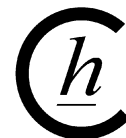


Why Fabulate?

The 8th Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture
on the Performing Arts
given by Sir David Hare
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B SHARP



*“Be subtle, various, ornamental, clever,
And do not listen to those critics ever
Whose crude provincial gullets crave in books
Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks.”*

I'll start, if I may, after Auden, with four chance remarks, trawled from everyday reading, which have stuck like burrs and scratched the surface of my brain. I emphasise that I am paraphrasing two of them from memory. But the sentiments have stayed with me precisely because they were unforgettable.

In the GUARDIAN, a British daily national newspaper, Terry Eagleton, Professor of English Literature at Oxford University, on being asked what books he most liked to read “Frankly, literature now bores me so much I'd rather watch men digging holes in the road” ;

In the DAILY TELEGRAPH, another British newspaper - this time transcribed, not from memory - the academic Liza Jardine, giving her reaction to a £6m BBC adaptation of Thackeray's novel VANITY FAIR : “I turned off after five minutes. I'm sick of period drama. I just thought 'Oh god, another one with bonnets'” ;

In the NEW YORKER, an American magazine, Bill Buford, its literary editor, introducing a fiction edition with the announcement that “The 20th century experiment of modernism is over. Pure narrative, story-telling is back” ;

And finally, the response of Lord Redesdale, an English aristocrat on being told in the 1920s by his wife that TESS OF THE D'URBEVILLES, which he had just finished, was not a true story, but written by one Thomas Hardy “What ? Do you mean the damned sewer invented it ?”

The first thing I hope you will notice about my choice of quotations is how bad-tempered they are. They share in common a definite sense of exhaustion – two years ago someone would have called it fin de siècle - as if storytelling itself, its claims and its practices, had either tricked or exasperated the speaker to the point where they felt that a little blunt philistinism was the only possible response. In reply to that tone – which God knows enjoys popular currency these days - it is hard not to be equally forthright. To Terry Eagleton, for instance, it is difficult not to respond by admitting that his disillusion may, like, presumably, his own books, be sincere, densely argued and deeply felt. But if he is in good faith, he is probably unwise to go on occupying a prestigious post at a prominent university. Surely, if he is to follow his arguments to their natural end, he would be more honestly employed as Oxford's Arterial Professor of Road Digging while the Chair in Literature be yielded to someone who actually likes the stuff.

Of Lisa Jardine, it is hard not to ask what abysmal depths of professorial ignorance it was which made another respected teacher of literature think she could turn on an adaptation of VANITY FAIR without being aware in advance that there was a sporting chance that the characters might be wearing the costumes of another era.

And to Bill Buford, it is important to point out that it is only a very narrowly-based coterie of novelists who ever thought that narrative had been superseded. If Buford had looked up and out of the metropolitan chicken-run, he would have noticed that most people, after all, get the majority of their fiction from television, from films, from theatre and from the radio. In these forms, which can sometimes be more intimate with their audiences, narrative never went away. For all the supposed crisis in modern fiction, it is clear that humankind now enjoys more enactments of its own destinies than at any time in history. Television alone ensures that we fabulate, and we fabulate obsessively. But the majority of that fabulation goes on in genres, which are still, after a whole century of popular ascendancy, condescended to by literary editors in New York.

You will infer from my replies to these first three propositions that, temperamentally, a playwright has very little patience with those people – be they critics or writers themselves – who declare, in the middle of a lifetime spent in the study of literature, that literature is in some way failing in its duty to give them what they need. When the modern academic adopts that deliberately crude tone, then he draws attention not to inadequacies in literature, but to inadequacies in him- or herself. It is rarely literature itself which has exhausted the critic. More likely, it is his own obligation to write about it on a daily basis which is actually getting him down. The complaints so many critics make against literature are not true literary grievances. They are more often grievances of life-style. Anger at the sustained difficulty of one's own job is not quite the same as anger against the art-work itself. Modern criticism would be considerably more interesting for the reader if professors paused a second before next confusing the two.

An Oxford Professor of English who complains that there is too much English about makes an obvious figure of ridicule. The word for another Professor who has seen too many period adaptations on television is 'spoilt'. And the editor who imagines that modernism has run amuck through fiction is getting his fiction from unrepresentative sources. So it is surprisingly to the English aristocrat that we must turn for the most probing and interesting question raised among these four. "What? Do you mean the damned sewer invented it?"

It is impossible for somebody who has now spent thirty years in the public profession of sewer - I dream up invented stories and put them before the public - not to stop occasionally and ask himself not just why he is doing what he is doing, but what it is that he is actually doing. We are now used to the idea that the daily manufacture of fictionalised versions of our lives has unnoticeably become the essential background against which we conduct our own. You might say it is the defining mark of a modern civilisation that it finds itself producing more stories.

Each night, a near-majority of the population of Britain, in an action which plainly has no parallel in the previous history of our island race, sits down to watch actors simulate situations which the producers devoutly hope millions of people will recognise. What does it matter whether we call it art or not? Nightly, we expose ourselves to countless myths, both uniform and uniformed. Our representatives, those chosen from our tribe for their talent or for their beauty, pull on blue serge or green scrubs to appear before us as doctors, as policemen and as vets. But strangely, although this development is so singular and peculiar to our age, although we experience so many more of these artefacts than any large human group before us, we rarely pause to ask ourselves not just whether the consumption of endless parallel narratives to our own is necessary, but what on earth we think we are doing when we indulge in it, or rather when we indulge in it to such extraordinary excess.

People seem, in the twinkling of an eye, to have gone from finding everything in one book - the Bible, the Koran - to finding very little in very many. Towns in the mid-West of America which boast a religious book shop and a pornographic book shop, but absolutely nothing in between, are remarkable, thankfully, because they are now untypical of the world many of us inhabit. But what exactly is the reason for this multiplicity? Are we simply bored? Are we just lucky not to have to dig the fields? Does modern city life in countries at peace so lack passion and distinction that we can only find meaning by comparing our way of existence with others more dramatic and sensational? Does the restlessness with which we skip from one history to another signify the merits of an inquiring mind, or does it just imply an inability to settle on anything very much? Sportsmen, aviators, explorers read comics. It is we, the desk-bound and the pavement-beaters, who prefer to search out subtler, more complex analogies. Is our aim, in short, merely to pass time which, in Beckett's phrase, would have passed anyway?

Some people will find the act of questioning the benefits of narrative culture impertinent and needless. The satisfaction they take in sitting alone with a novel, in listening to an opera or in going to the theatre is to them so ingrained, so obvious that they barely stop to ask themselves why they think they are spending their time well. They would argue, rightly, that the twentieth century was marked out by two undoubtedly splendid developments. In the first place, art, in most of its forms, became available to the many rather than to the few. Thanks to the idea of universal education, to the influence of mass newspapers, to radio and to television, news of the pleasures of art reached more and more people. But secondly, and, just as important, art itself reacted to the knowledge that it might be able to speak to a much wider audience.

Although it would be absurd to make any qualitative judgement about the grasp of twentieth century literature, we can at least confidently say something about its reach. No longer was a Zola or a Dickens an isolated figure, eccentrically choosing to portray the lives of the poor rather than the rich. Now, and in particular through film and television, it was understood that the special potential of fiction might be to throw light where it had rarely been thrown before - on the daily hardships of the forgotten and the underprivileged. It was still possible, of course, at least in the first half of the 20th century - though we may note much less in the second - to make major breakthroughs of technique: Joyce, Proust and Borges testify to that. But never forget that Hardy, Lawrence and Brecht made equally powerful break-throughs of subject-matter.

"Painting is dead, they tell me, but it's never concerned me," said William de Kooning, who proved his point by going on painting long after his conscious mind was able to understand what his hand was doing. It is one of the most notable features of this age of artistic super-production that just as the quantity of fiction produced has grown so alarmingly, so too has the number of observers ready, at the drop of a hat, to declare that all life has gone out of the activity. We no sooner open the cultural pages of a newspaper than some smart-alec tells us that the novel, the theatre, the television play, the poem or the movie has died, but that somehow nobody except them has noticed. There is no more predictable nor more tedious way of filling up the pages of a broad sheet newspaper - and, interestingly, how those too have grown, in volume, if not in impact - than by giving them over to the obituary notice for some particular art form. There is no more glamorous way of opening a Book Fair than by heralding the death of the Book.

"I had spent forty years reviewing plays" said the recently-retired drama critic, Irving Wardle, "and I didn't care if I never stepped inside a theatre again." It is as if confronted with the sheer fertility of a supermarket, the easiest response is to smash up your trolley and start screaming that nothing in the shop is worth eating. But underneath this understandable feeling of helplessness - a helplessness which you may say oppresses us as much in politics as it does in culture - lies a deeper unease and one which does seem to have grown in the last part of the

previous century. We cannot quite remember what virtue there is in telling made-up stories rather than in telling true ones.

The analogy with painting is, I think, a good one, because it was the introduction and growing popularity of photography which left painters wondering what they were going to do with their lives. If the job was no longer simply to serve as society's secretary, or as iconographer for its religion, then what was it? Plainly, portraying the Madonna was no longer enough. As news pictures acquired a clarity and immediacy which seemed to convey both urgent information and strong feeling to the public, painters began to wonder whether they were not, by infinitely complex means, doomed only to convey sensations which new methods of reproduction could deliver much more simply. The story of how painting found a role in the 20th century is a particularly inspiring one, but the answer to its prosperity was indicated most clearly in Picasso's unexpected reply when he was told of the insult which the Royal Academician, Alfred Munnings had paid him after looking at his work for the first time.. "Picasso" Munnings said, "can't paint a tree." "No," said Picasso. "He's right. I can't paint a tree. But I can paint the feeling you have when you look at a tree."

It is this superior means of access to our inner sensations, this sense that the artist is inside us, knowing what we know but able to give it voice and shape, this gift, if you like, for expressing the inexpressible, which has offered the artist his traditional claim of superiority to the 'mere' documentarian. Music, of all the arts, we are told, is the highest because it is the nearest of them all to being at peace with its own irreducibility. It is, by definition, not a record of anything because it does not exist in relation to anything which can be adequately discussed or described. Music can only be experienced, and because it does not truck with the common currency of verbal concepts or ideas, it is generally held to be the closest to the sublime. But when literature and the performing arts seek the same status as music or pure dance, when they assert that they are, as you might say, something more than photographic then they are forced to make a second and more contentious claim: namely that there is there is something called the 'higher truth' and that this higher truth can only be reached by the curious stratagem of lying.

From this artistic paradox - that by telling lies we reach the truth - an infinite variety of fun has been had by artists as various as Pirandello, Schnitzler and Luis Bunuel. If you can point to one prescient saying at the end of the 19th century which foretells all the artistic mayhem which will follow then surely it is Oscar Wilde's ringing declaration in *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* that 'the truth is never pure, and rarely simple'. When Freud produced a theory which formalised the already-growing conviction that we are all in only irregular touch with what goes on inside our own selves, then he cut the tape which allowed artists to pour onto a wonderfully irresponsible new field of play. Freud's bracing announcement that 'the ego is not master in his own house,' transformed the cultural world quite as much as it transformed the psychological. Not only were our characters unknowable. So were our motives. Surrealism thrived on the idea that we could not hope to distinguish the face from the mask, that dream might be as real to us as the real. There seemed no end to the good-natured sport that could be had by indulging the notion, in film and in written fiction, that human beings have the utmost difficulty getting to the heart of anything and - a very 20th century idea, this - that 'anything' may not in the long run turn out to have any heart at all.

But as the century drew to a close, you could feel people tire of the artist's too-easy get-out that there is no one truth, only yours or mine, and only at this moment and not necessarily for long. We had all heard too many dodgy biographical dramas, which had played fast and free with the facts of a person's real life, defended by their unscrupulous makers on the specious grounds that "No, well, it's not the literal truth of what happened, but it does express the higher, poetic truth of the thing." No wonder the words "higher, poetic" have become show-business code for "inaccurate."

Years ago, when a play of mine was performed in Holland, I asked my agent how it had gone. He replied that it had gone as well as a play possibly could in Holland. I asked him what he meant. "Well", he said, "because of the remains of a Puritan tradition, people in Holland never really approve of plays, because plays are fiction, and what is fiction but lying?" It was my agent's reply which made me realise why the avant-garde has always been so popular in that part of the world. It also brought back to me how in the days of popular stage nudity, you were guaranteed to see more actors scampering about buck-naked in Amsterdam than anywhere else in Europe. In the late '60s and '70s I was always fascinated to see that the Dutch took to the avant-garde with the same ease and confidence with which English-speaking audiences took to musicals or soap opera. In particular, they responded to any kind of theatre which came close to performance art. They felt comfortable when the artist was willing to strip him- or herself down to become the subject of their own art-work. (It is no coincidence, by the way, that the television programme BIG BROTHER was originated in the Low Countries). The conventional play-maker or novelist, by contrast, uses strategies intended not to reveal but to disguise. When you walk naked in a public square, perhaps letting out an unedited stream of consciousness at bystanders, then you are doing something fundamentally honest. When, on the other hand, you pretend to be someone you are not in order to re-create events which never, in truth, happened, then you are conniving at what may, from one point of view, be seen as a deliberate act of deceit.

"What, do you mean the damned sewer invented it?"

Those who have either missed or dismissed the cultural high-jinks of the twentieth century may still think that it is the test of any successful work to ask whether it fools the reader or viewer into thinking it is true. They may see Lord Redesdale's indignation as a sign of a job well done. The noble lord may have been left feeling that he had somehow been gulled, cheated into a sympathy unworthily given, but Thomas Hardy would be justified in congratulating himself on the skill with which he had held a mirror up to nature. Eighty years on, however, it is hard to imagine either such an innocent reader, nor indeed such an innocent writer. If photography and the video camera can claim now to provide a clearer, a less unreliable mirror than the individual artist, where, then, does art belong?

The late twentieth century saw so many readers announcing that they preferred biography to fiction, and so many television-watchers declaring that they preferred the news - 'hard' news, 'real' news - to the contrivances of drama, that you may suspect, as I do, that some shift was taking place in how the public wanted its cocktail, in exactly how many parts lies it was prepared to tolerate mixed up with how many parts truth. Although people were, mercifully, wearying of the fatuous cliché that there is more drama in ninety minutes of football than there is in the whole of Shakespeare, you sensed that this was probably because they were at last even more tired of soccer than they were of Elizabethan verse. But even so you could still feel people questioning what relation exactly the invented should have to the true.

For myself, I can only approach this difficult subject by taking examples from the world I know best. No play presented recently in London was more impressive than Richard Norton-Taylor's remarkable re-creation of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. Stephen Lawrence was an innocent black teenager, killed while standing at a bus stop. The murder of the 18 year-old Lawrence was the greatest British domestic scandal of recent years, if you count in the subsequent failure of the police to prosecute the gang of white racist youths who are alleged to have killed him. At the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn you were nightly able to see extracts from the transcript of the judicial hearings. Norton-Taylor had done no more than to choose those incidents or testimonies which most interested or alarmed him. But in that act of editing, he laid before a live audience all the subtleties and intricacies of British racism, all its forms and gradations, with a clarity which I had never seen emulated by television, documentary nor newspaper. The

play seemed not just a rebuke to the British theatre for its continuing drift towards less and less important subject matter. But it also seemed to expose other forms by the sheer seriousness and intensity with which it was able to bring the theatre's special scrutiny to bear.

In an extraordinary decision, however, at the end of the year, the judges of the Evening Standard Drama Award decided that there had been no play in 1999 worthy of their prize. Having sat on a few award committees myself I know that excruciating errors of judgement are endemic to the process. But in this case, there was cause for special dismay. The only possible grounds on which the judges could have overlooked Norton-Taylor's outstanding work was because they did not think it was really a play. (They had also, by the way, rejected the year's second-best play on the grounds it was Australian). It is true, of course, that the dialogue in *THE COLOUR OF JUSTICE* was, as it were, 'found'. Norton-Taylor, like a sculptor who works from given materials, did not actually have to waste time in the tedious business of giving characters lines, any more than the sculptor sits rusting iron or degrading driftwood. But in his faultless act of organisation and selection, he had done precisely what an artist does. The audience knew they were watching a play, even if the Evening Standard didn't. By Picasso's great criterion, Norton-Taylor did not paint a tribunal of a racist crime. He painted the anger you feel when you look at a tribunal.

It was seeing that play that made me realise how lazy is the natural assumption that what we see on television, presented to us as fact, is in any true sense 'true'. When, in 1998, I wrote an account of a visit I had made to Israel and to the Palestinian Territory, then I became convinced that honour could only be done to complicated questions of faith and belief by dropping the familiar apparatus of play-making and instead resolving to appear in my own play. As an outsider, a half-informed visitor, I despaired of writing fiction which relied on conventional scenes. Because I knew that English actors bearing machine guns and challenging each other at guard posts, or wearing yarmalkas, or pressing their wrongly-proportioned bodies against the wire of refugee camps, would, almost by definition, introduce an element of falsity which would pollute the subject matter, so I determined to stand - yes, like a Dutch performance artist - making myself the vessel of the show in order better to direct peoples' attention to the material itself.

It was my contention that, in this case, when the subject of a work is so hotly contested, so open to argument, that the audience could best decide whether the witness were honest if the witness were willing to appear before them. To those who warned in advance that an acting debut was a foolhardy thing to undertake at the age of 51, I could only quote Cocteau's injunction which has been obeyed, in my lifetime, by all the artists I most respect: "Whatever they criticise you for, intensify it".

It is important to make clear that, in its writing, *VIA DOLOROSA* involved me in as much structural labour as any story with 25 actors and a dozen changing locations. It was a play like any other. It involved me in as much work. I tried scrupulously to convey the meaning of what the people I met had said to me. I even checked my version with many of them. But I also sought to order their words in the most dramatic and effective way possible. Their rhythms became mine. Although I intended a seemingly artless narrative which had me blundering ignorantly from one stirring encounter to the next - my own faithlessness contrasting with the passionate convictions of those I met - nevertheless the exact order of those encounters and some of the feelings they aroused in me did not in fact precisely represent the reality of my first journey to the area. The itinerary was re-jigged. With the help of my director, Stephen Daldry, as much art went into this artlessness as would go into the making of a baroque altar. The play did not literally correspond to the letter of my experience. But it conveyed the spirit of that experience more faithfully than any 'mere' diary would have been able to.

The response to the work took me aback. People told me they had watched countless television documentaries, read countless articles, bought countless books, but that they had never felt close to the experience of the Middle East until they watched a play, a play which for all its unusualness of form, nevertheless operated by all the conventional measures of fiction. Nothing could have made me happier than a comment from a news journalist : “One leaves the performance with the conviction that one word can be worth a thousand pictures.”

As a result of this decision, as it were, to ‘go Dutch’, I am now frequently asked whether I’m giving up regular play writing altogether. It’s an irritating question, for not only does it miss the point that VIA DOLOROSA is indeed a play, but it also assumes that form is something which you apply to subject matter like paste, rather than something which grows from within it. VIA DOLOROSA was an attempt to escape from formula, not to impose a new one. Yes, it rejected old models. But it made no claim to be a new model. By standing alone on a stage, as Simon Callow rather unkindly put it, “unprotected by an actor’s shield of technique”, it is true that I seemed able, on occasions, to convince the audience of an urgent sincerity which they had not always found in other plays I had written. I found a parallel in Blake Morrison’s ability to move readers with his account of his relationship with his father in WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER ? to a depth he could never have achieved had he laid on top of his memories the usual thin smear of fiction and called it a novel. If I could bottle the quality of the audience’s reaction - their intense silences, their profound and mature consideration of the world I described - then I admit I would carry that bottle in my pocket for the rest of my life : a sort of playwright’s elixir. But as soon as someone asked me “Oh, could you come and do Ireland now ?”, then it was clear there is no such thing in art as a formal solution that works more than once. “If the novel is to survive” said Carol Shields recently “it has to be subverted.” I would agree, but add that you can never subvert anything in the same way twice.

I have used the word ‘mere’ in inverted commas to speak of documentary and to speak of diary, for you will gather from what I am saying that I have respect for any artist who wants to drag art closer to reality, and whose inspiration is the wealth of the external universe. I have never wasted an evening in the theatre which put as high a priority on bringing knowledge as it did on bringing what the writer believes to be truth. How do we know anything unless we first look at some facts ? Nothing has absorbed me more as a writer than taking apparently intractable subject matter - the Chinese Revolution, aid to the Third World, the prison system, the rigid rites and rituals of Alcoholics Anonymous, the far less rigid rights and rituals of the Anglican church - and striving, often without success, to persuade people that something is more interesting than they realise. There are, after all, only three disciplines to which human beings can go for help in understanding their own predicaments : to art, to science and to religion. There is so much to know, and we have such short lives in order to learn that I cannot understand any writer who, at some level, does not value curiosity over opinion, nor seek enlightenment over self-expression. What else will persuade the sated consumers that fiction can offer them something which the melodrama of football or the lassitude of magazines cannot ?

You will, I hope, by now, see what I am arguing. The ceaseless reiterations of reality with which we are hourly bombarded, far from threatening the artist, to my mind offer him or her an increased and special opportunity. It is precisely because there are so very many stories being told that audiences need to be refreshed. Why fabulate ? Because if we do not, everyone else will. We must fabulate because we all, as spectators, need to be brought up short and reminded that the lowest levels of fabulation, the formulaic levels which prevail everywhere, as much in half-baked novels as on half-baked television, do not, in fact, tell us very much about reality, or about ourselves. Bad story-telling, conventional story-telling, story-telling propelled by the doctrinal rules of UCLA screenwriting classes - Reel 10 : hero confronts apparently insuperable problem ; Reel 11 : hero overcomes apparently insuperable problem - serve only to dull us. Such

storytelling reduces the world and makes it less than it is. How much more desperately, then, we need our sense of wonder restored, given that so much in modern fabulation conspires to steal it away. Science, which effortlessly opens minds and exposes them to new ideas, will rob the arts of their audience if we are content to leave fiction clattering mindlessly along tracks it has traversed a thousand times before. The Dogma film-makers in Denmark who signed a manifesto foregoing the elaborate production values of American cinema have been mocked for their rigidity. The group appears to have disbanded after four fascinating films. But who can deny their basic conviction that the very look of a Hollywood film has come to act as a kind of glaze which serves only to seal it off from the audience's feelings ?

And let me be clear : not only do I look to leave the theatre or the television set knowing more, but most especially I hope to know more about now. The ignorant and foolish critic is the one who sneers that nothing dates faster than the up-to-date. A lifetime's experience of storytelling has convinced me that nothing is harder in the arts than to be contemporary. A majority of films and books could have been conceived any time in the last thirty years, because they are effectively reactions not to life itself but to other imitations of life. The deadly question "Who are your influences ?" presupposes of any writer that the primary source of their inspiration will not be is happening now on the street but what has already happened between the covers of other books. But the film-makers who give fabulation a good name are those - like Mike Leigh, like Pedro Almodovar or like the great Iranian Majid Majidi - who make films which could only have been conceived in response to the contemporary world. The wash of period dramas on television of which Lisa Jardine complains would not, considered alone, be so lowering were these dramas not offered as a too-easy substitute for the once-thriving PLAYS FOR TODAY. It is the ghost of what they have replaced which haunts us. "Ah yes," a television executive once smiled at me patronisingly, "You write strongly-authored work, don't you ?" "Well what do you want ?" I replied. "Weakly-authored work ?"

It was interesting during the Broadway run of VIA DOLOROSA - though not, significantly, during its run in the West End - to notice how much cultural commentary was provoked by the play's mix of the actual and the artificial. Controversialists fell on it like red meat. In particular the novelist Ellen Brockman was moved in the New York Times to argue that the play was part of a whole movement in the arts towards the real. In the face of so much representation of reality, the arts were, she argued, effectively throwing in the towel. In the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem I had noticed how much more powerful were the photographs of the camps than the terrible paintings and statues inspired by them. These art-works seemed somehow to diminish their subject matter, to achieve nothing except to insert an artist's presence gratuitously between peoples' unbearable suffering and our own reaction to it. From this section in the play, Brockman went on to conclude that my own cry of "Give us the facts ! It's the facts we want !" chimed in with a historical moment - a late twentieth century feeling that art, which claims to interpret, in fact is only embellishing in a way that people now find unnecessary.

I was obviously pleased that someone had been stirred by my argument. But from the same analysis Brockman and I draw opposite conclusions. It may be true that we are breeding generations who will prefer to watch the security cameras in department stores rather than to go to Royal Shakespeare Company. But it is interesting to note that, in television history, the fly-on-the-wall documentary which three years ago was all the rage is, in fact, now more or less extinct while EAST ENDERS and CASUALTY ride on regardless. The makers of these rightly-admired and formidable programmes know something which the low-level documentarists did not : that the editing and organisation of reality is a genuine skill. In response to the ubiquity of the real, we need, not as Brockman argues, to abandon fiction, but, on the contrary to make that fiction more original, more distinctive, to strive even harder to prove that only the greatest art comes near to matching the world's infinite suggestiveness. The enemy of art is not reality, but formula.

I began with Auden and I would like to end with him. In his last years, when his poetry was judged to be in decline, Auden wrote these startling lines, which apply as much to my profession today as they did to his then :

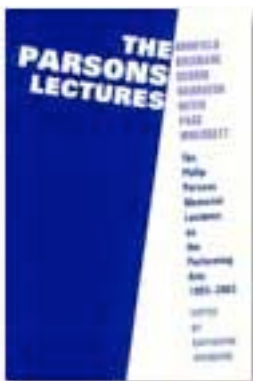
*After all, it's rather a privilege
amid the affluent traffic
to serve this unpopular art which cannot be turned into
background noise for study
or hung as a status trophy by rising executives
cannot be "done" like Venice
or abridged like Tolstoy, but stubbornly insists upon
being read or ignored*

In my youth, I remember being startled when the director Peter Brook remarked that he lived for the day when a theatre strike would inconvenience a community as much as a bus strike. Until people felt the same urgent need for drama that they do for a bus, drama was failing. That slightly ridiculous prospect (" I couldn't get to work this morning because there was no play last night") now has a whiff of '60s utopianism which seems as dated as William Morris or Craven A. At the turn of the century, out of the three million people who lived in Paris, half a million went once a week to a play, and twice that number went once a month. Now, children no longer rush to the cinema at 10.30 on a Saturday morning to fall screaming with delight on the one film they will see all week. Don Quixote no longer leaps up from his seat, so carried away by the play that he takes out his sword to cut the puppets' strings. The day when art is felt to be needed is as far away than ever, not because we all produce too much, but because we all produce too much which is reductive. On the death of Dashiell Hammett, his colleague Raymond Chandler wrote this obituary for the father of the American detective story : "(Hammett) did over and over again what only the best writers can do at all. He wrote scenes that never seemed to have been written before."

The world is not tired. Our reactions to the world are not tired. What becomes tired is the deadly habitude of our descriptions of that world. The artist exists only to externalise what we all do internally anyway. By making the descriptions new, we do not create alternative worlds. We remind people of the breathtaking beauty of the original.

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