotated, free of evident speculation, and bolstered by appendices of maps, tables, and documents. We discover the «thick description» and sensitive interpretation we desire. We are convinced that this is the most reliable history in existence of those eighteenth-century French events.

This is not the occasion to judge whether periods like «eighteenth-century» or isolatedly national entities are themselves best thought fact, fictions, or fictions more useful than facts. We need only reflect that at the outset, and at the close, there is a fiction in the implied or stated proposition that the history has its origin at this moment and its telos at that. Beginning and endings are not necessarily fictional: if they were it would be impossible to utter a non-fictional sentence. But to posit a single open and close for complex, continuing events is a fiction. It is in its way a *necessary* fiction for even a historian beginning with long-range, middle-range, and immediate causes.

Other fictions arise in the manner of setting forth. It can only be a fiction that the evidence provided as proof is the phenomenon being described; otherwise, there would only be the total illogic of events explaining themselves, and no matter how «the text» has been personified and «space» despatialized recently, nobody (as far as I am aware) has yet accused events of inventing explanations. A less radical but also important example of the fiction in factual accounts involves that special variety of explanation of causation already referred to, assignment of motives. As Metternich is said to have wondered on hearing of Castlereagh's suicide, «I wonder what he means by that?» We feel a need to know the springs of action, and in narrative the most satisfying is individual motivation. Since, however, we are considering others rather than ourselves, their motivation to an act is far more difficult to know, whether in a law case or in our armchair with Ranke. Lacking in fact what we desire, we consent with the author of the account to prefer plausible fictions over knowable facts too restricted to allow for assured explanation. As I have suggested, the issue is far wider than that, but it is sufficient to justify a modification of Bacon's essay, «Of Truth»: the addition of a fiction ever adds pleasure. Far more than that, it is often the addition of fiction that renders the fact intelligible.

Whatever their disclaimers, westerners believe that literature is (as literature) rather more wholly fictional than less. It is difficult for me to assess what such people think when it is pointed out that supposers in other parts of the world may presume very different things. In particular, east Asian critics and readers assume (in the absence of contrary evidence) that literature is factual⁶. Yet there is a traditional higher claim in the west: not that literature is factual so much as that it is true⁷. The western truth claim for literature enlists literary writers around the world and, in fact, critics from Aristotle to Samuel Johnson. Here is the Great Cham:

«The value of every story depends on its being true. A story is a picture of an individual or of human nature in general; if it be false, it is a picture of nothing. For instance: suppose a man should tell that Johnson, before setting out

for Italy, as he had to cross the Alps, sat down to make himself wings. This many people would believe; but it would be a picture of nothing».⁸

This extreme statement would be subscribed to by few, but it is as necessary to consider a larger category even than the fictional, one that includes lies.

Even if we define literature as writing, sounds, or knowledge contra-factual, or at least non-factual, we need not consent to the old accusation that literature consists of lies. If literature is factual, it is not mendacious⁹. It is no lie, because it is not intended to deceive, the basis of a lie. For that matter, the subjunctive and kindred moods in various languages may be contrary to fact, but they are not therefore false. When a woman says, «If I were a queen, all children would have thorough education», she is not lying with a claim to be queen, since that is precisely implied to be contrary to fact. (Whether if she were she should so behave is something not subject to proof or disproof, since — as it were — the major premise is contrary to evident fact).

This is so evident, so plain that it passes understanding that people have ever pretended or thought otherwise. But other at least equally important principles are involved. In particular, the fact-fiction distinction is sometimes useless, and they cannot both be anterior to each other. The limits are suggested by thought of literature and the other arts, for which dance and architecture may stand as kinds loved by many who have little to do with literature.

It defies effort to propose that a waltz or «The Nutcracker Suite» is fictional or factual, true or false. The same holds for the Eiffel Tower and the Tokyo Tower, but we sense that the reasons differ. That is, a dance seems radically distant from fact and truth, and the towers seem radically distant from fiction and lies. There may be facts about the one and lies about the other. That is another matter. It should be clear that fiction and lies cannot exist in a non-verbal kind of expression, and that to be articulated (and of course to be communicable) fact and truth must be linguistically expressible. Fiction and fact may, however, be construed to belong on a spectrum of expressions taken to be dominantly neither true nor false, neither not true nor not false, what I would term the virtual¹⁰. That the larger category may embrace — however differently — both fiction and fact explains why westerners may wish to characterize literature as fiction and east Asians as fact.

As is shown by such arts as dance and architecture, the virtual need not be fictional, although for literature it commonly is. Let us suppose a fictional narrative and ask about its relation to fact. To the extent that it is fictional, it is virtual in the sense of not being true, not being not false. On the other hand every fictional predication, a ceaselessly iterated task of language, depends on a basis in fact. «All happy families are alike». Each word of the English (I do not know the Russian) is fictional, virtual because the entire predication is fictional: for example, «all», «families», and «are». But neither these words nor the entire sentence can make any sense without the prior presumption of factfulness and meaningfulness in them. We may quibble endlessly about the meaning of «happy» or, for that matter, of

«families». But without the assumption of the existence of the psychological state and the social unit, fiction is impossible because sense is impossible.

That prior assumptions are necessary for fiction should be evident. If not, Vaihinger's extensive study, *The Philosophy of «As If»*, should make it clear, since he deals with science and logic more than with literature¹¹. Bentham also makes the point in his *Theory of Fictions*:

Every fictitious entity bears some relation to some real entity, and can no otherwise be understood than in so far as that relation is perceived — a conception of that relation is obtained¹².

In other words, not only are fiction and the larger category of the virtual dependent on fact; they depend on it to make sense, to exist¹³. And because the fictional form of the virtual makes sense, it is certainly both not false and not not true. Without sense, fictional use of language is strictly meaningless. Without presumption of fact, linguistic meaningfulness is impossible.

If any doubt remains, we can consider the wonderland in which Alice finds herself. We constantly recognize the margin between basis in real fact (human personality, place, time, spoken words, actions, motives clear and obscure, etc.) and violation of fact. Rudely put, if the presumption of fact did not exist, we could not presume fiction. That is not only because we are able by the presumption to judge the momentary suspension of fact in the presumed exact likeness of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. More importantly, the priority of fact and our compulsion to conclude with interpretation leads critics to boast success in showing that «Jabberwocky» makes proper English sense.

In the current climate of theoretical opinion, perhaps nothing requires underscoring quite as much as the dependence of fiction, and the larger aesthetic category of the virtual, on fact. Dance, for example, relies for its effect on the agreeableness to us of a «body swayed to music», caught in the rhythm that it also creates. Without the sheer pattern of that swaying, there could be no art. Without the actual body, space, and movement, dance would not exist, could have no virtual status. The non-fictional virtual is as dependent on fact for existence as is that version based on language and properly termed fictional.

Given the dependence of fiction (or the virtual more generally) on fact, and the inevitability (as also desirability) of a fictional presence in accounts of fact, the decision whether a given expression is factual or fictional is not simple. Usually it is not simple in the sense that we decide that we know the class something belongs to without doubt but that, whether fact or fiction, one relies on the other. Sometimes the decision is not simple in the sense that we deliver a mixed verdict. The margin between a given narrative history A and a given historical narrative fiction B of the same events may be difficult to draw. After all, both rely on substantially the same body of facts and both have important fictional elements. Yet if there were no

difference between fact and fiction there would be no distinction to find ambiguous — or clear.

We may feel particular difficulty in designating the cognitive status of many photographs. A photograph of something thought beautiful or tragic will pose the problem. In western culture there is the artistic convention of the nude (usually female). In a sense our clothes are a decorative addition, but it remains a fact that we spend most of our time each day covered to some extent by cloth. To remove the cloth is, therefore, a special gesture, and to consider the gesture pleasing or acceptable requires certain conditions and conventions of baring. A slightly unfocused, decentered photograph of a naked old woman wrinkled in skin, and bloated by starvation will not immediately be thought virtual, aesthetic. On the other hand, an attractive torso lithely bent, its undulations a counterpart to swirls of sand in the background — no more need be said.

There is, however, a final caution. What may be termed the hidden nature of fact in fiction and of fiction in fact should not encourage us to think we deal with the undecidable, with aporia. Of course we should recognize our readiness to account one the other and, in particular, to take our fictions as facts, or as things truer than mere facts. But that does not make difficult our recognizing that there is infra-red, ultra-violet, and a prismatic band between, over all of which we distinguish with ease the fictional *colores* from the hues of fact. Their presence on, as it were, the same cognitive prism makes us able to gesture with «truth is stranger than fiction», or «fiction is truer than fact». Sometimes it may indeed seem so, or even be so. But especially when we decide that to be the case, we presume we can distinguish fact from fiction.

From what has been said, certain propositions seem valid.

1. Fact and fiction are, in principle, distinguishable — although not necessarily wholly or in every instance.
2. It is difficult to propose a single literary example of pure fact or pure fiction.
3. Nonetheless, it is a cultural distinction that, in the absence of contrary evidence the western world should regard literature as fictional representation, whereas the east Asian assumption is one of affective factuality.
4. Although factuality is often a feature of styles or codes of realism, heavy factuality may seem unliterary.
5. Although fictionality (or the virtual) allies literature with other arts, extreme degrees seem fanciful, not serious.
6. Fictionality as specification of motivation and other causalities (Aristotle's probability or necessity) may be the grounds on which literature is assigned truth status.
7. Without grounding in factuality (persons, place, time, direction, society, etc.) literature would not be understandable.
8. It follows that fact is presumed logically and ontologically prior to fiction.

9. The declarative nature of human language gives even fiction the air of fact and truth, something strengthened by the existence of numerous fictions used to characterize fact: legal fictions, nicknames, role-playings, etc.
10. The kinds and degrees of literary factuality and fictionality vary culturally, historically, generically (in lyric, drama, and narrative), stylistically (as with realism), by author, and with other variables.

But perhaps the question now is not whether more, but less, ought to have been said.

Notes

- ¹ Mary McCarthy associates the fiction of novels both descriptively and normatively with fact and a belief in the real existence of the world. See «The Fact in Fiction» in *On the Contrary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961): «We do really (I think) expect a novel to be true, not only true to itself, like a poem, or a statue, but true to actual life, which is right around the corner» (pp. 262-63); and «In short, someone may be able to believe again in the reality, the factuality of the world» and create novels again (p. 270). The problem is, «We know that the real world exists, but we can no longer imagine it», *Ibid.*. For all the questions that might be raised, McCarthy seems to me to have identified, in spirit, the nature of the possibilities and of the problems.
- ² Of course there is the separate issue concerning facts about a given literary expression. These include not only authorship, date, etc.; they include not only uses made by a philologist or typesetter; they also include elements «in the work» itself. It is a fact that Ophelia is Polonius' daughter, the sister of Laertes, the admirer of Hamlet, and a suicide from madness. From these evident facts it is not a long walk to interpretation and dispute. But it is manifest that the facts about Ophelia cannot reasonably be posited about Gertrude, much less Laertes; and that although Horatio also admires Hamlet, his feeling is grounded differently from Ophelia's, and that the other facts given about her do not obtain at all for him. It is a pity that observation of these humble matters should be at all necessary.
- ³ See Jin'ichi Konishi, *A History of Japanese Literature*, vol. 3 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 509.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ I am happy to acknowledge being anticipated in this and my other major point by Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., tr. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955-58): «With this chapter [3:ch. 8] we reach the goal that has never ceased to guide the progress of our investigation, namely the actual refiguration of time, now become human time through the interweaving of history and fiction» (3:180). The careful examining of temporal features «of history and fiction» is truly Ricoeur's major concern, and for the presence of fiction in history he relies on Hayden White's *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and other writings in the context of German idealist philosophers and their (often dissident) successors. Ricoeur's concerns do appear somewhat different when topics less subjective than time are at stake.
- ⁶ See my *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), index, s.v. «factuality» and «fictionality». And see the example of efforts to redeem the factuality or truth of a poem by Du Fu discussed pp. 108-13.
- ⁷ Of course literature is yet more apt to seem true when it is assumed to be factual (in the lack of evidence to the contrary). Such is the case with east Asia, where aesthetic works

- are not at once considered a fictional «representation» but affectively justifying and justified expressions.
- ⁸ *Boswell's Life of Johnson* [ed. Edmund Malone], introd. Chauncey Brewster Tinker, 2 vols. in 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948) 1:650. This may be termed Aristotelianism. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle does not say precisely that poesy is true, but that it participates in necessity and probability (ch. 7) and is more philosophical than history (ch. 9). Dryden writes of poesy functioning, with the considerable latitude of a better or worse «likeness,» within the bounds of truth (*Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson, 2 vols. [London: Dent, 1962], 2:193-94). And Wordsworth adds to Coleridge's reading of Aristotle on the truth of poesy (*The Prose Works*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1974], 1:139): «Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing; it is so: its object is truth», etc. Aristotle's comparison is between poesy and historical writing; to him, as to the rest of the Academy, philosophy was the most «philosophic».
 - ⁹ Since extended predications of ordinary kinds incorporate both fact and fiction, the contrast implied here is too stark. For now it will be sufficient to say that we call fictional or factual that which we regard mostly, characteristically, or importantly one or the other.
 - ¹⁰ See *Comparative Poetics*, pp. 44-47; also index s.v. «virtual (aesthetic) truth status» and «truth statuses, literary.» It should be observed that the virtual includes non-literary entities as well: those subjunctive predications and legal fictions (giving rise to the concept of *factio* in Roman law). These various considerations lead me to reject Monroe C. Beardsley's proposition several years ago (in a lecture at Princeton) that the fictional is an illocutionary speech act and Stanley E. Fish's identification several years ago (in a conversation at Princeton) of the virtual solely with the fictional. The examples are anecdotal but probably echo the thoughts of many.
 - ¹¹ H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of «As If,»* tr. C. K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, 1924), a translation of the sixth edition of *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*. In fact, his understanding of «aesthetic fictions» bears certain problems. For example, he meaninglessly categorizes social fictions (greetings when meeting somebody, «dears» and «sincerely» in letters) as «Poetic fiction» (p. 83). He also fails to see that a fiction is necessarily expressible linguistically to be shared, whereas in arts not involving verbal means fictionality is a meaningless concept. Nonetheless, this book is a necessary aid to thought.
 - ¹² C. K. Ogden, ed. and introd., *Bentham's Theory of Fictions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), p. 12. Ogden's introduction is very nearly as long as Bentham's treatise (152 to 156 pp.). Bentham is useful in making clear that the relation of a fiction to what it presumes is not representation, not mimesis, not «copies of reality» (p. 16); he is also neither a naive realist nor a skeptic.
 - ¹³ John Stuart Mill makes clear one feature of this in «What is Poetry?» He writes, «that which can cause anything, even an illusion, must be a reality» (*Essays on Poetry*, ed. F. Parvin Sharpless [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1976], p. 5). The context is also important.