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OCCASIONAL PAPER ON LITERATURES AND CULTURES, 2013

WHY STORIES ?

K. NARAYANA CHANDRAN

U.G.C. Special Assistance Programme (DRS-I)
Department of English, Sambalpur University

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Nobody knows enough about stories and lives to write about them. I have written at least this much simply because I have had great support and encouragement from a few fine lovers of lives and stories. At least they were good enough to trust *my* story. It is a pleasure to record my gratitude to them.

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Nearly every alternate year since 1992, I have been offering some course or the other on narratives, some of them more 'stories' than courses in the strict curricular sense. Directing short and long dissertations on stories has occasioned more stories than I ever realized. Students and colleagues at the University of Hyderabad and elsewhere have been most considerate and indulgent. Audiences at Refresher Courses for teachers, conferences, workshops and seminars over many years have also contributed to this work in significant ways. Anna Kurian and Pramod K. Nayar have generously shared with me their love for, and expertise in, this subject besides being good tellers of stories. For gracious company and compliance with my seemingly endless search for library resources, I thank them as well as M. E. Veda Sharan of English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

Family, surely, is one of nature's masterpieces. I have relished this wisdom when Veenu and Juji involve me in our familial frictions. To both, in equal measure, I remain indebted. Writing these essays wouldn't have happened, its story largely untold, without them. My losses in the larger family of story-tellers include K. Ayyappa Paniker (1930– 2006), Gopu (1943–2009), and K. Philip Augustine (1949– 2011). As a euphemistic pun for such losses has it, they remain stories. I dedicate this monograph to their memory.

K. Narayana Chandran
The University of Hyderabad

Stories start other stories. That's how it is.
(Jeanette Winterson)

Stories happen only to people who can tell them.
(Attributed to Thucydides)

We tell amusing tales, what else is human life?
(K. Ayyappa Paniker)

Why Stories?

The questions no one asks about stories are not always the ones that hardly need answers for obvious reasons. *Why stories?* might appear at first to be one such question. My reason for addressing this subject is twofold. First, stories create a world for us. This is a world we hardly ever recognize as such because we have double standards about this world throughout the world. What are they? There is a world of the story, and there is a world that purports to have nothing to do with that world— a world of actual things and real people, of facts and figures, both quantifiable and verifiable. The story-world is always seen to be entirely an *Other World*— distracting and deceptive, if unrewarding and useless for all practical purposes. In reality, however, the empirical world so called is driven *only* by stories. The tellers and listeners of these stories are as real as the world they create, live and die in. We hear such stories always in the workaday world— at home and office, on streets and crossroads, during work and leisure, upon meetings and partings, on- and off-line, we rely heavily on stories to carry on with whatever we are doing. Institutions of course frown upon stories only when *we* tell them, but there is hardly an institution that is not founded on stories, or survives long enough without circulating them. Big and small stories help institutions reinvent themselves. In fact it is indisputable that stories make or mar careers and cases, and the only surprising aspect of so demonstrable a fact is that there are those among us who still affect surprise. Evidently, stories are grist to the institutional mill when they celebrate jubilees and landmark achievements. Chest-thumping proprietors cannot but recall on such occasions how something grew from a "modest house" or someone indeed had "humble beginnings." The chiasmic Cinderella story (rags to riches: riches to rags) nearly exhausts other possibilities. Stories are classified and graded, nevertheless paraded as gossip, legend, hearsay, or history.

Second, we shall never know what it is to live in a world without stories, if we never asked: *Why stories?* The most important thing to realize is that this one question might give us many possible

answers. Some answers not only add to our enjoyment of stories but enable us to live more comfortably in a world full of stories; some others ultimately lead us not to a better understanding of stories but to that of our *lives*, and what best to make of them. And not to at least wonder why stories and lives make sense mutually, and sometimes *only when* stories and lives begin to be seen in apposition, is to miss some genuinely fine points of living, telling, and listening to stories that complete humanity. The following is an old chestnut cited by narrative theorists and cultural anthropologists across continents ever since Alan Dundes, the famous folklorist, made it popular:

> A supercomputer is built and the entire world's knowledge is programmed into it. A gathering of top scientists punch in the question: "Will the computer ever replace man?" Clickity, click, whir, whir, and the computer lights flash on and off. Finally a small print-out emerges saying, THAT REMINDS ME OF A STORY. (Quoted in Dundes 35)

Stories are not only processed differently but their name and nature are variously construed by people, their dharma often mistaken in today's world. Our greatest story might well be just another story for other people. Stories, rather than real people, clash— on the streets, across seminar-halls and waiting rooms, in the market, on the floors of parliaments and stock-exchanges. In a study devoted to investigating the ways in which new narratives seek to equal the new lives in this world, Christian Salmon observes that "Modern 'storytelling' practices are not simply technologies for formatting discourses. They are also the very space within which discourses are elaborated and transmitted, a *dispositif* in which social forces and institutions, storytellers and the tellers of counter-stories, and encoding and formatting technologies, either come into conflict or collude with one another..." (ix). This is true enough to merit a hearing but whether we are always and helplessly within the precincts of a "mediasphere" as Salmon suggests is open to question. *Story, Another Story* was, therefore, what I called a course I taught some

years ago. My class used to wonder whatever happened to the (old) story as we knew it, our *literary* story; how different it sounds when the public media now appropriate this word to 'cover,' 'break,' 'update,' 'broadcast,' and 'relay' stories by seconds. If you don't have a story up your sleeve, you probably wear a story *on* it. The ever-expanding borders of the story were first noticed in a strange amalgam of discursive styles by Christine Brooke-Rose's *Stories, theories and things*. Parts of this unusual book were essential reading for my students who particularly seemed to appreciate Brook-Rose's characterization of the postmodern hold-all story:

> For 'story' has now become a star word in critical theory for theory, for the representation of 'things': history, criticism, chemistry, physics, sociology, psychoanalysis or philosophy, all are stories we tell ourselves to understand the world, all quite meta (-phorical, -linguistic, -historical, if there is a meta-),the Matter of Britain, of France, of the World, of Me. [...] So story has replaced 'philosophy', 'model', 'paradigm', 'theory', and may even swallow up the supposedly non-paradigmatic Fact of the Matter. [...]
>
> Let us play: There are more theories in heaven and earth, Horatio. [...] But no, it won't do, since it is all our philosophies that dream up the paradigms, models, interpretations, stories, scenarios, matters, things, absences, and there cannot, on much present theory, be more than are dreamt up, only more to be still dreamt up. (5–6)

Brooke-Rose's playfully cynical tone notwithstanding, her references to versions and variants of a literary genre called *fiction* might help us pose a crucial question about stories in general: What do we expect to hear usually when people tell us that they have a story to tell? How we think of ourselves, and the world we have made securely for ourselves, will largely determine and prepare us mentally for the story we are going to hear. If it isn't quite a 'story' by our standards of logic, reason, or persuasion, it is not a story. It certainly is not *our* story. Otherwise, it is. In other

words, from the personal, institutional, and communal to the international and global, *relations are stories* of which we either approve or disapprove. Open an American story-book (any story of the late 70s/ early 80s, say, by Joyce Carol Oates?) and you have stories of families. Family is where, we believe, the American kids grow up. They grow into adults who can't wait to tell psychiatrists about their families. So much, that is, would seem to depend on our notions of sameness and difference (in terms of language, ethnicity, gender, class, caste, religion...) in *relating* stories, in relating *to* stories, given our story-shaped selves, and story-shaped worlds. "Moreover," as Susan E. Babbitt puts it so incisively in an essay on the uncritical reception in the West of a Cuban story about homosexuality, "whether or not we even hear stories in the first place depends upon judgments we make about how the world is and ought to be. For we hear stories *as stories*, as giving an account of something or other, when we identify certain questions about which something can indeed be said, and sometimes the questions, or the assumptions that explain the questions, are not explicit." Babbitt suggests therefore "that stories themselves are not as epistemically significant as the questions that determine their meaningfulness in a specific context" (2). It is to such significant questions that other disciplines want their stories to direct them.

All this suffices, briefly and preliminarily that is, by way of answering *Why Stories?* There is, however, more to think about stories when we begin to see a story in any text we read, a story promising or persuasive enough to explain the world to us generally in a language that is neither hortatory nor minatory. At least, our education today does not (ideally, should not) prescribe select or further readings in any specific discipline but encourages reading *without* disciplines, across fields and specializations whose stories we feel free to bring along with us to our disciplinary 'homes' so that they inter-animate and crossbreed 'our' stories and conventions of composition and reception. Among the more celebrated theorists of interdisciplinarity and subversive reading tactics, the foremost storyist to my mind is Michel de Certeau

whose *Practice of Everyday Life* is a classic defence of the story-world and those who live in/by it. Certeau always had believed in stories, especially if they came from Others, the homeless, for whom stories are home. The handsome tribute he pays Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* is rooted in this belief. Foucault's distinction as a historian, according to Certeau, is in relating himself to marginal stories and those who tell them, and furthermore in "restor[ing] to madness its own language." In *The Writing of History*, Certeau debunks the global historiographical neglect of marginal stories while applauding Foucault's attention to "sorcery, madness, festival, popular literature, the forgotten world of the peasant, Occitania, etc., all these zones of silence" (40, 79).

Among my favourite passages in *The Practice of Everyday Life* is the following, a passage I would love to see printed on the flyleaf of every course-booklet of the humanities:

> An initial, indeed initiatory, experience: to read is to be elsewhere, where *they* are not, in another world; it is to constitute a secret scene, a place one can enter and leave when one wishes; to create dark corners into which no one can see....
>
> The reader produces gardens that miniaturize and collate a world, like a Robinson Crusoe discovering an island; but he, too, is "possessed" by his own fooling and jesting that introduces plurality and difference into the written system of a society and a text. He is thus a novelist. He deterritorializes himself, oscillating in a nowhere between what he invents and what changes him. Sometimes, in fact, like a hunter in the forest, he spots the written quarry, follows a trail, laughs, plays tricks, or else like a gambler, lets himself be taken in by it. Sometimes he loses the fictive securities of reality... (173).

And so on. Metaphors of reading and readers change and pass, but Certeau returns on virtually every page of *The Practice* to the stories and legends of open and closed spaces, in and out of time, to the economy of scriptural and other narratives. How

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does one make urban space habitable? Certeau has no other answer: by filling in those silences with "wordless stories," by walking. The Benjaminian *flâneur* in Certeau's avatar can make and unmake stories from even those spaces that seem unremarkable, lifeless and colourless, to mere viewers and passers-by. Of course there are stories everywhere; if we don't find them, it is only because we haven't looked *for* them. "Physical moving about," remarks Certeau, "has the itinerant function of yesterday's 'superstitions.' Travel (like walking)is a substitute for the legends that used to open up space to something different'....What this walking exile produces is precisely the body of legends that is currently lacking in one's own vicinity; it is a fiction.... As a corollary, one can measure the importance of these signifying practices (to tell oneself legends) as practices that invent spaces" (107).

A good deal of studies in the social sciences not only canvasses stories as respectable research material and method but relies on "standard stories," Certeau's 'heroic' subject of marginality, in order to understand "social construction." If the postmodern urban-industrial geography has considerably changed human imagination, it is largely because of massive demographic shifts in cities like Los Angeles where it is difficult to find a large number of white male bodies among the walkers. If such bodies have become largely "invisible," so have their "stories" of invisibility variously told by cultural theorists. Jean Baudrillard's *America* carries a long discussion of LA freeways (52–63) but what strikes us as most apposite to the stories of walkers and walking, of intellectual *flanerie*, is his categorization of the new walker who is no longer white and wealthy but one who is derelict and deprived, quite probably someone who could roam around with apparent impunity. "If you get out of your car in this centrifugal metropolis, you immediately become a delinquent; as soon as you start walking, you are a threat to public order, like a dog wandering in the road. Only immigrants from the Third World are allowed to walk. It is, in a sense, their privilege.... For other people, walking, fatigue, or muscular activity have become rare commodities,

'services' costing a lot of money" (58). If this isn't a story, it is because others have told it in a hundred different ways already, probably in less condescending and mockingly resentful tones. No wonder, in his *Stories, Identities, and Political Change*, Charles Tilly informs us that "many historians and social scientists have committed themselves to the view that standard stories do provide viable explanations of social processes…[,] that nothing accessible to analysis exists beyond the limits of the standard stories that participants in social processes tell" (10). Much as we seem disinclined, if ill-equipped, to treat *truth* and such allied contingencies philosophically, we have no other go. Whose truth is more fictional and unreliable than ours? What stories could we claim to be solely *ours*, if theirs did not prime them? Have we lost all intellectual purchase on the stories we love, and live by? What world of ours will remain when we are deprived of even *our* stories?

These, surely, are difficult questions. The considerable challenge to the profession of reading and writing fiction is certainly posed by a world that has an obligation to involve people at large in some business in which they are allowed the least stakes. Since they have little investment, they could practically claim nothing by way of natural and legitimate rights. In the new global trade and corporate business where *stories*, rather than real goods and services, are exchanged, they remain idle watchers, not participants. Sometimes corporate empires, as one would expect, are built not on solid material capital, on not even a story, but the *idea* of a story. In a story worth its name we want to know at least what happens or might happen next. We keep reading a story if only for the hope that we will know something we did not know or guessed when we began. We look for completion or closure of events that aroused our curiosity. Not so when big corporate affairs and global business are concerned. Deals are struck in virtual offices, money promised on soft-copied materials, offers transacted through demat accounts, and securitized as dreams—all versions of the 'story' we have read in books or overheard in company but now reportedly true as 'the sub-prime crisis.' It is

as if those who cried that the Emperor had no clothes are also in the business of managing his wardrobe. Even the hard-earners and pensioners who invested in Enron were content with a beautiful 'story' when it collapsed in 2003. The Enron company directors told them lies that would shame boys and girls caught copying in public exam halls. The 'economic meltdown' of 2008 explains, somewhat neatly, why no one ever really believed the Growth Story except the denizens of very tiny corporate kingdoms and their governments. The credit-worthiness of nations is no more exaggerated than the world-ranking of universities. For every Standard & Poor's there is some academic-rating outfit called the *Times Higher Education Supplement* or the NAAC. If you agree to play whatever game internationally, you ought to believe their stories and pass their dope-tests. The five M's of our vastly over-priced B-schools (money, material, machine, market, man) do not, however, add up to a credible management story unless someone pays real cash to real people in real currency. That, certainly, is not *our* story. Nor does that story give us a great moral to remember.

When new stories take the place of the old, we shall ask whether stories have ceased to entertain and edify us as they used to, once upon a time. Or, have we come to believe foolishly that stories have only a once-upon-a-time value and use? In any case what worries people who still invest in stories is the dismal political life of societies such as India which used to educate young princes and courtiers mainly through tales and legends such as Dandin's *Daśakumāracarita*, and manuals such as *Arthaśāstra* and *Nītisāra*. While the education of the current crop of our political classes and their civil servants is quite deplorable, we have absolutely no hope that their progeny will do any better. Today's political youth do not grow up listening to stories that tell them what constitutes *nīti* (in feeble English, *fair policy* in life and polity). Classical and medieval tales of a hundred traditions in various parts of India did nothing but tell children that there is no substitute for hard work, good intention, and a complete faith in humanity. Since sense of humour cannot be instilled or cultivated, those tales

only suggested that a fine sense of humour could perhaps save a few steps before one embarked on a fast-unto-death or rushed to the 'wells' of their debating houses. In short, living well means living *niti* before oneself and others. What is *niti* for you ought to serve well for others as well as long as you are not self-serving. What the children *saw* around them or read about in a story was, in the end, their *example*. Its word in Sanskrit *dṛuṣṭānta* couldn't make it more literal. The old world of the elders they grew up with echoed *subhāṣita* and *sūkta*, things well-said, wise sentences, and maxims. The sayings were not only poetic marvels that alluded to some story but suggested a whole range of interpretive possibilities, other stories. According to Daud Ali, a researcher in the ethical traditions of South Asian literature and folklore, "*Pañcatantra* ... is said to have been narrated to edify the slow-witted sons of a royal patron. Its moral tales, however, seem to be directed as much to courtiers and the wider community of men aspiring for success at the royal assembly as they are to royal princes" (23–24). Slow-witted sons and daughters of our ruling classes may have grown exponentially over the centuries, but it is anyone's guess what ethical tales are now on hand to edify them.

Stories circulate in a world on a daily, even hourly, basis in order to shape that world. If every telling predicates a story, that telling has a story to tell, a truth neither universally acknowledged nor openly told, unless we ask: *Why Stories?* When we reflect on the many stories of literary-historical movements and their emblematic creations, we hear them articulated from various centres (*Modernism*, for example, from Paris, Vienna, or New York...) and are often told by artists and writers who canvass this ideology, or prophesy that revolution, but the variously told stories fascinate us more than the truth of origins or breakthrough. Off the atrium on the second floor of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example, one gallery displays "Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*) by Félix Gonzáles-Torres. This is, in terms of physical size, a very small display: two very ordinary kitchen clocks against a blue wall ticking away, showing the same time. One

would expect, as in life, one of them to "die" in time—stop at some point (someday/ hour/ minute). Now the 'story' I prefer to read in the art of *Perfect Lovers* (1991) is perhaps as suggestive to me as the overall 'story' of *Time Passes* in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In her *Orlando* we read: "An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation..." (58). We can't be sure that Gonzáles-Torres hasn't read this passage; nor, too sure either, about Andy Warhol. His *Marilyn (Three Times)* certainly tells a more 'readable' tale than Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* of a legend's rise-fall-suicide.

Only time will winnow a handful of significant stories from all we hear and see of the *Modern*, upon which time-servers build their seasonally-varying canons and classics. It is perhaps this awareness that informs David Antin's quip: "From the modernism that you want, you get the postmodernism you deserve" (Quoted by Yunte Huang). Much of the theorizing endemic to the teaching profession is not so much about when things began as when certain stories about them began to be told. Anyone who has been in the business of teaching literature in any language through the last two decades or so will attest that we continue to be overwhelmed with stories *about* stories. Not many know or care *what* began this game; they play the game nevertheless. One story I shall never forget is that of a teacher of English in a fairly decent university claiming that she has never taught *belles-lettres*, nor would feel the need to teach them ever, for her interest has always been, she said, in *image studies*, by which she meant all the light-directed media and the stories they told the public.

That you do not see the point of a story, *why* a story is told, or that you do not attach as much importance to a story as others might, is not good enough reason, however, to banish

fiction from our curriculum. Not everything *in* or *about* a story is seen (or heard) by all, or all at once. I see this as a flip side to the abominable practice of proscribing texts by learned societies and syllabi committees. When an essay by A. K. Ramanujan on the traditions of telling the *Ramayana* story in India was banned in Delhi colleges, a few curious people rushed to read the essay in full. In an instructive anecdote Ramanujan was fond of recalling, in one version of the *Ramayana* legend he had heard from a group of villagers in the Andhra region, Sita insists that she join Rama during his exile in the forest. Rama tries to dissuade her but when all her logic fails, she tells Rama that she ought to join him for the simple reason that in all the versions of the legend she had heard, Sita did accompany Rama. There is no other *Ramayana*, she insists! Recall Phidias, again, who sculpted those marvellous statues mounted on the roof of the Parthenon, the tallest ever, *circa* 440 B.C. Not surprisingly to those who know enough about India's institutions of financial disbursement (less pompously, Cash Sections) there were "audit objections" to Phidias's hefty bills. "Why would anyone pay a sculptor for only the front-view of statues? Phidias has billed us for their backsides as well. How unfair! Who will ever get to see such rounded perfection?" Phidias's retort: *Can't the gods see them?* Stories, like Phidias's statues, sometimes ask for *parikrama pradakṣiṇa.*

It is to a more politically exploitative use of stories that Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives* directs us. It alerts us first to the specious logic of a story called Western Development that pays scant attention to the rest of the world, to those outcasts created by 'Western modernities.' This narrative couldn't be more biased and discriminatory than it is when the advanced economic summits routinely fault 'Third World' policies for neglecting their international standards of environmental pollution and pollutants. At its strangest, this story projects the denizens of Europe and North America as victims of illnesses caused, and crimes committed, by the unscrupulous Asians and Africans. For anyone who has studied the polemics of Western modernities and the models of 'development' canvassed by them know that the very

excluded and subordinated 'others' in this dismal polarization are indeed themselves. The Other-making business, then and now, are highly motivated acts masquerading as benevolence and munificence whose stories are widely circulated. In beautifully told stories, however, "These subordinated or excluded dimensions ... become misrecognized aspects of identity; difference is reconstructed as otherness." John Jervis's astute study called *Transgressing the Modern* also goes on to remark that "this 'otherness' takes its revenge on a modernity that cannot grasp itself with reflexive adequacy..." (213). Now Bauman, who holds a decent mirror to the West, might well be offering a sort of "reflexive adequacy." He is interested in stories not simply for the facts and figures easily marshalled through clichéd debates on 'sustainable development' (the Big Story) but the use he finds in a teller's strategies (small stories) of inclusion and exclusion, especially those details that bias intellectuals towards the *human* and *waste*. The following passage, for sample, casts an unusual light on the uses of a human story told from an entirely non-literary perspective:

> Stories are like searchlights and spotlights; they brighten up parts of the stage while leaving the rest in darkness. Were they to illuminate the whole of the stage evenly, they would not really be of use. [...] It is the mission of stories to select, and it is in their nature to include through exclusion and to illuminate through casting shadows. It is a grave misunderstanding, and injustice, to blame stories for favouring one part of the stage while neglecting another. Without selection there would be no story. (17)

***

I have written much of this monograph in slow meditative turns to which I assign serial numbers. While this has certainly helped my mind negotiate some crucial turns and counterturns, the serial numbers are apt to mislead anyone who looks for continuity or coherence. The numbers do not necessarily reflect a serial order of my meditative turns or their edited presentation

here. Much as I have resisted a tendency to formulate an aphorism rather than argue a case at length, I have had occasionally to be more cryptic (and perhaps a little elliptic) and proceed, either by citing an example, or by making an aside in a brief endnote. This mode of composition, I believe, has given me some freedom to break the sternly programmed back of the academic essay or the scholarly monograph where every thought and deed of the writer proceeds with a teleological vengeance. None of the following is 'answerable' in that sense to appropriate habits of organized thought. When a thought repeats here, I would like it to have collected, *en route*, greater cogency and amplitude. Only incremental thought conducts us to newer thresholds of experience. Western predominance has given stories a direction and progress largely predicated on neat beginnings, middles, and ends. Once upon a time…Years passed…And then one day…. This narrative line is of course soothing but I have somehow found it to be a product of regressively romantic epistemology.

I do not see an end to stories. I doubt if anyone will. This is not because I am, by nature, an incurable optimist but because I believe that the tellers of stories are optimistic. A little deception is allowed when narrators do not mess up their or others' lives. That explains the sneaking regard we have for our little ones who haven't quite mastered the art. Of course, unofficially, the Parent-Teacher Associations of the World have been doing nothing except catching them young in this life-long training. Jonah's mother listened to him. "That's a nice story, Jonah. Now tell me where you've *really* been for the last three days." How many of us can deny that we haven't been asked any such when we were telling those elders nothing but the truth?

1 Why do human beings tell stories? Why do they love hearing stories? Simply put, we might say that human beings tell (and love to hear) stories because they *are* stories themselves. Some of them are more pleasing, lovable, interesting stories than others; some of them more tragic than comic, more boring than engaging, etc. There is no life if it is not a story quite worth telling. What this means is that every human life remains incomplete until it is told as a story.

There is, however, a detail in this formulation we are apt to overlook. We are stories *to* others, but not quite so to ourselves. Our story is an externally realizable text whose potential for elaboration, stylization, and narrativity is really what we call life. When the time comes to relate our story, we become writers of sorts. Fictional properties contribute to the coherence of our 'story.' Living your life is not the same as telling it, or telling about it, even if you insist that *you* are living it and *you* are telling it. The only reason autobiography might after all be a spurious genre is that the very act of narrating one's own story to oneself is fraught with a big lie which, to my mind, is honourable in fiction but dubious in life. The paradox, however, is not hard to explain. We do not quite like the fiction we are; but we cannot live without that fiction we do not quite approve of. Leading what we often call a 'meaningful' life is simply being able to make and tell appropriate fiction. "Paradoxical.... And that's really the only thing I have to say about stories," according to Wim Wenders who once told a colloquium on narrative techniques, "because for me they only bring out lies, nothing but lies, and the biggest lie is that they show coherence where there is none. Then again, out need for these lies is so consuming that it's completely pointless to fight them and to put together a sequence of images without a story— without the lie of a story. Stories are impossible, but it's impossible to live without them" (54).[2]

This paradox, again, has quite an early beginning. When a child asks for a story— at its meals, at bed-time— what it is asking for really is a 'story' of its self. How did I come to be what I am?

Father and Mother must have been here before me, or was it someone else? Who did I belong to before I became 'yours'? What was the world like before me, and how did I get here? The child wonders. How are others— those in the family, in the vicinity, at school, on the playground, next door or block, all those others called 'strangers' to whom it is forbidden to speak— "related" to me? No wonder we begin with relations (time, place, action) in story-telling. We have no stories that skirt those essentially paired relatives and non-relatives: gods and demons, creators and destroyers, nursery and home, here and the hereafter, *swarga* and *naraka*.... Stories are *related*. We try to relate ourselves to children, the tried and tested method in all relationships. That makes our life worth relating— *as a story*. When we realize that our lives, like Keats's urn, are "storied," we develop a new sense of relationship with the world we have been trying to cope with all along.

"If the self had not always been in doubt, there would be no stories," observes Michael Roemer. "Just as historical accounts confirm the identity of a group or nation, so story clearly serves the continuity of the individual. All stories are centred on the survival of the subject..." (134).

2 Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* proposes that human life is governed by a desire for common good. No community can achieve this if its people are not happy. Therefore, it is only natural that human beings pursue happiness, what Aristotle calls *eudemonia*. The problem, as always, is with the constitution of *eudemonia*, since the material goods and worldly accomplishments can hardly satisfy a philosopher's idea of human life. Only a life of contemplation, aided by reason, can conduct a person toward 'the meaning of life.' Happiness is no other end. The quest is always for this meaning, realizing which the quester is happy.

I am fascinated by the logic of this 'story' because Aristotle also proposed the formula of tragedy as we know it in western narratives. The quest for meaning with which every story begins is complete with events that hinder, delay, or thwart the quester's progress. At some crucial turns, the quester either overcomes, or is beaten by, adversities or antagonists. The *tragic* is by far the well-received story it is simply because, in general, life seems more tragic to story-lovers than comic or epic. For when we tell stories, we are keen that the listeners do not miss the crucial 'meaning of life' our story carries. Is not the narrative pursuit of happiness a good enough reason for telling stories? Who but Carlos Fuentes would drive this home more forcefully to an American audience and recall to them an episode in a Kafka parable? "[N]o single concept has been as overpowering," he asserts, "as this of the Future: not any Future, but a Future synonymous with Happiness. The Pursuit of Happiness is inscribed as a right, but perhaps even more so as a Duty, in your Declaration of Independence. No longer as a right, only as a duty, it is also inscribed in blood on the back of Kafka's prisoner in the penal colony. This obligation to happiness," Fuentes remarks so acerbically, "is the surest guarantee of an unhappy future..." (334–335).

No wonder, then, that stories of the western tradition are predominantly tragic, what with their paradox of having to strive for happiness where there is very little indeed to cheer. Recall

those story-tellers who sketch people you don't know spending money they don't have on stuff they don't need, and yet have the cheek to ask you guess what motive for such fiction might be.

No story, as far as I can recall, is all fun from beginning to end. Tragedy is more suitable and rewarding for rational contemplation, according to Aristotle, for tragic stories are all about repeated failures on the road to happiness. We are used to being told that the tragedy of modern life is that life has no meaning. Hence, Melville, Kafka, Beckett.... But whoever said that life has no meaning was pronouncing a new meaning, which is that if you seek meaning and it is not to be found, you had better make it up—again, like Melville, Kafka, Beckett....

It would seem silly that we seek the larger meaning of something called Life when our lives, 'small' and putatively 'manageable,' make very little sense to us. One's self prepares for a quest by setting its narrative house in order, as Jeanette Winterson tells us: "I believe in stories, in story-telling, because a story can answer a question without reducing that question to banality. 'Who am I?' is a huge question, and the answer develops, unfolds, reveals itself throughout the whole of our life. At birth, we are only the visible corner of a folded map. The geography of the self is best explored with a guide, and for me art [story] is such a guide."[3]

3 If all stories were heard by everyone the way their tellers had first heard them, or would have liked others to hear them, *viz.*, stories as conducive to common good and contributing to human happiness, a short answer would probably end a discussion of *Why Stories?* Not only have notions of common good and happiness changed with years, but the question, *What good stories are in a society that has alternative options and priorities for 'common good'?* is posed by those who dispute the very definition of *literature*. As a matter of fact, controversies that plague literature seasonally either originate in stories or end up as other stories. We are not unused to completely naïve or downright imbecile thoughts and views expressed by the political public about a recent book, an author, or character in a book reflecting allegedly this ideology or that religious persuasion and therefore likely to offend a small but politically crucial section of our society most sensitive to such representations. Books are routinely banned or burnt, libraries and archives vandalized, on grounds neither authors nor their devoted readers understand.

In discussing *Why Stories?* it is only proper that we recall Leslie Fiedler who never avoided asking some of the toughest questions and examining the worst hypocritical notions about stories and those who tell them. He was perhaps among the most vilified "strangers" of English criticism and teaching whose essays courted controversies by squarely addressing embarrassingly nettlesome topics such as homosexuality, racist and gender-prejudices, anti-Semitism, popular youth-culture and the arts, civic intolerance towards strangers, freaks, nomads, etc. Fielder's literary anthropology was the forerunner of several polemical theories we read today in the U. S. and elsewhere but his insistence on getting the story right about our world was quite salutary.

If one were to look for a rationale for fiction, one might find nothing more persuasive than Fiedler's "How Did it all Start?" (an essay included in his *What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society*). He begins with Plato's puzzlement (why "grown

men and women found pleasure in scaring themselves silly over imaginary atrocities counterfeited by actors," 38) set against Aristotle's attempt to explain and understand the *nature* of fiction/poetry. Aristotle, says Fiedler, "sought...to identify the psychosocial uses of tragedy" (39).

There are unconscious impulses in all human beings that they are reluctant to see or acknowledge. We are drawn more and more toward the sins that religion or society, or Authority forbids us. The popular arts/culture always invite us to the sort of indulgence proscribed as offensive, degrading, wrong, even seditious, by theocratic regimes and secular governments. In most societies artists and story-tellers are seen to be non-conformist and radical thinkers. As such their art is often misunderstood when it is understood at all. This suspicion of the arts extends to the humanities generally in all educational regimes that emphasize 'quantifiable data,' 'productive benefits,' 'tangible results,' and so on. "But literature which transgresses our taboos," observes Fiedler, "teaches us that the impulse to do so pre-exists in the deep psyches of us all" (42). Furthermore, the stories that the righteous condemn afford us views no other public medium or agency allows. The mind that relishes this 'forbidden fiction' is the much the same mind that feels most embarrassed while caught reading it. This mind however knows how to negotiate what it represses. Only stories equip and embolden this mind to feel horrified by what it represses nevertheless loves:

> Like our personal dreams, myths or communal dreams tend to express the repressed: especially the dark side of our ambivalence toward what any status quo demands we believe, and more often than not, we do. In patriarchal ages, therefore, literature pays tribute to the matriarchal, even as in Christian times it gives the Devil his due. In societies that honor heterosexual bonding and the nuclear family, it allows us to acknowledge men's hatred of women, and women's contempt for men, along with the desire of parents to possess utterly or to destroy their children, and the corresponding Oedipal dream

> of those children. Whatever is officially defined at a given moment as abhorrent to civility and humanity is what such art celebrates, and what is most generally banned is therefore its most nearly universal subject: the impulse to cannibalism, for instance, and incest, the lust to rape and be raped. (41–42)

The unembarrassed muse is as much an ideal both for the repressor and the repressed. The embarrassing 'truth' of this fiction will always remain shrouded as long as we do not ask *Why Stories?*

4 Stories explore our identitarian resources and reinforce them to an extent no other cultural agency can. We tell stories in order to see whether we are still in command of our identities which we know and use for what they are. Our stories test the true power of words we use, the valence of communication that makes us indeed a live community of beings. If those words are borrowed, no story can be told. When honest story-tellers disappear or are silenced, a culture forfeits the power to tell stories. This is because only story-tellers know the *uses* of enchantment granted by the cultural and political identity in which, and by which, their stories were born and have grown. "An erosion of self-esteem," reminds Chinua Achebe, "is one of the commonest symptoms of dispossession. It does not occur only at [a] naïve level …; even more troubling is when it comes in the company of sophistication and learning" (81). If your story is good, that is, you don't have to tell people, *they* will tell you. And how proud you feel to *have* stories, not yours but your tribe's, to which you have free and liberal access. Trinh T. Minh-ha's Preface to *Woman, Native, Other* recalls that her stories are "Older than my body, my mother's, my grandmother's… [,]" widely shared as they are, and in the open. "The story circulates like a gift," she adds, "which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness" (3).

Colonial terror has struck larger and larger territories dumb, however, by depriving them of their stories. Achebe pleads therefore for a "balance of stories" in today's world that seeks the restitution of narrative rights by societies once ravaged by predatory business and imperialist conquests. "[M]y hope for the twenty-first [century]," he says, "is that it will see the first fruits of the balance of stories among the world's peoples" (Achebe 79). Colonization has meant *dispossession*, according to Achebe—the dispossession not only of material resources, but of stories. In other words, the loss of freedom to tell our stories

in our languages is hardly ever recognized as a loss by societies that claim to have gained political freedom. Making sense of our freedom means exercising our story-telling rights in a world that competitively controls the media rights of global communities.

It is instructive to follow tribes in such matters as narrative ethics and rights. No one 'owns' a tribal story. The tales of the tribe are not protected by copyright laws. Raconteurs are designated by the tribal chief. The tribals honour and grant them special privileges and immunity. In a tribe, the benefits are shared. Stories are deemed ancestral resources, not to be bargained for name or fame. Leslie M. Silko's *Ceremony* quotes a short verse that tells us about the therapeutic power of stories: "I will tell you something about stories, (he said)/ They aren't just entertainment. / Don't be fooled./They are all we have to fight off illness & death." This is exactly what the doctor tells Jacob Horner of John Barth's *End of the Road* protagonist. The idea of this story, anyone who cares to, or can, tell their stories, subscribes to *mythotherapy*. What else is the dossier that doctors and clinical laboratarians prepare and progressively build on until you are discharged from a hospital? The *story* of medical treatment is your cure.

5 Chinua Achebe, again, reminds us of stories that "outlive the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters." Stories, therefore, are reminders. They caution us when we forget where we live and what we live for. "The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us" (124).

Achebe has perfected the answer to *Why Stories?* in a manner of speaking, and might have rendered all that follows a mere footnote to his brilliant formulation but for the fact that the world seems to propose that its new stories demand other ways of telling, other ways of listening. Take, for example, how badly we have learnt, or have not learnt anything at all, from the acts of terror that unexpectedly erupt in many parts of the world from time to time. We need, in fact, to cope now not only with newer forms of dispossession but newer stories and the interpretive chains that relay them locally and globally. Ken Plummer's *Intimate Citizenship* is a book that aligns our ideas of conventional morality with the grounded realities of contemporary life-styles. He urges us to think about situations we are not yet prepared to face let alone judge in our daily lives where our ethical commitments would be severely tested. It is not easy to condense all Plummer's views and fairly represent all his concerns in a chapter called "Stories and the Grounded Moralities of Everyday life," but the following lets us see the urgency of new stories and their newer compulsions:

> Part of the problem for many of these emerging areas of moral concern about intimacies— from new families to cybersex— is that we have yet to develop a new language that can be accepted into the public sphere and thus allow life stories to be told. For example, with so many changes in families and parenting it is often hard to know how to start to refer to the members of these new families. We do not have a language— let alone a commonly accepted language— that can name all the

> new relationships. Just finding the right words for the stories, words that perhaps do not yet exist or cannot fully capture the complexities of lived experiences, becomes an issue. (104)

What words would be appropriate when terror strikes, and bodies— dead, half-dead, mangled, maimed— are strewn around those who must walk about the town? Is *pain* good enough as a generic term for the varieties of terror-borne casualties? Terror strikes everyone deaf-mute. There is no relationship decent enough between the terrorist and the terror-struck. If there is one, it cannot be related. Our defences against terror are notoriously skimpy and shabby; they are usually limited to plying ambulance trips, opening trauma clinics, and watching the extensive coverage of repellent horror-scenes by the never-blinking media networks. We can only guess why *we* have no stories to tell, we who patiently listen to reports and analyses of those whose truth-claims to that story cannot be disputed. This dispossession however speaks no name in interpretive studies of the media. That terror kills stories is known but we can only speculate how or why, like Robert J. C. Young in an essay called 'Terror Effects': "What does terror want? Terror makes us reactive rather than proactive and creative. It prevents us from telling stories" (325). It is not so much the reaction that affects the victims as their utter helplessness to narrate, to recoup, and feel 'whole' again after terror's trauma that destroys them. Colonial terror now returns to our indigent, crowded colonies in sackcloth and ashes. These are the new the killing fields where *dispossession* must be understood differently.

6 Stories shape our identity. We cannot survive as a people without narrative identities that perfectly fit us, like the clothes we wear. From pre-literate through the literate, post-literate, and digital phases of our cultural evolution, societies have been rewiring themselves mostly through stories. A community comes into being, and remains what it is, through communication. Stories communicate all there is to communicate among the people who make them. Communities are thus "imagined" and sustained by those who tell, and those who listen to, stories. Paul Ricoeur calls a society dead when its narratives fall silent. The stories of our ancestors, of those whom we call 'primitive,' are *myth*, a collective term for all coherently told symbolic narratives of human existence.

The Creation myths are narratives of covenants and bondedness (Judaeo-Christian), of the *sangha* and solidarity (Buddhist), of Vedic/ Puranic ritualistic affiliation (Hindu).When a society grows in time and size, it feels that it has outlived its foundational myths and has attained a level of sophistication by its own standards. It is anxious to demythologize itself. Myths of origin, then, fall into disrepute. Hardly realizing that a new story (say, of progress, science, development, growth...) has already replaced an old one, or the same story has begun to be retold by new tongues, sophisticated social engineers are always eager to shed the burden of myths and fault others who still hold on to theirs. As Elizabeth M. Baeten observes, "Myth is what is other.... [T]o call something a myth always marks it as the property of the 'other.' Myth belongs to some other culture, some other time, some other cosmology" (37). While *myth* is often a term we avoid applying to the real and serious matters of our modern lives, we lavishly allow *stories* our space and time. Our stories are quite important for us. Many of us live by them. If primitive myths served a largely integrative function, stories of post-industrial societies serve a largely promotional function. The latter fancy the socio-economic growth and cohesion of their people,

however distant they are culturally or geographically from the stories. Stories reassure. If they do not, we interpret them accordingly to suit our current world view. In one of Guy Davenport's brilliant asides, "Ovid studied men turning into animals; Darwin, animals into man" (245). Stories thus promise returns and compensation; the recovery of lost ground in politics or business; benefit and success through the worst economic crises or the darkest days of pestilence, violence or war. Who doesn't love stories when they are down and out, at least those lovely ones that endlessly suggest promise and change?

No wonder we welcome the creative and *re*-creative strength of stories. We are easily impressed by stories that project new things for us, alternative worlds and opportunities to do things anew or altogether differently. All we need to remember is that stories always did have— myths certainly had— this power to recreate and reinvigorate old and dying systems, to ward off senescence and death. Spoof or not, *Lacanian Ink* once published as one of its "Intercepts" the following by Digital Form Ltd. Rather than warding off death, one would welcome it, should such a horrendous scenario keep us away from those others to whom we appeal:

> Hello, welcome to the Psychiatric Hotline:
> If you are obsessive compulsive, please press 1 repeatedly.
> If you are co-dependent, please ask someone else to press 2.
> If you have multiple personalities, please press 3, 4, 5, and 6.
> If you are paranoid-delusional, we know who you are and what you want. Just stay on the line so we can trace the call.
> If you are schizophrenic, listen carefully and a little voice will tell you which number to press.
> If you are manic-depressive, it does not matter which number you press; no one will answer. (125)

When Stephen Greenblatt tells us quite candidly that his professional career is owed to his great interest in, and compulsion to narrate, stories we believe him and the rationale of the critical

school he leads. In "Story-telling," Greenblatt narrates his first experiments with reconciling "the personal pronoun "I", and the unpleasantly ironic "he" sounding inside my head....If [this] experience... intensified my interest in narrative, it made me quite literally wish to get the narratives outside myself" (305). Few critics confess to telling stories (and stories upon stories) to find themselves first— to find, that is, their identities and voices; and second, for regaling an audience in the guise of literary criticism.

7 Lessons in political and social philosophy extoll multiculturalist values. The need for tolerance and for nurturing an unfailing faith in humane values ought to be stressed as often as we can in all curricular discourse. We forget, however, that stories once fulfilled this urgent need and knitted our social lives more efficiently than religious or secular laws. Stories are still the most efficient syllabi for a truly multiculturalist education anywhere because *our* stories are always set against *theirs/others'*. A culture's treasure-chest is seldom open in full unless another culture's eyes peer into it. Cultures afford a mutuality of vision—our stories often contrast with others' and when we begin to see those others as never before, we begin to see ourselves as well, again, as never before. Stereotypes are undone, hasty judgements rethought, and problems viewed from angles and attitudes made possible by the *fiction* stories afford. Stories weigh and balance differences for what they are, and what they *mean*, in a world we share differently with others. Enlightened anthropologists like Clifford Geertz have always believed that their sciences are founded on this principle. "To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening," remarks Geertz. "To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes" (16). Of course this latter insight is not always shared by the less enlightened among Geertz's company. We are not large, nor do we contain multitudes, unless we are modest enough to realize that Walt Whitman commanded a large self quite modestly. Having written a classic multiculturalist poem of the nineteenth century, he could then contradict himself and say, "I am large and contain multitudes."

Here's Carlos Fuentes, striking a prophetic note. The following, addressed to an American audience, was written long before the Gulf War:

> Nations that kidnap the future for themselves refuse others both a future and a past. The future can only be a creative community if it belongs to a shared past: remember the future, it happened once. It is happening all the time, your future is in the rediscovery of an Aztec temple, in the persistence of a Hebrew legend, in the sound of the rain on the uneven pavements of Venice: you cannot have a future without these. [...] If we are to have a future, it will depend on the growing presence of cultures long relegated to insignificance because they did not participate in the truths proper to the triumphalist West...(351).

Fuentes's stories are no more Mexican than Barth's American or Gordimer's South African. Stories, he believes, talk across gulfs of pain and separation, agony and anxiety, regardless of who tells them and who listens to them. They also speak to (and among) a much larger world than "the triumphalist West" that thinks that the only future is theirs. There are stories that speak nothing at all, as Hélène Cixous tells us in the course of her Oxford Amnesty Lecture of 1992, but they nonetheless bring before us those for whom "when there is nothing, when there is neither time nor space, there is still a spring, which is language" (29).

Complexities of civic life find an easy outlet in the stories citizens exchange on a daily basis. Denying such basic rights as story-telling complicates and intensifies socio-political distress. The story-tellers in a multicultural world move both inside and outside of their selves by a method which Mikhail Bakhtin called *exotopy* or "extralocality," an escape to another place here the self can find a safer home. Exotopy affords the air writers feel free to breathe in without fear, freed now from the manias, phobias, and compulsions to love and hate such and such by their native ethnicities and homes. They are free now therefore to cross borders and close gaps more easily than they were under the surveillance of the State and its static machinery, of the Civic

media and Communication. "Tale-telling brings the impossible within reach," says Trinh T. Minh-ha. "With it, I am who It is, Whom I am seen to be, yet I can only feel myself there where I am not, *vis-à-vis* an elsewhere I do not dwell in" (11).

8 The finest stories ever told, or those we read in pictures or print, are gifted to us by artists who live and suffer with us in community. The 'authority'of these artists comes from their living and suffering among other souls, an 'authority' that enriches both the story and its teller, if we believe Walter Benjamin. Unlike the novelist, says Benjamin in his classic "The Storyteller," the real hero of the story is the one who tells it. In a rather puzzling argument, Benjamin insists that death guarantees the kind of authority storytellers command, for their wisdom is owed basically to their cultural lore. They, unlike the isolated and stand-offish novelists, are the real custodians of a tradition whose lore they pass on to the living at the moment of their death."This authority," according to Benjamin, "is at the very source of the story" (94). His uncanny sense in mentioning *death* couldn't have been more apt in the context of stories. We hardly notice when we listen to stories that they refer mostly to non-living things and beings— where they lived and what they lived for. Their continued relevance to our lives today preëminently serves an allusive function. Furthermore, we are pleased, even flattered, when we recognize and respond to cultural allusions because they are the surest test of our tribal belonging, the confirmation of our membership in a narrative freemasonry. Stories allude if only to measure the radius of reception of a circle, a class of people, that forms a community. It is a little like a taunting advertisement that means to get you into a select fold as this one of the American Round Table Pizza: *If you love pizza, we love you."*

As if responding in earnest to this insight, Mario Vargas Llosa created the eponymous Storyteller of Machiguenga. This character is both real and fictional, one created by anthropological reports and one fashioned after *seripigaris*, the Machiguengan shamans. The authority of this story-teller, we assume, comes from his peregrinations within the Amazonian jungles and familiarity with a host of indigenous lingos, rituals, and magical lore. Vargas Llosa's *Storyteller* is a splendid admixture of polyphonic narrative structures and effects—the novelistic prose is laced with three

of its 'story-telling chapters' complete with gossip and rumour, some mythic lore and anecdotes that underscore Machiguengan spirit of love, freedom, and self-reliance.

How easy it is for us to misunderstand this teller, and then claim that we pretty much understand the tale! Some such folly is hinted at in Beckett's *Endgame*. Listening to an alarm clock ring, Clov tells Hamm that the end of the ring was "terrific." To which, Hamm responds by saying that he preferred the middle. Now it is impossible to say *what* story they made of each other's sense of the alarm, but the need to read *some* story into the sound, and the silences before and after the ring, is respectable. How it all ends is not merely a curiosity but a necessary urge to comprehend life as we age, and we realize that we are pretty much alone near the end of our journey. For want of another name for this quest, let's call it 'meaning.' We do not yet know whether our stories are genuinely redemptive but we seem to know no other way of making sense of our lives, of the world we live in.

When do we begin to feel that no story makes any sense of the world we live in? Have we finally reached the end-of-story page? Ours, as Ross Clarkson comments, is a community of absence, one that fails to communicate even the absence of a community that it purports to be. "In the modern world its lack of a place is its place," remarks Clarkson. "Its lack of a place is due not only to the power of those States of the modern age that have decimated communities around the world, but also to the discourses of those same States within which it is impossible to speak of community without adopting the concept that has replaced the being of community" (76). What stories can be told, he wonders, when communities no longer communicate, when people are absent from one another, and no relationship communes in word or deed? Very true. Hamm and Clov are deficient in many ways but they seem to live so resolutely in a communal travesty that can only grieve now that its story can neither be told, nor heard.

9 Without dignity, without tragedy. How long can human beings suffer this exile from their communities, the stories that make them?

What lies in store, what consequences follow our actions, where do we go from where we seem to be.... Stories, then, are possibilities. They are illustrative and exemplary. Suppose, that is, we acted like those brothers and sisters in such and such a story; if we killed the animals and raided the countryside as those hordes did in the legend; or we did not act at all when the rains came and the town's rivers were in spate.... Suppose I were in X' shoes, Y's bed, or marooned with Y.... We tell stories because we try hard not being awkwardly bedded with strange fellows, or because we foresee trouble aided by our very powerful imagination. We cannot afford to sample so many lives, go about checking things out, google the best deals in life, and begin to live ours without any hassle. Stories *entertain.*

Let's now understand *entertainment* correctly. A story entertains by offering object lessons. How others live, or have lived, is very hard to see or experience otherwise. A story entertains us in two ways. First, it allows us to entertain a troublesome notion, a fearsome prospect, or a distasteful event without endangering us. That we could stick our necks out and yet be quite safe while entertaining such possibilities is the entertainment the worst tragic story affords us. The folkloric forms cognate with the story such as the proverb, riddle, parable, tall tale, exemplum, legend, etc. are instructive only when they entertain us in the double ways we learn to appreciate subliminally. Stories demand no formal teaching and institutional preaching. In some ways, that explains the homeless and nomadic lives of our best story-tellers.

Of many concepts in Sigmund Freud we are not sure, but there is reason to believe that what he called *the death instinct* is perhaps better understood as something human beings 'entertain' in order to make their lives liveable. Freud believed that death is an object of desire in all living beings; one's preoccupation with

death is the story each of his patients told him. He even believed that we tell stories because our death instinct makes us tell them. Life stories, for Freud, were death-stories in disguise. That rings a reminiscent bell for those who recall not only Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, but also a long tradition of death-mongers in early European poetry and fiction. Adam Phillips has this illuminating passage on the death instinct as story: "An instinct…is the biological word for a plot. Something inevitably happens to us when we are born, Freud says, which shapes our lives: we desire. From this point of view the story of our lives is the story of …our instincts and their vicissitudes. And yet, Freud asserts in 1920, above all, or rather beneath it all, we desire to die; or

10 In today's world, you lose out if you don't have a story. You doubly lose out if you can't tell or engage someone who can tell a story on your behalf. As citizens we suddenly realize that we are combating largely unsympathetic, even inhumane, machinery of public governance whose stories speak louder than ours. Why some groups of people among us are criminals and some others suspects in the eyes of law; why justice in this name or by that logic extends more readily to only a few; who is paid more for what exceptional service; whether our country must liberalize and what impact that would have on our small lives…; well, no one ever asks us whether we are *for* or *against* gravity. In sum, as decent human beings it behoves us to develop and respect our own Geneva conventions of the mind.

Systems of repressive administration and uncivil government always thrive on stories. Both the perpetrators and the victims of political violence often engage professional story-tellers. Unsurprisingly, the more powerful voices belong to the evil-doers because they must stay their ground and for long. Their rivals are certain minority media-professionals, indigent documentarians and journalists. Story-against-story is what we ordinarily see or hear on a daily basis. Since it is always one story against another, we are usually at our wit's end. It hardly makes a difference to those in power whether we believe them or not, but it does matter to them that the story is professionally told, packaged and delivered, against reasonable deadlines. When Power commits huge thefts, commits atrocity, and brazenly ignores the defenceless and the powerless, what go missing almost overnight are "records," stories that might unseat the powerful and bring them to justice. Stories that carry valuable material data and potentially reliable documents that testify to criminal involvement of people or parties will never be heard again. That explains the *retrospective* stories that we hear following alleged terrorist and anti-terrorist operations. Sadly, much of these retrospective narratives called "police stories" in democratic countries (for there is no police in

totalitarian regimes) have become almost a genre which, in the end, appeals to our democratic sentiments and stridently asserts the impartiality of a law and order machinery. In retrospective stories, the police are left with no option but arrest and detain suspects. (The suspects are seldom heard except in court.)

Who will tell such stories? Are we, lovers of stories, interested? Someone like David Hare, a playwright, is among the many new writers in the world who believe that the world has been looking elsewhere when the culture of crime has been endemic. In a play called *Teeth 'n' Smiles*, Hare was keen on telling Thatcherite England that a girl's individual choice to go to prison seemed to her more worthwhile than just reading romantic stories. Writing on political theatre— rather what it means for someone like him, and how it means to be in England, so writing— Hare says:

> Our lives must be refreshed with images which are not official, not approved; that break what George Orwell called 'the Geneva conventions of the mind'. These images may come on television, something of a poisoned well in my view, because of its preference for censoring its own best work, or simply banning it; or they may come in this unique arena of judgement, the theatre. (36)

An after-thought: What value might the Americans now attach to the *Starr Report* of 1998? How would future generations read it— as legal fiction, pornography, presidential papers, personal transcripts of national import, an historical document that shamed the U. S.? The *Starr Report*, now in absolute public domain, reaches us in much the spirit of the *American Declaration of Independence of 1776*: "let the facts be submitted to a candid world." In which case, would anyone read that *as* a story? *The personal is political*, with a vengeance?

11 Of course a story is not true. Nor was it meant to be. Not certainly in the courtroom or the highly conscientious sense of *true* or *truth*. The trouble is that those who do not understand how a story entertains, or how far this idea of entertainment could be stretched, begin to find other, often manipulative, uses of the story such as reportage and commentary, explication and interpretation, even critical exegesis and academic thesis. The harnessing of stories to mount large systems of belief or unbelief, to erect edifices of this ideology or that, and to legitimize socio-political folkways in vindication of dubious socio-economic values and cultural practices is so common in most parts of the world today. We might hope that all *grand narratives* will be discredited and reviled sooner or later.

We are at peace, however, when we seek the kind of entertainment best suited to our mental and physical health. Cultural practices generally afford this entertainment seasonally and communally. This natural desire for entertainment is legitimate; it is widely respected in all societies. Human beings, observes Friedrich Nietzsche, "have an unconquerable urge themselves to be deceived" (151). In one sense, stories are the best handbook to Evil. When we do know what Evil is; where it is usually located; in what common forms it manifests; and how best to steer clear of it, if we *must*, that is, the story has entertained us already. We need find no further 'use' for it. Let me hasten to say: *if I understand Nietzsche's language correctly. If,* because, Nietzsche's whole argument in "On Truth and Lying in a Non-moral Sense" rests on the *mis*understanding language causes when we try to understand language correctly by telling stories in it. Now our language has as much to do with this illusion as it has to make us realize that it is *as an illusion*, first of all, that we begin to understand this world. (It is the story that creates for us this illusion. We go on with stories until the very end.) We must give ourselves over to this illusion first, in order that we pretend to understand that it is *this* illusion we call 'reality.' We must delude ourselves, in other words,

so that (insofar as) we know *what* it is to be so deluded. The language in which this story is cast makes this happen. We delude ourselves twice when we use *language* (is there any other way?) for telling the story— of course we forget that we have really deluded ourselves. Nietzsche is at pains, I think, to explain this process when he tells us that our language is always already metaphorical and metonymical.

Among the non-manipulative, and perhaps culturally the most desirable, uses of stories is the way a highly distraught mind makes sense of the immediate world around it. In extremities, stories help resolve crises, reconcile causes with consequences, and console ourselves. While writing on the health benefits of a narrative, James Pennebaker offers the following explanation: "Once a complex event [such as death, divorce, domestic strife…] is put into a story format, it is simplified. … As the story is told over and over again, it becomes shorter with some of the finer detail gradually leveled…. Further, as time passes, we have the tendency to fill in gaps in our story to make the story more cohesive and complete. The net effect of constructing a good narrative is that our recollection of emotional events is efficient— we have a relatively short, compact story…" (12–13). Inchoate experiences deepen scars and wounds. Once we shape them as a decent story, they give us hope—another word for *meaning*. Even forgetting helps, as a poem called "A Lapse of Memory" logically puts it: "As there are such things as the liar's/ use of truth, and the well man's use/ of illness, there must be an amnesiac's/use of memory" (Ramanujan 1971: 20). If one is still doubtful, the best way is to try writing one's autobiography.

Any episode from the *Mahabharata*, randomly chosen, will prove why telling stories answers to a specific human need for kindred and kinship, rather a conscious bid on the part of a teller to stand up and be counted, especially among those that initiate or invite the story. *Kathāyōga*, the protocol of consultation and

consent involving raconteurs and their audience is peculiar to this narrative tradition. In other words, the fortunes of a story are no different from those an *ārambhaka*, the initiator, understands as chosen to be understood by his/her interlocutors. In other words, the very story has its fortunes; the communities' compulsions meet in it so that no one ever raises questions about its veracity, historical or topical. When what the people ask for and are told is*itihâsa*, the teller is not obliged to establish its truthfulness. What is told is what has been, or what was supposed to have happened. Therefore questions that beset western narratives such as: *Who first told this lie? Who carried it?* etc. do not so much bother Indian listeners. The teller, in other words, has only the role of a citer or reciter, one not liable to be prosecuted on account of his/her not having had a first-hand experience of what has actually transpired. In *itihāsa* the quote marks are circumambient as it were, which "keep the utterance apart from the speaker, the storyteller from the story, as if to put beyond doubt that it is really not *his* story" (Guha 60).[5]

12 Rather than saying *everyone loves a good story*, let's say that everyone loves *making* a good story. More plainly, they love *making things up*. If a story is told just once, it is not a story anymore. If the same story is told by another person, again, that is *another* story. For stories always promise to be things they really are not, or will unlikely be. The real story is in its potential, in its potential rather to be something other than what it is. That makes it not only the most demotic, the most democratic, of narratives in any culture but the art to which other narratives always aspire. This peculiar dynamism of a story is the very life it has and gives. The more compelling the story, the more committed and loyal its listeners become. This indeed has made stories the preferred channels of information, propaganda, and anti-democratic campaigns. Fundamentalist, sectarian and reactionary establishments on the one hand, and the 'free-thinkers' and 'progressives', on the other, love stories equally — especially, their kind of stories.

No wonder stories contribute to shape a person's social habits in a big way. "Survival in a world of meanings is problematic," observes Sabin, "without the talent to make up and to interpret stories about interweaving lives" (11). No philosophical or mystical thought has yet resolved the problem of what constitutes *self*— when in doubt, the narrative philosophies put this *self* under erasure and proceed. Why? Since the assumption of a *self* is fundamental to other assumptions, it makes plain sense to make a decent story of it, pretty much like the stories that frame our *curriculum vitae*; self-evaluation formats; autobiographical exercises towards career-advancement; Facebook exchanges and Tweets; even photographs, video footage, and the self-propelled drafts of our obituary, just in case those around us know very little of ourselves to fill a 2-inch column of the morning news. My plain sense of things tells me that what I am used to calling my *self* is largely a story. Since I have managed to tell this story (mostly at the interviews I gave and the conferences to which I was invited) reasonably well to those who mattered in my life over the last

60-odd years, and I keep telling updated and appropriately padded formats of it to all and sundry who seem to matter still, invoking an *I* I cannot vouch for completely, this story of mine, I believe, has not been a bad one after all. I know that 'my' story is not good enough, however, to be written down as best-seller fiction, or made into a smash-hit movie, but who doesn't love a good story, if it's one's own?

"The thing one gradually comes to find out," muses Gertrude Stein, "is that one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything. ...I am I because my little dog knows me..." (Stein: 146-47). There is, I believe, some truth in Stein's observation because if I insist, and impart the best training to my cats and dogs, the world will easily believe in the story I have made of myself. One's *self* cannot be a complete illusion, if only because that very *self* has had the potential to create, be an illusion, and yet perceive itself to be such. And all at once. On that count alone I must be a little better than the dog that knows me. We do not know, however, whether that was Stein's precise objection to Picasso's abstracting her face in a surreal bid to *suggest powerfully*, rather than state pictorially, a Stein-face. When Gertrude protested to Pablo that she did not look like *that*, the famous artist is reported to have assured her, "You will."

13 If everyone loves a good story, is it any longer surprising that the world of learning and scholarship not only loves stories but encourages learners to be professionally competent story-tellers? Let me illustrate from the discourses most familiar to the readers of *Why Stories?* "Academic Writing" is not only an emergent genre but an essential component of the higher educational curriculum. There are *How to...* books on this subject and they are widely used in our colleges. Our books and articles, shorter studies, working papers, abstracts and synopses, project summaries, research monographs and dissertations (some born again, in time, as scholarly books) were once beautifully told stories of writers and their works, now re-told as stories of author-functions and texts. The best critical commentary on a literary subject used to read even better than fiction or poetry. When, on the contrary, a reader complains that a doctoral dissertation "says nothing (original)," that "it has no argument," or "it doesn't cohere," you get the idea. The complainant has found no *story*, let alone an "original" one, in it. The point is that a *thesis*, so called in the institutions of advanced learning, ought to be a grand story, hitherto unheard of; and, if heard, it should at least be untold. (In most cases, 'theses' will seldom be opened or read, let alone cited, again.) The examiners of such scholarly work, including 'foreign' ones (those foreign to the subject discussed?) should concur that the writer has made a sound thesis— has made at least a reasonably convincing case (where none exists?) to justify the present or a future study, and therefore be awarded degree. Marshalling valuable evidence, citing earlier attempts at piecing-and-plotting together similar data, advancing a persuasive argument all through the study, and listing substantial bibliographical resources for the study of the subject in question are all legitimate building-blocks in a story called the research thesis. (Who doesn't know that all these are the most demanding 'blocks' — obstructions— in building a thesis?) In critical studies of literary things, we often allow, even encourage, a story-teller's

evasions and exaggerations. Hype springs eternal in the human breast. Deceit and plain lying assume scholarly respectability when propped up by conventions prescribed by style-manuals and citational protocols. From direct quotation, through interpolation-paraphrase-and-summary, the thesis-story progresses from chapter to chapter. Its inevitable Conclusion often makes us wonder why we have not had the good sense to read it first as the chronicle of a death foretold. No wonder if, at this juncture, it occurs to us in a flash that *hermeneutics* are named after Hermes, the fabled trickster, the patron of this cunning craft.

A tear, just a drop, is due for those wretched plagiarists whose story-telling gifts are more suspect than their stories. For they do not know that there is absolutely no story in our small world that awaits telling. Stories are retold but seldom *untold.* The art that conceals the art of telling a plain story is the hardest to learn. It takes long years of work and practice even to begin telling. Meanwhile, let them only learn that no appeal for remission is entertained by the jury when someone botches a good story. What readers and listeners resent is not so much a story retold as one told tastelessly with all the flourish.

Told well as stories, however, even the most hopeless anti-narratives (*The Waste Land*, *Waiting for Godot*, the classic stories of Kafka or Borges, *Chimera*...) begin to make reasonably good sense. When you teach them, you are sure no student *understands* them as they seem to "understand" *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* or *Kim.* In order to elicit from candidates something that at least looks (reads) like a decent answer, examiners often work helpful hints and prompts into their carefully phrased questions on texts like *The Waste Land.* I for one often remind my examinees that the poet of this modernist classic was bloody-mindedly fragmenting and shuffling a straightforwardly told and memorable Grail Legend, available to us in the elegant prose of Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance.* (Do they realize at least

that much?) Students of course graduate into budding researchers who postmodernize themselves by telling us more and more impressive stories about hybridity and hybridization, rainbow coalitions, diasporic dislocations, abjection, paratextuality, and transnational genres. Each one of them is a story, eminently narratable as new with hourly-varying tellers and listeners.

How prescient sound the words of Northrop Frye who, in the late 1970s, wrote the following about Blake scholarship. Four of the very early books on Blake, Frye reports, are mere trash. "But in a sense," he adds caustically, "you can't lose in the humanities: if your book is any good, it's a contribution to scholarship; if it's no good, it's a document in the history of taste" (15). Such stories are rarely told.

14 Stories of success, stories of failure— both demand telling. Success is a 'story.' We celebrate success, mostly hollering about it. Minutes of official meetings, the record of parliamentary proceedings, annual reports, business brochures/prospectus, ad-fliers and trade manuals are all proudly padded and finely frilled fiction. We never get to see, however, a university website list out details of its grim reverses such as mass failure in courses; annual drop-out; rampant plagiarism among its students and the faculty; the rejection of sub-standard dissertations and papers by their peer-group, or by reputed publishers and presses; the feedback from students relating to poor teaching and poorer academic infrastructure. A rogue-list of its employees dismissed over the years for embezzlement and other criminal offences, or sexual harassment cases investigated and convicted etc. might make another embarrassing list. You will never see any such, as story, or history. Not done, because they make for poor copy on Facebook.

If you win a contest, a battle; you come first in a competition; you win your coveted man or woman; you make it big in business or trade; win a match or corner some global tender— success stories are easily told. After all, in musical chairs, you get your *one* enviable seat, and unless you tell how, it is not success. Success *is* a story. Always, already. Even a promotion by lots is success, what if it is nothing more routine than the rotating system in some schools— every Monday, you moved up a seat?

So is failure (and loss). It comes in the appropriate Aristotelian format of the *tragic*, if you are a believer in the management of grief promoted by western narratives. If, on the other hand, you are familiar with alternative traditions of the story (Middle-eastern, South and South-east Asian, African) you will see the success running close beside failure. Neither breasts the Olympic ribbon indisputably. At least the ancient Indian *Pañcatantra* seldom divides its stories neatly into those of success and failure, but they are

fascinating tales of reciprocal dishonesty and shrewd deceit. Material loss is occasionally pitted against ethical gain, and vice versa. *Artha* is both material wealth and semantic plenitude in Sanskrit. Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* was also a primer for the ancient Indian managers and business people (among who were resourceful women and labour classes) and his stories of loss complemented those that told of gain. "Kautilya… describes the merchants whose spirit pervades the narrative literature as "thieves except for the name," observes van Buitenen. "It is not just profitable dishonesty that the Indian success story advocates, however, but a very effective sort of one-upmanship" (6). The epithet most commonly used for kings, commoners, and courtesans is *catur*. The semantic range of this one word would probably amaze English lexicographers as much as the plain English *plain* would amaze their Indian counterparts. Someone who is *catur* might be simply clever and wily, or wickedly crooked and villainous. That person might be enormously skilful and nimble-witted as well, complicating the success-scenario beyond words. The success stories of the *Pañcatantra* are simply amazing and alluring for this reason. Loss belongs to the one who is not *catur* (wicked in a worldly-wise manner) and we could grieve that the poor loser was not in another world where everything is always fair and square. *Catur* is also *square*, four-folded, four equal sides and four right angles.

15 We shall never be able to put away the self-story perplex until we construe the one with no respect to the other, and it has never seemed easy even for the most diehard philosophers. It is interesting therefore that Paul Ricoeur proposes that a self always remains a story that has not been told— not just yet, that is, as long as that self remains in the proper business of selfhood. A self is always a potential story, waiting to be told, or always in the making. Ricoeur's examples are just representative: a patient who unpacks fragments of his/her disordered life before a psychoanalyst; and a sympathetic judge who means to help his/her defendant by disentangling chaotic narrative bits and pieces that led to a crime. The 'background' so called in both cases comprises steps, crucial enough in the making of a story, that are mainly an analyser's job to identify and trace. As the 'background' emerges, so does the 'character'— or so goes Ricoeur's argument. The point is that much of what we seem to know about you and me will always remain in a larger domain of *untold* stories. Why you need to tell them for *my/our* sakes answers itself. "[N]arrative fiction," proposes Ricoeur, "is an irreducible dimension of *self-understanding*. If it is true that fiction is only completed in life and that life can be understood only through the stories that we tell about it, then an *examined* life, in the sense of the word as we have borrowed it from Socrates, is a life *recounted*" (1991: 30–31).

This story got worse when *telling* gave way to *reading*. It is a truism that a whole dimension of the story, and the self from which it emanates, is usually lost on readers whose imagination seems to play truant in a study. If the static remains steadfast despite the best dynamics of its print-effect, the art that suffers most in the bargain is the story. John Peter Berger is among the most distressed thinkers who have alerted us to this problem. Here's Berger at his insightfully best, asking us to see that a story is never finished even while reading it:

> Let me first return to the traditional story.

> *The dog came out of the forest* is a simple statement. When that sentence is followed by *The man left the door open*, the possibility of a narrative has begun. If the tense of the second sentence is changed into *The man had left the door open*, the possibility becomes almost a promise. Every narrative proposes an agreement about the unstated but assumed connections existing between events.
>
> [...]
>
> No story is like a wheeled vehicle whose contact with the road is continuous. Stories walk, like animals or men. And their steps are not only between narrated events but between each sentence, sometimes each word. Every step is a stride over something not said. (171–172)

What Berger calls "the unstated but assumed connections" are crucial in all story events. Susan Griffin's "Red Shoes," among many other postmodern narratives, pivots all that a self (in dialogue or a forked monologue?) says on the unstated and the assumed, but when have story-tellers *not* assumed that their listeners are enormously gifted imaginative beings? "Red Shoes" is by far the best *formal* exploration I have seen where a story flirts with an essay. Naturally, the flirts are non-committal, and the aleatory form best suits the story here. Striking indeed is the coincidence of Berger and Griffin invoking the door metaphor in the implicit allusion it makes to the *Alice Books*:

> Just as the reader is protected by the supposition that fiction is not true, so too, the author of fiction is shielded by this idea. Stories can be told that otherwise could not. But what is even more interesting is that because fiction evokes particular social and natural worlds in their entirety, many possible stories exist inside the narrative world implicitly, without being explicitly described. They exist as possibilities or even likelihoods. A door to a barn is described. The narrator does not open that door. But it exists. And therefore the reader can imagine what

> is behind the door. The shape of circumstances in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* suggests sexual abuse. One knows a racist political history has preceded *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Neither writer nor reader need have admitted these events fully into consciousness. The experience is part of the reality that is conjured. (4)

We are not to suppose however that a self tells its whole story. Of course not. There is as much story *within* the self as *without* it. That explains the loss of *rasa* while reading a story. The imprint divests the story of its voices that would otherwise bring persons before us. Modern story-writers assume that what is lost in print is made good in analysis and commentary, a major investment by readers. (Try hard, and see how miserably we summarise a story for others.) The truth is that readers are incurious about those conditions of orality that make the tale worth telling in the first place. So much so that the finest reading cannot but give us either disembodied voices or silent bodies. This oddity is generally known but not perceived keenly enough to notice a writer's manipulation of voices— whether voices have been allowed to speak freely *as/ for* themselves, or whether those voices have been assigned to this character or that. Some characters in certain hollering fiction do not speak a human language. Don't they sound like a ventriloquist's dummies?

Such distinctions are crucial in understanding why we tell stories. We tell stories not because we want to tell everything to everybody but because we want to tell just about the things we wish to. No one descants in a story unless your story is an *apologia*. Our stories do not purport to be comprehensive weekly or monthly reports or where-we-live-and-what-we-live-for accounts of ourselves. The best comes across between those crucial non-narrative gaps, pregnant pauses, silences, evasions, or prevarications. In other words, we will never know *What Maisie Knew* the way we satisfy ourselves by watching *I know what you did last summer*.

If everything has to be told, why tell stories? Unless we resist the urge to tell it all, how do we ever tell stories? Some great narrative peaks writers seem to have scaled just when they were *about* to tell a story— say, Katherine Mansfield's "Fly" or Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." No one looks for meaning *in* a story but *beyond* it.

16 Thinking of classic stories, we are apt to admire the sure touches of their tellers. We believe that expert tellers could easily pull it off because experience has taught them to place details correctly, to plan and execute effects without fail. We hardly realize however that nothing goes by luck in telling stories. One who tells a good story is likely to have asked him-/herself *Why Stories?* more often than their listeners for the simple reason that nothing, absolutely nothing, can be preordained and tendentiously programmed in a narrative. For what details arrest our attention, for how long; what might distract or flag concentration, cannot be predicted by a creator. What a story leaves in your mind; some tangible evidence of your having seen/heard/read it; something, let's say, more substantial than what we generally call *impression*—might just be the junk collected in a room, a snub from a termagant, a cloudy summer day on which everything looks so drab, anything at all you don't think too much about *while* reading a story. We don't quite know what *matters* and why in a story. "The Fly" is that kind of story. That writhing little figure of the ink-swollen fly on a piece of blotting paper upon which the old man fixes his stare is no great interpretable detail but a reader of Mansfield's story hardly forgets that moment. In short, our stories signify only when told, and what it signifies is often much more or other than what the teller had ever fancied.

In his "Postscript" to *12 Stories*, Guy Davenport underscores the unique power of our attention when a story unfolds. Stories have a peculiar way of aligning and unaligning the human faculty of relating to details. This most natural faculty is most evident in people who are the least academically oriented. Those of us *schooled in reading stories* always pick out and valorize salient details of the world according to an interpretive regime already and indisputably in place. Davenport, therefore, tells us a story to show that regardless of a maker's intention, a story takes an unpredictable course. It impacts life almost the way life impacts the way a story unfolds in it.

> A contingent of the Peace Corps once had the bright idea that a film made in the African village to which they were bringing enlightenment and hygiene would make wonderfully clear that puddles breed mosquitoes and that mosquitoes distribute malaria. Everyone got to be in the film; important elders had lines to say about standing water. The film was shown one evening to the whole village. At one point their solemn watching was broken by screams of excitement and wonder. "Ntumbe's chicken!" they all cried. Could they see the film again? There were inattentive children who had not seen Ntumbe's chicken. Please show Ntumbe's chicken again!
>
> The Peace Corps was mystified. But, sure enough, at the top of a few frames only, in a scene where a conscientious mother was sweeping away a puddle of rainwater, a chicken could be seen crossing the camera's line of vision. The film was thereafter known as "Ntumbe's Chicken." These nice young Americans can tell their outlandish tales about the *keke* all they want to, but to have Ntumbe's chicken, strolling and pecking, in a moving picture, what more can one ask of art? (234)

Of course Davenport's story does not tell us in so many words that the mismatch between the telling and the tale is created by a world of difference, but the fortunes of a story, for good or bad, are in the world where it is told. His story is not complete until we read his final comment on this experience: "The academy has even evolved a school of criticism to teach people to see nothing but Ntumbe's chicken (or its absence)" (234).

17 A potential story that a self will always be, but what complex stories of selves in a bourgeois society emerge when someone also wishes to write "zero degree," and play contradictory games with recognizably stale forms of the narrative such as biography, history, sociology, literature, etc. while presenting himself as badly placed, anachronistic, and awfully *outré* ? This is what Roland Barthes is for his readers in the many-lives-in-one structuralism (early/late; theoretical/ analytical; semiotic/impressionistic; discursive/ autobiographical; cryptic/elliptic...) he lived through. One way of reading Barthes, which I follow unmindful of the chronology and publishing history of his essays, is to be attentive to the 'stories' as they happen to him in non-places and temporal indifference. There is, further, warrant for reading him this way because in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes speaks of himself as:

> the fiction of an individual... who would abolish in himself all barriers, classes and exclusions, not by syncretism, but by simply getting rid of that old spectre: the *logical contradiction*; who would mix all languages, however incompatible; and who would silently put up with all accusations of illogicality and infidelity. (9)

This, I believe, is exceptionally bold and politically radical a view that a self under colonial rule could assume. It is hardly surprising to us that Barthes could assume as much to write all that he wrote within the Anglo-French imperial regime of which he was relentlessly critical.[6] But the fact remains, as Barthes again never tired of underscoring, that colonial relations are at bottom *reading relations* as well— the colonizer's story is very well endorsed and heard sympathetically by a large and influential section of the colonized. This silently odd collusion is a large part of politics to which writers like Albert Memmi have drawn our attention. In a chapter suggestively entitled "Mythical Portrait of the Colonized," Memmi asks us to ponder this strange story of collusive subjugation. When the colonial bureaucracy makes up stories of the natives' wilful negligence, uselessness, laziness,

mendacity etc., the natives slowly begin to believe in the stories told them repeatedly and circulated widely among their neighbours. This malicious image of the colonized is nothing but a *story*. The colonized are presented with a contrastive story, that of the colonizer, in which the latter comes across as most responsible, useful, enterprising, industrious, and truthful. This clash of civilizational stories, according to Memmi, explains the success of most governing classes whose ideology is borne by the stories they make and disseminate far and wide. In evident vindication of their colonial rights, the stories of the powerful perpetuate ideologies that are hard to be discredited by less powerful and their weakening social media. "In colonial relationships," observes Memmi, "domination is imposed by people upon people but the pattern remains the same. The characterization and role of the colonized occupies a choice place in colonialist ideology; a characterization which is neither true to life, nor in itself incoherent, but necessary and inseparable within that ideology. It is one to which the colonized gives his troubled and partial, but undeniable, assent" (88). But for Memmi, I believe, this manipulative use of stories by the new political regimes we become used to increasingly would have gone largely unnoticed. In all versions of new 'globalisms' today, appropriate stories work wonders when the less resourceful societies hesitate to turn a corner or take the next step.

18 If we grant that *a self is always a potential story*, let us also ask how long it would remain a story, or retain this potential. Only, as far as I can imagine, to the possible limits of imagination toward which it can incrementally advance and perhaps transcend. The real function of the *tragic* is to make us wonder from time to time what will happen to us in a world bereft of imagination. As Philip Larkin put it so memorably in "Church Going," speculating on the future of Christian practices in a largely secular and irreligious England: "But superstition, like belief, must die,/ And what remains when disbelief has gone?" What, indeed? Larkin would see all belief, unbelief, and non-belief as versions of the human imagination, each serving some non-contemptible social function in this world. What would happen when this peculiar imagination disappears altogether, leaving the British thoroughly undignified and untragic? As for our advanced technologies of learning, they haven't yet devised a strategy that will help us carry on without imagination. When we are forced to consider the waste, among other things, of life and labour, we wish our people had a little imagination.

Our stories certainly tell us not only whether we are naturally gifted imaginative creatures but how alive or dead that imagination is from day to day, year to year. Widely misunderstood as anything but what it really is, imagination brings us stories that can help matters when our living gets tough and we are subject to the most unimaginative regimes. Of course I don't have to *imagine* suffering in others in the stories I hear or read but I ought very well to observe myself responding to suffering. There is an *ethical* dimension to our imagination we recognize only when stories bring us face to face with the lives of others in order to test, as it were, our 'weapons' of imaginative response. In an essay called "Moral Tales," R. A. Sharpe points out how writers feel strongly about imaginative responses by citing the following:

> There is a moving story about Proust having described to him a schoolboy who was so ashamed of his dowdy mother that when she visited him at school he pretended she was the

> servant. Proust hid his face in his hands. The others assumed that he was laughing with them but when he removed his hands they saw that he was weeping. Why is this moving? Proust imagined what it was like; he felt for the humiliation of the mother and the agonizing disloyalty felt by the boy. It was a real reaction to an imagined situation. What is necessary is that he feel the discomfort, embarrassment and empathy that a decent person would feel if he were present. (160–161).

There is yet another dimension to imagination when writers find that the world has gone far too awry in its 'progress,' that it has left practically nothing to imagine decently, and some writers in sheer disgust refuse to imagine pleasant prospects anymore for this benighted world. If a writer couldn't imagine poetry after the holocaust, another cynically turned away from the atom bomb, the destroyer of human beings, who would be decimated before they would imagine it. Gertrude Stein wrote a short essay on the bomb saying that she wouldn't imagine a dying people to tell her stories but said that living people are still interesting. "Everybody gets so much information all day long," she remarks cryptically, "that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural. This is a nice story" (161).

"The imagination is not, as its etymology suggests, the faculty for forming images," cautions Gaston Bachelard, probably alluding to the naïve theorists of cognitive learning. "It is the faculty," he elaborates, "for forming images which go beyond reality. [...] The imagination invents more than objects and dreams— it invents a new life, a new spirit; it opens eyes which hold new types of 'visions'" (16). Stories, in other words, are by far the surest test we have to crosscheck the truth about cultures that make excessive claims about their authenticity, whether they believe in the images they project in the first place, and if they do, whether they go beyond the four corners of their socio-political realities.

If stories do not make us marvel at either the limits beyond which fiction cannot go, or our limitation in marvelling at as

much, they may not be worth our effort. John Barth's essay called "The Limits of Imagination" addresses this essential paradox at brilliant length. For now, let's recall this exquisite passage that directs us by way of a footnote to Samuel Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine*, which he says "embodies this paradox:"

> When we declare that we cannot imagine poetry or language or even the creative imagination itself going farther than this, or dealing commensurately with that, are we describing real limits of the medium and/or of the imaginative faculty? Or are we merely demonstrating the limitations of our own imaginations, which the experience of a new masterpiece might disprove tomorrow, if such things were really measurable? (59)

In any case, a serious matter such as *not* being able to imagine stories afflicts not only those who listen to them but those who tell them, an affliction that Wilson Harris finds endemic to western societies that have virtually enslaved themselves to conventions and institutions that prevent them from imagining other, unstable, impure, even fluid identities and realities such as those of the pre-Colombian tradition. Between the human and the animal sensibilities there hardly existed a divide that would have made human lives in the pre-Colombian world shrink away in horror or revulsion from wild lives. In an evident allusion to Beckett's play, Harris calls his essay, "Imagination, Dead, Imagine: Bridging a Chasm" in which he tries to explain the "numinous inexactitude" which characterizes his own imagination, an inheritance he is proud to explain:

> I would try to apply this term [*numinous inexactitude*] to all such figures of fluid and variable identity that we may pursue in the ancient American world. The craftsmen of that age...were in pursuit of a figuration of the creator that could never be grasped or realized *exactly*. Their treaty with the animal kingdom was such that they looked for support, for traceries, for cues, for clues, within infinite subtleties in metaphorically alive, fossil corridors

and shapes within the inimitable architecture of the animal kingdom. (187)

Harris, unlike Larkin, is least worried about the world from where even our disbelief has gone. He is worried rather that our newer forms of reality will prove to be terribly inadequate for imagining self-deceptions other than ours. "An elusive deity or creator whom one may view, so to speak, through a series of windows [no pun, I believe, is intended]... alerts us to the fallibility of human discourse. We need to revise our understanding, I find, of the nature of the Voice we hear— the nature of our utterance— in a dialogue with the sacred" (189). Not only people, but their imagination must be alive in order to imagine death.

19 Everyone who knows stories for what they are also knows that they take us out of this world. This does not mean that a story takes us quite away from, or beyond, the quotidian and that we feel instantly transcended. The point is that we do not realize the relative *ordinariness* with which we have come to view this world, and how miserably we have come to take this ordinariness for granted. We assume this ordinariness to be typical of the unexciting lives we lead among the typically unexciting people in our vicinity. For a very long time then we have been habituated to this dreary world of non-events so much so that we hardly ever recognize the new things around us; the things that ought to strike us as odd, if not strange; the excitement with which we ought to welcome change, or notice errancy.

Stories break the tedium of living on a daily basis. At least we hope they do. Stories are hope. At least they bring us this realization— almost suddenly and unpredictably— that we have become incapable of confronting the new and the exciting. A good story will certainly make us wonder whether we have been in the real world after all, or been in a make-believe, *un*real, world of the obvious we have all along, falsely, taken it to be. "For most of us, most of the time," observes John J. Mc Dermott, "being in the world has an obviousness to it. We move about, little aware of our gait, presence, and interruptive activities. From time to time an event, a startle, a happening, will jog us to immediate consciousness" (143). Faced with a story, you look into an imaginary mirror and regard yourself in it. That story will surprise you with the ability you slowly develop to look at your life as if it were somebody else's. When you are content to remain the 'familiar' self you have become, it only demands that everything in the world be familiar to it, observes Walter Abish. The need to see the world familiarly begins here; it hardens into a habit. The *novel*, however, brings to you the new, the unfamiliar, argues Abish, in a bid to make you unlearn your bad habits of familiar expectancy. Once this new world is realized through the fiction

you create, you become the new Promethean self, seeking and venturing, willing to take risks, and striking an altogether new relationship with the world, rather than just being in it. Stories, in sum, release these Promethean selves in us.

When someone meets someone, or when someone does not meet someone; when people arrive, or they don't; when somebody goes missing, or when somebody returns; when a child is born, or an old person dies...: stories begin almost anytime, anywhere but the event is hugely, excitingly, disastrously, or calamitously *consequential*. Whoever tells a story, tells more than a story. Whether we choose or refuse to choose, a story begins; for even when we do not choose, as Sartre once remarked, a choice has already been made. Of things considered unpoetic and trashy, people make stories. One theme common in contemporary cyber fiction is the prodigious loss consequent on the destruction (and extinction) of textual bodies. As Stewart Brand elegizes in *The Clock of the Long Now*, "Buried with [technologies and operations of computers that become outgrown] are whole clans of programming languages, operating systems, storage formats, and countless rotting applications in an infinite variety of mutually incompatible versions. Everything written on them was written on the wind, leaving not a trace" (84). Some Imp of the Perverse will someday weave classic legends out of them. And that, surely, will take us out of the ordinary.

Stories are hope. Consider why writers invest so much faith in stories. Here's George Steiner:

> It is because we can tell stories, fictive or mathematical-cosmological, about a universe a billion years hence; it is because we can ... conceptualise the Monday morning after our cremation; it is because 'if' sentences... can, spoken at will, deny, reconstruct, alter past, present and future, mapping *otherwise* the determinants of pragmatic reality, the existence continues to be worth experiencing. Hope is grammar. (85)

20 In a world that increasingly believes in obsolescence and supersession, it is worth wondering what is likely to supersede a story. What indeed? None. The sermon, public lecture, movies, television and its numerous varieties of talk, voice-mail, etc. only seem to have edged out stories, but they really have not. What we have been seeing is a change in nomenclature or the name misapplied to something that doesn't qualify basically as 'our' story. The reason is simple. All cultures begin with stories. What else would there be to begin with? As a matter of fact, much like ourselves, our stories make up our culture.

Claude Frollo, the gloomy archdeacon of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, once predicts the end of all gothic cathedrals (also, metonymically, all culture that the architecture of the cathedral represents and memorializes) in the wake of the Gütenberg revolution. Taking his eyes off the book open before him, Frollo views the gothic cathedral at a distance from his cell and rues: *Ceci tuera cela* (This will destroy that). Reading books, in a sense, has 'destroyed' many things considered valuable before Gütenberg, but certainly not architecture. Now *this- destroying-that* phenomenon hasn't quite worked the way Frollo predicted but no story is ever destroyed because another art takes its place, least of all another story. Taking pot-shots at faster programmes and programmers was quite common in the early days of digital technology. The Glasbergen cartoon *The Better Half* once ran this line: "What good is a faster computer, faster modem, faster printer, if you're still using the same old slow fingers?"

The persistence of story-tellers in culture is analogous to that of the conservationists who still marvel at the mystery of natural resources, rather their replenishment despite our mindless exploitative rapacity. "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod..." as the poet says, "And for all this, nature is never spent." (Hopkins 66). Nature refreshes and refills itself, seemingly forever and ever. So with our stories. As long as languages survive human

death, stories are sure to live on. Each new life is a story, a contribution to what the French call *imaginaire,* "a common symbolic heritage," of which Paul Ricoeur speaks in a dialogue with Richard Kearney. "Today the French are largely bereft of a shared *imaginaire*, a common symbolic heritage. Our task then is to re-appropriate those resources of language which have resisted contamination and destruction. To rework language is to rediscover what we are. What is lost in experience is often salvaged in language, sedimented as a deposit of traces, as a thesaurus" (Ricoeur 1984: 28).

Narrative identities are not renewed like passports. Every time one tells or listens to a story, a new identity is born. Its past is as much its assurance as its future. The story of a world without stories is yet to be told. That would be some fiction worth waiting for. Eternally, that is.

21 Nothing ever supersedes a story but the world always presents before story-minded beings a whole lot of objects with which they can make stories. Things around us *generate* stories if we like, and they could please us in lieu of stories, if we are so inclined. Children are quick to learn how this is possible, especially when no one is around to regale them with stories. (Mirror is one such proverbial object; recall how Freud proposes, and Lacan after him elaborates on, the first identity game, *fort/ da.*) Toys are stories in disguise; they enable a sort of world-making that children practise quite early. Understandably, child-psychologists and educationalists are keen to test whether (and how) children can play on their own, and in amiable company.

Giorgio Agamben's astute analysis of the playland, however, takes us much closer than most other theories of play when he tells us that "The essential character of the toy— the only one, on reflection, that can distinguish it from other objects— is something quite singular, which can be grasped only in the temporal dimension of a 'once upon a time' and 'no more.' " (79). It is astonishing that children are drawn to material objects that adults consider unserviceable, outworn, and so discarded in store-rooms and garrets. While Agamben remarks on this peculiarity, he suggests charmingly that the anthropologists probably owe a primary method of their investigation to such children. The child, suggests Agamben, is the first *bricoleur*, an avid collector of material bits and pieces, scraps and crumbs, that turn into 'instruments' and 'tools' with which his/her little world opens and shuts. "A look at the world of toys shows," says Agamben, "that children, humanity's little scrap-dealers, will play with whatever junk comes their way, and that play thereby preserves profane objects and behaviour that have ceased to exist" (79). In an interesting but rather strenuously articulated case, he further tells us how stories take off in children's minds from such 'toys.' Put in simple terms, it is in a child's *play* that the discarded pieces of furniture or broken implements assume their

reconfigured character and use. This story in contradiction (*work* becoming *play/leisure*) owes its success to the illusion implicit in all play. Agamben puts it this way:

> Everything which is old, independent of its sacred origins, is liable to become a toy. What is more, the same appropriation and transformation in play (the same *illusion*, one could say, restoring to the word its etymological meaning, from *in-ludere*) can be achieved— for example, by means of miniaturization— in relation to objects which still belong in the sphere of use: a car, a pistol, an electric cooker are at once transformed into toys, thanks to miniaturization. But what, then, is the essence of toy? (79)

In further thinking, etymology aligns *illusion* and *allusion*, both playful acts (< Latin *alludere* for "play with; touch lightly upon...) in which that which isn't there is made to appear as real and present, demonstrated more or less by Agamben's citation of Claude Lévi-Strauss to whom we owe the idea that the sacred narratives of tribes were basically inventions and improvisations. No story works with complete details. Scrappy and skimpy details weave a story. One story playfully recalls details of another, and yet another. Memory weaves and unweaves narrative fragments that seek wholes in the one who tells, and the one who listens.

For most writers stories are memories associated with objects— mostly conjured up by the senses, a fact to which Peter Stallybrass calls our attention in his remarkably touching essay called "Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning, and the Life of Things." Among the writers he cites is Pablo Neruda whose *Passions and Impressions* carries the following passage, which seems to continue and confirm the Lévi-Straussian story for us:

> It is worth one's while, at certain hours of the day or night, to scrutinize useful objects in repose: wheels that have rolled across long, dusty distances with their enormous load of crops or ore, charcoal sacks, barrels, baskets, the hafts and handles of

> carpenters' tools.... Worn surfaces, the wear inflicted human hands, the sometimes tragic, always pathetic, emanations from these objects give reality a magnetism that should not be scorned.
>
> [Our] nebulous impurity can be perceived in them: the affinity for groups, the use and obsolescence of materials, the mark of a hand or a foot, the constancy of the human presence that permeates every surface.
>
> This is the poetry we are seeking. (Quoted 39)

Each of Neruda's last phrases is a story. At least that's how stories begin. That is how the story-tellers leave their mark on what they tell. The materiality of the world is the only story. The rest of it is ornament. And nothing, absolutely nothing, goes by luck in telling or writing a story.

22 A very common misconception about stories is that they are the same, much like *muthos* they have gradually evolved from. Since *muthos* is supposedly forever, stories remain the most reliable sources of information, and in some cases the most trustworthy as cultural lore. It is true that myths sometimes harden into dogma. It is also true that through repetition and re-enactment myths often ossify into patterns, archetypal in character and ritualistic in seasonal reinforcement.

The story, however, is capable of resisting easy mythopoeia because a community tests its vibrancy *as* a community by virtue of the stories it circulates far and wide. A community is alive and well when a story is told again differently by its people, one version challenged by and retold in another, or when a counter-story circulates alongside the *m*-story to discredit the latter. These narrative subversions are the prophylaxis of a people struggling to uphold democratic values in tyrannical dispensations. "Stories can thus preserve ideas, beliefs, and convictions," observes Karl Kroeber, "without permitting them to harden into abstract dogma. Narrative allows us to test our ethical principles in our imaginations where we can engage them in the uncertainties and confusion of contingent circumstance" (9). The safest assumption regarding even the most widely circulated version of a story is that it is one among the many, most of which we haven't heard. But what if the community starts legally restricting or regulating the story-telling rights of its people? There indeed was this strange situation in the U. S. of the first two decades of twentieth century when its women were fighting for their birth-control-/ abortion-rights. The law forbade women from telling others about their private experiences; those "others" legally included even their spouses and parents, and certainly everyone outside their families such as medical/healthcare workers. Margaret Sanger, the crusader for women's reproductive rights in the U. S. has told us how revolutionary and crucially influential story-telling and sharing

proved to be in women's long march towards their right to control their bodies and lives. It is anyone's guess how the later public debates on female sexuality and abortion were possible in the first place by the "domain of intimacy" created by Sanger's first Brooklyn clinic[7].

How does a society (or a nation, for that matter) prove that it has survived the worst days ever of terrorist or political tumult—say, the U. S. after 9/11, or India after the Emergency? Stories contribute no less to this society's new life. That no official authority can 'programme' a story and set it in narrative motion, that no version can be so 'authorized,' is so undoubtedly guaranteed by democratic processes that script another story for a country ravaged by war, famine, or natural disaster. Life returns to normal not because the armies conduct flag-marches or more repression and reprisal are unleashed on a traumatized public, but when the sufferers recognize themselves in the stories they tell one another. A story is least obedient to diktat, and as Kroeber points out, "storytelling cannot be regimented or commanded.... A story does not coerce me into judgement; it offers me an opportunity to make a judgement on my own. And this is why the possibility of retelling and rehearsing or rereading is so important" (169).

23 Cautionary tales always have a special place in the evolution of all communities. And different communities imagine themselves differently. Irony begins with the availability of such lore. It is not for want of cautionary tales that war, pestilence, hate and greed, cruelty and physical violence continue unabated even today. When some communities begin to imagine themselves differently from others, we have territorial disputes and military conquests. Nature responds to radioactive fallout, for example, in ways unimaginable to those who are not familiar, say, with a fictional account Christine Brooke-Rose gives in *Out*. A recent report informs us that artificial radio nuclides from Fukushima (No.1) nuclear power plant caused physiological and genetic damage to pale grass blue butterflies, the most common species in Japan. It is too early to say whether this is a warning for other species, including the human, and what, if any, damage awaits human imagination. Nuclear pestilence respects no political or geographical boundaries. Cancer travels very far indeed when stories choose to settle in cancerous sites and force us to re-imagine cancer-prone communities. What if the worst sufferers in a pestilential outbreak refuse to think of themselves as part of a 'nation' when others subscribe to the dream of a commonwealth? Even the most sophisticatedly equipped pathological labs can very well do with a little imagination. And if they do, they will see that a good story will certainly help the recovery of the self, as from an illness.

The stories, however, do what stories always (and only) do. They warn us. They let us know beforehand what choices life under certain conditions can offer. What best, and what worst, to expect in stringent situations; what options we can reasonably and safely exercise are all before us. We continue to make the foolish mistake nevertheless by taking the story *as story* or by taking the story far too seriously to paralyze thought and do nothing at all to prevent disaster. I have no doubt that it was a story-teller who suggested that the peace negotiators put a small

statue of Venus (that old, armless beauty!) on their table. The international disarmament conference had better remember stories. Some stories, surely, are more powerful than the world's ballistic missiles.

Desire we can't do without. We can't give up this world for another that promises better things for us. Evil persists. Intelligence, especially the *social*, is scarce. But live we must. How this might be possible with the limited human and other resources we have is what the calculus of stories tells us. What can be legitimately desired, and what must forbid desire— suggestion *is* best understood as caution when we listen to stories. They are lessons we ignore at our peril.

There is always the chance that you do or do not get an infection. If infected, the chances are that the germs make you ill, or they do not. Your illness is either very serious or it is not. Your disease will eventually kill you, or it will not. You die, or you don't. Even after your death— well, don't you have a choice?

You have heard all this before, or you haven't!

24 People suffer mostly because their means and ends of life are so hopelessly confused by politics or economics they do not quite understand. They "labor under a mistake," as Thoreau observes in the opening chapter of *Walden* (47), which we take to mean that they are condemned to live in and work for regimes put in place by monologic-monistic intellectual traditions. In preliterate societies at least the soothsayers brought news from other worlds, and told the people when their labour seemed misdirected and futile. In modern societies it is impossible to figure out the rights and wrongs of our work and leisure because the public media are very much part of the mendacious governments that pamper them. Stories alone can assure us that things need not be as bad as they are. There is very little reason for us to despair when we listen to other people, other cultures and societies, whose lives present us with hopeful alternatives and opportunities for correction and reform. Listening to their stories, you feel as if you have, for the nonce, locked yourself out of your country and thrown away the key. "The time has come, perhaps" writes Matei Calinescu, commenting on effete fictional models, "to realize not only that there are many worlds but that each one of these worlds is interested, in order to make its own story more forceful, in listening to the stories of other worlds. From a past consisting of a multiplicity of successive conflicting monologues, the task of contemporary imagination is to create a vast dialogue" (169).

A self learns and unlearns. Its unique freedom as a self is immediately understood as inescapable bondage to other selves, its largeness perceived as smallness in contexts that only stories relate. Each story it narrates echoes some other story it has heard. Wayne C. Booth's *Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* develops this idea more persuasively than this short excerpt from another of his essays, but this is a good enough summation:

> Every person, even the dullest... has what no mere animal or vegetable has...[,] a story line. [...] In place of the self as an

> individual, an integrated, harmonious distinctive unit, more and more of us have been embracing once again a "philiated" self that every non-theoretical human being has always experienced just by being alive: a temporal sequence of encounters with others, encounters best described as a kind of *taking in of new selves*.... In other words, our lives... are narratable as *plot lines*, but the plots are plotted not just outside us but within us: my father and my mother are in me, encountering one another there; they meet there with my playmates from infancy, my schoolmates, my teachers, my various friends and enemies, my favorite literary characters and their authors, all of whom enter and some of whom remain forever. (90, italics in the original)

Reviewing George Steiner's *Either/Or*, Cynthia Ozick quotes Borges's famous remark that "Censorship is the mother of metaphor." One might see a big story begin there if all past (and recent) political stories of embargo on fiction were to be summoned. Ozick, however, gives the maxim a tweak to link up language and story, rather to ponder what exactly the oppressor is targeting. "[Borges's] is a maxim to gasp at; but Aesopian responses to oppression, however brilliant, can have only a limited life. Finally oppression destroys literature because it eats away at words, so that eventually an abused language will be of no use to an artist, no matter how metaphorical and Aesopian his devices" (76). Not every writer would think so, and give up her responsibilities as a writer. Writers cannot afford to look away from the political world in which they live and feel responsible for what they know, unlike the power-wielding politicians. "The writer has no reason to be if... reality remains outside language" asserts Nadine Gordimer. "An accurate and vital correspondence between what is and the perception of the writer," she adds, "is what the fiction writer has to seek..." ("Three in a Bed...", 120).

25 Stories, we believe, are grounded in 'reality' whose X axis we presume to be *space* and the Y, *time*. Stories are therefore stories of this place and that moment, or vice versa. No wonder most listeners/ readers/ viewers of stories disqualify them on the flimsy ground of a 'reality check' whose simplistic terms (names, persons, languages, dress, social behaviour...) must tally against the narrative details we are given. We don't, for example, want a scoundrel in R. K. Narayan's Malgudi to be as scoundrelish as the one we meet in an Isaac Bashevis Singer *shtl*. Anachronisms, uncharacteristic word or deed, oddly paired characters, preposterous and mismatched events invite stern censure from the pedantic literalists and diehard realists whose imagination works only in one direction, mostly along the lines of a commercial bank's balance sheet. Surprisingly, however, such literalists have no problem watching movies that short-change reality all the time. Beaten black and blue, a man returns home from a street brawl. He winces, when a woman tries to wash his bruised arm.

In the cultural audit, however, it is nice to see children behave like children, the old like the old, etc. (Children *are* children in the *Alice* stories, a crucial datum that falsifies their realities to no end.) Stories tell us about our roots and rootedness. To that extent, the X and Y axes have their unshakable uses. Even when we are transported to another place, it would be reassuring to know from where we are being so transported (and why). "We come to story," according to Michael Roemer, "in large part to be placed. For just as it reintegrates the central figure into the whole, so it joins us who are watching or listening into a community. It compensates for the sense of isolation, dread, and guilt that is, in some measure, the lot of all" (144).

Stories create for us a new understanding of space, an awareness of its dimension, that theories of physical science may not quite proffer. In our relationships unfold space to which

we stand *related*, the same relationships annulling the space from which we are deported, sometimes forever. Of course the *Alice* books are as good as any to remind us of such relations, but think also of the unforgettable scenes (forests, towns, hills, neighbourhoods, tribal reserves, rivers, streets, churches...) where our favourite stories have led us. Unless we spatialize our subjectivities vis-à-vis the fiction's, how do we know the characters in it for what they are, and the character of the fiction for what it is? It is only fair that we recognize that tales of exile and eviction since the Old Testament have defined human condition and human character for us. The Pandavas in exile took on the world differently than they ever did as princes and privileged royalty. And the dangers of possessing, or holding on to, space stupidly are brought home nowhere more tellingly than in "The Burrow." This is a famous Kafka parable in which a burrower seals off food beyond any opponent's reach, including, sadly, his own. The burrower starves to death, without dignity, without tragedy.

Space is play as well when human beings are forced to *imagine* space where none exists. Here's a passage from a splendid book on women's narrative art called *From a Broken Web*: "Consider the inexhaustible delight children take in hiding places, in special spaces like tents built under tables or tree houses, in clambering over boulders on a rocky shore, or in playing house. The playful plasticity of house: does it return for us as we bear the soul-child? Will our bodies not guide us, if we let them, to postpatriarchal space?" (Keller 244). Think now of the innumerable stories of the *Unheimlich* where in a place known to us (our study, bed-room, the foyer of our library, or some such) we suddenly feel constrained to grapple with two tenses, forgotten as it happens, recalled before it has begun.

26 Speaking of relationships that define space for human beings, let us not forget the *domestic space* (loosely understood as one's native sphere, the space with which identities begin to assume edge and character), the first place ever where we heard stories, and told some ourselves.[8] Jean-François Lyotard's *domus* is this space, where we first use and understand the uses of language *as* story. This is how Lyotard puts it: "[*Domus*] is a community of work. ... The child is one of these works, the first, the first-fruit. Within the domestic rhythm, it is the moment, the suspension of beginning again, the seed. It is what will have been. It is the surprise, story starting over again. Speechless, *infans*, it will babble, speak, tell stories, will have told stories, will have stories told about it" (193). The best illustration of *domus* is not always a child-story told from the faked point-of-view of a child. Very rarely do such efforts succeed because within the four walls of home we hold our secrets, and lead our secret lives of which the child knows very little. Our greatest conflicts originate here; so do our regrets and resolutions. The singular success of "The Child" by H. E. Bates, recast by T. S. Eliot in "Animula," should however convince us that Lyotard's *domus* is not altogether difficult to conjure up so tellingly.[9]

Growing up in cities, people hardly realize that the spaces they call 'home', those spaces that matter most to them, are registered *as stories*. How does that happen? That happens when the geometrical space is transcended by the inhabited space, the space inhabited by stories. The significance of such register is that it serves mnemonic purposes. The pity is that in urban-industrial environs, locations change and pass, and their maps redrawn beyond recognition nearly every decade. In a wonderfully evocative passage, Certeau works out an equation between the inevitable spatial and narrative dispersions that occur:

> Fragments of [memory] come out in legends.... A memory is only a Prince Charming who stays just long enough to awaken the Sleeping Beauties of our wordless stories. "*Here*, there used to be a bakery." "*That's* where old lady Dupuis used to

> live." It is striking here that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: "you *see*, here there used to be…," but it can no longer be seen. Demonstratives indicate the invisible identities of the visible: it is the very definition of a place, in fact, that it is composed by these series of displacements and effects among the fragmented strata that form it and that it plays on these moving layers. (108)

Only stories of home, alas, qualify as stories of exile. This is potentially so, when one tries to reconcile the chaos of an external, stranger world with the imagined, familiar order of home; or when the clinging is egregious to be theorized in non-fictive discourses. The reverse might also be true for some lives that begin sadly within the criminal precincts of 'home'— those paedophiles who are too familiar to be strange show their victims the dark and troubled underside of home. Everyone who leaves home, everyone who returns home, however, is, or has, a story. Not all diaspora qualifies as 'story,' though, if we raise the ethical bar and recall Emmanuel Levinas's hard questions on one's right to be:

> To have to answer for one's right to be, not in relation to the abstraction of some anonymous law, some legal entity, but in fear for the other. My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun,' my home— have they not been the usurpation of places belonging to others already oppressed by me or starved, expelled to a Third World: rejecting, excluding, exiling, despoiling, killing. […] Fear for all that my existence— despite its intentional and conscious innocence— can accomplish in the way of violence and murder. Fear coming from behind my 'self-consciousness' and whatever returns there may be of the pure perseverance in being toward good conscience. (23)

How many faces roll past a mind's screen, only conscience can tell. That they do all the same is the story Levinas reminds us; also that all those are the others, on whose faces our culture has shut the doors one time or another.

27 Now the Y axis: Time/time. If space is conceivable to us as relational or relative to a fictional self, Time gives all writers a deeply meditative pause. That is because, the more we think about Time, the more varied and incommensurable it becomes. The first of such conceptualization takes place in every listener's relative adjustment of *Time* (about which no one knows, can know enough) with *time* (about which everyone claims to know, or at least must know enough to be alive sensibly in their world). Stories are indifferent, however, to what we make of *their* time, the reason we hardly ever discuss the timelessness of stories. The latter is generally considered a highly professional subject, usually engaged by a philosopher/teller of stories like William Gass. At deeper levels of fictional/philosophical thought, this precious thing (some people keep repeating, *time is money*) has no value intrinsically. Look at the way characters in fiction are made to live *in* or *out of* it, report *on* time. They waste time, treasure it, or make the most of it, remember the times....

Stories take us out of the *time* in order to lodge us in *Time* and its varieties of experience without so much as letting us know that we are listening/reading, without our consciously having to adapt to our immediate surroundings or be appropriately guarded in the precincts of the unknown. Hardly ever noticing the longer events from the shorter, the more consequential from the less, the heavier from the lighter moments of discursive traffic, we enter the fiction on terms largely ours, unmindful of 'significances,' 'patterns,' and such until the more alert, cleverer, readers direct us to them. Lodged in our memory nevertheless are great moments— the climax of Mansfield's "Fly," the pregnant moments when the conversation snaps in "Hills Like White Elephants," Bishan Singh's loud scream in "Toba Tek Singh"...— that sometimes act like cinematic *stills*. Barthes's remark that "the filmic, quite paradoxically, cannot be grasped in the projected film... but only...in... the still" (59) applies perhaps more appropriately to such fictional moments. Such moments, like Barthes's stills, are "fragment[s] of a second text *whose existence*

never exceeds the fragment..." (60, italics in the original). (I now understand why I always seem to hear the agonizing howl of the peasant-tribal in *Ākroś*,[10] the highest peak ever in Om Puri's career-graph to my mind, whenever I look at this still.)

Since the bulk of scholarship on Time/time and stories is quite substantial, let's sample for the nonce a very shrewd remark by a critic who calls his essay "Reading Time," a pun beneficially attentive to our immediate concerns: "For the novel a drink of water is an event, but so is Pip's increasing debt—the scratching of an itch but also waiting for rivets, a fall off a ladder and also a wasting disease. Narrative moves alternately between punctual events (a laugh, a slap, a glance, a storm) and broader, slower events: a feud, a quest, the decay of influence, the securing of advantage, the learning of French, the strengthening of a family" (Levenson 514).

This distinction between the punctual and elaborately unfolding events is crucial to understanding why stories sustain us through thick and thin. Life neither hinges on the punctual nor on the elaborately unfolding events, reactions to which vary in all of us. If stories attune us to a consciousness of Time/time, we feel better prepared to face a world of perplexities and challenges. All societies are not always or evenly good learners, but the societies where stories circulate briskly survive calamity. Arthur C. Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God" is a great story to recall in this connection because it shows us that the world we believe in (and die for) will just disappear when it can be theoretically brought to an end virtually by number-crunching computer professionals. A group of Tibetan monks believe that if they transcribe all the nine billion names of god this world will be 'realized.' They have been on this job for three centuries and their Lama projects that it would take them at least 15,000 years to complete the job. The IBM technicians, who eventually take this up as a project, complete it in a couple of months. Was, then, the world realized *in* our time or their time, or *out of* our time or their time... wonder the monks.

28 Imagine a world without stories. If no one ever told stories or heard them, our hold on this world (*comprehension*, in more respectable terms) is sure to be seriously compromised. Even the most educated and electronically enabled among us realize now that half the world we live in is virtually created (and run) by mobile networks that provide increased and ready access to an ever-expanding array of high bandwidth applications and data services. Between what we 'command' and what evidently we don't falls a shadow. It is by the comparative crosslight afforded by stories that we are able to reconcile Space and Time (cosmic immensities) with space-time (the much smaller, easily negotiated workaday world) with apparent success. This is not to suggest that people living in other parts of the world are luckier than us, or that their technology or philosophy has enabled them to negotiate the world better than us because of *their* stories. Certainly not. Cultures create models of S-T (and s-t) best comprehensible to those who subscribe to those cultures. If the Indians do not understand *aeons*, the non-Indians fare no better with *yuga*s. No single model of S-T is entirely comprehensible to all people, belonging as they do to cultures that formulate S-T differently.

This is chiefly responsible for our difficulty with truth and truth-claims. But there is a way out. Stories. We could easily believe them once we agree that the 'truth' of fiction is at best provisional. We are neither ethically bound by nor politically committed to the truth that abides in stories. As a matter of fact, the most desirable value of stories is the absolute freedom they grant us to subject all truth-claims they make to the severest tests we prefer to administer. The more they flunk our 'reality tests' the better they live on as stories. They are borne on an invisible tide of narrative grace and subtlety even the best films cannot hope to create. Isaac B. Singer's "Gimpel the Fool" tells us why it is much easier to believe in the religion of man than invest more and more faith in god. Better a foolish husband than a wise

rabbi— the Jewish god will better understand this any day than a village full of hypocritically religiose fools.

These, at bottom, are our tests of S-T, the world we have known all along, and the world now shrunken (or swollen) beyond our recognition *virtually* within our work-and-leisure domains. We now know that the truth of fiction derives from an authority whose authorizing functions we are at liberty to suspend as suspect, challenge as untrue, or defy as impertinent.

29 We owe to Hayden White's perspicacity a decent resolution to a long-standing territorial dispute between *story* and *history*. The nature of this dispute is easier to understand if we can visualize rival tellers on a scene, each claiming that the other is not telling all the truth, or, lacking Emily Dickinson's integrity, claiming that what is told is not all, and what somehow gets told, has been told slantingly. There needn't be all this fuss when we realize that etymologically, history *is* story (Latin, *historia)* and one must always allow a teller some leeway to arrange and present the facts of a case (knowledge) according to his/her fancy. Of course we are not governed by history but by some people who claim the right to govern us by telling us this story or that. A deep-rooted distrust of such simple matters has unfortunately divided houses and nations, people and property. Ignorance of such matters has surely persuaded some historians to forsake the company of the humanist colleagues to seek refuge among the social scientists. Historians of ideas, however, still remain where they have long been. The best of them continue to tell us the best stories ever.

Now White wastes no time in agreeing that history is 'story.' The historians, however, ought to be mindful in his opinion of the way they tell the stories they "find, identify, and uncover," unlike the ordinary story-tellers who take full responsibility for their waywardness and fancy. For the raconteur certainly enjoys a license the historian does not. Not only the sources but the presentation and deployment of facts matter in history. Emplotment is serious business as far as history is concerned, far more serious perhaps than that of CAG reports and the income tax returns of civil servants in the highest offices of the state."The arrangement of selected events of the chronicle into a story," remarks White, "raises the kinds of questions the historian must anticipate and answer in the course of constructing his [*sic*] narrative" (445–446). The point is that historians are answerable to a public who have a right to know why a story couldn't have been told any other way. To such questions of civic propriety

and assumptive probity, the Kafkas and Calvinos of history are reticent. But no one except a crank is known to invoke the penal code against them for their indifference to the 'realities' they claim the licence to distort, misrepresent, downplay, or completely ignore. As a matter of fact, reading Kafka or Calvino, we are sometimes dumbstruck by the way, *pace* Walter Benjamin, a document of civilization doubles up simultaneously as a document of barbarism.

All is not quite well when one school of historicism meets another in open debate. Postcolonial storytelling assumes various formats, the most polemical of which is known as "colonial critique." Among the three modes of harnessing stories ahistorically, Frederick Cooper cites "story-plucking," an altogether inappropriate way of illustrating or buttressing a postcolonial argument. Cooper finds "coloniality" to be questionable when postcolonial discussions assume its story to be single, unidirectional, and rooted in particular historical place and time. The stories of coloniality are not one, he notes, but several and varied in regions and climates involving several ethnic groups and regimes. "One can pluck a text or narrative [from this colony or that period]... and derive a lesson that conveys a generalizable meaning" (404). In Cooper's view, "story-plucking" is not fair game in history. It is neither story nor history. I agree because all our lives we couldn't be wondering why *this* story (among many others) had to be told, and only in this way. No wonder totalitarianism seeks to totalize stories and perpetuate them.

Perhaps we need to remind ourselves amidst all the din of originality and "primary sources;" of one school crossing historical swords with another school over temples, mosques, and the birth-places of gods and goddesses; of the bitter apple and the bitten apples of archives, that we must always learn from people with whom we do not agree. Historiography and literary history are at bottom stories of disputed facts and dubious claims. But we need them nevertheless because we need such beautiful stories

of literature and history. As James Livingston so brilliantly puts it, the creation of the *past* for history and the *canon* for literature is the work of professionals: priests, scribes, librarians, professors, critics, all amazing story-tellers whose job it is to make professions without professing too much. According to Livingston, by "standing between us and the archive, telling us how to approach it," (34) they accomplish so much.

30 No one feels the power of stories more intensely than those who forfeit it under dubious regimes that survive by relaying stories of progress, reform, success, diplomacy, etc. through their 'official' media. Stories of the gagged victims of such regimes must be told. In the fairest democratic practices, we insist that we do have stories, *our* stories, to tell and that *we* tell them ourselves. We are heard, or we seek to be heard out. For stories alone have the great power to soothe us, to help us fight injustice and corruption, to help us cope with discriminatory suffering and material privation. It is not unusual that a whole society feels terribly outraged when the public media are averse to 'covering' their story. (In fact, such a grievance is best aired when the media fail to *un*cover their story.)

When stories circulate in a free society, and are received more fairly and openly than official channels allow them, they somewhat afford the aggrieved prospective and retrospective compensations. No wonder many such people write or tell stories, not necessarily theirs, when they stay put in asylums and labour camps, or are forcefully confined to hospitals and quarantines. Solitary confinement, incarceration, exile among those who do not speak your language... stories have better chances of life under conditions where speech is suspect, forbidden, or plain dead. When we can't run away from places where we are detained, language runs briskly. "Which is why I return again and again to the prophets of future lands," explains Hélène Cixous who considers language as the unique gift of the desert. "Because they remind us," she says, "that the desert can lead to the spring; when we have no land, the air remains, the flood is a promise of birth, and when we are led into the never-again and nowhere that lie behind the barbed wire, *a native land remains to us: language*, a land that *moves with us*, a land that is its own salvation" (28, author's italics). The unusually strange articulacy of detention is often celebrated in stories. Confinement *is* flight, a paradox that runs triumphantly against all odds through illness-cum-imprisonment narratives.

What is most intriguing about Kafka's parables, especially a political parable like "In the Penal Colony," is the powerless story telling itself so powerfully. Stories pull victims toward victimizers for much the same reason as the victimizers are drawn to their victims. The nearest explanation of this bizarre mutuality is the *Kafkaesque*, which Jane Bennett interprets neatly for us: "[Kafka's] stories reveal bureaucratic entanglements to be both maddening *and* attractive. The characters are oppressed by the obscurity of power, but there is also something about this officialdom— some magnetic force— to which they find themselves inescapably drawn" (105). Isn't it very interesting that both the powerful and the powerless have their stories, and they have their respective compulsions to tell them? That the *Kafkaesque* works beyond bureaucratic walls and that the cruel needle of persecution and domination weaves more indelible patterns elsewhere as well is the story Junichiro Tanizaki tells us in "The Victim." One would hesitate to call this story of a young tattooer called Seikichi a plain allegory but its close resemblance to Kafka's parables is unmistakable in a passage like the following:

> Within this young tattooer's heart lurked unsuspected passions and pleasures. When the pricking of his needles caused the flesh to swell and the crimson blood to flow, his patients, unable to endure the agony, would emit groans of pain. The more they groaned, the greater was the artist's indefinable pleasure. He took particular delight in vermilion designs, which are known to be the most painful of all tattoos. When his clients had received five or six hundred pricks of the needle and then taken a scalding hot bath the more vividly to bring out the colours, they would often collapse half-dead at Seikichi's feet. As they lay there unable to move, he would ask them with a satisfied smile, "So it really hurts?" (14)

31 What does it mean to say that stories are *provisional*? It simply means that the claim-to- truth of what we are told in a story is strictly within the precincts we are allowed to enter. Stories allow us to look ahead and forward, and provide for now. We look far enough and near enough to avoid pitfalls. Our present has its history in the past that, in turn, anticipates the future we are at perfect liberty to imagine. Stories afford us these unusual prospective and retrospective linkages while we seem securely lodged in the present. The interpretive function of what we hear as a story is different from other forms of information or knowledge we process on a daily basis. Stories make us aware of the awareness with which we grapple our notions of habitation: where we have been, where we are (for) now, and where we might be headed.[11]

Frameworks which we harness to understand this world, and the knowledge they variously provide us, might be described as linguistic, instrumental, corporate, organizational, therapeutic, theoretical etc., depending on the school you go to, but they tell their respective 'stories.' Let us take "knowledge society," which, to my mind, is a good enough 'story' for illustrative purposes. Now this is just *one* among the many such western stories of modernity, progress, advancement, globalization, etc. and is based on the assumption that highly specialized (preferably techno-scientific, or managerial economic) knowledge and expertise rule the world. That explains the phenomenally high fees technological institutes and business schools levy on the young who aspire to gain this "knowledge." The same story is variously told when "knowledge society" is styled as a "technological society," a "risk society," an "experimental society," an "information society," etc. Superficially, we understand these as versions of the same story, but in each of these, when narrated by very sophisticated story-tellers such as Jean-François Lyotard, P. F. Drucker, Daniel Bell, J. R. Beniger and others, we begin to see a world populated not simply with more factories and warehouses, massive installations

controlled by computer behemoths, intercontinental communicative networks and protocols but driven mainly on stories of trust and faith, of collaborative success and shared resource-funding. But when anything goes wrong, and they often do (witness Lehman bros. credit crunches, subprime lending crisis, the Japanese nuclear disaster, or simply the traffic snarls owing to the e-monitor-controls collapsing in a megalopolis...) we are told more stories about epistemic cultures, social machinery, work-ethic variables, and a whole lot of interpretations that hold up those beautiful stories. After all, someone, somewhere, should *believe* some story.

It is not even required of the teller to begin, develop, or complete the story after school-books and boring movies. Disaster stories are the same everywhere. The best of them still excite curiosity in us. We find them irresistible enough to try telling them in ways that best suit our imaginative needs of the moment. Ernest Hemingway's germinal story, for which he is rumoured to have won a $ 10-bet, is a classic:

FOR SALE: Baby shoes. Never worn.[12]

Here's another, by Margaret Atwood. Quite meaty stuff, I should imagine, for any number of Hollywood movies with tooth and claw, each of 2 hours: "Longed for him. Got him. Shit."

32 If stories do not help us understand ourselves, if our stories do not tell anything at all about us to others who listen to us, *Why Stories?* wouldn't be the engaging question it still is. That explains Walter Benjamin's glance at the history of stories while writing on the singular achievement of Nikolai Leskov, the master story-teller. For the world of Leskov was also the world of a vibrant community, of communication and communion, of artisanal kinship. This spirit, remarks Benjamin, infuses the entire community; it celebrates human lives and values by telling about them, remembering how their people once lived, and how they live now. "The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work," observes Benjamin, "...is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were.... It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (91–92).

Our understanding of ourselves as *human* begins within a community of imagination, a belonging we are eager to attest by contributing to its stories. It is not for nothing that Geoffrey Chaucer first creates a fellowship of some thirty pilgrims before he sets out to narrate/ report on their stories. At the Tabard Inn no one is stronger or weaker than the next person around as far as their potential for stories is concerned. There is everything going, as they say, for the stories to just be told. "Nothing shows up differences better than proximity," remarks George McFadden who has written on the company comedy keeps with writers; "gathering both accentuates identities and sharply displays idiosyncrasies. It allows threats to develop of assimilation to something else, of alteration to what one is not, of the destruction of one by the other" (38). We have no other, no better story to tell than of this company. We realize that the only way to record being and meaning *human* is by telling and retelling lives into being, both for the sake of ourselves and for the generations that later join us. *Humanities* are nothing if they do not cohere as stories—

whether of institutions, societies, individuals, or communities. We cannot simply understand the *human* without stories. We engage stories if only to be human, to respect our colleagueship in a race and stay related to others of the same race.

Benjamin's elegy on storytelling is perhaps unjustified because new societies tell new stories of artisanal kinship. *The Order of Things* seems to end with an ominous note when it says that "man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end" (Foucault 387). Unless we read too much into its author-function to conclude that this *end* is the inevitable cessation of a narrative session, Foucault's *end* is the purpose toward which *one* story has been heading in order to make way for another to commence. The point is that Foucault's *man* is a superb invention, fiction in the present continuous, one that must alter (with) each teller. All he means is that one such story has nearly run its course, or about to fulfil its purpose. Let us wait in the meanwhile for another to begin. Now we ought to know why *The Order of Things* begins with Jorge Luis Borges for whom stories survive the lives that tell them.

33 Stories are our tried and tested cultural investments. They guarantee sustained returns for our language that otherwise receives no attentive nurture from us. For there is no language that does not have its stories. *The story of a language* is both a story of its genesis and growth, and a story that is told in it. These are singular stories— no other story, in another language, can replace a story peculiar to one language. What translation can give us often is not so much the story as the illusion of it being told in a language known to us. If this is too hard to believe, try translating a simple proverb from your native language into a language you don't consider yours. A proverb is fossil story.

"To rework language," remarks Ricoeur, "is to rediscover what we are. ...To rediscover meaning we must return to the multi-layered sedimentations of language, to the complex plurality of its instances, which can preserve what is said from the destruction of oblivion" (1984: 28). We test the power of our language, in other words, by telling stories in it. There is hardly another exercise that will tell us how strong and effective our words are for the contexts we choose to deploy them. In short, one's language works perfectly well if it has stories *in* it.

A related test we could give ourselves. It is not enough to simply believe that we have a wonderfully creative language. We want to know how creative *we* are in a language in which, we are sure, many others have proved themselves to be creative. We might go further when we translate others' stories into our language if only to see whether it could stand the narrative labour of other cultures and the languages that have borne it successfully. Do we, in other words, make sense of our lives the way other people do by telling their stories? That we do in remarkable ways, especially in forging our moral identities by a cultural "interweaving of selves" is corroborated in many studies. In the work of the Mexican political philosopher Maria Pia Lara, for example, we read about the performative narratives, story-telling sessions, of social groups: "In creating a new vocabulary social

groups provide for new descriptions that not only illuminate once repressed truths but create possibilities for relationships that were never envisioned before. In their struggles for recognition, women have achieved all these tasks" (171).

The plot-making strategies differ but emplot we must. We emplot our selves after our fashion in order to make sense of our individual selves in this world."Our stories order our world," remarks Michel de Certeau, "providing the mimetic and mythical structures for experience" (87). If, for some reason, one plot doesn't work, we make alternative plots, all over again. If our stories make sense, our lives make sense too— first to ourselves, and then, hopefully, to others as well. It is perhaps this second extended effort that takes the form of the spurious genre known as *autobiography*. Those who lose their plots take their lives, not pens to write their lives. They are less likely to write stories, as did Sylvia Plath of the incredibly Angela Carterish *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, although their lives are perhaps decent stuff of fiction. "We work over our lives continuously," avers Hanif Kureishi. "Still, it is odd," he muses, "the public's desire to see fiction as disguised, or treated, or embellished, autobiography" (9). Considering that one's life is not always brute fact and fine fiction, so discretely lived let alone told; that the man who writes sometimes tells the story of a woman who suffers, or vice versa, autobiography is close to being spurious as a genre.[13]

34 Children get such things right before adults do. They know why stories are important, unlike those researchers in educational and the cognitive sciences who still conduct surveys on the popularity of fairy tales among pre-school children. Some narratologists have joined this group to analyse "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" to death. Apart from the fairly obvious advantage of instilling some moral values at an early age, tales and marvels are corridors through which we conduct young minds to reach a plane where the *others* (strangers, derelicts, castaways, waifs, orphans, nomads, foundlings and the like) confront us with the most awkward questions of socio-political justice, ethical fairness, or equitable human existence. Contrary to general impression among educationalists, tales were not devised to just scare kids away from nasty places and the nastier people who inhabit them. If that indeed were true, some entrepreneur would have turned our schools and colleges into massage parlours, shopping malls, or multiplexes.

Mercifully, our love of stories begins early, notwithstanding the ugly and the terrible creatures we meet in them. We are naturally gifted learners, pattern-making animals, that try hard to extend our childhood beyond our solicitous institutions of education, training and research. What we observe as children are not so much the beautiful or ugly features of our benevolent care-givers as their rhythmic, responsive, and reassuring movements. (It pleases me to record here a personal discovery: my twenty-year-old students who stumble when they see or scan a line of poetry, I daresay, had seldom been cuddled to rocking sleep.) As children we love to play with sounds, sound-making toys and movements. Our senses receive the best schooling ever *outside* schools; before, that is, we ever get to hear of the Mother Goose rhyme. Stories happen. When they do, the text-books are not open, and the teacher hardly watches. When we play, we feel free to play. Why are our playgrounds and stadia located far away from the class-rooms?

Problems of childhood and adolescence are reflected so well in the *patterns* we make of them. Imaginative identification is very easy when we are young. Children, as they say, are very natural. They know that no world is perfect. Interpretive commentary is hardly required, therefore, to let them see terror and ugliness for what they are. Children's dharma is seldom suspect. They ask the right questions, are unafraid of consequences, and intolerant of stealth and hypocrisy. Their peculiar curiosity leads them to questions that adults ask under pressure from supervisors, and the law-enforcement agencies. Since children are not obliged to look beneath the surface and identify the embedded motifs in a tale they are told, they traverse multiple realities of supreme fiction in nanoseconds without any loud fuss. The only condition they set is that virtue and vice are distinct enough to be easily seen by them as such, and not because a high-sounding interpretation makes them so. In short, children are not averse to playing a game called life. This is in contrast to those adults who are averse to playing a life called game. (The latter, by the way, is a theme so grimly explored in so many short stories, the most typical of which in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener." The adult refusal to see the 'play' of life is not different from Bartleby's refusal to participate in Wall Street, his adopted home.)

What was once considered axiomatic in the education of children in all societies— that they learn things on their own *relationally*— seems largely ignored in our newer approaches to learning in schools. "Genetic epistemology has much to teach us," says John Mc Dermott, "for children naturally make their own relations until we teach them that the world has already been named and properly codified. Against their original bent, they are told to march in step, name by name, definition by definition, until they too see the world as an extension of local grammar and hidebound conceptual designations. The social and moral result of this aberrant pedagogy is deleterious" (151). This is worth considering seriously, next time we put story-books in

the hands of children. If the lessons of the story are made to seem contradictory to the sciences we teach them, surely Mc Dermott has a point. That pedagogy is "aberrant" when the stories and the life around children do not *relate* meaningfully. Remember that it takes long for even adults to ask *Why Stories?*

35 Here we must make some small receptive adjustment to the routine scholarship on *innocence* we ascribe to children. Strange and sad though it is to be so reminded, we begin our research on subjects like innocence only after we have forfeited so much of it. I, for one, do not quite regret *my* loss of innocence but I do feel terribly handicapped by the loss of childhood curiosity, mostly in others, regarding why words mean or do not mean the things of our world. Despite William Blake and Sigmund Freud, we still equate a child's lack of schooling with innocence and helplessness. This is indeed regrettable. The next hop in our judgement is toward some lame theory of dependency and reliance childhood alone is supposed to know. Children, according to this erroneous belief, are *un*free.

Nothing can be so patently absurd than believing children to be unfree. Let us watch them at play. Most children enact situations that playfully involve a problem and its solution. They are able to play this out because they find themselves so unfettered. The solution sought is often a child's complete freedom from trouble— supervening elders, peers, situations, objects, virtually anything at all that is likely to come in the way of their enjoyment of utmost freedom in a world they have made all theirs. As a matter of fact, children do not *need* any supervision while they are playing.[14] Some children resent invigilation. Each of their unwatched actions has the format of a play: the police-thief, the hunter-hunted games; locked-up victim being freed after combat; entrance and exit and car-chase through labyrinthine ways and material quagmire.... What children do not want is parental solicitation, attention, or do-goodery. Orhan Pamuk tells us how such freedom is exhilarating even after so many adult years. "Like all children," recalls Pamuk fondly, "I liked to play make-believe, to put myself in someone else's place and imagine dream worlds in which I was a soldier, a famous soccer player, or a great hero. [...] The structural games of the novel I am composing add a further child-like joy to the pleasure I derive from writings" (70).

In one very interesting incident of recent years I observed a tiny girl, all of 5 or 6, mono-acting. Asked what she was trying to do, she told me that her house was on fire and she was trying to tell this to her very deaf grandmother. I hugged this small Grace Paley and shed all my theories of cognitive mapping. (But who knows? She might well be our Zohra Sehgal.)

36 It is quite sensible that even in the most technologically advanced societies, well-educated parents continue to read to or tell children those tales they had first heard. Folk-/fairy-tales have the unique advantage of not asking too much of their listeners. First, meanings are not an issue. What meaning the child makes of a story we can never tell. No child ever stood tiptoe over the kerb of its deep psychological well to see what lies beneath the rubbish moss and silted shrubbery. But it wants the same story told over and over again. Perhaps this is how a child begins to address *character*— especially in the sense of what one takes another person to *be*— when it listens to the repetition that endears the story and the one who tells it. "The story of Cinderella appeals to the child who feels itself left out," reasons J. A. Hadfield, "and what child," he asks, "does not at some time? Jack the Giant-Killer appeals to a child's desire to be strong as a corrective to its own present helplessness. Little Red Riding Hood brings him face to face with the problem of a mother or nurse who at one time appears kindly but, like the kindly grandmother, may turn into the angry wolf at any moment. They want these stories over and over again so as to get the problems clear by imagining similar situations and so work towards a solution" (124). Hadfield proceeds to argue that the child perfects in time a method to negotiate life's complicated problems by processing myths and parables until it graduates into a dreamer, but we must also assume that its young mind gains enough practical wisdom to distinguish between external sources of danger (such as kidnappers, bogeys who lure children and eat them, etc.) and those that pose threat from within domestic space (such vile presences as domineering siblings and elders of the family). Stories, in short, prepare children to be able and efficient in managing crisis.

Why Snow White took the bold step to go into a stranger's cabin, all alone and uninvited, and what urgency prompted her to tidy-up that space are questions I have never heard answered. When we are grown up enough to learn that the sins are basically *seven*, do we immediately connect that to the dwarfs of this tale ? That we negotiate far more complex problems in real life does not, however, diminish the first moral tables of multiplication

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and division that we learn from the folks and fairies. The surest guide in all this is none other than Eudora Welty whose "Some Notes on Time in Fiction" is still a classic in its genre:

> Only the nursery fairy tale is not answerable to time, and time has no effect upon it; time winds up like a toy, and toy it is: when set to "Once upon a time" it spins till it runs down at "Happily ever after." [Fairy tales] follow rules of their own.... Their fairy perfection forbids the existence of choices, and the telling always has to be the same. Their listener is the child, whose gratification comes of the fairy tale's having no suspense. The tale is about wishes, and thus grants a wish itself. (164).

37 Those of us who have wondered why children want the same story told again and again, and want it told exactly the same way, probably have not considered the fact that they do not quite appreciate the suspense that we create the first time we tell them an interesting story. As earnest listeners, all details and turns of events told engagingly are grist, if anything, to their suspense mill. It may not be feasible to record how children process stories involving unusual endings and prolonged suspense, but it is safe to assume that they begin to train themselves as story-tellers who know how to experiment with alternative-endings, and so build and sustain suspense on their own.

Perhaps the modern audience for stories is divided into two camps: those who prefer having stories told them by others, and those who would rather tell stories on/ of their own. Societies where more stories reach listeners/readers by the print- or electronic-media love stories told them by others. We had better not ask them what books they would choose to be marooned with. They are sure to be unsure of the choice— being marooned, or the books. Insofar as the other kind of society survives marginally, the tale takes many forms— rumour, gossip, messages, notes, and letters. The live voice still commands genuine respect and authentic appeal. In a very thoughtful discussion of the story, its making and re-making in the minds of readers, R. A. Sharpe comments: "We want to be told stories and to be told a story is not the same as telling one ourselves. ... Most societies prize those who tell stories well. ... I am pretty convinced that the telling of stories to children serves an important moral and educational need. But we do not grow out of it. Indeed the cliché seems to be true that as one gets older, the interest in biographies develops and here, again, we want to know how the story ends. The point is that we want to be told stories by others. Making them up is not the same" (417).

That children, on their own, discover the value of stories in educating themselves, in being in a world of differences (the rich

and the poor, male and female, white and black, the country and the city, school and home ...) is well known. They realize that stories are their best bet in understanding *relations* in a large and disparate world of differences and conflicts. No wonder we still fall back on narratives as our most cost-effective and rewarding pedagogical resources in enabling children relate to the realities and face the challenges of their world. From proverbs and riddles to folk tales and fairy tales, sound pedagogical practices always rely on stories to help children flesh out their early experiences involving space, time, motion, and other more complicated systems they must cope with in their growth. Such early lessons furthermore have a life-long use for them— stories tell them how to learn from the past without becoming entrapped in it.

38 Of all the informed and misinformed scholarship on Children's Literature, the one piece I look for listed in bibliographies (in vain) is the following by one of the greatest writers for children, Isaac Bashevis Singer. Apart from the fact that Singer is at his candid best and unsparing in ridiculing scholarly pretentions, his reasons will immediately appeal as genuine to anyone who has ever told a story to children. Further, I have known no Nobel Laureate to speak his/her mind to a Stockholm audience as openly as Singer. Children hate cant, and so must those who claim children to be their main readers. Here's Singer:

Why I Write for Children

There are five hundred reasons why I began to write for children, but to save time I will mention only ten of them.

1. Children read books, not reviews. They don't give a hoot about the critics.
2. Children don't read to find their identity.
3. They don't read to free themselves of guilt, to quench their thirst for rebellion, or to get rid of alienation.
4. They have no use for psychology.
5. They detest sociology.
6. They don't try to understand Kafka or *Finnegan's Wake*.
7. They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff.
8. They love interesting stories, not commentaries, guides, or footnotes.
9. When a book is boring, they yawn openly, without any shame or fear of authority.
10. They don't expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity. Young as they are, they know that is not in his power. Only the adults have such childish illusions. (Singer)

The more we know about the insanity of the world Singer portrays in his fiction, the more we begin to see why more and more stories must be told, and why those stories had better be

sane. For our stories, like the language in which we tell them, cannot be better or worse than us, their makers. A good story, like the good world we hope to make, is our way, our light, our life. Christ's parables are *illustrative* only in this plain sense.

39 At frontiers and borders stories abound. They are far too many to recollect in tranquillity if we have crossed so many borders in our otherwise uninteresting lives. We do not know enough of ourselves at the crossing. We may not even know that it is borders we are crossing. Ignorance bangs its head almost when we have reached a doorway. Initiation stories are best forgotten when they are ours. If we recognize the genre at all, it is because they are *stories*, nothing at all about us or of ours.

One way of describing very large subjects like cosmology, theology, history, and science is to tell them as stories. Always it is comforting to have a story told about things we don't quite understand by our ordinary reason or logic— like *inflation* in our time or *ocean currents* during the early stages of our civilization. The weather lore is a specialty, much like it is today for all the meteorological advances we have made. Our Met officials are no more knowledgeable about weather than the Village Headman whose coherent stories of wind and rain had at least some poetry in them. Stories are nevertheless comforting because we understand nature and life as cyclical. Excessive joy or debilitating grief has no place when life or death occurs. We understand continuum as stories that always begin when they end.

"Stories are the tracks we leave," ends a superb meditation on the American Frontier by a story-teller whose knack for mixing stories with critical commentary is as brilliant as his sour and sullen diasporic tales. Salman Rushdie's "Step Across This Line" brims with pride at the frontiers human lives have crossed and the advances made but cautions nevertheless against the great American sin of believing itself to be the world's authority on the world. Sovereign states respect and defend human rights and democratic privileges throughout the world. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Yale offered Rushdie the best platform for saying this in 2002. To a predominantly American audience he spoke about the great Frontier Thesis. Read correctly, he assured

the Americans, the Thesis wouldn't quite endorse American expansionism and military intervention that force the rest of the world to see all evil as non-American and essentially bred elsewhere. Rushdie now adverts to the *truth* of all Frontier myths: "The American frontier affected to despise words, but it was a landscape built of words. And it's gone now, but the words remain. Animals, as they pass through landscape, leave their tracks behind. Stories are the tracks we leave"(418–419).

It takes a while before we realize that Rushdie's aphorism carries more philological load than a largely monolingual Yale audience would know. Rushdie has just been alluding to the Wild West fiction and films where, he says, "actions spoke louder than words" (418). The hunters and the hunted have different stories to tell, but that is not quite the philological point. Never, in a parodic salute to D. H. Lawrence, trust the trailer, trust the trail. *Mārg(a)* is the "mark" the beast leaves behind its course. The heavy hooves dragging a bullet-spangled body mark a trail a hunter pursues in the forest. The Sanskrit *mārga* derives from *mṛg*, "to hunt." From Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* to the Hollywood westerns (Sheriff Kane, Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid...) the allusive tracks extend to cover all stories of adventure, mystery, and romance.

40 Of stories we have come to expect an impossible pleasure. I have wondered to myself whether this has anything to do with how we understand 'story' as it seems to strike our contemporaries. Is the *postmodern* a story, or is it a description of a kind or mode of telling stories that obtains these days? Since on a given day, we are subjected more to regimes of advertising persuasion and canvassing overkill than our self-directed actions and reactions, we end up processing *information*, always falling short of the specialized knowledge that we urgently need, or skills we seek to acquire, to cope with such information. The stories we chance to read or hear assume that we have such information. It is hardly surprising that some samples of the *postmodern* read like stories written to end all telling. Brooks Landon has a helpful gloss on this phenomenon which he seems to completely approve: "The hypertextual novel urges us to check things out— not through the modernist gambit of allusion, not through the postmodernist gambit of quotation, but through the simple suggestion that the more we read around their texts, the more complete our experience of their texts will be. Information assumes huge importance in hypertextual novels not as a commodity, but as the core of new processes.... In a strong sense postmodern culture has technologized perception itself...". The stories of information are best read with the information the electronic culture proffers. Stories, in other words, also tell us how to process them in our new media-rich environs.

Very rarely do we have at hand, however, an example like the following by David Antin, himself a postmodernist *par excellence*, but who, to my mind, is not unmindfully so because he has always considered his writing in a Borgesian-ironic light. Few writers of his persuasion could match the acuity of his perceptions about human speech and English talk-rhythms. In his splendid talk-poems we often hear stories *erupting* rather than someone telling them. The following is an anecdote Antin narrates in the course of an interview he gave Charles Bernstein:

> A few years ago Alan Golding invited me to talk at a conference on postmodernism at the University of Louisville. I was scheduled to speak later in the day, but I wanted to hear some of the other speakers to get a feel for the way they engaged the topic. My plane was delayed in Atlanta because of snow, but I got there in time to hear the first speaker. He had a nice attentive crowd of what I took to be mainly young literature professors, and what he seemed to be doing was comparing Franz Fanon's image of the racial outsider in the white European empire with Homi Bhabha's vision of the racial and cultural migrant in its ruins. But he never bothered describe or compare anything. Almost all the energy of the talk was spent invoking the spiritual presence of absent but terribly potent critical beings through a gracefully elliptical incantation of their magic words "hegemony," "subaltern," "archive," "panopticon," "rhizome...." Whenever the speaker uttered one of these words, a shiver of pleasure went through the room, and those who shivered knew they were true members of the expert audience to whom this talk was directed. But it seemed that the talk's only purpose was to celebrate the existence of the group it was designed to animate. In the afternoon I gave a talk about the difficulty of buying a mattress.

While we can very well see why Antin tries hard to distance himself from a predominantly postcolonial audience by choosing to "talk about the difficulty of buying a mattress," we do not quite see how his topic will be of no material interest to that audience. Be that as it may, his point is worth attention. Even the most classic story has a natural register which listeners are quick to recognize. The 'postmodern' is perhaps another story, but to say that it is *no* story is rather untenable given that Antin has quite successfully heard it, albeit with a big frown. Antin, surely is right to believe that "talk" has its register— a plain, simple, 'vernacular,' dimension to it. We ignore it at our peril. While we may not quite use the talk of a talk-show host(ess), our stories are better served as "talk" rather than jargon-laden discourse.

41 Care/Cure. One certainly is the other, when it is a story. No one tells a story when one couldn't care less, especially, to one who couldn't care less. Carefully told stories are the most caring among human creations. No wonder, stories are a time-honoured salvific in all cultures. After recalling the acts of colonial oppression and the imperial destruction of African human and material resources, Achebe tells us why he is in the business of story-telling. "Despite the significant changes that have taken place in the last four or five decades, the wound of the centuries is still a long way from healing. And I believe that the curative power of stories can move the process forward" (2001: 83). In short, if the Europeans care, surely, there could be some cure. Rather than cursing the oppressor to no end, or giving in to a *ressentiment* that leaves no room for a positive outlook, Derek Walcott has consistently believed in the new Antillean stories of art and artists. Care is not incidental to the metaphoric cure that he proposes in a passage like this:

> Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asian fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. (28)

Postcolonial stories had better cite this passage as their epigraph, for the Antillean making is the *remaking* of stories from those fragmented memories. They are no longer troubling when care touches them. St. Augustine's confessions and Freud's talking cure are too well-known to merit detailed attention here but it is

important to note that certain forms of mental illness are more oriented towards story-telling than others where the patient resists all telling and tellers. Not everyone can induce, extract, or elicit narratives from tongue-tied and melancholic people. Such people are the opposite of those who sensibly believe that a story is the shortest distance between one's self and truth. It is pretty unclear how Jacques Lacan would proceed when a hapless victim of dementia, for example, resists all allurements to a fruitful narrative collaboration; how one must proceed when the "only single intermediary [of psychoanalysis], the patient's Word," (9) fails.

In a world in which more and more *institutions* for care (day-care schools and crèches, old-age homes, trauma-care clinics ...) proliferate and the needy feel less and less cared for, a *self* is a story— only to the extent, that is, it substantiates itself. Rather than being, or validating, a reality of which it is a part, a *self* must begin a story which will successfully endorse a reality. The care of one's self, simply, is the story it is able to sustain. If I have somehow made this clear, let me turn to the following passage from Roy Schafer for a clearer elaboration:

> We are forever telling stories about ourselves. In telling these self-stories *to others* we may, for most purposes, be said to be performing straightforward narrative actions. In saying that we also tell them *to ourselves*, however, we are enclosing one story within another. This is the story that there is a self to tell something to, a someone else serving as audience who is oneself or one's self. When the stories we tell others about ourselves concern these other selves of ours, when we say for example "I am not master of myself," we are again enclosing one story within another. On this view, the self is a telling. From time to time, and from person to person, this telling varies in the degree to which it is unified, stable, and acceptable to informed observers as reliable and valid.

42 All rituals, ceremonies, festivals, calendrical events and seasonal observances of religious and secular significance are at bottom stories. Strangers are often told why and how a community observes a given day, what conduct during observances is expected of its members, and for how long. One of the most misunderstood concepts among the British, according to Stuart Hall, is *heritage*. Hall laments that for most people in Britain, heritage comprises what exists already, things conserved and preserved, objects and artefacts collected and showcased in museums, galleries, archaeological sites, etc. rather than what might be evolving and becoming part of a culture. Hall proposes that "the Heritage [is] a discursive practice. It is one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory. Just as individuals and families construct their identities in part by 'storying' the various random incidents and contingent turning points of their lives into a single, coherent narrative, so nations construct identities by selectively binding their chosen high points and memorable achievements into an unfolding 'national story.' This story is what is called 'tradition' (74).

Writing on the goddess cult in South India, A. K. Ramanujan details the making of another common tradition, especially of village deities. Stories honour this tradition of some very ordinary women, who were once poor and wronged by men. "Such goddesses do not descend from heaven," observes Ramanujan; "they are not incarnations, *avtars* or 'descents.' They are human beings, not consecrated, but desecrated, who in fury become goddesses. Their stories are stories of the ascent of a human being to divinity, even a demonic divinity" (14). The larger pattern of this folklore is easily discerned in the individual stories of this cult that basically serve the purpose of commemoration. Wrongs cannot be righted but the stories of those wronged women live on. We cannot, we shall never, forget them. Those who donate iconic or miniature organs to the deity in gold or silver are praying

metonymically. That story, presumably, is understood by the deity. (That is, if you are seeking your lord's blessing for the restitution of a diseased leg or arm, the story of its loss is supposed to be recalled, and its sinful commission or omission forgiven.) There are any number of stories related to mutilated and transplanted organs that carry forward memories in their new habitat. On some BBC programme I watched some months ago, I heard an American scientist recount how a little girl who received the heart of a murder victim couldn't help narrating the circumstances of her donor's death. Apparently she even 'knew' the murderer. Do stories provide admissible forensic evidence?

The ritually enacted annual ceremonies and sacred events help social memory.[15] They are the stories we live by. If a ritual's validity and authenticity is its performative repetition, a story's currency is in its wide circulation. Think of Christmas or Ramadan or Diwali without its public performances and prayers, each telling and thereby recreating stories. In each commemorative event, we see a modern society going back gladly into a primitive mode of celebration or revelry, often conducted in a primitively performative idiom most appropriate for it. This dimension of the story's relevance to modern society is implicit when Paul Connerton discusses the authority of the sacred language of religions in safeguarding social memory:

> In preliterate as in literate societies[,] sacred languages contain an archaic component, whether in the form of a totally different language or whether in the partial preservation of another idiom; and this archaic component remains so long as rites refer back to a period of revelation.... What matters is that rites must manifest the gift of tongues. (67)

What ceremonies and rituals have done to save stories from forgetfulness might seem negligible compared to what the electric and electronic technologies after Gütenberg have done to the story worlds of our time. And yet, only story-tellers grieve occasionally, as Ozick does below, that the new technologies

completely blot out some stories of genealogy and communal narrativity:

> The telephone was particularly welcome— not so much was lost that ought not to have been lost in the omission of letters agreeing to meet the 8:42 on Tuesday night on the east platform. Since then, the telephone has abetted more serious losses: exchanges between artists and thinkers; documents of family and business relations; quarrels and cabals among politicians; everything that in the past tended to be preserved for biographers and cultural historians. The advent of the computer used as word processor similarly points toward the wiping out of any *progressive* record of thought; the grain of a life can lie in the illumination of a crossed-out word. (166–167).

43 "All stories," reminds Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, "are haunted by the ghosts of the stories they might have been" (116). We believe somehow that stories are a self-commemorating art, not simply because they mostly come to us unbidden, in the most needed and appropriate contexts, but we do recognize in their repetition and return, the annual rituals that remember the dead. Such rituals, at a height of thought, are not merely commemorative but *interpretive*. What do they interpret? They interpret our memory alongside the dead whose memories they are. If we have no stories at all of the dear departed, we seem to have little else to recall, the reason that we long to (and sometimes *do*) hear their voices. For we recall and recognize not so much the faces of our long-dead kin, but their *voices*. "And," as T. S. Eliot so memorably put it in "Little Gidding," our most treasured stories are more than prayer commonly understood, but "what the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead" (215). By some strange logic of metaphor, narrative memory is often spectral and spectatorial, as when J. Hillis Miller recalls for us a passage from the *Odyssey* which Plato cites in the *Protagoras* and remarks that "the fundamental poetic power" consists of "the poet's power to bring back the dead and endow them with faces and voices within his language.... Storytelling, oral or written, depends on the power to create persons out of modulated sounds in air or black marks on the page" (71– 72).

This, indeed, is Miller' way of saying what Eliot had no speech for, when living, but what he could tell Miller (and us), being dead. All stories upon which we write, and those we harness as illustrative material, bring the dead alive for the nonce. Miller insists however that prosopopoeia is hardly "the ascription of a voice or a face to the absent, the inanimate or the dead" (57), but a story-teller poet (Homer, Dante, Eliot, Pound, Walcott, Heaney ...) endeavouring to make them speak to us. For, as Miller puts it, "the power to speak for the dead, who have no voice of their own" belongs to the poet. "Without prosopopoeia," he adds, "no poetry, no narrative, no literature" (72).

We tell stories because we want our dead to speak to us. Our stories are ultimately theirs; we now hear them told by ourselves. We wish those we hear were live voices. In some way, as Auden wished for Yeats: "By mourning tongues/ The death of the poet was kept from his poems." In stories we often seem to hear voices other than the direct voice that holds our keen immediate attention. This uncanny, the sense of which most of us have perhaps lost because of our inattentiveness or indifference, is a very telling/echoic effect. The teller seems to be stereologic rather than monologic while talking about events; characters; or mimicking their voices, and acting out dialogues; speaking *sotto voce*, etc. This haunting helps us recognize the voices in the story although we haven't heard them before. In bringing back the dead to us in the stories, we sense the doubling that characterizes all narratives, a doubling that cannot but remind us of *our* death in the thought of the dead that *are*, now, our stories.

Somewhat similar ambivalence informs our varied responses to those minor if marginal genres of the story whose tellers are absent, invisible, anonymous, therefore 'dead' for all practical purposes. Folklorists are apt to call them "static genres" in order to distinguish them from those dynamic genres where performances essentially are live. *Spectral* genres would suit them better because, "Numbered among these [stories], "according to Roger D. Abrahams, "are such expressions as autograph-album rhymes, 'latrinalia' and graffiti, chain letters, epitaphs, book inscriptions and warnings, and epigrammatic printed signs (such as those found in barrooms and restaurants" (211). They circulate much the same way as other folkloric material do in public domain,[16] but sometimes the art of the anonymous tombstone versifier might impress us more than the shocking stories of the documentary camcorder-realists of the television channels. Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* has not received the attention of radical narratologists that it deserves. The Spoon River dead have neither axes to grind nor hatchets to bury when they tell their stories.[17] Masters succeeds in showing us how most of the

marginal dead in this village community have begun to communicate more freely through their fascinating riddles in spectral voices than when they seemed to speak in their real lives. How hospitable to such ghosts does Spoon River become in the poet's haunted lyrics. It is upon these dark secrets of the heart that Masters' uncanny casts its light. Our real stories begin perhaps when we are all gone.

Why Stories? Why, indeed?

What has, and what has not, delivered the goods among the stories we know (and respect as stories) may be debatable but when we realize that this strange beast is no longer what it used to be in the classical sense; that in its extended or mutated forms it proliferates, even disperses, the time has come, finally, to examine the metaphors of Story.[18] As its range widens, and for each kind of story a name sticks in order to distinguish its use from its cousin's or next-door neighbour's, we are not quite sure that their names equal all their functions or uses: epic, ballad, fable, tale, yarn; anecdote, episode, gossip, rumour, scandal, news, libel; short story, novella, and the novel; entries in journal, diary, logbook; annals, legend, saga, chronicle, history; epistle, *apologia, testimonio, confessio*; abstract, blurb, synoptic account; databank, FIR, case-diary, news, report, notes/jottings on file; tabloid feature, imaginary description, the bare bones of a 'happening'; blog, twitter-feed; an advertisement, a narrative sequence connecting conceptual dots; the sermon and such religious discourse; statistical / barcoded data on a commercial product; or even a bare list interpreted sequentially according to one's fancy; *addenda, corrigenda*.... Anyone interested in prolonging this speculation will certainly find amazingly instant and encouraging support in William Gass who earnestly believes that the world has a lot of room still for stories and wonders where all the tellers have gone. Not only does Gass write such brilliant stories himself but writes such stuff that might pass easily for fiction, should our attention flag. "There are even scripts," begins a long list of would-be stories: "weddings, for instance, all our ceremonies, rituals, holidays, outings, including our habits too, the way and when and if we shine our shoes, the route to work, the menu of a meal..., the contents of a book, the schedules of teams, the hierarchy of classes in a school, seniorities at work, the clock and calendar, appointment book, magazine subscription, ..." (26). And so on, until we realize that none of this is *yet* a story but someone at least half as resourceful as Gass could make one on demand. Or anyone can, and perhaps meet Gass's

approval. Rather than stories, are they not stories *of* a Story? [19] Arguably at least, they are. They can cover a multitude of sins. For, the one who ploughs a lonely furrow knows his/her loneliness but the furrow knows it has been there a hundred times before in other company. The *lonely* of story-furrows is a transferred epithet.[20]

It is a matter of common observation that words clothing concepts "slip, slide, and perish" in daily use. Semantics, like couture, is the big business it is because you could mean and yet *not* mean, depending on who your listeners are. You could eat your words and have them too. This slip-slide phenomenon is attributed by most philosophers to the metaphoricity of language, a very generous view that treats all words as *nodes* of meaning, crossroads of sense, every time someone uses them. "Transference from one sphere to another," observes Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* , "not only has a logical function; it corresponds to the fundamental metaphoricity of language" (431). The proliferation of stories, in other words, is a sure sign that a story is, or tends always to be, a metaphor of itself.

It may well be that human beings are perhaps seeking new metaphors for their telling. (Is not parable, at bottom, a metaphor? And *that* story is as old as the Buddha, or at least, the same age as Jesus Christ. Did Ramakrishna Paramhamsa evolve the parabolic pedagogy with no respect to the *Bible*?) That, in a way, explains the relative tedium, even the despair, of telling— not just stories, but anything at all. When was the last time we heard a story we hadn't quite heard before? Surely, this indeed makes modern journalism and media-work one of the most heroic professions in history? If we cannot quite remember those crucial *where* and *when* details, the media will persuade us to believe that what we had heard or seen thus far wasn't *quite* a story, but the one *here*, the one *now*, is the real story. Stories are not *new*; they never were. Nor are they about experiences we have never had or about characters we haven't met or noticed before, etc. Stories, in short,

are just about themselves. Only that we haven't quite noticed the metaphoricity about them. All said (and not yet done), we agree that India's Corruption is a story. A big story, but a pity that it is *only* a story, and is likely to remain one.

Here, then, do we really begin to ponder *Why Stories?* Stories encourage us to think, and think *differently*, about them. *This* story cannot be new, unless we think of it as engendering metaphors of itself. In "White Mythology," Jacques Derrida reminds us that every metaphor is caught in an interpretive circularity— that is to say, we cannot talk about metaphor except by way of another metaphor. That seems to be the case with stories as well; stories are metaphors of what they are. Let us think of them, as Derrida prompts us to do, as our lodging stations, homes for the nonce, rather than the permanent settlements which they long for but never seem to reach. Tropes, like the human beings who make them, become more efficient and effective the longer they defy regimented habitation and stable points of reference. If *trope* is turn (movement), it is toward this metaphoric home that we move without any certainty of arrival. As long as we are in transit, we are lodged, in Derrida's view, in:

> metaphor itself; it is a metaphor for metaphor: expropriation, being-away-from-home, but still in a home, away from home but in someone's home, a place of self-recovery, self-recognition, self-mustering, self-resemblance: it is outside itself— it is itself. This is philosophical metaphor as a detour in (or in view of) the reappropriation, the second coming, the self-presence.... The use of a metaphor to convey the "idea" of metaphor— this is what prohibits definition, but yet metaphorically assigns a stopping place, a limit, and fixed point: the metaphor-home. (55)

Before this thinking gets any more convoluted, let me suggest that in reading/listening to stories, we must put away our literalisms. Unbeknownst to ourselves, we unlearn to read a story

literally. For we are surely reading only the letters when we ask whether there are/were fairies and witches and goblins in our real world, or who has really seen them last and where, etc. We ought, in other words, to be perfectly normal and unsurprised if we chance to hear someone say that they saw Eternity the other night and not ask, "*Really?*" When we enter the metaphorical precincts unawares, we know how (and from where) to call up appropriate mental images naturally. The story casts it spell on us even before we quite realize this and as long as we remain under its spell. Of course with the too literal-minded, this unawareness may not be very easy; there is no 'story' for such people. That is to say, the most successful stories are those whose metaphors we appreciate without the least awareness that they are indeed metaphors. "They open a door on Other Time," as J. R. R. Tolkien remarks in his celebrated essay on fairy stories, "and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe." (Let's recall Berger's hypothetical man leaving a hypothetical door open, or the man who *had* left the door open to make, as Berger remarks, the possibility a promise.) We shall now open further doors of metaphor — of course with no unrealistic expectation that the skies would clear or the loaves would multiply— in order to see how some stories create a different sort of illusion for us. In reading them, we shall seek further answers for *Why Stories?*

Susan Sontag's "Description (of a Description)" is a clear case of dereliction, if you like, of a story-teller's duty. Sontag has her reasons for what she thinks she is doing, and we might guess fairly accurately where such ideas of the world and of the story-teller who lives in it come from. For starters, I shall only mention that her introduction to *A Barthes Reader* is some help in figuring out much of her narrative logic, such as it is, that might appear here. Since "Description (of a Description)" is rather inaccessible

to readers and underrepresented in standard Sontag bibliographies generally,[21] let us have the opening passages of this text at hand before we begin to look more closely at her motive and method in writing something like this:

> *One day recently at eleven o'clock in the morning* a delaying phrase. Memorabilia are things worth remembering, not things remembered. You can forget everything and then it all comes back. Better a scrupulous inexactitude. I give the time (eleven, morning) but not the village. (New England?). Sketch, if you please, a genre picture. Tavern, church. Cowbells, churchbells. My insomnia, my bad dreams: it was already late for me. I had left my pretty, low-ceilinged room, a casing for neurasthenic privacy, and was already on the street, near the post office from where I'd mailed you so many abject letters. Under a tangerine winter sun and shredded clouds. On my way.
>
> *a man suddenly collapsed right in front of me* scissoring my splendid ribbon of footwork. Someone unknown to me: mesomorph in a blue suit. There were few people on the street, and I just happened to be there— walking, stalling behind him. He lay by the curb, his right cheek on the icy pavement. Spoiling the genre picture: thatched roofs, an inch of snow on the road.
>
> *as if struck by lightning* which will convey the idea that it was sudden (nothing had prepared me for this drama) and the cause was not evident. No one brained him with a tomahawk. There was no pistol shot. I had nothing to do with this calamity.
>
> *and all the women in the vicinity screamed aloud;* it was hardly a common sight to see someone respectably dressed keel over. The respectable stay vertical. The extravagance of village weather, the staidness of village manners. But because this is not a modern story, people were not indifferent. Switzerland, or the nineteenth century? Women were surprised, appalled, frightened. Who? The hunchbacked girl at the newspaper stand wearing a farmer's black leather cap with snapped-up flaps that

come down over the ears, for instance. Others? Others, too. Not only women, of course. But no one did anything. My reaction was different.

I myself raised him to his feet the heavy body he had not fainted actually perhaps he had just yielded to the call of the ground. I grappled with his weight in my arms, I felt his body expanding. He was much older than myself, time had fallen in on him. Not a predator but someone in the process of perishing. His life-size gravitational pull, his death-size inertness. I remember his spasmodic breathing.

and attended to him I brushed off his coat and set his glasses back on his narrow intelligent gray face thus I brought him back from the brink. He was hatless and I dusted off the crown of his head. An act of intimacy. From him I heard a queer mumble of noises

until he had recovered his speech— for it was not until he could talk that I knew he was well enough to go on. He began to talk. He told me his name was Ralph, and that he had been let out of prison three weeks ago; that his wife had left him; that he had many enemies. I let his words chew into my heart. You can imagine…if you care to. As he talked, his face darkened, stained with dread. He must have wanted from me a little animal reciprocity. (141–142)

It is tempting to go on with this current, slowly gathering some narrative momentum despite a little dilatory hold-up here and some pensive deflections there. We are sure that there is some compelling 'story' close at hand but we also sense an equally compelling force that withholds it. We cannot ignore Sontag's meticulous title: "Description (of a Description)"—we shall expect the narrative to be nothing more than a description for now, tentatively folded within another description, basically of details that would swell a story in time. In a neat division of narrative labour, as it were, the external and the internal are assigned voices. It would appear that the voices from within and without

'run' apace, while the presiding consciousness (if there indeed be any such!) of the story-teller is off-duty. Perhaps our initial reactions are guided by a sense of "throwntogetherness," a sudden realization that a public place that the narrator seems to have 'known' for quite some time had suddenly turned unfamiliar and inhospitable when the man collapses in front of her as though soliciting immediate attention and care. The whole "description" and the one enfolded there seek to steady her reactive and performing selves on the one hand and the fallen man on the other, typographically suggested by the *italic* and the roman passages— visually 'prone' and 'straight-up' words/ phrases that meander through reflections on space and spacing. Doreen Massey has coined a term, "throwntogetherness," for a more politically sensitive reconceptualization of urban space, a condition that necessitates a renegotiation of even the most familiar places in our neighbourhood. "Reconceptualising place in this way puts on the agenda a different set of political questions," argues Massey. "In sharp contrast to the view of place as settled and pre-given, with a coherence only to be disturbed by 'external' forces, places...pose a challenge. They implicate us, perforce, in the lives of human others..." (141). Massey's "throwntogetherness" couldn't have sought a more striking illustration than in the Sontag scenario where the two strangers 'get to know each other' on the road.

Before we feel tempted to be too judgemental about the peculiar way of 'getting to know each other, let's recall Zygmunt Bauman's extraordinarily perceptive remark about the way we have reconfigured *proximity* and *approximity* (roughly, the near and the far) ever since the electronically channelled audio-visual cultures have impacted our everyday experiences. When we live mostly in this newly constituted virtual geography, argues Bauman, *our* worlds are felt to be safer and nearer than those ever-tumultuous and politically turbulent, even hopelessly violent, places where "things happen which one cannot anticipate and comprehend and would not know how to react to once they

occurred: a space containing things one knows little about, from which one does not expect much, and regarding which one does not feel obliged to care" (13). Except this last phrase, "not obliged to care," Bauman has captured the Sontag picture almost faithfully. What Bauman cannot anticipate in his social text is the possibility of a self in quandary over the sudden collapse of the near and the far "One day ...at eleven o'clock in the morning..." on your way to some urgent business. That explains her need to place one description within another to show when distances suddenly give way to proximities, unwanted if uncalled for, two worlds impinging on each other— the one we 'know' and the other we know through mediation; the 'known real' and the 'virtual real,' if you like. Would they meet now as strangers or acquaintances?

Are they complete strangers to each other? Hardly so, if we recall that at least at one juncture, the *roman* is echoed in the *italic*: "*all possible drives would have had time to imagine the experience* drives? And to be prepared. Forewarned..." (142). We cannot help feeling therefore that we have indeed met these 'strangers' elsewhere— are they the Baudelairean/ Benjaminian *flâneur* reborn in Sontag as twins? There seems to be an unspoken alliance between old and new sensibilities when they seem to *co-respond*. When the voices overlap (or 'interlap'?) however we seek alternative measures to disengage ourselves from the complexity that this narrative enforces on us and are pleased to discover that the two accounts can after all be tracked separately and distinctly if we respect the italic-roman signals. *One day recently at eleven o'clock in the morning a man suddenly collapsed right in front of me as if struck by a lightning and all the women in the vicinity screamed aloud; I myself raised him to his feet and attended to him until he had recovered his speech—*. This is good enough as description but run beside its contrastive other, which is more elaborate and cautious, self-conscious and nuanced, the account in italics is rather colourless and journalistic. Sontag might well have taught a whole new generation of postmodern tellers a thing or two about multiple, laterally developing, storylines which they believe originated with classic videogame structures.[22]

As we get used to the textually misaligned oddity of "Description (of a Description)," we begin to realize that neither description is merely descriptive but perhaps *speculative* to a fault. This, indeed, is the metaphor Sontag makes of her 'story,' if that is what we might quite provisionally call this text. Beyond the mandatory information and data ("eleven o'clock in the morning," "the time... the village," "my pretty, low-ceilinged room," "mesomorph in a blue suit," "by the curb," the surprised women, the hunchbacked girl, Ralph, his darkened face...) there is enough data for anyone to get going if the 'story' were indeed that, or *only* that. That there certainly is more to all this fiddle is apparent as the narrative closes. Here are the concluding paragraphs of "Description...":

> *What then are our experiences?* That which befalls us, that for which we are not prepared. My campaign of enlightened selfishness: sometimes I manage to snatch composure from my insignificant terrors. Every event has a little label on it. Which says: And to think that this, too, is within the realm of the possible.
>
> *Much more* there is always more we are always trying to prepare ourselves. How to face the others without fear and weakness.
>
> *that which we put into them than* I knew you did not love me and could never make me happy but I could not relinquish my love for you my idyllic self
>
> *that which they already contain!* No reason to react at all one could just keep on walking but I wanted to show I was strong and competent. No big time gestures. Out of lack of pride I behaved with pride I know I made many mistakes with you
>
> *Or must we go so far as to say that* Being with you is like living with a bomb that keeps on ticking. I am always starting up, straining to hear a change in the sound, that slight hesitation, the dip in the rhythm before the wretched thing goes off

in themselves the experiences, if one can call them that, or the sense of loss. Tick tock. Perhaps it won't go off. I can get used to moving slowly.

they contain nothing? There is nothing now. I am not pining away. But one can forget everything and then it all comes back, enhanced with fantasies of violence.

To experiment is to invent?—My watchful solitariness. An urban Robinson Crusoe, I have told this story many times. (143)

Beyond the usual descriptive claptrap, what can readers legitimately expect in an ordinary story? Serious readers are certainly entitled to certain types of information while navigating the fictional seas but the claptrap remains just that if it is not suggestive enough by itself, or by virtue of its circumstantial placement. Why should they be told by someone who begins a story, for example, that "Memorabilia are things worth remembering, not things remembered"? Again, why caveats such as: "But because this is not a modern story, people were not indifferent. Switzerland, or the nineteenth century?"... etc. There is plenty here of the kind that teases (but delivers little) by way of information, imagery, incipient turns and asides, false starts and self-reflexiveness. Readers therefore are apt to wonder whether a point was missed on purpose, or the teller hardly realized when she had missed a narrative beat. If, again, they chance to remember Barthes's "Deliberation," the concluding piece in *A Barthes Reader* edited by Sontag, they will take "Description..." to be the sort of writing Barthes would have sneered at, the sort of writing where the artist's pose stands exposed so embarrassingly. "Description..." suffers from what Barthes calls "this *diary disease*" (479, italics in the original) even to the extent of Barthesian mannerisms of style and address infecting it right from its opening gambit. Here's a sample from Barthes:

> Very soon, continuing my reperusal, I get tired of these verbless sentences ("Sleepless night. And the third in a row," etc.) or sentences whose verb is carelessly condensed ("Passed two girls in the Place St-S.")—and try as I will to re-establish the propriety of a complete form ("I passed ..." "I spent a sleepless night"), the matrix of any journal, i.e., the reduction of the verb, persists in my ear and exasperates me like a refrain. (480)

Whether we are persuaded to read "Description..." as entries in a journal or not, it wouldn't take us long to realize that *this* metaphor of the story works quite well when a story-teller lays bare all her workshop material before us. This is surely not about *one* story or how to tell it when she confides in us that "Experiences," even of the most quotidian variety, are *Much more that which we put into them than that which they already contain!...Or must we go so far as to say that in themselves they contain nothing? To experience is to invent?*—. If this reads again like another insight from Barthes of "The Reality Effect," we might fairly assume to have solved *our* problem but the story-teller is rather stuck with the old question, *Why Stories?* The story-teller's immediate problem is to reconcile the known with the unknown, the unpredictable with the predictable, and the querulous with the tremulous (selves) — all in *one* story albeit stylized in typographically discrete spaces. Barthes of course had anticipated, even forewarned, such story-tellers in "The Reality Effect" when he declared that:

> The general structure of the narrative... appears essentially *predictive*...Description is quite different: it has no predictive aspect; ... its structure [is] purely additive.... The singularity of the description (or of the 'useless detail') in the narrative fabric, its isolatedness, brings up [the following question]: is everything in the narrative meaningful, significant? And if not, if there exist insignificant stretches, what is, so to speak, the ultimate significance of this insignificance? (12)

Sontag is perhaps the most technologically savvy among her peers and she couldn't have been negligent of the dimensions imposed by the new media on our narrative consciousness whether we are telling or listening to a story. There is much to be said indeed for Lev Manovich's proposal in *The Language of New Media* that our consciousness has irrevocably ceded to the powerful software that guides much of what we do, say, and respond to in today's world. If the new media have redesigned our cognitive repertoire, it's time, Sontag would argue, we learned to negotiate two (or more) stories simultaneously. For our visual culture for now "*is cinematographic in its appearance, digital on the level of its material, and computational (that is, software driven) in its logic*" (Manovich 165, his italics).

That agreed, we are still very much within the precincts of an aesthetic felicity when the narrative signs itself off with "My watchful solitariness. An urban Robinson Crusoe, I have told this story many times." Of course she has, and so have many others before her who have wondered why stories are told again and again. For the teller's longing for the story is proverbial. That longing, like the Crusoe fantasy, has always sustained this business— the telling that begins all beginnings, the longing to begin all over again, once *again* upon a time. While it satisfies one teller that the world is described as one naturally finds it, there will always be another who contests that description on account of it being most *un*natural. There is no one way of description, any description being subject to socio-political and historical circumstances. That surely brings back Crusoe to his job. Colonies are still interesting possibilities for the colonizer to bond narratively with the colonized because, after all the material goods and services are finished, newer stories can begin, with another Crusoe's ship full of civilized goods and potential services amiably called Foreign Direct Investments. If there weren't stories, what would happen to our globalizing conscience?

If there is anything common to a fairly large number of postmodernist responses to stories, and I believe there is at least *one* thing common to them all, it is that what we often take to be a story is no longer than a metaphor for a story, a story-in-the-making, an apology for a story, or some such. The reason for the proliferating metaphors is that readers seem not so much interested in a story as such, but *why* such a story has been told in the first place. This has certainly something to do with the "exhaustion" writers like John Barth had found in the narratives and narrators long ago,[23] but further in the postmodern urge to engage more with ways of telling and listening (also writing and reading) than with the stories themselves. What is lost in telling, in most cases, is its kernel— at least what the teller believes earnestly to be true *as* a story. Have we, then, reached a stage in our evolution as *homo narrans* when even the provisional or speculative truth we used to grant fiction is no longer 'believed'? It would seem that this, mostly, is the case: post-structurally, we seem to be haunted by a ghost of meanings; spectral voices, so to speak, that, despite our rational and learned protocols of reading, prompt us to look elsewhere for the 'real' story. In other words, the *telling*, rather than the story, is fraught with challenges language poses among the people who use it. Although it wouldn't at first make interesting sense, a story today is that which is told or written *wrongly*. At least we cannot sometimes help feeling that yesterday's *flâneur* is reappearing today in a Lacanian guise, navigating an urban-industrial sea of mirrors, rather helplessly, *seated* before his TV set. Since when have we begun to *walk the talk* on television? Let's look at an example that would make us think a little along these lines at least in some preliminary way: "The Last Channel" by Italo Calvino.

A man whom the doctors believe to be mentally unstable is charged with a crime. He was seen going about pointing a gun-like instrument (actually a remote-control of a TV set) at shop-windows, city-traffic, and some people. He explains in a report/appeal addressed to magistrates of the court (which indeed we read as "The Last Channel") that he had really meant no harm. As a matter of fact, he says, he loves his city, the things in it, and its people; he was only trying to change the channel, to reach an appropriate wavelength, another frequency as it were, where he might find his city more habitable. He wants his city to be the happiest on earth. In pretty much the way we switch channels in order to look for something we expect to find more congenial to our taste on TV, here's a man seeking to transform his city, his habitat, fancying that by pressing the buttons on his remote-control, he would reach the happiest world ever. We are in no doubt that this man suffers from obsessive compulsive neurosis. The hospital staff forcefully deprives him of the remote-control; instead, he is given a typewriter and ream of paper. There is no television now. Maybe in this reversed narrative regime, he might be able to type words, *write*— his world into being?

That indeed is what the narrator does. He *writes* a report in which he keeps repeating the word *story*. He admits of course that nothing can equal his mind's 'story.' In a curious reversal of roles, he begins to pinpoint the faulty diagnosis of his detainers: "The first mistake they made in their diagnosis was to suppose... that my mind can only capture fragments of stories and arguments without a beginning or an end..." (47). He avers that his aspiration as any normal human being is nothing to be scoffed at. He is "convinced... that there is a sense in the happenings of this world, that a coherent story... is going on at this very moment, ... and that this story contains the key for judging and understanding everything else" (47). He is so persistent in this belief that he finds anything less or other than the 'story' he is looking for on the TV channels of the day — deodorant ads, live chat-shows, entertainment and news etc.— wholly distracting

and boring. He is keen, rather obsessively insistent, that such momentary distractions should not, even for a minute, turn him away from pursuing *his* 'story.' There is, he believes, "the *real* programme... out there in the ether on a frequency I don't know...; there is an unknown station transmitting a story that has to do with me, *my* story, the only story that can explain to me who I am, where I come from and where I'm going. Right now the only relationship I can establish with my story is a negative relationship: that of rejecting other stories, discarding all the deceitful images they offer me" (48–49).

Calvino's narrator refuses to be dissuaded from his pursuit. After all his is a pursuit of happiness, a right that those in authority seem to deny him by mistaking him for a criminal. The world projects images of plenitude and promise, indices of socio-economic well-being and success before him: "sparkling windows of the jewellers', ... the stately façades of the banks, ... the awnings and rotating doors of the big hotels..." (49). None of these is the story he is after. He hopes that at the press of a button, a new scene will appear before him, and the real story will begin; "prompting my gestures was the desire," he says, "to save all stories in one story that would be mine too..." (49). Meanwhile he confides in us his love story. By now he has begun to invoke metaphors from televisual experience such as "hit[ting] on the right channel" (53) with his lover called Volumnia. Everything seems to fall in place for a while (his liking everything about the girl, the time they spend together, the offer of a job by Volumnia's father, etc.) but given his propensity for doubting himself and others, he begins to wonder whether even his momentary experience of "happiness [with his lover] might contain within it that sense of contrivance and tedium you find in a bad TV channel" (530). From the narrowly personal to the hugely political seems but a small step in his rapid thought. Where then, he persists, is that last channel where his desire for another world be met, "where the leaders... were able to stop the cracks that open in the foundations, the reciprocal distrust, the

degeneration of human relationships..." (55). The story is not complete as his utterance breaks off here; nor was it meant to be "complete," given that all he was after was a *metaphor* of a story that he believes his utopian world to be.

The Parable of the Sower

Guru began with another parable. The sower set out to sow. Some seeds fell by the road. The birds ate them up. Some fell by a rocky place. As they sprouted, they withered in dry heat. The thorns choked the seeds that fell among the bramble. Those that fell on fertile soil sprouted and bore fruit.

A group of pupils sat on the beach munching LSD. They crawled toward Guru, falling at his feet. *Guru, you are great! But do tell us what this parable is all about.*

Guru took a deep drag at the smoking cannabis. He patted his pupils gently. Know ye not, little lambs, this parable? *We* are the sowers. We set out with a potful of seeds. Sterility devours the seeds we sow in barren women. In virgins they are aborted before they sprout. Contraceptive pills choke those we sow within prostitutes. Those we scatter in another's wife, alas, sprout, flourish, and yield fruit.

And they boarded a bark toward the other shore.(Gracy 177)[24]

Gracy is a well-known contemporary writer in Malayalam. Her stories challenge the usual socio-cultural assumptions about the "unusual Kerala model" and the picture-perfect ethos it evokes. She has relentlessly fought male arrogance and dominance among writers and intellectuals and has pioneered a distinct microfictional genre that scathingly unmasks Malayali hypocrisies of chauvinism and feelings of inferiority among men. Understated but remorseless, Gracy's humour borders on the supreme fiction of nonsense, the fiction that first knows itself to

be nonsense before it begins to affect its readers' reception. Her allusive and anecdotal writing often assumes a fairly decent awareness of the classical and contemporary cultural texts as well as those details of folk- and pop-lore of which political Kerala has always remained rich and vibrant. We shall see below the peculiar metaphor Gracy makes of this renowned parable, an exercise she undertakes in order to widen the scope of what might otherwise pass for as a mere retelling-in-translation of a metaparable in Matthew 13: 3–8 and further explicated in the same chapter: 18–21.

It will never cease to amaze lovers of stories that a parable never finishes; its inexhaustibility is very telling indeed. This is because a parable *tosses* or *projects* itself beside another, etymologically speaking.[25] What this means for us is that while listening to one story, we cannot afford to put the other on a "disattend track,"[26] as it were. The parable's multiple thrusts poke desires that often exceed our normal receptive grasp. For we cannot help feeling that the story we are told has always been gesturing us towards another story, tangentially. In the immediate example of the sower and his seeds, although we see the different and uneven terrains over which the seeds fall with what different and uneven results, we sense nevertheless that the experiences of the sower and ours are different and uneven in ways to which we are called upon to make appropriate and approximate adjustments on an interpretive scale. A parable tempts its listeners to respond with *their* desires, even project them on to it. The life they see in a parable only equals the lives they see in themselves. Put in other words, they *live* the parable whose meaning, whose truth, their own lives exemplify. They sow, they reap. How dismal a thought, then, that Gracy's men set out with "a potful of seeds," and all the rest of it follows a weird logic of kinky sexuality. How awful, further, to be treated to such male fantasies of sovereign mastery! Gracy's enviable success as a parabolist is hardly derivative. She believes, like Christ, that there are ears and eyes in

Kerala that work overtime but to no ethical point. If the parable has a pedagogic edge to it, and she knows it surely has, she also wants us to understand *why* it has this edge, and for whom is this most pertinent.

Leaving aside the obvious pointers like Guru and his pupils and the mock-scene of a class-room on the beach etc., this retold parable carries the shrewd subtext of pedagogy whose success we seem to take for granted. Given the texts whose ethical values are indisputable, only their interpretation by minds perverted by communitarian or other politics is likely to harm young minds. This would perhaps sound a reminiscent bell for those who recall reports on controversial readings of school text-books in Kerala over the last few decades. The point that brings this parable closer home to us is Jesus, the first Teacher of us all to enunciate a pedagogy that emphasizes seeing and hearing as essential to learning. Matthew 13: 24–30 narrates the parable of Wheat and the Tares and promises the Kingdom of God as the reward for discriminating between good and evil. Closely thereafter Christ identifies "He who sows the good seed [as] the Son of Man." Teaching couldn't be better described — giving that knowledge with which learners are able to distinguish between good and evil. Remember that Christ specially mentions in these verses that the *scandalous*, those things that offend and those who offend, "will be cast into a furnace of fire."

If we are able to recall at least this much from Matthew 13, we shall see why Gracy plays so thoughtfully upon the Parable *of* the Sower, a parable that tells us *about* a sower, and a parable that the sower appropriates as *his*. The teacher, above all, is a sower, one who disseminates knowledge. *Dissemination*, a theoretically overloaded concept since Derrida's book of that name, gathers within its capacious ambit such related ideas of *semen*, *seed*, *seme*, *semantics*, etc. Don't we call the parables of the Bible "*Christ's* parables"? Does he not call himself the Son of Man, a sower of good seeds? Gracy's Guru who retells this parable 'faithfully' but

interprets it viciously (on his terms) is nevertheless entitled to both 'mastery' and ownership of this parable. He is both good and evil in one person, a purveyor of evil pedagogy but in all fairness, let's say, he offers the interpretation of the parable only when his pupils beg him for its *gutens* (goodness?). Certainly this new Guru (perhaps an anti-Christ?) is the smart nominee of a dubious educational regime that presses a parabolic pedagogy on an unsuspecting public in order to subserve oppressive ideologies. Does all this sound scandalous? It ought to, if we are able to see that a translation is apt to go far beyond its customary call. It takes us way beyond the Kingdom of God originally promised by the parable of the sower. Perhaps one might consider analogically the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* v.2 where the disciples of Prajapati (another archetypal teacher and creator of the world) approach him for advice upon their graduation. Prajapati just answers *dā* to each of the three groups of students: gods, human beings, and demons. They variously but according to their *swabhāva* interpret the *dā*. As the Indian parable exemplifies, students of a class always receive the same text differently. The *Upaniṣadic* injunction however has this unique power to appropriately evoke responses from its heterogeneous listeners, but those responses answer perfectly to their *swabhāva* they begin to recognize as peculiarly their own. Is it surprising then that in Gracy's version the parable shrinks to the narrowly monologic and phallocentric? It cannot but betray anything other than an all-male group's libidinal compulsions. Gracy's parable retold is a prism. It refracts Biblical light in colours that betray Malayali culture's abjection and abomination.

We are not quite done with this extraordinarily dynamic metaphor of the story-as-parable; not just yet when we realize that in one unignorable sense, the sower must be, by his deed (and word), both a custodian and scatterer of seeds. Christ cannot keep the word to himself; while spreading it far and wide, he must give it meaning, *his* meaning, an inevitability dissemination

enjoins on all sowers of words *as* deeds. The parable thus becomes the ultimate metaphor of stories, and *for* teaching stories (a professionally hazardous ambiguity all the same) in rewardingly multiple ways. Teachers of fiction (literature generally) always confront this peculiar situation when their class seems to ask a question so large and momentous as to have no immediate urgency or specificity, a question the class does not always verbalize or articulate pointedly, but one that always persists: *Why this story?* Why now? So, what do we make of all this? The point is that citing a parable always runs a risk of one's feeling pressed to offer an interpretation of it in the most appropriate language for the benefit of an audience to which it is addressed. It is not without significance that Matthew 13: 10–13 recognizes the presence of an unequal world the teller faces, his audience comprising differently-abled persons in terms of their interpretive and intellectual skills and persuasions. There are those 'insiders,' so to speak who already know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, and those 'outsiders' who don't. That a *secret* is inherent makes the parable all the more challenging for the interpreter: once its secret is given away, where is the parable? But how does one interpret it without giving its secret away? The crucial verb here is *give* (of which, more below) and what is given is *knowledge*. It is truly liberating, however, to discover that the parable as metaphor for a story changes its terms and conditions of reference; that metaphors generally are productive of meanings to which all of us (the interpreters who learn together as a class, regardless of our natural and socio-cultural differences) can relate and gain new insights.

The giver, the giving, the gift, and the one(s) so gifted are commonplaces in most scenarios involving the scriptures. The religious lore throughout the world capitalizes on these commonplaces that largely influence the machinery of pedagogy. The practice continues to this day when students are "admitted" to school by selection and the faculty "recruited" competitively

for teaching. Simply put, academic learning is highly selective and preferential. Only the terms and conditions of selection and preferment are somewhat different in parts of the world. J. Hillis Miller's essay entitled "Parable and Performative" opens by alerting us to some paradoxes that beset our discussion of the literary parable but the one most fundamental to all interpretive engagement is the following. "The paradox of parable," says Miller, "is that it is a likeness that rests on a manifest unlikeness between what is given and what cannot by any means be given directly. A parabolic 'likeness' is so 'unlike' that without interpretation or commentary the meaning may slip by the reader or listener altogether" (58). No matter what else is lost in translations of the Bible into the many languages of the world, it is truly amazing that the Word of God, the Gospel, retains its mystery in the parables, gifts that simply cannot change hands but must bind the giver and the taker in a reciprocal relationship. Considering that the Bible in Kerala, like the scriptures of all proselytizing religions throughout the world, has had a history fraught both with resistance and reception, and the indigenous cultures in Kerala have known and mastered the Bible through the interpretive ministrations of western missionaries (again, as in most Afro-Asian countries), the parable *as* gift complicates the metaphor in interesting ways. The Bible stories as texts in moral instruction and literary education go far beyond the discipline of the paradox Miller finds endemic to parables in general. With every new translation, the Bible has grown among the indigenous traditions of Kerala, its use and application harnessed to secular and political ends by Christian and other denominations and creeds— and spawned new interpretive communities across this small Southern state of India— not always devoted to the Gospels and noble Christian lives within a largely left-oriented, if areligious democratic political culture.

As far as I could gather, Gracy's parable has, mercifully, not provoked any section of Christian believers in Kerala or elsewhere,

especially those literal-minded, dour and doughty readers prone to bait critical readers not only of the Bible but all literature. Indian writers dealing with mythical or historical figures and themes, especially those writers and artists who position themselves radically outside the institutions of official interpretive protocols, are often faulted for not walking the cautious tightrope over vast terrains of inhospitable and violent protests and reprisal. Malayalees often joke that there are only Christ's people but no people's Christ.[27] Now Gracy certainly enjoys an interpretive edge, the one Miller's paradox grants anyone citing a parable. We just can't have a parable given to us, one left uninterpreted. A parable is *not* a gift unless some interpretation completes it. Let's also remember that Gracy's Guru is cast in the guise of a service-provider, a hoary figure in the history of Christianity in Kerala where missionaries, pastors, evangelists, and preachers from the podium or the streets had taken the Gospels to the public, "interpreted" them for the uninitiated and less educated. As a matter of fact the impetus given by the Christian churches, and the schools abutting them, to Kerala's proud cent-per cent literacy is well-documented. Given that the Bible itself is a "gift," a Malayali reader might indeed, as a matter of right, look for a short pull-out of a "user's manual," an interpretation that honours, albeit mockingly, this tradition. The pupils who beg for the *gutens* of this parable represent this craven readership. In any case, gone are the days of official interpretations and authorized commentaries of Biblical texts. The Malayalees know by now that the Word, its history and meaning are largely constituted by the histories and meanings of its ecumenical interpretants and interpreters.

While anthropological and kinship studies of the west have pointed to the role of material gifts in fostering and sustaining relationships within a community, non-material gifts such as parables, the repositories of collective wisdom, help bring the peoples of the world together and seek to promote healthy

international relations. It is perhaps to the failure of this ideal that Gracy's parable points. If, within the colonial paradigm, the Biblical parables might be seen as politically motivated, Gracy's retold parable today raises interesting questions about the 'gift' itself, now mistaken by our young students as "freebies," or "give_back material goods" etc. in a largely market-oriented economy of exchange. Lost in the illegal global trafficking and use of banned drugs and dope, this generation, as Gracy's new parable seems to suggest, cannot relate to a story on their terms. Unless mediated and guided by a Guru who brokers relationships, the pupils are absolutely helpless in receiving legitimate gifts. In this bizarre academy of shared guilt and shame, of promiscuity and profanity, Guru and his pupils are seen to neither appreciate the parable nor understand the larger ethics of being in this world. Do they know *what* they might be sowing when Guru so triumphantly declares, "*We* are the sowers"? They have given nothing to the world, nor are they entitled to receive anything, let alone Christ's parable, as gift. For, as Rauna Kuokkanen who has written so brilliantly on the kinds of epistemic ignorance rampant in the modern academy observes, "The gift... implies *responsibility*; an ability to respond, to remain attuned to the world beyond self and be willing to recognize its existence through gift giving. Such a sense of responsibility is a result of living within an ecosystem and being dependent on it" (66).

Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time" (1989) begins so unlike a story. A writer is heard contemplating at bedtime why she should be asked to send something suitable for an anthology of *children's* stories. The anthologist, she tells us, seems to agree with some reputed novelist who believes that every writer "ought to write at least one story for children" (23). She resolves however *not* to write for children, for she does not see why a writer "ought

to write anything" (23) if she does not feel like writing *for* anyone at all. Presumably after a little sleep, she wakes up to some noise, still unclear what roused her. Was it an intruder, some assailant planning attack on her lonely self? She stares at the door, lying still on her bed. Her thoughts now deflect toward the house in which she now lives. In apartheid South Africa, who could tell what might befall an unprotected white woman? She begins to think, as if prompted by a sudden historical awareness that her house is inhabited by 'stories' of colonial exploitation involving poor human labour and rich natural resources:

> The house that surrounds me while I sleep is built on undermined ground; far beneath my bed, the floor, the house's foundations, the stopes and passages of gold mines have hollowed the rock, and when some face trembles, detaches and falls, three thousand feet below, the whole house shifts slightly, bringing uneasy strain to the balance and counterbalance of brick, cement, wood and glass that hold it as a structure around me. [...]
>
> I couldn't find a position in which my mind would let go of my body— release me to sleep again. So I began to tell myself a story; a bedtime story. (24–25)

Gordimer's exquisitely framed metaphor begins here. She is in a house but not quite safe as she might imagine because she must realize that hers is a House of Fiction that "shifts slightly, bringing uneasy strain to the balance and counterbalance" of materials with which she ought to build it anew every time she tells a story. Is this the strangely "complex fate" of all South African writers? Far from just being a question of managing memories in politically correct ways, a sensitive mind looks more within than without. In a passage eerily reminiscent of Nadine Gordimer's reflections here, J. M. Coetzee writes in *Youth* (2002) of his protagonist:

> South Africa is a wound within him. How much longer before the wound stops bleeding? How much longer will he have to grit

his teeth and endure before he is able to say, "Once upon a time I used to live in South Africa but now I live in England"? (116)

Youth is an interesting experiment in autobiography. In order to maintain an ironic distance from both himself and the countries to which he stands related in, let's say, politically awkward ways, Coetzee has his own story told by a character, a writer in exile, called John. (Strange, again, that Gordimer and Coetzee cannot tell their stories unless they seek alibis, by splitting themselves Borges-like into private persons and public authors.) What is intriguing is not only John's recourse to *Once upon a time...*, admittedly a commonplace we can't escape in story-telling, but his loaded allusion to Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time," a metaphor *par excellence* of a story. Gordimer's is indeed a horrendous story of wounds, self-inflicted and other, by the white people of South African apartheid.

Now the first part of "Once Upon a Time" is just about two pages, the background so called to a 'real' story that meets all the expectations of conventional listeners more adequately than they would ordinarily expect. In a suburban house live a white couple and their only child. The family has pets (one dog, one cat); a housemaid who is "absolutely trustworthy;" a gardener who visits on certain days, one who has earned their confidence. The man's mother ("that wise old witch") drops in occasionally to give her son timely advice and her grandson a toy Space Man and a book of fairy tales as Christmas gifts. What the family most fears and talks about from time to time is a possible attack on them by the unemployed crowd outside their gate— loafers and trouble-makers, intruders and burglars, even teams of armed robbers. Of course there are the riot-police and soldiers, the law-and-order-machinery in place, but they somehow feel terribly unsafe even within a house with its high wall, burglar bars, alarm system, and electronically-operated gates. Of course this white wealthy family couldn't have been anymore foresighted than their

peers in the vicinity, having enrolled itself in a medical benefit society, subscribed to the local Neighbourhood Watch, and its members insured against damages caused by fire and floods, theft and burglary.

Nothing however seems to assuage the family's paranoia, for they always hear only about reported burglary, riots, cheating and robbery in their vicinity. The man's mother pays him money (another Xmas gift!) for buying extra bricks so that they could build a higher wall. The man and wife feel somewhat safer when they spot a coil of steel barricade fitted along the length of a wall. "Placed the length of walls, it consisted of a continuous coil of stiff and shining metal serrated into jagged blades, so that there would be no way of climbing over it and no way through its tunnel without getting entangled in its fangs. There would be no way out," as they assure themselves, "only a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier, a deeper and sharper hooking and tearing of flesh" (29).

The story ends most tragically when, as one might expect, the family is hoist with its own petard. Inspired by a fairy tale, the little boy tries to clamber over their wall, imagining himself to be the Prince destined to brave tall trees and brambles in order to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty awake. There is blood all over the place when the horrendous machine drags the boy more and more into its coiled tunnel to leave his body hopelessly mangled. The "bleeding mass of the little boy," concludes this bizarre tale, "was hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire-cutters, choppers..." (30) and taken into the house. Few stories portray "only a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier" (29) in more lurid detail than this. We now recall this phrase for its awful dramatic irony, earlier used to describe the deadly steel barricade. We are shocked that the white couple could ever contemplate such an inhuman scenario without the slightest sense of waste or compassion. And of course how insensitively silly of them ever to conjure up unknown if non-

existent predators fearing whom they install an engine of destruction at their gate called "DRAGON'S TEETH" (29).

"How much longer before the wound stops bleeding?" asks Coetzee's narrator in *Youth*: "How much longer will he have to grit his teeth and endure before he is able to say, 'Once upon a time I used to live in South Africa'..."? As long as, Gordimer seems to answer, we do not insistently flog this allegory of racial tension and violence, mostly self-inflicted and pointless. A more instructive "bedtime story" would it become for adults who do not any more fancy bringing up children only on fairy tales and restrict their mental and physical movements within a small social circle beset by racist fear, suspicion, and hatred. As a writer, Gordimer feels it urgent to break the mould of the story to ask: *Why Stories?*

Why indeed? Gordimer's stories do not purportedly 'educate' or 'edify' an arrogantly stupid public still paranoid about their racial "others" and hardly prepared to even consider *how other* they themselves are from the others they dislike and cannot tolerate. Stories, however, can still enable us, as no other social media can, to feel disenchanted about the way we experience the world. They can enable us, in the words of Patrick O'Donnell who defines "cultural paranoia" as a method, to see "the multiple stratifications of reality... as interconnected or networked" (464). What this means is that there cannot be any complete escape or permanent safety for the simple-minded paranoiacs. They might, in sheer ignorance of the politics that manipulates all social beings, raise their wall of seclusion higher and higher, or install louder and louder alarms that sound false all the time. It is in the nature of contemporary stories however to make us realize that it is not too late to see ourselves as constituted by the paranoid fiction *we* make as readers/listeners. If "Once Upon a Time" teaches a lesson, it does so *not* by handing out a ready-to-use "object lesson" of textbooks and instruction manuals, but by asking us to take a hard if disenchanted look at tales of fantasy and

romance, stories of domestic mishap, children, adults, and racially segregated societies where, as O'Donnell tells us:

> [P]aranoia becomes the means by which connections are forged between disparate material realms: everything is known; everything is related; the anecdotal becomes the conspiratorial; accident becomes design. Further, paranoia, under these conditions, can be viewed as the binding force of the nation or the community: What brings people together, as it were, is the sense that they are the wary participants in an unfolding historical plot over which they have no control, but through which they gain visible identity as historically unified subjects. (465)

There is hardly any other way, as O'Donnell suggests, telling or understanding the stories we make and live by in today's world that offers us a paranoiac epistemology in order to cope with its complicated reality. As we shall see, Gordimer's method of simplifying this complicated scene is by enlisting all the familiar and easily spotted terms of our social and literary narratives in the service of her story. In this method she is not giving us *a* story to interpret but rather offering us *metaphors* for telling it. For she believes that no story exists alone, by itself; a story, like the person who tells it, lives among a collective of stories, a community of tellers and listeners. The tried and tested terms of narrative endearment and empathy are therefore no longer tenable, if seriously limiting and *un*helpful, for readers who must, from now on, look beyond socio-cultural stereotypes and literary clichés. It is not for nothing that she plays off social stereotypes against narrative clichés in telling us this bizarre "bedtime story."

That we are conducted through a *metaphoric* rather than a routinely fictional terrain becomes clear when "Once Upon a Time" rubs in all the text-book claptrap of fairytales and storybooks. Readers will then be wakeful and watchful, not losing themselves too much in a fairytale world to be completely unmindful of the hard socio-political everyday, the apartheid world of mounting paranoia and potential trouble. While they

are free to entertain an illusion of fiction, they are certainly *not* entertained by it; they do not feel for example that the conclusion of this story was inevitable and utterly just so. In the "double reading" Gordimer so affords them, they at once sense the knowing wink and tongue-in-cheek allusions she periodically makes to the familiar motifs of the fairytale such as the "wise old witch;" gates and barricaded entrances; the warning of impending trouble/danger, etc. The nearly predictable pattern of children's stories is a bonus, if they recall that as well—Gordimer's story plays on the well-known topos of a child leaving the boring 'safety' of home to court some 'dangerous adventure' only to 'return home' chastened and grown wiser! The more motifs and topoi one recalls, the heavier swells the new story's irony. First of all, we note this story's conformity to the norms of an Aristotelian plot: single and continuous action in a three-beat sequence with a clearly marked exposition, climax/catastrophe, and a tragic denouement. In Gordimer's telling, the deferred impact of suspense deepens the story's dramatic irony. The "happily ever after" refrain prepares us somewhat portentously for the story's extremely horrifying and ironic end. (The unnamed white middleclass couple, always cautious and fixated on the security of their home and their only son might remind one of "The Monkey's Paw" by W. W. Jacobs, a much anthologized tale in most western schoolbooks. Of course Jacobs exploits the three-wish formula of fairytales with aplomb, and so does Gordimer, but her most strikingly stereotypical pointer to this intertext is perhaps the English family in "The Monkey's Paw" called *the Whites*. Their only son's death in a freakish accident involving a deadly factory-machine equals the macabre end to Gordimer's story.) All this has the air of a task executed with a vengeance, its brutal knowingness of a white literary tradition that misses nothing crucial *en route*. The story builds itself systematically upon blocks of literary/folktale conventions and clichés on the one hand, and a familiar set of apartheid stereotypes on the other.[28]

Clichés

Children's/Bedtime story
Happy ending: "living happily ever after"
Happy family: Father, Mother, Son
(Cat, dog, toys, storybooks, servants…)
"The Wise Old Witch" of fairy tales
Holidays, swimming pool
"Cat looking before it leaps" (proverbial cliché)
Mother reading a storybook to son at bed-time
The Storybook as Xmas present by Grandmother
The boy-prince and daredevilry (the allusion to Sleeping Beauty)

Stereotypes

The white family's hatred and fear of the natives in South Africa
(burglar bars, alarms, gun under pillow, dogs,
Electronically-controlled gates)
Prejudice against casual labourers as criminals
("Anyone off the street')
The Neighbourhood Watch, Gated Community of the Whites
The racial profiling of intruders: YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED
sign
(the ambiguity of its profile…)
Riots incited by people of colour
Burglars as food-starved and craving for expensive single malt
whisky
The portrait of the unemployed black, job-seekers (27)
The housemaid's fantasy about loafers and tsotsis
Reports always of *Black* threat and intrusion into White territory
A string of clichés: architectural styles of well-protected houses (29)
People for Total Security, DRAGON'S TEETH, business ads.

Now Gordimer kills two birds with one stone in aligning narrative clichés with racist/apartheid stereotypes. She is able to demonstrate very well that both betray, and are betrayed by, those who practise racial and elite class discriminations. The point is that neither literature nor society will make any headway if it is still stuck in old ways, if it mindlessly repeats the same old story

of unfounded prejudice and mutual fear. If we are able to read "Once Upon a Time" with as much ironic awareness as of its *story* as metaphor, we are able to see for ourselves the larger and subtler irony of all 'knowledge' that we claim to acquire of any society. We cannot know others unless we invoke differences and contrasts; unless, that is, we are able to see ourselves as different from others in significant ways.

There is no other way we can learn about ourselves, about others, about the societies we live in. Stereotypes, then, are essentially pedagogical tools whose usefulness and *ad hoc* applications we must begin to appreciate in the various stages of our evolutionary learning. Robert Cantwell's "On Stereotype" argues that cultures understand and express themselves solely through stereotypes. This essay, by far the best exposition I know of on this complex phenomenon, is full of insights and revealing facts about how cultures know themselves, but here is one crucial observation that characterizes *the stereotype as a story* that a culture chooses to tell itself and others:

> How ... can culture express its knowledge of what is not itself, and how can that knowledge... have any authority save that which it has from its own historical and cultural situation? What can we know about social reality especially, when the discourse in which we know is itself social? Insofar as human communities of whatever kind, on whatever scale, express, preserve, and transmit their experience in culture, and insofar as culture *is* the medium of knowing, one community can know another only negatively... (56).

And further, explaining the rationale of distortion that facilitates a deeper and reflexive understanding of culture, Cantwell observes:

> Stereotype is a science of distortions— but a vernacular science, one which reasons from a primary cause, which is the distortion itself, supposing that all difference can be explained *as* difference. It does not ask what are the traits of the outsider,

> for it already knows them, as effects of causes it has adduced from the laws of its own world; reasoning only unknown effects from known causes, denying to the outsider causes peculiar to his own history, circumstances, and occasions, particularly those hidden causes which lie in the cross-cultural encounter itself, stereotype denies the outsider, in effect, his life. (57)

So, too, with our business of arts and letters. We cannot recognize them for what they are, and having known this, open them up for increasingly nuanced critical debate, unless we learn first to recognize the Aristotelian patterns and paradigms and the repeated uses to which most western practitioners put them. Clichés, the literary equivalents of cultural stereotypes, are better recognized as such so that we know the distortions to which they subject fiction itself, the 'make-believe' story that mistakenly points toward only one direction and intuits single meanings affirming partial truths in a dangerous politics that demeans lives and letters. And Gordimer has every reason to be most worried about the harm clichéd writing and stereotypical thought will do in South Africa because, as she has repeatedly wondered to herself what *truth* and what *reconciliation* would suffice when racist regimes cannot see beyond the white and black. "Polymorphous fear cramps the hand," she wrote as early as 1973, speaking about the intimidation of black writers in South Africa. "Would-be writers are so affected that they have ignored gigantic contemporary issues that have set their own lives awash. Such stories as they are...repulp the clichés of the apartheid situation... that have been so thoroughly blunted by overuse in literature good and bad that they can be trusted to stir the censors and the police as little as they can be trusted to fire the people's imagination" (133). What most distresses Gordimer as a story-teller is not so much the destiny others seem to fashion for her as a writer as the destiny she begins on her own to discover to be hers, one to which she seems condemned. It is about this dehumanized world she writes in "Once Upon a Time," a world that makes stories of clichés that match stereotypes and vice versa. What distinguishes

this exemplary narrative of Gordimer's "complex fate" above all is her candid reflection on the metaphors storytelling affords when colonial fantasy meets postcolonial forensics, when gothic fear and desire are recognized as such, and when stereotypes are identified as shadows of the clichéd substance at once. But tell we must, this and other stories, no matter how pointless the exercise, how frustrating the results for now. It is not for nothing that the conscience of the teller is awakened, "the echo-chamber of the subconscious" (23) stirred, by voices, even if those voices may be far from "afar" or "ancestral" and they may not yet be "prophesying war" (Coleridge 73).

"The worst readers are those," declares Nietzsche in his *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, "who behave like plundering troops: they take away a few things they can use, dirty and confound the remainder, and revile the whole" (15–16). This fate has befallen Homi Bhabha's "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," an essay (first, a paper at an Essex University conference, 1982; later, published in *Screen* in 1983) that has had a chequered interpretive history in postcolonial scholarship for about three decades. For those who still find the essay rather too densely argued and complicated to argue a coherent set of positions on issues related to the colonial strategies of 'othering,' I would propose a reading of "Once Upon a Time" as some immediate help. At least I have benefited by reading the Gordimer story for the light it casts on the paradoxical nature of stereotyping in Bhabha. I am not sure however that Gordimer herself was familiar with Bhabha's essay while writing her reflections and the story in 1989. The two writers nevertheless seem to envision a common ground upon which ideas of racial alterity and ambivalence meet discursively in order to explore the complex relationships they notice between knowledge and narratives involving colonial stereotypes.

Assuming, as Bhabha does in his essay, that the stereotype is a form of knowledge, we further understand "that the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation"

(100). He gives the reason for this at the outset when he cautions us that we shall not mistake it to be a settled and fixed episteme, but take it only as "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... to be proved" (94–95). In sum, he sees both repetition and ambivalence to be central to stereotypes that grow and vitiate relationships in a society that divides itself by enforcing stereotypes to define and regulate relationships. This is the viciousness of the circle Gordimer's story shows to be true. When stereotypes proliferate, clichés arise to meet them discursively. The Other Question, when told as a story, will read like "Once Upon a Time."

Gordimer's story is certainly evidence of "a theoretical and political response that challenges deterministic or functionalistic modes of conceiving of the relationship between discourse and politics" so that its writer is able "[t]o recognize the stereotype as an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power" (Bhabha 95). The story of the white couple here engages "the relationship between discourse and politics" in ways fiction can when it sheds its putative 'make believe' and is made to reflect on its dharma that makes a story-teller of every citizen. Clearly, she is most determined not to be guilty of the literary theorist's projection of the sin that constructs the colonial subject in discourse that largely ignores "forms of difference— racial and sexual" (96). This granted, we shall now see Gordimer's story as reading the Other Question more shrewdly than most critical commentaries on it.

The reason for this is simple. Gordimer, unlike Bhabha, does not see the ambivalence of colonial discourse affecting only the colonized but here (ironically) affecting herself as well— a 'colonizer' if you like, because she is white but one who is obliged to see herself as part of the politics of apartheid rather unfairly, in which special sense one who is as much colonized as the Colonized Other of the stereotype's binary. If such stereotypes

have stuck, and they cannot be undone, one might at least deal with them ironically in art because history hasn't closed the book for ever on such peculiar politics and people. Building up a colonial fantasy in the opening section of her story, Gordimer is determined to address what Bhabha calls "an 'impossible' subject" (116) somewhat differently. How? If anyone seriously questions the suitability of the title "Once Upon a Time" for an account of the happenings that is better read as "This, in Our Time," we have some clue as to how "an 'impossible' subject" might be represented in fiction that is not quite that, but probably a metaphor for fiction. Famously, *pace* W. H. Auden, *fiction makes nothing happen*; the pun on *nothing* works both ways. If nothing happens "once" as fiction, her fiction makes *even* nothing happen "now." We are unlikely then not to miss the irony with which she loads her "bedtime story," embedded punningly again as conceived of at bedtime and delivered of herself while lying awake in bed. If the colonial subject is hopelessly split and hybridized, she is as much split and hybridized *as a writer*, one knowable and yet different like Bhabha's colonial subject. For the woman who suffers and the writer who assumes omniscience here are not one. The one resists the demand for a story in its first part; the other tells it despite herself in its second.

If clichés have their uses in the arts and letters (basically, how to approach or appreciate a work) stereotypes are indispensable in all socio-political constructions. There is always some vague threat of the barbarians at the gate necessitating borders and barricades, fences and walls. The commentary Bhabha uncannily seems to make on the Gordimer story is particularly interesting. Citing Fanon's famous example of recognition/disavowal of white/black subjectivity, Bhabha remarks: "Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determination, guilt, aggressivity..." (117). Reading this we will be reminded of at least some specific details

of the Gordimer story, but the tragic end to the imagined fears of the white couple illustrates Bhabha's later cryptic remark that "the stereotype is at once a substitute and a shadow" (117). What remains *after* the stereotypes are undone determines the success of the story. For, despite the "ambivalence" the stereotypes do not seem to leave white consciousness. Gordimer herself cannot be sure that it is her subconscious (mentioned in the prefatory section of her story) that generates the ambivalence. The unfamiliar and the disquieting howl, the threatening and censorious voices that seem to emanate from her echo chamber, mysteriously lodge her within the precincts of a reality only fiction will negotiate so that she might feel less anxious and guilty about the difference that her race, economic and social class, and western education combine to make *her* a stereotype. The question further is: What is this ambivalence ambivalent towards— the stereotypes, or the *knowledge* of them to be nothing but stereotypes? If there is one last lesson "Once Upon a Time" teaches us it is this. Despite the best efforts, the knowledge of the stereotypes is no guarantee that we can get rid of them. Like the white couple and the man's mother (at least two generations) it is impossible to live without stereotypes. Much as we cannot be naively unsuspecting and boldly welcoming trouble, with the best of intentions of the best politics available to us, we find ourselves invoking stereotypes only to feel ashamed and regretful that we have done so. For the trouble with stereotypes (as with the literary clichés that best go with them) is that they not only work for beginners (social beings, students...) but they *overwork* every time we begin all over again. Nothing in this world is proof against life-threatening danger, a lesson once learnt we are apt to forget, a lesson every generation must learn all afresh, and hopefully not too late like the wealthy white family in Gordimer's story.

Moving far beyond the insidious discourses upon which Bhabha still focuses his censorious light, Gordimer seems more concerned about the "responsibilities" others now impute to

white writers in erstwhile colonies. Let us recall also that "Once Upon a Time" begins by strongly declining an invitation to contribute to an anthology of children's stories chiefly because she resents the suggestion of "a certain novelist [that] every writer ought to write at least one story for children" (23). For someone who feels so strongly about *what she owes to society as a writer*, Gordimer's views on this subject are at least as forthright as they are apposite to those who read Bhabha's "Other Question." The following passage sums up albeit cryptically her credo as a writer, something readers of fiction today might love to remember when they reconsider the Other Question:

> What right has society to impose responsibility upon writers and what right has the writer to resist? I want to examine not what is forbidden us by censorship — I know that story too well —but to what we are bidden. I want to consider what is expected of us by the dynamic of collective conscience and the will to liberty in various circumstances and places; whether we should respond, and if so, how we do. (Gordimer, "The Essential Gesture", 6)

Russell Edson mixes prose with verse in order to break the old habits of reading. This encourages his devoted readers to turn genealogists of sorts, sometimes to prompt them to reflect whether a fable of his they are given to read is a cross between, say, Samuel Beckett's plays and Marianne Moore's poetry. The Edson poems are usually stories— again, metaphorically like those of Sontag, Calvino, Gracy, or Gordimer that urge readers / writers and tellers to reposition themselves in a world where new *relations* of reception and relay become imperative. A further detail about Edson's prose-poems is their generic status as "minority" that somewhat entitles him to tell stories involving

minority tastes and people, the marginal social phenomena of which we know nothing unless they are brought to the fore by writers. Given that poetry itself is marginal in the world of letters, Bob Perelman makes a very insightful suggestion that we accord a "doubly marginal" status to prose-poems:

> ...[E]very poem, is a marginal
> work in a quite literal sense.
> Prose poems are another matter: but
> since they identify themselves as poems
> through style and publication context, they
> become a marginal subset of poetry,
> in other words, doubly marginal... (Perelman 19).

We shall not enter the debate of a proem's generic status but let's look at a sample from Edson which goes like this:

> Piano Lessons
>
> There was once a girl who was learning to play
> piano by taking it for walks in a wood.
> She would guide it with an elephant goad.
> Mother would say, oh do be careful, its such a
> costly piece of furniture.
> The piano farted.
> Father said, take that horrible old man out of
> here or I shall really have to remember who I am,
> for I shall be shouting in such a manner to be
> quite unlike myself.
> But in time the piano became the greatest girl
> player in all the world.
> Father said, how odd.
> Mother said, oh my.
> The piano used an elephant goad in quite such a
> manner as to bring the girl to song.
> It is quite lovely, said father.
> It is not unlovely, said mother.
> Very soon the house was filled with little pianos.
> Father said, well, I hardly expected this.
> And mother said, well, this was not

quite expected, but past the initial shock
one learns to expect what has already happened. (Edson, 78)

What is unusual about Edson among his postmodern peers is his enthusiastic urge to share his sheer narrative pleasure, his discoveries in an indulgent medium, with us. It turns out in most such cases that his 'story' is as much the pleasure as its telling. The poet, etymologically, is a *maker.* True to his profession, Edson *makes*, and makes it all up. The prose-poem with which readers have come to identify his work is a Janus-faced genre whose form and function critics are reluctant to define for the simple reason that the "creative" here is hard to pinpoint when the most familiar, tried and tested forms (prose, verse) are put to unexpectedly creative uses. "[I]t's simply a question of creativity," comments Juan Sánchez who sees no point in seeking a proper definition of the prose-poem, "how installation art does something unfamiliar in a familiar space, how a wine bottle may be used for more than wine" (177). For Edson, however, the facility he finds in this formal hybrid is that it allows room for a piece of prose to evolve from the poem it once was, and for a poem to be a piece of prose which it aspires to be. (After all, Ezra Pound believed that a poem should be written at least as well as prose, something good to remember in an age of poem-looking prose things.) That room, we believe, is still the largest in the world— the room for *improvement*, which story indeed is what "Piano Lessons" subtextually tells us. Those of us who are more sensitive to *language*, its philosophy and social life, are able to go beyond such simplicities as *human language is reflexive* in order to notice how that reflexivity works in a fundamental way when a poet uses the same language as they use in everyday life. If we find Edson's poem somewhat "difficult," it is not because we do not understand its words, not because the poem deals in obscure allusions and analogies, not even because we are unused to its absurdities and non sequiturs. Edson proves to be not so much "difficult" as challenging for another simple reason. While his narrative voice seems to be using a language we all know to

be so uncomplicated and effortless, it prefers, *á la* Melville's Bartleby, to use this language *not to mean* what others usually mean with the same words and phrases. At least *not* in the same way others want those words to mean for their settled comfort. We are then keen not to read the Edson-story here, a "Cold Pastoral" if you like, as a bad joke played on a suburban family but as a condition which certain thinking about language has created with which serious thinking about language must reckon. We are, in short, intrigued.

All we need then to do is to notice that Edson's poem is *reflexive* in two important senses, each helpful probably in revising our ideas of the real/imaginary, and the language that poets generally use to represent them. "Piano Lessons" revisits certain fictional bromides of realism and verisimilitude. Its narrative voice plainly debunks the stock-in-trade of a realistic-fictional suburbia— the small family, parental care, romance in the woods, music, lovely scenes anticipating the arrival of adorable children, and a happy ending. Edson defaces the formulaic real so mercilessly that even a die-hard fan of fictional realism will agree that realism is at bottom a lie; that the illusion so created owes everything, again, to a language of realist interpretations. The success, in other words, of any realist representation is directly proportional to the failure of words to capture the absolutely real in all its rawness and crudity. (Who wants to meet another drab day in all actual details in art?) Realism, as Terry Eagleton observes, "tends to conceal the socially relative or constructed nature of language: it helps to confirm the prejudice that there is a form of 'ordinary' language which is somehow natural" (117). A furtive revenge fantasy of sorts, "Piano Lessons" also reflects on a wide variety of truth-claims made by language, from the folk to the philosophical, of what understanding of the world human beings command when they use language.

Edson is not alone in speculating such deeply philosophical dimensions of the language he harnesses as a writer but reading

his short verse-fable along with the other metaphors of stories helps us appreciate the asymmetrical relation the *verbal* shares with the *non-verbal* in human lives. (*Speculum*, Latin for 'mirror.') We seem never quite happy with the words we have with which to explain, narrate, relate, describe, engage, or portray the 'reality' we believe to be 'true.' We seem never quite happy with the instruments of knowledge and belief we have at our disposal or the linguistic resources and energies at hand to be able to communicate the 'real' and be true to our own selves. The language of "Piano Lessons" is exceptional in the ease with which it deploys evocative synecdochic details, and our difficulty of even imagining that which is unimaginable: such as taking a piano for walks, thinking of this ordinary piece of furniture as an "old man [who] farts," the elephant goad being used "in quite such a/ manner," etc. We are astounded, outraged, or made to feel terribly betrayed further when the poem ends with the girl's mother just saying: "...well, this was really not/ quite expected, but past the initial shock/ one learns to expect what has already happened." Really? Is this true of language generally, or of the exceptional language of Edson's narrative? What, indeed, are our expectations of language— that it will give us only that which we might reasonably expect; or that it would give us only that which we could easily comprehend; that language will allow us to reconsider what it could do otherwise than supply us the predictable or comprehensible? How much of reality, in the name of realism, could we bear? Would authentically realized fictional worlds demand authentically realizable language to match them? Further reflections on the topic of language seem quite implied in Mother's disconcerting phrase, "past the initial shock." Learning one's language actually means progressively getting past the initial shock, onto other minor and major shocks, one after another. You never know what terribly awkward situations arise in your life, and what language would be most appropriate to wriggle yourself out of them. Since there are no coaching classes for living or dying (nature takes care of both, for all of us, free of cost) we

can't be adequately 'prepared' for the most gruesome or the awkward. Human beings grow with language, much as their language grows with individual learners, and successive generations in whose lives it lives. It is debatable though whether we grow *up* ever, or what role, if any, one's language plays in this process.

That we have been negotiating (initially unawares) two incommensurable worlds in theory becomes evident when our usual certainties of the word and the world are belied. This discomfiture alone is perhaps a good enough beginning for pursuing *Why Stories?* We notice, for example, that this "girl who was learning to play a piano" has slowly begun to make a play for it/him, and that the piano has begun to play around with her. And what splendid lessons! Her parents observe all this but we are not sure that they are only mildly embarrassed or simply wonderstruck. Another question that intrigues us is the *character* of this narrative. We are not too sure, for example, that what we have just heard as "Piano Lessons" is not *quite* a parable; it might well be a short commentary on the motives of speaking in parables, or an earnest bid to answer: What makes us *homo narrans*? One of the motives clearly discernible here is the mutuality of 'being-in-a-world' and 'a-world-in-a-being' afforded by narratives generally. Put in simple terms, human beings *are* stories variously told and made by the world to which they belong. My life therefore is a story (crisscrossing several others) *I* want to make, and would rather make it cohere, more than anybody else. Any rupture in that narrative is inadmissible, most of all, to me. Nor do I want it to be incomplete or fragmentary, unless I want you to know that I am completely out of my mind. But how is this related to Edson's peculiar story? Reading Edson's prose poems, I imagine that he is testing me whether I manage still to have my wits about me, whether I have given up on my story-telling rights. "Piano Lessons," surely, has designs on its readers. One way or another, we are bound to ask: Have we lost our world, our sensoria, to the electronically-monitored- and-surveilled environs, the televised

reality comprising soap, thriller, children's, doctor, police, wildlife-stories? If we have, Edson will surely suggest some plans for the restitution of our precious senses. Once we regain sanity, we shall be better placed to ask from whose situated perspective the poet has been telling his story, and whether we, as readers, share that same situated perspective. (It would only be logically fair, for example, to suppose that neither Melville's Bartleby nor the narrator of Calvino's "Last Channel" would have preferred to have his story told us by his employer or his detainers respectively.) To that end, Edson tries hard, I think, to make language *imagine* what human beings ordinarily won't or can't. It was perhaps to this most peculiar imagination that Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous image of language going on holiday appeals. One traces the genesis of philosophical problems, according to Wittgenstein, to those occasions when language goes on holiday (19). The 'nonsense' of "Piano Lessons" knows more about the sense we have lost purchase on than the sense we proudly claim to have won or kept in this age of information technology, virtual reality, and electronic superhighways. Perhaps it makes further sense to recall that the girl and the piano share a secret, the mentor now turning a sweet tormentor, the logic of which hardly appeals to Father and Mother who discharge no more than a choric function in this superb one-act.

Few stories urge us (like Sontag's, Calvino's, or Edson's) to reflect on the ethics of reading metaphors of stories in the lives before us. This is the first step toward considering not only 'what literature means' generally, but also how texts might mean to us as 'knowing' more than its makers had probably meant them to mean, and further perhaps toward the ends of literature. Edson's, like the company of tellers to which we have now aligned him, is an unusual *voice* whose address we find so irresistible and insistent. Much as we cannot gauge exactly the range and reach of electronic literacies or how they have affected our reading habits in globalized economies, we do realize nonetheless that

we are unequal readers and do read differently. We read the worlds we inhabit differently (recall Calvino's character in "The Last Channel") from those other worlds we fantasize about in reading and by watching media events. Many stories of the early twentieth century, those of Joyce and Faulkner for example, might perhaps point towards some sort of a spiritual and entelechic *niṣkāmakarma*, but here in Edson or Calvino, we find those who suffer with us epitomizing its exact opposite: *niṣkarmakāma* (vain pursuit of desires to the total neglect of one's bounden duty). This may not be as quite neat a formulation as many would like it, but we are round and about getting life's *dharma* right which, to my mind, is almost in danger of being lost in the virtual-reality-whirligig of our days and nights.

Perhaps to ask *Why Stories?* and still be entertained by the metaphors of the story we have sampled above, calls ideally for a posturing captured most brilliantly by Marianne Moore's prescription for reading modern poetry: *a perfect contempt.* If we are able to ever command such modernist heights while reading the postmodernist Edson fable, we shall also notice, with some amused irony, that in "Piano Lessons" familiarity didn't even get time to breed contempt before it bred "little pianos." *A perfect contempt*, surely, in Moore's sublime sense, is after all an asset worth having while metaphors rather than the stories call us to this new world.

NOTES

1. Ian Hacking would have loved this as an "advance notice" to his *Mad Travelers* (1998). His book tells many stories but the most gripping of them all is that of Albert Dadas who probably stands (or walks) at the head of a western tradition on which Hacking writes with such love and understanding.

2. For another take on the inherent paradox of stories, see # 14 below. I cannot but agree, as many before me have, with Friedrich Nietzsche's famous observation that human beings are prone to deceptive metaphorics involving themselves and others. Nietzsche observes: "But human beings themselves have an unconquerable urge to let themselves be deceived, and they are as if enchanted with happiness when the bard recites epic fairy-tales as if they were true, or when the actor in a play acts the king more regally than reality shows him to be." The heavily padded 'fiction' we read in most *Curriculum Vitae*, ours included, may be underwritten by this charity, especially after we read Nietzsche's line that follows this observation: "The intellect, that master of pretence, is free and absolved of its usual slavery for as long as it can deceive without *doing harm...*" (Italics in the original, 151). Strictly speaking, I have not yet known anyone's *CV* doing harm to a profession or institution if the person concerned doesn't.

3 Read # 7 below in order to see that the 'meaning' of our stories has so much indeed to do with authority. Not everyone can tell stories, can they?

4 Not quite integral to this reflection, nevertheless interesting as a 'story' is the claim made by Adam Phillips, the editor of the multivolume New Penguin Freud (2003) that his new Freud can now be read "as you would any great novelist" (Quoted in Parker 92). Andrew Parker suggests, but does not elaborate, what difference translation brings to the stories we read from the Standard Editions of Freud, Marx, and others (91ff.).

5 I remain indebted here to Ranajit Guha's Chapter 4 of *History at the Limit of World-History* for his comparative reading of western historiography and the Indian *itihāsa*, especially, 55ff. For those interested in further nuances of telling, Guha's comments on report, commentary, and personal account of experience in the Indian epic will be useful. Of course the scholarship on the narrative traditions of India is voluminous, but those interested in a friendly

metanarrative should read R. K. Narayan's remarks on the Indian raconteur in his "World of the Storyteller."

6 Barthes expressed "strong feelings" in writing the pieces for his *Mythologies*, angered as he was by "an implicit naturalizing psychology as though event and meaning coincided naturally." He attributed this "naturalizing psychology" to political regimes of the imperialist west. The phrases quoted are from Kristin Ross's essay (240) on reading *Mythologies* today.

7 For an illuminating, though brief, account of this historical phase of "intimate storytelling," see chapter 3 of *Just Words* by Alan Ackerman, especially, 125 ff.

8 Not quite the first place, according to Julia Kristeva who spatializes the semiotic. For her, *chora* is that preverbal space, presumably all lyrical and full of stories, that stages our conversations with Mother even before a child is born. In one crucial sense, *Why Stories?* can be easily answered if we understand that a child's subjectivity (narrative, basically) is constituted by both the 'symbolic' and the preverbal exchanges of the semiotic.

9 For a discussion of this topic in intertextual crosslight, see my "T. S. Eliot's Literary Adoption: 'Animula' and 'The Child' of H. E. Bates." *English Studies*, 88. 4 (2007): 418– 424.

10 I refer to Govind Nihalanai's *Ākrōś* (1980) starring Om Puri, Amrish Puri, Smita Patil, and Naseeruddin Shah.

11 *Provisional* allows both 'looking ahead' and being tentative for now. "We are tentative about meanings because we are looking ahead.... We speak 'under correction' because we are uncertain about the exactitude of our knowledge concerning the present and the past" (Hirsch, Jr. 222).

12 Amihud Gilead quotes another version in an essay which goes like this: "For sale: Baby shoes. Never used" (119).

13 This is a debate I had better not enter into at present, but the gist of my argument is closer to the following: "We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects by the resources

of his medium?" (Berger Jr. 248) The former fallacy is brought home by the episode in *Don Quixote* where the Knight and a galley slave meet. Asked whether he has finished his autobiography, the galley slave replies that he couldn't possibly *finish* it as long as he is alive. Who would live long enough to 'end' the autobiography still remains a theoretical problem. Another conundrum to which an unauthorized biographer has drawn our attention is more interesting. Only when celebrities are alive can biographies be authorized. The dead usually gain the best lives because their biographies as a rule are unauthorized. From the story-lovers' point of view, no amount of good writing can lessen or enhance the pleasure of holding some celebrity in esteem.

14 Ordinarily, on their own, most children stay out of danger unless their over-solicitous parents install 'security systems' and alarms that excite curious children and lure them to grievous calamity. An example of this is Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time."

15 For a brief discussion of the way social memory operates through stories, see Niles, 54 ff.

16 I haven't quite been able to assign the status of *dead letters* in the scheme of dynamic and static genres. Dead letters were once live, but once they have gone astray, are abandoned or mislaid, they begin to add stories of their own, like Poe's celebrated Purloined Letter.

17 See my essay, "Revolt from the Grave: *The Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters." *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 29. 4 (1988): 438–447.

18 I am reluctant to use the more familiar but widely misused concept and term *metafiction* for two important reasons. I do not believe, first, that metafiction can cover all the phenomena peculiar to a story of an on-the-spot-creation of a story by a writer (such as "Myself upon the Earth" by William Saroyan) to the extended and overtly critical forms and functions of the story (by such writers as J. C. Oates, John Barth, and Donald Barthelme). In fact, a successful case could be made for *all* fiction that has something or the other essentially of self-reflection. Second, the phenomenon in which I am interested here is not so much self-reflection (or self-reflexiveness) as the story being or beginning to be something other than what it is, or what we expect that it would be. In short, *the metaphors of the story* are worth considering: What, in other words, *are* they, if they are not stories? Or, what they would have

been if they fell short as stories? The latter begs an important question, which is that we know enough to recognize a piece of writing or speech-act as *story* because we surely and already know what *literary* is. In other words: metafiction presupposes that a piece of fiction is reflecting upon other fiction intertextually. We know however that not all tellers are literarily oriented in the stories they tell or in the manner they expect their stories to be heard.

19 A very good sample of a narrative cluster that might take any form in future is the following: "When female athlete Pinki Pramanik was arrested for 'rape', an MMS of the gold medallist undergoing a gender test went viral, and the Eastern Railways stripped her of her job. A leading fortnightly wondered then if anyone has bought movie rights to this story." *The Times of India*, Hyderabad edition, October 8, 2012: 10. I detect in every phrase of this passage a germinal story, each potentially translatable across a range of print-, film-, plastic-, or virtual-media. While which one of these will unfold as a *story* is debatable, are we justified in calling a commercial *brand* "a product narrative"? While the best brands are recognized by association of the stories they have made by advertisements or real consumer experiences, we have come far enough in this story to associate certain well known logos with stories.

20 The footnote, endnote, marginalia, etc. are all stories. They tell us stories, otherwise untold, of memorabilia and documents, scholarly resources and their users, the academic hit-parade, current fashions and trends, thoughts *pro* and *contra*, and in the most helpful cases of the evolutionary history of thought and discussion within and across disciplines. No other scholarly apparatus has been however so widely and long misused by authors of western scholarship than the footnote whose fortunes through at least two long centuries form the subject of Anthony Grafton's *Footnote: A Curious History*. No style-police has yet blown the final whistle on any of the most blatantly inappropriate uses of notes including chest-thumping self-citations, derisive dismissal of scholarly rivals, deflective afterthoughts on and lame excuses for omissions and peccadillos, account of needlessly laborious work calculated to impress non-professionals, largely misplaced and ill-conceived excursus into tangential issues and worries, and the intellectual "grafting" of the sort Derrida would have derided. The least abusive footnote or endnote practice is the passage we are offered as a remark or an aside in a take-it-or-leave-it spirit. Its content is usually some throw-away information, something incidental and adventitious that might interrupt the progress of the main text but matter nonetheless of some potential value and application by

readers. In the best scholarly traditions many suggestive and promising lines for future investigation and inquiry appear among the endnotes and *addenda*. For all its strengths, Grafton's book is remiss in not quite addressing what many professional writers instinctively command: *the footnote/endnote logic*.

21 "Description (of a Description)" was first published in *Antaeus* (Autumn1984). I have, however, quoted from the reprint in *Facing Texts* (1988).

22 In a podcast called "Video Games and the Future of Storytelling" Salman Rushdie says: "There are all kinds of excursions and digressions that you can choose to go on and find mini stories .... that really interests me as a storyteller... to tell the story sideways" (bigthink.com). In an excellent discussion of Virtual Reality as a semiotic phenomenon, Marie-Laure Ryan devotes some pages to the empathetic readers' immersion in the material texts they read. Her remarks on the "disembodied consciousness of the impersonal narrator" will interest a reader of Sontag's "Description...". This narrative consciousness, according to Ryan, "can apprehend the fictional world from any perspective, adopt any member of the fictional world as focalizer, select any spatial location as post of observation, narrate in any temporal direction (retrospectively, simultaneously, even prospectively), and switch back and forth among these various narrative modes" (118–119). What strikes me as most apt in Ryan's observation here is her later remark that "Fiction, like VR, allows an experience of its *reference* world..." (119, emphasis added). For Sontag achieves the nearly impossible effects for readers in taking them out of the material book while keeping them firmly within a printed book's protocols of reference.

23 I allude to Barth's famous essay called "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1968) where he suggested that writers since the 1960s appear to have felt that fiction has been virtually used up but have soldiered on exploring the very theme of the 'used-upness' of fiction. Much has been made of this essay and its sequel ("The Literature of Replenishment," 1979) by writers of fiction and their critics but Barth couldn't help feeling that they missed the whole context of his idea that he seemed to debate with his "master," Jorge Luis Borges. Many years later, in 1991, Barth had the following to say about this idea: "I would have liked, I guess, to teach my teacher: to make clear to Borges that I've never thought literature to be exhausted or exhaustible (as, evidently, he thought I thought); only that felt ultimacies in an artistic or cultural generation can

become a considerable cultural-historical datum in themselves, turnable against themselves by a virtuoso to generate lively new work" ("Borges and I: a mini-memoir" 178).

24 My translation. Addressing their Guru, the pupils break into English ("You are great, but...") in the original. They ask for the *gutens* of this parable, a word I have avoided using in my translation. *Gutens* is an interesting word here because it is *not* a Malayalam word and is not known to have descended from either Dravidic or Sanskrit word-stock. It is a strange word used by Malayalees in order to highlight the mystery of a case in question. A rough equivalent of *gutens* would be what most native speakers of English generally understand by *gist*, or *secret* that helps interpret an idea or phenomenon. It is further interesting that the pupils instinctively seek *gutens* here because in the hoary western tradition of story-telling, a parable is a *dark* saying; only in the light of interpretation is its *gutens* clear or accessible.

25 "The original Greek word [for *parable*]," according to Mark Turner, "had a much wider, schematic meaning: the tossing or projecting of one thing alongside another. The Greek word could be used of placing one thing against another, staking one thing to another, even tossing fodder beside a horse.... *Parable is the projection of a story*.... Literary works known as parables may reside within fiction, but the mental instrument I call parable has the widest utility in the everyday mind" (7).

26 This is Erving Goffman's phrase for the capacity of human beings involved in an activity to carry on with a topic/action/address while withdrawing attention from another topic/action/address that compete for their attention. On the disattend track, says Goffman, might be consigned "a range of potentially distracting events, some a threat to appropriate involvement because they are immediately present, others a threat in spite of having their prime location elsewhere" (202).

27 At a recent art-cum-documentary exhibition in Kerala called "Marx is Correct," sponsored by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), a painting depicting Jesus Christ among the victims of capitalist/class-inimical oppression created public furore. Christ, ran the legend below the painting, "was a social reformer who emancipated the Jews from slavery." Many church-leaders and political spokespeople of Kerala condemned the appropriation of Jesus Christ by a Communist party ideologically opposed to religious beliefs and

worship. The Catholic priesthood in Kerala saw in this art-work a political strategy to win over the Christians to the Leftist fold during the forthcoming public elections.

28 Perhaps *beyond* the apartheid stereotypes as well, if we consider the proliferation of gated communities throughout the western and other worlds. Literature on the 'politics' of exclusionary safety and obsessive distance from all potential trouble is vast. "It is a defensive, possessive, anxiety-driven politics," explains David Morley whose chapter on "The Media, the City and the Suburbs" (128–148) devotes bibliographically-rich sections to this phenomenon in the suburbs.

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INDEX

The reflections and essays here engage older questions on narratives in new light rather than try to answer the complex questions of human lives, and the stories we make of them. Not only has 'story' changed since its first telling, but the innumerable ways in which tellers and listeners construe their stories. *Why Stories?* explores some of those crucial questions central to our narrative consciousness. While its cross-cultural perspectives invite further thought, they suggest how diverse traditions of the story cannot but ask the titular question differently in our time. The concluding essay examines a handful of stories as they morph into tropes where the human beings who make them appear (or fail to appear) to give complete or satisfactory account of themselves. The longer such stories defy designations and protocols of the scholarly archive, their makers (Susan Sontag, Italo Calvino, Gracy, Nadine Gordimer, Russell Edson…) seem to pose 'Why Stories?' yet again in their own distinctive voices and ways.

K. NARAYANA CHANDRAN has been a teacher of English for about 40 years. Educated in Kerala and Bombay, he taught colleges in Kerala; the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay; and the Central Institute of English & Foreign Languages, Hyderabad before joining the English Department at the University of Hyderabad in 1986. He continues to work there as Professor.

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