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**WRITING IN
SOCIETY**



The Tenses of Imagination



Imagination has a history. There are changing and conflicting interpretations of what it is and of its value. Imagination also has a structure, at once grammatical and historical, in the tenses of past, present and future.

Commonsense appears to predicate that it is bad to lack imagination but almost as bad to have or use it too much. This follows from the complex history of the idea. The negative senses are strong and early in English: 'full of imagination, of dreads' (1390); 'conjecture and ymaginacion' (1460). This is the idea of a mental conception of something not present to the senses, but there was always uncertainty whether this should be valued as vision or dismissed as fantasy. The Latin root word had at first a simple physical sense, the making of images or likenesses; it is linguistically related to the idea of 'imitating'. It developed a later sense of picturing things to oneself, and it is there that the double judgment starts. As in English in 1576: 'they accounted his undoubted divinations madde imaginations'. Or as in the lines of *Midsummer Night's Dream*:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.

One sees devils, the next sees beauty where there is none, the next 'gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name'. This last sense of 'creative imagination' has come through very strongly. It is now one of the two main positive senses, the other being connected with a capacity for sympathy and understanding in the ability to 'imagine', to 'realize', someone's else situation. Yet in context the 'strong imagination' has 'tricks', summoning but often mistaking the objects of joy or fear.

The ambiguous valuation has persisted, in spite of attempts on the one hand to distinguish and distance 'imagination' from mere 'fancy' and on the other hand to distinguish both from 'reality' and 'facts'. 'Fabricating images without any foundation in reality is distinguished by the name of imagination', Kames wrote in 1762. 'Imagination,' Darwin wrote in 1871, 'is one of the highest prerogatives of Man. By this faculty he unites, independently of the will, former images and ideas, and thus creates brilliant and novel results.' But 'facts and not imagination', almost everyone seemed to say, if the occasion suited.

It is not surprising that so powerful and universal a process should have been so variously interpreted. Moreover, there is no simple way of resolving the ambiguity: much that is valuable has been imagined, and much that is worthless and dangerous. Yet at a different level it may be possible to make some different distinctions. In the course of my own work I have often been struck by the varying tenses of imagination. The sense of imagination as working on the past to create some new present is familiar in Darwin's concept and more widely, over a range from associationist psychology to psychoanalysis. The apparently opposite grammatical sense, rooted in ideas of divination but also given different and more rational bases, turns imagination towards the future, towards foreseeing what will or could happen. At the same time one of the strong current positive senses is essentially involved with the present: having enough imagination to understand what it is like to be in some other contemporary condition: bereaved, unemployed, insane.

These are everyday uses and are all important. But in the processes of writing, the considerations and then the actual practices seem to me to be different, and they are different also according to whether the directive tense of the writing is past, present or future. Writers have related in varying ways to the everyday definitions: to the processes of combining images and ideas to create something brilliant and novel; to the process of imagining, down to fine detail, what could happen, given this selection of characters and circumstances; and to the processes of empathy, to be able to write of a condition not directly experienced. All these are involved in different kinds of writing, but there is also a major conflict of ideas, in the long argument about whether imagination, in any of these kinds, produces or can produce things more real than what is ordinarily observable, or

whether these are specific processes for 'realizing'—embodying in communicable form—what is already, at other levels, undoubtedly real. There is also the popular bypassing of this problem in the idea that imagination creates autonomous objects of art, which have their own rather than some other reality.

I have thought about these problems, in theory and in practice, but the problems of actual work seem to me quite different. I can give examples only from my own writing, though I think—or imagine—that I notice them also in the work of others. They would not be problems of the same kind if I could believe, like most of my contemporaries, that I am sitting here alone doing the work. I am in fact physically alone when I am writing, and I do not believe, taking it all in all, that my work has been less individual, in that defining and valuing sense, than that of others. Yet whenever I write I am aware of a society and of a language which I know are vastly larger than myself: not simply 'out there', in a world of others, but here, in what I am engaged in doing: composing and relating. And if this is so at what can be seen as one end of the process, it seems to be equally true at the other: what is usually defined as what we are 'writing about'. Many writers talk of researching their fiction, not only for historical novels but for contemporary stories and plays. Even tax inspectors will sometimes make an allowance for travel to get what they nicely call 'copy'. I can't be sure, but while I have often visited places and people and asked questions, and also looked things up, this has usually seemed quite separate from writing. Even the ideas and experiences you think you are taking to the blank page come out differently, again and again, as you go through the actual practice, which is one of intense and locally isolated concentration and yet, at the same time, as I have experienced it, a condition of active presence—assisting and resisting—of the wider forces of a language and a society.

I have tried to understand this after the work has been done. For example my 'Welsh Trilogy'—*Border Country*, *Second Generation* and *The Fight for Manod*—has a simple structure of past, present and future. This covers the actual periods of the action; a succession of fathers and sons; even the forms of transport that are among the most evident social relations. Yet I could not get *Border Country* right until it was more than the past—the period of my childhood. I had to make that past present in the fully independent and contem-

porary figure of a father: in fact, as it turned out, two fathers, to make an inherited choice of directions actual. But then this was eventually accessible because it was a lived past. For the sequence during the General Strike I could go to my father's direct memories and to the documents he had kept. Yet I had then to invent episodes which activated the sequence, as distinct from what can happen in memories—especially prepared memories, *memoirs*—when what is there is the summary product. There is then also the process—obvious but quite hard in practice—of seeing this happening to a young man rather than to the old man who is telling you about it. Yet still, while the voice is there, the past has this living connection.

It is proving very different in the trilogy I am now writing, on a vastly greater timescale, following a place and its peoples through very long changes: what I think of as historical rather than as period novel-writing. Its only living connections are the physical presence of the mountains in which and under which so many different kinds of life have been lived, and the physical inheritors of all these lives, who are however *not* historically aware of them, whose memories are recent and whose projections, beyond those memories, are usually (not through their fault; it is what has passed for education) vague and wrong. My wife and I have done long research for these novels: research in archaeology and history and in exploration. It has often proved possible to find a real and surprising base: a different physical landscape, different and yet precise kinds of work and living.

Yet what is then involved in making people move and speak on that base—people 'like ourselves' when the point is so often that they are at once very like and very unlike, and differently so as the real history of the place develops: is that imagination? I suppose it must be; it certainly feels like it, not least in its practical surprises, in what has actually got onto the page. Yet much of the time it is as if prolonged thinking about what I have called the base, especially when this is done, far away from books, on the actual ground, however altered, where it all happened, is not imagination in that inventive sense at all, though of course one is literally inventing. It feels, rather, like some kind of contact, and not irrationally so; like some authentic information, stressing every syllable of that word. Then later of course you have to check up and see if you got the discoverable facts right or at least not wrong: facts that are the condition but

only the condition of these other lives that you think you have begun to feel move.

I was recently trying to compare this with what at first sight seems most different from it: the experience of writing a consciously contemporary novel, begun in Oxford on a city much like Oxford, with its places and kinds of work and kinds of people all around me. 'Kinds of people': that was where I hesitated and then took the experience across. For if you read the novel *Second Generation* back, from the finished product—and this is the normal procedure for most people who write about what they call imaginative works—you can see a fairly clear set of social relationships, positive and negative, between the car factory and the university in a single city, and these relationships as embodied in people who, however sharply individualized, are social figures of that set of relationships: liberal don and working-class graduate student; shop steward and his politically and intellectually ambitious wife; the non-political home-centred worker and his family-centred wife. I am forcing myself to describe them in these abstract ways, as a way of facing the problem that this is how they might or even should be construed when in conscious practice nothing of that kind of thinking happened at all. Of course I was strongly aware of what I have been calling the base: the strong social, economic and cultural contrasts between the people around the car factory and the people around the university. At an important level I sought to inform myself more fully about the kinds of life being lived: visiting the car factory and talking to people who worked there as well as more consciously observing the university and political circles in which I had a more connected presence. But still there, in an actual city and in an immediate present, this base was only fully relevant at an early and then at a late stage of the writing: preparation and checking, one might say, though each process is more complicated than that. Indeed it was not so very different, in that available actuality, from the later situation in a much more distant, relatively unknown past. But then how can this be so?

I can say only that what seems to happen is the emergence of a structure of feeling. This is a phrase I have used in analysing works written by others, when I know little or nothing of their making but only what has been made. It is a difficult phrase and idea, but it comes much nearer the experience than any other I know. For I remember being preoccupied, before either the car factory or the

university was there as material for writing, with that extension of the father-son relationship which comes through as a movement of generations. I was engaged by the experience which I once tried to describe as having, simultaneously, a loved physical father and a quite different 'social father', who in a time of exceptional social and especially educational mobility was taking on many of a real father's functions: passing on knowledge and experience and judgments and values in this differently constituted and discontinuous social situation. Father and son, tutor and student: the relationships are in different dimensions but both, in these circumstances, are real and can become confused.

The simpler structure of feeling of *Border Country*, within a relatively more stable world which had nevertheless been brought to a point of radical choice of values and ways to live, was at once connected and suddenly much more complicated, and the complication soon settled in the figure of the mother: intellectually ambitious but without her son's apparently defined place and role. That mother, necessarily, invoked another mother, so that Kate and Myra were there with Harold and Robert Lane and Arthur Dean. And then what happened was what writers often describe, that certain characters and situations were being strongly felt, and the base which was there both before and after them was where they lived rather than where they were lived from.

Perhaps that has to happen, if the people are to come through, but I am not persuaded by some reductive accounts of the process, in which persons, 'individuals', simply materialize, in a creative alchemy, any more than I am persuaded by the theoretically opposite reductive accounts, in which the writer reads the real structure of the society and then sets figures to it: types who are then personalized. What I have called the structure of feeling seems to me different from either kind of account. It is strongly felt from the beginning, in the way that important actual relationships are felt, but also it is a structure and this, I believe, is a particular kind of response to the real shape of a social order: not so much as it can be documented—though it ought never, I think, to contradict the documentation—but as it is in some integrated way apprehended, without any prior separation of private and public or individual and social experience.

Moreover, so far as I can understand it, this process is not distillation or novel association; it is a formation, an active formation,

that you feel your way into, feel informing you, so that in general and in detail it is not very like the usual idea of imagination—'imagine if...', 'imagine that...'—but seems more like a kind of recognition, a connection with something fully knowable but not yet known.

There must, all the same, be a radical difference in how this happens as it relates on the one hand to societies in which you are living and then to other societies which are at some significant difference in time. I have known this difference, in obvious ways, in trying to approach a kind of life in which, for example, the land was not known and named but was being explored, or in which very different kinds of primary relationship were decisive: the kind of hunting group or family, for example, in which people were close and loving but where the need to abandon a crippled boy or to be pressed, by custom and scarcity, to female infanticide had to be felt not only as alien and distant but as *recognized* in actual people and situations. Perhaps across such distances it is not possible, yet I have not so far found it so. I know that I am getting beyond my own life, as those structures of feeling form, but in a lesser degree that was also what was happening even when writing about contemporary life in a known place. Either past or present, in their ordinary and reasonable temporal senses, seems to have to go through this other process before, as we say, people begin to move and speak. There may be a very general idea of what one is doing, but all the active and detailed formation seems to happen somewhere else. People may call the results 'imagination', and if the connection really happens 'imaginative', but this is where the matter of tense comes in again, for something very different is involved if a writer tries to 'imagine' the future: to 'project' a future, as it is often put.

I am fascinated by the forms of 'future fiction', just as much as by that other large area of 'science fiction'—the very best of it anyway—in which what I see happening is a structure of feeling formed as some alien life and environment. Often this stands out more sharply than the structure of feeling, even a very similar structure, which in the course of writing has been saturated in known and recognizable and connecting detail: our everyday, which can seem and sometimes be the whole object, and is then so different from that distant and surprising and discontinuous 'science fiction' world. I have no direct experience of making that kind of work, though I

respect its obviously 'imaginative' reach. But I have now twice—in *The Fight for Manod* and in *The Volunteers*—set novels ahead of their time of writing: in one case more as a plan, in the other case—deliberately and discontinuously—as an action.

I may be wrong but I found in these two very different cases that something much nearer the ordinary idea of imagination was directly involved. I mean that at some important stage, in work with the future tense, a writer sits and *thinks*; assembles and deploys variables; even constructs what in secular planning are called 'scenarios', in the interplay of this and that projected factor, when even the factors are only partly known—their degree of development can be variably estimated—and when their interaction—bringing this factor up, fading that down—is quite radically uncertain. It can of course be argued, and in many cases demonstrated from actual works, that the structures which are projected and realized are usually no more than reproductions of existing structures in externally altered circumstances—the trivial case of those American stories in which Planet Earth encounters aliens through a President and corporations in Washington and New York is only an example of hundreds of more serious cases. Even some of the more surprising futures, in Huxley and Orwell for example, can be shown to rest on striking *interpretations* of the present, from which countervailing or mitigating factors are simply excluded: a negative present, you might say, rather than a positive future.

But beyond reproduction and interpretation there do seem to be cases—Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* is an example—in which there is evidence both of deliberate and sustained thought about possible futures and then, probably both preceding and succeeding this, the discovery of a structure of feeling which, within the parameters of that thought, is in its turn a form of recognition. In *The Fight for Manod* I tried to include some of the relevant thinking and argument about a possible future, but without any convention of cut-off from the present. The whole point of that novel was the relation between necessary and desirable plans for the future and at once the ways in which they get distorted and frustrated and the even more complex ways in which they relate to what is already lived and known and valued. In *The Volunteers* I used a degree of cut-off from the present, to get an action in which both received and abstract values were tested without the familiar context of supporting and reliable institu-

tions embodying them: a possible near future, I then thought, and with whatever variation of date and detail, I am not yet persuaded it was other than closely possible.

In any real future tense, then, what we call imagination seems more like the usual accounts of it than in either present or past tenses. We speculate, we project, we attempt to divine, we figure. The actual writing that goes with that dimension is in its turn distinctive: more general; more immediately accessible to ideas; often more angular and more edged; relatively low in the kind of saturation by detailed and unlooked-for experiences so common and ordinarily so valued in the other tenses. I do not want to turn a contrast of kinds into some order of merit. Each kind of writing does quite different work. But if that is a recognizable kind of imagination—over a range from the secular and political to the solidly traditional and the surprisingly private visions and divinations—there is a problem in using not just the same word but the same concept, pointing to the same general process, in the other tenses. The problem is already there, however, in the everyday range of the word. The mental concept of something not present to the senses, which corresponds to future-writing and to many kinds of fantasy, coexists in the language with the sense of empathy, of feeling our way into a situation which in a general way we know but which we can come to know as it were from the inside—a sense which I think is not far from the idea of discovering and being moved by a structure of feeling within what is already nominally and even carefully known. Yet if the word can be applied to either process, the real processess are still different, and the key difference, as it matters in writing, seems to me essentially a matter of real tense.

There are periods in a culture when what we call real knowledge seems to have to take priority over what is commonly called imagination. In our own image-conscious politics and commerce there is a proliferation of small instrumental professions which claim the sonorous titles of imagination and creativity for what are, when examined, simple and rationalized processes of reproduction and presentation. To know what is happening, in the most factual and down-to-earth ways, is indeed an urgent priority in such a world. A militant empiricism claims all; in a world of rearmament and mass unemployment seems rightly to claim all. Yet it is now the very bafflement and frustration of this militant empiricism, and especially

of the best of it, that should hold our attention. It can quickly identify its enemies among the hired image-makers, the instrumental projectors of the interests of wealth and power. But now, very clearly, there are other deeper forces at work, which perhaps only imagination, in its full processes, can touch and reach and recognize and embody. If we see this, we usually still hesitate between tenses: between knowing in new ways the structures of feeling that have directed and now hold us, and finding in new ways the shape of an alternative, a future, that can be genuinely imagined and hopefully lived. There are many other kinds of writing in society, but these now—of past and present and future—are close and urgent, challenging many of us to try both to understand and to attempt them.