

THE PERSEVERANCE OF TRUTH

"I've a right to think," said Alice sharply, for she was beginning to feel a little worried.

"Just about as much right," said the Duchess, "as pigs have to fly..."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter IX

On 19 January 2007, I read that the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was murdered in Istanbul by a 17-year-old Turkish nationalist, for having criticised the government's denial of the Armenian genocide. The murder of journalists who attempt to tell the truth is a time-honoured custom and the justifications advanced for such crimes enjoy an equally long tradition (I use the terms "honoured" and "enjoy" advisedly.) From John the Baptist and Seneca to Rodolfo Walsh and Anna Politkovskaya, truth-tellers and their executioners inhabit a surprisingly vast literary shelf.

A little over twenty-four centuries ago, in the year 399 BC, three Athenian citizens brought a public action against the philosopher Socrates for being a menace to society. After the trial, in which both the prosecution and the defendant presented their case, the majority of the jury of representative Athenian citizens found Socrates guilty and, with peculiar severity, condemned him to death. Plato, the disciple who perhaps loved Socrates best, wrote, some time afterwards, a record of his defence which has come down to us under the title of the Apology. In it, Plato has Socrates discuss many subjects: the notion of impiety, the character of his accusers, the charges of heresy, of corrupting the young and of insulting the Athenian democratic identity: this latter charge carries for us today a curious familiar ring. And, like a luminous thread running through the entire allocution, Socrates discusses the question of a citizen's responsibilities in a just society.

Halfway through the speech, Socrates considers the risks a man will run who is willing to tell the truth in the world of politics. "No man on earth who conscientiously," says Socrates, "prevents a great many wrongs and illegalities from taking place in the state to which he belongs, can possibly escape with his life. The true champion of justice, if he intends to survive even for a short time, must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone."

Indeed. A long roll-call of truth-sayers, dating back to the very first prophets, have paid with their lives for this human vocation, and every year Amnesty International publishes a bulky reminder of how many of them are kept today in prison, all around the world, for no other reason than that of speaking out. Hans Christian Andersen, in "The Emperor's New Clothes," forgot to tell us what happened to the little boy who pointed out that the Emperor had in fact no clothes on at all. Surely we wouldn't be surprised to learn that his fate was not a happy one.

Socrates explains to the court that he is well aware of the risks of telling the truth. The person who opposes wrongs and illegalities, says Socrates, pays for telling the truth about these wrongs and illegalities with his own life. So much is clear. But then, Socrates --Socrates, for whom the pursuit of truth is, as it should be for everyone, the primary purpose in life-- Socrates goes on to say that, if a person wants to save his skin

"even for a short time," this pursuit must be restricted to one's private circle and not be allowed to overflow into the vaster circles of society itself.

But how is such a thing possible?

Unless Socrates is being dangerously ironic, he, of all people, must know that every pursuit of the truth, every questioning of a lie, every attempt to bring into the light fraud, imposture and deceit, every pointing out that the Emperor is in fact naked, must, necessarily, spill over into the common ground, into the world we share with our fellow citizens. At either end of our life we are alone, in the womb and in the grave, but the space in-between is a common realm in which rights and responsibilities are defined by each of our neighbours' rights and responsibilities, and every perjury, every falsehood, every attempt to conceal the truth damages everyone in that realm -- including, in the final account, the liar himself. After Socrates was forced to put an end to his life, the Athenians repented, closed the wrestling yards and the gymnasia in sign of mourning, banished two of the accusers from Athens and condemned the third one to death.

As Socrates knew well, every society defines itself in two ways: through what it allows and through what it forbids, through that which it includes and recognizes as its own image, and through that which it excludes, ignores and denies. And every citizen living within the walls of a society has a double obligation: an obligation to obey those common inclusions and exclusions (that is to say, society's laws) and an obligation to his or her own self. A living society must have, within its fabric, the means to allow every citizen the performance of this double duty: both to obey and to question, both to comply and to change society's laws. A society in which citizens are allowed one but not the other (a dictatorship or an anarchic state) is a society that doesn't trust its own tenets and is therefore threatened with extinction. Human beings require the common protection of the law, together with the freedom to voice their thoughts and testimonies and doubts, as much as they need the freedom to breathe. This is of the essence.

Perhaps it may be easier to understand Socrates' words if we listen for their echo in a distant and strange disciple of his, a certain gentleman of La Mancha who, obsessed by his reading of novels of chivalry, sets out one day to be a knight errant and to carry out the precepts of valour, honour and righteousness "for the increase of his honour and as service to his society." Like Socrates, Don Quixote knows of the risks in attempting to prevent "a great many wrongs and illegalities from taking place in the state to which he belongs." And for this, Don Quixote is deemed a madman.

But what precisely is his madness? Don Quixote sees windmills as giants and sheep as warriors, and has faith in enchanters and flying horses, but in the midst of all this fantasy, he believes in something as solid as the earth he treads: the obligatory need for justice. Don Quixote's storybook visions are circumstantial imaginations, ways of coping with the drabness of reality. But his driving passion, his unshakeable conviction, is that orphans must be helped and widows rescued -- even if, as a consequence of his actions, both the saviour and the victim's fates become worse. This is the great paradox that Cervantes wants us to face: justice is necessary even if the world remains unjust. Evil deeds must not be allowed to go unchallenged even if other deeds, of greater evil perhaps, will follow. Jorge Luis Borges put it this way, in the mouth of one of his most fearful characters: "Let Heaven exist, even if my place is in Hell."

In this pursuit of justice (which is the human way of seeking out truth) Don Quixote acts individually. Never, in his many adventures, does he lust for a position of power, a seat of government, a role in the world of politics. It is Sancho, his squire, who is offered (in the tradition of the novels of chivalry) the lordship of a realm as reward for his efforts. And it is Sancho to whom Don Quixote offers advice about public affairs: dress the part, know something of both arms and letters, show humility, avoid passion in judgment. Between irony and wisdom, Don Quixote's recommendations define the role of the head of state -- a role to which, very clearly, he himself does not aspire.

Towards the end of all the adventures, returning home with Sancho, after having been tortured and mocked by dukes and duchesses, Don Quixote has this to say to his native village: "Open your arms and welcome your son, Don Quixote, who though vanquished by a stranger's hand, returns the victor of himself; and that, as has often been told, is the greatest victory that can be desired." And here is perhaps part of the answer to my question. Maybe this is what Socrates meant when he said that "the true champion of justice, if he intends to survive even for a short time, must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone." Not to seek public victory or praise, but merely a private victory over oneself, an honourable role in the intimate sphere, vanquishing the cowardly impulse to close one's eyes to injustice and to remain silent about society's wrongdoings.

This is Don Quixote's underlying concern: not to ignore society's atrocities, not to allow those in power to bear false witness, and, above all, to chronicle the things that happen. And if, to get to the truth, Don Quixote must retell reality in his own literary vocabulary, so be it. Better to see windmills as giants than to deny the existence of windmills absolutely. Fiction, in Cervantes' case, is the way of telling the truth when Spain had decided to rebuild its own history on a lie, the lie of a pure, uncontaminated Christian kingdom, barely a century after the expulsion of the Jews and the Arabs, and at the time of the banishment of all Arab and Jewish converts. For that reason, in order to denounce the fictional reality, Cervantes invents an honest fiction, and tells the reader that he is not the father but merely the stepfather of Don Quixote, and that the real author is a certain Cide Hamete Benegeli, an Arab scholar, one of the supposedly disappeared people, so that the credulous reader will believe that the book he holds in his hands is merely a translation from a tongue long banned in the realm. Fiction, Cervantes implies, must reveal the deceit of an identity in which Spanish history attempts to clothe itself, an identity cleansed of any Jewish or Arab influence, an identity that need not question or take itself to task because it is supposed to be cloaked in Christian purity. Innocent as the boy in Andersen's tale, Don Quixote points his sword at that identity and shouts: "But it is naked!"

For Cervantes, history, the faithful account of what has happened, can be "translated" in many ways in order to be better told. It can be revealed in a novel, it can purport to be the words of a mysterious Arab author, it can be told as a story of magic and violence and wonder. But however put into words, it must, in the deepest sense, be true. History, Don Quixote tells Sancho early in the book, is the mother of truth, "rival of time, storehouse of deeds, witness of the past, example and pattern of the present, a warning to all future ages." And Spain is only now learning the lesson Cervantes tried to teach it four centuries ago -- though, even today, it is unwilling to recognize its full import.

Though the existence of a Jewish and Arab Spain is, these days, for the most part acknowledged, the question of a fake national identity has come up once again in Spain's refusal to recognize the crimes of the Franco era. Unconscionably, Judge Garzon' has been denied the request to have Franco's mass graves opened and an enquiry set up into the atrocities committed by both sides, Nationals and Republicans. But, like the invention of Spain's identity in Cervantes' time, this too may perhaps one day be deemed worthy of a story.

Like Spain then and now, collectively, we find it difficult to acknowledge murky moments in our society's history. Through cowardice, through ignorance, through arrogance, and, in fewer cases, through shame, most societies have at times denied or attempted to change certain culpable events in their past. In the first half of the second millennium BC, the priests of the Temple of Shamash in Mesopotamia, faked the date on one of their newly-erected monuments in order to lend it eight more centuries of existence, thus managing to increase the royal allowance to their venerable institution. The Chinese emperor Shih Huang-ti, in 213 BC, commanded that all the books in his realm be destroyed so that history could begin with his accession. During the Third Reich, to prove that no Jewish inspiration had ever contributed to German Kultur, the Propaganda Minister Paul Joseph Goebbels proclaimed that Heinrich Heine's celebrated poem "Die Lorelei" was an ancient German ballad of anonymous authorship. Famously, Stalin ordered that Party members who had fallen from grace be deleted from official photographs so that no record of their political existence remain for future historians. Closer to our time, the Chinese Communist Party refused to acknowledge that the massacre at Tiananmen Square had ever taken place. The examples, alas, are endless.

Sometimes, the event denied concerns one single individual wished into oblivion; sometimes a millions of men, women and children deliberately and systematically murdered. In every case, the denial is a society's attempt to do the impossible, to do that which medieval theologians concluded was impossible even for God: to alter the past. Alice, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, explaining her intention to climb to the top of a hill, is interrupted by the Red Queen who says that she could show her hills "in comparison with which you'd call that a valley." "No, I shouldn't," Alice answers bravely. "A hill can't be a valley. That would be nonsense --". Indeed, that would be nonsense. Over and over again, our societies insist on such nonsense, arguing that hills are valleys, and that whatever has evidently and painfully taken place never really happened.

In the thirteenth century, the Armenian poet Hovhannès d'Erzenga, known as Blouz, wrote that "Only the true sun gives light: let us distinguish it from the untrue one." This obvious injunction is not easy to carry out. Not because, in a few cases, it is hard to distinguish truth from falsehood, the true sun from the untrue one, but because to do so would imply that a public fault has been committed, an unjustifiable deed performed, and most societies have a limited vocabulary of apology and repentance.

Perhaps because of this, because of the difficulty in uttering a collective self-reproach to purge our troubled souls, most religions have ritualized the act of contrition. The Catholic mea culpa repeated three times during confession, the Jewish Day of

Atonement in which forgiveness is asked from your friends and neighbours, the request for God's pardon uttered in the five daily Muslim prayers, are all attempts to recognize human frailty in our societies, and the terrible acts of which we are capable. These rituals pay homage to the victims, of course, but above all they offer the victimizers, if not oblivion of their sins, never oblivion, at least the chance to redeem themselves by acknowledging that they've done wrong. Words can be misused, can be forced to tell lies, to whitewash the guilty, to invent a nonexistent past in which we are told we must believe. But words can also have a curative, creative power. By allowing the misdeed to take shape first in the mouth of the victimizer and then in the ear of the victim, by transporting it from what happened to what is acknowledged to have happened, words effectively allow history to be, as Don Quixote proposed, the mother of truth.

So as not to permit unspeakable events to remain unspoken, so-called democratic societies, as secular organisations, sometimes raise monuments to commemorate their victims and to bear witness to past atrocities. However, the danger with monuments is that, unless they are somehow transformed into a living, shared experience, they become the mute carriers of those memories, so that society can discharge itself of the burden of remembrance and allow the unspeakable events to become silent once more. What has been called "the duty of memory" in a society, must be an active duty, one of forceful remembering, so that the terrible acts will not be repeated or, if they are, so that they cannot be repeated claiming ignorance of their import and of how future society will judge them. Recently, in the New York Times, the Nobel Prize winner Paul Kruger maintained that, unless Barack Obama orders an inquest into what happened during the Bush administration (and we expect that he won't) those who hold power will believe that they are above the law "because they don't face any consequences if they abuse their power." As Don Quixote would argue, most acts of injustice are committed because those responsible know that they will not be made to face the consequences. Under such circumstances (and here we return to Socrates), it is every citizen's duty "conscientiously" to try to prevent "a great many wrongs and illegalities from taking place in the state to which he belongs." And that duty includes the active duty of memory, a secular ritual of atonement in which the guilty acts of the past are put into words for all to hear.

But memory can betray us. Sometime in the 1960s, psychologists identified a phenomenon in our psyche which they called the "perseverance of memory." Often, when we learn of a fact that later proves to be untrue, the force with which that information was first received can be so great that it overrides the knowledge of the fact is untruth, and we continue to remember the fact as true in spite of being told otherwise. That is to say, the memory of a known falsehood assimilated as true perseveres in our mind and prevents the corrected information to replace it. If this is so, if we can "remember" as true what we positively know to be false, then it should not surprise us that, on a collective level, the duty of memory can become distorted and a revisionist version of the past can supplant that which historians have factually proven. In the Athenian court, Socrates can be shown to have done what he demonstrably has not done, and be condemned to death for it, and the Bush administration may, in future years, be remembered "for bringing peace to the Middle East" (as Condoleezza Rice has pronounced.) History may be the mother of truth, but it can also give birth to illegitimate children.

However, if governments can sometimes rely on this social perseverance of memory to misinform and misconstrue, they must also take into account another equally powerful perseverance: what I would call the "perseverance of truth." There is an old English saying, "Truth will out." Beyond our fantasies and our logic, beyond our invention of social realms and fairy-tales about the universe, lies the implacable reality of what is and of what has happened, and it will always eventually appear from under the innumerable layers of deceit. We can, with practice, as the White Queen says to Alice, believe "six impossible things before breakfast," but this feat of irrationality will ultimately change nothing in the relentless course of the world.

Adolf Hitler, who had much practice in such things, asked his military cabinet, shortly before the 1939 invasion of Poland: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" Hitler's rhetorical question has thousands of answers because, ever since the terrible decade in which over a million and a half Armenians were massacred by order of the Ottoman Turkish government, Don Quixotes around the world have been repeating: "Here is an unforgivable atrocity, here is an evil deed that cannot be forgotten, here is a terrible act of great injustice. You may want to believe the impossible, that the great crime never took place. But it did. And nothing you can say can undo the tragic event." From the anonymous protesters who, already in 1915, collected in America over a million dollars for the Armenian cause, to individual brave voices such as that of Hrant Dink, Hitler's question is not allowed to go unanswered. And yet those thousands of voices are not enough. Since Hitler's time, the world has condemned, and continues to condemn, the atrocities of the Third Reich, and Germany itself has recognized, and continues to recognize, those atrocities. "Yes," the Germans say, "this happened. And we repent in the name of our forefathers. And we beg forgiveness, if such a thing is possible. And we will not forget nor allow anyone to forget what happened, here, on our soil. And we will not allow this to happen again." And every time a Neo-Nazi group tries to re-invent the historical past, Germany, and the majority of Germans, say "No." This is what I mean by the perseverance of truth.

But Turkey, or at least the Turkish government, unfortunately has not yet reached that stage of recognition. In spite of those thousands of acknowledging voices around the world, a large section of Turkish society, as if attempting to lend strength to Hitler's question with an accomplice silence, still refuses to admit the historical facts: that the entire population of Anatolia, the oldest extant population in the region at the time, over a million and a half men, women and children, were exterminated between 1909 and 1918, in what the poet Carolyn Forché has called "the first modern genocide."

Hrant Dink wanted nothing more than that which every serious journalist, every honest intellectual, every self-respecting citizen wants: that the truth be recognized. His murder confirms Socrates' assertion with which I began this talk, that "no man on earth who conscientiously (...) prevents a great many wrongs and illegalities from taking place in the state to which he belongs, can possibly escape with his life." Hrant Dink must have known this, and also Socrates' corollary, that "the true champion of justice, if he intends to survive even for a short time, must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone." Such a confinement, as Dink understood and as Socrates himself knew, is impossible, because everything we do, every decision we make, every opinion we give as private citizens, has political consequences. Politics is, by definition, a

collective activity in which a few occupy the seats of power and the rest of us the remaining myriad roles. No citizen is dispensable, no voice useless in the continuing struggle to render our societies less false in their pretences and more true to themselves. "My only weapon was my sincerity," Dink wrote in his last published article. As Socrates knew all too well, sincerity is a weapon deadly in more ways than one. This was Dink's final lesson: that even though the seeker of truth may be silenced, his sincerity (from the Latin *sincerus* meaning "clean" or "pure") will eventually do away with the lie.

Alberto Manguel