

Colin Grant

The Fact of Fiction

In the early days of television a thoroughly business-like Sergeant Friday persistently interrupted reports of witnesses with a demand for "just the facts." Any inclination for editorial interpretation or proffering of personal background were quickly dismissed as extraneous distractions from the issue at hand. What was required was the pristine presentation of pure fact. In his single-minded devotion to fact, Sergeant Friday might be regarded as a patron saint of an age whose passion for fact has left it all but bereft of saints. Among the various features which serve to distinguish the modern west from previous ages, none is more pervasive than the assumption of the crucial importance of factuality. The results of that concern are all around us in a myriad of products and procedures which have made life faster, wider, longer, higher than was dreamed of in previous ages. However, this extension of our reach has been accompanied by a contraction of our vision. Robertson Davies confesses through the lips of his principal character in *Fifth Business*, "I don't regret economic and educational advance; I just wonder how much we shall have to pay for it and in what coin."¹ It might not be insignificant that Davies poses the dilemma of economic advance in economic terms. The cost of economic security and technological convenience may be conformity to the vocabulary and mentality of economics and technology. The thesis proposed here is that we have been the victims of a confining mentality of factuality and that the antidote for this is a recovery of an appreciation of the indispensable role and significance of fiction.

I

The assurance with which fact is enthroned in the contemporary mentality means that any questioning of its assumed authority must

appear to be an instance of obscurantism, at best, if not of downright irrationalism. Why would anyone possibly challenge the significance of fact as the final arbiter of truth and reality? Any such challenge invites the suspicion of some hidden agenda of an arbitrary nature. It is tempting to attempt to counter this impression at the outset by suggesting that it is not really fact that is the problem, but the tyranny of fact, the way in which the assumption of the sole sufficiency of fact dominates the modern mentality. Such a qualification would not be without merit, but it suggests the inevitable academic solution of compromise, and thus blunts the edge of the issue that is at stake. The only course is a direct confrontation with the assumed authority of fact.

The authority that appeal to fact enjoys in the modern west is not unlike other authorities it has displaced in benefitting from a certain inflationary perception of its own significance. This is aided by the tendency to revere rather than to define fact. If we were to attempt to establish just what fact refers to, we would find that each candidate for definition contains blemishes which detract from the air of sufficiency surrounding factuality. Perhaps the most obvious understanding of fact is as a representation of what is the case. Fact refers to the real situation in contrast to speculation, opinion, wishes, or deliberate distortions. To know the facts is to know the truth; it is to know what is the case. But is it? If you reflect on the strict claim that is implied in the appeal to factuality, I think you will have to agree that this is precisely what fact can never tell us. To be accorded the status of fact, something must belong to the past. If it entails the settled assurance that fact has come to connote, then it must be completed, and finalized in some quite definite way. Thus far from telling us what is the case, fact is confined to telling us what was the case. Put in these general terms, this may sound like a piece of pedantic nitpicking. But concealed within this focus of factuality on the past is a problem which continues to puzzle philosophers after more than two centuries of ardent pursuit of factuality, and after more than two millenia of awareness of the underlying issue, the problem of how you get from particular facts to general conclusions, of how you get from the pastness of facts to the aliveness of the present and the prediction of the future, in short, the problem of induction. The distinctive feature of the modern era in contrast to previous ages might be identified in terms of the shift from deduction to induction, from drawing conclusions through reflection on general principles to drawing conclusions on the basis of particular pieces of evidence. This insistence on sticking to the evidence has constituted an embarrassment to the deductive orientation from which

it has never recovered. However, the victory of the inductive strategy has been less than total. For to get from the particulars of evidence to the general level of a conclusion seems to require something very like the abstract principles assumed by deductive inference. No amount of increase in facts, as such, will yield any significant conclusion. Newton's insight into the law of gravity would not have been made easier if he had witnessed a ton of apples falling, instead of one. Nor would it necessarily have improved his chances if he had been treated to an array of different fruits cascading from laden branches. Empirical evidence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the promotion of discovery. And multiplication of evidence in itself, is of no avail. Many people had seen apples fall before Newton. What made Newton's sighting significant was his insight which allowed him to see this event as an instance of a law, the law of gravitation. Newton did much more than attend to the facts. His procedure was far more imaginative than a direct induction from the instance of a falling apple to a general law to account for that phenomenon. The falling apple became an event worth classifying as a fact precisely through this imaginative insight. If Newton had stuck to the facts, it would have been left for someone else to solidify the Copernican revolution in a new cosmology.

The insufficiency of bare facts as a source of insight and understanding might lead us to seek the particular significance of facts at a later stage in the knowing process. Perhaps what makes facts significant is not that they facilitate knowledge in any direct way, but rather that they constitute the screen through which insights may be filtered so that they may be corroborated, refuted, or modified. This would seem to be more in line with the central direction of the scientific method what has elevated fact to its contemporary prominence. Science is far more imaginative and creative than the popular conception of it as the prospector of facts would suggest. Where the concentration on factuality comes in is in the laborious stage of checking insights against the evidence. Thus what makes our modern scientific outlook different from prescientific perspectives is not that we are confined to strict inductive inference from the facts, but that we require that any alleged insights be supported by evidence. It is thus that facts offer the assurance of truth, and if they can strictly only tell us what was the case, rather than what is the case, at least they tell us this with certainty. Or do they? Here again we are confronted with one of the assumed characteristics of fact which loses something of its popular aura under examination. For the painful attempt to analyze how the appeal to

evidence operates which characterized so much philosophical effort of the recent past has had the one incontrovertible result of demonstrating that certainty is precisely what facts cannot tell us. The stringent requirements of certainty can be met only by formal pronouncements which contain their own assurance of truth within themselves, the formulae of logic and mathematics being the most obvious examples. These formulae are true by definition. Two plus two equals four, and always will equal four, because it cannot be otherwise. This is certain. But two drops of water added to two drops of water may equal one if they are placed close enough to one another to coalesce or they may equal hundreds if dropped on a surface smooth enough to cause a beading effect. This is how things are in the messy world with which fact deals. When we descend from the empty certainties of formal definitions and equations to the realm of factual claims, the most we can be assured of is an estimate of the degree of probability. Now this may not be a particularly serious liability. It may well be that for purposes of scientific investigation, and everyday living, this is all we need. In practice, high probability may be just as useful as certainty. But this exclusion from the realm of certainty does constitute another qualification of the popular image of the total sufficiency of factuality.

Still it may be that we have not yet touched the most distinctive feature of factuality. Perhaps what makes the appeal to fact so impressive is not that it is assumed that facts tell us what is the case in any direct way or that they provide any assurance of certainty, but that the procedures of factuality have the merit of excluding our own biases. One of the most striking features of the modern scientific approach is just this attempt to exclude the person of the scientist from the phenomenon under investigation. The results achieved thus take the form of publicly available knowledge which is true for everyone regardless of their own particular assumptions or circumstances. If anyone doubts this, they are free to follow the test procedures themselves and confirm the facts as the scientists who devised the procedures have done. At least anyone is free to do this in theory. The sophistication and expense of modern research precludes such confirmatory checks actually taking place in practice. Thus the public nature of this most neutral form of investigation is compromised by its own success. Far from excluding the person of the investigator, in a procedure which is in principle open to public scrutiny, scientific understanding is more and more totally confined to the persons trained in its disciplines and privy to its resources. It has come to be generally recognized that science is very much a communal venture, involving indoctrination in the received

tradition and training in the refined methods of the guild. Any exclusion of the self is only accomplished on the basis of a thorough giving of the self to the discipline and dedication needed to qualify for admittance to any of the highly specialized branches of contemporary science. This demand on the person of the scientist does not come as any surprise to science itself. At least since the emergence of relativity theory there has been a recognition that the position of the scientist is an inescapable variable in any scientific observation, even in the most physical of the sciences. So here again the popular perception of the unquestionable sufficiency of factuality needs to be qualified. The personal factor of the scientist cannot be discounted in the sophisticated procedures of contemporary science. When this consideration is broadened to take in the wider interests of the sponsoring bodies, the fallacy of assuming that science is a strictly neutral pursuit of fact for its own sake becomes completely untenable. But still, this should not be surprising. Perhaps what should surprise us, on reflection, is the assumption that science could be totally neutral as far as scientists or their sponsors are concerned. For how could anybody be interested in something from which they could be totally detached? The fallacy of that assumption has become more and more apparent as the methods of science have been extended to the human sphere and the stakes of science have been raised through developments in genetics and nuclear technology.

Yet these considerations do not at all undermine the impressive prestige of fact. For many people who subscribe to factuality with virtually total confidence are aware of these limitations. But they would also argue that, even with these qualifications, the pursuit of fact is the only option we have as finite human beings living in the late twentieth century. It is at this point that the stronghold of fact becomes most impregnable, and conversely, most confining for those who are constrained to live within its fortress walls. For at this point fact has abandoned its own criteria and assumed the proportions of a world view. Far from gradually building up an accumulation of evidence, it makes a gigantic leap in concluding that this is the direction most adequate to the nature of reality. Rather than calculating degrees of probability, this ultimate confidence in fact requires a certainty which precludes the luxury of hypothetical theorizing. To take this direction is to exclude other directions. And finally, the dimensions of this commitment make any pretense of neutrality totally farcical. Commitment to fact is a commitment of life itself. Thus the pervasive confidence in fact is not itself factual, and by the very extent of its

scope, it cannot be. However, the confidence in fact itself resists recognizing this because, on its own terms, the only alternative to fact is arbitrariness. This is where the impact of the factual mentality is most devastating. The real difficulty with it is not due to any inherent limitations in the nature of fact as such. For practical purposes, these limitations do not hamper the pursuit of factuality itself. The real cause for concern is the totalitarian tendency of this approach which results not only in a disinclination to recognize its own limitations, but in the sponsorship of that disinclination through the disparagement of any alternative approach to life and truth.

II

The most obvious alternative to fact is fiction. Indeed, this is generally the way in which fiction is understood, in contrast to fact. Where fact is assumed to declare what is the case, fiction is not bound by the constraints of actuality. While there is some point to such a view of fiction, this characterization degenerates into caricature when the distinction is allowed to become an absolute contrast. When the lack of constraint by actuality is read in the broad sense of lack of constraint by reality, fiction has become the contrary of fact, and is regarded as mere diversion from the serious pursuit of fact. Less than three weeks before she died in 1964, the southern Catholic fiction writer, Flannery O'Connor encountered a classic instance of this view of fiction. "When she went home for a last short stay, the doctor told her that she was not to work, but that it would be all right for her to write a little fiction—a misimpression that gave her some dry amusement."² O'Connor herself repeatedly remarks in her letters about the temptation to write essays either for publication or as texts for the many lectures she was invited to give at colleges and universities, because it was so much easier than writing fiction. Essays are affairs of the mind, but fiction has to be incarnate; far from luxuriating in fantasy, fiction imposes the discipline of making truth visual. Even for those writers for whom story comes easily, there is a constraint involved which also contradicts the popular conception, as such writers find their characters taking over and forcing them to follow in directions other than those they themselves had intended. There is a demand and a constraint in fiction of which those who simply contrast fiction with facts as the unreal in distinction from the real are unaware.

One of the most obvious places to look for clarification regarding the nature of fiction is that institution which is dominated by the

distinction between fiction and non-fiction, the public library. However, the prominence of the distinction in public library operations is not necessarily indicative of a corresponding clarity of rationale for the distinction. In some ways, the public library seems to mirror the popular disparagement of fiction, despite its own preoccupation with it. Thus one survey of *The Humanities and the Library* suggests: "When the scientist, the philosopher, the historian, and the sociologist turn from the serious pursuit of their professional interests, they become general readers with interests in literature as diversion and entertainment."³ Where do professors of literature turn? Their professional material is the material of diversion and entertainment. In fairness to this source, other things are said which suggest a more positive view of literature. Reference is made to "the broader goal which the library has set for itself—not merely entertainment but enrichment, not pure diversion but recreation in its nobler sense."⁴ Consideration of this role evokes criticism of the stereotypes of popular fiction because they present no intellectual challenge of new ideas, they stifle the development of discrimination and taste, they deliberately appeal to selfishness, and they engender self-satisfaction and acquiescence in the status quo.⁵ Thus there is fiction and there is fiction. However, even with this recognition, there is room for concern that it is the view of fiction as diversionary that really dominates in the public library, and in this regard, the public library would represent a microcosm of our culture at large.

The problem is that the academic who turns to the public library distinction between fiction and non-fiction as a source of clarification of the status of fiction in our society is probably the victim of a misconception. Although libraries are closely aligned with academic interests, they do not share the remote perspective of the academic vantage point. Thus the fiction/non-fiction distinction which characterizes public libraries does not reflect a conclusion of rational analysis about the nature of fiction so much as a pragmatic decision about how books may best be made accessible to readers. The criteria is reader interest rather than subject analysis.⁶ But pragmatic decisions have metaphysical implications. The concern to make books accessible to readers in the most efficient manner possible entails and promotes an understanding of the nature of fiction even though this is not generally explicitly identified. And this understanding seems to reflect and further endorse the popular contrast between fact and fiction.

On the surface, the public library gives a primacy to fiction. It is the basic category, in contrast to which other types of material become

“non-fiction.” This reflects the interests of the readers. The great demand in public libraries is for fiction. However, in spite of some hint of a positive role for fiction, there is reason to suspect that the actual demands made on public libraries and the influence of the contemporary outlook conspire to effect an inversion of these explicit priorities. The primacy of fiction dictated by readers demand is inverted in the understanding of fiction in contrast with an assumed primacy of fact. Thus fiction is something different from “informational books” understood as “those whose major purpose is the presentation of factual information undiluted by additional appeals.”⁷ Sergeant Friday strikes again: “Just the facts, Ma’am.” Fiction represents a fundamental option beyond the realm of pure factuality. It might involve real challenge and personal enrichment, rather than simply diversion and escape, but it is still a second level and implicitly an optional one.

The dilemma of the public library is epitomized in the following prognosis: “The public library of the future will build on the past and take advantage of the political and technological opportunities of the present to create a future in which libraries provide the information and knowledge that encourages people to search for wisdom.”⁸ The nicely balanced character of this proposal glosses the central dilemma faced by public libraries, and, more generally, by our whole contemporary culture. The assumption that providing information and knowledge will encourage the search for wisdom flies in the face of our experience. It is precisely the concentration on information as the source of knowledge which has diverted concern from, and undermined the credibility of, the search for wisdom. The information explosion is not only debilitating because of the sheer weight of information available, but because the information outlook is a variety of the fact-dominated mentality which inherently disparages fiction. It is in this regard that the public library constitutes a microcosm of our society. The fundamental role of the public library is the dissemination of fiction, and if fiction is understood in the positive sense, this will entail the promotion of the pursuit of wisdom rather than simply the facilitating of entertainment and diversion. However, by its very nature the public library is not itself concerned with fiction, but with affording access to fiction. Thus its own primary focus is not on the pursuit of wisdom but on the providing of information. The tendency for concern with information to displace the pursuit of wisdom is almost inevitable. Thus even in that institution which is dedicated to its dissemination, fiction becomes mere fiction.

The repercussions of this demotion of fiction are varied, but two effects are of particular importance. On the one hand, the totalitarian

exclusion of fiction from the realm of truth results in a literalistic mentality. It focusses our attention on fact as an acquired possession and understands our mission in life as one of extending that assured base on which we stand. This results in regarding our formulations in one of two ways, either as literal truths or as mere instruments to further control. Thus statements are taken to be either true or false, with no allowance for any more subtle interpretations or else they are regarded as useful or useless as means of extending processes of prediction and control. Either way, we are cut off from any reciprocal relation with reality. At best we have information about it, and by its fundamental one-sidedness, this information is bound to be distorted. It is in this way that the pursuit of information short circuits the search for wisdom. One searcher of wisdom tells of seeing a flock of wild geese flying over, and of how he rushed to the window and proceeded to count them. There were forty-five. Then he makes this revealing comment. "On telling of them and their number I met with a true question: if you counted them, how could you have seen them?"⁹ He did not see the geese at all, except as a set of forty-five objects. The information mentality short-circuited the experience. Of course there are times when things have to be counted, and there are people who devote their professional lives to counting in one form or another. We could not exist as a modern society without these services. But when counting is all that counts something has gone seriously wrong. This is the difficulty that confronts us in the information society. The focus on fact relegates fiction to a diversionary role so that only information as literal truth or manipulable symbol is accorded serious treatment. What makes this particularly tragic is the way in which this precludes our appreciation of whole dimensions of life. Far from facilitating the search for wisdom, the focus on information subverts the search for wisdom through its fixation on knowledge.

Besides making us literalists, the mentality which denigrates fiction also makes us secularists. Not only are we cut off from reality through preoccupation with our own formulations and manipulations, but any grasp of reality we do have must be sponsored by these formulations and manipulations. Our orientation in life must be derived from the brick-by-brick construction of the edifice of fact. The obviousness of this anthropocentric perspective to our modern ears is only exceeded by its absurdity when viewed from the transcendent perspective of a more classical outlook. From the standpoint of religious concern, for example, this amounts to the requirement that worship be inherently idolatrous. We can only give ourselves to what we can control. But this

is obviously unworthy of our worship. Ergo, there is no place for worship. Whether worship is so easily dismissed, however, is another matter. From the perspective of a positive appreciation of worship, it would appear that the idolatrous route is pursued in spite of its inherent inadequacy. This contemporary religion of secularism is a product of the fixation on factuality. It affords us the precise information and technological control to enclose ourselves in the prison of our own arrogance. The fact that we do not yet have all the answers is mitigated by the consideration that this will be resolved in the future. Mystery is dissipated in a total preoccupation with problems, as Gabriel Marcel astutely observed. Anything that eludes our grasp remains a problem to be solved by the ever expanding network of fact. So total is this world view that it exudes an obviousness that prevents its recognition. Something of what is being missed through it may be indicated in the following confession.

I, who do not share any of Tolstoy's religion or that of the prophets of Israel, and who do not believe that a single jot of Dante's or Blake's world view is 'true' in any scientific sense, nevertheless realize that any carping I might do about the correctness of their convictions would be preposterously petty. Their words are the conduit of a power that one longs to share. One reads their words only with humility and remorse for having lived on a lesser scale than they, for having at any point forgone the opportunity to achieve the dimensions of their vision.¹⁰

The factual mentality precludes our even approaching such visions because of concern over the factual accuracy with which they are articulated. This preoccupation with precision confines our horizon to the scope of our own mental digestion. That we could possibly live this way is perhaps the most amazing fiction ever entertained by humanity.

Part of the answer is Davies' concern about the cost of our economic and educational advance would seem to be that we are paying for this advance through a fixation on fact which has as its shadow side a corresponding devaluation of fiction and that some of the coin in which that payment is being extracted is a literalness of mind and a secularism of spirit.

III

The extent to which we are subject to factualization might be suggested by consideration of certain key differences a positive appreciation of fiction would entail. One such difference would be a requirement to reconsider the nature and importance of myth. In the

perspective of factuality, myth is a synonym for the non-factual. And since truth is equated with fact, myth is a synonym for the untrue. On the assumption that we are engaged in a progressive accumulation of fact which is inexorably eliminating everything other than pure factuality, "myth" is used to refer to affirmations which were once held to be true but which we now know to be false. These may still be held by some people, but this simply reflects the fact that such people are not fully enlightened. They do not know the facts. Thus a pair of knowledgeable economists expose the fallacy prompted by the energy crisis which centered in the concern that we are running out of non-renewable resources. These writers catalogue the number of times in the past that people thought they were running out of particular resources, only to find a substitute which was more abundant than the particular resource that was becoming scarce. Acquaintance with these facts exposes the concern as unfounded, false. The fallaciousness is proclaimed in the title of the book, *The Doomsday Myth*.¹¹

When myth is used in this sense in which it is equated with falsehood, it is always attributed to someone else. The exposé of myths is always entirely myth-free. They take their stand on the antiseptic assurance of pure factuality. But while there are some so-called "myths" on which there would be widespread agreement of their falsity, such as the myth of the racial superiority of whites, although recognition of the falsity is by no means universal, there are others such as "the doomsday myth," which are far less obvious. It could be suggested that the exposés of "the doomsday myth" are perpetrating a myth of their own, one which we might call "the complacency myth." This would counter their identification of recovery from previous resource depletions by pointing out the lesson of the inductivist fallacy, that we cannot be assured of alternative resources in the future simply because they have appeared in the past, and that, in line with factual procedures, it must be reckoned that the probability of alternative resources not appearing is progressively greater because more and more resources are being depleted. In this way, a creditable case could be made for a stance somewhat in line with the concerns these authors dismiss under "the doomsday myth" label. To adopt such a stance and accuse these authors of underestimating the seriousness of our profligate culture, would result in a mythical stand-off. Accusations of adherence to the "doomsday myth" would be stale-mated against accusations of subscription to a "complacency myth." But this situation may not be as hopeless as it might at first appear. The futility of mutual accusations of falsehood may be transcended by a reconsideration by the nature of myth.

Rather than dispensible falsehood, myth might be thought of as referring to comprehensive perspectives which characterize our thinking more than being characterized by it. Thus in the stalemate between "doomsday" and "complacency" myths, there are different understandings of human life and of reality. Doomsdayers demonstrate a concern for future generations and a sense of responsibility for conserving the earth's resources, in line with a deterministic sense of the finitude of those resources, whereas the complacent display a sublime faith in the future with a lack of concern about depleting resources sponsored by a guiding sense of an infinity of resources. Pursuit of this comparison would demand many qualifications on both sides, but it would not produce a detailed picture which would show the obvious superiority of one side. No matter how strongly we may be convinced of the merits of one side, or the other, the scope of the issues involved is such that there is no way of dismissing the other side with any firm assurance. Such considerations suggest a more positive appreciation of myth beyond its direct relegation to the status of falsehood or that of dispensible preliminary perspective to that of an indispensable context in which evidence and reason themselves are given their place. The first victim of such an understanding of myth is the myth of factuality. "An education which took into account the need for a myth framework of some kind as an essential condition of human development would not equate knowledge with facts or enlightenment with premature destruction of illusion."¹² There may be nothing as illusory as the myth of the all-sufficiency of fact. It entails a view of ourselves and of reality which is at the least extremely ambitious if not excessively arrogant. However, that conclusion assumes the other elements involved in a positive appreciation of fiction.

The second of those elements, after the reconsideration of the importance of myth, is a renewed appreciation of metaphor. Under the domination of the myth of factuality, metaphor appears as a decorative addition beyond the serious assertion of the literal. As fiction represents a diversion from the serious pursuit of knowledge, metaphor constitutes one of the principal vehicles of this diversion. The fanciful alignments of metaphor provide a release from the demanding preoccupation with the literal focus of truth. Amid the demands of business and politics, research and planning, it is a novel relief to find a poet referring to one of those fact-filled days as "a page in life's story." Of course this is not serious. It is just poetry. It is the play of metaphor as a diversion from the serious pursuit of truth.

Any positive appreciation of fiction will involve a reconsideration of such disparagement of metaphor. At the very least it will insist on the legitimacy of metaphor as a vehicle of truth alongside the literal truth of statements of fact. Seeing a day as a page in life's story suggests dimensions of life that cannot be grasped in the calculating procedures by which many of us are constrained to live our days. Rather than being simply a release from that calculating perspective, metaphorical affirmations can inform and challenge that outlook. They can afford access to truth which is too elusive for the methods of research and planning. There is a widespread endorsement of such a recognition of the legitimacy of metaphor in academic circles today. But there is reason for concern that such a recognition does not go far enough in recovering a full appreciation of the significance of fiction. It could be argued that rather than simply recognizing metaphor as equal to literal statements of fact as an avenue to truth, we must go on to realize that metaphor is the only avenue to truth. In other words, there is no such thing as a literal truth, and that applies to this assertion itself.

The apparent absurdity of any such condition must not deflect us, because that sense of absurdity is to be expected as a corollary of the myth of factuality. From the point of view of that myth, the notion of literal truth is so firmly ensconced that the temerity of anyone who would even suggest that it may be subject to question is beyond belief. But consider what might pass for a literal truth. Bertrand Russell suggested something like "this here" as the prime candidate for a literally true statement. However, such a statement is totally unintelligible in itself. It requires the supplementation of practices of denotation. The person making that statement has to point to something in a particular setting. Thus Russell's bare statement of fact entails all the assumptions of ostensive definition. It presupposes a setting which links the maker of the statement with the object being identified and with the person to whom it has been identified, while at the same time assuming a sufficient distinctiveness in the object for both persons so that it can be distinguished from other objects in the background to which the demonstrator is pointing. Thus even at this minimum level, there are whole complexes of relations involved. If we take the further step of trying to articulate what is being pointed out, with a statement such as "The apple is on the table," we find ourselves inextricably immersed in something that looks very like metaphor. What is on the table bears no intrinsic resemblance to the word "apple." We would be hard pressed to derive any nourishment or taste from the word "apple." But the very fact that we expect to find nourishment from the

object to which it points is indicative of the complex associations that this word entails. "The apple is on the table" communicates because of a whole array of relations in reality and among words and between reality and words. Rather than recognizing an apple by some process of denotation and building up associations from there, it would seem much more in line with experience to consider that we begin with the complex of associations and that the recognition of the apple constitutes an abstraction from that varied background. Thus rather than the literal acquaintance with the apple providing the basis for metaphoric references to apples as images for the earth or for a person's head, the recognition of the apple itself is metaphoric. The only reason we do not normally notice this is that it is a dead metaphor. It is so commonplace that its metaphoric quality is not evident. Viewed in this way, all language is metaphoric, and all thinking is metaphorical. In articulation and reflection we are engaged in exploring associations. This is true of the most mundane identifications and of the most complex abstractions. Thus far from constituting an optional diversion, the metaphoric sensitivity which undergirds fiction is also the basis of our assertions of fact. Fact and fiction then do not represent contraries but rather complementary stages on a continuum, and if primacy is to be assigned to either one, it must be to fiction. Any approximation to literal truth is dependent on metaphoric processes.

Recognition of the metaphoric nature of our speaking and thinking leads to one final feature in a positive appreciation of fiction. It will also involve a restoration of metaphysics. The factual perspective understands itself as the eliminator of metaphysics. It maintains that it is simply erecting a carefully contrived construction of fact without benefit of any overall vision. It must maintain this because truth is seen to reside in statements of fact themselves. However, if we take a more comprehensive view of truth, one which is broad enough to recognize truth in fiction as well as in statements of fact, then it will appear that the factual position represents not so much an abandonment of metaphysics as a particular kind of metaphysic. It has its own view of reality, a view which equates reality with the malleable and understands the metaphysician as a manager. Thus the fixation on fact is left in the awkward position of surreptitiously endorsing a metaphysic which on its own terms it cannot officially acknowledge.

Recognition of this situation, and an alternative to it, is made possible by an appreciation of fiction. When our thinking and speaking are seen to function metaphorically, rather than in a direct literal manner, we will understand truth in a broader sense than in its equa-

tion with statements of fact. In one sense, on this view of truth the issue only becomes interesting when we penetrate beneath the facts. Thus the concern of the western Canadian novelist, Rudy Wiebe, with uncovering truth as it has been apprehended in the Mennonite tradition, has been summed up in these terms:

The facts of our history we, many of us, know tolerably well.

It is the truth of our history that we have never learned.¹³

The prerequisite for such learning is a willingness to entertain a more pervasive and thus more elusive form of truth than is congenial to the literal focus of factuality.

Nor is this simply a matter of going beyond the facts by invoking some kind of additional level of interpretation. It may rather involve a deliberate refusal to become entrapped in the factual mentality. In the introduction to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the story of an attempt to affirm human dignity and initiative in the setting of the dehumanization of a mental health ward presided over by a particularly domineering head nurse, Ken Kesey says:

. . . You think this is too horrible to have really happened, this is too awful to be the truth! But please, it's still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it's the truth even if it didn't happen.¹⁴

What is at stake is something much more challenging than can be arrived at by ascertaining the literal truth of the story—did those conditions actually exist, and did mental patients actually rebel against such conditions in the ways portrayed in the story? To focus on such considerations is to miss the wider issue regarding our understanding of mental health and the depersonalizing and manipulative structures that proliferate in our culture. These truths are ones that require fiction for their elucidation. Far from being derivable from a net accumulation of facts, they are of such a comprehensive nature that we can only address them by attending to what might be the hallucinatory ravings of a mental patient. But whether or not this is what we have before us is not finally important either. What is at stake is rather dimensions of life and reality which speak to us through the story and claim not only our attention but our very being. With this we reach the most important feature of the understanding of truth implicit in a positive appreciation of fiction.

In contrast to the literal truth of fact arrived at in answer to our questions, the comprehensive truth of fiction rather questions us. It is the truth which encounters us not only in the classics of literature but

also in the literature of the major religious traditions. If it seems inappropriate to categorize these traditions as fiction, we need only reflect that it is no less appropriate than thinking of them in terms of fact. Indeed, it is precisely because our contemporary outlook constrains us to approach them in terms of fact, that our only hope of appreciating them lies in our ability to approach them as fiction. In this way, our questioning of the accuracy of these traditions is transcended in an appreciation of their metaphoric nature which allows them to question us. Insofar as this happens we are exposed to truth and reality from which the factual notion of truth excludes us.

It might even be suggested that with this metaphysical dimension we come full circle. In contrast to the factual dismissal of fiction as escapist and diversionary, it could be argued that it is the factual approach which is escapist in its attempt to reduce reality to manageable proportions which avoid the challenge of living truth encountered in fiction at its best. In contrast to the metaphysic of control implicit in the factual approach, the metaphysic of relation involved in a positive appreciation of fiction not only defies our control but exposes us to the possibility of catharsis and conversion. It is much simpler and safer to stick to the facts. The problem is that the realities addressed in fiction are facts also.

Indeed, we might even reinstate the vocabulary of fact as long as this is understood in a sense comprehensive enough to embrace the fact of fiction. It is the ultimate concern of fiction at its best, no less than of fact, to tell it like it is. What fiction insists on is that *it* is much more mysterious than infatuation with factuality can allow. If this is acknowledged, so that there is a genuine appreciation of the inevitability of myth and the indispensibility of metaphor and allowance for that engagement with reality which can be articulated only through the indirectness of fiction then there can be no objection to designating this recognition as an appreciation of the fact of fiction.

NOTES

1. Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), 199.
2. Sally Fitzgerald, "Introduction," *Three by Flannery O'Connor* (New York, New American Library, Signet Classic, 1983), xxxi.
3. Lester Asheim and associates, *The Humanities and the Library, Problems in the interpretation evaluation and use of library materials* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1957), 206.

4. Ibid., 254.
5. Ibid., 254f.
6. Ibid., 202.
7. Ibid., 234.
8. Marilyn Gell Mason, "The Future of the Public Library," in *Library Journal*, 110 (Sept. 1, 1985), 139.
9. Henry Bugbee, Jr., *The Inward Morning* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1958), 227.
10. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969), 237.
11. Charles Maurice and Charles W. Smithson, *The Doomsday Myth* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1984).
12. Rosemary Haughton, *On Trying to be Human* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate, 1966), 69.
13. David Toews, "Rudy Wiebe—The Blue Mountains," in *The Canadian Novel Here and Now*, ed. John Moss (Toronto: N.C. Press, 1983), 170.
14. Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Signet Books, New American Library, 1962), 13.