

THE COUNTRIES OF INVENTION

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MOST WRITERS WRITE from a private place: a nation or a country in the mind, whose landscape and whose climate are made up of what has been seized and hoarded from the real world — *en passant*.*

No one is static. Not even dead, are we static. Stillness is something in the mind and nothing more: a part of forward movement. After death, decay and remembrance keep on moving us forward — who knows where? — but certainly the living, by digging in the earth, can make a guess. And anyone who reads or listens or watches is perfectly aware of the dead who keep our company. This is because we have given them a place in the countries of our invention.

We are never still. If you live by the side of the road, as I do, you are very much awake to this fact (and, sometimes, awakened by it), since every time the shadows move it means that someone is passing. And my garden, my wall, my house, and the cat asleep on the roof will all become images fixed in someone's mind — part of their private hoardings, their collection — because they have come this way seeking passage.

I, too, pass. It is only natural: making my own collection, lifting my images from here and there — vistas, faces, gestures, accidents — carrying them forward with me, letting them rattle round my brain, my innards until they have settled themselves, either as landmarks or as residents. I am a travelling country of invention. A roadshow.

“Pay attention.”

Thornton Wilder used to say that; “pay attention,” if he caught you looking at the pavement, trying to avoid the cracks. “There’s nothing down there but your feet, Findley. Look around you; it’s much more interesting.”

Yes — and he was right. Thornton Wilder lived in fear of missing something — not in the gossipy sense (gossip is all too common knowledge) — but in the sense of missing something no one else had noticed. That bridge that fell into the chasm at San Luis Rey. . . . No one else had seen it falling. But he did. Paying attention to the landscape around him, it is more than likely Thornton Wilder — being a world traveller — saw the bridge falling (a ghost bridge only) into an

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Austrian valley. Or, perhaps, it fell into the gorge at Crawford's Notch. Where it was first "seen" falling doesn't matter. All that matters is that, paying attention *en passant*, he caught a glimpse of it superimposed on a foreign landscape: foreign, at any rate, to the landscape where it ultimately fell. The fact is, it fell in Peru. But Thornton Wilder had never been anywhere near Peru; never — until he went there in his mind, equipped with the image of a bridge that had fallen through his imagination somewhere in Europe or New Hampshire. It may be the image was prompted by the space between two peaks; the awesome depth of a gorge or the width of a valley and Wilder had thought (because he was paying attention): *what a dreadful distance to fall that would be. What a fearful height that is and, if one had to walk there over a bridge. . . . And if the bridge fell, who would fall with it? Who would be fated to fall: or chosen. . . ? And why?* In an instant, glimpsing his imaginary bridge as it spanned the real space between two heights, the basis for a classic novel was laid in place — and cemented.

Thornton Wilder's work comes very close to providing the perfect example of the countries of invention: Caesarean Rome in *The Ides of March*; eighteenth-century Peru in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*; post-Platonic Greece in *The Woman of Andros*; the Ice Age and Noah's Flood in *The Skin of Our Teeth*; beyond the grave in *Our Town*. Wilder was no historian, in the academic sense; neither was he a time-traveller — yet, each of these places resonates with the sound of real voices and each of them is — at times alarmingly — alive with the textures of a life so vividly imagined that it *becomes* life. The countries of invention can be more real than any place we see and hear in our everyday lives: the ones we live outside of books and daydreams.

Everyone has memories: private memories and shared memories. One of the most poignant of human activities is the game that begins: "*do you remember . . . ?*" And there is also the sharing of private memories, the game that begins: "*I remember. . . .*" Both of these games are vital to the theatre and playwrights have employed them since Euripedes first prompted Hecuba to recall the wonder of happiness as she surveys the ruin of Troy. And there is no more magical moment in the theatre than Justice Shallow's "*Jesu! The days we have seen. . . .*" The conjuring of memory, as pure device — its theatrical impact aside — is equal to the closing of the circle, whether the circle be of fate or clarity around the shape of a character.

The whole of Chekhov's impetus as a playwright seems to have sprung from a desire to set people loose in a minefield of memory and to see which one of them, if any, might survive it. His plays show us one unbroken line of men and women caught in this minefield — some of them stumbling and certain to perish; some of them gracefully waving aside the danger and stepping forth boldly into

the past while others are transfixed, unable to move with any kind of joy into the past and, thus, unable to conjure any sense of the future at all. Chekhov sees, perhaps most clearly of all the great playwrights, the importance that memory plays in our ability to survive. He knew that much of what anyone remembers is not “real”: that memory itself is a country of invention. But he also knew it was a source of solace and the basis of all reconciliation. Memory provides a ground — however profusely mined it might be — on which we can face reality, accommodate reality and, possibly, even survive it. If only we would believe the best of what we recall about ourselves and others, there might then be some chance to make something real in the here and now that is an echo of that better person. But the countries of invention can be treacherous, and most of Chekhov’s people are beguiled by memory and they go to live there forever. This was not pessimism on Chekhov’s part. The fact is, he saw it all for precisely what it is: a great ironic comedy at the end of which we all, as does the old retainer *Firs* at the close to *The Cherry Orchard*, lie down in memory, to pass away — forgotten — forever.

Forgotten forever. This, of course, is everyone’s fear: not to be one of those people chosen, *en passant*, to be hoarded in someone’s memory; not to be a resident in someone else’s country of invention. Marie-Claire Blais has said that every writer is *un témoin*: a witness. One of the things they witness and record is the cryptic passage of people and events that, otherwise, would gain no place in memory. This is not only because, by paying attention, they see what others fail to see but, also, because they record what others resist remembering. We resist remembering what we cannot understand — what we cannot cope with — what is ugly — what is dangerous to our self-esteem and our way of life. What we fail to see can range from falling bridges to the peach we dare not eat. Our survival may not depend on falling bridges and uneaten peaches, but it may very well depend on our being reminded of their existence: “J. ALFRED PRUFROCK THWARTS DESTINY BY PAUSING TO EXAMINE PEACH BEFORE SETTING FOOT ON THE BRIDGE AT SAN LUIS REY!”

Paying attention pays off.

I WAS RECENTLY GIVEN the opportunity to reach back into the past in order to explore my beginnings as a writer. My publisher thought it was time to make a collection of my short fiction and this meant re-establishing contact with three decades of stories. The thing that struck me first was how consistent the images were: they had been gathered by a pack rat whose tastes and interests could be established just by running the eye over sentences written as far apart as 1956 and 1983. The country in my mind has a lot of distance in it,

but the distance can be covered by the sound of a banging screen door or the barking of a dog or the voice of someone calling: "you'll be late, if you don't hurry up!" Many of the people — the children and the men especially — turn up over and over again in white; the women wear the colour — blue, orange, red, & the darker shades of grey. Many of the people have the habit of shading their eyes — which implies a plethora of light. Certainly, there is endless heat: summer is the dominant season. All the roads are dusty and the rooms are filled with brass and copper lamps. I don't know why. Storms are important (the weather in my country is appalling) and they blow up from nowhere. People are terse with one another — mostly, that is, till one of them decides to talk for ten pages. Why? I don't know; I really don't know — and I'm not going to ask. I only point it out because it tells something. It shows something. It shows what one writer's eyes have been scanning for thirty and more years and it shows that he has been looking for something, whether he knew it or not (he didn't) and it shows that, *en passant*, he has made a collection of remarkable cohesion. It also shows what the writer's ears have been listening for — a particular tone of voice — perhaps a way of speaking — always for the sound of someone *trying* to say something. It has not just been the inability to communicate that caught his attention — but the inability to communicate through speech. And the noises! All those screen doors — plus a lot of falling chairs and the sound of voices rising in argument in a distant room. These people, places, noises — all these voices belong in one country; even though the territory spans from Ontario to Austria and from Montreal to the Bahamas, New York to Hollywood. The maps to the countries of invention might be collected one day as an exercise in the destruction of reason. How can so much sameness be so disparate?

There is nothing out of place in the countries of invention. This is their hallmark. The accidents, the mutilations, the deaths belong there alongside the people sitting behind the screens on their porches and the children playing in the tall grass and the rabbits giving birth on the lawn. There are no surprises in the countries of invention, but there is amazement and there is bewilderment at the behaviour of the inhabitants and the treachery of the climate. The real world is not like that. In the real world our lives are plagued by surprise and yet we are never amazed and, certainly, no one's behaviour bewilders us. We expect and even anticipate jeopardy in all its various shapes and perfidy in all its forms. In real life we are always saying: "*there, you see? I told you so.*" In the real world we are jaded — a nice old-fashioned word for a nice old-fashioned condition. But go and pick up someone else's world of invention and the odds are, the jade will fall away.

It is only in fiction, only in memory that our eagerness to be trusting is justified. This is one of fiction's — one of memory's and one of imagination's —

bravest functions. It is by these media we are urged towards hope and sanity; maybe even compassion.

Is memory a medium?

Yes. In every sense. By promising continuity, it gives the present certainty and it gives the future an odds-on chance of making an appearance in our lives. It also broadcasts and publishes its daily reminder of better times and lost causes. Memory is not only, in itself, a country of invention; it is also that country's *Time* and *Maclean's* and its six o'clock news.

We cannot live in the countries of invention. We can only go there and come back. For those who choose to go and live there forever, who choose it as a *way* of life, there is always the grave danger of becoming merely reactionary. This is a dead end. The truth about the countries of invention is that everyone you put there is put there because they are posing questions. For the reactionary, the questions take on the heat of answers. For the visitor who writes — who goes there to write — the questions are all that matter. There are no answers: none. If there were, there would be no reality.

This brings us back to Thornton Wilder's *Bridge* — its imminent collapse and the deaths of those who walk upon it. And the question.

And the question.

Why?

The answer is not in Thornton Wilder's country of invention. The answer is in everyone who picks up *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and who reads it through to the end.

