

05 September 2015. Rewley House, Members' Day. Peter Townsend

THE TRUTH OF FICTION

1. Fiction is not lies, or errors. These are fictive, not fiction.

Lies are deception; errors are delusions or inaccuracies. Fiction is overt, not covert.

2. FICTION GIVES US WAYS TO UNDERSTAND: consistent and coherent patterns and examples.

3. From FACTUAL examples we induce patterns. These enable us to create possibilities.

4. FICTION is ordered in the form of possible narrative - a model to aid understanding.

5. FICTION creates possibilities which fit the model - the frame for understanding.

6. AXIOM: A pattern is 'true' to the extent that it repeats. (So is an example.)

(MB This is definitional, not a metaphysical claim. Neither is a bivalent definition, being graded.)

7. PATTERNS: repetitions in time and space make categories, language, reasoning possible, and so enable understanding

8. Science and fiction. Science - from facts to patterns. Fiction - from patterns to possible examples.

Science strips out context; fiction supplies it.

9. Two different contracts, but a similar result: freedom to discover.

10. So, in what sense is fiction 'true'? Authors aim for truth by telling stories.

11. **Storytelling:** Myths and fables

Narrative implies cause and consequence. It creates paradigmatic structures around which experience can be ordered. We don't know now how the myths were once perceived - as 'true' in our sense or just as ways of understanding, or if they cared.

The atom as a structure of little balls - 'particles'. But that model is not the 'truth'; it is just an illustration that offers an imperfect way of understanding.

In religion and ideology history becomes the frame of understanding. Religions are founded in story.

12. The possible

Understanding lets in the *possible* - a new tool in our locker. Our narrow life has been broadened to take in other lives. It is a kind of freedom - doubly so, because we can pick the book up and put it down.

Because we know it is *not* true; our belief is optional. Fiction is truth as coherence: as non-contradiction, as concordance, harmony and fit.

12. Ways of seeing

The best fiction jogs that world-view, so that we see askance, and are granted a fresh vision. It allows us into the worlds of other kinds of people, people less or more fortunate than us, people with obsessions we are glad we don't have, or with intricate and rich powers of observation that enable us to see differently.

13. Overt versus covert fictions

(Maybe fiction is a sort of play. But to do that, you have to be able to believe and not believe at the same time.)

A distinction: between overt and covert fictions. The overt kind are written in order to be read as fiction. The covert kind pretend to be real. They present a narrative to account for origins, history, mystery and moral compulsions. We have an insatiable appetite for simplicity and certainty. Simplicity is a short-cut to understanding understanding on the cheap. Overt fictions open up options.

(It is notable that puritans and fundamentalists of all persuasions seek to eliminate fictions, play, as frivolous, even dangerous, alternatives to their truth.)

Like the proverbial lamppost, fictions offer both light and support; we can use them for either purpose; it is up to us to choose which. If for light, then they will light up other alternative sources; if for support, we can be afraid to let go.

14. Falsification

If we cannot apply normal 'truth-makers' to fiction, can we, instead, falsify it, like a hypothesis?

In fiction, we judge as 'false' what appears 'insincere': writing or telling that is either falsely motivated - to bully or persuade, for example - or falsely mediated, as when the style betrays posturing, or showing off, or the adoption of ready-made attitudes and clichés. It proceeds from a false source *or persona*, via false means.

Or it does not relate to us, to our experience (our patterns of experience). We cannot empathise or sympathise with the characters; we do not see *ourselves* in there. The author has not spoken to *us*. Fiction, I now claim, is falsifiable in that sense - by the reader, or critic (we are all critics). Literary criticism, then, that much-maligned profession, does have its uses!

My claim then, in short, is that fiction teaches us to understand the difference between true and false ways of understanding.

As the late lamented Terry Pratchett said: "Fantasy can't get you anywhere; but it tones up the muscles that can."