

The Contemporary Personal Novel: An Approach to Individual Life

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MAN DUPLICATES his world by means of fiction: images, pictures, stories, novels, plays, movies, television. What for? Is not the world, the 'real' world, complicated enough? It seems to give us sufficient worries. Do we need to have another beside it, an imaginary one? This is the problem.

Or is it? Perhaps the distinction between a 'real' and an 'imaginary' world is itself a previous problem. Let's think of one of those old shepherd's cups, made out of horn, with little figures carved patiently at knife's point. One would say that these tiny carvings are 'images' on a 'real' cup.

But this is a cup because it is for drinking, i.e., because of the projection of my virtual drinking, in other words, of an imaginary possibility, which is formally an element of the reality "cup." Perhaps somebody would not be easily satisfied; he would agree, but at the same time point to the obvious fact that a cup is an artificial object, and therefore not fully real; what is truly and plainly real, without any mixture of imagination, is not its form (cup) but the stuff it is made of: a horn. Now, the cup is part of a horn, which is not present, but imagined; and this is again a

bull's horn; the bull is imaginarily included in the reality of the cup. Finally, even the full reality of the bull seems questionable: what is a bull? In Amsterdam perhaps the opposite number of the cow, but in Seville certainly the bullfighter's partner; he may also be a draft animal, a certain number of steaks, the mythical abductor of Europa. Imagination is interwoven in reality.

My projects, interposed between myself and reality, make "things," but they are imaginary. This is a desk because I intend to put my elbows on it for thinking, or paper and books on it for reading and writing; but the desk becomes wood if my purpose is to burn it in the fireplace; a barricade if it protects me against my enemies; an object for sale if aligned with others in a store; a raft, if it remains afloat after a shipwreck; a relic, if Goethe wrote lines of *Faust* on it. Project and imagination alone don't make the thing; there is a reality, but this is necessarily interpreted as desk, raft or firewood.

This is only the first function of imagination, the 'making' of things as such, of 'real' things. The second, and more questionable, is fiction, by means of which a new human world is added to the real one, that, as we just saw, is an inextricable intermingling of reality and image.

II

THE MAIN form of fiction is a *story*. Perhaps a good way of ascertaining the role of fiction in human life would be to see what the most elementary forms of it gave and still give to man. Fable, myth and parable, which can be found in nearly all cultures, constitute three different attempts made by man to know himself and the world he lives in.

The fable's striking feature is the intervention of *animals*. Why? Even before Montaigne, man has known that he is "on-

doyant et divers"; he is highly complicated and changing, unforeseeable, and very difficult to grasp from outside. Animals, on the other hand, appear as "natural," as defined ways of being. An animal has a simple and permanent nature, a general pattern of behavior. The fox is cunning, the peacock is vain, the snake is treacherous, the lion is magnanimous. Man is always an *x*. In the fable, as soon as an animal appears, the listener or the reader are "oriented": they can easily foresee—and understand—the behavior of Donkey, Ox or Eagle.

As for myth, let's not forget that *mythos* is one of the Greek words for 'fable'; the other is *logos*. (Remember the title of Wilhelm Nestle's famous book, *Vom Mythos zum Logos*: is this not to go, in a long historical process, from one fable to another?) But I am here mainly concerned with "myth" in the sense of mythology. What is the meaning of the fact that Greek and Roman polytheistic religion is mythological, that it largely consists of stories about the gods? In my opinion, they have a very precise and essential function: in them the gods are 'somebody', i.e., persons, and these forms permit a personal relation with them. Zeus, Aphrodite, Hermes or Artemis are persons to us because they display their personalities in what they do (or "did"): to rape Europe, to fascinate Paris, to carry messages, to shoot arrows in moonlit woods.

Without myths, the gods would simply be abstract "natures," defined by their hierarchical relationships, "powers" or functions. The ancient polytheistic religion had to be mythological in order to be "personal," i.e. to be religious.

If we wish to think of something closer to our present sensibility, let us think of angels. We can have a notion of their "nature"; we can arrange them in nine ranks, etc.; but any personal relation with

angels is hardly imaginable, excepting one case—when the angel has historical connections, and some story can be told of him. Gabriel is for us a person because he once entered a house in Nazareth, filled it with his wings and spoke words to which we still are listening.

Thirdly, the parable, differing from both fable and myth, with human characters and human situations, is again a short story with no moral maxim, which often kills the spirit of the fable. It is the situation itself, imagined and sympathetically lived by the listener, which demonstrates and communicates the teaching of Christ: not what Jesus *said*, but what he *meant* (in Spanish we would use the expression 'what he wanted to say,' which very aptly points to the fact that we never say wholly and accurately what we want to). And the character of parable of the real teachings of Christ—the prodigal son, the wealthy young man, Nicodemus the Pharisee, the adulteress—is as evident as it is essential. The narration is the teaching itself. The listener to the parable or the present reader of the Gospel puts himself imaginatively in the situation and this makes understandable its truth and at the same time Jesus' personality.

A general history of narrative could easily explain it as a painful progressive approach (with some backward steps) to personality and concreteness. Let us compare a series of stages: epics, Spanish medieval 'romance,' the Renaissance *novella*, *La Celestina*, *Don Quijote*, the 19th century novel (Balzac, Stendhal, Dickens, Galdos, Dostoevski), the novel of our time. Step by step, fiction discovers and takes possession of man: from the "typical" epic character (Ulysses standing for ingenuity and wit, Nestor for wisdom, as surely as the Fox or the Owl for their attributes) to the irreducible uniqueness of the individual. Or, if you prefer, from the Greek *prosopon*,

the Roman *persona*, mask or role, to our personality as a creative invention of oneself.

III

FICTION HAS ALWAYS been a powerful means of knowledge. Under the word *paideia*—education in its most powerful sense, close to German *Bildung*—the Greeks did not think primarily of philosophy or science, but of epics, mainly the Homeric poems, tragedy and lyrical poetry, i.e., fiction. In an old essay of mine ("The Novel as a Means of Knowledge," translation in *Confluence*), I once tried to summarize a few characteristics of imaginative representation:

1. Fictional narration is a summing up of life under the aspect of time. If we try to look at somebody else's life, we find that it is impossible to see it as a whole. But the novel can give a picture of life that is all-inclusive. In direct experience we can know life as a whole from hearsay only; literature allows us to grasp something of its totality. In its form and its characters, we can see the "plot" of the ages, the whole of a journey, from birth until death.

2. The very unreality of the fictional character, by escaping from the opacity of "reality," takes on a kind of transparency. Imagination and fiction are thus necessary for the understanding of the real man; we require a fictional representation of life in order to grasp its meaning. In order to understand a fellow being, it is necessary—aside from a certain amount of social data which can be known easily enough, and the physiognomy and expressions which can be perceived—to improvise a sort of "novel of expediency," highly schematic to be sure, but which allows us to construct a model within which the person's gestures and actions acquire their proper place and feeling. This is equiva-

lent to the reconstruction of the novel of his life. And similarly, we are only capable of understanding ourselves—and of living—because of the novel we imagine of ourselves which becomes the “projection” of our life.

3. Fiction establishes a mid-point between the absolute concreteness of reality and the abstraction of purely conceptual schemes. Thus it facilitates the passage from one to the other.

4. The novel also contains within itself the possibility of “experiment” which is generally lacking in real life. We are unable to alter the conditions in which another life unwinds itself, merely to see what would happen. One cannot, in order to observe his reaction, give someone an unexpected inheritance of a million dollars. Nor can one deliberately cause some misfortune in order to watch the consequences, or prolong a life beyond its normal duration. But the novel permits this modification of vital conditions, this alteration of circumstances. One might object that this fictional “experiment,” precisely because it is unreal, is not submitted to verification; consequently, its value as knowledge could be said to be worthless. But this is not the case: the story is subject to the indirect verification of verisimilitude, meaning that whatever is unlikely in literary terms is also philosophically false. To be sure, frequently enough in some contemporary novels, one comes across a shocking improbability. But it will always be possible to show its correspondence to a definite philosophical fallacy in the author’s metaphysical ideas.

5. The novel elaborates and interprets the raw material of human life. That which, in itself, is opaque reality, often irrational and unintelligible, on being spoken, told, or narrated, acquires order, coherence, and meaning. The tale trans-

forms it into something understandable, at least in principle.

6. Finally, the novel is at its most fruitful when it puts into practice a certain knowledge of life which is not purely conceptual but which nonetheless leads toward conceptual understanding. The novel can describe and interpret this knowledge, thus helping to give it scientific validity, capable of being incorporated into the general knowledge accessible to man.

Life and narration are both temporal, consist of temporality. They have duration, but there are different kinds of duration and at the same time of narration. In the epics it is an account of things past, distant and without any connection with the time of the narration. In the modern novel, the narration is connected with *presence*. This goal is reached, perhaps for the first time, in *La Celestina* (1500) with a different technique: instead of the still primitive narration as a report or account of absent, distant subjects we have the dialogue, the dramatic structure which brings before us the characters, in a mental “close-up,” i.e., in our presence. Henceforth, especially after the discovery of *Don Quijote*, fiction allows us to attend to human life in its making, to watch the temporal constitution of its personality.

IV

THE NOVEL is a kind of narration that gives the reader a *world*. In the epics the “world” is purely schematic, without real connections, i.e., it is not a world at all. This explains the possibility of breaking an epic poem into fragments which have an independent life (*chansons de geste* or *cantares de gesta* and *romances*, epics and chronicles, the “composition” of the Homeric poems out of previous elements); but the novel is a *whole*, because it is defined by a world without being split off, it is internally connected.

Now, the main question would be this one: what are these connections? A world is always somebody's world. The characters are the real connections which turn the localisation of the novel into a world. The links which bind the different elements into a world are not topographical or geographical, but strictly biographical. I would define the novel as the *free play of a perspective which always remains faithful to itself*.

Therefore, the idea of man lies behind the novel; and this idea is a changing one. Man can be interpreted as a thing, an animal, a consciousness, a psyche, a life, a person. Philosophy has often missed what man is; the novel, which takes its idea of man from the social environment of its author or from a philosophical theory prevailing in his surroundings, has seldom been able to grasp the authentic reality of human life. The golden age of the European novel was the nineteenth century; unfortunately, the influence of positivism was then overwhelming and its consequence was first 'realism' and later 'naturalism.' The positivist philosophy (Comte's followers rather than Comte himself, who was a man of genius) had a deterministic conception of man. Heredity and environment explain everything; the same method is good for the study of stones, plants, animals or men. This determinism becomes simple mechanism. Emile Zola wrote in 1880 his theoretical book, *Le roman expérimental*: he often quotes long passages from Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*, substituting the word "novel" where Bernard had written "medicine." Imagination has little to do in a realistic or naturalistic novel; the main instrument of the novelist is observation. "The character," says Zola, "becomes, like plants, the product of air and sunshine; this is the scientific conception."

The most refined form of this 19th cen-

tury novel was the so-called "psychological novel," which still remains based on facts, if only psychical facts. The philosophy of our time has discovered that psychical life is not a primary reality, but a theory, i.e. an interpretation of reality. We no longer deal with psychology or with the psychic life, but with life itself. And this means primarily personal, individual life. In many different ways, not always converging, present-day European continental philosophers have explored this field: Unamuno and Ortega, Scheler, Jaspers and Heidegger, Marcel, later on Sartre and others. A close parallel exists between the history of philosophy, as it moves from psychologism to the existential analysis of *Dasein* or to a metaphysical theory of human life, and the history of the novel, which in its turn moves from the psychological to the existential or personal novel.

In the last two decades, there has been much talk about the existential novel, meaning mainly the work of Sartre and his school. In 1938 I wrote an essay on "Unamuno's work: A Problem of Philosophy" (see: *Obras*, V, p. 277-307), later developed in my book, *Miguel de Unamuno*, 1943 (*Obras*, V, p. 13-201), whose main theme was the study of Unamuno's existential or, as I preferred to say, personal novels.

These novels are not *romans à thèse*; they do not illustrate a previously known "truth" in a persuasive literary form, but attempt an interpretation of human reality which parallels the efforts of pure theory. In fact, this type of novel was born out of despair of any theory, of any philosophical attempt to penetrate human life in its real depths. The 19th century philosophy identified reason with scientific reason, i.e., explanation, reduction of reality to its causes, elements or principles. Now, when there is something which interests us by itself, not for the purpose only of dealing

with something, either physically (technique) or mentally (science), it appears to be irreducible and therefore unfit for reason. This is the case of life and history, and this is again the very root of irrationalism. Philosophy fails to account for the life and death of man. Reason, it is said, freezes and kills whatever it touches; it breaks the rhythm of living; it paralyzes into cold and rigid concepts the fluid and temporal reality of existence. This is the general trend of philosophy for nearly a century, from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to William James, Bergson, Unamuno and Spengler. On the other hand, according to Unamuno, "imagination is the most substantial of all our faculties. It merges with the substance of our own soul, the substance of the soul of things and of our fellow-beings." Therefore, if one wants to know human life he has to give up reason and philosophy and make a detour through imagination and fiction: this is the negative source of the personal novel.

I do not mean that Unamuno was the only discoverer of this literary genre; in many ways, Dostoevsky, Proust, Pirandello, Hesse, above all Kafka, have been close to the same point of view, they have discerned the same problem. In *Der Prozess*, for instance, Kafka was concerned with nothing less than the meaning of man's existence, and his entire work is one long desperate question. But I think that Unamuno was the author in whom the personal novel reached maturity, if not perfection.

Unamuno wrote novels because he believed that reason is incapable of grasping and understanding life, that only imagination can do this, and also because of another more positive conviction. With Calderon and Shakespeare, he insisted that our life is a dream, that we are the stuff that dreams are made of. For him, the fictional character equals the real man, Don Quijote is as real as Cervantes. By

this exaggeration—for Unamuno exaggeration was as natural as breathing—he did not mean the unreality of man. He simply wanted to emphasize that human life is something that 'happens,' an event, a drama, unlike rigid, ready-made things. Human life is something that has to be told, narrated; any 'statement' about it, if real and concrete, has to be a story. Hamlet is fictional and Shakespeare is 'real'; but Shakespeare is closer to Hamlet than to a tree or a stone. Man's way of being, i.e., personal being, exemplifies itself in the fictional character as opposed to things.

Unamuno did not point to a static structure, a psychic figure or form, nor even to the stages in its evolution; he contemplated temporal working within the framework of a personality. He never made realistic descriptions (I am afraid that the realists misconceive reality—with things); he only described the vital relationships of the character with the physical environment of his life, and also the human element of it. He used instead this new road of description, narration of what the characters do, which in its turn reveals their environment as their world. From many perspectives, life in its making, never frozen into things, is re-created in the personal novel, which tries to penetrate the "bottom of the soul" and even to throw an imaginative glance upon death.

V

OUR IDEA OF REASON is very different from the prevailing conception in the late 19th century or the first decades of the 20th century. In Spain, Ortega y Gasset has coined the word 'vital reason' and has made of it the nucleus of his philosophy. Today irrationalism is out of date. We cannot restrict the meaning of reason to abstract reason. On the contrary, its higher

form is vital reason, which is narrative in its method, although it relies on an analytical theory of human life. (See my book, *Reason and Life*, Yale University Press, New Haven; Hollis & Carter, London, 1956). The novel, even the personal novel, cannot claim a self-sufficiency from the point of view of knowledge, because it needs concepts and has no concepts of its own, but has to take them from philosophy or the common usage.

The role of the personal novel is, nonetheless, very important. Individual life is many-sided, inexhaustible, opaque and always mysterious. Its temporality makes impossible the grasping of its totality; only God could know the whole person; but man can know the person himself. The novel makes possible a particular understanding, a presentation of human life as

such, i.e., as a dramatic event, without substituting for it an abstract theory or a petrified thing.

This is, in my opinion, the role of the personal novel. Fictional narration is not a substitute for philosophy, but can give to metaphysical thought an adequate presentation of its object. By means of it, at the end of a very long process which started with the elementary forms of fable, parable and myth, fiction has finally reached individual life. A new continent is before us, both in the perspective of philosophy and in that of fiction. Goethe said:

Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,
und gruen des Lebens goldner Baum.
Our time sees now that imagination and reason are not separable, that theory, in order to be real, strict theory, has to be green, like the golden tree of life.