Chapter 14

Fiction: The Power of Lies

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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 is not quite on target.

Whether novels are accurate or false is as important to certain people as whether they are 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 three hundred 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.

In fact, novels do lie—they cannot help doing so—but that is only a part of the story. The other is that, through the lying, they express a curious truth, which can be expressed only in a veiled and concealed fashion, masquerading as what it is not. This statement has the ring of gibberish. But actually it is 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 the lives they are unresigned to not having. The germ of every novel contains an element of nonresignation 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 is 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 Leoncio 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 have 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 are not written to recount life but to transform it by adding something to it. In the novellas of the French writer Restif de la Bretonne, reality is as photographic as can be, a cataloguing of the eighteenth-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 do not fall in love with women for the purity of their features, the grace of their body, their spiritual endowments, and so on, 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 on 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 glory battle I participated in, the Gothic profile of the girl I loved—that is 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 is 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 is not 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 readers, a symbol or allegory, in other words, a representation of realities, of experiences they 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 or 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 is not determined merely by the language in which it is 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 discerning meaning, for we are presented with a perspective never provided by the real life in which we are immersed. This order is an invention, an addition of the novelist, that dissembler who appears to re-create 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 readers' reach. Thus the readers can judge it, understand it, and, above all, live it with an impunity not granted them in real life.

What difference is there, between a work of fiction and a journalistic report or a history book? Are they not, too, composed of words? And do they not, within the artificial time of the account, encapsulate that shoreless torrent, real time? It is 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 farther 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 error of *War and Peace* with respect to the Napoleonic Wars would be a waste of time—the truth of the novel does not 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 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 the heroines of the romantic novels she read.

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 are not 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 that 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 these lives because 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 people 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 document not their lives, but rather their driving demons—the dreams that intoxicated them and made the lives they led more tolerable. An era is populated not 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 people, 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 is 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 cannot 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.

"Things are not as we see them but as we remember them," wrote Valle Inclan. He was undoubtedly referring to the way things are in literature, that spurious world that 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 that precipitates it on its indeterminate journey toward fiction. 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 pretense, 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 that frequently constitute flagrant historical inaccuracies or even lies. Although the almost cinematographic description of the battle of Waterloo that 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, Joanot Martorell—the conquest of England by the Moors described in *Tirant lo 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 that cannot be found in history books. For literature does not lie gratuitously. All its deceptions, devices, and hyperbole only serve to express those deep-seated and disturbing truths that come to light only in this oblique way.

When Johannot Martorell relates in *Tirant lo Blanc* that the Princess of France had such a 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 exploits of a hero who, single-handed, routs the mob and literally ravages half of 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 tell us not what the Valencians were really like at the end of the fifteenth century, but how they would have liked to have been and what they would have liked to have done; they depict not 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, that are brought to life. In a successful work of fiction it is the individual’s experience of an age that comes to life; and that is why novels, although, when compared with history, they may be full of fabrication, nonetheless communicate to us certain transitory, evanescent truths.
that always defy purely scientific descriptions of reality. Only literature has the powers and techniques at its disposal to distil the delicate elixir of life: the truth that lies hidden at the heart of the human imagination.

Now there is nothing deceptive about the deceits of literature; at least, there should not 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 coexist 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 people's actions, what they do and what they say, but also aim to control their imaginations, their dreams and aspirations—and, of course, their memories. 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 the extraordinary volte-faces made famous by the Soviet Encyclopedia. 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 elite of the moment. This is a practice that 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 is to legitimize whoever is in power and to find al­bis 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 Inkas, for example. They effected it in a brutal and theatrical manner. When the emperador died, not only did his wife and concubines die with him, but also the court intellectuals who were known as amautas, or wise men. Their talents were applied essentially to performing the following little conjuring trick: creating history out of fiction. The new Inka 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, and the like that were previously attributed to his predecessor would be from now on transferred to the new emperor’s personal record of achievements. Gradually his predecessors would be forgotten—lost in oblivion.

The Inkas knew how to put the past to good use, turning it into litera­ture, so that it could contribute toward the stabilization of the present—the ultimate ideal of any dictatorship. They prohibited personal accounts of what happened because those must always be at odds with an official account, which is of necessity coherent and unappealable. The result is that the Inka 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 that 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, to accord 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 popularize and illustrate it. The difference between historical truth and liter­ary truth disappears; and the two become fused into a sort of hybrid that imbues history with a sense of unreality and empties fiction of any mystery, originality, or spirit of nonconformity it may have toward the establishment.

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 a certain social justice. It seems to have been proved that the Inka period—an extraordinary achievement for its time and for ours—put an end to hunger: everyone in the kingdom had enough to eat. And modern totalitarian societies have given a great impetus to education, medicine, sport, and employment, making them accessible to the majority of the people, something that open societies, despite their widespread prosperity, have not yet succeeded in doing, for the price of the freedom they enjoy is paid sometimes by enormous inequalities of wealth and—even worse—inequalities of opportunity among 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 Inkas did through their amautas—one of the great nerve centers of life is destroyed. And men and women suffer a sort of mutilation that 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 that 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 diabolical 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 trapping 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 to it that dimension 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 authors of works of fiction do with their readers—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 fulﬁl 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 that ensures that it never will be in the future.