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'Am I a novel or am I a literature seminar?' Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas once asked. For today's discussion, we could usefully rephrase Vila Matas' question thus: Am I a novel or a history lesson? Or to put it more bluntly: *Is the novel what its author wants it to be, or what it is interpreted and perceived to be by the majority of his or her readers?* As the author of novels sometimes referred to as 'historical' or 'documentary', I have often had cause to reflect on the fact that the two perceptions need not coincide, indeed rarely do.

What, then, is a documentary or historical novel, and how does it differ from other kinds of novel?

In one sense, all novels as historical to the extent that they are concerned with something that has been considered or dealt with, which - in principle - is the case the moment the author puts pen to paper. And in principle, all novels can be called documentary as soon as they are inspired by, or based on, some form of extra-literary source, which most novels are, one way or another. But those who are anxious to maintain a clear distinction between historical fiction, documentary literature and novels of other kinds, this is not the source of the problem. The problem arises when a reality is portrayed in literary form and has already been depicted in other ways, in other forms, expressed by other means. Events, that is, for which there can be said to be an existing objective correlative of some kind. In other words, what matters is not the form chosen by the author but what is true or false.

Now when it comes to literature, it is not entirely easy to establish what is truth and what is lie. In talking about literature, we employ various conceptions of the truth, which we often jumble together or allow to flow into each other. Most people are prepared to admit there is something generally known as *literary truth*, and that it exists independently of what the text otherwise does, or is trying to say. It is literary truth we have in mind, for example, when we characterise a novel as 'convincing'. But if we find a novel convincing in a literary sense, we tend to find it credible in other respects as well. So we are ready to attribute to the account an objective veracity that it does not have and perhaps does not even claim to have. Conversely, it may be that if a novel raises a subject we see as important, we tend to inflate its literary qualities. This is a good novel, we say, when all we mean is that the subject it tackles is one that ought to touch or interest everybody.

On top of all this there is a third concept, which we can call literary *authenticity*, and which has nothing to do with a novel's aesthetic qualities, nor with its themes, but with the degree of credence we are prepared to give its author. Concealed behind this notion of authenticity is a series of presumptions influencing how a novel is interpreted and understood. An individual engaged in reading is, as we know, a private individual. When he or she sits down with a book, she closes the door to the world outside. This is what she has done ever since the middle-class subject became a *reading* subject, that is, when books became an item of consumption and there was a private chamber in which to

shut oneself. Equally old is the idea of the author/ omniscient narrator as someone every reader can identify with.

Though we are reminded time after time and in the most painful manner how false this idea is, in the form of memoirs and confessional novels that appeal for our participation but never rise above the level of pure narcissism, we continue trusting blindly in the individual subject and putting our faith in the unique, naked voice. The novel should ideally be set within the sanctity of private life, not just to make us believe in it, but also so we can relate it to our own lives and thus also believe in its author. If, on the other hand, an author does the opposite, that is, goes from his or her own world of necessarily limited experience to a world he or she actually, physically shares with other people, the reader immediately starts to mistrust. Not only in the literary work per se. ('Is this really a suitable topic for a novel?' is a question one sometimes hears.) But also in the intention of the work. 'Why are you as an author so interested in the Second World War?' is a question I have often been asked, for example. As if there were some kind of contradiction between the two. Once my novels started being published in other languages as well, the question also began to assume a very special kind of ethnic twist: 'Why are you, *a Swede*, so interested in twentieth-century German history?' With the sub-text: stick to your own backyard, stop digging in other people's.

It has been clear to me for quite a while now that this is actually a matter of extremely restrictive definitions. But it sometimes surprises me how widespread and all pervasive they are, and how unthinkingly they are passed on. The invitation to these Literature Days, for example, said: 'If we feel we are seeing an increasing tendency among today's authors to tackle historical subjects, can this be interpreted as a broadening of literature's sphere of activity, or as an undermining of its value? Is it the case that today's readers are no longer capable of being gripped by imagined worlds? And do authors then start to parasitise real events or famous lives instead of writing real novels? To win back their readers' favour?'

Before I continue with this subject I would like to make a few things very clear, so there will be no doubt whatsoever about where I stand on these issues:

* If there one thing that must be defended, here and now and always, it is *fiction's right to be fiction*, regardless of the material it employs. Even, and perhaps especially, if that material is of a kind not normally associated with the novel. The content and value of a fiction is measured not by the nature of the material it uses but by the way in which it defies and overcomes its own limitations.

* It is equally important to defend the author's freedom to do with this material exactly what he or she wants, no matter which boundaries (in terms of genre or anything else) he transgresses in the process. The novel is, by definition, transgressive. Not bound to any one reader, nor to any one reading.

* It is also important to state that literature can never be seen or interpreted as a tool for anything other than itself. The aim of literature is not and cannot be, for example, to shed light on historical events or explain historical contexts. (This may be the result of a literary depiction, but it can never be the aim.)

* Nor can literature be read as a way of illustrating actual events and bringing them to life. To do anything like this would (again) be to marginalise literature, reduce it to something it is not and has no prerequisites for being.

To have any kind of understanding of how prose fiction relates to history, or history writing as a whole, one must first understand literature as autonomous, independent even of the reality it is said to portray (or parasitise): as a form of knowledge in its own right.

How, then, shall we define the novel? One way of at least starting to answer this question is to consider its points of departure.

For me, the novel almost always starts with a place. The place may be real or imaginary but it is always concrete and clearly delimited. A hospital, an island, a ghetto. Closely tied up with this place there will be an existential or moral dilemma. This is what sets everything in motion. My novel *De fattiga i Łódź* (The Poor People of Łódź, published in English as *The Emperor of Lies*) is about the Nazi-appointed Eldest of the Jews, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, and his desperate attempts to save the Jewish population of the Litzmannstadt ghetto from certain death by offering up the weak and the sick, all those who cannot work and contribute to making the ghetto fit for survival. However he acts, he will do wrong. But act he must, otherwise the entire world he knows will go under.

Now the ghetto is a real place, of course, and Rumkowski was a real person who ruled over the ghetto as an obedient Nazi tool for several years until he, too, was of no further use and was put to death. What happened in the course of those years is, moreover, very well documented, and while I was writing the novel I spent a lot of time studying the relevant documentation.

Here I would like to interject something that may sound surprising. In a case like this, when a novel is so plainly based on an actual place and real lives, I do not think the working methods of the historian and the novelist are basically all that different. Both of them have to take pains over the facts. But they do this for different reasons. The historian does it in order to assemble as clear and comprehensive a picture of a historical event as possible. The novelist does it in order to make the *fiction* appear as credible as possible. It is crucial to preserve this distinction. It is important for the novelist to master his material for the same reason as it is important to master the language he is writing in, the elementary syntax and grammar: so the reader will not be distracted by a succession of obvious errors when reading. A historian will want the reader to *see* the details he has unearthed, while a novelist would prefer the reader *not* to see them. Or at least to see them in a different way, as an organic part of the novel as a whole, lending the text deeper resonance, making it feel richer and more rounded, and hence also more believable – *nota bene*, as *fiction*.

If slipped into the right places, small historical details can also help to introduce the required amount of friction into the text: a grating element, a quality aptly referred to by French literary theorist Roland Barthes as *l'effet du réel*, the reality effect. If we are aware while reading of an excess of detail in the text, we perceive it as more real. But the historical material, this store of details gleaned from the author's research, can also add to the rhythm and form of the novel itself. In his book *The Anatomy Lesson*, Serbian author Danilo Kiš draws a

distinction between what he calls 'authoritative' and 'decorative' quotations. When an author quotes from his or her material it may be for the same reason as a historian does: because that particular piece of text adds something essential, something especially worth accentuating, to the content or theme of the novel. But it can also be because the text as a whole needs a *break* at that juncture, or there is a change of perspective, or another voice makes itself heard.

All of this is, naturally, a means to an end: taking a step nearer to the moral dilemma that is the main focus of the novel, to which the entire text gravitates. But this is merely one more argument in favour of the point I am trying to make. *The historical material in a novel is of no intrinsic value.* Quite the reverse: the foundation of historical fact on which a novel builds, indeed *must* build, as faithfully as possible is to be viewed rather as the springboard the author needs in order to take the liberties the fiction *forces* him to take, the better to embody the existential or moral problems that are its hub, its pain point, without which – if I may use my own novel as an example - there would have been no historical reality to portray, no fences, no barbed wire, no ghetto.

Should one therefore demand that the author take responsibility for the manner in which he uses historical material? Can it be that the way in which the author depicts a historical course of events or a historical character also changes the reader's image of those events or that character? Even when we are talking about a fiction? This was an extremely pertinent question for me when I was writing *De fattiga i Łódź*, and still is to a certain extent, because so many people persist in questioning what they think is my 'picture' of Chaim Rumkowski, Eldest of the Jews. My answer to this criticism is that there is no single, unambiguous picture of Rumkowski in my book. There are a number of pictures, and they are not compatible, not even within framework of the novel. This is what makes the novel, at least as I tried to define it in my introduction, so unique as a form of artistic expression. With the rich spectrum of language, of elements of form and genre that are available to it, it can experiment with multiple perspectives at the same time, perspectives that are not mutually exclusive but simply accentuate the complexity and moral tension of the text.

Yet the fact remains, as I initially said, that the author's perception of his novel and the reader's perception of the same text do not always agree, and the question of the author's responsibility for what he writes must of course be taken very seriously. But as I see it, the question can also be put differently. Why are there so many people today with an interest in history who seem to prefer literary versions of historical events to pure non-fiction? People who consistently, even consciously, confuse the two conceptions of the truth that I spoke of earlier.

There are naturally many explanations for this, but allow me in conclusion to put forward a hypothesis. I think many readers have an unspoken idea that literature has a function *beyond* that of being literature. I think it is to do with our need for things to be clear-cut, our yearning for the truth (whatever its character, and whatever the form in which it manifests itself) to be one and indivisible. History, as we know, is ambiguous, puzzling and not to be relied on: it seduces and misleads us. Above all it is by its very nature open and unfinished. Literary texts are by nature, or so it is assumed, coherent and naturally rounded

off. They have a beginning and an end, a peripeteia and a moral. Or to put it another way: there is a perception that literary form itself creates coherence, thereby helping to provide an unambiguous interpretation of a reality which would not otherwise lend itself to any intelligible interpretation. Seen in this light, literature is not a form of knowledge in its own right, but a tool to make us understand something we doubt we otherwise could. It is a false understanding, however, which sets reality straight, primarily by simplifying and trivialising it.

One example of this misreading, if I may call it that, is the increasing tendency nowadays for literary accounts of the Holocaust to be viewed as historical testimonies, equal to those given by Holocaust survivors. Read that way my Rumkowski, for example, becomes *the* Rumkowski: the literary figure turns into a historical figure, despite the fact that it was never my aim to write his biography, but just to portray the basically timeless moral predicament in which he found himself, and the consequences for the human beings affected by his decision. This misreading is problematic in a number of ways. Not only because it credits literature with a truth content it cannot conceivably have. But also because it has the effect, in a back-to-front way, of fictionalising the personal testimonies of the survivors. It was never the intention of *their* narratives to give their own privations a purpose or higher meaning; they only wanted to give as clear a picture as possible of what happened, using their own lives as examples. This individual and that individual were there, this sequence of things happened, and this person or that person was to blame. By interpreting and reading their evidence in the same way, making the same assumptions, we wear down the threshold between two types of text that have vastly different aims, that work with historical material in entirely different ways and that also, as a logical consequence, deal with wholly different conceptions of truth.

So why this mix-up, this confusion?

Perhaps it is because in literary accounts and stories of the Holocaust, we think we are following a course of events that is carried through to a comprehensible ending, which thus leads something apparently incomprehensible towards a form of understanding or even reconciliation; what we might call *closure*, to use the technical term. So the Holocaust is shown not as what we *know* it to have been – namely a total breakdown of all human values, which not only smashed families to pieces but also made cold-blooded murderers of perfectly ordinary, civilised men and women – but as an event that has *a meaning, after all*; albeit in no *other* sense than that it can be depicted in a coherent and meaningful way.

This misreading, however, does not confine itself to private individuals. There is a tremendous compulsion in today's society to make all traumatic events *mean* something; to insist that *healing* must take place and that this healing must have a meaning; and the general view seems to be that we can look to literature to provide such meaning: that the main value of literature lies in supplying a form of therapy.

A countryman of yours, Jean Améry, describes this very well. A society will find it easier to forgive a mass murderer who admits his guilt than to forgive a victim who refuses to be reconciled with his tormentors. The first case can be restored to favour; the second must be cast out for the simple reason that society cannot tolerate contradictions or internal conflicts, conflicts not easily resolved.

And here we come to the most important argument for why a novel can never, as I said in my introduction, be interpreted within the framework it erects for itself; why the novel can never serve as an example or illustration of anything else or, in the final instance, be read as a vicarious testimony. Since society does not tolerate contradictions, this is precisely what literature must build on and result in: contradictions. The novel *should not* add up; it should seek to thwart *closure* in every possible way, with all the means at its disposal. This it must do in order not to fail that basic human conflict which it, and it alone, can portray. That is to say: the conflict that will not let itself be atoned for or healed.

Because the novel as an art form possesses this rare ability to hold two apparently incompatible perspectives together, without creating false syntheses, it is also capable of doing much more than merely bringing historical events to life, or serving as some kind of testimony *lite*. At its best, in its best authors' hands, the novel can even bring us close to reality as it was *before* it was closed and became a story. In other words, holding fast to, and making use of, the multiplicity of means of expression at the novel's disposal – and thereby stubbornly refusing to close off perspectives, to simplify, embellish, or worst of all, conciliate – is the best way for the author to accept responsibility when faced with his or her readers, and responsibility for the historic material he or she employs. In that sense there should be no contradiction whatsoever between writing important literature about historical events, and playing a responsible part in the stewardship of our collective memory.

Translated from the Swedish by Sarah Death