

JACK GOODY

From Oral to Written: An Anthropological Breakthrough in Storytelling

The telling of tales is often thought to be characteristic of all human discourse, and it is fashionable to speak of narrative as a universal form of expression, one that is applied both to the life experiences of individuals and to the dramas of social interaction. Storytelling in oral cultures in turn is seen as the foundation on which the novel is built in literate ones, and the activity is regarded as the focus of much creativity. Blind Homer was the model, putting all his nonliterate imagination into the epic. In discussing storytelling we are clearly leading into the topics of fiction and the novel. But not all storytelling is fictional; it can also involve personal narratives. However, although typically it is associated with oral cultures, with “the singer [or teller] of tales,”¹ in his article on the subject, Walter Benjamin sees the storyteller disappearing with the arrival of the novel, whose dissemination he associates with the advent of printing, and no longer directly linked with experience in the same way as before.²

The timing of the appearance of the novel is subject to discussion. Mikhail Bakhtin uses the term *novel* (or “novelness”) in a much more extended sense. But in dealing with origins more concretely, he traces three types: the novel of “adventure time” back to the Greek romances of the second century C.E., the novel of everyday time in the story of *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius, and the “chronotope” centered on biographical time, although this does not produce any novels at this period. All three forms are harbingers of the modern novel.³ That is basically a product of the arrival of printing in the late fifteenth century, but as we see from these early examples, the nature of storytelling had already radically changed with the coming of writing. Indeed, I want to argue that, contrary to much received opinion, *narrative* (already in 1566, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, used for “an account, narration, a tale, recital”) is not so much a universal feature of the human situation as one that is promoted by literacy and subsequently by printing.

¹ Lord 1960.

² Benjamin 1968a: 87.

³ Clark and Holquist 1984, chap. 13, “The theory of the novel.” Doody 1997 rejects the categorical distinction, found only in English, between romance and novel, placing the origin of the latter in ancient Greece.

4 A STRUGGLE FOR SPACE

Today the word *narrative* has come to have an iconic, indeed a cant, significance in Western literary and social science circles. I suggest a rather different approach, using the term in a much tighter way, implying a plot with a firm sequential structure, marked by a beginning, a middle, and an end in the Aristotelian manner. Otherwise, one becomes involved in a kind of extension similar to that which Derrida has tried to give to *writing*, in which term he includes all “traces,” including memory traces. That usage makes it impossible to make the at times essential distinction between written archives and memory banks. The same is true for the use of the word *literature* for oral genres, what I call standard oral forms, since this usage obscures important analytical differences. Likewise, narrative is sometimes held to include any vaguely sequential discourse. “What is the narrative?” is the often heard cry. When I employ the term, I do so in an altogether tighter sense, as a standard form that has a definite plot that proceeds by structured stages.

Let me take a recent, authoritative example of the wider usage. In his book, *The Political Unconscious* (1981), which is subtitled *Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Fredric Jameson sees his task as attempting to “restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of *narrative*, which I take to be . . . the central function or *instance* of the human mind.”⁴ There is little one can say about such a terrifyingly inclusive aim centered on such an all-embracing concept of the process of narrative. He is not alone in this usage. Some psychologists view storytelling as a prime mode of cognition; at a recent conference on competences, philosophers proposed the creation of narrative as one of the key competencies of humankind.

In attempting to query this and similar assumptions, I want also to tackle another. In an article on “the narrative structure of reality,” reflecting another all-inclusive use of this term, Stuart Hall remarks, “we make an absolutely too simple and false distinction between narratives about the real and the narratives of fiction, that is, between news and adventure stories.”⁵ Is that really too simple and false? In my experience the distinction exists, if not universally, at least transculturally. Indeed, I would suggest it is an intrinsic feature of linguistic discourse. How do we know someone is not deceiving us, telling us a fiction, a story, if we make no distinction?

As Orwell observes about Catalonia in his “Looking Back on the Spanish

⁴ Jameson 1981: 13.

⁵ *Southern Review*, Adelaide, 17 (1984): 3–17, quoted in Sommerville 1996: 173.

Civil War,” “This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all, the chances are that those lies or at any rate similar lies will pass into history.”⁶ Whether what we are being told is a fiction or a deliberate lie (implying intentionality), both are departures from the literal truth. It does not matter to me in this context whether there is philosophical justification for objective truth, a correspondence theory of truth. I need only an acknowledgment of the fact that the actors need to distinguish between truth and untruth.

It is true that psychology, psychoanalysis, and perhaps sociology too, have qualified our view of the lie from the standpoint of the individual, in an attempt to elicit the reasons why people do not tell the truth. But in dyadic interaction, in social communication between two or more persons, the question of the truth or untruth of a statement remains critical. Did he or did he not post the letter I gave him as he claimed? Untruth may not be a lie. It may also involve fantasy or fiction, fantasy being the latter’s nonrealistic equivalent. Fantasy does not invite a literal comparison with a truthful account of events at the surface level. But fiction may do just that, may make a claim to truth value. That was the difference between romances and novels in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The realistic novels of Defoe and others deliberately invite an assessment of the truth or otherwise of the tale. The writers often claim truth for fiction—not the underlying experiential truth but literal, factual truth.

The distinction runs parallel to that commonly made between history and myth, marked respectively by linear and circular time; the former in effect requires the availability of documents and hence of writing, but its absence does not exclude a sense of the past in oral cultures, of which myth is only one variety of “history,” in the formal meaning of a study based on the examination of documents. We might wish to qualify this distinction for our own purposes, but there can be little doubt that it emerged within the actor’s frame of reference; the Homeric *mythos* was set apart from *historia* and even *logos*, both of which implied some assessment of truth.⁷

In the absence of writing, communication in oral cultures has to rely largely on speech. Yet experience in Africa suggests that such discourse rather rarely consisted in the telling of tales, if by that we mean personal and fictional stories created for adults. The LoDagaa of northern Ghana certainly make a distinction of this kind between what I translate as “proper

⁶ Orwell 1968.

⁷ Goody and Watt 1963: 321 ff.

speech” (*yil miong*) and lies (*ziiri*), between truth and falsehood. Proper speech would include what I have translated as “The Myth of the Bagre,” but that recitation itself raises the question of whether what it offers is a lie or whether it is God’s way, God’s truth. Folktales are not referred to as lies, since they make no claim to the truth, but neither are they truth (for example, animals speak and behave like humans); as I shall claim, such tales are largely addressed to children, and they do verge upon the lie in the Platonic sense, as we see from the account of a LoDagaa writer.

For the problem with fictional narrative emerges from another angle in a rather imaginative autobiography by a member of this same LoDagaa group, Malidoma Somé, who claims his people make no distinction between the natural and supernatural or between reality and the imagined (which I doubt). Somé is described in his book, *Of Water and the Spirit*, as “a medicine man and diviner” as well as holding a Ph.D. from Brandeis and giving lectures at a spiritual center in America. He decides to test the absence of these distinctions by showing the elders of his African village a videotape of *Star Trek*. They interpret the film as portraying “the current affairs in the day-to-day lives of some other people living in the world. . . . I could not make them understand,” he writes, “that all this was not real. Even though stories abound in my culture, we have no word for fiction. The only way I could get across to them the Western concept of fiction was to associate fiction with telling lies.”⁸ That assertion corresponds with my own experience, at least as far as adults are concerned.

Truthful narratives among the LoDagaa, in my own experience, would be those relating to one’s own personal life, perhaps accounts of labor migration to the gold mines in the south of the country or those of local feuds or wars that happened before the coming of the colonial conquerors early last century. Stories of this kind are occasionally told, but their place is rather marginal; narrative and storytelling, even nonfictional, are hardly as central as is visualized by those seeking to reconstruct the forms of discourse in early literate culture and supposedly inherited from yet earlier purely oral ones.

The discussions of Derrida, Hall, and Jameson seem to me to represent the elimination or neglect of historically and analytically useful distinctions in a misguided, postmodern-influenced drive against “binarism” and toward holism. In fact the distinctions we have adopted do not threaten the overall unity of the *esprit humain*, the human mind, nor do they necessarily embody a we/they view of the world.

⁸ Somé 1994: 8–9.

Turning more specifically to the question of narrative in oral cultures, there are five aspects I want to look at: legends, epics, myths, folktales, and finally, personal narratives. The epic is a distinctly narrative form, partly fictional, though often having a basis in heroic deeds on the field of battle. It is defined as a kind of narrative poetry that celebrates the achievements of some heroic personage of history or tradition (that is, which may have a quota of fact). The great scholar of early literature, Hector Chadwick, saw the epic as the typical product of what he called the Heroic Age, peopled by chiefs, warriors, and tribesmen (1932–40). Since this genre is usually regarded as emerging in preliterate societies, much academic research has been directed at trying to show that, for example, the Homeric poems, as epics, were composed in preliterate rather than literate cultures. During the 1930s, the Harvard classical scholars, Milman Parry (1971) and Albert Lord (1960), made a series of recordings of songs in Yugoslav cafés and aimed to show that their style, especially in the use of formulaic expressions, made them representative of epics of the oral tradition. However, Yugoslavia was by no means a purely oral culture, and its verbal forms were strongly influenced by the presence of writing, and especially of written religions. Some of the recitations actually appeared as texts in songbooks that were available to the “singers of tales,” and there was reference back and forth. It is also the case more generally that the societies of the Heroic Age during which the epic flourished were ones where early literacy was present. By contrast, in the purely oral cultures of Africa, the epic is a rarity, except on the southern fringes of the Sahara, which have been much influenced by Islam and by its literary forms.

Africa south of the Sahara was until recently one of the main areas of the world where writing was totally absent; that was also the case in recent times with parts of South America (together with Australasia and the Pacific). Most of South America was transformed by the Spanish and Portuguese in the sixteenth century, though a few remote areas escaped their overwhelming, hegemonic influence. Africa offers the most straightforward case, even though influenced by the written civilizations of Europe in the West, of the Mediterranean in the North and of the Arabs in the East. It is also a continent whose oral literature has received much attention. The main work of synthesis has been carried out by Ruth Finnegan. On the epic she is very definite: “Epic is often assumed to be the typical poetic form of non-literate peoples. . . . Surprisingly, however, this does not seem to be borne out by the African evidence. At least in the more obvious sense of a ‘relatively long narrative poem,’ epic hardly seems to occur in sub-Saharan Africa apart from forms like the [written] Swahili *utenzi* which are directly attributable to

Arabic literary influence.”⁹ What has been called epic in Africa is often prose rather than poetry, though some of the lengthy praise poems of South Africa have something of an epic quality about them. Otherwise most frequently mentioned are the Mongo-Nkundo tales from the Congo; these too are mainly prose and resemble other African examples in their general features. The most famous is the Lianja epic, running to 120 pages of print for text and translation. It covers the birth and tribulations of the hero, his travels, the leadership of his people, and finally his death. Finnegan suggests that the original form might have been “a very loosely related bundle of separate episodes, told on separate occasions and not necessarily thought of as one single work of art (though recent and sophisticated narrators say that ideally it should be told at one sitting).”¹⁰ In other words a similar type of amalgamation of short tales may have taken place under the impact of writing, as apparently occurred with the Gilgamesh epic of Mesopotamia.

We do find some poetry of a legendary kind in the *mvet* literature of the Fang peoples of Gabon and the Cameroons, as well as in the recitations of the *griot* among the Mande south of the Sahara. She concludes: “In general terms and apart from Islamic influences, epic seems to be of remarkably little significance in African oral literature, and the *a priori* assumption that epic is the natural form for many non-literate peoples turns out here to have little support.”¹¹

Since Finnegan’s earlier book, the picture with regard to longer compositions has somewhat changed, both in respect to “mythical” and to “legendary” (including epic) material. As far as longer myths are concerned, we now have two published versions of the Bagre of the LoDagaa,¹² the first consisting of some twelve thousand short lines, and taking some eight hours to recite. This work is concerned not with the deeds of heroes (as in epics) but with the creation of the human world, with the position of humankind in relation to its God and its gods, with problems of philosophy and of life.

It contrasts sharply with the recitation of the *griots* of Bambara and Mali, whose products may well have been influenced by Islamic literature. The *griots* (the word is in general use) are a type of minstrel belonging to an endogamous castelike group. They mainly perform at the courts of chiefs but also on other secular, public occasions, for the societies in which they are found are kingdoms, unlike the acephalous, tribal LoDagaa where praise

⁹ Finnegan 1970: 108.

¹⁰ Finnegan 1970: 109.

¹¹ Finnegan 1970: 110.

¹² Goody 1972; Goody and Gandah 1981; plus a number of unpublished versions.

singing is little developed and legends are no more than migration histories of the clan or lineage.¹³

Listen to the account of his profession given by the *griot* Tinguidji, who was recorded by Seydou:

Nous, le mâbos, nous ne quémandons, qu'auprès des nobles: là où il y a un noble, j'y suis aussi. Un mâbo ne se préoccupe pas de ce qui n'a pas de valeur: s'il voit un pauvre et qu'il quémande auprès de lui, s'il le voit dénué de tout et qu'il le loue, s'il en voit un qui en a l'air et qu'il le loue, un mâbo qui agit de la sorte, ne vaut rien. Moi, celui qui ne m'est pas supérieur, je ne le loue pas. Celui qui n'est pas plus que moi, je ne le loue pas; je lui donne. Voilà comment je suis, moi, Tinguidji.¹⁴

It would be wrong to assume that all the activities of the *griots* were directed toward pleasing or praising the aristocracy in return for largesse. There were some who adopted an aggressive attitude toward the world in general, "griots vulgaires et sans scrupules dont le seul dessein est d'extorquer cadeaux et faveurs et qui, pour cela, manient avec autant de desinvolture et d'audace la louange et l'insulte le panégyrique dithyrambique et la diatribe vindicative, la langue noble et l'argot le plus grossier."¹⁵ Apart from these differences of approach, *griots* differed in other ways, but all belonged to the "gens castés," the *nyeenybe*, which included smiths, woodcarvers, leather workers, weavers (who are also singers, the *mâbo*). These minstrels, "artisans du verbe et de l'art musical," included the following:

the *intellectuel-griots* who have studied the Qur'an
the *awlube*, or drummers, who are attached to a particular family whose
history, genealogy, and praises they sing
the *jeeli* of Mandingo origin, who play many instruments, are unattached,
and make their living by their profession
the *nyemakala*, wandering singers and guitarists who organize evening
entertainments¹⁶

The *intellectuel-griots* were those who studied the Qur'an, giving support to Finnegan's point about Islamic influences. The bulk of the epics in Africa

¹³ Goody 1977.

¹⁴ Seydou 1972: 13–14.

¹⁵ Seydou 1972: 15.

¹⁶ Seydou 1972: 17–20.

are found on the fringes of the Sahara where such influences are strong and of long duration. The Fulani epic of Silâmaka and Poullôri recounts the story of a chief's son and his slave together with a companion who attempt to relieve their country of its debt of tribute. It is an epic of chiefship recited within a culture that was linked to the written tradition of Islam; A.-H. Bâ has described the society of that time as village-based, with each village headed by a man who was literate in Arabic,¹⁷ but in any case, the language and its literature were known throughout the towns of the region, influencing the nature of local life and thought, especially its artistic forms as well as its history.¹⁸

Under these conditions, narrative recitations of an epic kind appear. The model is provided by Islamic tradition; they are found in complex chiefdoms, the rulers of which are served by professionals of various kinds, including praise singers. Being focused on the past deeds of the chiefly ancestors (the history of the state), such songs take upon themselves a narrative format, recounting struggles of heroes of earlier times.

It should be pointed out that the content of this Fulani epic was "fixed" in certain broad features but varied enormously in its telling. Seydou describes how the legend crossed frontiers and was spread by the mouths of *griots* who, "chacun à sa guise et selon son art propre, l'ont enrichi, transformé, remanié à partir d'éléments divers empruntés à d'autres récits. So the epic ended up as "une véritable geste dont il serait fort instructif de reconstituer le cycle complet, tant dans la littérature bambara que dans le peuple," that is, in Fulani.¹⁹ As a result we find a great number and variety of versions²⁰ that develop one particular episode and exalt this or that hero, because it is recited for both the contending parties in the struggle, the Fulani and the Bambara. Each time the *griots* are playing to a specific but varying audience. They live by the responses of that audience; they travel, play the lute, and change their story to fit the community in which they are working. In other words, while the Fulani epic, like the epic in general, seems to occur in a society influenced by writing, the form it takes varies considerably depending on the bard, the time, the situation. Such variants should not to my mind be regarded as part of a definitive cycle, for that exists only when inventiveness has stopped and the epic has been circumscribed in text, but rather as part of an expanding universe around a narrative theme.

¹⁷ Seydou 1972: 81.

¹⁸ Hiskett 1957; Wilks 1963; Hodgkin 1966.

¹⁹ Seydou 1972: 9–10.

²⁰ For example, Veillard 1931; Bâ and Kesteloot 1969.

Both Finnegan (1992) and Tedlock (1983) reject the proposition that the epic is characteristically a feature of purely oral cultures and associate it with the early literate cultures of the Old World. Finnegan works mainly on Africa, Tedlock on the Americas. The latter concludes that the only “epic texts with long metrical runs come from folk traditions within larger literate cultures.”²¹ However, in commenting on these conclusions, Rumsey claims that recitations found among a group of neighboring societies in the New Guinea Highlands do constitute “an oral epic tradition.” The examples he gives have a strong narrative content and are marked by formulaic repetition of the kind to which Parry and Lord draw attention in their analysis of Yugoslavian songs. He discusses two kinds of story, *kange* and *temari*, which have been assimilated to the European distinction between “fiction” and “fact”²² but which others have seen as having more to do with the distinction between the world of narrated events and the here-now world from which they are being narrated.²³ Nevertheless, some kind of “truth value” does seem to be involved. *Kange* tend to be told indoors, at night, after the evening meal. A single individual holds the floor for ten to twenty minutes, and there is a turn-taking rule with a “ratified speaker.” Some stories are told by women but to children rather than to the world at large.

Rumsey compares these tales to European epics. But while they are certainly narrative and many have a central heroic character, they are short recitations, mostly running between three hundred and seven hundred lines in length. It is not part of my intent to deny the presence of fictional narrative in oral cultures, merely to say that long narratives are rare and any narrative at all less frequent than has often been thought, because I would suggest, of the inherent problems of fiction. The fact that Rumsey finds (short) epics in the New Guinea Highlands and that Finnegan denies them for black Africa and Tedlock for the Americas in itself raises a problem of presence and absence. Why should such a problem exist at all? Why are epics, defined by Tedlock as “a heroic narrative with a metrical, sung text,”²⁴ relatively rare in oral cultures? Why do narratives, especially fictional ones, not dominate the discourse of oral cultures, especially in artistic genres, in the way that much contemporary theory about storytelling requires? I am referring here not only to long, substantial recitations. The so-called epics from the New Guinea Highlands are quite short and involve a single speaker holding the

²¹ Tedlock 1983: 8.

²² Rumsey forthcoming.

²³ Merlan 1995.

²⁴ Tedlock 1983: 8.

floor for ten or twenty minutes. Even if we were to see these tales as epics (and they are certainly narrative), we have a problem of presence and absence that needs to be faced beyond saying that this distribution is “cultural.” That is a question to which I will return later.

What about other forms of narrative, of storytelling? Legends are often linked to epics, but do not take the same metrical form. Despite their presumed association with the written word (*legenda*, what is read) and their connection with written saints tales and the like, they are also found in oral cultures—in tribal ones in the form of clan histories, and in chiefdoms in the form of dynastic ones. In the latter case they are often much more fragmentary than is often thought; in some cases the state histories take the form of drum titles for chiefs and of chronicles rather than narratives in a stronger sense.

Once again myths, which are perhaps the most studied genre, are too often assumed to be universal. Mythologies are (in the sense of universal constructions of a supernatural order) but myths in the sense of long, supernaturally oriented recitations, of the type recorded for the Zuni of North America or the Bagre of the LoDagaa, which take hours to recite, are very unevenly distributed and much less narrative in form, however, than the early Hindu Mahabratra or even the Gilgamesh “epic” of Mesopotamia (both creations of literate cultures) would lead us to suppose. Myths are standard oral forms; mythologies are bodies of beliefs in the supernatural derived from a multiplicity of sources and reconstructed by the observer, as in the case of the *Mythologiques* of Claude Lévi-Strauss.²⁵

Myth does a number of different things. It has some narrative element. But the importance of that has been greatly exaggerated by the collectors of myths (and mythologies), who have asked their respondents for stories and not cared much about the philosophical, theological, and wisdom aspects of the recitation. That is an error that has led in the past, before the portable tape recorder, to considerable misconceptions. At one level I would liken the Bagre to the Bible in the number of tasks it performs. There is the etiological narrative in Genesis, the “wisdom” of Proverbs, and the ritual prescriptions of Leviticus. But there is not a sequential narrative or even continuity running throughout. Hartman (1999) writes not only of its uniqueness but of its unity. Every piece of writing is at some level unique, but that is not I think what is being said. In any case, unity is not the obvious characteristic; books have been aggregated together as a canon almost haphazardly; the unity is given by the ritual context, not by the text.

²⁵ Lévi-Strauss 1969.

What I have called “the Myth of the Bagre” found among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana will serve as an example. It concerns serious supernatural affairs, falling under the category of “proper speech,” and it is associated with membership in the Bagre society, which is held to confer medical (and in a sense spiritual) benefits. This long recitation takes six to eight hours to perform in the accepted fashion, with each phrase (or “line” in my transcription) being repeated by the audience of neophytes and members (their guides), and then the whole process is repeated twice yet again by other Speakers. The time taken varies with the Speaker and the degree of elaboration he employs, as well as with the point in the ceremony at which the recitation takes place. It consists of two parts, the White and the Black. The first is an account of the different ceremonies that are held over several weeks, and it is recited up to the point in the sequence that has been reached. The Black, on the other hand, is intended only for the ears of those men (women are now excluded) who have passed through the first initiation and includes some account of how mankind was created (and how he learned to create himself) as well as how he came to acquire the basic elements of his culture, that is, farming, hunting, the raising of livestock, the making of iron, and the brewing of beer.

This is “proper speech” because it concerns man’s relationship with the supernatural, especially with the beings of the wild who act as intermediaries, sometimes mischievous, between man and God. And while the outsider may look upon the recitation as “myth,” as an imaginative expression of man’s relationship with the world and with the divine, for the LoDagaa it is real enough, even though the possibility that it is false is often raised. Indeed, the salvation against trouble, including death itself, that the Bagre medicine offers to new initiates is subsequently shown in the Black Bagre to be an illusion; hopes are raised, only later to be crushed.

However, the point that I want to make here is that, leaving aside the question of fiction, of truth or falsehood, the narrative content of the recitation is limited. A certain framework is provided for the White Bagre, the account of the ceremonies, which explains how the Bagre was started after consultation with a diviner following a series of troubles adjudged to have divine origins. There is obviously a sequence in the account of the ceremonies and of their associated prohibitions and injunctions. But this hardly takes a narrative form. What we do find, on three or four occasions, is short narratives, resembling folktales, embedded in the recitation at certain points in the context of a particular ceremony. Denys Page has remarked upon similar modules embedded in the Homeric poems.²⁶ These tales do assume a

²⁶ Page 1973.

definitive narrative form, with a beginning, middle, and an end. They also seem to require a different commitment regarding 'belief' than the bulk of the recitation.

The Black Bagre begins in a more promising manner as far as narrative is concerned. The elder of two "brothers" experiences troubles that he attributes to mystical causes. He consults a diviner to find out which ones. As a result, he sets out on a long and arduous journey, which takes him to the Other World. Coming across a river, probably that separating this world from the other, he meets an old man, probably the High God, and with the aid of the spider, climbs up to Heaven (to "God's country"). There he meets "a slender young girl" and the High God shows them how a child is created in a mystical way. The recitation continues at length with the man and woman quarrelling about the ownership of the male child and his education. Meanwhile they are introduced, with the aid of the beings of the wild ("fairies"), to various aspects of LoDagaa culture, to the making of iron, the cultivation of crops, the brewing of beer, and eventually to the procreation, rather than the creation, of children. While a loose narrative frame exists, the greater part of the recitation concerns the description of central aspects of culture, especially its technological processes. And much of the rest deals with philosophical problems (like the problem of evil) and theological ones (like the relationship between the High God and the beings of the wild). Narrativity is not the dominant characteristic. And even these long recitations, myths, are very unevenly distributed. The LoDagaa have them; none of their neighbors apparently do.

What does seem to be universal, at least in the Old World, are folktales. We find these everywhere, often in a surprisingly similar form—short tales, sometimes followed by an inconsequential tail or end, involving as actors humans, animals, and often gods. We may think of the Akan Ananse stories (with the Spider as trickster) as prototypical, together with their Caribbean variants, the Nancy tales of Brer Rabbit.

Those tales have been taken by some observers as representative of primitive thought. Frequently they are envisaged as being told around the evening fire to a mixed audience. My own experience in West Africa is rather different. Such stories, like those in the works of the brothers Grimm, are mainly aimed at children and do not represent the thought of adults in oral cultures. By far the greater part are short folktales (fairy tales) of the kind told to children, not the fare of ordinary adult consumption. They represent primitive mentality only to the extent that "Jack and the Beanstalk" in Europe today can be held to represent contemporary modernity. They are set aside as children's discourse. Indeed, fiction generally is for the young;

adults demand more serious matter, not fictional stories of life or of the Other World, but truthful or near-truthful accounts. The possibility that these are the main forms of narrative fiction in many oral cultures carries another implication, that fiction itself is seen as appropriate for children but not perhaps for adults.

Finally we come to personal narratives. In psychoanalysis the “talking cure” requires both analyst and analysand to construct a case history out of fragmentary conversations, histories that appear in the form of Freud’s Dora or the Wolfman. The case history is never produced autonomously but is elicited and created; and it is a creation of a literate society and of literate procedures; like the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh or the contemporary Mungo epic in all probability, it represents a piecing together of fragments to form a continuous narrative, which is never (or very rarely) given to the inquirer on a plate, except in writing.

It seems natural that we should create a narrative summary of our lives, for incorporation in a résumé, for presentation to an analyst, or for elaboration in a diary or an autobiography. But how far are such narratives called for in purely oral cultures? I can think of few if any situations where this happens. It is I, the anthropologist, the psychologist, the historian, who tries to construct life histories (like other histories) from the fragments of knowledge that have come my way, or from the arduous struggle of asking questions and getting one’s respondent to respond, to articulate for me what no other situation would prompt him or her to do. Life histories do not emerge automatically; they are heavily constructed. The constructed nature of case histories is superbly brought out by Gilbert Lewis in his *A Failure of Treatment* (2000). The history does not exactly traduce the “facts,” but it gives a narrative shape to the fragments of experience that present themselves in quite a different way.

The partial exceptions I have encountered are in visits to a diviner, where he provokes a response by asking what the problem is, or in accounts of past events in hearings of dispute cases in moots and courts. However, in both instances narrative recollection is not elaborated into a complete life history but focused on the situation at hand. The diviner will prompt questions from the client that his paraphernalia of divining instruments will attempt to answer; in moots and courts we have more structured narrative accounts of the dispute, but directed to that incident, even though the notion of relevance may be more inclusive than is usual in a contemporary Western court.

Narrativity, the narrative, and above all the fictional narrative, does not seem to me a prominent characteristic of most oral cultures. The rise of narrative, or of lengthy stories at any rate, is associated with written cultures. It

is true that one finds, but very unevenly distributed, some recitations like that of the Bagre, but they are justified by their religious “truth.” They can be regarded as fictional only in the same sense that the Old or New Testaments can be so considered.

This absence is not only a matter of the juvenile status of much fiction, of its imaginative relation with “truth.” Part of the problem with long recitations is the attention they demand. The situation of an audience sitting round listening quietly to any long recitation seems to me a rare occurrence. Most discourse is dialogic; the listener reacts to what he hears, interrupting any long sequence. One may begin to listen for a short while to an individual’s account of his voyage to Kumasi when he went to work down the mines or to another’s account of a holiday in Mallorca. But he or she will not in real life be allowed to continue for long without some interruption, such as “I myself had an experience like that.” The exception is when a monologue, because that is the nature of narrative, is validated by its supernatural character or context. One is hearing not about mundane matters but about the work of the gods. So such “mythical” accounts tend to be told in ritual contexts where attention is required for magico-religious reasons. It is ritual, ceremony, rather than narrative that is the focus of the recitation, which is often much less a purely storytelling exercise than the term narrative suggests—more like the diversity of discourse we find in the Bible. And in any case, for the listener it is not fiction.

The Novel

Walter Benjamin saw the advent of the novel as putting an end to storytelling (which he sees as basically a speech form), an end that began with the introduction of printing to Europe at the end of the fifteenth century. Lévi-Strauss considered that myth gave way to the novel at the beginning of the eighteenth century. My earlier argument has suggested that storytelling, at least to adults, and indeed narrative in general, received much less emphasis in preliterate cultures than has been assumed. The break came with the coming of the written word. Writing takes place in private. We construct an autobiography, like a diary, in private. Privacy means that we do not face the problem of direct, unmediated communication to an audience, the problem of interruption or its authoritarian suppression; we have the peace and leisure to construct. Of course later on the writing will probably become a public document. And in so doing it sets a model, an agenda, even for orally composed recollection of one’s past. Literacy imposes its own pattern on the

self-narrative and sets the stage for medical, sociological, psychological, analytic, inquiries where the individual is asked to provide a history, a curriculum vitae. There is feedback from what the written has encouraged and achieved. Narratives, monologues, long recitations, are encouraged by writing. The products include some brands of fiction or fictionlike forms, such as epics of a heroic character or legends like saints' lives. The problems to which fictional narratives earlier gave rise in oral cultures are still there, and that is perhaps one reason why the novel appeared so late on the scene, when printing was available to diffuse it rather than with writing alone. When it does appear, it signals the blossoming of narrative, which subsequently makes its mark in film and in the electronic media.

It is not difficult to see how narrative, the telling of true or fictional stories, was encouraged by writing. Writing automatically involves distance between the teller of tale and the audience in quite a different way from oral storytelling. Both the teller and the reader have time to reflect on what they are doing, either writing or reading, whereas the speaker is in immediate contact with the audience. A sheet of blank paper and a pen is an invitation to produce a narrative of structured recollections or of imaginative invention. One begins at the top of the page and continues to the foot, then goes on to the next. One is (relatively) uninterrupted in the writing as well as in the reading. Human discourse does not work like that; a speaker is constantly being interrupted because, except in authoritarian situations, discourse is dialogic, interactive. A story begins and is interrupted by an interlocutor: "That reminds me of a time . . ." So that the teller does not get the chance to finish a tale, or even a speech, before another breaks in. From one point of view there is no real division between speaker and audience. All are speakers, all are listeners (of a kind), and the conversation proceeds in starts and stops, often in incomplete sentences and nearly always in unfinished narratives.

Of course there are occasions in an oral culture when a speaker commands an authoritative position and delivers a continuous speech, either directed to a specific occasion or in a standard oral form (which would be "literature" if written). These occasions are rare and special—perhaps a traveler returning from a voyage and telling of her adventures and of the knowledge she has acquired; or in politically centralized regimes, a chief or his spokesman addressing his subordinates gathered before him; or a subject offering praise songs to the ruler, recalling the deeds of ancestors, songs that perhaps verge on fiction.

Just as writing makes "history" possible, so too it promotes life histories. I do not mean to imply that oral cultures have no conception of the past on

a societal or on a personal level, but organized, narrative history is rare, and without documents, fragmentary. So in terms of cultural history, what is surprising about the novel, as distinct from narrative more generally, is not simply its absence from oral cultures, but its late and sporadic appearance long after writing was introduced, followed by its great popularity despite the continuing hostility it attracted up to the nineteenth century in Europe, later elsewhere. Today we live in a culture dominated by fiction, as none other has been.

The word *novel* appears to come into English from the Romance languages in the late fifteenth century with the meaning of “news.” Within ten years of the advent of the printing press to Europe, around 1486, Henry VII started to publish partisan diplomatic accounts as well as news or announcements in occasional printed broadsheets. By Elizabeth’s time, various groups beside the government made use of this media, often for domestic affairs in the form of ballads. The term used for these news-ballads was *novels*, like the French *nouvelle* or the Spanish *novela*. “It only suggested something new, and did not press the issue of facts versus fiction.”²⁷ In the sixteenth century the word is used, after the Italian, to refer to a tale or short story of the kind in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. In the seventeenth century, it comes to be employed as in contemporary English to refer to a long fictional prose narrative in contrast to the romances (the French and Italian *roman* and *romanzo* cover both), because of the close relation to real life. Nevertheless, the problem of acceptability remained. There was still a doubt, expressed by Richard Steele in the *Spectator*, no. 254 (1711) when he wrote, “I’m afraid thy Brains are a little disordered with Romances and Novels.” The great diffusion of both was related to the mechanization of writing in the form of printing, reducing the need to read aloud, as many could acquire, even if temporarily from a friend or a library, their own copy for silent perusal.

It was this possibility of a disordered mind that encouraged the notion of people being led astray by fiction, to the symptom of Bovarism named after Flaubert’s nineteenth-century novel, but which had arisen much earlier with regard to the romances as we see in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* of 1604, in Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* of 1751, in the many objections to the novel that were expressed in the eighteenth century, and in the preference of most male readers for nonfiction and the development of a dominantly female reading public.

The novel is clearly a product of literate cultures as well as of leisured

²⁷ Sommerville 1996: 18.

ones, yet it flourished relatively late in cultural history and certainly did not follow closely from the invention of writing itself. Early narratives appear in Greece and Rome, few in the earlier period in the Near East. But stories like Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* or Longus's *Daphne and Chloë* and the erotic romances of the Greeks were at best forerunners of the novel as we know it today.²⁸ Early examples of narrative fiction, often referred to as romances or novels, that were found in ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian literature were relatively short, very different in scope from later novels either in Europe or China. Although these works were thought to have been directed at a popular audience, the reading public was much smaller and more elitist, though it comprised women as well as men.²⁹ In Egypt, fictional narratives were written in Demotic (from say, the seventh century B.C.E.), but they were apparently all "of fairly modest length." Modest could mean less than six thousand words. Some were longer. "The chief structural means by which stories were made more extensive than a simple anecdote is the device of a story-within-a-story."³⁰ What kind of status did such fiction have? There is no evidence that narrative texts were used in education. Closer prototypes than these "novels before the novel" appeared in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, most notably in Rabelais and *Don Quixote*, but also in the mass of French romances of the seventeenth century.

After the classical period and the long hiatus that followed in Europe, fiction seems to have revived only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The historian Norman Daniel sees this revival as representing a bond with oral culture: "The sudden appearance of a fictional literature is evidence of Europe's natural links with the other cultures that derive from the ancient sources of the Near East"—in other words, the Bronze Age cultures with their invention of writing.³¹ For example, the earliest example of the "boxed" story (the story-within-a-story as in the *Arabian Nights*, the frame story for which is probably Indian and the first reference from the ninth century) he sees as being Pedro de Alfonso's *Discipline Clericalis*. The author was a converted Jew who translated the tale from the Arabic and "was the first to introduce the genre of fable, a kind of subdivision of Wisdom literature."³²

²⁸ On the novel in classical societies, see Perry 1967; Heiserman 1977; Hägg 1983; Tatum 1994; Morgan and Stoneman 1994; Holzberg 1995.

²⁹ Egger, "Looking at Chariton's Callirhoe," in Morgan and Stoneman 1994.

³⁰ Tatum 1994: 206.

³¹ Daniel 1975: 310.

³² Daniel 1975: 108.

Linked works of Indian origin such as *Kalila wa Dimna* and *The Seven Sages* [also known as the Book of Sinbad] began to appear in the thirteenth century [in Spain; in Greece in the eleventh century], and, a little later, Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucaver*. European boxed stories include the *Confessio Amantis* of Gower, the *Novella* of Giovanni Sercambi [an important future name for the genre in English], Boccaccio (not only *Decameron* but *Arreto*) and, above all, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, as well as the *Tale of Bergis* associated for a time with Chaucer. All these date from the later fourteenth century and represent at least what we have called "Mediterranean culture"; in some cases there are Arabic and even ultimately Indian sources.³³

What is fascinating here is the relatively late appearance of these narrative forms at roughly the same period in different parts of the globe.

A central problem about the history of the novel is precisely its late arrival on the scene, its initially uneven distribution and its great and widespread popularity since the eighteenth century. The late arrival occurs not only in Europe but in China. Andrew Plaks remarks on "the outstanding coincidence that the rise of prose fiction occurs nearly simultaneously, step by step, in both China and Europe," namely, in the sixteenth century.³⁴ He tries to explain the appearance of the Ming literati novels, "the four master-works," in terms of the transformation of the Ming economy, factional politics, and the expanding educational system.³⁵ In other words, the form is certainly not a purely Western phenomenon. While it is not found in all earlier literate societies, the limitation of the discussion of the rise of the novel to Europe, let alone to early eighteenth-century England, has no justification.

But why the uneven distribution and why the late arrival? I suggest the problem goes back to my earlier discussion of narrative, especially fictional narrative, in oral societies. Despite the development of narrative in writing, similar doubts about its fictional forms arose. Storytelling was always an ambiguous activity, implying "telling a story" in the sense of an untruth or even a lie. It failed to represent reality, was not serious.

There were two ways around this problem. As with myth, the narrative could be legitimized in the form of an account of supernatural events, which automatically got around one objection to the reality of the representation. The earlier narratives of Christian Europe were legitimized as being accounts of heavenly miracles (the New Testament) or of the lives of saints, in

³³ Daniel 1975: 310.

³⁴ Plaks 1977: 321.

³⁵ Plaks 1977: 6ff.

the same way that painting and drawing became possible in the early Middle Ages if the subjects were drawn from religious sources. Even in the eighteenth century, it was this aspect of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that rendered it acceptable to many Nonconformist Protestants.

The modern novel, after Daniel Defoe, was essentially a secular tale, a feature that is comprised within the meaning of "realistic." The hand of God may appear, but it does so through "natural" sequences, not through miracles or mirabilia. Earlier narrative structures often displayed such intervention, which, in a world suffused by the supernatural, was present everywhere. Indeed, one can argue that in such circumstances the actors drew little distinction between natural and supernatural; it was certainly shaded, even in personal narratives. Those times had passed with the saints' tales and with the fantasy of the romance. And even earlier in the classical world, there was a separation between the two, more distinct in some fields than others.

With the coming of the Renaissance and of printing, secular romances made a definite appearance. But they were often ridiculed, seen as fare for leisured women rather than serious men, and having potentially very negative effects on their readers. In eighteenth-century England, the romances of fantasy were supplemented by the realistic novels of Defoe and his followers, more serious and less fanciful.

The early-eighteenth-century novel adopted a different strategy of legitimation, which was its claim to be true to life, to be "a history" rather than "a story." Consider Defoe's attempts to establish the details of the time and place of the tale he is telling. And in fact the tale itself, in the case of *Robinson Crusoe* or *A Journal of the Plague Year*, did oscillate between truth and fiction, incorporating details of actual events. So too with time and place in Henry Fielding or Tobias Smollett. The epistolary mode, adopted by Aphra Benn in the late seventeenth century and later by Samuel Richardson in *Clarissa*, was perhaps another example of this claim.

I have used the words *truth*, *actual*, and *reality* in their obvious, literal, commonplace, perhaps superficial, meaning. There is an equally obvious sense in which these words could be applied to fiction that purported to say something imaginatively about the human condition. But a discrimination between literal truth and poetic truth is often recognized and refers to different modes of discourse. Fictional narrative embodying the second is certainly promoted by the use of writing, but its fictional nature is sometimes concealed either by a concern with the supernatural, the nonnatural or, in the early history of the novel, by the pretence to offer literal truth. In this way the reader's bluff is called, and his or her doubts are calmed.

Despite the new realism in the eighteenth century, the novel was still heavily criticized. As fiction, the novel was widely considered to display a lack of seriousness, much as I have argued it did in many oral cultures. The resistance to the novel continued in eighteenth-century Europe. These objections to the novel and the preference for nonfiction is visible in the history of American printing. The first work in the category of fiction was that ambiguous production by Defoe, *The Dreadful Visitation in a Short Account of the Progress and Effects of the Plague . . . Extracted from the Memory of a Person Who Resided There*. This work, which as we now know was largely imaginative, was published in 1763 by Christopher Sauer of Germanstown, Pennsylvania; *Robinson Crusoe* followed only eleven years later in 1774. New novels were imported from England; they were rare in the publishing world even of the later eighteenth century in America. For early New England firmly rejected the secular trends that it saw as returning with renewed vigor to England with the restoration of the Stuarts to the throne. The Puritans objected to idleness, to the theater, to ribald literature. That included romances, which were seen as especially attractive to women. In 1693, Increase Mather wrote of this “vast mischief of false notions and images of things, particularly of love and honour.” While such material was imported and diffused through circulating libraries, the moral arbiters continued to frown on all fiction.³⁶

This resistance to fiction by important cultural authorities meant that its consumption and to some extent its production rested on “marginal” elements such as women. In seventeenth-century Europe, as I have pointed out, the main readers of fiction were women; French romances were often written by women, and it was women who formed the main audience of the English novel in the eighteenth century. The dominance of women among the audience was one reason it came under criticism. They were the ones more likely to be misled and deceived, especially by the lengthy romances, though such perils were not limited to women only. The great Spanish novelist Cervantes built the picaresque novel, *Don Quixote*, around the deception of the hero, who was led astray as the result of reading old romances.

It was the same in the eighteenth century. As I have noted, the “realism” of the writings of Defoe and others was intended to contrast with these fanciful tales; they “deceived” in another manner, by making false claims to historical truth as a way of presenting an imaginative tale that came closer to reality. In this way they attempted to circumvent the criticism of the old romances that they misled people into not only false beliefs but into false

³⁶ Mather quoted in Daniels 1995: 46.

conduct. The statement of this position is nowhere clearer than in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, in which she tells the story of Arabella, who was herself misled by the reading "the great Store of Romances" left by her mother.

Such possibility of deception was not confined to the French and other romances; it was equally criticized in the Gothic novels of the later eighteenth century, above all by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*. As noted by Arnold Kettle, Q. D. Leavis emphasizes "how strong a part in Jane Austen's novels is played by her conscious war on the romance. She did to the romance of her day (whether the domestic romance of Fanny Burney or the Gothic brand of Mrs. Radcliffe) what Cervantes had done in his."³⁷

The heroine of the novel is Catherine Morland, who strikes up a friendship with Isabella Thorpe in the Pump-room at Bath. The relationship between the two develops rapidly. When it was wet, they read novels together. "Yes novels," declares the author, "for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding. . . . Let us leave it to Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. . . . Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been more decried." With this reputation, which the author herself discusses, Jane Austen contrasts that of the *Spectator* or other nonfiction ("gentlemen read better books").

All Catherine's experience comes from reading fiction. She "had read too much not to be perfectly aware of the care with which a waxen figure might be introduced [into the coffin], and a supposititious funeral carried on." As with Don Quixote, with which the theme is often compared, reading led her away from reality into "fancy" (that is, fantasy), which turned out to be "folly."

That reading colors her entire journey to Northanger Abbey. Nothing "could shake the doubts of the well-read Catherine"; castles and abbeys were "the charm of her reveries" and with them went "the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun." Riding there in the curricule with her suitor, Henry Tilney, she anticipates "a fine old place, just like what one reads about." He plays on this expectation: "Are you prepared to encounter all the horrors that a building such as 'what one reads

³⁷ Kettle 1965: 112.

about' may produce?" He then goes on to elaborate all the "Gothic" possibilities of this Gothic Abbey. Her responses are fully roused by the storm that strikes the building on her first night and by the closed chest and cupboard that prove to contain nothing more than spare linen and a laundry list.

She suffers from "causeless terror" that results from "self-created delusion," all due to the indulgence of that sort of reading. For it was not in the works of Mrs. Radcliffe that "human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for." Her suspicions are unfounded and Henry Tilney upbraids her. "Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observations of what is passing around you." Not books but your own experience. Her disillusion is complete. "The visions of romance were over," and Catherine is "completely awakened . . . from the extravagances of her late fancies."

The advocacy of "critical realism" in *Northanger Abbey* is not isolated.³⁸ Criticism of the novel, at least of the romantic and Gothic novel, appears in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801) where Lady Delacour comments, "My dear, you will be woefully disappointed, if in my story you expect anything like a novel." In her early writings, Jane Austen engages in burlesques that take the form of "the direct inflation of the novel style." In *Love and Friendship* (1790), Edward's father asks, "Where Edward in the name of wonder did you pick up this unmeaning gibberish? You have been studying Novels, I suspect." The genre came in for heavy criticism for being either a simulacrum or a travesty of life.

The best-known literary example of this kind of deception is undoubtedly Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857); indeed the predicament of the eponymous heroine has given rise to the problem of "bovarism." Her problem is not only being misled by novels but by reading in general. Like Don Quixote and Arabella, Emma Bovary is effectively in retirement, living in the country, married to a boring doctor and having little to do but lead a fantasy life of the imagination in which reading plays a dominant part. But her imagination revolves around contemporary life, not the past; she constructs a virtual reality. She buys herself a street map of Paris, and

with the tip of her finger, she went shopping in the capital. . . . She took out a subscription . . . to *Le Sylphe des Salons*. She devoured every single word of all the reviews of the first nights, race-meetings and dinner parties. . . . She

³⁸ A. D. McKillop, "Critical Realism in *Northanger Abbey*," in I. Watt, ed., *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), 52–61.

knew the latest fashions . . . she read Balzac and Georges Sand, seeking to gratify in fantasy her secret cravings. Even at the table, she had her book with her, and she would be turning the pages, while Charles was eating and talking to her. The memory of the Viscount haunted her reading. Between him and the fictional characters, she would forge connections.³⁹

Emma uses novels to escape from her own present into another imaginary present. Books dominate her life. She entertains the young clerk, Leon, with the fashion magazines she has brought along. He “sat beside her and they looked at the engraved plates together and waited for each other at the bottom of the page. Often she would ask him to read her some poetry. . . . And so between them arose a kind of alliance, a continual commerce in books and ballads.” When a certain novel starts a fashion for cactuses, he buys some for her in Rouen. The book overshadows all and directs much of the course of events for those who immerse themselves in it. This gives rise to a dependency on fiction, to a kind of addiction, to a devaluing of the life into which one was born and a hunger for a life of luxury, of a higher stratum. These qualities were thought to be characteristic of “women in idleness,” and a novelist portraying them reveals his own ambivalence toward the feminine; in criticizing them Flaubert is consciously playing with what he called his own feminine disposition.

These criticisms of the effects of fiction did not of course appear only within the pages of the novel itself. Already in 1666, Pierre Nicole, in *Les visionnaires*, describes “un faiseur de romans et un poète de théâtre” as “un empoisonneur public.” One hundred years later, Dr. Pomme, in *Traité des affections vaporeuses des deux sexes* (1767), suggests that among all the causes that have harmed the health of women, “la principale a été la multiplication infinie des romans depuis cent ans.” Concern about health continued. In 1900, La Baronne Staffe was still worrying about women in *Le cabinet de toilette*: “Restez assise, tard dans la nuit, à lire des romans, voilà ce qui creuse autour des yeux ces terribles petits sillons entrecroisés, qui défigurent le plus joli visage.”

Moral health was even more at risk. In 1884, Gustave Claudin announced, “Ce sont surtout les dames légères qui font la plus grande consommation de romans”; while as late as 1938, Jacques Leynon protested that soon every novel would have to have a chapter taking place in a brothel.⁴⁰

³⁹ Flaubert 1857: 45. Trans. G. Wall (Harmondsworth, 1992).

⁴⁰ These quotations are taken from G. Bechtel and J.-C. Carrière, *Dictionnaire de la bêtise et des erreurs de jugement* (Paris, 1984), for which reference I am indebted to Wolfgang Klein.

The Holy Book and Christian literature were approved. That was the fare of Roman ladies in the first centuries of Christianity, not the light novels of today, whose reading is so dangerous. Nor is their perusal confined to the towns: “L’on rencontre dans la lande la gardeuses de brébis qui a glissé sous son capoulet le mauvais roman passé de main et main, et qu’elle a encore la pudeur de vouloir caché.”

Why were criticisms of the novel and of fiction in general especially prevalent in Europe in the eighteenth century? That of course was the time when the genre took off, so we could also expect it to be marked by pronounced resistance. It was also the period of the Enlightenment, of the new *Encyclopedia*, when many institutions were being queried.

Criticisms of the novel, doubts about its legitimacy, were not confined to Europe, any more than was the novel itself. Such objections lay at the root of its frequently marginal status and indeed of its failure to appear at all in many times and places. The early novel from eleventh-century Japan, *The Tale of Genji* by the Lady Murasaki, achieved a canonical status. Nevertheless, it attracted many objections, from Confucian scholars especially, owing to “its fictional character and concentration on amorous relationships.” In the Confucian tradition, the distrust of fiction is usually traced to a saying in *Analects*: “The subjects on which the Master did not talk were extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings.” Fiction was among the genres of literature scorned by Confucian literati. McMullen comments, “In part, this distrust must derive from the rational, didactic tenor of the tradition. Events that involved fanciful or strained credulity also lacked persuasive, narrative power; they were falsehoods, the products of undisciplined, indulgent minds, that could undermine the truth.” This view is represented in the *Genji* itself. Indeed, the novel was defended by the great commentator of the early Tokugawa period, Kumazawa Banzan, as being a true record; it is not “a bookful of lies.” Banzan adopts another line too, however, also found in Europe, justifying a genre where “no fact exists but where a moral truth is comprehended and a fact supplied for it”—the underlying imaginative or experiential truth.⁴¹

Similar criticisms arose wherever we find the novel—in China, for example. The concept of *wen*, imitation, is discussed in the context of narrative literature, both historical and fictional. Indeed, the preferred form of fiction is often historical; the purely fictional is doubly suspect. As Plaks remarks, the act of fiction writing is “the business of fabricating illusions of reality”;

⁴¹ McMullen 1999.

the opening formula of the “Heart Sutra” that appears in *Jinping mei* (*The Golden Lotus*) reads, “reality is emptiness, emptiness is reality.”⁴² The novels themselves offer criticisms of the way of life they describe, “the fourfold scourges of excessive indulgence in wine, women, wealth and wrath.”⁴³ Indeed, the works themselves also contain some warnings about indulgence in fiction. As in the eighteenth-century English novel, “the simulated narrators’ recurrent use of the *rhetoric* of historiography in introductory sections, asides, and concluding comments . . . to emphasize the sense of judgement going hand-in-hand with the mimetic presentation of events” may encourage the “sense that the fictional narration may convey generalized truth even where it forgoes the presumption of historical veracity.”⁴⁴ Chinese literature has an important didactic component, often with Buddhist monks or Daoist recluses coming forward “to preach what seems to be the author’s own message of worldly renunciation,” showing “the futility of it all.”⁴⁵ That moral message poses problems in the face of the manifest content, often turning on “excessive indulgence” and may lead to the introduction of warnings against fiction, at least in the hands of the young. That seems to have been more generally the view; the contents of novels were essentially frivolous, and indeed lewd and immoral. But there is a wider problem of truth and fiction that no amount of overlap (history/story) can entirely evade and that emerges in Confucian reactions, such as the criticisms of *The Tale of the Genji* in Japan. The balance that Plaks sees between the two also contains a contradiction that (under some circumstances) may lead to rejection as well as to acceptance.

Particular works might be suppressed for particular reasons. *Water Margin*, a tale of outlawry and rebellion, was thought to encourage brigands. Fiction and reality were merged; the work attacked the abuse of power and misgovernment, and is reformist in tone despite “the anarchic actions of its heroes.” However, “many late Ming peasant rebel leaders were taking the names or nicknames of *Water Margin* heroes for themselves.”⁴⁶ The authorities perceived this as a threat and ordered the work to be suppressed in 1642. The same happened to *The Merry Adventures of Emperor Yang*, not so much because of “its explicit descriptions of the emperor’s less conventional

⁴² Plaks 1977: 511–12.

⁴³ Plaks 1977: 505.

⁴⁴ Plaks 1977: 328.

⁴⁵ Plaks 1977: 352.

⁴⁶ Hegel 1981: 77.

sexual exploits” but because it raised the question of the limits of loyalty.⁴⁷ *The Prayer Mat of Flesh* was “more effectively proscribed.”⁴⁸

This constellation of opposition to the novel recalls immediately the similar set of societies I have discussed elsewhere regarding opposition to images and to the theater, as well as to relics (bones) and flowers.⁴⁹ The suspicion that we are dealing with a general phenomenon is again strengthened. It is strengthened still further when we look at recent events in China where again we find the suppression of flowers, of religious (and other) images, and of the theater. The novel shares in this history. In the Sichuan town of Yebin during the Cultural Revolution, Jung Chang’s mother initially had a hard time in her party cell, being subject to continual criticism. But when she was moved to a new job and a new cell, things were better: “Instead of sniping at her like Mrs. Mi, Mrs. Tung let my mother do all sorts of things she wanted, like reading novels; before, reading a book without a Marxist cover would bring down a rain of criticism about being a bourgeois intellectual.”⁵⁰

In Islam and in Judaism objections seem to have gone deeper. The former made a firm distinction between historical truth and religious myths on the one hand, and imaginative fiction on the other. Such storytelling might be used, as in the *Thousand and One Nights*, to distract, but it consisted essentially of a distraction from more serious activities. In the Arab world there were general objections to affabulation in historical and exegetical work, and occasional and casual expression of contempt from a learned standpoint was directed at the *Thousand and One Nights*. But such tales were not only read before plebeian audiences; they seem to have been in favor at court, especially those containing mirabilia, like the voyages of Sinbad. Once again objections to fiction, ambivalences to created narrative, seem to be rooted in the fact that it “re-presents” reality and is not itself the truth. Even serious narrative may be looked down upon as a way of discovering truth more appropriate for children and for those who need guidance than for the sophisticated searcher, rather like icons for early Christians and Buddhists.

Later in nineteenth-century Europe such criticism was more muted. That was when fiction came into its own with the reading public, with the great novelists—Scott, the Brontës, Dickens, Eliot, Meredith, and Trollope

⁴⁷ Hegel 1981: 85.

⁴⁸ Hegel 1981: 227.

⁴⁹ Goody 1997.

⁵⁰ Jung Chang 1991: 26.

in England. This dominance of the novel has been seen as deeply transforming human emotions and behavior. While that may be partially true, it is also accused of making such behavior more shallow, as the result of copying the actions of the characters in romances. That was a constant criticism during the eighteenth century and remained in force during the nineteenth, when *Madame Bovary* was seduced away from reality by the novel's fictions, indeed by reading itself. The defense again lay in its role in peering below the surface at the underlying "truth" of the novel, at least of the distinguished novel. But that approach provided no defense at all against the bulk of fiction, whether of Dame Barbara Cartland and other Mills and Boon romances, or of most detective series, thrillers, and westerns, which are frankly escapist, as is most film and television. That movement certainly represents a major shift over the past hundred years or so. Until the mid-nineteenth century, most published books were theological in character. If they read, most men read serious nonfictional works, whereas fiction was left largely to women to read, and sometimes to create. The situation began to change with the historical romances of Scott, and today the readership of the novel is no longer gendered in the same way, although certain types may well be.

This form has today become a completely accepted genre, largely immune from earlier criticism. Indeed the phrase "criticism of the novel" has acquired a totally different meaning as the genre has moved from the shadows to a dominant position on the literary scene. As with images during this the same period, now diffused in every corner of society through printing, iconoclasm virtually disappeared, so overwhelming was the presence. Something of the same process seems to have occurred with fiction; objections were drowned out by the sheer quantity coming off the presses and the incorporation of the novel into daily life. However, the contradictions, which, as I have argued elsewhere, are inherent in the process of representation, still found occasional expression. Even in the sphere of the visual arts, where both painting and sculpture long preceded the dominance of the novel, opposition has continued. Walter Benjamin called attention to the recent victory of the visual arts (perhaps especially noticeable for a Jew as for a Puritan), and he attributed this to the tidal wave of cheap publications made available by changes in the modes of communication. Nevertheless, resistance continued, at least in the visual domain, taking shape in the works of French abstract painters. For them the represented object was merely the superficial manifestation of a more profound truth, an essence, a purity, that could be expressed only in the absence of objects, of figurative representation, of iconicity. Perhaps the same kind of resistance to pictorial representations also takes the

contemporary shape of preserving the carcass of a sheep in formaldehyde; only the real thing is truth, never the still life, *nature morte*.

Did the same process occur with fictional representations? There have been a number of attempts at the anti-novel, and radical efforts to reorganize it on less narrative lines. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and others too, in *le nouveau roman*, have made moves in this direction. But basically the storytelling form has endured, with volumes filling the windows of our bookshops and the newstands of our railways and airports by authors who had their roots in the late impressionists that reached their apogee in Russia with Kasimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky, with their philosophical justifications for the abstract as attaining purity of vision. Was the dominance of the novel, at least at the popular level, partly the result of its changing content, that is, to the elaboration of specifically sexual themes (for example, in the romantic novel) and of the murder mystery (in the detective story)? Both of these topics were often suppressed in earlier literature. Love was not suppressed but sex was, except in Chinese novels such as *Ching Ping Mei* and in the erotic novels of ancient Greece, and that too was the situation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. This raises the question of how far storytelling is linked to seduction. In *Othello*, the Moor claims he attracted Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian senator, by his tales of foreign lands, of

The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Did grow beneath their shoulders.

.

She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse.

.

She love me for the dangers I had passed. (1.3.143–66)

Telling a story, creating one's fictional biography or personal life, is part of many a courting encounter. The story and its telling either seduces or prevents seduction, as with Shaharazad and Sinbad.

The change represents a shift of interest in reading to one in which the majority were concerned, after their time at school or at university, with "entertainment," with distraction. The sales figures for books amply illustrate the different perspective, and that has to be regarded as a change of consciousness. It is true that individuals now read more newspapers, more "serious" journalism, probably more biographies and autobiographies, and that

their knowledge of the world is more profound than in earlier times. But so too is their desire for entertainment, especially home entertainment, made possible by the relative cheapness of reading matter and by the installation of the radio, television, and computer in the home, bringing there fiction and film as well as the news and commentaries, including public discussions of contemporary issues.

With the novel, one hears complaints of triviality, of escapism, rather in the same vein as the eighteenth century saw fiction as more appropriate for women in their domestic capacities than for men working in the outside world. Today, biography is perhaps more masculine, more concerned with the world. Can the novel, offering an imaginative version of experience, ever compete with the reality of everyday life, especially in the aftermath of the Holocaust? That at least is the problem raised by the novelist Wolfgang Holdesheimer, an interpreter at the Nuremberg trials. In a lecture in Dublin in 1981, he predicted the end of the novel, as fiction was incapable in his eyes of taking stock of the complexities of our age, in particular of the horrors of mass extermination. There are topics with which imaginative fiction cannot expect to deal.

Conclusions

In summary, my argument runs as follows. Narrative, and in particular fictional narrative, is not a predominant characteristic of adult intercourse in purely oral (nonliterate) cultures. Long narrative sequences, whether fictional or not, require special discourse situations. Short fictional narratives, or folktales, are aimed mostly at children—adults already know “Cinderella” and do not need it repeated, partly because the content is clearly aimed at a juvenile audience. Longer recitations, in which the narrative element is rarely the most prominent, require a ritual setting to provide an attentive audience for whom the hearing may be something of an ordeal, and require a validation beyond from the human realm. Contrary to many beliefs, the epic is characteristic not of oral cultures (though it may be presented in speech) but of early literate ones. That was also, in my view, the case with Homer and the Vedic epics.⁵¹

The reasons for the scarcity of long fictional narratives is different from that for long recitations in general. As with shorter folktales, the former

⁵¹ Goody 1987.

may be recognized as trivial, fit for children, as compared with the weightier demands of truth. In other words, their scarcity is related to the inherent problem in representations of all kinds pointed out by Plato—but in no sense limited to the Western tradition—that fiction is not historical (self-evident) truth; it is from the literal point of view a lie, although it may aim at another kind of imaginative truth—aim at but not necessarily succeed in achieving. And for some that aim will always remain illusory; the biography, which doubtless contains its element of make-believe, may be preferred to the invented story, which may offer only a distraction, not a truth of any kind.

In real life the narrative is rarely unchallenged. The legal/jural process is perhaps the touchstone because the narrative is part of the duel: the plaintiff tells his or her story, the defendant another; one is judged to be truthful, the other a lie (or at least is not believed). Doubts about fiction, about the novel, have dogged the history of this genre, because such worries are embedded in the human situation. With the dominance of “fictionality” in Europe from the eighteenth century, with its becoming so central a feature of our lives with the advent of printing, of the rotary press, and finally of the electronic media, with the cinema and with television, resistance to fiction and the novel has become less explicit. Yet some tension remains.

For fiction is the domain of fancy and fantasy. The sharp contrast between fancy and reality is a key theme of the poems of John Keats. Fancy is highly praised in the poem of that name (1820):

Ever let the Fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home;
At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth,
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth; . . . (1–4)

Fancy can step in when life disappoints. But it only does so in a deceptive (lying) way, as we are told in the final stanza of “Ode to a Nightingale.”

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf. (71–74)

My interest in narrative, especially fictional narrative, arises from my interest in representations. Narrative itself I argue is not as pervasive as many recent accounts suggest, certainly not in purely oral cultures. When one

thinks of it, life does not proceed like a sequential narrative. It is full of repetitions (the breakfast menu, the embrace on parting) that would make little narrative sense. The narrative, but not the sequence in a looser sense, is broken by knocks on the door, by the next e-mail message (one is bleeping its way through as I write), by scarcely relevant thoughts. Hence the stream of consciousness may be a closer representation of reality than the narrative, which I am using with a tighter meaning than pure sequence.

Fiction, as distinct from narratives of actual events, adds another dimension. At the surface level it is plainly not “true,” though it may claim to be so. So in this sense it is a lie, as Plato maintained of the arts in general. To represent was not to present; it embodied an illusion. It was this doubt, lying at the core of the arts, that led not only to criticism of their achievements but at times to their virtual banishment. To this I attribute the virtual disappearance of the great artistic achievements of the classical world, of sculpture, and of three- and even two-dimensional representation in a secular context during the European Middle Ages. So too, representation in the form of the theater vanished from the scene. Physically the theater collapsed; indeed, in St. Albans and elsewhere it seems to have been deliberately destroyed early in the fourth century C.E. and did not reappear except in temporary form for some 1,500 years.

There are two aspects to these absences and doubts. The first expresses a reaction to the “luxuries” of post-Bronze Age culture, to the emergence of the stage, to the development of aesthetic activities such as reading novels and painting pictures, which were enjoyed mainly by the few who had the leisure, education, and motivation to participate. These luxury cultures were differentiated in material and cultural terms. That situation often gives rise to some kind of ideological and practical opposition, often expressed most clearly by moralists, philosophers, and theologians. But there is a second problem inherent in representation itself and therefore in fiction.

Any form of re-presentation may raise doubts and hence ambivalence about its relationship with the original. Such doubts I suggest are inherent in the human situation of language-using animals facing their environment. It is intrinsic to language, and therefore to narrative. A *horse* (the word) is never a horse (the animal). An account of events is never the events themselves. When it does not even pretend to be such an account but is fictional, the situation is aggravated. It is I think because of these general Platonic objections, reinforced in post-Bronze Age cultures by parallel “puritanical” tendencies that are generally constructed around the rejection of luxury, that fiction, including the novel, has attained the history and the distribution that has marked it worldwide. Even in oral cultures it is largely assigned to

children and until recently raised widespread doubts for adults, above all for those concerned with the running of society.

Writing modifies some of those doubts; fiction and narrative expand. But doubts persist, even today where the genre has become dominant, and there remains a substantial divide between entertainment and more “serious” writing, between fiction and nonfiction.

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