

## IN LIEU OF A PREFACE: *Why I Can't Write Fiction*

Friends of mine sometimes ask me why I don't try my hand at writing a novel. They know that novels are just about all I read, or, at any rate, all I ever talk about, and they wonder why I don't try writing one myself. Fiction, they reason, should not be so difficult to compose if one already knows how to write nonfiction. It seems to me they ought to be right in that, and yet I can't *imagine* ever being able to write fiction. This complete absence of even the fantasy of my writing fiction used to trouble me. Or not trouble me, exactly—I used to wonder at it. But I gradually came to see it as one aspect of the constellation of capacities which make it possible for me to write nonfiction. Or, rather, the other way around: the part of my sensibility which I demonstrate in nonfiction makes fiction an impossible mode for me. That's because for me the world is already filled to bursting with interconnections, interrelationships, consequences, and consequences of consequences. The world as it is is overdetermined: the web of all those interrelationships is dense to the point of saturation. That's what my reporting becomes about: taking any single knot and worrying out the threads, tracing the interconnections, following the mesh through into the wider, outlying mesh, establishing the proper analogies, ferreting out the false strands. If I were somehow to be forced to write a fiction about, say, a make-believe Caribbean island, I wouldn't know where to put it, because the Caribbean as it is is already full—there's no room in it for any fictional islands. Dropping one in there would provoke a tidal wave, and all other places would be swept away. I wouldn't be able to invent a fictional New York housewife, because the city as it is is already overcrowded—there are *no apartments* available, there is no more room in the phone book. (If, by contrast, I were reporting on the life of an actual housewife, all the threads that make up her place in the city would become my subject, and I'd have no end of inspiration, no lack of room. Indeed, room—her specific space, the way the world makes room for her—would be my theme.)

It all reminds me of an exquisite notion advanced long ago by the Cabalists, the Jewish mystics, and particularly by those who subscribed to the teachings of Isaac Luria, the great, great visionary who was active in Palestine in the mid-sixteenth century. The Lurianic Cabalists were vexed by the question of how God could have created anything, since He was already everywhere and hence there could have been no room anywhere for

His creation. In order to approach this mystery, they conceived the notion of *tsimtsum*, which means a sort of holding in of breath. Luria suggested that at the moment of creation God, in effect, breathed in—He absented Himself; or, rather, He hid Himself; or, rather, He entered into Himself—so as to make room for His creation. This *tsimtsum* has extraordinary implications in Lurianic and post-Lurianic teaching. In a certain sense, the *tsimtsum* helps account for the distance we feel from God in this fallen world. Indeed, in one version, at the moment of creation something went disastrously wrong, and the Fall was a fall for God as well as for man: God himself is wounded; He can no longer put everything back together by Himself; He needs man. The process of salvation, of restitution—the *tikkun*, as Luria called it—is thus played out in the human sphere, becomes at least in part the work of men in this world. Hence, years and years later, we get Kafka’s remarkable and mysterious assertion that “the Messiah will come only when he is no longer needed; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come not on the last day but on the very last.”

But I digress. For me, the point here is that the creativity of the fiction writer has always seemed to partake of the mysteries of the First Creation (I realize that this is an oft-broached analogy)—the novelist as creator, his characters as his creatures. The fictionalist has to be capable of *tsimtsum*, of breathing in, of allowing—paradoxically, of creating—an empty space in the world, an empty time, in which his characters will be able to play out their fates. That is, I suppose, the active form of the “suspension of disbelief.” For some reason, I positively relish suspending my disbelief as long as someone else is casting the bridge across the abyss; I haven’t a clue as to how to fashion, let alone cast, such a bridge myself. . .

~ Lawrence Weschler (1985)