

Fahri ÖZ

### Truth, Nothing but the Truth

The history of literature teems with examples of the rift between fact and pure imagination.

Plato banished poets from his Republic on the grounds that they distort facts and deviate from the ideals of the Republic. Since they corrupt youth by inciting their passion rather than encouraging the fruits of reason, Plato believed poets should be driven away. They could come back on the condition that they prove their usefulness for the Republic. So, for Plato, the production of delight by means of imagination did not suffice, and poetry should also have some pragmatic use.

In short, from a pragmatic viewpoint, poetry and literature, in general, is a wild horse that can be dangerous for its rider and other people. Therefore, it must be tamed, penned up, and treated with caution.

But such caution does not solve the problem. Imagination and facts are like a seesaw where equilibrium is rather difficult to maintain. It is difficult to determine where imagination ends, and facts begin. So, let's attempt to define them. By facts or truth, I mean statements whose validity does not depend on personal perceptions and impressions. Imagination, on the other hand, is based on impressions and perceptions.

To illustrate this point, let's take the case of the novel *My Struggle* by the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard. This work, introduced as a novel in Turkey, was in fact a fictionalized autobiography (some prefer the term autofiction). Knausgaard revealed a lot about his personal and private life, as well as some delicate family secrets. The book was a big hit, but it was cursed by Knausgaard's offended relatives since some of their dirty linen was exhibited to the public!

For some poets, personal experience and facts play a major role in their writing. The turn—of century poet Thomas Hardy wrote heart-breaking lyrics about his late wife. In the 1960s and 1970s, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton went bolder into the poetic sea and wrote about their psychological experiences verging on nervous breakdown. The use of "truthiness" comes probably most strikingly to the fore in war poetry. The WWI poet Wilfred Owen is one of the most straightforward in dealing with atrocities of trenches and chemical warfare.

The Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet wrote abundant lyrics about his own experiences in prisons, about his lovers, wives, and friends; he wrote about his country he was banished from: that banished him:

I love my country:  
I've swung on its plane trees,  
I've slept in its prisons.  
Nothing lifts my spirit like its song and tobacco.<sup>1</sup>

Nazim was a legendary poet, and this legend was woven out of his tragic and beautiful life. Like Walt Whitman, with whom he shares a deep love for his country and its people, he did not need a mask. In Nazim's poetry the speaker and the poet, the lyric voice, and the author overlap; the poem is no

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<sup>1</sup> "Istanbul House of Detention". *Poems of Nazim Hikmet*. Trans. from Turkish by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Koenig. New York: Persea Books, 1994. p. 79.

mere artifact but almost an organic outgrowth of the poet himself.

My poems are based on my personal experiences, my dreams, and visions. However, I treat my experiences in such a way that they could become experiences of anybody. My poems do not simply reveal my inner world; I use my personal experiences as a means to talk about similar situations or about what they may signify for readers of my poems.

I must confess I am still at a loss to what extent my personal experiences and real people I know should enter my poems. One of my poems made use of a figure, a cloth merchant, from my village without mentioning his name. When my book appeared my sister called and congratulated me, and she added how she liked the poem that deal with the cloth merchant from our village. In the poem, I imagine him driving his old blue truck to the town where he used to sell fabrics. This is a reference that only those who knew this man could figure out. For others who don't know him, the poem is simply about a man driving his truck.

This brings us to the issue of what literature is, and in particular what poetry and is. While fiction is expected to provide a setting for a narrative (names, places, dates, motives, etc.), poetry is not. The readers of poetry are invited and encouraged to imagine particular images, feelings, experiences, and situations. As Jean Cocteau says, "I am a lie that always tells the truth."