

# internationales literaturfestival berlin

Nancy Huston

## WHY LITERARY LIES ARE BETTER THAN OTHER LIES

Before I get started, I have a confession to make. When I sent Ulrich Schreiber the title of this lecture last spring, I felt a bit like the advertiser in the joke my brother and I used to tell as kids: splashed across his billboard in huge capital letters was the word "SEX" and then, in much smaller lettering underneath: "Now that we've got your attention, buy Maxwell House Coffee," or whatever. I'm actually not going to talk to you about lies at all; I just wanted to get your attention; my real title should have been "Why Literary Fictions are Better than Other Fictions," but I know the word "lies" is sexier, as it were, than the word "fictions." Will you forgive me? I sincerely hope that you'll find what follows more interesting than Maxwell House Coffee.

A couple of years ago I met with a reading group at the women's prison at Fleury-Mérogis, some twenty miles outside of Paris. After an hour or so of discussion, one of the prisoners, who'd been stubbornly silent up until then, suddenly looked up, stared me straight in the face, and asked, "What's the point of making stories up when reality is already so incredible?"

The woman was prostrate. She had killed somebody; I had not. My murders were all in my novels. The other members of the reading group glanced at me expectantly, waiting to see what sort of an answer I would come up with. The silence lengthened, and I felt an abyss opening between these women and myself, for there was no denying that their reality was more incredible than mine. Plausible scenes from their incredible reality starting flashing through my mind – scenes rife with blood, knives, guns, bombs, screams, drugs, blows, disorder, poverty, anguish, sleepless nights, bad dreams, alcoholism, rape, despair and confusion.... What could I say? "To give shape to reality"? No, I could not say that. It would have been insufficient – absurdly, woundingly insufficient – and also pretentious, somehow. It couldn't possibly be the right answer. I racked my brains, and what I eventually came up with went something like this. "*Fiction is the human condition. Just because human reality is shot through and through with simplistic, involuntary fictions, it is important to invent complex, voluntary ones...*" Now let me develop on that a bit.

The specialty, the prerogative, the glory and the downfall of the human species is the question *why*. But why the why? Whence cometh it? From Time. (Consciousness, I believe, can be defined as *intelligence plus Time*.) And whence Time? From the fact that we alone, of all the animal species, know how we were born, and that we will die. Our awareness of these two phenomena gives us what even our closest relatives (chimps and bonobos) don't have - i.e., the notion of what a *lifetime* is. We alone see our existence on Earth as a *path* endowed with meaning (and direction). An arc. A curve that takes us from birth to death. A shape that unfolds in time, with a beginning, a series of adventures, and an end. In other words, a *narrative*.

For us humans, ever since we started living in Time, there is no such thing as real-reality; always and only fictional-reality. Because we know that we are here, and cannot bear to be here arbitrarily, living and dying as it were "for nothing," we make up reasons for which to live and die, then proceed to believe in them.

Narrativity evolved in our species as a survival technique. It is inscribed in the very

circonvolutions of our brains. Weaker than the other species, over millions of years of evolution, *Homo sapiens* learned to reap the benefits of endowing reality with meaning through confabulation. Meaning is our hard drug. In the form of political or religious ideals, it is not only hard but pure. To get a dose of it, people are willing to sacrifice the lives of their loved ones... and even their own lives.

Fictions permeate the human world. To say that a world is human is to say that it is permeated with fictions. No one is responsible for them. No one decided to invent them. They are not the result of a plot of the powerful against the powerless. To us human beings, they are as real as the ground beneath our feet; indeed they *are* that ground; our support and our sustenance in the world. No one has ever come across a human population that was content to live in reality – that is, without religion, taboo, ritual, genealogy, fairy tales, magic, stories – without recourse to the imagination, without confabulation. Because of the faith we place in them, the fictions we have concocted over the centuries are our most precious and incontrovertible reality. Shot through and through with imagination, they give rise to a *second level of reality* – human reality, universal despite its widely varying appearances over space and time. Rooted in these fictions, *made up* of them, human consciousness is a fabulous machine – and an *innately confabulating one*. We are the confabulating species.

For instance: we humans find it virtually impossible to acknowledge that *there is no particular merit in being born this or that*. To be born, for a human, is to *deserve* to be born. Among illiterate peoples, genealogy (no matter how fanciful) is the primary element of education – that is, of identity. As of our conception (psychic before physical – the *dream* of a child conceived by its mother, its father, or both), we are endowed with an artificial merit – that of being "the child of So-and-so." The fictions start there, and they don't stop until we've been effaced from the memory of all the living.

To welcome a child into the world is to make a place for it within a series of concentric circles: family/ethnic group/church/clan/tribe/country, and so forth. Before it can say *I*, it needs to

exist within a series of *we's*. Invariably, the latter are defined by contrast with a series of more or less threatening *thems*.

*You are one of us. The others are the enemy.* This is the archaic, all-powerful Ur-text of the human species, the basic structure of all primitive narratives, from caveman lore to *Star Wars*. Yes – because life is nasty, brutish and short, and we are afraid. Fear is the normal response of all animals to the prospect of death, but the fact that humans know about their death in advance changes everything. In a word, it makes our species paranoid. Paranoia, the pathology of *overinterpretation*, is mankind's congenital illness. In the days of our ancient ancestors, this paranoid structure was probably indispensable. In recent decades, it has become seriously counterproductive. Being hardwired into our cerebral circuits, however, it is still very much with us. *Nota Bene* : when I say that fiction is the human condition, I don't mean to imply that facts do not exist; only that we are unable to apprehend and transmit facts without interpreting them.

Millions of inhabitants of the New World indeed lost their lives as a result of the arrival of a few thousand Europeans; millions of Africans were indeed deported and sold as slaves. However, the minds of the actors of these situations were filled with fictions that served to explain what was happening to them, or to justify what they were doing. The Aztecs believed the Spaniards to be gods; the Spaniards believed they were legitimately extending their king's dominion or spreading the word of Christ; fair-skinned men saw themselves as the natural masters of dark-skinned men, and so forth.

Six million Jews indeed perished in the Nazi concentration and death camps, but they perished because of a bad fiction – namely, the natural superiority of the Aryan race. Once dead, they could be reinserted into other bad fictions – the one, for example, about *a land without people and a people without a land*, or the one about a *Return*, which gives every Jew in the world – even recent converts, half-Jews and felashas, even those Jews none of whose traceable ancestors ever lived in Palestine or so much as heard the word Palestine – to come to Israel/Palestine and settle permanently there.

Blowing one's own horn is humanity's favourite music.

Nowhere in the world, perhaps, is the fictional nature of human identities more evident than in the city of Jerusalem, where they are madly juxta- and superimposed. The city resembles a gigantic Monopoly or Lego game handed out to the various groups with no instructions for use, so that each has undertaken in its own way to define the rules, determine the Meaning of the different pieces, decide who is the winner, who the loser, and how the game should "inexorably" unfold.

Today, any African-American in the United States, any Jew or Muslim living in the Middle East, could theoretically say to himself or herself, "Okay, I've had it. From now on, I'm going to be free and autonomous. My people's heritage, with its heroic sacrifices and monumental tragedies, is no longer of any concern to me. I refuse to be determined by the past, passively dependent on what happened to my ancestors. From now on, like the hero of a novel by Sartre or Kundera, I will forge my own destiny."

If they do not make this decision, it's because it would damage the fictional foundations of their being – fidelity towards their parents, ancestors or coreligionaries; identification with their suffering; need to pass on their stories. If they *do* make this decision, however, they will be free only to subscribe to another fiction – the childish, arrogant, Promethean fiction of the self-engendered, self-sufficient individual.

Of its own history and the history of others, each country tells the version it finds the most gratifying, the one that shows it in the most flattering light. Many important facts get condemned to oblivion and vanish forever; others, on the contrary, solidify into official myths and are ceaselessly emphasized, commemorated, taught. What is the "true" story of your family, or your country? You don't have the faintest idea – and for good reason. What we are taught about our Nation, our family line, etc., is not reality but fiction. The facts have been meticulously selected and organized so as to make up a coherent, edifying tale. What happened to the duds, the whores, the halfwits, the wrongdoings, the massacres, the tragic mistakes? All historical

narratives are fictional because they tell only part of the story. Only God could tell the whole story. Unfortunately, being outside of Time, God is not a storyteller.

Children are at the mercy of the fictions inculcated into them by adults. They have no choice but to take them seriously, especially when their parents seem to consider them sacred. These fictions are always biased, almost always simplistic, and often dangerous. Since our brains do not contain hermetically sealed chambers, one for fantasy and another for reality, children intermingle and superimpose facts and fictions. What they learn about real kings is colored by what they know about fairy-tale kings. What they're told about God the Father influences their perception of their own fathers, and *vice versa*. Only much later – and even then, only if they are lucky – will they learn to think for themselves and challenge some of the fictions they ingested at an early age.

What do I mean by "lucky"? Lucky people are those who have access to other cultures. The fictional nature of the latter being instantly apparent to them, it can help them grasp the fictional nature of their own. The luckiest people of all are those who have access to the *novels* of other cultures. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, raised by a Somali mother who practised a repressive, dogmatic version of Islam, was fortunate enough to live in four different countries before the age of twenty; this can only have whetted her intelligence. She underwent a real inner revolution when, in the Kenyan school she attended as an adolescent, she began to read English and American novels. In her autobiography *Infidel*, she says that Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mister Hyde* had an especially powerful impact on her – because, unlike the Manichean religious fictions she'd been taught up until then, it helped her to see that good and evil could exist within a single person. \*The vast majority of human children do not have this good fortune. American children growing up in born-again Christian families don't have it. Neither do little boys

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\* For a while, Hirsi Ali was a luminous figure who thought in complex terms; later, though, she reverted to the schematic thinking of her childhood, simply reversing the terms, so that Islam became all-bad and the Western world all-good.)

who get sent to Coranic schools in Afghanistan, or little girls in North Korea, who learn to dance and sing the praises of Kim Jong-Il. Etc.

The human brain's innate penchant for narrativity, knowingly manipulated by religious discourse over the centuries, has in recent years begun to be exploited by the media, governments, big business and the military. The buzzword for this process is *storytelling*. "Facts talk," as a cynical specialist put it, "but stories sell." Under a thousand different guises – in the workplace, in our city streets, on our television and computer screens – stories are presented to us as "true" and we are asked to adhere to them, believe in them, be moved and inspired by them, identify with their characters, implicate ourselves in their plots and morals. Propaganda; disinformation. Because of the emotions elicited in us by these simple, edifying tales, we can easily be persuaded to buy such-and-such a product, vote for such-and-such a candidate, commit ourselves to such-and-such a company, support such-and-such a cause. Sweetened with storytelling, lies are amazingly easy to swallow.

To be civilized is to recognize that identity is a construction, become acquainted with numerous texts – and, through them, learn to identify with people unlike oneself. Unfortunately, no matter how sophisticated we are, it is always possible – no, *easy* – to reactivate our gut fears. Whenever a nation feels threatened or humiliated (like Germany after the Versailles Treaty, or the United States after the World Trade Center attacks), it will spontaneously – and dangerously – tend to revert to the Ur-text. Bad fictions give rise to hatred, wars and massacres. People are willing to torture, kill or die for bad fictions. It happens every day.

The faith which billions of people place in a transcendent reality inspires, supports *and transforms* them, day after day. It can incite them to help the poor, or to fasten a bomb around their waists and blow themselves up in a packed city bus. In our species, as Rousseau was already aware, the best and the worst flow from the same source.

All explanations in which people believe *effectively* confer Meaning on their lives.

To be Jewish is a fiction. To be Muslim is a fiction. To be Christian is a fiction. To be

Hindou is a fiction. To be a voodoo adept, etc. – all these things are fictions. In and of themselves, they are neither good nor bad. On the other hand... Good Jews and Bad Muslims: a deleterious fiction. Good Muslims and Bad Jews: a deleterious fiction. Good Christians and bad infidels: a deleterious fiction. *Ur-Texts*, once again. Wars and massacres guaranteed.

The Good Samaritan: a beneficial fiction. A story which, instead of presenting itself as true, presents itself as a story. It *contains* a truth – namely, that we can identify with the suffering of people who belong to groups other than our own. Such is the premise – and the promise – of the novel.

Polytheisms, monotheisms, even nihilisms: so many confabulations that give human beings a handle on their earthly existence. They are not true – but to the extent that their adepts believe in them, and behave in accordance with that belief, they are *effective*.

Thus, there are two sorts of truth: the *objective* sort, whose results can be confronted with reality (sciences, techniques, daily life), and the *subjective* sort, which can be attained only through inner experience (myths, religions, literature). No religion can provide us with an objective answer to the question of why the universe and mankind exist. All of them, on the other hand, provide excellent subjective answers.

Believing in unreal things helps people to endure real life.

The strength we derive from fictions is due to the presence of other people within ourselves. It comes from the texts and the Ur-texts we've absorbed – first in our family circle, then at school, church, university, on TV and at the movies... All these texts, through the process of *identification*, have shaped our *identities*.

When a collectivity is weakened, humiliated, or under threat, its members tend to listen to, believe and obey their leaders in much the same way as children listen to, believe and obey their parents. This is why a majority of Americans bought George W. Bush's tall tale about Iraq being responsible for the 9/11 attacks. In the Middle East, wars will continue to break out as long as the different peoples go on stubbornly adhering to their respective fictions. Naturally, the worse

their situation gets, the more ferociously they will cling to them.

In Palestinian schools, children learn nothing about the Holocaust; thus, they find the massive arrival of Jews in Palestine, and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, incomprehensible and shocking. Israeli schoolchildren are taught little or nothing about the *Naqba* (or "Catastrophe"), in the course of which seven hundred thousand Palestinians were forced out of their homes, dispersed, exiled, or killed to make room for the new arrivals, the new country. This makes Arab resentment towards them indecipherable, not to say monstrous.

Though it is tempting to see the two situations as symmetrical (for symmetry is yet another fiction our brains find satisfying), they are not. All we need to do is compare Israeli and Palestinian statistics in a few areas – not only average annual incomes and military budgets but education of women, percentage of children attending school, and especially *access to the novels and films of other cultures* – and then ask ourselves which of the two populations is more likely, in its religious and political speeches (assuming there is any distinction between the two) to preach hatred.

In France, one could do the same sort of statistics for young people who live in the culturally deprived suburbs and those who live in the city centers, then ask ourselves which of the two groups is more likely to think, speak and act in simplistic ways.

When people are maintained, year after year, in a world of constraint and humiliation, they can hardly be expected to bring warm smiles and subtle arguments to the negotiation table. Endlessly reinforcing the security contingents around the "agitators" only makes them more and more primitive – and thus more and more dangerous.

The more a group is oppressed, compressed, and crushed, the more liable it is to subscribe to the Ur-text, painting reality in black and white and recommending violence to eliminate the black and impose the white.

Novels are written, and can only be written, where survival is guaranteed. As soon as their survival is at stake, humans will tend to adhere unreservedly to the fictions which underlie and

reinforce their identities. Those countries which allow people to revise the fictions of their given identities – by changing religions, political parties, opinions, or even sexes – are also those in which novels are written and read. To be primitive is to stick to one's identity as if it were a fixed, unchanging essence, and to identify only with people like oneself. Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia were primitive countries. They forced their peoples to adhere to the Ur-Text, burning or banishing stories that deviated too much from it.

In many ways, early twenty-first-century America has been behaving like a primitive country. Fortunately, there are many excellent novelists in the United States. Unfortunately, fewer than one American out of two reads more than one novel per year. Non-readers are potentially dangerous, as they will tend to have a preference for simplistic narratives that can be easily exploited and manipulated by churches, governments, and the media.

The novel, both in its historical emergence and in its everyday consumption, is inseparable from the individual. It is intrinsically *civilizing*. [An aside: it is possible that women, at least in the Western world, are more civilized than men – not only because women read far more novels than men do, but because, from childhood onward, reading accustoms them to seeing the world (including themselves) through the eyes of others (men)!]

A country's voluntary fictions (stories) provide better access to its reality than its involuntary fictions (History). Reading novels – and, through them, learning to identify with the *characters* of another time, social milieu, or culture – gives us distance from our own, received identities. This can actually help us to decipher other cultures, and perhaps even identify with the *people* who belong to them.

Terrorism being neither more nor less than the result of bad fictions, what our governments should do is not manufacture more weapons but rather, in the countries where it has taken root, favor, encourage and promote the translation, publication and distribution of the masterpieces of world literature. Nothing could be more useful or more important.

The more people think of themselves as realistic, the more they tend to dismiss novels as

superfluous, silly, or a waste of time, the more liable they are to slide towards to the Ur-Text – that is, towards vehemence, violence, criminality, the oppression of their loved ones, or of women, or of those whom they consider to be weak, or of an entire people. This applies as much to the owners of big companies, multi-billionnaire arms salesmen, and ambitious politicians as it does to inner-city kids involved in gang warfare or to Islamist fanatics plotting feverishly in European capitals.

All of these individuals have one important trait in common – they're too busy to read.

In the ideal City imagined by Plato, only the Guardians were to have access to the truth. To behave reasonably, the philosopher believed, the masses needed to be told fibs – for instance, that human beings are naturally divided into groups (Gold, Silver, and Bronze) with different destinies. My own conviction is just the opposite: the elite should renounce its monopoly on good fictions and make it its duty is to share and disseminate them as widely as possible. Concretely, this means that schools should no longer content themselves with ensuring that children acquire their country's literary "canon," simultaneously aggrandizing it with patriotism and anesthetizing it with theory.

What children need to acquire is the love of reading per se; the desire – and the ability – to devour literature from all over the world. If they don't see what good reading does us, they won't find it interesting; thus, it is essential that we know what good it does us.

True, bad novels exist ! Many novels are racist, nationalist, Manichean, sentimental, boring, pretentious, useless, or silly... True, even excellent novels can be badly read – rumor has it that John Lennon's assassin gleaned the order to commit his crime from J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*... True, a great novelist can turn into a despicable, racist, murder-loving individual (Céline)... True, even people who have read hundreds of novels can be led, under extreme circumstances, to kill their own children or to recommend the use of torture... True, whenever a group feels threatened, it will tend to revert to its primitive, gregarious reflexes and recite the Ur-Text.

Nonetheless, the characteristics of the novel – the way in which it explores the tension between individual and society, between freedom and determinism, and encourages us to identify with people unlike ourselves – make it capable of playing a role in ethics.

The prisoner's question that first got me thinking about this issue – "What's the point of making up stories when reality is so incredible?" – implied that the goal of literature is to surprise, impress or dazzle us – in other words, to boggle our minds. Only bad literature sets itself that goal. As a rule, novelists do not set out to create a world more astonishing or incredible than reality. Nothing can beat human reality. It is insuperable – both for its madness and its ingenuity, its cruelty and its grace. What the novel *can* do, on the other hand, is to give us *another point of view* on reality. To enable us to step back from it, analyse it, see how it has been slapped together, criticize its underlying myths.

What were the fictions that gave rise to the "incredible realities" of the women locked up at Fleury-Mérogis? Of what human follies had they been the subject or the object? Love fables (jealousies, marital quarrels leading to murder), fables of motherly perfection (leading to infanticide), political or religious fables (making them willing or even eager to set bombs), fables about money or drugs leading to happiness...

Whence the value of literature – which, instead of presenting itself as truth, like the millions of other fictions which surround, invade and define us, lays its cards on the table. *I am a fiction*, it tells us. Love me for what I am. Use me to feel your freedom, push back your limits, discover and awaken your own creativity. Follow the twists and turns of my characters and make them your own; allow them to enlarge your universe. Dream me, dream with me, never forget to dream.

Putting our feet in the author's footsteps, we learn to hear the unique musique of his or her language— and gradually, if the magic takes effect, our minds leave the ground and start to soar, ultimately *partaking* in the divine prerogative of creation. Yes, through literature, we can sense that element of divinity hidden within each and all of us (and nowhere else!). Through it, in

secret, in silence, ephemerally but truly, we become gods.

Not only that, but – at least temporarily – we become better people! Yes, every good novel is also an appeal on behalf of ethics, but of a very special kind. Unlike our religious, familial and political fictions, literary fiction doesn't tell us what is good and what is bad. Its ethical mission is to show us the *truth* of human beings – a truth which is always mixed, impure, filled with ironies, doubts and abysses. (The minute a novelist starts imposing her vision of good upon us, she betrays her vocation and ruins her book.)

Whereas our lives in society incite us to pronounce cut-and-dried judgments, taking sides only with the people we resemble and condone, the novel ushers us into an more variegated moral universe. It helps us to hear the true music of the world, which is neither celestial harmony nor infernal cacophony. Absorbed in a novel, we are in fact far more moral than when we act as citizens, parents, spouses or church members. Since all the events unfold within the privacy of our brains, and we do not feel threatened by those verbal beings known as characters, we often listen to them with more tolerance, more curiosity and more benevolence than the flesh-and-blood people who surround us. Not only do we forgive them their weaknesses, we're actually *grateful* for them! When we encounter "evil" people in novels (criminals, religious fanatics, castrating bitches, violent parents, etc.), our impulse is less to condemn than to comprehend them – to let their stories develop in our minds and try to see, if not how we might resemble them, at least how they got that way.

By presenting itself as a fiction, by allowing us to *choose* it, literature temporarily frees us from the obligations and constraints of the countless fictions to which we are *subjected*. It makes us the gift of a reality which, though recognizable, is more precise, more profound, more intense, fuller and longer-lasting than the reality of the outside world. Ideally, it can give us the strength to go back to that reality and decipher it, as well, with greater subtlety.

It can even lead us – such things have been seen – to act upon it.

In conclusion: *Narrative empathy* is the basis for equality and exchange between the

prisoner and myself. Alone of all the arts, literature allows us to *explore other people's inner existence*.

That is its sovereign privilege, and its value. Inestimable. Irreplaceable.