

Writing the Truth Five Difficulties

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Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties. He must have the *courage* to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the *keenness* to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the *skill* to manipulate it as a weapon; the *judgment* to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the *cunning* to spread the truth among such persons. These are formidable problems for writers living under Fascism, but they exist also for those writers who have fled or been exiled; they exist even for writers working in countries where civil liberty prevails.

1 The Courage to Write the Truth

It seems obvious that whoever writes should write the truth in the sense that he ought not to suppress or conceal truth or write something deliberately untrue. He ought not to cringe before the powerful, nor betray the weak. It is, of course, very hard not to cringe before the powerful, and it is highly advantageous to betray the weak. To displease the possessors means to become one of the dispossessed. To renounce payment for work may be the equivalent of giving up the work, and to decline fame when it is offered by the mighty may mean to decline it forever. This takes courage.

Times of extreme oppression are usually times when there is much talk about high and lofty matters. At such times it takes courage to write of low and ignoble matters such as food and shelter for workers; it takes courage when everyone else is ranting about the vital importance of sacrifice. When all sorts of honors are showered upon the peasants it takes courage to speak of machines and good stock feeds which would lighten their honorable labor. When every radio station is blaring that a man without knowledge or education is better than one who has studied, it takes courage to ask: better for whom? When all the talk is of perfect and imperfect races, it takes courage to ask whether it not hunger and ignorance and war that produce deformities.

And it also takes courage to tell the truth about oneself, about one's own defeat. Many of the persecuted lose their capacity for seeing their own mistakes. It seems to them that the persecution itself is the greatest injustice. The persecutors are wicked simply because they persecute; the persecuted suffer because of their goodness. But this goodness has been beaten, defeated, suppressed; it was therefore a weak goodness, a bad, indefensible, unreliable goodness. For it will not do to grant that goodness must be weak as rain must be wet. *It takes courage to say that the good were defeated not because they were good, but because they were weak.*

Naturally, in the struggle with falsehood we must write the truth, and this truth must not be a lofty and ambiguous generality. When it is said of someone, "He spoke the truth," this implies that some people or many people or least one person said something unlike the truth—a lie or a generality—but *he* spoke the truth, he said something practical, factual, undeniable, something to the point.

It takes little courage to mutter a general complaint, in a part of the world where complaining is still permitted, about the wickedness of the world and the triumph of barbarism, or to cry boldly that the victory of the human spirit is assured. There are many who pretend that cannons are aimed at them when in reality they are the target merely of opera glasses. They shout their generalized demands to a world of friends and harmless persons. They insist upon a generalized justice for which they have never done anything; they ask for generalized freedom and demand a share of the booty which they have long since enjoyed. They think that truth is only what sounds nice. If truth should prove to be something statistical, dry, or factual, something difficult to find and requiring study, they do not recognize it as

truth; it does not intoxicate them. They possess only the external demeanor of truth-tellers. The trouble with them is: *they do not know the truth.*

2 The Keeness to Recognize the Truth

Since it is hard to write the truth because truth is everywhere suppressed, it seems to most people to be a question of character whether the truth is written or not written. They believe that courage alone suffices. They forget the second obstacle: the difficulty of *finding* the truth. It is impossible to assert that the truth is easily ascertained.

First of all we strike trouble in determining *what* truth is worth the telling. For example, before the eyes of the whole world one great civilized nation after the other falls into barbarism. Moreover, everyone knows that the domestic war which is being waged by the most ghastly methods can at any moment be converted into a foreign war which may well leave our continent a heap of ruins. This, undoubtedly, is one truth, but there are others. Thus, for example, it is not untrue that chairs have seats and that rain falls downward. Many poets write truths of this sort. They are like a painter adorning the walls of a sinking ship with a still life. Our first difficulty does not trouble them and their consciences are clear. Those in power cannot corrupt them, but neither are they disturbed by the cries of the oppressed; they go on painting. The senselessness of their behavior engenders in them a "profound" pessimism which they sell at good prices; yet such pessimism would be more fitting in one who observes these masters and their sales. At the same time it is not easy to realize that their truths are truths about chairs or rain; they usually sound like truths about important things. But on closer examination it is possible to see that they say merely: a chair is a chair; and: no one can prevent the rain from falling down.

They do not discover the truths that are worth writing about. On the other hand, there are some who deal only with the most urgent tasks, who embrace poverty and do not fear rulers, and who nevertheless cannot find the truth. These lack knowledge. They are full of ancient superstitions, with notorious prejudices that in bygone days were often put into beautiful words. The world is too complicated for them; they do not know the facts; they do not perceive relationships. In addition to temperament, knowledge, which can be acquired, and methods, which can be learned, are needed. What is necessary for all writers in this age of perplexity and lightening change is a knowledge of the materialistic dialectic of economy and history. This knowledge can be acquired from books and from practical instruction, if the necessary diligence is applied. Many truths can be discovered in simpler fashion, or at least portions of truths, or facts that lead to the discovery of truths. Method is good in all inquiry, but it is possible to make discoveries without using any method—indeed, even without inquiry. But by such a casual procedure one does not come to the kind of presentation of truth which will enable men to act on the basis of that presentations. People who merely record little facts are not able to arrange the things of the world so that they can be easily controlled. Yet truth has this function alone and no other. Such people cannot cope with the requirement that they write the truth.

If a person is ready to write the truth and able to recognize it, there remain three more difficulties.

3 The Skill to Manipulate the Truth as a Weapon

The truth must be spoken with a view to the results it will produce in the sphere of action. As a specimen of a truth from which no results, or the wrong ones, follow, we can cite the widespread view that bad conditions prevail in a number of countries as a result of barbarism. In this view, Fascism is a wave of barbarism which has descended upon some countries with the elemental force of a natural phenomenon.

According to this view, Fascism is a new, third power beside (and above) capitalism and socialism; not only the socialist movement but capitalism as well might have survived without the intervention of Fascism. And so on. This is, of course, a Fascist claim; to accede to it is a capitulation to Fascism. Fascism is a historic phase of capitalism; in this sense it is something new and at the same time old. In Fascist countries capitalism continues to exist, but only in the form of Fascism; and *Fascism can be combated as capitalism alone, as the nakedest, most shameless, most oppressive, and most treacherous form of capitalism.*

But how can anyone tell the truth about Fascism, unless he is willing to speak out against capitalism, which brings it forth? What will be the practical results of such truth?

Those who are against Fascism without being against capitalism, who lament over the barbarism that comes out of barbarism, are like people who wish to eat their veal without slaughtering the calf. They are willing to eat the calf, but they dislike the sight of blood. They are easily satisfied if the butcher washes his hands before weighing the meat. They are not against the property relations which engender barbarism; they are only against barbarism itself. They raise their voices against barbarism, and they do so in countries where precisely the same property relations prevail, but where the butchers wash their hands before weighing the meat.

Outcries against barbarous measures may be effective as long as the listeners believe that such measures are out of the question in their own countries. Certain countries are still able to maintain their property relations by methods that appear less violent than those used in other countries. Democracy still serves in these countries to achieve the results for which violence is needed in others, namely, to guarantee private ownership of the means of production. The private monopoly of factories, mines, and land creates barbarous conditions everywhere, but in some places these conditions do not so forcibly strike the eye. Barbarism strikes the eye only when it happens that monopoly can be protected only by open violence.

Some countries, which do not yet find it necessary to defend their barbarous monopolies by dispensing with the formal guarantees of a constitutional state, as well as with such amenities as art, philosophy, and literature, are particularly eager to listen to visitors who abuse their native lands because those amenities are denied there. They gladly listen because they hope to derive from what they hear advantages in future wars. Shall we say that they have recognized the truth who, for example, loudly demand an unrelenting struggle against Germany "because that country is now the true home of Evil in our day, the partner of hell, the abode of the Antichrist"? We should rather say that these are foolish and dangerous people. For the conclusion to be drawn from this nonsense is that since poison gas and bombs do not pick out the guilty, Germany must be exterminated—the whole country and all its people.

The man who does not know the truth expresses himself in lofty, general, and imprecise terms. He shouts about "the" German, he complains about Evil in general, and whoever hears him cannot make out what to do. Shall he decide not to be a German? Will hell vanish if he himself is good? The silly talk about the barbarism that comes out of barbarism is also of this kind. The source of barbarism is barbarism, and it is combated by culture, which comes from education. All this is put in general terms; it is not meant to be a guide to action and is in reality addressed to no one.

Such vague descriptions point to only a few links in the chain of causes. Their obscurantism conceals the real forces making for disaster. If light be thrown on the matter it promptly appears that disasters are caused by certain men. For we live in a time when the fate of man is determined by men.

Fascism is not a natural disaster which can be understood simply in terms of "human nature." But even when we are dealing with natural catastrophes, there are ways to portray them which are worthy of human beings because they appeal to man's fighting spirit.

After a great earthquake that destroyed Yokohama, many American magazines published photographs showing a heap of ruins. The captions read: STEEL STOOD. And, to be sure, though one might see only ruins at first glance, the eye swiftly discerned, after noting the caption, that a few tall buildings had remained standing. Among the multitudinous descriptions that can be given of an earthquake, those drawn up by construction engineers concerning the shifts in the ground, the force of stresses, the best developed, etc., are of the greatest importance, for they lead to future construction which will withstand earthquakes. If anyone wishes to describe Fascism and war, great disasters which are not natural catastrophes, he must do so in terms of a practical truth. He must show that these disasters are launched by the possessing classes to control the vast numbers of workers who do not own the means of production.

If one wishes successfully to write the truth about evil conditions, one must write it so that its avertible causes can be identified. If the preventable causes can be identified, the evil conditions can be fought.

4 The Judgment to Select Those in Whose Hands the Truth Will Be Effective

The century-old custom of trade in critical and descriptive writing and the fact that the writer has been relieved of concern for the destination of what he has written have caused him to labor under a false impression. He believes that his customer or employer, the middleman, passes on what he has written

to everyone. The writer thinks: I have spoken and those who wish to hear will hear me. In reality he has spoken and those who are able to *pay* hear him. A great deal, though still too little, has been said about his; I merely want to emphasize that “writing for someone” has been transformed into merely “writing.” But the truth cannot merely be written; it must be written *for someone*, someone who can do something with it. The process of recognizing truth is the same for writers and readers. In order to say good things, one’s hearing must be good and one must hear good things. The truth must be spoke deliberately and listened to deliberately. And for us writers it is important to whom we tell the truth and who tells it to us.

We must tell the truth about evil conditions to those for whom the conditions are worst, and we must also learn the truth from them. We must address not only people who hold certain views, but people who, because of their situation, should hold these views. And the audience is continually changing. Even the hangmen can be addressed when the payment for hanging stops, or when the work becomes too dangerous. The Bavarian peasants were against every kind of revolution, but when the war went on too long and the sons who came home found no room on their farms, it was possible to win them over to revolution.

It is important for the writer to strike the true note of truth. Ordinarily, what we hear is a very gentle, melancholy tone, the tone of people who would not hurt a fly. Hearing this one, the wretched become more wretched. Those who use it may not be foes, but they are certainly not allies. The truth is belligerent; it strikes out not only against falsehood, but against particular people who spread falsehood.

5 The Cunning to Spread the Truth Among the Many

Many people, proud that they possess the courage necessary for the truth, happy that they have succeeded in finding it, perhaps fatigued by the labor necessary to put it into workable form and impatient that it should be grasped by those whose interests they are espousing, consider it superfluous to apply any special cunning in spreading the truth. For this reason they often sacrifice the whole effectiveness of their work. At all times cunning has been employed to spread the truth, whenever truth was suppressed or concealed. Confucius falsified an old, patriotic historical calendar. He changed certain words. Where the calendar read “The ruler of Hun had the philosopher Wan killed because he said so and so,” Confucius replaced *killed* by *murdered*. If the calendar said that tyrant so and so *died by assassination*, he substituted *was executed*. In this manner Confucius opened the way for a fresh interpretation of history.

In our times anyone who says *population* in place of *people* or *race*, and *privately owned land* in place of *soil*, is by that simple act withdrawing his support from a great many lies. He is taking away from these words their rotten, mystical implications. The word *people* (*Volk*) implies a certain unity and certain common interests; it should therefore be used only when we are speaking of a number of peoples, for then alone is anything like community of interest conceivable. The population of a given territory may have a good many different and even opposed interests—and this is a truth that is being suppressed. In like manner, whoever speaks of soil and describes vividly the effect of plowed fields upon nose and eyes, stressing the smell and the color of earth, is supporting the rulers’ lies. For the fertility of the soil is not the question, nor men’s love for the soil, nor their industry in working it; what is of prime importance is the price of grain and the price of labor. Those who extract profits from the soil are not the same people who extract grain from it, and the earthy smell of a turned furrow is unknown on the produce exchanges. The latter have another smell entirely. *Privately owned land* is the right expressing; it affords less opportunity for deception.

Where oppression exists, the word *obedience* should be employed instead of *discipline*, for discipline can be self-imposed and therefore has something noble in its character that obedience lacks. And a better word than *honor* is *human dignity*; the latter tends to keep the individual in mind. We all know very well what sort of scoundrels thrust themselves forward, clamoring to defend the honor of a people. And how generously they distribute honors to the starvelings who feed them. Confucius’ sort of cunning is still valid today. Thomas Moore in his *Utopia* described a country in which just conditions prevailed. It was a country very different from the England in which he lived, but it resembled that England very closely, except for the conditions of life.

Lenin wished to describe exploitation and oppression on Sakhalin Island, but it was necessary for him to beware of the Czarist police. In place of Russia he put Japan, and in place of Sakhalin, Korea. The methods of the Japanese bourgeoisie reminded all his readers of the Russian bourgeoisie and Sakhalin,

but the pamphlet was not blamed because Russia was hostile to Japan. Many things that cannot be said in Germany about Germany can be said about Austria.

There are many cunning devices by which a suspicious State can be hoodwinked.

Voltaire combated the Church doctrine of miracles by writing a gallant poem about the Maid of Orleans. He described the miracles that undoubtedly must have taken place in order that Joan of Arc should remain a virgin in the midst of an army of men, a court of aristocrats, and a host of monks. By the elegance of his style, and by describing erotic adventures such as characterized the luxurious life of the ruling class, he threw discredit upon a religion which provided them with the means to pursue a loose life. He even made it possible for his works, in illegal ways, to reach those for whom they were intended. Those among his readers who held power promoted or tolerated the spread of his writings. By so doing, they were withdrawing support from the police who defended their own pleasures. Another example: the great Lucretius expressly says that one of the chief encouragements to the spread of Epicurian atheism was the beauty of his verses.

It is indeed the case that the high literary level of a given statement can afford it protection. Often, however, it also arouses suspicion. In such case it may be necessary to lower it deliberately. This happens, for example, when descriptions of evil conditions are inconspicuously smuggled into the despised form of a detective story. Such descriptions would justify a detective story. The great Shakespeare deliberately lowered the level of his work for reasons of far less importance. In the scene in which Coriolanus' mother confronts her son, who is departing for his native city, Shakespeare deliberately makes her speech to the son very weak. It was inopportune for Shakespeare to have Coriolanus restrained by good reasons from carrying out his plan; it was necessary to have him yield to old habit with a certain sluggishness.

Shakespeare also provides a model of cunning utilized in the spread of truth: this is Antony's speech over Caesar's body. Antony continually emphasizes that Brutus is an honorable man, but he also describes the deed, and this description of the deed is more impressive than the description of the doer. The orator thus permits himself to be overwhelmed by the facts; he lets them speak for themselves.

An Egyptian poet who lived four thousand years ago employed a similar method. That was a time of great class struggles. The class that had hitherto ruled was defending itself with difficulty against its great opponent, that part of the population which had hitherto served it. In the poem a wise man appears at the ruler's court and calls for struggle against the internal enemy. He presents a long and impressive description of the disorders that have arisen from the uprising of the lower classes. This description reads as follows:

So it is: the nobles lament and the servants rejoice. Every city says: Let us drive the strong from out of our midst. The offices are broken open and the documents removed. The slaves are becoming masters.

So it is: the son of a well-born man can no longer be recognized. The mistress's child becomes her slave girl's son.

So it is: The burghers have been bound to the millstones. Those who never saw the day have gone out into the light.

So it is: The ebony poor boxes are being broken up; the noble sesban wood is cut up into beds.

Behold, the capital city has collapsed in an hour.

Behold, the poor of the land have become rich.

Behold, he who had not bread now possesses a barn; his granary is filled with the possessions of another.

Behold, it is good for a man when he may eat his food.

Behold, he who had no corn now possesses barns; those who accepted the largesse of corn now distribute it.

Behold, he who had not a yoke of oxen now possesses herds; he who could not obtain beasts of burden now possesses herds of neat cattle.

Behold, he who could build no hut for himself now possesses four strong walls.

Behold, the ministers seek shelter in the granary, and he who was scarcely permitted to sleep atop the wall now possesses a bed.

Behold, he who could not build himself a rowboat now possesses ships; when their owner looks upon the ships, he finds they are no longer his.

Behold, those who had clothes are now dressed in rags and he who wove nothing for himself now possesses the finest linen.

The rich man goes thirsty to bed, and he who once begged him for lees now has strong beer.

Behold, he who understood nothing of music now owns a harp; he to whom no one sang now praises the music.

Behold, he who slept alone for lack of a wife, now has women; those who looked at their faces in the water now possess mirrors.

Behold, the highest in the land run about without finding employment. Nothing is reported to the great any longer. He who once was a messenger now sends forth others to carry his messages. . .

Behold five men whom their master sent out. They say: go forth yourself; we have arrived.

It is significant that this is the description of a kind of disorder that must seem very desirable to the oppressed. And yet the poet's intention is not transparent. He expressly condemns these conditions, though he condemns them poorly. . .

Jonathan Swift, in his famous pamphlet, suggested that the land could be restored to prosperity by slaughtering the children of the poor and selling them for meat. He presented exact calculations showing what economies could be effected if the governing classes stopped at nothing.

Swift feigned innocence. He defended a way of thinking which he hated intensely with a great deal of ardor and thoroughness, taking as his theme a question that plainly exposed to everyone the cruelty of that way of thinking. Anyone could be cleverer than Swift, or at any rate more humane—especially those who had hitherto not troubled to consider what were the logical conclusions of the views they held.

Propaganda that stimulates thinking, in no matter what field, is useful to the cause of the oppressed. Such propaganda is very much needed. Under governments which serve to promote exploitation, thought is considered base.

Anything that serves those who are oppressed is considered base. It is base to be constantly concerned about getting enough to eat; it is base to reject honors offered to the defenders of a country in which those defenders go hungry; base to doubt the Leader when his leadership leads to misfortunes; base to be reluctant to do work that does not feed the worker; base to revolt against the compulsion to commit senseless acts; base to be indifferent to a family which can no longer be helped by any amount of concern. The starving are reviled as voracious wolves who have nothing to defend; those who doubt their oppressors are accused of doubting their own strength; those who demand pay for their labor are denounced as idlers. Under such governments thinking in general is considered base and falls into disrepute. Thinking is no longer taught anywhere, and wherever it does emerge, it is persecuted.

Nevertheless, certain fields always exist in which it is possible to call attention to triumphs of thought without fear of punishment. These are the fields in which the dictatorships have need of thinking. For example, it is possible to refer to the triumphs of thought in fields of military science and technology. Even such matters as stretching wool supplies by proper organization, or inventing ersatz materials, require thinking. Adulteration of foods, training the youth for war—all such things require thinking; and in reference to such matters the process of thought can be described. Praise of war, the automatic goal of such thinking, can be cunningly avoided, and in this way the thought that arises from the question of how a war can best be waged can be made to lead to another question—whether the war has any sense. Thought can then be applied to the further question: how can a senseless war be averted?

Naturally, this question can scarcely be asked openly. Such being the case, cannot the thinking we have stimulated be made use of? That is, can it be framed so that it leads to action? It can.

In order that the oppression of one (the larger) part of the population by another (the smaller) part should continue in such a time as ours, a certain attitude of the population is necessary, and this attitude must pervade all fields. A discovery in the field of zoology, like that of the Englishman Darwin, might suddenly endanger exploitation. And yet, for a time the Church alone was alarmed; the people noticed nothing amiss. The researches of physicists in recent years have led to consequences in the field of logic which might well endanger a number of the dogmas that keep oppression going. Hegel, the philosopher of the Prussian State, who dealt with complex investigations in the field of logic, suggested to Marx and Lenin, the classic exponents of the proletarian revolution, methods of inestimable value.

The development of the sciences is interrelated, but uneven, and the State is never able to keep its eye on everything. The advance guard of truth can select battle positions which are relatively unwatched.

What counts is that the right sort of thinking be taught, a kind of thinking that investigates the transitory and changeable aspect of all things and processes. Rulers have an intense dislike for significant changes. They would like to see everything remain the same—for a thousand years, if possible. They would love it if sun and moon stood still. Then no one would grow hungry any more, no one would want his supper. When the rulers have fired a shot, they do not want the enemy to be able to shoot; theirs must be the last shot. A way of thinking that stresses change is a good way to encourage the oppressed.

Another idea with which the victors can be confronted is that in everything and in every condition, a contradiction appears and grows. Such a view (that of dialectics, of the doctrine that all things flow and change) can be inculcated in realms that for a time escape the notice of the rulers. It can be employed in biology or chemistry, for example. But it can also be indicated by describing the fate of a family, and here too it need not arouse too much attention. The dependence of everything upon many factors which are constantly changing is an idea dangerous to dictators, and this idea can appear in many guises without giving the police anything to put their finger on. A complete description of all the processes and circumstances encountered by a man who opens a tobacco shop can strike a blow against dictatorship. Anyone who reflects upon this will soon see why. Governments which lead the masses into misery must guard against the masses' thinking about government while they are miserable. Such governments talk a great deal about Fate. It is Fate, not they, which is to blame for all distress. Anyone who investigates the cause of the distress is arrested before he hits on the fact that the government is to blame. But it is possible to offer a general opposition to all this nonsense about Fate; it can be shown that Man's Fate is made by men.

This is another thing that can be done in various ways. For example, one might tell the story of a peasant farm—a farm in Iceland, let us say. The whole village is talking about the curse that hovers over this farm. One peasant woman threw herself down a well; the peasant owner hanged himself. One day a marriage takes place between the peasant's son and a girl whose dowry is several acres of good land. The curse seems to lift from the farm. The village is divided in its judgment of the cause of this fortunate turn of events. Some ascribe it to the sunny disposition of the peasant's young son, others to the new fields which the young wife added to the farm, and which have now made it large enough to provide a livelihood.

But even in a poem which simply describes a landscape something can be achieved, if the things created by men are incorporated into the landscape.

Cunning is necessary to spread the truth.

Summary

The great truth of our time is that our continent is giving way to barbarism because private ownership of the means of production is being maintained by violence. Merely to recognize this truth is not sufficient, but should it not be recognized, no other truth of importance can be discovered. Of what use is it to write something courageous which shows that the condition into which we are falling is barbarous (which is true) if it is not clear why we are falling into this condition? We must say that torture is used in order to preserve property relations. To be sure, when we say this we lose a great many friends who are against torture only because they think property relations can be upheld without torture, which is untrue.

We must tell the truth about the barbarous conditions in our country in order that the thing should be done which will put an end to them—the thing, namely, which will change property relations.

Furthermore, we must tell this truth to those who suffer most from existing property relations and who have the greatest interest in their being changed—the workers and those whom we can induce to be their allies because they too have really no control of the means of production even if they do share in the profits.

And we must proceed cunningly.

All these five difficulties must be overcome at one and the same time, for we cannot discover the truth about barbarous conditions without thinking of those who suffer from them; cannot proceed unless we shake off every trace of cowardice; and when we seek to discern the true state of affairs in regard to those who are ready to use the knowledge we give them, we must also consider the necessity of offering them the truth in such a manner that it will be a weapon in their hands, and at the same time we must do it so cunningly that the enemy will not discover and hinder our offer of the truth.

That is what is required of a writer when he is asked to write the truth.