

The Comfort of Civilization

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Source: *Representations*, No. 12 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 115-139

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3043781>

Accessed: 13-03-2017 05:28 UTC

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## The Comfort of Civilization

**BILDUNGSROMAN.** A CERTAIN MAGNETISM hovers around the term. It stands out as the most obvious of the (few) reference points available for that irregular expanse we call the “novel.” It occupies a central role in the philosophical investigations of the novel, from Hegel’s *Aesthetics* to Dilthey to Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*. Found in the broad historical frameworks of Mikhail Bakhtin and Erich Auerbach, it is even discernible in the models of narrative plot constructed by Yuri Lotman. It reappears under various headings (“novel of formation,” “of initiation,” “of education”) in all of the major literary traditions. Even those novels that clearly are *not Bildungsromans* or novels of formation are perceived by us only against this conceptual horizon; so we speak of a “failed initiation” or of a “problematic formation.” Expressions of dubious usefulness, as are all negative definitions; nonetheless they bear witness to the hold of this image on our modes of analysis.

Such semantic hypertrophy is not by chance. Even though the concept of the *Bildungsroman* has become ever more approximate with time, it is still clear that we seek with it to indicate one of the most harmonious solutions ever offered to a consubstantial dilemma of modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of “self-determination” and the just as imperious demands of “socialization.” For two centuries now, Western societies have recognized the individual’s right to choose one’s own ethics and one’s own idea of “happiness,” to freely imagine and design one’s personal destiny—rights declared in proclamations and set down in constitutions but that are not, as a result, universally realizable, since they obviously give rise to contrasting aspirations. And if a liberal-democratic and capitalist society is without a doubt one that can best “live with” conflict, it is equally true that, as a *system* of social and political relationships, it too tends to settle itself into an operational mode that is predictable, regular, “normal.” Like all systems, it demands agreement, homogeneity, consensus.

How can the tension toward *individuality*, which is the necessary fruit of a culture of self-determination, be made to coexist with the opposing tension toward *normality*, the offspring, equally inevitable, of the mechanism of socialization? This is the first aspect of the problem, complicated and made more fascinating still by another characteristic of our civilization, which, having always been pervaded by the doctrines of natural law, cannot concede that socialization is based on a mere compliance to authority. It is not enough that the social order is “legal”;

it must also appear *culturally legitimate*. It must draw its inspiration from values recognized by society as fundamental, reflect them and encourage them. Or it must at least seem to do so.

Thus it is not sufficient for modern bourgeois society that the drives which oppose the successive prevailing standards of “normality” merely are subdued. It is also necessary that, as a “free individual,” not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceive the social norms as *one’s own*. One must *internalize* them and fuse external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter. This fusion is what we usually call “consensus” or “legitimation.” If the *Bildungsroman* appears to us still today as an essential, pivotal point of our history, this is because it has succeeded in representing this fusion with a force of conviction and optimistic clarity that will never be equaled again. We will see in fact that here there is no conflict between individuality and socialization, autonomy and normality, interiority and objectification. One’s formation as an individual *in and for oneself* coincides without rifts with one’s social integration as a simple *part of a whole*. These are two trajectories that nourish one another and in which the painful perception of socialization as *Entsagung*, “renunciation” (from which will emerge the immense psychological and narrative problematics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) is still inconceivable. The “comfort of civilization”: perhaps the *Bildungsroman’s* historical meaning can best be summarized in these words.

...

**“All peasants and craftsmen might be elevated into artists . . .”**

The characters in *Wilhelm Meister* are not idlers. If they make this impression on Werner it is because, as a proper merchant, he cannot conceive of work that does not bring with it renunciation and asceticism, sacrifice. But the immense bet of the Tower Society, previously announced by Wilhelm in the letter to Werner on the differences between the noble and the bourgeois (*WM* 5.3), is that a kind of work can be created that would enhance not “having” but rather “being.” A work that produces not commodities, objects that have value only in that market exchange which distances them forever from their producer, but, as Wilhelm hints, “harmonious objects,”<sup>1</sup> objects that “return” to their creator, thereby permitting the entire “reappropriation” of one’s own activity.

Work in this way is fundamental in *Meister*—as *noncapitalistic* work, as reproduction of a “closed circle.” It is an unequalled instrument of social cohesion, producing not commodities but rather “harmonious objects,” “connections.” It gives a homeland to the individual. It reinforces the links between man and nature, man and other men, man and himself.<sup>2</sup> It is always *concrete* work. It does

not require a producer who is “average,” “abstract,” denatured, but is addressed to a specific individual and to the end of exalting his peculiarities.

Work in *Meister*, in both its “harmonious” results and in its manner of presenting itself to the one who works, seems to have as its end the *formation of the individual*. It is, in its essence, *pedagogy*. This is the true occupation, much more so than its landed enterprises, of the Tower Society, which, after all, has its origin in a pedagogical experiment. Producing men—this is the true vocation of the masons in *Meister*:

Free your mind, where it is possible, from all suspicion and all anxiety! There comes the Abbé. Be friendly towards him until you learn still more how much gratitude you owe him. The rogue! there he goes between Natalia and Theresa. I would bet he is thinking something out. As he above all likes to play a little the part of Destiny, so he does not often let a marriage be made from love-making. (*WM* 8.5)

The Abbé and Jarno, who pronounces these words, are precisely those who have worked at educating Wilhelm. They have written his *Years of Apprenticeship* and will also decide, overcoming his resistance, which woman he should marry. These are all double-edged particulars. On the one hand, they are reminiscent of what Schiller envisioned in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*: a situation in which the “goal” of society is man. On the other hand, the premises and consequences of this utopia cannot but appear disturbing. If in fact the end of society is man, then it goes without saying that those who hold social power have the right or duty to chart the progress of their “product” even in its minimal details—man, in turn (“be friendly towards him”), is also required to show gratitude toward them. Here organicism and liberty, organicism and critical intelligence, are antithetical—for an organic system is without a doubt an inviting homeland, but in every organism, as will gradually become more clear, there is room for only one brain.

The “harmony” that characterizes work in *Meister* is due to the fact that work does not obey solely an economic logic in the strict sense, one that is necessarily indifferent to the subjective aspirations of the individual worker. Instead of forcibly sundering an “alienated” objectification and an interiority incapable of being expressed, work in the *Bildungsroman* creates a continuity between external and internal, between the “best and most intimate” part of the soul and the “public” aspect of existence. Once again we have the congruence of formation and socialization, but there is more. For a work defined in this way is in fact indistinguishable from what a large part of the German culture of the time called “art.” Humboldt:

Everything towards which man directs his attention, whether it is limited to the direct or indirect satisfaction of his merely physical wants, or to the accomplishment of external objects in general, presents itself in a closely interwoven relation with his internal sensations. Sometimes, moreover, there co-exists with this external purpose, some impulse

proceeding more immediately from his inner being; and often, even, this last is the sole spring of his activity, the former being only implied in it, necessarily or incidentally. . . . A man, therefore, whose character peculiarly interests, although his life does not lose this charm in any circumstances or however engaged, only attains the most matured and graceful consummation of his activity, when his way of life is in harmonious keeping with his character.

In view of this consideration, it seems as if all peasants and craftsmen might be elevated into artists; that is, into men who love their labour for its own sake, improve it by their own plastic genius and inventive skill, and thereby cultivate their intellect, ennoble their character, and exalt and refine their enjoyments. And so humanity would be ennobled by the very things which now, though beautiful in themselves, so often go to de-grade it.<sup>3</sup>

In this current of thought, which will continue up to Ferdinand Tönnies's *Community and Society*, work can assume two opposing forms. The first—capitalistic work—“degrades” humanity. It serves not man but rather (say Schiller and the Abbé in *Meister*) the god of “profit”; in so doing it betrays the very essence of work, what it is “in and for itself.” Beautiful. Nobilitating. Formative. If only this second type of work can be substituted for the first. . . .

Indeed. What would happen then? Or to put it in other words, *from what standpoint* is this “aesthetic” and humanizing work superior to one that is instrumental and alienated? Certainly not for its productive capacities. Schiller, in fact, in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, postulates an inversely proportional relationship between the “wealth of nations” and the “aesthetic education of man.” To the “superiority of the species” that characterizes the modern period from classical Greece must be opposed the “inferiority of the individual” (letter 6). This is what the harmony of work as art (or as “play”) must remedy—cost what it may:

Partiality in the exercise of powers, it is true, inevitably leads the individual into error, but the race to truth. Only by concentrating the whole energy of our spirit in one single focus, and drawing together our whole being into one single power, do we attach wings, so to say, to this individual power and lead it artificially beyond the bounds which Nature seems to have imposed upon it. . . .

Thus, however much may be gained for the world as a whole by this fragmentary cultivation of human powers, it is undeniable that the individuals whom it affects suffer under the curse of this universal aim. . . . The exertion of individual talents certainly produces extraordinary men, but only their even tempering makes full and happy men.<sup>4</sup>

The reversal undertaken by Schiller in the second of these paragraphs is one of the keys for penetrating the universe of values of the *Bildungsroman*. The *Bildungsroman* does not bother with “extraordinary men,” “universal aims,” or what “may be gained for the world as a whole.” Its purpose is to create “full and happy men”—full and happy because “tempered,” not “partial” or unilateral. Free from that disharmonious specialization that, in the eyes of Wilhelm, constitutes the particular curse of the “bourgeois”:

He is to cultivate individual capabilities so as to become useful, and it is already presupposed that there is no harmony in his manner of existence nor can there be, because he is obliged to make himself useful in one direction and must, therefore, neglect everything else. (*WM* 5.3)

Only if the individual renounces the bourgeois who dwells within him will he be able to become an harmonious entity, be “full and happy.” Only then will he feel that he again “belongs” to his world, and only then will the strife that pervades the modern age be at an end. For the aesthetic utopia is a *social* utopia:

Though need may drive Man into society, and Reason implant social principles in him, Beauty alone can confer on him a social character. Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it establishes harmony in the individual. All other forms of perception divide a man, because they are exclusively based either on the sensuous or on the intellectual part of his being; only the perception of the Beautiful makes something whole of him, because both his natures must accord with it.<sup>5</sup>

Schiller is wishing here for the advent of a “social” society, spontaneously cohesive, devoid of lacerations and strife. It is for this end that “beauty,” “play,” and “art” are necessary. And yet, it is clear, these cannot really modify the functioning of the great, alienated social mechanisms: the “mechanical” state, production for profit. To bring harmony “to the individual and to society,” aesthetic education follows a more indirect and elusive strategy. Instead of directly confronting the great powers of social life, it creates a new realm of existence in which those abstract and deforming forces penetrate less violently and can be reconstituted in syntony with the individual aspiration toward harmony. This realm is organized according to the dictates of “beauty” and “play”; it is pervaded with the “happiness” of the individual; and the *Bildungsroman* is its narrative explication. Fine. As always, however, when one is dealing with utopias, the question arises: *where* exactly is the realm of aesthetic harmony to be located? Furthermore, *which* aspects of modern life has it effectively involved and organized?

### **The Art of Living**

A fairly simple and reasonable answer can be offered for these questions. Schiller’s aesthetic “sociableness,” like Humboldt’s artistic “work,” represents in fact the precapitalist community and its craftsmanship; just as typically pre-bourgeois is the idea—dealt with at length by Werner Sombart—that man is “the meteyard of all things.”<sup>6</sup> The notorious “Deutsche misère” corroborates this hypothesis, which contains without a doubt much of the truth. The allure of *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* or of *Wilhelm Meister* would therefore be born, in large measure, of the regret for a lost harmony. As likely as this seems, I would like to propose here a different type of historical interpretation: that aesthetic organicity, and the happiness that comes with it, belong not only to a *past* that

precedes capitalist production and the “mechanical” state but endure in modern times as well. But now they are shifted “to the side of,” so to speak, the new collective institutions, which they engage in a silent and unending border war.

Following the lead of various recent studies, I will call this “parallel world” the sphere of “everyday life.” Henri Lefebvre:

Everyday life is defined as totality. Considered in their specialization and technicalization, the higher activities leave among themselves a “technical void” filled in by everyday life. The latter engages *all* activities in an extensive relationship and encompasses them together with their differences and their conflicts; it constitutes their meeting grounds and their common link.<sup>7</sup>

Lefebvre is *half* right. That there are no limits to what can be incorporated by everyday life seems, to me, to be true. But it is also true that, if we must define a sphere of life, and declare that it is without limits, then we have not come very far. A new element must be inserted; we must specify that what characterizes everyday life (as well as Schiller’s aesthetic education, for that matter) is not the nature or the number of its pursuits but their “treatment.” That is to say, the direction that they assume, the end to which they are subordinated. Karel Kosik:

The everyday appears . . . as the world of familiarity. . . . The everyday is a world whose dimensions and potentialities an individual can control and calculate with his abilities and resources. In the everyday, everything is ‘at hand’ and an individual can realize his intentions. . . . In the everyday, the individual develops relations on [the] basis of *his own* experience, *his own* possibilities, *his own* activity, and therefore considers the everyday reality to be his own world.<sup>8</sup>

We may thus speak of everyday life whenever the individual subordinates any activity whatsoever to the construction of “his own world.” We are at the antipodes of Protestant ethics, of the ascetic and imperious Weberian vocation. In everyday life, it is the activity—*any* activity, at least potentially—that must be submitted to the service of the individual. It must become proportional to “his abilities and resources.” If the enterprise succeeds, “an individual can realize his intentions,” and the world acquires the comforting dimensions of familiarity. It is no longer the world of hardship and duty. It is a world where man truly is the meteyard of all things.

We have more or less retraced the picture hypothesized in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Further proof of this affinity between aesthetic education and everyday life is to be found in Agnes Heller’s work, who, following Lukács, defines Kosik’s “individual” as a “particularity” that “tends toward self-preservation, to which it subordinates everything.”<sup>9</sup> Heller, reappropriating Hegel’s notion of the “world-historical individual,” thus opposes “particularity” to what she defines as “individuality”:

It is the individualities—particularly those most developed individualities . . . to whom we shall refer as *representative individuals*—who individually incorporate the evolutionary generic apex of a given society.<sup>10</sup>

These great men, Hegel had written, seem to follow only their passions, their free will, but what they want is the universal, and this is their pathos.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently:

It was not unhappiness they chose but exertion, conflict, and labor in the service of their end. And even when they reached their goal, peaceful enjoyment and happiness was not their lot. Their actions are their entire being. . . . When their end is attained, they fall aside like empty husks. They may have undergone great difficulties in order to accomplish their purpose, but as soon as they have done so, they die early like Alexander, are murdered like Caesar, or deported like Napoleon. . . . The fearful consolation [is] that the great men of history did not enjoy what is called happiness.<sup>12</sup>

To use once again Schiller's terminology: these individuals may be "advantageous to the species" but they are not "full and happy" men. They are "representatives," for Heller, "of the evolutionary generic apex of a given society;" of its major historical turnings and acquisitions. But precisely for this reason they are *not* representatives of those times "of ordinary administration" that, we will see, constitute the privileged historical backdrop of the novel, especially of the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>13</sup> Here the "representative individual" does not want "exertion, conflict, and labor in the service of their end": these struggles will take place (and in an extremely problematic way) only in Stendhal, whose heroes, not without reason, are taken in by the "world-historical" model of Napoleon; they thus give life to a narrative plot whose typical event is a clash with the existing order. But the hero of the *Bildungsroman*, like Heller's "particular," "wants a life *free of conflict*, wants to feel at ease in the world as it is."<sup>14</sup> His compass is personal happiness, and the plot that will permit him to realize it will follow the model of *organic integration*: the polar opposite of the conflictual plot.

Although they are different in many ways, the studies of Lefebvre, Kosik, and Heller nevertheless all converge toward a single goal, the formulation of a *critique* of everyday life. They want to "disalienate" it, reveal its wretchedness or transience, unmask the "happiness" it promises as something mean or imaginary. In doing this, all three oppose it, more or less echoing Hegel, with the great and revolutionary march of universal history, and there can be no doubt that, against such a backdrop, this happiness seems a truly poor and fragile entity.

Further along, in discussing the stance of the *Bildungsroman* toward the French revolution, we too will find a particularly lucid example of the alterity between the two spheres of life. A difficulty remains, however: the viewpoint of universal history, on which the critique of everyday life rests, is certainly not the only one possible, and above all *it is not the one assumed by novelistic form*. Not blind to the



progress of universal history, novelistic form nevertheless “reshapes” it as it is perceived from the viewpoint of everyday life. Furthermore, the novel “funnels” universal history into this mode of existence in order to amplify and enrich the life of the “particularity.”

In other words, in the *Bildungsroman* the “significance of history” does not have its reference point in the “future of the species.” Historical significance instead must be revealed within the more narrow confines of a circumscribed and relatively common individual life. What is involved here is an *a priori* condition of the “symbolic form”; whether we like it or not, this is how things stand. It thereby follows that the novel exists not as a critique but as a *culture of everyday life*. Far from devaluing it, the novel organizes and “refines” this form of existence, making it ever more alive and interesting—or, with Balzac, even fascinating.

Given the affinity between aesthetic education and everyday life, one of the tasks of the *Bildungsroman* will be to show how pleasing life in “our small world” can be. Once again, Agnes Heller:

Satisfaction in everyday life consists of two ingredients: the *pleasing* and the *useful*. . . . The pleasing is of consequence *exclusively* in everyday life. With it we simply imply a positive feeling that accompanies the physical or psychic state.<sup>15</sup>

The pleasing: the comfort or ease of being in the world. And it is precisely this satisfied equilibrium that renders such comfort deaf—exactly in the same way as the “aesthetic education”—to the proud harshness of modern, “autonomous” art. “Great works of art,” Heller continues, “either are *not* pleasing, or are *more than* pleasing.”<sup>16</sup> In both cases it is art itself that makes impossible the “full and happy” temperance of Schiller’s project. Is there no way then to fuse art with life? Not exactly, but there is a solution that has appeared precisely in the most recent decades. Kitsch:

Kitsch is linked to an art of living, and it is due to this world that it has found its authenticity, for it is difficult to live intimately with artistic masterpieces *tout court*, whether those of woman’s fashion or those of Michelangelo’s vault. Kitsch, instead, is of *human* proportions. . . .

Kitsch is acceptable art, that which does not transform our spirit via a transcendence beyond the bounds of everyday life, via a force superior to ourselves—especially if it must make us overcome ourselves. *Kitsch* has human proportions, whereas art is beyond these. . . .

In the adaptation of the tonality of the environment to that of the individual we find a *recipe of happiness*. Kitsch is the art of happiness, and each exaltation of the messages of happiness is at the same time an exaltation of Kitsch. Hence its universality. . . . Kitsch coincides with the material environment of everyday life. It is difficult to conceive of it without some concrete prop.<sup>17</sup>

From “happiness” as an insertion into an organic whole to its miniaturization in the aesthetic harmony of the individual—and from here to kitsch and to everyday life. Kitsch literally “domesticates” aesthetic experience. It brings it into

the *home*, where most of everyday life takes place. Moreover, it raids all sorts of aesthetic material to construct what will be the typical household of modern times. In *Meister* the “harmonious objects” *par excellence*, those that make the world an inviting “homeland,” are precisely homes, and this is even more true for *Pride and Prejudice*. The crucial episode, here, is Elizabeth Bennett’s visit to Pemberley, Darcy’s country residence. Pemberley is open to the public: it is a monument of “beauty” for the admiration of outsiders. But there is nothing museum-like about it, and the reaction it arouses in Elizabeth certainly is not “aesthetic.” On seeing Pemberley, she instead thinks of Darcy for the first time as a possible husband—not because of ambition or avarice, but because Pemberley reveals that the everyday—domestic—life of a man like Darcy can precisely be something very “beautiful.”

Beautiful? Not exactly. Jane Austen, who chose her words with legendary precision, attributes the adjective *beautiful* only to the “natural” beauty of the estate. The house, the rooms, and the furniture are not “beautiful”—they are “handsome.” A term that indicates a “decorous” and “balanced” beauty, “without harshness,” “comfortable” (as the etymology itself suggests). A beauty, in a word, of human proportions. Repeated three times in a page to indicate objects, *handsome* reappears a page later—four times in ten lines!—to designate Darcy.

“Handsome”: a beauty that is not in the least threatening or disconcerting, not in the least autonomous. It envelops the ideal of a golden mean, of a clear and reciprocal translatability between the individual and his context. It is the miracle of eighteenth-century “taste”—of the “artistic period” that literary historiography sees as ending with Goethe’s death. An “artistic” period not because marked by a matchless aesthetic production, but because art still seems within it to form a whole with “life.” With the life of the social elite, of course, which becomes ever more broad and rich, while artistic production (especially architecture and painting but also music), which has not yet installed itself in the “marketplace,” remains in good part within the bounds and rhythms of that existence. The two spheres thus achieve a “natural” fusion, without suffering any resulting disgrace or deformation.

It is the miracle, we have said, of eighteenth-century taste. To associate such a fusion with *bad* taste might seem a gratuitous slap in the face: in the end, when a musical cigarette case plays Mozart’s serenade, something has changed. Granted—but the point is that the kitsch that will engulf the following century—and which is already leering in the castle episode in *Meister* or in the Rosing chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*—is not distinguished from neoclassical *taste* because it has betrayed its aspirations but because it has remained faithful to them in a historical context that has by now changed too radically. And what has especially changed is the position and self-knowledge of the aesthetic sphere: “My dear Fräulein,” observes the musician Klesmer in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, “you have developed your qualities from the *Standpunkt* of the salon.” This *Standpunkt* could still

be relevant to Darcy and Elizabeth, whose path Gwendolen Harleth would in fact like to follow. Halfway through the nineteenth century, however, art leaves the salons. Thus, Klesmer coldly concludes, “you must unlearn all that.”

Aesthetic education must be *unlearned* because it has no more worth. It is neither true aesthetics nor true education. In “giving a meaning” to the lives of Eliot’s heroes, we witness its replacement with a much more demanding “vocation”: a much more rigid and “depersonalizing,” and also, as we will see, more painful or self-damaging, ideal. And this explains why it has been so difficult, for Western culture, to find a true substitute for the harmonious “dilettantism” celebrated in *Meister* (Eliot herself will pay tribute to it with *Middlemarch*’s Will Ladislaw). The aesthetic fullness of everyday life in fact ensured a “humanization” of the social universe that will be, in the future, difficult to imagine. We should not therefore be surprised if it has continued for a long time, in countless metamorphoses, to enhance the existence of the modern individual.<sup>18</sup>

### Personality

The balanced harmony that strikes Elizabeth at Pemberley is not only an architectural style but also the visible manifestation of a pedagogical ideal. An ideal of the greatest importance, in an age in which the formation of the individual had become saddled with new problems. Philippe Ariès:

Our modern spirit is uneasy (when faced with the nature of medieval associations) because it refuses to admit the intimate mixing of ways of being that today are sharply distinguished—the intimate mode of life: family or friendship; the private mode of life: diversion and distraction; the religious mode of life: devotee and cult activity; the corporative mode of life: the gathering of those who exercise the same profession with the purpose of learning it, or of gaining profit from it or protecting it. Modern man is divided between a professional life and a domestic life that often clash. . . . Modern life is characterized by the separation of elements that were at one time intertwined.<sup>19</sup>

If by individual we mean something fundamentally unitary, then the human being described in these lines is no longer so—or not yet so. The variety of his fields of activity has certainly enriched him, but it has also deprived him of all cohesion. The modern individual is marked from birth by this heterogeneity of occupations, by a perennial disequilibrium of his symbolic and emotive investments. To become an “individual” in the full sense of the word, he will have to learn how to master this multiplicity and how to keep it from turning into a wearisome disharmony.

How can this be done? Richard Sennett’s *The Fall of Public Man* is one of the most intelligent reconstructions of this effort.<sup>20</sup> For Sennett, the conflict can be reduced to the two extreme poles of “public” life and “intimate” life. During the last two centuries, the meaning of existence, for the Western individual, has moved ever more decisively into the intimate sphere, resulting, therefore, in “the

fall of public man." When faced with each situation or collective institution, this individual has turned more and more to a magical and almost obsessive phrase—"what does this mean *for me?*"—which reflects the transfer of the "meaning of life" and celebrates the triumph of the sociopsychological attitude known as "narcissism."

Amazingly rich in intuition and thought across the most divergent fields, Sennett's reconstruction has perhaps only one weak point. It is not necessarily true that the narcissistic "for me" has always dwelled in the sphere of *intimate* life. Heedless of the "objective" significance of what surrounds him, the narcissistic "I" is in fact basically irresponsible. However, intimate life during the last two centuries—the realm of marital and familial relationships in the narrow sense—has been in fact dominated too much by ideals of responsibility, self-sacrifice, and consideration of the other. The origin of narcissism should not be looked for here. The intimate is a realm that is too "strong" emotionally, too full of symbolic and legal obligations to allow for the evasion of responsibilities. We must look for a world of less rigid and demanding relationships. One that leaves the individual a wider range for the centripetal and narcissistic manipulation of external reality.

This more pliable realm is in fact the sphere of everyday life. Agnes Heller has called it the sphere of the "fattening of the particularity." Here all relationships, intimate as well as public, only have worth in their contribution to the rounding out of the individual personality. "Personality": elusive catchword of our times, its semantic content changes precisely in those decades between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as it settles down into two intertwined senses.

First of all, personality is a distinctive trait. It designates what renders an individual unique and different from others. But this distinction—and here comes into play the second aspect of the term—never applies to a single activity or to a single characteristic. The modern individual feels that no occupation, be it work or family life or whatever, ever permits one to "fully express" one's personality. Multilateral and prismatic, personality remains a consistently unsatisfied idol. It would prefer never to have to bend for anything, never to be the means toward an end, whatever that end might be. It would instead prefer that each activity lose its autonomy and objective consistency in order to become a mere instrument of its own development.

For all these reasons, modern personality lodges at the center of everyday life, and it is under its lead that the latter is reunited with the culture of *Bildung* and with the theory of the novel itself. Georg Simmel:

Here we see the source of the concept of culture, which, however, at this point follows only our linguistic feeling. We are not yet cultivated by having developed this or that individual bit of knowledge or skill; we become cultivated only when all of them serve a

psychic unity which depends on but does not coincide with them. Our conscious endeavors aim towards particular interests and potentialities. The development of every human being, when it is examined in terms of identifiable items, appears as a bundle of developmental lines which expand in different directions and quite different lengths. But man does not cultivate himself through their isolated perfections, but only insofar as they help to develop his indefinable personal unity. In other words: culture is the way that leads from the closed unity through the unfolded multiplicity to the unfolded unity.

This can refer only to a development towards something prearranged in the germinating forces of personality, sketched out within itself, as a kind of ideal plan.<sup>21</sup>

During the same years in which Simmel was recapitulating this ideal of individual culture—aware, likewise, that the development of capitalism and of the metropoli had rendered it by then unattainable (and it is not by chance that neither play a deciding role in the *Bildungsroman*)—György Lukács was following an analogous path. *The Theory of the Novel*:

The content of such maturity is an ideal of free humanity which comprehends and affirms the structures of social life as necessary forms of human community, yet, at the same time, only sees them as an occasion for the active expression of the essential life substance—in other words, which takes possession of these structures, not in their rigid political and legal being-for-themselves, but as the necessary instruments of aims which go far beyond them. . . .

The social world must therefore be shown as a world of convention, which is partially open to penetration by living meaning.

A new principle of heterogeneity is thereby introduced into the outside world: a hierarchy of the various structures and layers of structures according to their penetrability by meaning. This hierarchy is irrational and incapable of being rationalised; and the meaning, in this particular case, is not objective but is tantamount to the possibility of a personality fulfilling itself in action.<sup>22</sup>

There is one point on which Lukács and Simmel seem particularly to agree: that it is fairly difficult for modern “personality” to reach its goal in a professional occupation alone, that is to say, in work. Work has become too fragmented in its nature and also too “objective,” too impervious to “living meaning.” Those who devote themselves to a modern profession must give up their own personality: thus Max Weber, writing in the same years as Simmel and Lukács. And in his letter on the antithesis between the nobility and the bourgeoisie, Wilhelm Meister likewise states:

A bourgeois may acquire merit and with great trouble cultivate his mind, but his personality is lost, whatever he may do. (*WM* 5.3)

That this not happen, *Meister* suggests that one turn to occupations at the same time more pliable and more integral: the “pedagogic” vocation, “aesthetic” enjoyment—we will see other examples shortly. But *Meister* also suggests that we will find the key to modern personality, and to its sphere of everyday operation, not so much in specific “activities” but in a peculiar *disposition of the soul*. This

infiltrates little by little into each occupation, ruminates on it, appraises it, and assails it if it must in its efforts to render it consonant with the development of the individual as an “unfolded unity.” In this way we can truly say with Jean Baudrillard that everyday life is a *system of interpretation*; the same holds true for personality. Both are ways of “reshaping” the world, of perceiving and judging it, according to human proportions. In the words of Lukács quoted above, external reality acquires value according to the “possibility of a personality fulfilling itself in [it].” Whatever lies beyond this circle and cannot be translated into “experience” becomes, conversely, “insignificant”: it does not attract the eye, the novel has no desire to tell it. It is, to paraphrase Sennett, “the fall of public perception”: an ethical-intellectual nearsightedness that blurs our image of the modern individual. Without it, however, everything leads one to believe that the individual would be difficult to imagine.

### **Trial, Opportunity, Episode**

If we read *Meister*, or even better *Pride and Prejudice*, with a dose of healthy critical ingenuity, sooner or later arises the inevitable question of what precisely the main characters are “doing.” Werner gives a response upon seeing Wilhelm anew: “Look at him, how he stands! How it all suits and fits together! How idling makes one flourish!” (*WM* 8.1). Yes, in the end Wilhelm and Elizabeth engage in “idling.” But this, we have seen, does not mean doing *nothing* but rather means not entrusting the definition of one’s personality to any *one* activity.

We have here a further convergence between the particularities of everyday life and the categories of the theory of the novel. By not defining himself in only one sphere of life, the novelistic protagonist ceases to be definable as a “role”—the “merchant” Werner, the “minister” Collins, the “mother” of the Bennett sisters. He becomes instead, to echo Philippe Hamon, a “polyparadigmatic character.” That is to say, he becomes an entity defined by various, heterogeneous traits that may even contradict one another.<sup>23</sup>

To explain the genesis of this “polyparadigmaticity,” narrative theory usually makes use of some conception of “realism.” Somewhere along the line we learn to represent existence in a more “faithful” way. If this is true, however, how do we explain why such a multiplicity of traits always applies to a very small number of characters in a novel? Another explanation is needed. Perhaps by putting a polyparadigmatic character at the center of a story, every event becomes automatically attracted *into the orbit of “personality.”* Each event draws its meaning through its reflection at the other levels of Wilhelm and Elizabeth’s existence, from the internal harmony that it helps to bind or crack.

It is therefore not a question of representing things or people in a more *truthful* way but of deciding that a certain aspect of existence is more *meaningful*

than others and can consequently have a special function in the story's organization—a “central” function that puts the narration into perspective wherein the plot has its center, in fact, in the multilateral development of the protagonist. This “focused” perception of a structure is precisely the image of social relationships most consonant with the *anthropocentrism* that is the point of departure and arrival of everyday life.

But plot is still, nevertheless, a *diachronic* succession of events. How do we reconcile our spatial metaphors of “centrality” and “focus,” which transmit an idea of equilibrium and harmony, with a temporal dimension that implies change and instability? In other words: how do we reconcile a *novelistic* plot, which is uncertain and gripping, with the familiar and pleasing rhythm of everyday life? With the rhythm of “ordinary administration”?

Perhaps we can start by observing that the “ordinary” course of modern everyday life does not coincide, as at first sight would appear inevitable, with banality, inertia, and repetition. Lefebvre, who initially held this position, had later to write a few hundred pages to refute it.<sup>24</sup> More concisely, Karel Kosik:

The everyday has its experience and wisdom, its sophistication, its forecasting. It has its replicability but also its special occasions, its routine but also its festivity. The everyday is thus not meant as a contrast to the unusual, the festive, the special, or to History: hypos-tatizing the everyday as a routine over History, as the exceptional, is itself the *result* of a certain mystification.<sup>25</sup>

Kosik is right. Modern everyday life is no longer reducible to a mere repetition of prescribed, “uneventful,” narratively *insignificant* events that therefore do not merit being related. The intervention of personality has broken down the rigid barrier between “workday” monotony and “holiday” exception:

One day in winter, as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called ‘petites madeleines.’ . . .

In this all too familiar example from Proust, the grayness of modern everyday life is seen to preserve within itself the “Sunday mornings” of childhood (“and all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann’s park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray”), only to return them to us at the most insignificant moments, from the depths “of my cup of tea.” And the spark of the entire process is precisely the work, voluntary or not, of personality, which the novel uses to bring to life a sort of temporal third dimension, with ever-expanding confines, in which nothing can be declared *a priori* as entirely without significance, and nothing as absolutely significant. Nothing is mere repetition; nothing

is sheer novelty. The typical novelistic “episode,” as we shall shortly see, always contains within itself something of Proust’s *madeleine*, some type of experiment with time.

The two stances toward time that dominate *The Theory of the Novel*—hope and, above all, memory—refer only in appearance to the dimension of the past or to that of the future. In reality, they confer on novelistic time a particular focusing, a curvature that continually has past and future converge *on the present*. On a present that is “individualized” and is the constant work of reorganization of what has taken place as well as a projection of what is to come. It is an elastic, elusive present, the exact opposite of the definitive “here and now” of tragedy. Not only of tragedy, however, for it is in such a representation of temporality that one witnesses the absolute incompatibility between the *Bildungsroman*, and modern formation-socialization, and that “initiation” with which it is so often confused. Not just the initiation of primitive ritual but, even more so, that of a work which preceded *Meister* by only a few years and which Goethe admired enough to sketch a continuation of it: Mozart and Schickaneder’s *The Magic Flute*.

The “trial” in *The Magic Flute* is the typical exceptional event. It breaks Tamino’s life into two parts that have nothing in common. Before the test Tamino is a boy, “ein Jüngling”—after, he is a man, “ein Mann.” Before, he is in fact a prince in exile—after, the true heir of his father the king. Before, a wandering and solitary individual—after, the member of a powerful community. Before, the tortured admirer of Pamina—after, her legitimate spouse.

Before, after . . . and *during* the trial? During the trial, and this is the point, Tamino is nothing. He is pure potentiality. He can be what he ends up being, or he can be knocked back down to what he was. But in the course of the *Prüfungszeit* he is on hold, at zero degree, just as time in fact is on hold. The “trial” of initiation consists precisely in accepting that time stop and that one’s own identity dissipate. It consists in being willing *to die* in order to have the possibility *to be reborn*. The only virtue put to trial is courage in the sense of “patience,” the virtue of exceptional circumstances, virtue in the face of death. It does not measure the capacity *to live*, which does not seem to concern it at all, but only the ability to endure the stark alternative (there exists no gray area between the Night Realm and the Court of Sarastro) of death and rebirth.

The opposite is true in *Meister*. Just like Tamino, Wilhelm is accepted into a secret society, but without ever being put to a recognizable “trial.” Just as in space there exists no line that separates the world of the initiates from the outside one (there is no symbolic door on which to “knock three times” as in *The Magic Flute*, the beat of which is heard from the very “Overture”),<sup>26</sup> so in time there is no irreversible moment in which everything, in one fell swoop, is decided. Wilhelm’s



*Bildung* consists also in his realization of such a state of affairs and in his no longer searching for the decisive act, the event from which his destiny shines forth. The Wilhelm of *Theatrical Mission*, still a prisoner of this vision,<sup>27</sup> will never finish his quest. The Wilhelm of the *Years of Apprenticeship*, vice versa, will succeed precisely because he has adopted a flexible attitude toward the passage of time. There is a warning of the Tower Society that constantly accompanies him—it almost torments him: “Remember to live!” Not to live in one way or the next, but simply to live. What is important is not to establish a goal and concentrate all of one’s forces for the moment in which it is neared, the moment of the test. What is important is to be able to dispose of one’s energies *at every moment* and to employ them for the numerous occasions or opportunities that life, little by little, takes upon itself to offer.

“Seize the opportunities.” If we project this phrase onto the diachronic axis of plot we get the contours of the novelistic “episode.” Unlike what occurs in the short story or in tragedy, the novelistic episode does not refer back to an objective necessity but to a subjective possibility. It is that event which, in the strong sense of the word, *could also not have taken place*. Every novel is in effect an unending combinative matrix of events that are potentially crucial but frustrated, and of others that, apparently of little consequence, acquire instead an unexpected importance. The “meetings” in *Meister*, the “conversations” in *Pride and Prejudice*: they are on every page, but not all become equally meaningful.

They *become* meaningful: that is the point. The novelistic episode is almost never meaningful *in itself*. It becomes so because someone—in the *Bildungsroman* usually the protagonist—*gives it meaning*. He prolongs the encounter, he probes into the conversation, he recalls it, he puts his hopes in it. . . . The novelistic plot is marked by this curvature toward interiority, which dispenses meaning and thereby creates events. “Remember to live”: remember that all you run into can be used for the building of your life; it can all be made meaningful.

This is the uneven glimmer of “experience.” Another catchword of the culture we are examining, *experience* too changes in meaning in the second half of the eighteenth century. *Experience* (not as in the famous aphorism “Experience consists in experiencing something that we would have preferred not to experience”) no longer indicates something that is essentially displeasing: the experience of pain, baroque disillusionment, the loss of an original innocence. By now it refers to an acquisitive tendency. It is growth, the expansion of self, and it is also a type of “experiment” performed with one’s self. An experiment, and thus provisional: the episode becomes an experience if the individual manages to give it a meaning that expands and strengthens his personality. . . .

. . . but also manages to impose limits before it becomes unilaterally and irrevocably modified. This is the other side of the novelistic event. It demands—

and thus again is different from the short story or tragedy—that one does not get in too “deep,” for if no episode in itself is immune to meaning, no episode, on the other hand, can contain the *entire* meaning of existence. No character will ever entirely reveal his essence in a single gesture or encounter. (Elizabeth Bennett, by forcing in this way her interpretation of Darcy, thereby risks destroying her “novel.”)<sup>28</sup>

The “trial” that the protagonist of the *Bildungsroman* must overcome consists thus in accepting the deferment of the ultimate meaning of his existence. It is the new pedagogical ideal of the eighteenth century, which substitutes admiration for precocity with the image of a gradual growth, a few steps at a time.<sup>29</sup> For this to happen—and Rousseau returns constantly to this point in *Emile*—one must first of all learn to control the imagination, which is at the origin of the two errors that can lead us astray from the path toward “maturity.” Restlessness, first of all, the “rambling thoughts” of Robinson Crusoe, makes man too much of a wanderer, too detached from his environment, thereby preventing him from extracting all the potential meaning it contains. But even more than restlessness, *intensity* compels him to see an *excess* of meaning in those things around him and to bind himself to them too thoroughly and too quickly. Prematurely: in ways that are not those of an “adult.”

The middle road of the hero of the *Bildungsroman* is lined with characters who err in the opposite directions. Restless characters, such as Lydia Bennett, who are prey to futility; and intense characters, their pathetic innocence driving them to a tragic end: Mariane, Aurelie, the Harpist. And, of course, Mignon. The episode that decides her death—one of the most disagreeably cruel in all of world literature—embodies without half-tones the eighteenth-century repudiation of premature and passionate desire (the episode takes the form of a mystery in 5.12 and is explained in 8.3). Mignon, one night, secretly enters into Wilhelm’s bedroom, spurred on by a desire that she cannot yet well define. She hides and waits for Wilhelm to arrive, but Philine arrives instead, slips into bed, as does Wilhelm, half drunk, moments later. From her hiding place, Mignon will be the silent witness to the night of love between the two.

Not much can be said about the meaning of this scene: it is such a very clear and banal “everything has its time and place.” But it is a savage banality: when Goethe shows us his philistine side he does absolutely nothing to appear affable. In an episode like this we see the convex side of everyday life: that part of it which faces not the elect individual but rather the outside world. Its conventions seem so flexible and inoffensive, almost without confines—but only as long as one remains within them, and within a spiritual disposition consonant with them. If one gives in to the flight of imagination, however, one then discovers that those confines do indeed exist, and with a cutting edge: but then it is too late. The limbs that are severed from the organism, in *Meister*, can never be rejoined. That most fervid and alive interiority, because it is not yet objectified, and perhaps is

not objectifiable, that new and closed dimension of the spirit marked by strife, which will dominate the great nineteenth-century novels, is, in the relentlessly “industrious” and “objectified” environment of the *Bildungsroman*, a symptom of illness. It is a betrayal of life, its opposite. This explains the frequency, most uncommon for novels of the period, with which Goethe kills his characters or deprives them of reason. Beyond the organism there is not loneliness but—as already in *Werther*, and later in *Elective Affinities*—nightmares, insanity, or death.

A death, it is understood, by which the imminent and radiant conclusion must not be upset. Thus the repugnant *mise en scène* of Mignon’s burial—embalmings and choirs of angels conceal the reality of the corpse and transform even the funeral into an “episode” that merits being lived. The gaze must be removed at the first opportunity, in other words immediately, from the spot that will remain empty. One must immediately move on to new tales, to new connections. It is that “immediately” that makes one shudder, cruel as only Goethe, in his well-known abhorrence of death, managed to be. Every void must be filled. Moreover, it *can* be filled without real losses. There is no doubt that we can easily reformulate “Remember to live!” as “Forget the dead!” Mourning does not contribute to *Bildung*.

### Conversation

Trial in *The Magic Flute* is an obstacle. To enter into one’s own role as an adult an external barrier must be overcome—the four elements in revolt of the final test. It is an archaic mechanism that makes one think of Vladimir Propp’s models of narrative plot; linear sequences of thrusts and counterthrusts, with corresponding allies and adversaries. Trial in the *Bildungsroman* is instead an opportunity: not an obstacle to be overcome while remaining “intact,” but something that must be *incorporated*, for only by stringing together “experiences” does one build a personality. If Tamino ceases to exist during his *Prüfungszeit*, Wilhelm exists *only* in the course of his “years of apprenticeship.”

This antithesis between initiation and formation is seen with exemplary clarity in the different functions that language is called upon to perform in these works. In *The Magic Flute* Tamino must above all remain *silent*. That maturity is confirmed with silence illuminates how terrible, how essentially violent, the ritual of initiation can be: to be silent means, first of all, not to scream from pain (or, in the less bloody world of *The Magic Flute*, from fear). It also means that, in the climactic moment of his existence, the individual agrees to deprive himself of his most elementary right: the right to talk, to reason, to “have his say.” It is a logical privation, in any case, since he is introduced to a role that has existed for him unchanging, and before which his arguments must remain mute.

There is more, however. In the course of the final test Tamino is permitted—a detail that does not really fit in with the logic of the plot, and is for this reason

all the more interesting—to use the flute given to him by the Queen of the Night. Uneasy surrogates for words, more “potent” than them but tremendously more enigmatic, the notes of the flute tell us that the crucial point in Tamino’s trial rests not so much on not emitting any sound, but on not emitting any sound *endowed with meaning*. Either all language is renounced, or one is used that is by definition asemantic. No “meaning” is given, or can be given, to the trial. It lies beyond the realm of the verbal sphere and wants to remain outside of it. Conversely, language becomes “twaddle”: it suits Papageno, not Tamino, and it will never be an essential stage in the journey of formation.<sup>30</sup>

Those who are familiar with *Meister* and *Pride and Prejudice* know well that, in these works, the paradigm is reversed. Here, if anything, one talks too much. One *talks* too much: the formation of the individual, once seen within everyday life, involves language primarily as a tool of *conversation*. A decisive turning point in Wilhelm’s *Bildung* is when he abandons the “theatrical” rhetoric of impassioned monologue for the much more prosaic art of dialogue. Elizabeth and Darcy, for their part, must literally learn to talk to one another: only thus will they be able to overcome those “embarrassing moments of silence” that mark and frustrate their every encounter.

“To learn to talk to one another,” to talk to one another “sincerely.” These are circumlocutions to say that one must *trust* in language. In the magic circle of everyday life language in fact appears—as does work—as a *sociable* social institution. If one abandons oneself to it without reserve, the double operation of “expressing oneself” and of “understanding others” then becomes possible. One will be able, in other words, to reach an agreement: as every conversation beyond a mere exchange of civilities (or of insults) presupposes the willingness of the participants to abandon their own viewpoint in order to embrace that of the other.<sup>31</sup> It is a secret inclination—just as strong in Goethe as in Jane Austen—to separate conversation from that violent, noisy, and partial discussion that had accompanied the formation of eighteenth-century public opinion, a discussion that took place in strictly public places—cafés, inns, postal centers—and excluded on principle all interest in and reference to the private condition of the participants: each spoke only as a member of the public.<sup>32</sup> In comparison with this historical precedent, conversation brings the linguistic exchange back to a more domestic and “familiar” space. It is reserved for persons who know each other well; one is not only not unaware of the personal import of one’s words but actually strives to understand and give worth to that element. Conversation seems, more so than the “rational public debate” that Jürgen Habermas sees at the foundation of public opinion, to lead back to the less demanding language of “worldliness”—“se rendre agréable dans la société”—examined by Peter Brooks in *The Novel of Worldliness*.<sup>33</sup> It is as if the term *conversation* were still faithful to

its etymology, thereby indicating—beyond and more than a verbal relationship—an everyday familiarity, a concrete habitat, a serene and varied way of occupying one's niche in the world.

Conversation, just like everyday life, is born of the attempt to assimilate every sort of experience. It presents itself as that rhetorical form which permits one to talk "about everything." To talk about everything, however, is not easy, or, better put, is a type of rhetoric, a system of rules that must be observed. But conversation has become for us by now so habitual, having read so many novels and having engaged in so many conversations, that it is hard for us to see it as something artificial, as only one of many possible modes of discourse—with its advantages and its limits, its words and its silences. Limits and silences that do not refer to the subjects of conversation: obviously every era provides for permissible and forbidden ones. The essential silence instead involves conversation's *form*, and it consists of avoiding in a systematic way the *purity* of reasoning. For in the modern world one can truly talk "about everything" only if one forgets about a break, and a truly irreversible one, in the history of thought. Agnes Heller:

In antiquity any type of scientific thought could refer more or less to the experience of everyday life. . . . In the Platonic dialogues Socrates always begins with an everyday occurrence, with everyday thought. . . . He "raises" to philosophical theory experience present in everyday thinking, whether he is dealing with theories relating to "natural sciences," metaphysics, to gnoseology, ethics, aesthetics, or politics.<sup>34</sup>

From the Renaissance on, however, this continuity is broken: knowledge slowly loses its anthropomorphic traits and becomes incommensurate with everyday experience. Moreover, it as a rule begins to challenge common sense, to demonstrate that from it no cognitive "growth" is any longer possible. "Familiarity," Kosik succinctly summarizes, "is an obstacle to knowledge."<sup>35</sup>

Yet, in the *Bildungsroman*, the exact opposite takes place. Here thought's greatest risk is to become *abstract*. "Ideas" must never drift too far from "life." Goethe:

Wilhelm saw himself free at the moment when he could be at unity with himself. . . . He had sufficient opportunity for noticing that he was lacking in experience and therefore he laid an excessive value on the experience of others and the results which with conviction they deduced from it, and thereby he came still more deeply into error. What he lacked he thought he could just acquire if he undertook to collect and keep all the memorable things which he should come across in books and in conversation. He therefore wrote down his own and other people's opinions and ideas, indeed whole conversations which interested him. In this way, unfortunately, he kept the false as well as the true, stayed much too long on one idea—one might say on a simple maxim. . . . No one had been more dangerous to him than Jarno. This man had a clear intellect which could form a correct and severe decision about present things, but with this he had the mistake of expressing these individual decisions with a kind of universality, whereas the verdicts of

the intellect have force only once and that in the definite case, and would be incorrect if one applied them to others. (*WM* 5.1)

Here again is the anthropocentric vocation of everyday life that, with the *art* of conversation, subjugates the manifestations of thought and draws from them a plastic and pliable language, a refined and inedited rhetoric of the “concrete.” The language and rhetoric, if one thinks about it, of the *novel*: the first and only literary genre that not only has chosen not to accentuate its irreducibility to what we call “ordinary language” but has even contributed, as little else has, to the diffusion and nobilitation of the idea itself of linguistic “normality” and to the making *meaningful* of that mode of discourse which aims at continually converting the concrete into the abstract and vice versa. Once again it is that eighteenth-century taste for including and harmonizing: the comfort of equilibrium.

If all this is contained in the conversational form, what remains outside of it? Or to put the problem in historical terms, “against” what form of the manifestation of thought do Goethe and Austen conjure up their magnificent dialogues?

The beginnings of an answer can be found in a memorable chapter of *L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution*: “How, towards the middle of the Eighteenth century, men of letters have become the most important political men in the country, and of the consequences which have resulted.” In these pages, Tocqueville reflects on the peculiarities of the Enlightenment intellectual in France: neither “mixed up in everyday affairs or administration, as in England,” nor “as in Germany, totally extraneous to politics, confined to the world of pure philosophy or of the *belles lettres*.”

The fact is that there emerges in France a new and explosive form of the manifestation of thought. It is at once fundamentally and stubbornly *political* (“French intellectuals continually are concerned with problems connected with the activities of government”) and without restriction *abstract* (“All believe that it is good to substitute with simple and elementary rules, based on reason and natural law, those complex customs sanctioned by tradition which govern our society”).

Given this, I would not exclude the notion that the relaxed and sturdy language of novelistic conversation has its opposite not in silence but in the revolutionary pamphlet or oration. This is an antithesis that brings with it many others: the “curbing” earthiness of concreteness against the cold and daring universalism of principles; the dialogic convertibility of the “I” in “you” against the rigid demarcation between orator and audience; the attention toward the patient weaving of a plot against the urge to tear, the passion for “beginning anew.” Irreconcilable contrasts that tell us a common truth—everyday life and revolution are incompatible—and a little less common truth: that this incom-

patibility also exists between revolutionary epochs and the narrative structures of the novel.

Yes, the novel, even though it is born declaring that it can and wants to talk about everything, prefers as a rule to pass over in silence revolutionary fractures.<sup>36</sup> Because they are fractures, upheavals in the narrative continuum that are too abrupt and radical, of course. But also because they affect that particular sphere of action—the centralized power of the state—in relation to which the culture of the novel, in antithesis to that of tragedy, is the victim of an unmistakable and very real taboo.

—Translated by Albert Sbragia

## Notes

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The following pages are taken from the first chapter of my *The Prose of the World*, to be published by Verso (London) in 1986. The book undertakes a reconstruction of the European *Bildungsroman*, from Goethe to Flaubert and George Eliot, seen as the most significant attempt, on the part of Western culture, to come symbolically to terms with modernity. An effort is made in the work to bring to light connections between fields of research and spheres of life that are usually considered distant from one another: narrative theory, aesthetic ideology, nineteenth-century philosophy of history, sociology of everyday life, history of youth, the world of the metropolis and of the capitalist marketplace. . . .

Concerning the internal dynamics of the study: in the first chapter the archetypal model of the *Bildungsroman* is examined in its “aesthetic” foundation, as formulated by Goethe and Jane Austen. In the second chapter the works of Stendhal and Pushkin are discussed, especially regarding the intertwining of politics, novelistic rhetoric, and aesthetic realism. The third chapter deals with the works of Balzac and Flaubert, interpreted in the light of ambiguous tensions that link the formation of the individual with capitalist development. In the fourth chapter an effort is made to trace a particularly English tradition of the *Bildungsroman*—from Fielding to Scott, Charlotte Brontë, and Dickens—concluding with the revival and exhaustion of Goethian problematics in the works of George Eliot.

1. “We are moved by the story of a good deed and by the sight of every harmonious object; we then feel that we are not quite in a strange country; we fondly imagine that we are nearer a home, towards which what is best and most inward within us is striving”; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*, trans. R. O. Moon (London, 1947), book 7, chap. 1. All further references to *Wilhelm Meister* (hereafter *WM*) appear in the text.
2. It is through work that one can cure, at least temporarily, the madness of the Harpist: “I find the means of curing insanity very simple. They are the same by which you prevent healthy people from becoming insane. Their activity has to be aroused, accustom them to order. . . . An active life brings with it so many incidents that he must feel how true it is that every kind of doubt can be removed by activity” (*WM* 5.16).

3. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, trans. J. Coulthard (London, 1854), 27–28.
4. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. R. Snell (New Haven, 1954), letter 6, 44–45.
5. *Ibid.*, letter 27, 138.
6. Werner Sombart, *The Quintessence of Capitalism*, trans. H. Fertig (New York, 1967), 13.
7. Henri Lefebvre, *Critica della vita quotidiana*, Italian trans. (Bari, 1977), 1:113–14; originally published as *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (Paris, 1958).
8. Karel Kosik, “Metaphysics of Everyday Life,” in *Dialectics of the Concrete*, trans. K. Kovanda and J. Schmidt (Dordrecht, 1976), 43; originally published in Czech (Prague, 1963).
9. Agnes Heller, *Sociologia della vita quotidiana*, Italian trans., 57; originally published in Hungarian (Budapest, 1970). An abridged version of this work has recently appeared in English as *Everyday Life*, trans. G. L. Campbell (London, 1984).
10. *Ibid.*, 52.
11. Georg Hegel, “Introduction: Reason in History,” in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1975), 85.
12. *Ibid.*
13. “Our comparison of novel and drama shows that the novel’s manner of portrayal is closer to life, or rather to the normal appearance of life, than that of drama”; György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. H. and S. Mitchell (London, 1962), 138. That this affirmation refers to the *historical* novel renders it, in my opinion, more meaningful still.
14. Heller, *Sociologia*, 66.
15. *Ibid.*, 407–8.
16. *Ibid.*, 408.
17. Abraham Moles, *Il Kitsch: L’arte della felicità*, Italian trans. (Rome, 1979), 42–43, 46, 47, 53; originally published as *Le Kitsch: L’Art du bonheur* (Paris, 1971).
18. I have discussed the ups and downs of the aesthetic dimension in twentieth-century life in “From the Waste Land to the Artificial Paradise,” in *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London, 1983).
19. Philippe Ariès, *Padre figli nell’Europa medievale e moderna*, Italian trans. (Bari, 1976), 282–83; published in English as *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. R. Baldick (New York, 1962).
20. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, 1977).
21. Georg Simmel, “On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture,” in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, trans. K. P. Etzkorn (New York, 1968), 27–46, esp. 28–29.
22. György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. A. Bostock (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 133–34, 137–38.
23. The novelistic protagonist can no longer be presented as the hero of the classical epic—shrewd Odysseus, fleet-footed Achilles, wise Nestor. One’s Christian name must be, and is, enough—“Wilhelm,” “Elizabeth.” Such a manner of naming denotes a great familiarity and thus suggests a complete and almost “natural” knowledge of the person in question, but it above all gives to our knowledge, as it were, the utmost liberty, neither constraining it, leading it in a precise direction nor binding it to a clearly defined subject. It is a “knowledge” that combines a maximum of certainty with a minimum of commitment. It is so open and inexhaustible that it can never truly be put to a test. What happens with novelistic heroes is what happens with our friends and relatives: we know them, while we do not know who they are.



24. "One of the more recent forms of the critique of everyday life has been the critique of the *real* via the *surreal*. Surrealism, in departing from the everyday toward the extraordinary and the surprising . . . rendered the prosaic unupportable." Furthermore: "Under the sign of the Supernatural, the literature of the nineteenth century launched an attack against everyday life that has not lost any of its force"; Lefebvre, *Critica*, 34 and 122.
25. Kosik, "Metaphysics of Everyday Life," 43.
26. "A complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes *preliminal* rites (rites of separation), *liminal* rites (rites of transition), and *postliminal* rites (rites of incorporation)"; thus Arnold Van Gennep in his classic analysis of primitive initiation, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. Vizedom and G. Caffee (Chicago, 1960), 11. The "transition" space, often associated with youth, is seen to be very narrow, severely regulated, and merely functional to the passage from the infantile aggregation to the adult one. Once this passage is complete, the "transition" space loses all value. The pattern is still fully valid for *The Magic Flute*, but its hierarchy is unequivocally overturned in *Meister*. Here the "transition" of youth is vastly expanded; one lives in it in complete liberty, and, above all, it is transformed into the *most meaningful* part of one's existence, precisely that one which "merits being told." We find an analogous overturning in the relationship between those typical periods of transition known as courtship, engagement, and marriage. In archaic societies courtship and engagement chronologically precede marriage but, from a logical standpoint, are a consequence of it: one must get married, and therefore one must first get engaged, but the value of courtship and engagement ends here; they are purely instrumental. In the modern world, and in the novel, the opposite is true. Marriage is the consequence of a satisfying courtship and engagement, and if therefore the *Bildungsroman* ends with marriages, it nevertheless narrates courtships. The emotive and intellectual center of gravity has decidedly changed.
27. Thus Wilhelm to the "gentleman from C.," who is about to leave for war (*Theatrical Mission*, 4.11): "Oh how fortunate you are to be lead by destiny to where a true man can call upon his best powers, where all that he has become in life, all that he has learned is changed in a moment's time into action and appears in its utmost splendor!" Needless to say, the gentleman from C. sees it in a totally different way, and his answer chills Wilhelm's epic enthusiasms.
28. This dialectic of meaning and episode is the basis of the novelistic *chapter*. An extraordinary mechanism of self-segmentation of a text, the chapter sets up a balance between our satisfaction with what we have learned (the meaning that has been attributed to an event) and our curiosity for what we still do not know (that meaning is as a rule always incomplete). We can thus continue our reading (giving in to our curiosity) or interrupt it (declaring ourselves satisfied). The narrative structure authorizes both choices and thereby renders symbolically plausible the irregular rhythm of interruptions and resumptions to which the reader is in any case constrained by the dimensions themselves of a novel.

Thanks to this true miracle of self-regulation that is the chapter, the novel imparts to literary enjoyment a totally unique character, which Poe in his *Philosophy of Composition* found self-destructive: "If any work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed"; in *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. David Galloway (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1967), 482. What Poe did not manage to see is that the novel quite simply *wants* the affairs of the world to interfere. Unlike the

short story, or the lyric poem, it does not see in everyday life anything disparate from its own conventions; rather it sees there its chosen object, with which it must also “materially” mix itself—via the patient rhythm of a reading of interruptions and resumptions—in order to give it a form and a meaning.

We have here the two major paths—one diurnal and domestic, the other lunar and estranging—of modern literature. And not only of literature: if many cinematographical effects find a surprising anticipation in Poe’s theoretical writings, radio and television, on the contrary, pursue with other means the colonialization of everyday existence begun by the novelistic genre. (It is a parallel that could go on forever: to enjoy cinema one must leave the home—radio and television bring the world into our bedroom. . . . At the movies a three-minute delay is a tragedy—we move constantly to and from the television with utter peace of mind. . . . At the movies all must be dark except the screen—we watch television with at least one light on, almost as if we wished to remind ourselves at all costs of the domestic context in which it is found. . . .) As long as we are on the subject: the principal novelty of Wim Wenders’s films consists precisely in his having “weakened” the cinematographic episode and the narrative concatenation of plot, thereby bringing both of these closer to the manner of novelistic composition. Coincidence or not, Wenders’s second film was a remake of *Meister*.

29. See once again Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, especially the second part.
30. “During most of the ceremonies which have been discussed, and especially during the transition periods, a special language is employed which in some cases includes an entire vocabulary unknown or unusual in the society as a whole, and in others consists simply of a prohibition against using certain words in the common tongue”; Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 169. We will see how in the *Bildungsroman* it is instead the *obligation* to use the common language that seems to hold.
31. Conversation is thus a totally different thing than Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia.” The *Bildungsroman*’s socializing vocation brings with it the *reduction* of the plurality of social languages to a “middle of the road” convention with which they may all easily participate.
32. Regarding this point see the fourth chapter of Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, and especially Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied, Germ., 1962).
33. Peter Brooks, *The Novel of Worldliness* (Princeton, 1969).
34. Heller, *Sociologia*, 106. On the implications of everyday life, anthropomorphic thought, and artistic production, see also the first chapters of Lukács’s *Aesthetics*.
35. Kosik, “Metaphysics of Everyday Life,” 46.
36. Ever since Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, whose protagonist, “born in the city of York in the year 1632,” remains in England until 1650. But on the civil war that, after all, permits him to be a merchant in peace and quiet, there is not a word.