

## A CRYPTOGRAM OF ITS AGE

**A**N ENTRY IN Benedetto Croce's diary records a visit from 'Moravia, the writer of novels'.<sup>1</sup> There is an unmistakable hint of malice in the description, the shrewd, wounding humour that is perhaps what chiefly endures of the genius of Don Benedetto. The punctilious designation 'writer of novels' is a way of cutting Moravia down to size, implicitly making light of his reputation. It is as if to say that the name 'Moravia' is not enough; more is needed to establish his identity, details of a profession or other information, as for any other anonymous visitor. The specification, moreover, does not sound like a compliment. Though neutral on the face of it, like the entry in a passport, it strikes a reductive note, suggesting an honest occupation, commendable if only as a well-meaning endeavour, but not a particularly brilliant one, and certainly not one of the highest expressions of the life of the mind; the exercise of a practical function—useful enough in its own way—rather than what Croce understood as the work of poetic creation.

To be sure, there were novels that Croce liked, and he knew how to interpret them. But the novel as a form remained fundamentally alien to his aesthetics and his criticism. This was no accident. For the novel was an expression of that radical modernity Croce celebrated as affirmation and progress of the spirit—history as the unfolding of freedom, liberalism emancipated from religious and political dogma—but which his innermost nature resisted. He was unable to comprehend and share this new way of being and feeling, these transformations of sensibility and of subjectivity in their relations to the world—a dusty, parodic, even degraded, yet also radically new and intrepid odyssey.

The novel was born out of the disintegration of a feudal agrarian civilization, mirror of those perennial—or at least, very long-lived—structures

that remained fundamental to Croce's imagination and taste, shaping his way of seeing and experiencing the world and making sense of its evolution. Politically, he exalted the bourgeoisie that destroyed the classical standards of that order, and created and prized the novel. But aesthetically he remained completely insensible to the modern 'prose of the world' which was the premise and essence of the new form. Croce could immerse himself with tactical intelligence in his contemporary political world, but not in that of culture, literature and the arts, where people lived their lives and through which they also experienced politics. He was a committed contemporary of Mussolini and Lenin, but not of Kafka.

Can we imagine the novel without modernity? The novel *is* modernity. Not only could the form not exist without the epoch, like a wave without the sea, but in some ways it could be described as its most intimate, mobile manifestation, as the expression of a face is captured in a glance or the contour of a mouth. True, the term 'romance' goes back to medieval times, and there were what we call Greek 'novels'. But to the extent that these Hellenistic fictions are deserving of the word, it is because they already display—even if only embryonically, beneath all the cultural, social and stylistic markers of their time—traces of the modernization and ambivalence that characterize the novel as we know it: its connexion with the dissolution of the epic; the symbiosis between the crisis of a derivative literary culture and its technical innovations, where vestiges of the epic universe are reshaped into new structures, and the sunset of the old values coexists with the bold construction of a new reality; a mish-mash of popular narrative strategies, serials and *feuilletons*, which captivated the public of antiquity as it would the bourgeoisie; and a polyphonic fusion of high and low genres, and especially of registers and themes. Then again, the end of the ancient world seems increasingly to mirror the end of the modern one (and the post-modern as well?) and the elusive imminence of something radically different that we can feel, yet cannot define or even imagine.

The first 'proper' novel is *Don Quixote*, which Dostoevsky thought enough to justify humanity in the eyes of God. Centuries later it was a touchstone for the Romantics in their codification of the novel as the expression *par excellence* of modernity. In Cervantes the epic, and

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<sup>1</sup> This is a translation of 'E pensabile il romanzo senza il mondo moderno?', in Franco Moretti, ed., *Il romanzo*, vol. 5, Rome 2003.

faith in the epic, meet their demise, yet without ceasing to traverse the ruined roads of this world as if these were enchanted woods, dense with poetry and meaning. His novel is born out of disillusionment and a paradoxical resistance to it. *Don Quixote* is an epic of disenchantment that preserves, at least at first, deep echoes of epic poetry in the lucid new medium of prose.

According to Hegel, 'the great epic style consists in the work's seeming to be its own minstrel and appearing to be independent, not having any author to conduct it or be at its head.' Homer is one, nobody and many. The hero of the epic—and the author with him—lives his life in a poetic world, one as full of tangible meaning and poetry as the forests of the ancient myths, inhabited by gods. It is the 'original poetic condition' of the world, as Hegel put it, in which the values, norms and unity of life are felt by individuals not as an external imposition, but as if fused into their souls, which know no scission. The subject bathes in a harmonious, innocent unity with itself and with life. The infinite variety of objects is subsumed within a higher order, illumined by a meaning that confers on things their incommensurable value, transforming in *Don Quixote*'s vision a common barber's basin of metal alloy into a unique, irreplaceable helmet of gold.

For Hegel, that original poetic condition came to an end with the modern epoch of labour, a stage of modernity in which individuals must work towards prescribed objective ends, sometimes against their own wishes, in keeping with a conception of social progress that requires specialization—curtailing personal development and sacrificing individuality—in pursuit of a one-sided profession. Once this scission has occurred, the universal forces guiding human action are no longer at home in the soul but rise before it like an external constraint, a 'prosaic order' of things. The abstraction and mechanization of labour disempower the subject, counterposing to the poetry of the heart—the need to live a life that is entirely *one's own*, woven of experiences whose meaning is irreplaceably individual—the 'prose of the world', that anonymous web of social relations in which persons become mere means in a social mechanism whose ends escape them. Hyperion, the hero of Hölderlin's novel-poem who dreams of the rebirth of Hellas in a new civilization at once more harmonious and whole, tells of a life cut off at its roots, of human beings who were—and should be once again—everything, and instead are nothing.

The novel is a product of the triumph of this prose of the world, perceived and affirmed philosophically as a radical historical rupture, a devastating alteration of society and life and how they can be recounted—a metaphysical turning point: the eclipse of metaphysics itself. Modernity is domination over history and nature, a project to mould and direct their development. Whatever that direction may be, it will induce a vertiginous sense of the mutability of all that had once seemed unalterable. Gradually the passions and perceptions, the consciousness and reason of human beings themselves become subject to change, and so too their canons of beauty and poetry. The novel is the perfect signifier of this universal transformation, which destroys every classical order and remnant of a perennial poetics, dispelling any belief that Homer's sun still shines upon us. It is not hard to see why it found little favour with Croce, for whom the dichotomy between poetry and non-poetry was immutable.

The novel is the literary form in which the subject feels at first a stranger, sundered between a nostalgic inner life and an indifferent, disconnected external reality. It will often recount a search for meaning that is no longer there, an odyssey of disillusionment. Hegel hoped and expected that the novel would be the modern bourgeois epic, whose protagonists—overcoming the adolescent need for poetry of the heart—would mature to take their place in the 'concatenation of the world', submitting to the mundane reality of the social relations that had initially dismayed them. After passing through the Caudine Forks of disenchantment and depression, the conflict between the individual and the world would have a happy epilogue in the acknowledgment of a social whole to belong to, and conscious acceptance of the high price to be paid—the disempowerment of the individual—for historical progress.

### *Anti-epic*

The 'modern bourgeois epic' inspired by this dialectical faith never materialized. At best it found, paradoxically, a mediocre fulfilment in socialist-realist fiction: Stalinist novels of the collective construction of an epic world—revolution, five-year plans, communism—conferring meaning on the lives of its participants, even if they are crushed by it. Rather than producing the modern epic to which Hegel looked forward, the novel became the anti-epic of disenchantment, of an existence fragmented and disintegrated. Perhaps only in the eighteenth-century novel, predating the French Revolution, do we find something like a modern

epic that fully accepts the prose of the world, indeed discovers within it space for a life of adventure liberated from any moral code. Fielding's *Tom Jones* is a real bourgeois epic, depicting the joyous correspondence between a protagonist and a world that are equally unencumbered with values, the second offering itself inexhaustibly to the boundless desires of the first and the salutary conflicts that arise from them. Defoe's characters—above all, the indestructible courtesan Moll Flanders—make and enjoy their own world, with a vital energy released by the interchangeability of values, adopted or discarded like so many items of clothing. The premise of this 'modern epic' is confidence that out of ruthless struggle and universal competition comes a greater liberty.

Is it the case, then, that Adam Smith's invisible hand, goddess of a modernity governed by the dismal science of economics, rules the universe of the novel, as once the gods of Olympus—and above them, the fates—the world of epic poetry? The order and outcome of things are not, however, preordained. Smith himself used the metaphor of the invisible hand less often than is commonly supposed—just three times; and while he certainly had trust in its operation, his faith in it was not as unconditionally optimistic as we are led to believe.

For Fichte, in a diagnosis that would be brilliantly developed by Lukács, the novel was the literary genre of a modern era that he defined as the age of guilt, of an 'absolute sinfulness' or empty freedom that unleashed a ferocious conflict dissolving any possible order—a ruthlessly selfish war of all against all, the anarchy of the particular uprooted from the whole. Although he believed in a redeemed and liberated future to come, Fichte felt modernity to be in hopeless contradiction with itself, and the guilt deriving from that contradiction to be the source of the greatest modern art and, above all, the great modern novel. This 'sinfulness' was not a matter of the personal actions of individuals, for which they were subjectively responsible. It was a general historical condition arising from the objective impossibility of establishing value and discovering meaning in the chaos and anguish of the world. The individual lives existence in a fallen world as guilt. Kafka's characters, unable to redeem their condition of weakness and futility, powerless before the machinery of a menacing world, are constitutively guilty. Melancholy, the depressed sensation of being a victim, is experienced as guilt. This feeling of culpability involves no failure to appreciate progress and its achievements, or nostalgia for an idealized past. Simply, it underlines

the close connection between progress and the violence of the changes that realize it, where the individual risks being unseated and engulfed in a featureless anonymity.

Extraneous to life, inactual to the time, art assumes at once its antithesis to the world and entrapment by it. Modernity is marked by the want of an ethical or aesthetic code, of foundational values which could give meaning and unity to a protean existence that takes on the appearance of a disconnected, random assortment of disparate objects. The novel is born out of this confusion and reproduces it. Citizen of the metropolis, emblem of modernity and allegory of transience, it dwells amid tumultuous progress and gargantuan constructions, and the accumulation of ruins they leave behind.

In consequence the novel is often a mixture of celebration and critique of modernity, its breath and lifeblood. The novel is the bourgeois literary form *par excellence*, at once unsparing portrait and expression of the new demon of consumption. The bourgeoisie, architect and protagonist of modernity, embodying the nexus between production and consumption, produces and consumes novels in a cycle and at a pace in which it is hard—as always with *homo economicus*—to say whether demand increases supply or vice versa. This is a class, as Giuliano Baioni has noted, that lives directly the instability of the modern world, that ‘variability’ of existence of which Simmel wrote.

Through the novel—both creature and voice of this variability—literature is incorporated into the mechanisms of consumption and competition, and so into the market. In his remarkable essay *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, written in 1797, Friedrich Schlegel observed that for moderns the beauty and objectivity of classical forms had given way to the ‘interesting’: whatever was new and eccentric, capable of stimulating the ever more sophisticated taste of consumers with ever more exciting surprises, as in a drug addiction where stronger doses and newer concoctions are constantly required. One of the originators of Romanticism, Schlegel was thus also a theorist before his time of both the avant-garde, with its ever more radical experimentation, and of mass production. The novel (one has only to think of what happened to the romantic fiction promoted by Schlegel) internalized consumption as the destiny of the modern, and the ‘interesting’—at every level, from the indiscriminate to the more refined to the high poetic—as its enabling mechanism.



In so doing, it also embraced the ephemeral, the transient, the melancholic as the new spirit of the age. Fashion—a leading theme in *Manon Lescaut* and many pages of Goethe—combines seduction with caducity, *eros* and artifice, as the unstable substance of life. Masterpieces of universal literature would arise from this soil, from *The Red and the Black* to *Niels Lyhne*, *Oblomov* to *Sentimental Education*, great odysseys of the modern individual; exiled from transcendence, subject to a time without fulfilment, a life no more than evanescence.

### *The Austrian exception*

The novel is thus unthinkable without the new function of money, which accompanied the rise of the bourgeoisie. Money becomes a protagonist of fiction. The great English novels of the eighteenth century revolve around the new qualities it acquires: the rhythms of its circulation, the mobility and fluidity with which it transforms lives, erases frontiers and creates new ones, breaks and forges chains. Money seems to flow like blood pulsing in the veins, in the drives of individuals liberated from tradition and at the mercy of the world, raising them up or sweeping them away. In a passage of Goethe's *Faust*, Marx recognized one of the first examples of the new demonic nature of money, an insight into the essence of capitalism, where money does not simply permit the acquisition of goods but transforms its users, becoming a way of being, capable of converting anything—including feelings and values—into anything else, as the medium of a universal interchangeability. In Defoe, Goethe or Balzac, money and its manifold opposite uses (consumption, investment, speculation) are inseparable from the seduction and violence that literature—hues and judgements varying according to author, epoch and situation—depicts as the framework of encounters and conflicts between the individual and reality.

This conceptualization of money is inseparable from the novel, which itself becomes a phenomenon of the market with bestsellers like *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, unthinkable in the past. But above all, the new fiction internalizes the market as its own structure. The exception is Austrian literature, where this sense of money is almost completely absent and economics, although the subject of major schools of thought from the era of Maria Theresa to the twentieth century, never acquired the status of a *Weltanschauung*, remaining—despite a high degree of scientific complexity—a descendant of Aristotelian

chrematistics: the art of squaring the accounts, an important and difficult one, but needed for the realization of other values, which had nothing to do with political economy. In the Austrian literature of the nineteenth century, money is exorcized, spent in a tavern, cashed as a pension, sunk in an estate; it is never invested, never becomes a living substance, as in the world of Balzac or the liberating—and devastating—entrepreneurial activity of Faust. So it is no accident that in nineteenth-century Austrian literature, which was rich in other forms, there is little or nothing in the way of novels. Austrian culture, a backwater in that period of the great philosophical theories of modernity, imbued with confidence in immanent historical progress, became a vanguard when this strong form of modernity—with its systematic theories and totalizing attempts at understanding the world—entered into crisis. Then Vienna became the ‘meteorological observatory of the end of the world’, as Karl Kraus would put it: a site for endless deconstructive analysis of every unity, starting with the subject itself, and vantage-point for capture of the modern condition of uncertainty and indeterminacy, the stochastic chaos of contemporary life.

So Austria produced the great anti-novelistic novels of our time; frescoes not of society, but of the disintegration of the social fabric and its elements, including the self, as in the masterpieces of Musil, Kafka and others. Austrian culture was most finely attuned to the phenomenology of the modern when it was least willing to subscribe to its global demands. To take just one example: no one understood better than Kraus the power of the media and the transformation of the means of information, in the same way that the culture which produced him refused to believe that reading the newspaper could be a substitute for the morning prayer, in Hegel’s phrase—even if it had ceased to recite such prayers, or know to whom they should be addressed. Just for that reason Austrian culture proved the subtlest interpreter of the crisis of modernity, when its certitudes gave way to uncertainty, undecidability and virtuality, and when to a sense of reality—often absolutizing present reality as the only one imaginable—was counterposed a sense of possibility, as in Musil: the idea that things could well go otherwise.

### *Meaning and totality*

Yet these radically innovative novels, undermining customary narrative structures, were themselves unthinkable without the transformation of



objects and subjects wrought by modernity, that process of fragmentation and decomposition which left nothing unaffected, reducing the self to an 'anarchy of atoms' (Nietzsche), an 'other' (Rimbaud), a 'man without qualities' (Musil), a nexus of nodes and attributes without a centre, of qualities without a man. 'Our whole being', Musil declared, 'is no more than a delirium of many.' In his *Theory of the Novel*—a masterpiece still fundamental for an understanding of the last two hundred years of existence and its narratives—Lukács argued that the novel belonged to a world in which meaning was no longer given, as it was in the world of the epic, where even when it lay concealed, it was immanent. It now had to be constructed—and, progressively, would become impossible to construct. On the title page of the modern novel, we might imagine as an epigraph Ibsen's terrifying dictum that to claim to live—truly live—is megalomania. Ibsen believed, of course, that the quest for a true life was necessary, but only an awareness of its difficulty could bring it closer.

The novel recounts the trials of this quest, the odyssey of its failures—or, in spite of all, the long-sought harbour of meaning achieved. For the form, born of the disintegration of the epic, could on occasion—especially in some great novels of the nineteenth century—reconstruct an epic sense of life as a whole. Such epics did not arise from the prose of the world, as Hegel expected, from a totality coextensive with a purely social mechanism, but from a totality conceived in mythico-religious terms, the product of an agrarian society, still pre-industrial and not yet bourgeois. Modern epic, or an art capable of grasping the totality of life beyond all contingent divisions, is incompatible with social prose, rejecting and transcending it. The amplitude of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which condenses its law in Natasha's dance, is rooted in a natural totality, and the society and ideology that correspond to it.

In American literature the epic totality finds expression not in the novel, which typically focuses on the social sphere, but rather in the romance, a form in which social-realist or psychological plausibility is alien to the narrative, open instead to an 'intuitive and poetic vision of the world', like that of little Pearl in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The epic is not the bourgeois novel but mythico-fantastical romance, free—as Henry James observed—of the vulgar contingency and banality of everyday life, its gaze fixed on extreme situations and last things, the paths of destiny, the burdens of sin, the scope of liberty. This American epic, still

close to the world of nature and not yet engulfed by the second nature of technology and social relations, is often unfinished: groping in search of some ultimate meaning in life beyond any 'prosaic' social boundary, 'it leaves the copestone to posterity', as Melville put it. This is an *epos* that, as in *Moby Dick* and later in Faulkner, may recount the annihilation of life, but not of meaning. In more recent times it has developed, at or beyond the margins of bourgeois society, against the novel; Latin American literature possesses a masterpiece of this kind, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* by Guimarães Rosa, the epic of a nomadic life in the backlands of Brazil which, through all its twists and turns, never loses a sense of its own Faustian unity. In this case, the objective value that transcends the single individual is not the social mediation of labour relations, nor a subversive refusal of them in the ironic spirit of an avant-garde, but a mythico-religious sense of the unity of life, faith in a universal connecting the multiple.

So, like the spear of Achilles, the novel wounds and heals. From Hugo to Dickens, from Tolstoy to Dostoevsky, a form that emerged as a splinter from the fragmentation of time sought to recover the unity that modern existence had shattered. It could celebrate ideals and narrate passions, debate the great social questions of the day, inform and educate, offer a map of fantasy and yet of knowledge, as it could also intensify the negativity of existence (an essentially modern concept), the dissociation—to irreconcilability—between individuals and their lives.

The novel of the self, starting with Moritz's *Anton Reiser*, is about the denial, repression and obliteration of the self. Some of the leading heroes of the modern novel—or better, of works depicting the crisis of strong modernity and its projects of historical mastery—are, in one way or another, characters without a world and without a story: from Frédéric Moreau to Oblomov, from Niels Lyhne to Bartleby, from Josef K. to Peter Kien. The great epic narrative and the isolated, inaccessible splinter could come from the same author: Melville wrote not only *Moby Dick* but also *Bartleby the Scrivener*.

No scrutiny has looked so deeply into the abyss of modernity, or its stalemate, as the novel. Zeno's laughter, which could only come from this form, is the last resort—all the more tragic, as ironic and elusive—of Western nihilism. Without that nihilism, the European novel as we

know it would not exist. Its protagonist, beneath so many and such contrary masks, is the *Übermensch* theorized by Nietzsche—not so different, as Nietzsche himself acknowledged, from Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*: subjects undergoing a radical anthropological mutation. Like Nietzsche, Dostoevsky had already glimpsed the imminent coming of nihilism, in what is still a future for us, but partly also our present—the end of known moral values; for Nietzsche a liberation to be celebrated, for Dostoevsky a malady to be fought.

In the novel, moreover, modern reality becomes the narrative structure itself. Musil's description of the metropolis offers a radiography of experimental fiction:

So let us not place any particular value on the city's name. Like all big cities, it was made up of irregularities, alternations, falls, intermittencies, collisions of things and events, punctuated by unfathomable silences; of one great rhythmic beat as well as the chronic discord and mutual displacement of all its contending rhythms. All in all, it was like a boiling bubble inside a pot made of the durable stuff of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions.

The protagonist of *Man Without Qualities*, the great endless novel of an illimitable contemporary reality, is made up of a similar multiplicity. From Döblin to Dos Passos, the complex order and disordered diversity of urban life become montage and collage, style and substance of the narrative itself. In *Karl and the Twentieth Century*, Rudolf Brunngraber transforms historical events like price fluctuations, or statistics of employment and inflation, into characters.

### *Endings*

If the novel is a mimesis of the modern world, it is also a privileged means of its discovery. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1930s—the great cultural season of the West, when literature reached frontiers still unsurpassed—writers like Musil, Joyce, Proust, Svevo, Mann, Broch or Faulkner looked to novels for that knowledge of the world which the sciences, in all their prodigious development, could not supply. Extreme specialization rendering each of them impenetrable even to researchers in the others, let alone to ordinary men and women, voiding all sense of the unity of the world, it was left to novelists to take

up questions the sciences could not answer and show us how to live in a disintegrated world, capturing the significations of reality and of its dissolution, mimed but also mastered in formal narrative experiments.

Is the novel conceivable without modernity? The question is absurd; the attempt to answer it would involve an impossibly large-scale survey of the entire landscape and history of the modern novel. Quite another question, altogether more legitimate and disquieting, is posed today. Is modernity in its strong sense coming to its end, in a sea-change as momentous as the end of the classical world? For nearly two hundred years the greatest Western literature was as if the other side of the moon of history, the zone of its shadows. Denunciation of the inadequacy of existing reality, the sense that it was radically wanting, spoke of the need of something irreducibly 'other', a revolutionary redemption negated by every actual revolution. From the start—that is, from Romanticism, or even from the late eighteenth century—this literature was aware of the deep wound inflicted on the individual by history, the impossibility of fulfilment in harmony with the evolution of society, or of any true life; the exile of the gods and the pulverization of the world. Social progress—which never went unacknowledged in great innovative writing, as it did in the literature of nostalgic reaction—only spotlighted the disarray and uncertainty of the individual all the more starkly.

If the novel—and literature more generally—was the voice of modernity, at once its poetry, its tribunal and its contestation, that all seems over now. A multiplex karaoke culture has silenced any thought of utopia or revolution, as humanity itself undergoes a radical mutation, proceeding at breakneck speed, not the glacial pace of previous transformations. In a world where bio-engineering promises the creation of *Übermenschen*, new and indefinable beings of the future, where the virtual supplants what we still call the real, and immaterial bytes replace atoms, what can the novel be or do? For the moment the novel seems reluctant to acknowledge this upheaval, inclined instead to step back from the experimentation of a recent past. The average novel is flourishing, at least quantitatively, in absolute ignorance of the world and its transformation, a serene disregard of reality, coming to resemble—not least in a patina of noble sentiments continually paraded and validated as if nothing had happened—the stale literary genres which the great modern novel had swept away. Such regression marks a surrender to the 'sterile power of the merely existent', of which Lukács wrote in his

unfinished notes on Dostoevsky, in whose works—no longer novels, he thought—he saw the hopeful emergence of a new world redeemed from iniquity, and a new way of narrating it. Rather than any utopian *epos*, what has appeared a century later is the triumph of a politico-social supermarket, in which novels—often remakes of traditional versions—are a minor product line, though a popular and marketable one. Maybe the novel will end in involuntary self-parody. But that, as Kipling would say, is another story.

*Translated by Alessandra Asteriti*