

## IN DEFENSE OF METAPHOR

"That's how they all squeal at first," he said.  
 "As if the world could be changed without killing someone."

Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Griechen sucht Griechen*

Mephistopheles: No Lord, I believe that, as always,  
 everything is in a rotten state.

Goethe, *Faust, Prologue in Heaven*

### I

A few years ago, the papers announced that the government of South Africa was going to set up a programme to import and produce low-cost drugs to treat patients with AIDS. Almost four years after the announcement, the Association of Pharmaceutical Industries, which represents several of the largest laboratories in Europe and North America, filed a suit in the High Court of Pretoria, claiming that the South African law which allowed for such a programme --a law signed by Nelson Mandela-- contravened the international copyright and patent agreement meant to protect the rights of scientists, artists and writers.

In South Africa today there are 4.2 million people infected with the HIV virus, close to 10% of the population, the highest percentage in the world. They cannot be treated, purely for economic reasons. A year of AIDS drugs costs, in Europe or North America, between twenty and thirty thousand American dollars. This, in Africa (and in most of Asia, and in South America) is far beyond a common mortal's dreams. Local pharmaceutical companies, however, have managed to produce generic drugs (that is to say, the same drugs as their costly European and American counterparts, without the designer labels) at a tiny fraction of the price, about four hundred dollars for a year's treatment. In answer to this, the largest of all pharmaceutical companies, GlaxoSmithKline (born from the fusion of the two British giants, Glaxo-Wellcome and SmithKline-Beecham) solemnly declared that "the patent system must be maintained at all costs". At all costs.

It will be said that without the monetary investment of these companies, scientific research would be impossible. To allow for new discoveries, those with the money must be coaxed into investing in research and, in order to get people with money to invest in anything, they must be convinced that their money will make a profit. Not just a profit, but a large profit. And a guaranteed profit. And what greater guarantee can be found on this earth than sickness leading unto death, and the human desire to overcome it. Therefore, the temptation for setting up a pharmaceutical company in our time is clearly strong. The motives behind such companies are not what one would call philanthropic: the call for healing is not foremost in their mandate. There is an illumination in the sixteenth-century French manuscript *Chants Royaux du Puy de Rouen* that depicts Christ as an apothecary, dispensing (at cost, I'm sure) the drugs of eternal life to Adam and Eve. I don't believe this image is known to the trustees of GlaxoSmithKline.

Now, barely a few months ago, due to international pressure, thirty-nine of the biggest companies dropped their suit in South Africa. The protests and letter campaigns of Doctors Without Borders and other organisations created what one of the pharmaceutical companies called "exceedingly adverse publicity"; carefully balancing profit gained from usury and profit lost from a tainted image, the advertisement-savvy companies chose to negotiate. However, the question of the legitimacy of these gargantuan profits remains unanswered.

How can we (I mean our societies) tempt these companies into investing in scientific research without giving them in exchange the lives of millions of human beings? I leave the practical problem of funds, trusts, rates and taxes to economists, my elders and betters, and choose to concentrate instead on the other factor in this equation: the moral context which allows these practices to thrive.

Is it possible for a society to pose convincingly such moral imperatives while addressing effectively the practical demands of the scientific industry? Is it possible for a society to consider, at the same time, the urgencies of science and the context within which that science develops? "*Erst kommt das Fressen, dan kommt die Moral*", sniggered Brecht some time ago. "First comes the fodder, then the morals." Is it possible for a society to lend equal importance to both morals and fodder, to the ethos and to the business of a society simultaneously? This ancient question keeps cropping up, again and again, in all ages and under all skies. It was asked when Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia for the

sake of fair winds that would allow the Greeks to sail to Troy. It was illustrated by Shaw in *Major Barbara*. It was implicit when, in search of Chinese investments, the Canadian Prime Minister refused to address the question of human rights in China. It was imagined by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* and by Wells in *The Island of Dr Moreau*. It was raised when the Nazi doctors experimented on live human beings. Its true essence was put into a story by Oscar Wilde, when the Young King, who refuses to be crowned in jewels crafted by suffering, asks whether the rich man and the poor man are not brothers, and receives the answer, "Aye, and the name of the rich brother is Cain."

## II

This unanswerable question is all-important. Literature, as we know all too well, does not offer solutions, but poses good conundrums. It is capable, in telling a story, of laying out the infinite convolutions and the intimate simplicity of a moral problem, and of leaving us with the conviction of possessing a certain clarity with which to perceive not a universal but a personal understanding of the world. "What in the world is this emotion?" asks Rebecca West after reading *King Lear*. "What is the bearing of supremely great works of art on my life that makes me feel so glad?" I know that I have come across that emotion in all kinds of literature, supremely great and supremely small, in a line here and there, a paragraph, and sometimes, not often, a whole book, for no obviously discernible reason, when something that is being told about a particular character or situation, suddenly acquires for me, its reader, enormous private importance.

Are Don Quixote's quixotic gestures commendable when, after threatening a farmer for viciously beating his young apprentice, the farmer redoubles his punishment once Don Quixote is safely out of sight? Is Poirot, at the end of his long life, justified in murdering a murderer in order to prevent others from being murdered? Is it excusable for Aeneas to abandon to her tears the welcoming Dido for the sake of the glory of the future Roman Empire? Should Monsieur Homais have received the *croix d'honneur* after the death of the miserable Bovarys? Is Galdos's Doña Peffecta a monster or a victim, and should we pity him or fear him, or (this is much more difficult) fear and pity him at precisely the same time?

Reality deals in specifics under the guise of generalities. Literature does the contrary, so that *A Hundred Years of Solitude* can help us understand the fate of Carthage, and Goneril's arguments can assist us in translating the dubious ethical dilemma of General Aussaresses, the torturer of Algiers. I'm tempted to say that perhaps this is *all* that literature really does. I'm tempted to say that every book that allows a reader to engage with it, asks a moral question. Or rather: that if a reader is able to delve beyond the surface of a given text, such a reader can bring back from its depths a moral question, even if that question has not been put by the writer in so many words, but its implicit presence elicits nevertheless a bare emotion from the reader, a foreboding or simply a memory of something we knew, long ago. Through this alchemy, every literary text becomes, in some sense, metaphoric.

Literature handbooks since the Middle Ages have arduously distinguished between metaphor and image, image and simile, simile and symbol, symbol and emblem. Essentially, of course, the intellectual insight that conjures up these devices is the same: an associative intuition intent on apprehending the reality of experience not directly but once removed, as Perseus did in order to see the face of the Gorgon, or Moses the face of God. Reality, the place in which we stand, cannot be seen as long as we are in it. It is the process of "once removed" (through imagery, through allusion, through plot) that allows us to see where and who we are. Metaphor, in the widest sense, is our means of grasping (and sometimes *almost* understanding) the world and our bewildering selves. It may be that all literature can be understood as metaphor.

Metaphor, of course, breeds metaphor. The number of stories we have to tell is limited, and the number of images that echo stories meaningfully in every mind is small. When Robén Dario speaks of

*El mar, como un vasto cristal azogado...*

he is hearing once more the sea (the same sea) that Mallarmé listens for, so longingly, after telling us that "all flesh is sad" and he's "read all the books". It is the same terrifying sea that Paul Celan hears, "*umbellet von der haiblaunen See*", "barking in the shark-blue sea". It is the wave that breaks three times for the tongue-tied Tennyson on "cold grey stones" – the same "tremulous cadence" that moves Matthew Arnold on Dover Beach and makes him think of Sophocles "who long ago/ Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought/ Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human

misery." Mallarmé, Celan, Tennyson, Arnold, Sophocles are all present in Dario when, far away on the Nicaraguan shore of the Pacific Ocean, he sees the metallic water shine. And what does the reader find in that sound? Arnold says it exactly: we find "in the sound a thought". A thought, we can add, that translates itself through the power of metaphor into a question and into the vaporous ghost of an answer.

### III

Every act of writing, every creation of a metaphor is a translation in at least two senses: in the sense that it recasts an outer experience or an imagining into something that elicits in the reader a further experience or imagining; and in the sense that it transports something from one place to a different one -- the sense in which the word was employed in the Middle Ages to describe the moving of the pilfered remains of saints from one shrine to another, an activity generously known as *furta sacra* or holy thefts. Something in the act of writing, and then once more in the act of reading, pilfers, enshrines and changes Arnold's essential literary thought from writer to writer and reader to reader, building on the experience of creation, renewing and redefining our experience of the world.

A few years after Kafka's death, Milena, the woman he had loved so dearly, was taken away by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp. Suddenly life seemed to have become its reverse: not death, which is a conclusion, but a mad and meaningless state of brutal suffering, brought on through no visible fault and serving no visible end. To attempt to survive this nightmare, a friend of Milena devised a method: she would resort to the books she had read, stored in her memory. Among the texts she forced herself to remember was a short story by Maxim Gorki, "A Man Is Born".

The story tells how the narrator, a young boy, strolling one day somewhere along the shores of the Black Sea, comes upon a peasant woman shrieking in pain. The woman is pregnant; she has fled the famine of her birthplace and now, terrified and alone, she is about to give birth. In spite of her protests, the boy assists her. He bathes the newborn child in the sea, makes a fire and prepares tea. At the end of the story, the boy and the peasant woman follow a group of other peasants: with one arm, the boy supports the mother; in the other he carries the baby.

Gorki's story became, for Milena's friend, a paradise, a small safe place into which she could retreat from the daily horror. It did not lend

meaning to her plight, it didn't explain or justify it; it didn't even offer her hope for the future. It simply existed as a point of balance, reminding her of the light at a time of dark catastrophe.

Catastrophe: a sudden and violent change, something terrible and incomprehensible. When the Roman hordes, following Cato's dictum, razed the city of Carthage and strew salt over the rubble; when the Vandals sacked Rome in 455 leaving the great metropolis in ruins; when the first Christian crusaders entered the cities of North Africa and after slaughtering the men, women and children set fire to the libraries; when the Catholic Kings of Spain expelled from their territories the cultures of the Arabs and the Jews, and the Rabbi of Toledo threw up to Heaven the keys of the Ark for safekeeping until a happier time; when Pizarro executed the welcoming Atahulapa and effectively destroyed the Inca civilisation; when the first slave was sold on the American continent; when large numbers of Native Americans were deliberately contaminated with smallpox-infected blankets by the European settlers (in what must count as the world's first biological warfare); when the soldiers in the trenches of World War I drowned in mud and toxic gases in their attempt to obey impossible orders; when the inhabitants of Hiroshima saw their skin fly off their body under the great yellow cloud up in the sky; when the Kurdish population was attacked with toxic weapons; when thousands of men and women were hunted down with machetes in Rwanda; and now, when the suicide planes struck the twin towers of Manhattan, leaving New York to join the mourning cities of Madrid, Belfast, Jerusalem, Bogotá and countless others, all victims of terrorist attacks -- in all these catastrophes, the survivors may have sought in a book, as did Milena's friend, some respite from grief and some reassurance of sanity.

For a reader, this may be the essential, perhaps the only justification for literature: that the madness of the world will not take us over completely though it invades our cellars (as the Brazilian novelist Machado de Assis pointed out) and then softly takes over the dining-room, the living-room, the whole house<sup>1</sup>. The poet Joseph Brodsky, prisoner in Siberia, found it in the verse of W. H. Auden. For Reinaldo Arenas, locked away in Castro's prisons, it was in the *Aeneid*; for Oscar Wilde, at Reading Goal, in the words of Christ; for Haroldo Conti, tortured by the Argentinian military, in the novels of Dickens. When the world becomes

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<sup>1</sup>Machado de Assis, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, cap. VIII: "...passar mansamente do sótão à sala de jantar, daí a de visitas e ao resto."

incomprehensible, we seek a place in which comprehension (or faith in comprehension) has been set down in words.

On Tuesday 11 September, having heard the unbelievable news, I opened Chateaubriand's *Memoirs d'Outre-Tombe* and came across the following: "The Revolution would have carried me along, had it not begun with murder: I saw the first head carried at the end of a pike and I drew back. Murder will never be in my eyes an object of admiration or an argument for freedom; I know nothing more servile, more despicable, more cowardly, more narrow-minded than a terrorist." Across the centuries, Chateaubriand speaks to me of my own time and place.

Every act of terror protests its own justification. It is said that before ordering each new atrocity, Robespierre would ask, "In the name of what?" But every human being knows, intimately, that no act of terror is possibly justified. The constant cruelty of the world (and also, in spite of everything, its daily miracles of beauty, kindness and compassion) bewilder us because they spring up with no justification, like the miracle of rain (as God explains to Job) falling "where no man is". The primordial quality of the universe seems to be absolute gratuity. Attempting to push the creative act as far as possible outside the confines of the rational mind, to free it from prejudices and conventions, André Breton outrageously suggested, in the second *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1930, that "the simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd." He meant the action to exist only in the sphere of the unrestrained imagination. He was writing about literature; reality co-opted his writing.

Of all this we are aware, as we also aware the old truisms: that violence breeds violence, that all power is abusive, that fanaticism of any kind is the enemy of reason, that propaganda is propaganda even when it purports to rally us against iniquity, that war is never glorious except in the eyes of the victors who believe that God is on the side of large armies. This is why we read, and why in moments of darkness we return to books: to find words and metaphors for what we already know.

Metaphor builds on metaphor and quotation on quotation. For Montaigne, for Thomas Browne, for Martin Buber, for Anne Carson, the words of others are a vocabulary of quotations in which they express their own thoughts. For Joyce, for Eliot, for Borges, for Lawrence Sterne those other words *are* their own thoughts, and the very act of putting them on paper transforms those words imagined by others into something new, reimagined through a different intonation or context. Without this

continuity, this purloining, this translation, there is no literature. And through these dealings, literature remains immutable, like the tired waves, while the world around it changes.

During a staging of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* in Algiers, at the height of the War of Independence, after the hero, Béranger, had pronounced the play's last brave words, "*Je ne capitule pas!*", the entire audience, Algerian *independantistes* and French colonials, burst out in cheers. For the Algerians, Béranger's cry echoed their own, intent on not giving up their struggle for freedom; for the French, the cry was theirs, intent on not surrendering the land their fathers had conquered. Ionesco's words are, of course, the same. The sense (the reading) is different.

#### IV

It may be useful here to look at the practical side of this question of intellectual ownership, that is to say, at the notion of literary copyright. What it sets out to protect is not the right of, say Homer, to put himself forward as sole inventor of the expression "the wine-dark sea", but rather to regulate the exploitation of that expression by, say, Ezra Pound and the Greek Tourist Board. While Martial brags about his poems being read by even the centurions posted at the empire's farthest borders, he also complains about publishers who sell those poems to the far-flung centurions without paying him, the author, for the privilege. It was in order to make sure that Martial got his sestertium, that on August 4, 1789, the Revolutionary Assembly in Paris abolished all privileges of individuals, cities, provinces, organisations, and replaced them by the notion of rights. Authors as well as publishers, printers and booksellers were granted particular rights regarding a text, and would from then on share in the profits of what the author had written, the publisher published, the printer printed and the bookseller sold. Two essential points were made. The first, that "the work is deemed created, independently of its being rendered public, by the very fact of its having been conceived by the author, even if left unfinished." The second, that "intellectual property is independent from the property of the material object itself." That is to say, *Rhinoceros* belongs to Ionesco even before the first production, independent from the fact that Algerians and French may each have appropriated the play through their individual readings. The "value" of *Rhinoceros* belongs to Ionesco.



What is this value? This is the best answer I know: "Value does not carry whatever it is written on its forehead. Instead, it transforms each of the fruits of labour into a hieroglyph. In time, man seeks to decipher the meaning of the hieroglyph, to penetrate the secrets of the social creation to which he contributes, and this transformation of useful objects into objects of value is one society's creations, just like language itself." The author of this splendid discovery is the sadly ill-reputed Karl Marx.

Value as meaning: anyone interested in literature can grasp the common sense of this notion, akin to Keats's Beauty as Truth and Truth as Beauty. "What imagination seizes as beauty must be Truth -- whether it existed there or not", Keats wrote to a friend. Value then is a metaphor, as are Truth and Beauty. They stand as conceptual realities, things that we know are there, in our flesh and blood, but, like the thrill of *King Lear*, cannot be defined more precisely. We try, of course, for better or for worse, so that every work of art is accompanied by its critical assessment which, in turn, gives rise to further critical assessments. Some of these become themselves works of art in their own right: Stephen Sondheim's interpretation of Seurat's painting "La Grande Jatte", Beckett's observations on Dante's *Commedia*, Mussorgsky's musical comments on the paintings of Viktor Gartman, Henri Fuseli's pictorial readings of Shakespeare, Marianne Moore's translations of La Fontaine, Thomas Mann's version of the musical *oeuvre* of Gustav Mahler. The Argentinian novelist Adolfo Bioy Casares once suggested an endless chain of works of art and their commentaries, beginning with a single poem by the fifteenth-century Spanish poet Jorge Manrique. Bioy suggested the erection of a statue to the composer of a symphony based on the play suggested by the portrait of the translator of Manrique's "Couplets on the Death of His Father"... . Every work of art grows through these countless layers of readings, and every reader strips these layers back to reach the work on his or her own terms, searching to decipher the work's "value". In that last reading we are alone.

A company, an aptly called Anonymous Society, a protean Multinational or an Umbrella Organisation, is a thing invisible and incorporeal, except in its effects. It has no face, no soul. The "value" of its labours, the meaning of its metaphors is falsely advertised, and it is society's dull obligation to read its pronouncements closely, over and over again, in order to be aware of their potential harm in which we are, as citizens, implicated.

In March of this year, Paul Stewart, one of the directors of the German pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim, was touring an AIDS clinic in the township of Khayelitsha, outside Cape Town. Boeringher is the maker of nevirapine, a drug used to treat certain AIDS-related illnesses, and Mr Stewart was in South Africa to prevent the production of a generic version of the drug. At a certain point in the tour, Mr Stewart came upon an emaciated seven-year-old boy alone in a crowded waiting-room. The boy was too weak to lift his head, and his chest was covered in raw blisters. Mr Stewart grew pale. "I would like to pay for his treatment, personally," he blurted out. Wisely, the clinic's director told Mr Stewart that it was too late for such private emotional responses. Mr Stewart had to do more than address one single heart-breaking case. He had to confront the vastness of the problem, the large moral question, the horror of which the seven-year-old boy was the visible reality, a horror in which Mr Stewart's company played an intricate part, a horror which Mr Stewart could not change by the expiatory gesture of digging into his pockets.

## V

I am not certain that a piece of writing, any writing, however brilliant and moving, can affect the reality of South Africa's AIDS sufferers, or any other reality. There may be no poem, however powerful, that can remove one ounce of pain or transform a single moment of injustice. But there may be no poem, however poorly written, that may not contain, for its secret and elected reader, a consolation, a call to arms, a glimmer of happiness, an epiphany. Something there is in the modest page that, mysteriously and unexpectedly, allows us, not wisdom, but the possibility of wisdom, caught between the experience of everyday life and the experience of literary reality.

There is perhaps a metaphor that may conjure up this space between our imagining of the world and the page (from the point of view of the writer) or the space between the solid page and our imagining the world (from the point of view of the reader). In the seventh canto of the *Inferno*, Dante describes the punishment of thieves who in the looking-glass universe of sin and retribution are condemned to losing even their own human forms and are endlessly transformed into creature after monstrous creature. These transformations happen in staggered stages,

gradually, so that at no one time the agonised soul is a single self-possessed shape. And Dante says (this, in Richard Wilbur's translation):

*Just so, when paper burns, there runs before  
the creeping flame a stain of darkish hue  
that, though not black as yet, is white no more.*

Between the blankness of the page and the authoritarian letters in black, there is a space, a moment, a colour in which, everchanging, the writer and the reader, both, may find illumination just before the meaning is consumed by the flames.