

The story of Tintin and Popeye

One day, many years ago, a man was standing at the edge of the harbour quay, in a small town beside the sea in Norway. He was wearing a golfing outfit, and as he brushed the shock of red hair from his face, he could only barely make out the horizon through the late afternoon haze. The wind was rising and a storm had been predicted.

The man noticed that a large crow had alighted on the guard rail, and appeared tame, allowing him to come very close. He could have sworn that the two beady eyes were smiling at him, almost as if they were trying to tell him something. But nothing could raise his spirits, as life had been very difficult recently and today he had reached some kind of a limit. He knew he could not take much more.

Then there was a tap on his shoulder.

"Got a light, mate?" A short stocky man in a black waistcoat faced him, gesturing at him with an unlit pipe of tobacco. The golfer reached for a lighter, handed it over, then soon must step back as the cloud of smoke poured from the bowl of the pipe. With great satisfaction the smoker smiled a

toothy smile, as he suddenly slapped the back of the golfer.

"Ouch!" The golfer stepped even further back. "Careful, my friend. You are stronger than you know!" The smoker roared with laughter, displaying enormous biceps proudly.

"But have I not seen you somewhere before?" he asked. At this golfer groaned.

"Here we go," he muttered. He had heard this question so many times.

"But you are Tintin," the smoker shouted, and once more shook back his head, chortling with glee.

At this stage Tintin knew the game was up.

"I know all about that comic book," he admitted wearily. "The whole world has seen it by now. It's true. The creator of Tintin based his idea on me. This fact has become the curse of my life. I have never, ever been able to have any privacy since that day. Eventually I sued and received a small amount in damages, but it is hardly any compensation for a ruined existence. I cannot even go out any more."

All of this time the smoker was responding with a ludicrous series of winks and glances, which was hardly the most appropriate or caring response to this discovery. Tintin began to grudge the obvious insensitivity of the man. But then the

smoker began to laugh so uncontrollably that Tintin, now outraged, turned and began to walk away. At that the smoker ran and seized him by the shoulder.

"Wait!" he shouted, with an almost childish eagerness. "Wait! You don't know what is going on here! Don't imagine you are alone. Look at me! Can you see who I am?"

The two froze. Tintin stared the man up and down, taking in every feature of his face and body, the big jaw, the white sailor's cap, the bulging forearms, the sailor's trousers, even the little anchor tattoo on the arm. Now an astonishing, delightful understanding came to him. It felt like walking into the sunshine.

"Popeye?" he whispered. "Is it really you? I simply cannot believe this." Yet the smoker merely nodded and winked, and then smiled more, paralysed by the poetry of this meeting.

"It's me," he finally grunted, in a harsh undertone. Then he roughly wiped back a small tear. "It's true. I am him. I am Popeye. So you and me certainly have much in common. Of course I am not really Popeye, but approximately the same thing happened as you describe. My life, I fully admit, has been rather legendary. An American writer, a cartoonist, liked the look of me, during one of his holiday trips over here, and the next thing I knew, a friend told me that a certain New York newspaper had begun to feature a comic strip, and there I was,

the character based on me, and now internationally known, just as yours is. We are brothers, my friend."

"And victims," Tintin added. They shook hands, then continued staring, hardly able to believe in what had just happened.

"I try to ignore it all," Popeye added. "Since I am a sailor, I can cut off from the world, which is quite a blessing, I can tell you."

"Not so easy for me," groaned Tintin. "And you know what? As the years pass, there are moments, terrible, desperate moments, where I start to actually believe I am nothing but that wretched character in the children's book. I have terrible problems with self-worth today. What am I really? What does my life add up to? Do I even exist? Before you arrived, I was standing here on the edge of the quay, trying to muster up the strength to throw myself in, and finish with it all forever.

"No!" Popeye tenderly clasped Tintin's arm and drew him further from the water. Now he gently turned him around, and together they gazed at the charming little harbour town, with the rows and rows of fishermen's cottages rising up on the side of the hill.

"Life is beautiful," he said. "Look at those houses. See the majestic, snow capped mountains behind. We are lucky to be

alive. The world is a good place. People are wonderful around here, with such good hearts."

For a second there was a silence, but then suddenly Tintin shrugged off Popeye's arm and faced him directly.

"It's no use," he barked suddenly. "I do appreciate that you clearly care for me, and are trying to help me, and to cheer me up, but I am afraid that it is all untrue.

Listen, it's not just my own existence that I question. All of reality is a lie. Everything of this that you see in front of you is delusion and merely a smokescreen. Just look around you at our modern world and witness what is happening. Can you not see that there is manipulation, disinformation and endless propaganda everywhere? I tell you that we are being deceived. On top of it all you and I do not even exist. We think we do, but it is a hallucination. We are nothing but comic book characters, simply coloured ink on pages. Deal with it! Wake up! You are deluding yourself, my friend. Thank you for your kindness though." He looked around hopelessly, but his jaw was set firmly, eyes fixed on the mountains, far away.

Popeye was packing more tobacco carefully into his pipe, staring at the tram lines, trying to make sense of this enormous philosophical eruption, an uncomfortably harsh analysis, he felt, and so unexpected. However he himself, in his leisure days in between fishing trips, had recently had the habit of visiting the

tiny harbour town library, and reading up on a few of his favourite philosophers. Then he would occasionally take a book or two to sea with him, stowing them carefully in a box cupboard in his cabin.

"I was wondering if it would get to this," he announced grimly. "The question of whether we exist at all, or in what way we exist is always a fascinating one."

"We do not exist," Tintin retorted stubbornly. "Listen to this. There was once a man called Descartes."

"I know about him," Popeye replied. "*Cogito ergo sum*. I think, therefore I am."

"Exactly," Tintin agreed. "So if you and I are thinking right now, then I suppose that means we exist."

Popeye winked at him.

"I am afraid you have just shot yourself in the foot, my fine fellow," he chortled diabolically. "You were the one who just said that reality is all a lie!"

"Did I?" Tintin stuttered. "Well it appears you have won a point here, and also cheered me up all at the same moment. We are real! Reason to celebrate, I suppose. What a fool I was! I award you one gold star for your brilliance and debating prowess."

"I'll take it," laughed Popeye, suddenly whisking a flask of whisky out of a waistcoat pocket and handing it to Tintin all in one move, before taking a giant swig himself, and returning it to the pocket again.

By this time the sea was rising, and the storm was battering at many trees further up the hill. Dark clouds were on the horizon, as a few drops of rain began to fall. Now Popeye guided Tintin across the tram lines and into the shelter of a bus stop, close to the tramlines which crossed the main street. A few children were running into distance, screaming with excitement at how strong the gusts of wind were becoming. A few fishing boats were bouncing up and down, straining against their moorings. The pair now sat down side by side on an available bench, enjoying the delicate, rich flavour and welcome punch of the whisky shots, fully content with their new-found friendship, and determined to argue this matter out, in an attempt to shed light on exactly as to how or why they existed.

Popeye was full of warm feelings towards his new companion. How wonderful, it occurred to him, that Tintin clearly shared his own love of philosophy. Suddenly he became emboldened. He knew now that there was no holding back. They must fight this thing out together, he resolved, yet always in the form of noble debate, never letting it slide down to the level of ignorant mud-slinging. It must never deteriorate to a

crude little scrap of two egoists, merely attempting to win dominance over the other, merely to laugh at his fall.

"Tintin, my good man," he started out delicately, feeling his way thorough this tangle of complex notions and emotions, picking out a route like a ballet dancer who must cross a raging torrent using tiny stepping stones, and always fearing to soil her pretty shoes.

"Now, now," he continued, "do not be troubled by your failure. It is not really a failure at all. Many great scientists today are now claiming that reality is not at all what it seems. You may be half right, or even more than half right."

Tintin sat up slowly and managed a weak little smile.

"Are you sure?" he quavered.

"Of course I am sure," crowed Popeye, standing up and pacing up and down confidently.

"And I have more!" he added enthusiastically. "Have you heard of that great man called David Hume?"

"Yes, of course," came the reply.

"Aha! You have been doing your homework, I see. Now listen to this. Reality and consciousness are very much intertwined. You may be right in your defence of the reality of Descartes. We do appear to be in a real world. Material things

appear to have genuine substance. Now, for the philosopher Hume. What did he say?" At this Popeye smiled and winked, and fidgeted and continued to dance around the troubled face of Tintin, who remained staring at the ground.

"Hume argued, very cleverly that consciousness is merely a bundle of perceptions, shaped by our experiences," Popeye declared triumphantly. "So you see that it's not such a big deal. Consciousness is over-rated. It's easy for us to have it. Just relax on this, won't you?"

"But what experiences can we actually have, if we are nothing but cartoon characters?" wailed Tintin.

Now Popeye became impassioned, and his cheeks, always normally red, were flaming like fire.

"Life!" Popeye shouted. "The world! The glory of it! We experience it all. Can you not see or feel that? Look at that storm out there! Wake up, Tintin! Don't miss out!"

"OK, OK," said Tintin. "Calm down. Take a deep breath, and tell me, slowly and carefully what you are trying to say. I am not a fool. Can you see that I'm here, ready to listen?" Tintin felt slightly irritated at the way Popeye had become emotional when the whole point was to stay calm and rational.

"Thank you," said Popeye, as he sat down once more, and then turned to survey Tintin in a clinical manner.

"You are frightened," he suggested curiously. "Is this true? You have a great fear or anxiety that you do not, or may not exist? Does this keep you awake at night, or off your food? Is that it?"

"It's true," Tintin confessed miserably. "It's worse though. I actually believe or even know that I do not exist. But come on, finish with what you were saying about Hume, anyway?"

"I have said it all," rapped Popeye. "It's finished. However I do have something to add. Hume's words would hold very little water if it was true that you and I actually lacked the substance of existence." He frowned thoughtfully.

Tintin did not understand this last expression, but something about it made him shiver. Then a thought suddenly occurred to him. He had been reading the newspapers recently and watching how, over the past few years, the computers were now talking to people and appeared to be coming alive in some way.

He took a deep breath and jumped in.

"Perhaps we must consider the nature of artificial intelligence as well?" he questioned. "Can one of these new machines truly possess consciousness, and if so, might we all, also, be suffering a kind of limited or simulated consciousness, a delusion of consciousness, if you like?" he asked cleverly.

Popeye was a little taken aback by this remark. He had not know that the talk would go into such an area.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "Possibly. Yes, maybe you are on to something there."

At this point the two discussed many other philosophers and how they would frame this rather crucial issue.

By now the storm had become furious. The rain had stopped, but the wind howled, whipping up the ocean waves. Dusk was falling and now little lights jewelled the houses on the hillside. As a tram rolled past, the two shared a little more whisky.

Everything was becoming very unreal. The two were not succeeding in proving anything, least of all that they might be real people rather than mere characters from a book. Nevertheless they fought on, fuelled by whisky, love of life, the desperate need to prove that they were alive and real, and the love of philosophy.

Finally the debate gained heat.

"Never forget Socrates," Popeye shouted, in a great shout of triumph, crooking a finger at Tintin.

"Socrates believed that true wisdom comes from acknowledging our own ignorance," he pointed out. "If we were

nothing but figments of imagination, then wisdom would elude us entirely."

"Well said," chanted Tintin, cheering up rapidly.

"Good old Socrates! I don't know how wise or how modest I am, but let's give him the benefit of the doubt!

"Hurrah! So we are real people! I always knew it, deep down! I should never have doubted it!"

At this the two jumped up, and spontaneously broke into a little dance together, a ridiculous tango, now a waltz, then finally a kind of beatnik, wild and crazy jazz dance, before eventually roaring with laughter as they hugged each. Eventually they collapsed prone, each lying face down on his own bench, half unconscious from the alcohol, but fabulously elated, and very aware that something truly magnificent was happening.

For the sky now darkened. A bolt of lightning forked and sparked its way across the bay. Then, seconds later, a resounding crash of thunder shook the little seaside town, scaring the birds and causing all the dogs to start barking furiously.

Tintin rolled over in a confused manner and seized Popeye's arm, pointing at the wild, monstrous waves which were right now breaking entirely over the harbour wall and

even starting to deluge the cobbled streets of the town. Behind them anxious ant-like figures raced out to lock up their shops and dash off towards home.

Fighting against the noise and confusion, Tintin roared into Popeye's ear something about Nietzsche.

"I can't hear you," wailed Popeye, clutching at his pipe, which was bedraggled by rain and had long since gone out.

"Nietzsche!" roared Tintin. "Nietzsche! He proclaimed that God is dead. Do you understand this? Because of this, he then left us with the problem of how to deal with a world without transcendence! In a similar way, I would ask you the following question. If it turns out that we do not exist, then does our lack of true existence condemn us to suffer the nightmare of eternal despair?"

Popeye moaned loudly and rolled on his bench, tormented by this idea. He began to yell his reply into Tintin's ear.

"Can't you just shut up?" he raved.

"The more we obsess over these dangerous philosophical ideas," he ranted, "the deeper our madness and our neurosis grows. We long for the truth and actual reality, yet we will probably never find it."

Then Tintin suddenly sat up.

"Popeye," he whispered. "Popeye! Haven't we missed something here? Don't you see? If we truly are not alive, not real, but simply characters from a book, then don't you see that we are free? Much more free than a real person? We can do anything that we want! Anything that we can imagine. Look up there at the sky, Popeye. Birds fly in that sky! Perhaps we can fly up there too!"

"I'm not sure," Popeye quavered.

"How can it harm us to try? Let's go! Follow me," Tintin insisted. Reaching over he dragged at the semi-comatose Popeye, pulling him to his feet and then right outside the bus shelter.

As the cold air hit Popeye's face, it brought him to his senses. He woke to see the ludicrous sight of Tintin, still in golfing outfit, making a series of little jumps, flapping his arms desperately. At this he felt a little sorry for his friend. Now Popeye himself attempted to run and jump into the air a few times, but achieved very little. However the sight of this exhibition brought renewed hope for Tintin, who suddenly clutched at Popeye's arm, urging him to look at a group of black objects in the sky. They were ravens.

"The ravens are here, Popeye!" he yelled. "They will surely teach us to fly. Watch them, Popeye! Do as they do! They have been sent to teach us to fly!"

And now the largest of the ravens swooped down closer, and immediately Tintin recognised his avian friend from a few hours before, and once again witnessed the same knowing gleam in that bird's eye. Excitedly the pair watched how he circled them, treading the air with careful, elegant movements of his wings. Then he twisted his beak towards the sky several times, as if to tell them that their moment had come, and that they should follow.

The two glanced at each other, and took a deep breath, and now they were running and jumping, running and jumping, and oh, how glorious a feeling it was.

"The wind, the wind!" shouted Popeye. Run into the wind, not with it. This is how the birds do it! The wind will lift us!"

And so it was. Their leaps became larger and larger. Their eyes were now huge with astonishment, wonder and joy, as they took to the air and flew. The bird looked back proudly, and gave a cluck of satisfaction before disappearing with the other birds, heading for shelter.

But Tintin and Popeye had other ideas. The storm was still raging around them, and they feared to be thrown down into the ocean at any moment.

"Higher, higher," gasped Popeye. "Leave the storm behind!"

"Look down," shouted Tintin. Popeye looked down at the tiny houses, and cars and trams, and the miniature trees all leaning in the blistering gale. There were white horses on the water, and yet in the distance, sunshine fingered the snowcapped mountains.

"Almost there," cried Popeye. Side by side they flew, proud and confident now, amazed at how simple this had become.

With an enormous love for the world in their hearts they now flew higher and higher into the blue, leaving the storm behind, breaking through the clouds into a magnificent place where the sun was shining forever.