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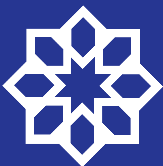
Problems, Myths and Stories

Doris Lessing



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THE AUTHOR

Doris Lessing was born in Persia, now Iran, brought up in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, and has lived in London since 1949. She has written novels, short stories, essays and plays. Her best known books are probably *The Golden Notebook, The Children of Violence* sequence and the *Canopus in Argos* sequence. She has won major literary prizes in Austria, France, Germany, Italy and the U.K. The second volume of her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade,* came out in October 1997.

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Problems, Myths and Stories

We take stories and story-telling for granted. The great reservoir of myths, legends, parables, tales, that we dip into for entertainment, use for films and plays, refer to so as to elucidate a point or draw a parallel – it is always there and we hardly think about it. Tales are as old as humanity, like a long shadow thrown by our history. How old? We don't know. Whenever we reach a point where it seems impossible to go back further, then we can be sure that soon the dark of our ignorance will yield to research and, behold, it is evident that the long shadow showed itself much earlier than we had thought. I like to think that the Neanderthals developed from grunts and barks to 'Once upon a time...' I asked an anthropologist who said, 'Impossible, they did not have the mental capacity.' I objected, 'But let us suppose this Neanderthal returns from the hunt and says, 'I visited our grandfather's grave and I saw him talking with the white bear.' That is a story.' He said, 'The first part of that sentence is possible, the second part is not: they did not have imagination.' Two hundred thousand years those Neanderthals lasted: in that time grunts could have become, 'I saw my dead grandmother talking to an owl', or so it seems to me. But we have a need to denigrate the past and its people, to put ourselves at the height of achievement, human and animal.

We have not until recently been asking ourselves, 'What is the function of story telling? What are stories for?' And that is extraordinary in itself. We tell stories all the time. Everybody does, recording our experience, perhaps even shaping it. When a woman returns from a supermarket and says, 'Guess what, I saw Dick in the cheese department, but he wasn't with Betty, he was with some new woman', that is the beginning – and the middle – of a story, though we do not know the end yet. We tell each other stories all day, and we daydream and fantasise, and when we fall asleep we tell stories again, for dreams are stories, not only wildly surreal, but as matter-of-fact and consistent as a B-movie; they can be horrific, or funny,

or entertaining and even instructive, telling you things your conscious mind has not yet caught up with. And there is a hint, perhaps, of what stories may be about – or some of them – suggesting that they not only order experience, which for some reason we need to do, but accept inputs from other regions of the mind.

Quite recently, let's say in the last ten or fifteen years, the use of stories as education has been generally acknowledged, even in the academic world: to have said twenty years ago that stories had this function would have been greeted with derision or indifference. Stories were entertainment, and that was the end of the matter. As soon as the idea surfaced, the facts stared us in the face and soon traditional tales were claimed by feminists, seen as messages from oppressed people, politicos of all kinds.

Recently I read an anecdote about an Inuit society, I suppose in Northern Canada, since the book was by a Canadian author. A little boy has gone into the forest where he has killed a rat, for fun. The elders of the tribe take this seriously, because if animals are treated frivolously and without respect, then they won't come and keep their side of the bargain, which is to allow themselves to be killed for food and for their skins. And so it was: the animals kept away and the tribe began to starve. The child was told to go again into the forest and apologise, north, west, south, east, to the animals for the rat. And the animals returned. This tale was used – for all I know still is – to instruct small children. From it we may gather that not all Inuits have always been creatures of ice and snow, but lived in kinder habitats sometimes.

The Nigerian author, Mariamne Bá, unfortunately no longer living, wrote a book, *Too Long a Letter*, a middle-aged woman telling a friend about the terrible thing that has happened to her. Her husband has fallen in love with a girl the same age as his daughter, and married her, and she, the author, is without a husband, but not without a home, since the extended family has resources denied to the tight little family we are used to. But in the course of this 'letter' she tells quite casually, how a young girl is sent to her grandmother to further her education as we once sent middle-class girls to be 'finished'; and this education consisted of tales, which instructed her in her own proper behaviour, the history of her clan and tribe: customs , manners, mores. That was education, and in some parts of

the world still is. Tales are seen as a repository of information, used to instruct the young: along with entertainment comes the message.

British tales are few when compared with those of the Germans, the French, other countries. We have nothing like the Brothers Grimm and our ‘fairy’ tales are mostly imports from France – their origin is hinted at by the fact that ‘fate’ tales is a better translation. Is this great lack in our culture because we were so often conquered, and every time the stock of tales became less? The Romans – what did they destroy? We had four centuries of them. The Angles, the Saxons, the Danes, the Norsemen, the Normans. Conquerors often destroy their victims’ cultures as a matter of policy. In Southern Rhodesia, where I grew up, the British actively discouraged Shona and Ndelebe cultures, on the grounds that they were backward, and what we were bringing was civilisation. One may easily imagine the Romans doing the same. I have a Shona friend whose grandmother was storyteller for her clan, but he knew not one story when I begged him to write them down. ‘The Jesuits beat all that out of me,’ said he. Literally – beat. He was flogged, all the children were, for any hint of ‘backwardness’. A couple of years ago I was in Zimbabwe at an occasion where people were dancing their contributions to the festivities, but I said I would tell a story, which was Idries Shah’s *The Man, the Snake and the Stone*. (It was the right length.) I was impressed by how they responded, as if they were sitting round a fire listening to a tale-teller, an active audience, very different from our passivity: groans, excitement at the right places, clapping, clucking their tongues. And then a woman said, ‘What a pity we have forgotten so many of our stories.’ But Idries Shah’s *World Tales* offered to libraries there (and a library may be a shelf under a tree) has long queues waiting for it. ‘Yes, we have a story like that one – my mother, grandmother, great-grandmother told us stories, I remember now...’ And so stories may be lost, or half forgotten and may come back again, perhaps changed, adapted.

We have imagined tales travelling from culture to culture, or as it were spontaneously generating like an emanation of the spirit of a people: now we see them as deliberately introduced – which does not contradict either of the other two theories. Idries Shah has told us that tales are continuously being fed into cultures everywhere, by masters of the art, the Sufis, experts on human psychology, tales described as being of different kinds and having different functions.

Some have immediate charm and magic – for instance, Cinderella which is so to speak one of the Ur-tales, with literally hundreds of variants. We may wonder about its potency, but that is as far as we go. The teaching stories have dimensions not available to ordinary enquiry, and of these I am not qualified to speak. I want to talk about the reception and use of this material on a lower level, that of the ordinary reader, or pupil, or student, and about literature in general, which we must look at now as possessing areas interpenetrated by high influences. It is easy to see, for instance, how Nasrudin jokes become acclimatised everywhere from Central Asian tea houses to pubs and bars. There are tales that have left their origins and become transmogrified into novels and short stories. *Appointment in Samara* is one: people destined to die on a certain day will do so, even if they travel to avoid their fate. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is another, about the curse of gold and greed.

There are aspects of tales that we take for granted, but which we could examine to our profit. One source of tales is the Bible, which once everyone knew, but now only a few people. Until recently – let's say until the Second World War – people went to church on Sundays and heard there some of the most glorious prose ever written in English, in the King James Bible. Every Sunday and often in between too. This as it were unofficial or parallel education was classless: princes and paupers, labourers and farmers and lords and ladies, sat in those pews and heard language which fed into the prose of writers, some of them fine writers, others not, for you may hear the rhythms of the Bible running in poor writers' language as well as in good ones.

> Doth not Wisdom cry? And understanding put forth her voice?
> She standeth at the top of high places,
> by the way in the places of the paths,
> she crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city...

Or:

> Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.
> He cometh forth like a flower and is cut down,
> he fleeth also as a shadow and continueth not...

Or:

> Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities,
> all is vanity.

Or:

> What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever.

The point is, this was an influence that affected everyone who went to church. That is to say, the majority of the population. A literary education, and in storytelling, for in the Bible there is everything from the bloodthirsty and the brutal to the tenderness, for instance, of Ruth. This immersion in fine language lasted for generations, from when the Bible was translated from Latin, so the common people could understand it and it was no longer the preserve of priests. That voice has fallen silent. When we talk of 'dumbing down' – and this goes on now everywhere, and has become a major complaint of our time – it is astonishing to me that no one mentions that not so long ago we heard or read the Bible, and do not now. My poor father was dragged to church as a child twice on Sundays and to Sunday school as well, and said Sunday was for him and his friends a black hole in every week, but he said too, often, that he owed his love of good writing, and of literature, to that education, the Bible.

It was an education, too, in many-sidedness, subtlety. I wonder if the simplemindedness of much new writing, the narrowness of judgement, stereotypical goodies and baddies, is due to the loss of that broader experience. 'Dumbing down', the complaint goes, means that people cannot understand long words, or read long books; they complain about 'difficult' books, which their grandparents read with ease, but surely this must be at least partly because their experience has not included that other influence? When a child went to church, and had to sit through hours of being bored, he or she had to take in the long words and try to understand them, and difficult ideas and often powerful and often bloody stories and the ambiguities of the parables. No one lowered the level of the discourse, chose simpler words, or made easy difficult ideas, for the children's sake. No concessions were made. The church-going experience said that life was deadly serious, they were expected to understand the words and ideas above their heads, to make efforts. The unspoken message was that life was important, they were important, and everything was expected of them.

Now contrast their weekly experience, the strongest cultural one

in their lives, with the children's programmes on television, which are jokey, giggly, familiar, everything is a laugh, and the unspoken message is that nothing much will be expected from these children, nothing difficult demanded, nothing is important.

The clock cannot be turned back, and church-going has gone as a general experience, but storytelling and reading has not, and used well could supply what once the Bible did.

There have been other books as powerful as the Bible. Let us take one, *Kalila and Dimna*, translated by Ramsay Wood. The origins of this book go back into the mists of myth. Here is one version. When Alexander the Great left India, he had put into place rulers chosen by him. One of them was a bad man and an unsatisfactory king. Then a sage, Bidpai, said to his wife that he was going to the palace to reprimand and warn the king. While she wept and wailed, he did go to the palace, demanded an audience, and for his temerity was flung into the bottle dungeon, in other words the sewers. That night the king was watching stars on the roof of the palace and it occurred to him that he was after all a very small item in the cosmic ledgers. At that moment there appeared to him that Stranger Dressed in Green who figures in so many Sufi tales. He said, 'Because you have for once in your life had a thought not concerned with your magnificence and importance, I am going to give you some advice. If you go hunting tomorrow in such and such a direction, you will find treasure.' Next day off went the king with his court, and when he saw a ragged figure by the roadside, he reined in and said, 'Ho, fellow, I am looking for treasure that has been promised.' 'If you are King Dabschelin,' was the reply, 'the treasure is waiting for you in that cave over there.'

In the cave the king found mounds of precious stones and gold, but after some minutes of jubilation he said, 'Wait! I already have treasure houses full of such things, why do I need more?' Then he saw a book, which he opened, but could not make sense of it, so he took it back to the palace to puzzle over until he remembered the sage he had had thrown into the dungeons. He had the man taken out and washed and brought before him. 'Can you explain this book to me?' he demanded, and Bidpai said he could and at once began instruction. And that is how the history sometimes begins of this book which is a vast collection of animal tales and fables, some of which can be found in the canon of Buddha tales, when Buddha was a deer, a monkey, a

lion; while some are to be seen on rock carvings in North India. How old they are we don't know. So here again, when we probe into origins, history unfolds earlier... earlier... One of the book's sources was a treatise by a certain Kautilya, on the art of government, dated at 300 B.C., but he wrote as the last of many authors on government and administration, and there is no way now of seeing why this – to us – so ancient a book was seen by him as a mere latecomer in a series. Here we may be reminded of Ecclesiastes's 'Of the making of books there is no end', – but after all, of those innumerable and – to him – wearying books we have very few left.

This book is at times called *Bidpai*, after the sage, sometimes *Kalila and Dimna*, and has had hundreds of years of energetic life. It has been described as 'having been more widely translated than the Bible'. In this country the first translation was in the sixteenth century by Sir Thomas North, who translated Plutarch into a work which was the source of Shakespeare's knowledge of the Roman world. North's Plutarch was popular reading, and so was his version of *Bidpai*. There followed dozens of versions of the book, twenty of them in the hundred years before 1888, after which there were none. So, once anyone with a claim to literary education had read *Bidpai*, but now few people have even heard of it.

The Persians heard of this wonderful book, used in India to educate rulers, and sent ambassadors who had to steal it, so closely guarded was it. It became a precious book to them, too. It was translated into many languages and tales from it spread everywhere, becoming absorbed and assimilated. When I was in Mexico, at the university, a professor said that tales from the book, and the idea of the book itself, were part of Spanish popular culture to the point that peasants telling and retelling the stories believe them to be Spanish.

The frame story concerns a ruler who is bored with his life and who, told that a white bull has been discovered lost and wandering, orders that it should be brought to him. The bull becomes a friend and adviser, but two jackals, Kalila and Dimna, were jealous of the noble beast's influence on the king, and had it murdered. One may easily imagine how peasants and common people everywhere identified with this, as easily as the princes who were given the book as a manual of advice. Macchiavelli's *The Prince* is supposed to be a descendant. One great Persian book, *The Lights of Canopus*, of Sufi provenance, was derived from it, centuries after its origins.

What an influence that book has had, and not only on folk culture and on literature: from it were inspired illustrations in Moghul art – they can be seen in the British Museum.

It is not possible to imagine European culture without *The Tales of Bidpai*, nor English literature without the Bible.

There are influences that echo down to us from before either. Once humanity used 'oracles', where voices emanating from sacred sources answered questions, but in our time we tend to see them as a variation of our agony aunts. People travelled long distances to consult oracles, and we still want to be told what to do and how to think by problem-solvers and gurus. 'Oracles' are by no means all in the past. In Zimbabwe, for instance, there are shrines and holy places where the shamans – wise women and men – still offer advice in the names of the ancestors, or other-worldly guides. These can be skilled politicians, and perhaps this may throw light back onto the oracle phenomenon, which even now may create awe and that type of curiosity which betrays a desire, or at least a readiness, to believe.

Recently a large crowd collected in Matabeleland, at the memorial to one Alan Wilson, to whose name is always attached the words 'Last Stand'. Alan Wilson's Last Stand was an exemplary tale told to white children. He and his company stood their ground against attacking Matabele warriors, and were killed. The memorial has always been a totem for the whites, a way of defining themselves, and execrated by the blacks as a symbol of white conquest. But, behold, the shamans announced that their wisdom would be delivered at this memorial. People in the crowd, both black and white, protested at the choice of this place. And this is what the Wise Ones said – or at least, how it was reported to me:

> 'And why should we not speak in this place? Oh, shortsighted ones, blinded by your immediate interests. You never see anything in perspective and from a higher viewpoint. Alan Wilson was a brave warrior killed fighting for what he believed in and he was killed honourably by brave warriors. Alan is as much an ancestor of Zimbabwe as the brave men who killed him. We honour him. When will you learn to see things as we do, who see far into the future, and understand how to judge events, refusing easy revenge and retaliation?'

In that context, this was dynamite. All of Matabeleland was simmering with rage and the desire for revenge because of Mugabe's massacres of the Ndebele. Mugabe was – and is –

fomenting hatred against the whites. Yet here was a mouthpiece of the Ancestors putting the weight of traditional wisdom against everything that was being popularly felt and said. This was no misty Oracle, clothing advice in riddles which time would unfold. And this event, and others like it, make us wonder if the ancient oracles intervened similarly in politics and policy.

There is something else about this event, relevant to our theme. It is the tone of what was said, which surely has to remind us of the sagas, that seem so far from us today. They were told – or sung – for centuries, in the halls of the powerful, in hovels, in marketplaces, in forests beside fires that frightened bears and wolves. The sagas defined those people's idea of themselves, reinforced codes of behaviour, of honour. Long ago – but they still have a powerful effect. You may hear, in Iceland, modern people passionately arguing about characters in a saga. There is a wilful woman in the saga called *Burned Njal*, Hallgerdur, who has been brought back into relevance by the women's movement. Men tend to hate her, women to admire. But the point is, the tale is alive and potent.

But that was the oral tradition: when we in our time talk of stories, tales, we often forget that for most of human history – thousands of years – tales were told or sung. Reading came much later, is comparatively recent, and changed not only the ways of receiving tales, but the actual machinery of our minds. The print revolution lost us our memories – or partly. Before, people kept information in their heads. One may even now meet an old man or woman, illiterate, who reminds us what we once were – what everyone was like. They remember everything, what was said by whom, when and why: dates, places, addresses, history. They don't need to refer to reference books. This faculty disappeared with print. It was an effect, I think, that was not foreseen, and surely this should make us at least wonder what unforeseen changes may result from the current technological revolution: television, radio, the Internet, computers. How will our mentation be affected? Will the changes be to our advantage?

The novel is what we think of first, these days, as the most representative kind of literature. Very recent is the novel, even if we take Cervantes as the starting place, even more so if we start with the English eighteenth century. It has been said that the novel is the art form peculiarly of our time, that we take it altogether too much

for granted, that it is a storehouse of information about the world we live in, different cultures, peoples, ways of thinking.

The novel has always been embattled. Ever since I came to England in 1949, I have been reading that the novel is dead. It is a favourite complaint of critics. Meanwhile the novel seems to be doing very well everywhere you look. The novel has been – is – seen by dictators as dangerous. And it is: Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, it is often said, was the major influence in bringing down the Soviet Empire. Moralisers and preachers saw the novel as frivolous and perverting. Jane Austen returned a classic defence to accusations of triviality in *Northanger Abbey*:

> '...there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit and taste to recommend them. 'I am no novel reader... I seldom look into novels... Do not imagine that *I* often read novels... It is very well for a novel...' Such is the common cant. 'And what are you reading, Miss –?' 'Oh, it is only a novel!' replies the young lady while she lays down her book with affected indifference or momentary shame. 'It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda'; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.'

The novel has always provided characters and situations that people argue about, influencing them to emulate (not always happily) or avoid. We may remember Goethe's *Werther*, which caused young men to throw themselves off cliffs and under horses all over Europe. Lovelace was a pattern of male profligacy and influenced the literature of the time, particularly Russian – we owe Raskolnikov to Lovelace. Becky Sharp identified a certain type of young woman, new in Society and in literature.

So, to look into literature for models, for comment on good and bad behaviour, for instruction, is nothing new: we have always done it. From the animal fables that are as old as we are able to imagine, and the parables of the Bible; from sagas and epics, from the songs of troubadours and trouvères, and all the way to our most characteristic form, the novel, we have used stories and storytelling.

In the East, the figure of Nasrudin, known also as Joha and the

Hoja, provides a cultural template from Albania to Afghanistan. Nasrudin/Joha/Hoja tales have been around a long time in the West, but Idries Shah in the 1960s, when making literary material available from Sufi sources, reintroduced Nasrudin tales in new and fresh forms. He told us that the materials he was contributing to our culture were a mirror in which we could see ourselves, he was defining and illustrating an attitude that was already ours. There is a Nasrudin tale of the man who picked up a mirror from the ground, grimaced at what he saw in it, reasoned that it must be something unpleasant to have been thrown away – and dropped it. But whatever we do see in it, the impact of Shah's work is surely a speeding up of that process which we refer to – in shorthand – as 'growing up'. We all know that a novel, a story, read when we are twenty, looks very different when we are fifty, or seventy. But a Sufi tale may change from year to year, or even month to month, hinting that we are in the middle of a process of sharp acceleration. That quality seems to me the most remarkable, the most easily seen, when studying Shah's work. It changes.

What an experience it is, reading perhaps for the twentieth time a Nasrudin tale, which at first seemed flat, pointless, certainly not a joke – and then suddenly, there it is, the meaning. Or one of them? And what has happened? It is not the story that has changed, we have. Or, we are for the first time reading in a heightened, perceptive state; because there is another aspect of the tales, the material. We have been told that our mental states continually fluctuate, and that we are hardly aware of it, or are aware only of its cruder manifestations. We say, 'I'm dull today', or 'I can't concentrate', contrasting what we feel with what we were yesterday and what we hope we will be tomorrow, or in an hour's time. You may read a passage that one day is vibrant, alive, electric, but a week later you read it and it is flat and you can't find in it what you did before. But to see fluctuations in our mental state, you don't need Shah's material, it can happen with ordinary books. For instance, I once read Isabella Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* and it was so alive to me, so present, that I was that intrepid lady riding down a mountain path in a blizzard with only a cardigan to keep her warm, and with cold legs because she'd taken off her stockings to make into rags for her horse's hooves to stop them slipping on an icy path that had a cliff on one side and a

precipice on the other. I was the woman lying at night in a shed with the temperature degrees below zero, looking at the stars through a hole in the roof through which snow was falling to cover the floor and her... and re-reading the book a month later, I found the magic gone. This kind of experience may make you question the reliability of your own mind even before the experience of Sufi material; make you even more eager to examine it in this new light.

I certainly do not want to suggest that Shah's work should be used as people have used books for centuries, looking for auguries and advice by opening them at random. 'I didn't know what to do, so I opened my Bible and read, 'Fear not, for thou shalt not be ashamed', and so I decided to sell my corn.' That kind of thing. But if you have absorbed Shah's work, then tales come into your mind when you find yourself in similar situations and enable you to examine where you stand, what choices you have.

It is impossible to read much of Idries Shah and not to find your mind widened. Not possible to ask, when a calamity happens, 'Why me?' (the car accident, the plane crash) if you have absorbed the Nasrudin tale that is summed up thus: *He* fell, but my neck is broken. There is a tale that always makes me laugh, while reminding me of a certain solipsistic tendency we all have. Nasrudin wakes his wife to tell her he has had an inspiring thought, namely that everything in the world is organised for the benefit of mankind. 'Just think, if camels had wings, they would go romping about on our roofs and spitting down their cud, and what a nuisance that would be.'

And there are unexpected resonances, such as when finding in your mind a tale that apparently has nothing to do with the dilemma you are in (so that you suspect the machinery is malfunctioning). But then as you go along the relevance becomes only too clear. And this is similar to the sometimes surprising messages of dreams.

The reactions of other people to jokes and tales can be unexpected and very useful: Nasrudin was riding along on his donkey when it shied because frogs in a pond ahead began loudly croaking. He was saved from a fall into the water. He threw handfuls of money into the pond. When asked why, he replied that he was rewarding the frogs.

This tale inspired in a friend paroxysms of rage. Not polite surprise, incredulity, but literally shouts of rage. He could not tolerate that frogs were being given what they could not use.

You’ve guessed it: this man is the meanest I’ve known, devious and dishonest.

Wine is often mentioned, usually as an analogy for a certain state of mind. A young man who had just read a book by Shah protested that it was all about drinking. I joked that he was an example of the tale about the man who complained to an encyclopaedia compiler that it was all about money, when in fact there were only a few references to money. ‘Obsessed with drink,’ said this youth, who was an alcoholic. None of us by now may be unaware – so much is written and said – that strong reactions to something can conceal (or reveal) secret strong attractions, opposition, addiction.

There is a Nasrudin tale about the man with two wives, one pretty and one not, and when asked which he would save if both were drowning, he asked the ugly one, ‘Can you swim, my dear?’ I have heard a feminist reject all of Shah, root and branch, because of this ‘sexist’ tale.

When someone objects that it was ‘unfair’ when an instructor cuffed a youth about to set off to fetch some water, on the grounds that it would not be much use hitting him after he had spilled the water, then it is not difficult to see that this person has problems with authority.

A man I know decided not to do business with someone, because of a Nasrudin tale. Nasrudin regularly crossed a certain frontier to trade. The Customs knew he was smuggling but could never catch him. Years later, when he and they had retired, they asked him what it was he had been smuggling. ‘Donkeys,’ he said. The potential partner saw this tale as advice on ways to cheat Customs. ‘I like this guy Shah,’ said he, ‘he understands business.’

Again and again through Shah’s work are reminders that our culture has lost certain attitudes to higher thought and experience, which are part of other cultures. For instance, when told a story, in some parts of the East, the hearer will ask, ‘What can I learn from this?’ I find these hints intriguing, to say the least. Did we have this attitude once, but have lost it? May one imagine a child, let’s say in old Afghanistan, as a matter of course being asked to think about a tale, when he or she has done with the fascination of it, the humour? What other capacities have we lost that we don’t know about? Or perhaps never had? Or only certain people had them? There are hints and intimations everywhere.

At the very end of his life, when Goethe was an old and much revered man, he said that he had only just learned how to read. Since he was probably the most eminent poet and thinker in Europe, he was not complaining about his ABC. What did he mean? I think it was a message even more relevant now than then – to read passively, but alertly, without interposing our own agendas between the prose and ourselves, is a difficult thing to do, when we have all kinds of ideologies and dogmas at work, shredding literature to find texts to support whatever political or critical programmes they operate. This is what Goethe meant, that we should read what is actually there, trying to receive from the author what he or she is offering.

And here is a piece from his autobiography. The prose is somewhat heavy, but surely that must be the fault of the translator, since Goethe was known for his fluent and fluid prose:

> 'Hence it is everyone's duty to enquire into what is internal and peculiar in a book which particularly interests us, and at the same time, above all things, to weigh in what relation it stands to our own inner nature and how far by that vitality of our own is excited and made fruitful. On the other hand, everything that is external, that is ineffective with respect to ourselves, or is subject to doubt, is to be consigned over to criticism, which even if it should be able to dislocate and dismember the whole, would never succeed in depriving us of the only ground to which we hold fast, not even perplexing us for a moment with respect to our once-formed confidence.'

To regard literature as a serious matter, for people who took themselves seriously, was common, I would say, until about the end of the Fifties. I think the hedonism, the drugs ('If you can remember it, you weren't there' – said as a boast) of the Sixties was responsible for a general lowering of standards, a barbarising.

There used to be a phenomenon, The Educated Person, who assumed reading was part of education. They would know the classics of their own countries, currently approved modern books, perhaps the better known classics of other European countries, and all this on a solid basis of Greek and Latin. (This was of course a Euro-centred education.) Possibly a couple of classics from the East were added, the Vedas, the *Mahabharata*, and, until a century ago, *Kalila and Dimna*, or *Bidpai*. And this was not only for upper class

people, because you can find in novels of the past how poor people aspiring to better things valued books.

People then could read the best that had been written, but since that time literature has exploded everywhere, geographically, so that if you visit a country and say, ‘Give me a list of your good books’, then it will certainly fill pages. Countries that had few authors, or none, now have many. The novel travels well... it has always been its own creator, because only the author has been able to say what his or her novel should be. An art form that began in this country with *Tom Jones* – picaresque tales; *Tristram Shandy*, that surreal squib of a book; or novels written in letter-form like *Clarissa*, cannot accept strictures about what it ought to be. It is this flexibility that has enabled it to adapt to any culture. For instance, in Zimbabwe there are good novels written by people whose grandmothers were storytellers, whose heritage was oral. The expansion has not only been geographic, for the novel has proliferated into a hundred new forms. Science and space fiction, women’s writing, black writing, the ‘magic realism’ of South America, factoids (where reporting and imagination merge, sometimes remarkably), novels using the dialects of the computer – I could go on, but Goethe now could not read all the good novels that are being written, and nor could any reader during the last thirty years. This is a new thing. The ‘Cultivated Person’ has had to relinquish any attempt at ‘keeping up’, and is probably specialising. You may meet science fiction addicts who disdain ‘mainline literature’ and conventional readers who wouldn’t dream of reading science or space fiction. Alas, new snobberies seem to be born with every human breath.

To deal with this vast new challenge all kinds of defences have been invented, one being that very old one of the barbarian who, faced with a culture she or he does not understand, says that it is no good anyway – The Dead White Male is to this point. Another says that there is no such thing as good and bad writers, all are the same – but we need not waste time on the extremities of (mostly) academic folly.

At the same time as this great spread and proliferation of literature, there is a completely new thing, a generation of young people, who may have spent fifteen, twenty years studying, have carried off prizes and attracted acclaim, but who have read nothing, know nothing outside their school or university curriculums, and

are not only ignorant but incurious. To spend an hour with such a person challenges any idea you might have had about education. If you say, ‘Do you realise you are the first generation who did not take it for granted that reading is part of education?’ then you may easily find yourself shouted at, and called an ‘elitist’. You cannot have a conversation, because they can only talk about themselves, their friends, gossip about the currently famous, shopping, food. They live in tight little self-enclosed worlds. It is true that some, reaching their twenties and finding themselves so disadvantaged, compared with their contemporaries who have read, start trying to catch up. Not easy when you haven’t got the habit of it, perhaps only read slowly from lack of practice, and are coping with the pressures of being an adult – which now have to include drugs as well as sex and work.

A great deal of effort is going into trying to get children to acquire the reading habit: exhortations, lectures, easy access to books – never has a generation had it made so easy for them to read.

Yet far too often you are forced to realise that when you belong to a reading generation, there is a whole web or map of references, information, knowledge that you have taken for granted; you realise that reading has been a parallel education, filling and extending what education you in fact did have. With contemporaries you talk from inside this web, or net, or reference, but with more and more of the young, you choose your words, try not to use long ones, so as not to hear ‘I don’t know that word, what does it mean?’ And you know that a careless reference to, let’s say, Goethe, will bring blank looks. ‘What’s that?’ Patagonia, The Cultural Revolution, the Mongols – ‘What’s that?’ The Renaissance, the Russian Revolution of 1917, Dante... ‘What’s that? What was that?’

Suggested Reading

Caravan of Dreams, *A Perfumed Scorpion*, *Knowing How to Know*, *Learning How to Learn* (all The Octagon Press, London) are among Idries Shah’s books that explain the Sufi attitude to literature.

A very good book on the heritage of tales is *The Past We Share* by E.L. Ranelagh (Quartet Books Ltd., London).

I recommend *The History of Reading* by Alberto Manguel (HarperCollins Publishers, London).