

Dreams of fiction

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During the reunion last June George Richardson ran a panel on the findings of the Grant Study, which have recently been published. Anyhow, after battling around how people change or don't change, according to the scientific experts and pseudo-experts, he asked if "any of our novelists are here," and Evan Calkins pointed to me and I had the floor. I had not been prepared for it and didn't say much. But in subsequent days and weeks I realized what I ought to have said, namely that the novelist differs from the scientist in that the novelist's interest is in how does it feel? The scientist describes what the rat does in his experiment. The novelist's fascination is not ~~when~~ what the experiment showed or didn't show, but with how it felt to be the rat. The psychologist is concerned with the objective. He examines the data, and writes a description asserting that this is how Harvard men change when they are 40, this is what they are like in their 60s, etc. The novelist is concerned with the subjective. He is concerned with how it felt to be some particular Harvard man at 40, and whether his character is a typical one that fits into the Grant study or whether he is a very untypical one does not matter. What concerns the novelist is the reality of what it is like to be on the inside, this particular guy in this particular guy's situation, how it is to him -- and what psychologists and sociologists later say or deduce about his character is of interest to the novelist but of secondary interest. The point, for the novelist, is the subjective reality.

A satirist, e.g., Jonathan Swift, or Heller, uses a fictional framework when his primary purpose is a comic polemic against society. Defoe uses it as the vehicle for a religious tract. Harriet Beecher Stowe is in between; Uncle Tom's Cabin is a political document, but ^{for} a political position she came to through perception of what a certain subjective reality must be like, and though a conviction that in this instance the subjective reality itself must be the strongest possible argument. But for the novelist who is a novelist in the purest sense, what ^{he} is saying is always this: here is the realest reality I know.