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Stories We Believe in

Let me tell you a story

When I was a boy, perhaps nine years old, the moat of the castle in Detmold, the small German town I grew up in, froze over for the first time in many years. The local fire brigade declared it safe, and the expanse of smooth ice was opened for skating. This was tremendously exciting. Having grown up with a Dutch mother, I had heard many stories of the “*elfstedentocht*” and of glorious adventures on the frozen surface of the grachten of Leiden, breath steaming from people’s mouths in white gusts of laughter as they made the canals their playground. Now I would taste the same adventure. I couldn’t wait.

When I finally got on the ice, surrounded by crowds of people most of whom were not quite sure of their balance on their unfamiliar, shiny skating blades, I was delighted to find that I could zoom away where others would stagger, fearing neither falls nor other skaters. Falling is no big problem when you are relatively small, and light, and unafraid. I set out to explore the whole expanse that was literally lying at my feet, only to find that part of it had been cordoned off. A small group of ducks, quacking contentedly, were paddling in a hole in the ice, while others were standing on its edge, perched on one leg, the other one safely retracted into their warm feathers. I went up to the red-and-white tape that had been put up around it. Someone explained to me that the ducks needed this hole to dive for their food, and that they kept it open by paddling around in it, preventing the ice from forming. We were not allowed to come too close, because the ice cover was too thin to support much weight.

Impatiently, I went off into a different direction. Some distance away a huddle of people had formed on the ice and I wanted to see what they were looking at. Full of curiosity I pushed my way into the middle of the circle, and there I saw it: a swan, graceful like a painting with its wings outstretched and its long neck describing a gentle curve as if in mid-flight, frozen into the ice under our feet. It had obviously dived for food and lost its bearings, missed the hole, and had suffered a death that was as cruel as it was strangely beautiful. People looked at it in silence, almost with a kind of devotion. It was quiet.

Suddenly there was a groan, a metallic crash, a dark noise like huge bone being crushed. Like frozen lightning, a tear ripped through the ice underneath my skates and people sped away in panic and I, too, flew to the edge of the surface, close to the safety of the bank. The weight of so many bodies on so small a surface had been too much for the frozen surface to bear, but it was soon found that the tear did not put skaters at risk. Frightened but elated, I raced around for the rest of the afternoon as far away as possible from the thin ice of the duck pond and the weakened spot where the swan had found its end. It was the last time I saw the castle moat freeze over. Climate change and perhaps my own itinerant existence meant that I have never since had the opportunity of skating on it again.

There is a dilemma with stories such as this one. By sharing my memory with you, I have extended your world a little and have added to the tissue of your own memories. The image of the swan is now part of your own associations with winter, which are, I assume, as thick as the ice on a frozen lake in January. This is a nation of skaters, after all, and I am almost certain that every one of you was reminded of similar winter days, of the cold, the excitement, the wonderful sense of floating effortlessly through a white world that one can have on skates. You can see a castle with moat, and laughing, screaming children rushing around trying to catch one another, cheeks red with cold and

excitement. But can you believe me? Are you sure this really happened, or is it just a way of easing an audience into a discussion of more abstract ideas?

As it happens, I really do remember this. I even went back to the meteorological records to confirm the year which my memory does not retain exactly, but which almost certainly was the exceptionally severe frost of early 1979. I did not find any mention of a dead swan in the ice, but if someone were to take the trouble to interview people who were there that winter, I am certain that some of them saw the swan, and would confirm its existence. This story really happened, and you can believe me.

Interestingly, though, it does not matter whether or not any of this has really taken place. Not to the story. It is either good or bad, told either well or badly and you, the listeners, respond primarily not to the factual truth, but to the narrative force of what you hear. It stirs your memories; it creates pictures in your mind. You are ready to engage with it whether or not I can prove anything about it.

You are ready to believe me because sharing stories is the most potent way of building a shared world, much more so than sharing hard information, and because without belief you would not be able to live another day. Despite the fact that most of you have never set foot in Antarctica you assume that it exists because you have heard many stories about it, stories which do not contradict one another, which were told by witnesses you believe to be reliable – your teachers, a nature documentary, a scientist perhaps. You have seen photos of the icy wastes and you are prepared to accept that they describe what they claim to. You believe these stories because it would be impossible to verify everything you hear about. David Hume pointed out that there is no logical reason that the sun will rise tomorrow, and yet we all believe that it will, simply because it appears to have done so quite reliably ever since anybody can remember. If we were really to doubt everything we could not put to an empirical test, we might as well stop now. Without believing in stories, we would be lost.

In another way it does not even matter whether the story about the frozen swan is true or not, whether in January 1979 a bird was really killed under the ice on the moat of Detmold castle, seat of the princes of Lippe, an aristocratic family a branch of which incidentally also produced a certain Bernhard Leopold Friedrich Eberhard Julius Kurt Karl Gottfried Peter Prinz zur Lippe-Biesterfeld, better known as Prince Bernhard, prince consort to Queen Juliana and father of Queen Beatrix. The image of the swan has its own, poetic truth, independent of what actually happened. There is no clear border between fact and fiction in the stories we create, and which create us.

Storytelling Animals

The world in which we live is a thick tissue of stories. They allow us to navigate our lives and our environment; they tell us who we are; they bind us to one another; they give us a past and a future and in doing so they shape our present.

We know of no other animal capable of telling stories, of recreating an abstract image of the world and communicating it through signs. Bees can communicate the location of food sources through an abstract dance, but they merely give instruction; sleeping dogs apparently have vivid dreams about hunting and fighting, as their twitching legs and suppressed barks attest, but they do not tell about their dreams after waking up; chimpanzees have been observed treating a piece of wood much like a human child would treat a doll, carrying it around with them and even building a soft nest for it, but their symbolic imagination is not communicated through gestures, images, or language; other monkeys can lie, uttering warning cries that send the other members of their group into the safety of the treetops in order to enjoy a fruit they found on the ground without having to share it, but they do not spin tales about imaginary tigers outside of this immediate context.

We are animals that tell each other stories, not by choice but by necessity. Storytelling as a way of relating and creating a kind of truth is part of our biological hard wiring. Every story imposes a structure on the world around us, a sense of purpose and order. Evolutionary scientists interested in this question have pointed out that stories order the world, explaining puzzling facts of life, using the imagination to give reasons to seemingly random facts. It was a survival advantage to our remote ancestors, they say, to ascribe agency to elements of the world around them. Better to believe one time too often that a branch in the grass is a poisonous snake than the other way round. Better to believe that there might be a tiger lurking behind a moving branch than to ignore the visual clue. Learning to see a hidden will behind the visible phenomena and communicating this insight into abstract signs was an important step in our mental development.

This developing reflex gave early humans an edge over other animals. By interpreting the world around them more extensively they could predict events more reliably, identify pattern and purpose. They began to project order into their experience, meaning into apparent randomness. Not only could they foresee when and where predators and prey were likely to appear, they could also communicate it by weaving their experiences into symbolic patterns and by projecting the hierarchies of their own groups into the natural world: if something moved there had to be a mover even if he was unseen; if they themselves mothers and fathers, and sons fighting among themselves, and youngsters falling in love, and elders sitting in judgment, the natural order of things must surely reflect this. We fully became humans by projecting our own social universe into the world around us and by sharing this imaginary order through stories, lending order to the world, identifying hidden intentions and explanations and creating a structure for experience: to humans, everything means something.

Learning to tell stories

This all-important pattern has to be conquered anew by every individual. Small children are born with a hunger for narration, but not with a full understanding of it. The first stories they tell imitate narrative order without grasping structure. "There once was a tall tree," says a two-year old, "and a big, brown cow, and then a man fell from the clouds and hurt his foot." This kind of rudimentary narration is an image of the bewildering world of seemingly unrelated facts toddlers inhabit, a world in which the existence of Father Christmas is no more unlikely than an uncle in a country far, far away, or the fact that so many people can sit in a tiny plane up in the sky.

Narrative order then becomes an endless string of facts: "and then... and then... and then...", but only gradually children learn that it is not enough to simply line events up in infinite succession, but that they must have a purpose, that a situation must be resolved, an arch created, that a story needs a beginning, a middle and an end. Children are story junkies and need repetition precisely because they still have to internalize the order of things, have to learn how to narrate experience to themselves. They never tire of a particular story because they listen to its structure as much as to its characters and events, because its familiarity allows them to conquer a small part of the world around them. They learn to ritualize what would otherwise be a torrent of randomness, to identify what is important and what is not, and they begin to understand about other minds, other emotional horizons, hidden motivations. They learn to structure their beliefs about the world.

Even as grownups we approach the world through stories: the history of our country, our family and ourselves, our private mythologies, our narrated selves. We read books, go to the movies and watch television not to inform and improve ourselves, but to delve into a tale and find reassurance in its order, just like children. We might as well not bother watching a crime show because we know already that the inspector is going to catch the murderer in the end – but it is exactly this familiarity that we seek.

Dealing with other people, we build up a version of ourselves for public consumption, a persona woven out of tendentious memories or outright lies. In conversation, we narrate our lives to others every minute of every day: “I met so-and-so in the street,” we will tell a friend, “and he said... and I said... and he said...”, or, in a more contemporary idiom: “and I was like... and he was like... and I was like...”

Immediately, we are in a narrative situation, imitating voices and gestures, placing ourselves in a good light, telling an episode that is a full miniature drama by selecting what is relevant to the tale. People who select too little are experienced as boring: their stories are not interesting because they give all elements equal weight, lose themselves in details, clutter the narrative with unimportant information, make us impatient. We demand narrative order from one another. We need a hierarchy of facts that allows us to structure our beliefs by integrating new occurrences into the shape of the familiar.

This narrative order achieves a miracle: it allows us to survive by creating a world for us that is worth inhabiting, an order of things in which stories have heroes and villains, problem and resolution, a beginning, a middle and an end. None of us could live a single day without it.

This curious obsession of our species gives us the courage necessary to survive. Our actual, unfiltered experience of the world is marked by an unbearable amount of injustice, chaos, and randomness. Things we live, work and hope for fail to materialize, others happen apparently out of the blue. Children die of disease, good people are frustrated and beaten down and reduced to poverty, crooks prosper as often as not and grow old rich and surrounded by their families, entire cities are annihilated by natural or man-made catastrophes – everywhere accidents and coincidences give our lives a shape we had not foreseen or wanted, forcing us into compromises and positions we had always been determined to avoid. For most people, life as it unfolds is an unlivable string of disappointment and decline.

But we do not experience life in this way. We experience it as we ourselves tell it to ourselves. We narrate our lives and create coherence and plot out of the many random twists and turns of our personal and collective past, shaping a historical account that emphasizes order over chaos, logic over chance, victory over defeat. We find the courage to start something new by telling stories.

In our stories at least, life has a purpose and actions lead to justified results. In the classic storytelling paradigm, evildoers are punished and good people rewarded – the cosmic order is disturbed through ignorance or malice, and eventually restored. The classic Greek order of Hubris – Catastrophe – Catharsis is respected. It is not always so easy, of course, and we can tell stories in which this seductive pattern is broken, but even if we narrate against the classic order of the narrated world, we can read and understand this opposition only because we have internalized the basic patterns.

If you fall in love and want to build a life with another person, the worst thing you could do is to look at hard facts. Consulting statistics, you would see that most relationships end in disappointment, two thirds of marriages in divorce, that many people locked into relationships find their sex lives unsatisfactory, their love dulled by routine, their children alienated, their financial situation driven by external demands – and even those who are reasonably happy stand a good chance of having to contend with disease, accidents, and decline.

But this is not what people do when they fall in love. They laugh at statistics. It will be different for them. They know that they are going to make it, succeed where others failed, that they will ride off into the sunset hand in hand, live happily ever after. This, and only this, gives them the nerve to enter the existential wager in the first place. You may say that all they do is to fall prey to delusion, an encouraging lie that will be followed by cruel disappointment as sure as sunshine will turn into night, but that is not the whole truth: by projecting ourselves into a future that is made up of stories

we actually stand a chance of realizing at least part of that early vision. Some people really do find happiness in companionship, they are able to navigate life's blows together better than alone, they find a kind of fulfilment they would not have found otherwise.

By telling ourselves stories we do not just make an ugly reality more seem beautiful by lying to ourselves: stories can create a future that would have been impossible without them. They are not just an existential consolation allowing us to get up in the morning by giving us false courage: they themselves shape the world we will live in. We are and we will become the image of the stories we tell ourselves.

I once had the opportunity of speaking to the German-French writer Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt about an autobiographical novella he had written. As a boy, in 1938, Goldschmidt had been forced to flee from Hamburg, his native city and mine. His literary work circles around the terrible anxiety of an uprooted adolescent whose home sickness is intensified by the sexual confusion of puberty, and by the savage beatings he received at the hands of a sadistic and sexually frustrated female school director in the French boarding school where he was hidden.

The novella he had just published describes the masochistic anguish and loneliness of a young man after the war, and after many pages of beautifully rendered misery it ends with a simple paragraph in which he tells of meeting his wife, and finding happiness with her for the rest of his life. I asked him whether after so much terror this short and matter-of-fact statement did not need elaboration, and he answered me: "But why? Where happiness begins, words end. I have nothing to tell about being happy."

Goldschmidt is right. It is impossible to narrate happiness. Stories deal with adversity and how to overcome it. They give us hope by convincing us that other people have undergone and survived troubles worse than our own, and that meaningful actions can have meaningful results. Stories exist because our sense of justice is outraged and because otherwise we would despair of any possibility of living a good life. In a perfectly just and happy world we would need no stories, and no art. They are valuable because they can mend what has been broken – at least in our imagination.

Values Dramatized

If storytelling offers solutions to despair, it is important to realize that they can do so in very different ways, that they contain a User's Manual to life. Speaking about the conflict in the Middle East and the conflicting claims of Jewish Israelis and Arabs to the same land, Amos Oz once said: "Every tragedy has two possible outcomes. One comes from Shakespeare, the other from Chekhov. At the end of a Shakespeare tragedy, the stage is strewn with corpses and the spirit of Justice hovers above. Not so in Chekhov, where ultimately everybody is unhappy, everybody had to give something up, nobody has received justice – but at least everyone is still alive. I favour a Chekhovian solution"

If stories can have outcomes that are so different, and if we, our way of thinking and of feeling, are made up of a web of stories we tell about ourselves, then nothing is more important than which stories we choose to tell. To some degree, of course, our entanglement in a web of stories since earliest childhood means that we cannot simply step outside them, evaluate them, and choose between different stories as we might choose tomatoes for a salad. But we do possess a capacity for reflection that allows us to gain some perspective, nevertheless.

Our cultural history is a succession of stories being told about our place in the world, and these stories change from the myths of early hunter-gatherers to those of early agrarian cultures, to city myths fixed in writing, from Homer to the Bible and from there to the Enlightenment. They exist in a subtle and powerful dialectic between simply mirroring and dramatizing the values of our social

environment and our knowledge about the world, and projecting us into a future in which these values change through being narrated.

The greatest stories are those that succeed in shifting our collective values – not always as a step on the great road of progress, as Hegel believed, but certainly in a way that changes the lives of people enmeshed in them. Christianity was such a story. It changed the values of antiquity and pushed an entire culture in a different direction. It is arguable whether it created a better world, but nobody can doubt that we are all products of a broadly Christian heritage and that even our seemingly secular culture is still suffused with the tropes and images and reflexes of centuries of Christian lore.

We may think that our individualist, market-driven, sexualized, dog-eats-dog society is thoroughly secular, but look beneath the surface and you see us all as captives of Christianity. We still see the future in terms of paradise and apocalypse; our society still believes in the redemptive value of suffering; we still believe that the mind is nobler than the body; despite mounting scientific evidence we are desperately attached to the idea of free will that is so important to the religious concept of sin (no sin without freedom) and which still dominates our approach to justice; we are still hungry for redemption, still seeking a great Truth. In the dominant form of storytelling of our culture, Hollywood movies, it is branded obscene to show naked bodies, never mind aroused ones, while it is quite acceptable to see bodies tortured to death. Is there a better example of the Christian hatred of physical pleasure?

Where our ancestors venerated the statues of saints as unattainable goals to be emulated, we have created our own metaphysical realm of beauty with the photoshopped images of the young, the cool, the wealthy and the glamorous in the advertising which surrounds us and which has much the same effect on us as the saints of old: we are inadequate in comparison to these ideals, they make us feel small, they keep us in place, they make us obedient. George Clooney as Nespresso angel is the perfect image of the consumption heaven we have created to tyrannize ourselves. We are still entangled in the story of Christianity, but we no longer realize it and this makes it infinitely more difficult to take a reflected attitude towards it, to decide which aspects of this story are beneficial to us, and which imprison us.

Translation and Interpretation

At this point we have to address one of the most fascinating, thorniest issues in this context: the relationship between fact and fiction – or should I say between truth and lies? It is not that simple. Consider the craft of the historian, my own, and its relationship to truth.

On the surface, the question is easy: things either happened or they did not, and it is the job of the historian to make a clear distinction between the two. There are methods for dividing fact from fiction. If you have heard stories about the battle of Waterloo and you doubt their veracity, you only have to go to Belgium, to the village of the same name, and the visitor centre and souvenir shops will tell you that there was. The famous painted panorama, all 110 meters of it, will give you a good impression of the horror of battle.

If you go out into the fields and you take a spade you, you can get beyond the mere second-hand stories and representations. If you dig deep enough, you will find at first dozens and then thousands of bullets, bones, and buttons and every historian worth her salt will tell you that they date from around 1815 and that there must have been a major battle there, because the bones are shattered by bullets and sabres indicating that thousands of people died a violent death, and they appeared to wear uniforms as the buttons testify, and that these uniforms were French, British, and Prussian.

There was a battle at Waterloo, and even a brief look into any library will tell you that it was a decisive event at which Napoleon was finally defeated and European history changed, an event that

greatly exercised the Western imagination, inspiring artists from Tolstoy and Lord Byron to Stendhal and Beethoven and, closer to our own time, W. G. Sebald.

But this is where things become complicated. We can know from the bullets, bones and buttons that the battle of Waterloo took place, but what does it mean? Veterans will have told their children very different stories, depending on whether they had fought on the French or allied side, and while some of them regarded it as a disaster, others looked at it as a triumph. Joseph Stalin, to most of us one of the most monstrously murderous criminals of the monstrously criminal twentieth century, is still regarded as a hero by many Russians, including historians. They do not dispute the murders, the show trials, the gulags and the famines, they merely think that they were acceptable sacrifices for a much greater cause. Their history is built on different values.

Most historical facts are open to such a range of interpretations and subject to being the material of a myriad of different and conflicting interpretations. As storytellers, historians face the same challenges as musicians: Ludwig van Beethoven, for example, was in the habit of putting exact metronomic markings above his pieces, and a musical fundamentalist would stand on solid ground claiming that this is exactly as fast as they ought to be played. But we have different instruments today requiring different techniques and Beethoven himself, who ruined many a piano in his quest for a greater sound, might have preferred the weightier sonorities of a modern concert grand, or the power of a modern orchestra.

Concert halls today are larger than any Beethoven ever heard his music played in; some are too resonant for playing as fast as he indicated because the music would turn into an acoustic blur, while the dry sound of a small room or a studio may demand a higher speed and therefore also a different phrasing. Musician and audience, finally, live in a world after Wagner, Brahms, Schönberg, Cage, the Beatles and the Stones — a wealth of associations and resonances that the composer and his contemporaries did not share. How then is it possible to mediate any kind of truth between Beethoven's intent and today's ears?

A musician is inevitably left with the task of interpreting, translating the factual basis—the music, the score, into the reality of living art in a particular setting. An interpretation that ignores the notes as they were written will be objectively false, but is there such a thing as a true interpretation? Even in the best of circumstances, a concert or a recording is not going to capture the one Truth about a work by Beethoven but one interpretation that may or may not be accepted by listeners because they find it fascinating, illuminating, and authoritative. The score in itself is dead and can be brought to life only as a subjective account informed by knowledge, craft, taste, circumstance, and personal style.

The result is always mired in perspective, in a particular horizon, but that is not to say that it is arbitrary or relativist in a post-modern sense. It is always contingent, but based on facts in a score and relies on stylistic conventions, technical competence, and experience, and ultimately it must resonate with perceptions of the audience. An interpretation that obviously ignores pertinent facts will not be accepted by those who know them.

It is the same with stories and what we can believe about them. A story can be true or untrue in the factual sense: there was a swan caught under the ice in that moat in 1979 or there was not. But stories also have a poetic, metaphorical kind of truth, which is why we are interested in them in the first place. The image of the graceful, frozen swan speaks to us in a way that is independent of any bird's actual end. It embodies something that allows us to use fiction — a tissue of lies — as a vehicle for human truth.

The Conspiracy of Fiction

The truth of fiction is not the same as the factual existence of the bullets, bones and buttons of Waterloo. The narrator and her audience, her readers, enter into a conspiracy together, a conspiracy we know from childhood: let us pretend that this is true, she says, follow me into this world and keep pretending and I will show you marvellous things. We follow the author and we live with her creation, just as we would live with real people. We know that they are not real. The old anecdote of the cowboy who stood up in a theatre somewhere in the old West in which a travelling troupe of actors played Othello and shot the protagonist because he had just strangled a beautiful lady is appallingly funny because the shooter, presumably a simple soul, had not grasped this difference, and nobody would travel to St Petersburg to research the biography of Anna Karenina, even if she is more real to us than most nineteenth-century Russians who were actually alive and whose existences are documented.

Fiction lives in a delicate balance which children master instinctively. They live stories, they live games. They do not *pretend* to be Superman or a princess, they *are* these characters, inhabiting them totally, but only after they have said: I'm Superman now and you are my enemy. But if Superman gets hungry or falls and hurts himself, the pretence instantly vanishes and there is only a little boy in a blue-and-red costume. Children move between the reality of their imagination and the reality of their immediate lives with perfect and natural ease, a faculty most of us can no longer conjure up so easily as adults.

But even if we cannot capture the sheer delight of inhabiting a story with our very being, we believe in the human truth of a novel or a film or a play without seeing it as fact, we breathlessly follow the lives of its protagonists and view them as friends, even if we know they never lived. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's beautiful phrase we "suspend our disbelief" for the time of our engagement, only to regain it later.

Don Quixote famously failed to make this distinction. Fed on a diet of medieval romances and unable to find the way back into his own century, he went out to enact what he had read, and only the illiterate Sancho Panza could save him from coming to serious harm. If we fail to make the distinction between fact and fiction, if we believe in fiction as we do in the world around us, we are all shaggy knights sitting on our Rosinantes, fighting windmills.

In Lolanta's Garden

There is another story which makes this point very beautifully, the tale of Lolanta, a beautiful princess who was born blind and lived in a walled garden. Her father had placed her there, instructing her servants on pain of death never to make any reference to the sense of sight. His daughter was to live in her make-believe world of sweet smells and sounds without suffering the dreadful realization that she was deprived of sight and everyone around her conspired to maintain the illusion. As is inevitable in a fairy tale, a travelling knight appears and falls in love with the beautiful princess. Through him she learns about her handicap, and when the king threatens to execute the man who ruined her artificial world, she is miraculously cured and, of course, gets to marry her suitor to live happily ever after.

This story is a timeless and acute expression of a human truth – the princess is a prisoner of her illusion, in a story created for her and maintained by all around her, that she is blind in the metaphorical as well as the literal sense until she is forced to see her own situation, a painful realization that restores and widens her senses. There are many Lolantas in the world – people and whole societies who prefer to remain immured in a comforting lie rather than face a reality too painful to bear. It comes as a surprise that this little psychological masterwork was written only in 1845, by the Danish poet Hendrik Hertz.

The opposite of Lolanta's artificial ignorance in her walled garden is a much older story: Ariadne, a figure from Greek myth, whose golden thread allows Theseus to enter the labyrinth and kill Minotaur, the savage, bull-headed monster imprisoned in the maze, and then to find his way out again. The golden thread reminds of the Fates, who spin the yarn of each person's destiny, and so human kind becomes a tissue woven of innumerable threads of fate, another way of speaking of the weave of individual stories creating the weave and pattern of a greater whole.

Recent Arrivals

These tales tell us something not only of their characters, but also about our own relationship to stories. If we lose the ability to distinguish between the stories we need to survive in a chaotic world, the structure they give to our thoughts and feelings about ourselves and the world we inhabit, if we fail to use the golden thread to find the way out of the maze of our own imagination we become prisoners of our stories like Lolanta in her garden. If we can no longer navigate the world, we can be encased in the crystalline beauty of a story like the swan under the ice I saw as a little boy.

The structure of the stories we still tell ourselves is infinitely older than our civilization, a recent arrival in our collective past. For most of our history as a species, roughly for two hundred thousand years, we roamed the plains in bands of hunter gatherers, no stronger than thirty or forty and constantly on the move, first in Africa and then, perhaps sixty thousand years ago, migrating beyond the bounds of the continent that was the cradle of humanity.

Our lives as sedentary tillers of the soil dates back no more than some ten thousand years, and our city cultures with writing, trade, administration, mathematics and priest-craft take us back a mere six thousand years – just three hundred generations, a chain of three hundred women connecting each one of us to the Neolithic age. Science and technology as we know them today were unknown to most people even ten generations ago, and as for international travel of information and people, electricity and computing – they all emerged in living memory.

It should come as no surprise that this tremendous acceleration of history has not yet reached the remote corners of our instinctive minds. The greatest part of our history and the oldest strands of our stories describe a world that has become unfamiliar and unreal to us. To our ancestors it was important to tell stories making sense of a world that was incomprehensible in many ways. By projecting human fears and hopes, human emotions and human social structures into the world around them, or ancestors achieved a sense of mastery over their environment. Animism, in which every shrub and every animal is the living expression of a spirit and lightning is the visible wrath of an angry demon, was the best model for understanding a world before the advent of science.

We are animals who tell stories because stories allow us to escape the randomness of our existence and of our experience, a thought that is unbearable to us. We project purpose and meaning and structure into the world because otherwise we would despair. But, as we have seen, the stories we tell not only structure our world, they also shape our world, our emotions, and us ourselves and we need to ask ourselves whether they correspond to us, and our goals.

Theological Thinking

As a collective story, our hunger for purpose and meaning became codified in religion, and I believe that it survives today in what I would like to call theological thinking: the instinctive and unexamined conviction that everything that happens to us must follow a great plan with us at its centre, with us as its ultimate purpose, even if this plan is unknown to us.

This was a natural and helpful response in a world that did not extend beyond a few kilometres around and receded into the dim, mythological memory of previous generations of a life unchanged

since millennia. It is no longer a rational or a helpful view in a world we now believe to consist of more than a hundred billion galaxies, each containing billions or trillions of stars, of which the Milky Way, our own home, is one of the smaller ones, containing a mere four hundred billion stars, each with uncounted planets around them, among them our own blue earth – a mere spec in an expanse too vast to fit into our little heads. Long after we have vanished and after this blue spec has been consumed by the sun the universe will still be there: vast, silent, and unmoved by this tragedy.

This is an uncomfortable thought because it explodes the confines of our imagination, because there is no story and no image large enough to contain it. Our minds, after all, have evolved to cope with and project meaning into a particular environment, not to contain the multitudes of cosmology. Nothing in the history and formation of our minds predisposes us to grasp such a monstrosity, and our mental reflexes are as anthropocentric as ever.

Our intuitive understanding of our place in the world is still much like that of a three year-old child, who believes that nobody can see her when she closes her eyes. We continue to tell ourselves stories that resonate with our experience, an experience formed by generations whose lives were centred on a clan, a particular landscape with its characteristic flora and fauna, on the constant danger, the presence of death, the excitement of the hunt and the long hours around the camp fire, telling stories to make sense of it all.

Understanding the anatomy of stories and their place in our lives therefore becomes a central challenge to us.

Stories enact values. We grow up with them and develop our views and feelings through them, we have heard told and referred to countless times. We can tell heroic stories about ourselves or, in the secularized heritage of Christianity, stories about ourselves as victims of injustice and persecution. The literary historian Erich Auerbach believed that there are in Western cultures two basic ways of storytelling, the Hebrew and the Greek. In the Hebrew tradition, stories are transformative, and their protagonists must undergo trials that change them, allowing them to progress to a higher form of dignity and insight.

The people of Israel had to err through the desert for forty years before being worthy of the land their Lord had promised them, Abraham had to be ready to sacrifice his son (one of God's cruellest tricks), Jacob to fight the angel and be wounded in the process, a logic that has continued to suffuse not only the Christian cult of martyrs, but also the Romantic worship of the tragic genius, from Prometheus to Kurt Cobain.

To Greek myth, this cult of transformative suffering was unintelligible. When Odysseus returns home after twenty years of searching, he is older, but not nobler and none the wiser. He has lost twenty good years, but not been transformed by them. Suffering in the Hebrew tradition can be transformative – it is simply a waste.

We are sceptical towards this dismissal of personal transformation. Of course we are. As post-Christians we are more Hebrews than Greeks and we are constantly seeking to transform ourselves with strategies ranging from dieting to yoga classes. Our failure to realize the ancestry of this impulse is an example of the greatest intellectual trap we can fall into – and regularly do fall into, all of us – is that of familiarity, of assuming that things *have* to be like this because they *are* like this, simply because we grew up with them and have not encountered alternatives.

We can escape the trap of the familiar by being alive to the multiplicity and the necessity of aesthetic form. If the historian's craft is like that of a practicing musician – excavating a score of facts and then interpreting it by means of ability, tradition, style and insight – there is another musical parallel here: every piece of music must be played on a particular instrument or group of instruments, and every

instrument comes with its own range of technical possibilities and limitations, of pitch and tone colour.

To a large extent, the instrument dictates what I can play, and how. It dictates an idiom. I cannot play pure music, which Bach searched so intensely that some of his pieces such the Art of the Fugue were not even written for a particular instrument, as if they were meant to be heard in their pure form. Musicians have always faced a dilemma: by transcribing the Art of the Fugue for different instruments, say an organ, a piano, a string quartet and an orchestra, they have been forced to make different pieces out of this great work.

Even Bach, of course, was the product of a musical tradition with its particular approach to scales and harmony, do assonance and dissonance, to form and social function. As musicians, we are aware that we cannot escape idioms, escape the fascinating particularities of interpretation and transposition. Pure music may be an ideal, but like all ideals it is by definition impossible to realize.

In storytelling the same is true. The teller is forced to choose an instrument, a language, an idiom, a social register, with all its possibilities and limitations. At the simplest level, this is apparent from translations and their cultural resonances: Goethe's line „Über allen Wipfeln ist Ruh“ cannot be adequately rendered in English as „above all treetops is silence“, and inversely the Stones' „I can't get no satisfaction“ is somehow not the same as „Ik kan geen bevrediging krijgen“.

It is a truism that every language has its untranslatable terms - *joie de vivre*, *Heimweh*, fairness, *Islam* – but their subtle influence extends far deeper than to questions of vocabulary. One can express different things in different languages, and there is good reason to believe that one can and must think and feel differently, too. Stories exist in language. A pure story can exist no more than a piece of pure music – and if it does, it cannot be communicated without being tainted, changed and appropriated by its medium.

Every sentence we utter is embedded in the tissue of previous stories, is an act of interpretation and translation which conjures up resonances in its audience. If I tell you of a swan, you will immediately call up images not only of their noble appearance, but of Lohengrin and Swan Lake and the Ugly Duckling, of walks in a park, outings with small children to feed them - and of the wry reflection that every swan that glides over the water so majestically is paddling very hard underneath the water. All this is determined by the resonances of our own culture.

My wife, who comes from New Zealand, is thrilled every time she sees a white swan not because she is fond of tautologies, but because the swans that were imported by the early settlers in her own country were and still are black. Karl Popper, who lived and taught in New Zealand during the Second World War, made this fact the basis of his beautiful reflection that in order to falsify the sentence “all swans are white” we should not try to find more white swans, but one black one. If I told the episode on the ice 1979 to an audience in Somalia or in the Brazilian rainforest, there would become a different story, and even if I told it in New Zealand, the instinctive image in the heads of my audience would be of a black bird encased in ice. Every sound I make, every word I use resonates with the associations of millennia.

And yet the historian's craft, my own, has another aspect: to compare the story of our collective past and its values to the widening and deepening realm of fact – to see whether and were they elide, embroider, manipulate and deceive. Historians not only have the task of retelling the story of our civilization anew for every generation, they also have to keep them from accruing too much extraneous ballast, from diverging from the bullets, bones and buttons of the past, which they are beholden to.

The Anatomy of Storytelling

The anatomy of storytelling is the anatomy of how we see the world, how we are in the world. We can no more choose whether or not to live through stories as we can choose whether or not to eat, but individually as well as collectively we must attempt to avoid the fate of Don Quixote or Lolanta, and in order to do this we must first be able to recognize the stories surrounding us as stories, instead of taking them for objective reality. Only then can we engage with them productively. Only then can we decide which stories we want to tell ourselves.

The stories of our civilization have evolved with our societies and describe the history of our relationship with transcendence, with the idea that outside of us there is a reality that is not just described by the physical laws, but that describes a wholly immaterial reality, a deeper meaning and purpose of our lives.

Humans have always, and I believe instinctively, assumed the existence of such a deeper meaning, of an objective story they are part of, from the ritual narratives we can still perceive in the cave paintings made thirty thousand years ago and the myths they speak of to the codified religions and the great ideologies of the twentieth century – the last grand attempt to wrestle back the messianic master narrative from the centrifugal forces of history. All these were different idioms, different interpretations of the transcendence we long for in our lives, and perhaps it is true that nothing terrifies us more than a loss of transcendence, of a meaning, the feeling of being lost on a tiny planet in a cold and purposeless universe.

Our civilization has clung tenaciously to transcendent meaning. Communism and fascism gained ascendancy in people's minds after the catastrophe of World War I, the greatest shattering of collective stories after the French Revolution. In a tremendous and frequently disorienting shift of paradigms, the great story of progress belonging to the European middle classes was rejected in favour of a new collective set of beliefs, religious in all but name.

The devastation of Europe's great second thirty years' war, 1914-1945, has left the West disillusioned with big, ideological answers. Our cultural answers to life's apparent injustice and lack of purpose retreated into the realm of formulaic fiction or of hard, cold facts, of scientific proof. Evolution and the survival of the fittest became the basic structure of the stories we began to tell ourselves because they appeared to be related most closely to observable reality.

In the world of social intercourse, of commerce, its most powerful expression became the Darwinian interpretation of a free, unfettered market, increasingly stripped of any form of regulation and seen as an end in itself. The market, we are told, is an objective force of history, the inescapable mechanism of human nature at work in the real world. We must believe in it because we can prove it, just as we can prove that the earth circles around the sun. After millennia of cultural blindness, the argument goes, we have finally reached the realm of fact and scientific understanding.

It is here that we need to be awake, aware and vigilant. As I have tried to outline, we cannot think outside of stories and our very feelings and perceptions are cast in the mould of the idiom our culture has taken on. The free market as an historical force is no more objective than God's will, or Hegel's self-realization of the World Spirit, or Hitler's Providence. It is the story our culture is telling itself at the moment, and like all stories it dramatizes and enacts a set of values buried within its narrative. These values come at a heavy price which millions of people are forced to pay: from our own new underclass deprived of hope to the slave workers of south-east Asia we rely on to produce our cheap consumer goods.

According to the story of the market, these unfortunates are the victims of Progress, the collateral damage of historical necessity. It is a pitiless gospel, and it constantly is recited in our ears. No news

broadcast would be complete without a look at the markets and their ups and downs. We are taught to think of the market as an objective, theological force of history, quite divorced from us, a force we have to heed and obey. It is quite hard to remember that our daily dose of stock market news is pure propaganda: useless to the people involved in it, who need updates by the second, and even more irrelevant to those not immediately involved, whose lives and immediate concerns are in no way influenced by knowing that today the Dow Jones fell by fifty-three points.

The market has become a god-like presence in our lives, a product of our instinct for theological thinking. Every day, in the media, we are told of the reactions of “the market” to this or that development. The market is worried or depressed, is euphoric, reacts sceptically to a political announcement made for its benefit. If the markets are discontented, as they are in the current so-called Euro crisis, burnt offerings of money and jobs must be made at their altar to assuage their mood. We have even appointed theologians, high priests and oracles who tell us how the mysterious ways of this volatile bull-and-bear deity are best to be understood. You can see them on TV every day.

There is little awareness left that the market is nothing but the sum of decisions taken by individuals and that these individuals could choose to decide differently, if their priorities were different, that this is a social, educational and ideological choice. There is no market apart from the people who gamble with our lives every day of the year.

The almighty market holds our collective imagination in a stranglehold not because it serves our daily needs – in fact, only a tiny elite profits from the white heat of speculation and the circles of boom and bust while most of us live lives that are less secure and more anxious that they would need to be and a majority in a society is being progressively more disenfranchised and confronted with declining standards of living, fewer jobs, less security, less access to health care and to decent education, and fewer opportunities.

So why is it that we still live in this system in which the weakest are ruthlessly exploited and wealth is shifted to the famous one per cent?

Because the fiction of an objective market satisfies another deep longing in us: the longing for transcendence, for the great master narrative, a single objective Truth, a story to believe in. As societies, we have lost the comfort of religions and ideologies and no narcissistic wound is deeper than to learn that we are not the centre of the universe, that there is no divine providence watching over us, no hidden Truth we can discover and accept, and so the price appears to be worth paying. The rule of the market is the theology of our day and we are willing to make sacrifices for it, even if it is nothing more than a fiction whose values are working against the interests and needs of most of us.

A Debt to Pay

The religion of bull and bear is a master narrative that harms many in our societies and does very little to allow the rest of us to live fulfilled lives. Its ancestry is indeed in theology and firmly links it to the most joyless forms of Protestant Christianity. With its fixation on economics and individual merit over solidarity and community it is a thinly veiled new edition not only of social Darwinism, but of Calvinism. Calvin and his successors preached that God’s grace is bestowed independently of how hard we try to live a good life, that we live among the blessed and the damned, according to God’s will, and that he shows his divine grace and favour through material wealth. The rich are rich because they are the Chosen, they are virtuous, they deserve their lot – as do the poor, cast out as they are from God’s favour.

In our own time of secularized Christian thinking this has become the dominant paradigm according to which societies are regarded primarily as economies, and citizens as consumers. For too long we have racked up debts for our children and grandchildren to pay – not only to banks, but also to the environment to the planet we live on.

Here, incidentally, we encounter another instance of anthropocentric hubris: time and again we are told that we are destroying the earth with our greed and exploitation, that we need to repent for the planet's sake. But don't be fooled. The earth can and will exist quite happily without us, and even the greatest environmental catastrophes will be nothing but a transitory episode in the life of our planet. If we manage to destroy our own survival base through our greed and stupidity and take countless species of tree frogs and wildflowers down with us, planet earth will regenerate over the short time span of a few hundred thousand years and be blossoming, vital and fascinating once again after a period of global warming and an ice age or two – a beautiful world, but without human eyes to see it. The earth does not need us, but we need it. We have lived on credit for too long.

The evolution of our understanding of debt, of guilt, shows both the persistent theological structure of our thinking and its changing emphasis. In a religious world, we owe a debt of gratitude to God and we owe respect to one another. We have simply secularized and quantified this idea. We now owe sums of money to institutions, as individuals and as societies, but as our idea of debt has been transformed into an exclusively financial obligation, our sense of indebtedness to one another, our human solidarity, has suffered. As long as we ourselves still have a credit line and can function as the consumers as which we see ourselves, our sense human indebtedness, of being our brother's keeper, has declined.

Now that our societies are struggling to save the walls of this thoroughly dysfunctional and inhumane system from burying us all beneath them it is time to realize that we need a new, more humane story that emphasizes solidarity over competition, fulfilment above wealth, shared responsibilities over exploitation.

But we need more than just a new story to believe in: we need a new attitude to stories, allowing us to live with and through them without becoming their prisoner, allowing helpful and humane stories to evolve with us by being retold and renegotiated by every generation. This is a daunting task.

What do we believe?

Let us come back to the original question: what do we believe? And if we cannot live outside of or without stories, how can we live with them in a constructive way?

Here I can turn to an old friend of mine, the eighteenth-century philosopher, wit and writer Denis Diderot. He, too, was fond of theological thinking, and in the most literal sense: as a young man he had trained to become a Jesuit. Later in life, Diderot came to reject religion and became a materialist, a hedonist, and a secular humanist. He particularly rejected Christianity because he found its insistence on transcendence and its hatred of sensual pleasure to be especially inhuman.

Diderot's own, radical Enlightenment recognized in the moderate thinking of Voltaire and other deist Enlighteners another version of theological, implicitly Christian thinking, privileging the mind over the body, reason over desire, and social order over solidarity. The problem with this enticing vision of absolute rationality is that we are all chained to a body whose desire, ageing, illness and impulses will never fit the rationalist frame and cannot be made to fit without a degree of violence.

Only if we take humans as the animals they are, thought Diderot, can we develop a truly humane philosophy which integrates our physical desire into our intellectual and communal goals, which seeks fulfilment not in overcoming our sensual and irrational nature, but in educating it. As his own

prolific output shows, he passionately believed that our contradictory desires are the origin of all life and all thinking – a motive Nietzsche would popularize later in his *“Wille zur Macht”*, which is nothing but the blind, striving life force without which all culture and all intellectual endeavour must remain a sterile and hostile force.

Diderot retained a sense of nostalgia for the pious and simple world of his provincial childhood. “My head pulls me in one direction, my heart in another,” as he reflected in a letter. It was one of his greatest and most modern philosophical achievements to understand his own desire, the psychological attraction of a Great Truth, and also the impossibility of ever attaining it. His yearning for faith, he concluded, was just that: a personal desire that was mirrored in the stories created by others with a similar need, but not by any objective metaphysical reality. He understood this longing to be real but without object, a psychological fact he had to learn not to suppress and deny, but to deal with it in his own mind.

This conflict between longing for a single great narrative and the realization that no such great narrative could possibly be true became a mainspring of his literary work. Time and again in his stories and novels, his characters debate of a single truth - be it Jacques the Fatalist who believes that everything is “written above” or the totally cynical Rameau’s nephew, who simply milks society for everything he can get and believes only in his own greed.

Diderot lived in stories and through stories. To him there were only desire, empathy, and the tales spun around them. In his novels, he never allows the reader to forget that she is reading a tale, that the narrator can intervene and hold the reader hostage: “you can see, reader,” the author warns at the very beginning of *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*, “... it depends only on me to make you wait one year, two years, three years, for the tale of Jacques’ loves; I can separate him from his master and make him encounter all the hazards I like. What stops me from marrying the master off and make him a cuckold?”

The novelist plays hide and seek with his reader’s longing to immerse herself in the story, and engaging with it becomes an intricate game of expectation and power, of suspension of disbelief and constructive scepticism. Diderot knew that stories are necessary to our understanding and survival in the world, but that they are and remain *just stories*, a conspiracy to be entered into at one level, but questioned at another in a constant dialectical motion.

This is not an easy or a comfortable position to be in, but it seems to me that it is the only possibility for living a life that one might describe as intellectually adult: We need stories like the air we breathe, but we must not forget that they are *only stories*, exercises in interpretation and translation that come with their own baggage, their own values and demands on our imagination and our lives, no more expressions of a literal truth than any interpretation of a piece of music can be.

To Diderot the solution to the problem that our longing for an objective master narrative cannot be satisfied is a beautiful paradox. Recognizing his own irrational urge for a great meaning, he sought a creative and experimental answer through the practice of art, and of storytelling. In narrating and experimenting with narrations he can talk to his readers’ emotions, indulge their need for narrative and his own, and make them aware of the conspiracy they have entered into, and of its cost. Art as a constant and conscious exercise in interpretation becomes an analytical tool for understanding the central challenge to our imagination: to use stories without falling into them.

None of these thoughts were in my head when I skated away from the dead swan immured in his crystalline grave many years ago. Today, though, it seems to me that the nearby ducks in their hole in ice have a story to tell that may be as important as the swan’s. Paddling around and quacking to themselves they looked less noble and less beautiful than the frozen swan – but they were still alive. They had found, as it were, a Chekhovian solution to the dangers of winter and were occupied with

keeping open a hole in the ice that allowed them to dive for food, a modest occupation, but a useful one. For their survival and their obvious contentment, they relied on solidarity by taking turns in the cold water while the others rested on the ice.

As a culture, we could do worse than to emulate them, not allowing our instinctive longing for transcendence to control us, the ice of any master narrative to form around us, beautiful as it might be, but to work away tirelessly and cooperatively at keeping open the flowing element we rely on for sustenance.

This occupation is quintessentially un-heroic; it neither satisfies our inborn desire for a Grand Truth nor does it promise a final redemption and an end of history: spring will come, but later winter will settle in again, forcing another generation to work hard keeping the ice open, and so on. It is not a grand vision, but perhaps we have to accept, with Diderot, that not all our psychological needs can be answered simply because we feel them. Perhaps the essence of life is less heroic, more modest but also more humane than our longing for absolute Truths might lead us to assume.

Given the choice, I would rather be a live duck than a dead swan.