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# THE FUNCTION OF FICTION B

I have read three novels this year – two by Thomas Mann, one by Robert Musil. Respectively: *The Magic Mountain* (which I first read in 2001),

*Doctor Faustus* (which I first read in 2002) and *The Man Without Qualities* (which I only now read for the first time, and I'm far from finished – it is a gargantuan 1300 pages after all). Of course, none of these are really novels – they're more like slightly (ever so slightly) fictionalised philosophical treatises. Right up my alley.

What are some of the *real* novels I read? I can't remember any. Do Chekhov's short stories qualify? I hope they do – Varlam Shalamov's bone-chilling *Kolyma Tales* certainly don't – if only because of what they led Maxim Gorky to say, despairingly, about his own writing. (Something with 'log'.) *Writing*: there is only good or bad.

I have read a couple more poems this year, but not much more, despite what some rumors might say. (And that's okay.) None of them are very long – the point of the poem being its shortness, after all – but in my mind they still resemble the aforementioned tome by Musil: *big*. How I wish I had memorised Robert Lowell's "Notice"! It would sound – and look – very good right now, in print (I'm away from my library at the time of writing). And how one particular poem by Rilke made for a pleasant surprise, by the way – something with Parisian streetwares.

I have never read a science fiction story in my life, and only two detective novels, ever: by Sjöwall and Wahlöö, because a friend of our's described the protagonist in their series as "philosophically inclined", and because their novels were said to be pretty accurate reflections of Sweden in the 1970s – which sounded great.

This probably all adds up to mean one thing, and one thing only: that fiction, in the end, is not for me. The facts suffice, thank you very much. And: "just the facts, ma'am, just the facts." ("Fuck the Facts" is a title of a John Zorn composition that appeared on the first ever *Naked City* album, which I liked a lot – I stuck it on the door of the apartment I lived in around 1992, but perhaps it was never really "me".) *Verbum sat sapienti*, and that *verbum* is

elegantly shaped, a fact as much as a thing – like a work of art. The German expressionist poet Gottfried Benn, who was trained as a doctor and practiced medicine for most of his life, allegedly wished the following epitaph for himself: "here lies a man who loved nouns." Nouns are a bit (well, not just a bit) like facts – and perhaps verbs are a bit like fictions. (Perhaps this is also the reason why I prefer "being" to "becoming" – and not just in a purely philosophical sense.) But my most basic objection is really this: why would one make *anything* up if the world is so rich in quasi-fictional improbabilities already? Or, as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it: "not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is." The demands that this world makes upon the powers of the imagination are overpowering enough already.

When I was a child, my grandmother used to bring home children's story books from the library for me; she noticed I spent lots of time leafing through her atlas and her encyclopaedia and although this did not worry her, she thought I should read more "stories", something a little more in tune with a child's fantasy world. But I didn't care for those books; I was more interested in *knowing* – knowing what the capital of Namibia was, knowing when Napoleon was born, knowing how many teeth the Tasmanian Devil had. Why didn't I become a scientist, logician or engineer? Well, who's to say I'm *not* a scientist, logician or engineer? I *am* all those things – only in relationship to something habitually associated with the *opposite* of science, logic and engineering. (This, incidentally, my favourite Stalin quote: "ye writers, engineers of the human soul!")

I used to teach at an art school where very often upon entering an art student's studio, I would be asked to *read* something they had written, or *listen* to something they had recorded (needless to say: never anything musical), rather than *look* at something they had made – storytelling was and is a big thing with these students, and as they are young and with it and (so I assume) in touch with what's up, I take this to mean that storytelling is big, period. Is this why so many young artists experiment with alter egos and fictional biographies? Even I have written poems and enacted performances under someone else's name.

*Why* fictions? *Why* stories? So far, three of the above paragraphs have started with the word 'I'; in one paragraph, 'I' is the second word. This paragraph starts with a word that sounds very much like it, and that only 'I' can ask. For the sake of symmetry, 'I' is how this must be brought to a conclusion:

'When she was ten years old, a summer holiday was spent on the Belgian coast – a built-up strip of land along the North Sea already then known for its drabness (this much she knew). When school started, the question inevitably arose who had gone where during the past summer months. Partly out of shame, partly because her imagination was just too vivid to be tied down to the dour facts of the aforementioned concrete wasteland, she told her teacher and her classmates that she had gone to South Africa – she did have family there, after all, so it wasn't so outrageous a claim to make. A writing assignment followed, in

which she waxed lyrical about the safaris undertaken, the antelopes seen. Word soon spread around the school: how had a girl from a family of visibly limited means managed to travel all the way to South Africa? When the truth finally came out, the teacher was unforgiving: the girl had *lied*. Somewhat precociously, the girl protested her innocence: wasn't she at least allowed to fantasise a bit? The teacher was unimpressed – perhaps class-based feelings of jealousy mixed with his insistence that at all times the truth be told, no matter how shameful. In other words: embellishment, yes – but not at the expense of the indisputable *truth of shame*. And that – lying later in life for both amorous and professional reasons notwithstanding – was the last story the girl ever told.'