

Guido Mazzoni

*The novel, human sciences, democracy*

1. *An immense multitude of men*

In 2008, when my father died, I tried to collect the photos that I had of him, as often happens in these cases. And, as often happens in these cases, I ended up extending my search to include previous generations. There were extremely few images that depicted the paternal side of the family. I discovered that in 1972 in the middle of a move my grandfather had decided to throw away some of the few photos he owned. When my mother asked him why, he responded “Old junk, all dead people.” Born into a peasant family in conditions not much different from those of the Ancien Regime, he was raised in an epoch that considered photography expensive, complicated, and the province of an elite. He didn’t think he had the means much less the right to leave behind a trace. He considered himself a laborer. His life made sense only in the context of the extended family, working to allow the children to live better than their parents, just as had happened for immemorial generations of sharecroppers from which he descended. All the rest was irrelevant and didn’t pertain to him, least of all the preservation of his image in time.

In the third decade of the 19th century, Alessandro Manzoni imported into Italian the model of the historical novel invented by Walter Scott. It almost happened in real time: *Waverley* was published in 1814; in 1821 Manzoni began to dedicate himself to the book that will be entitled *I Promessi Sposi* (1827). Manzoni at this point was 36 years old, a writer of solid classicist formation who in the preceding decade had searched for new and anticlassicist paths. He had refused the use of ancient mythology, he had written poems inspired by the Bible, he had written verse tragedies modelled on Shakespeare. With the novel he experimented with a relatively new unprestigious literary form, destined for a relatively vast and unlettered public. He began to write right after concluding a verse tragedy, *l’Adelchi*, where he depicted a decisive episode of the 8<sup>th</sup> century war between the Lombards and Franks in northern Italy, and a historical work about that epoch, namely the *Discorso sopra alcuni punti della storia longobardica in Italia* [Treatise on some issues of Lombardic history in Italy].

In the second chapter of this *Discorso*, Manzoni stopped to ponder a cultural lacuna. Reading books of history, he writes, will not tell about the lives of the Latin-born population conquered by the Lombards:

The historians of the Middle Ages recounted above all the principal or extraordinary events, and composed the history of the sole conquering people, and sometimes of the kings and primary protagonists of that people.

Official historiography is written by the winners and ignores the masses: consequently, an enormous quantity of human beings pass over the

earth without leaving a trace, either because they are vanquished or because they are private people, and as such excluded from the range of discourse.

And if the most philosophically precise investigations of the condition of the Italian population during the dominion of the Lombards could only lead to the desperation of knowing such a condition, this demonstration alone would be one of the most serious and fertile thoughts that history could offer. An immense multitude of men, a series of generations that pass over the earth, on its earth, unobserved, without leaving a trace, is a wretched, but prodigious phenomenon, and the reasons of such a silence can end up being more instructive than many factual discoveries.

Instead the ignoble genre of the novel can fill up this enormous void: the protagonists of *I Promessi sposi*, two Lombard peasants of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, form a part of that multitude of people who pass over the earth unobserved; in the introduction to the work, written in a language that parodies 17<sup>th</sup> century rhetoric, Manzoni calls them “working people of humble condition” and he juxtaposes them with the “princes, rulers and distinguished figures” narrated by official history. Through invention, fiction, the novel can reconstruct or invent the traces of every person: it can write the history of private lives.

## 2. *History of private life*

The object called a *novel*, *roman*, *Roman*, *novela* or *romanzo* was formed throughout a long and complicated process. At the end of this process, two families of terms gathered together very different groups of works. In a rather complicated manner these two categories of terms descended from two medieval literary genres, the French roman and the Italian novella, which, starting from the middle of the 16th century, expanded their semantic spectrum and acquired new significance. The literary object of which we speak was formed between the second half of the 16th century and the end of the 17th, drawing together distinct types of works: medieval chivalric novels, Greek novels rediscovered in the middle of the 16th century, novels imitating these very rediscovered Greek models, pastoral narrative, epistolary narrative, comic *romance*, Spanish picaresque novels and their European tradition, epistolaries, French *nouvelles*, Spanish *novelas*, the 18th century humoristic novel, exemplary biographies, stories of travellers, of sinners, of criminals. Such different works are tied together by two common elements: first, narrative form; and second, partial or total extraneousness to those models and principles of poetics inherited from ancient poetics. These poetics constituted, of course, the architrave of classicism of the early modern age, the hegemonic literary system in Europe between the middle of the 16th century and the end of the 18th century.

Precisely because they didn't belong to legitimate and prestigious literature, many of the texts that, between the middle of the 16th century and the second half of the 18th century, ended up in the territory of the novel, constantly attempted to legitimise themselves. The growth of the new genre was accompanied by an enormous quantity of treatises on poetics, critical discourses, and self-justifying prefaces. One of the *topoi* that recurred most frequently in these works interpreted the new genre as a history of private life. It is a commonplace that emerged in the course of the French debates about the *nouvelle*: we find it in Charles Sorel's *Bibliothèque*

*françoise*<sup>1</sup>, in Abbe de Charnes's reflections on Madame de Lafayette's *Princesse de Clèves*. We also find it between the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century in English literature: Defoe calls *Moll Flanders* "a private History" and juxtaposes it with novels and the non-historical, e.g., fictional romances, which comprised much of the literature of his age<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, Fielding used this formula in *Tom Jones*<sup>3</sup>. The *topos* of the history of private life doesn't apply to all the texts converging in the genre of the novel (the tradition of the romance is excluded), but it is one of the most common ways, beginning from the end of the 18th century, of justifying what English literary history called a novel. This *topos* accompanied and intersected with another legitimatizing strategy: presenting a text as an *exemplum* of a moral truth. At bottom they are both parts of the same discourse: the novel can be read as an *exemplum* precisely because it narrates lives similar to those purely private lives of the readers; if it had narrated lives remote from the readers, it wouldn't have had the same paradigmatic effectiveness. A similar discourse circulated in the 17th century French *nouvelles* and spread everywhere in the course of the 18th century<sup>4</sup>: in Albrecht Von Haller's view of *Clarissa*<sup>5</sup>, in John Hawkesworth's reflections on the novel<sup>6</sup>, and in Diderot's *Éloge de Richardson*<sup>7</sup>.

What is implicit in an idea such as that of the history of private life? In the critical vocabulary reigning in the greater part of the discussion on the novel up until the second half of the 18th century, the term 'history' refers to the Aristotelian distinction between poetic compositions and historical compositions: the former are tied to plausibility, that is the conventionally universal; the latter narrate the truth, namely the particular, the contingent, the uncommon. To write that a novel is a history of private life means placing it among texts that follow the rules of stories that want to be true, and not merely plausible. But in the ancient and classicist literary system, written history according to the rules or *vera historia* speaks of public figures, not private lives. In this sense, the novel legitimately fills a gap: a vocabulary and a critical logic with classicist origins become used to justify a genre unforeseen by classical and classicist poetics. The *topos* had a great and longterm success, owing to its unassailable foundation. Until the beginning of the 19th century, historiography, in the hegemonic tradition in the West, descending from Thucydides, was not dedicated to the reconstruction of customs and traditions of ordinary life of common people through ethnological or antiquarian research, but told above all of the *res gestae* of public men, and contemporary political history. The rediscovery of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Sorel, *La Bibliothèque françoise. Seconde édition revue et augmentée* (1667) (Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), pp. 178 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, The Author's Preface.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones. A Foundling*, Book II, Chap I and Book VIII, Chap. I.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Regnaud de Segrais, *Les Nouvelles françaises ou Les divertissements de la Princesse Aurélie*, texte établi, présenté et annoté par R. Guichemerre, vol. 1 (Paris: Société des textes français modernes, 1990), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Albrecht von Haller, *Clarissa*, in «Bibliothèque raisonnée des ouvrages des savans de l'Europe», janvier, février, mars 1749, t. XLII, première partie, pp. 326-333.

<sup>6</sup> John Hawkesworth, in *The Adventurer*, 4, Saturday, November 18, 1752, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Denis Diderot, *Éloge de Richardson* (1762), in Id., *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 5 (Paris: Le Club Français du Livre, 1970), 128-29.

Herodotus in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century heralded a paradigm shift that, however, took place only in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when one could no longer write history without speaking of what Manzoni, in his *Discorso sopra alcuni punti della storia longobardica in Italia*, called “the state of the population,” that is the life of the masses. The idea of the novel as a history of private life would be decisive for the legitimization of the model of the historical novel invented by Scott. As one reads in *Ivanhoe*, scholars of antiquity have left us only few “hints concerning the private life of our ancestors”<sup>8</sup>, while novels like those that Scott wrote narrate what historians have not told us.

A gap analogous to what we found in the domain of historiography also existed in literature. The noble forms of the ancient and classicist literary system, epic and tragedy, recounted stories of heroes, kings, mythological figures and actions of clear universal significance. On the other hand, daily private life and the lives of common people ended up in the lower genres, either comic or middle register, such as ancient comedy, new comedy, iambics, epigrams, and satire. This is because the ancient and classicist literary system obeyed that implicit principle that Auerbach called the rule of the division of styles (*Stiltrennungsregel*). He placed this rule at the centre of *Mimesis*, that long-term history of Western literature, which proceeds through case studies. Auerbach doesn't say it, but the first text in which this rule finds an explicit expression is in the second chapter of Aristotle's poetics:

Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher (*spoudaios*) or a lower type (*phaulos*) [...], it follows that we must represent men either as better than us, or as worse than us, or like us<sup>9</sup>.

The men whom Aristotle calls “better than us,” that is demigods or aristocratic epic and tragic heroes, accomplish extraordinary feats or go on to undergo exceptional misfortunes which poets represent with a serious attitude and a high style, conforming to the dignity of the exploits. Men ‘worse than us,’ that is slaves and worthless characters in comedy, fulfill ridiculous or slight actions that poets represent with an attitude and a style appropriate to a low rank. Aristotle is giving voice to a way of understanding literary space that preceded him and would last for millennia: the most prestigious region of ancient and classicist literary space was occupied by the stories of public people; the stories of people ‘like us’ usually finished in a minor, intermediate, or more often comic space, subject to rules of rigid and stylized genre. This is because in ancient and classicist literatures *Stiltrennung* turned out to be a bipartition more than a tripartition: if there were three *genera elocutionis*, the boundaries between low and middle were always rather uncertain: low style could include the comic, the satirical, the humorously erotic, the obscene, but also daily life, news, sketch, the marginal fact; the mime, the iambic, and the satire formed part of this, but also the fragments of a judicial oration that dealt with private or economic themes.

Let us now try to pose to ourselves one of those head on historical-philosophical questions, which the history of literature generally doesn't

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, Dedicatory Epistle.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 2, 1448 a.

pose: what innovation did the novel introduce into the longstanding history of Western literature? There are many possible responses, as is obvious; if, however, we needed to choose one, I would say this: the novel, as Friedrich Schlegel precociously intuited, is the first genre that managed to relate anything in any manner. Thanks to this mimetic freedom, it was able to narrate, with an unheard-of precision and seriousness, something that has become crucial for us moderns, and which until that moment had only occupied a minor position in Western literature, that is the private life of common people. Thanks to the novel, an unprecedented number of real or imaginary private stories acquire the right to leave traces. This doesn't mean that the dimension of the private had never entered into narrative space; it means that it had never entered in this quantity and with this emotional shade. Classical and classicist literature and historiography narrate with seriousness the stories of public individuals whose visibility is guaranteed by myth, collective history, legend or the function that they exercise. In short, the novel tells the stories of individuals who, in the public sphere, represent only themselves. Certainly, other discursive formations contributed to the metamorphosis: journalism, modern lyric poetry, the modern autobiography born from the model of Rousseau's *Confessions* are parts of the same process; in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, photography and cinema would complete the transformation. Without a doubt, however, the novel has a privileged role in all of this. Beyond individuals, our genre opens up to the worlds where private life takes place. In French, private people are called *particuliers*: they inhabit the dimension of the particular, the specific, they live in differentiated environments, they move in the plurality of the accidental world, in polymorphic contingency. To narrate private life means then to open up literature to ordinary individuals, real or imaginary, giving them the right to leave traces. Thanks to the novel (and to journalism, the modern autobiography, and modern lyric poetry) an enormous quantity of stories and singular events become introduced into mimesis, represented, brought into being. This is, without a doubt, the most important process of democratization of literary history of European origin.

### 3. *Proper names and average men*

Widening one's gaze, one can observe the complex space of the Western discourses of truth, and how our culture tries to identify its own images of the world. Indeed, right in the epoch in which the family of linguistic games attempts to restore particularity in all of its constitutive anarchy, another family of linguistic games emerges forcefully, equal and contrary to the first. I will illustrate this beginning with a coincidence. Rousseau's *Confessions* is a crucial work for the birth of the modern autobiography and of that novelistic subgenre that Joachim Merlant, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, called the *roman personnel*<sup>10</sup>, and which includes works like Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Foscolo's *The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*, Chateaubriand's *Atala* and *René*, Madame de Staël's *Delphine* and *Corinne*, Senancour's *Obermann*, Madame de Krüdener's *Valérie*, and

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Joachim Merlant, *Le roman personnel de Rousseau à Fromentin* (1901) (Geneva: Slatkine, 1978).

Constant's *Adolphe*. In the first pages of the work, Rousseau justified his own project with many arguments; the most famous puts into writing the *topos* of the modern conception of individuality:

I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality<sup>11</sup>

Individuals are singularities: to enter into literature, proper names do not have to strip off their contingent traits to approach a model of the allegoric individual. They must instead conserve their specific idiosyncratic difference. The novel, the autobiography, and modern poetry developed from this implicit presupposition: literary communication goes from the reader insofar as he is a singular individual to the singular paper individuals whose stories are read; the literary genres of our epoch are designed to let contingency run rampant, not to reduce it.

Now, a few years after the publication of Rousseau's *Confessions*, Buffon published the fourth supplement to his *Histoire naturelle* (1777) and used an expression that would prove influential: *homme moyen*. If the private singular man is the foundation stone of modern literary genres, the *homme moyen* is the conceptual brick that makes a different discursive family possible. The emergence of the novel, of poetry and the modern autobiography, is contemporary with the development of fields of knowledge that strive to arrange the mutability of accidental life into the medium of concepts, or even of numbers. Between the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the opening of the 19<sup>th</sup>, the expansion of interest in distinctive forms of life made disciplines emerge that are dedicated to the conceptual study of contingencies. Indeed, the multiplication of these branches of reflective knowledge about life is one of the constitutive traits of modernity. The novel emerged in its current state right when the human sciences are affirmed, namely when the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century 'sciences of the soul' were transformed, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, into the discipline that would be called 'psychology'<sup>12</sup>, and when the reflection on social life, begun with Montesquieu, and even before with Bodin, caused the birth of what Comte, in the 1830s, would call 'sociology'<sup>13</sup>. The human sciences act according to an equal and contrary logic to that of modern literary forms: they apply the *medium* of the concept to the world of individuals, they equal out the differences by seizing upon the universal constants. The beings of whom they speak are not interesting in themselves but for another reason, the search for regularity; the focus of the discourse is not the singular empirical individual, but the generic being, *l'homme moyen*.

The parallelism is still more profound: the epoch in which the artistic representation of the particular was refined, and writers became capable of recounting the minimal details of consciences, of destinies, of environments, is the same that applied the calculation of probability to life and saw the discipline of statistics develop. The turning point in the history of the novel is the project of the *Comédie humaine*, the work that attempted to represent the totality of human life by accepting the principle of specificity: every social class, every environment, every character, every habit by now

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, Book I.

<sup>12</sup> Fernando Vidal, *Les Sciences de l'âme XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, Champion, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Aron, *Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

has the right to a particular representation; the democratic right to leave traces touches every aspect of life, so much so that Balzac's work risks slipping into what Hegel called the bad infinity. In the same years in which Balzac gave form to his project, and Comte invented the term sociology, Adolphe Quetelet recuperated the expression *homme moyen*<sup>14</sup>. Meteorologist by education, Quetelet was the first to apply statistics to the study of the life of human beings. He spoke of the *homme moyen* in 1831, presenting a paper on the human growth at the Royal Academy of Brussels; four years later, in his greater work, *Sur l'homme et le développement de ses facultés* (1835), he clarified the notion better. The average man, Quetelet wrote, is born from the statistic cancellation of individual particularities:

The greater the number of individuals observed, the more do individual peculiarities, whether physical or moral, become effaced, and allow the general facts to predominate, by which society exists and is preserved<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore, European literature became capable of recounting the minute particularities of social life exactly when, on the other side of the cognitive field, sciences developed that were founded on the presupposition that differences between individuals could be cancelled and reduced to conceptual laws or mathematical formulas; the opening to the democracy of differences is contemporary with the reduction of these differences to the gelid identity of numbers.

#### 4. *The dual regime of modern truth*

The antithesis between the discursive formations that imitate the particular and the discursive formations that reduce particular beings to conceptual unity or numerical unity is one of the deep structures that gave birth to the modern manner of conceiving particularities, and, more in general, our culture and our idea of democracy. Today, to say something about a life, we entrust ourselves to two discursive families: the first represents the single individuals in their most minute particularities or allows them the right to leave traces, to express themselves: the second ignores the differences and aims for what is shared, it establishes what is average. On the one hand, modern literature, journalism, photography, videos, the apparatus of contemporary mimetic-expressive activities; on the other hand, philosophical reflections on the everyday, human sciences, statistics, the apparatus of conceptual knowledge about human life. On the one hand, the singularities of the masses expounded in detail; on the other hand, the consciousness that the singularities, observed insofar as they belongs to the masses, are functional parts of a series. On the one hand,

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen M. Stigler, *The History of Statistics. The Measurement of Uncertainty before 1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 161 ff.; Stephen M. Stigler, *Statistics on the Table. The History of Statistical Concepts and Methods* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 59 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Adolphe Quetelet, *Sur l'homme et le développement de ses facultés* (1835); English translation *A Treatise on Man and the Development of His Faculties* (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1842), p. 6.

democracy as difference; the entrance of the individual singularity in the sphere of the sayable and visible, the eruption of ordinary individuals in the dominion of expression; on the other hand, democracy as levelling out of differences in the unity of anonymous forces acting through individuals, and which are grasped by concepts or numbers. It is a dual regime, which we experience every day. Think of the two most visited websites in the world, Google and Facebook. The first is the most sophisticated statistical system that has ever been invented: a mathematical algorithm determines which sites correspond the best to the search typed on the screen, and classifies the singularities on the basis of laws. The second is a public diary of the masses that democratizes the right of spreading traces, allowing billions of people to publish maxims, anecdotes, reflections, stories, photos, videos, music, and, above all, cats: Facebook is full of pictures of cats. It allows private individuals to carry outside the particles of their own lives. Google and Facebook, considered as symbolic forms, produce opposing images of the world. This analysis repeats a constitutive bipartition of Western culture, that separation between poetry and philosophy, imitation and concept which emerged at the end of a long discursive battle fought between the VI and IV centuries BC in Greece, and ratified by Plato in the II, III, and X books of the *Republic*. But beyond being now repeated, it is taken to the extreme: contemporary mimesis descends into minute details with an unheard of precision. The concept becomes a statistical number, annuls the differences in the purest of identities – number. What does this dual regime of truth mean?

In the last two centuries, in the West and in the countries touched by the cultural hegemony of the West, particular lives have multiplied. This deals above all with a quantitative expansion: the number of living beings on the planet has exploded, physical and mental spaces have become saturated with lives. This mass of existences has acquired the right to see themselves recognized with a space of private autonomy, the right of having rights: of being the epicenters of sense, of pursuing their own interests, of criticizing what has been handed down, of participating, at least in theory, in the creation of the collective political will, of constructing an autonomous sphere of values. But the epoch that increases the nominal weight of single people, and pulverizes the collective transcendencies, is the same one that ties men into systems of reciprocal dependence, multiplies the chains of action and reciprocal reactions. If individuals attain autonomy and security within the small spheres surrounding them, the overall mountain ranges of their existential territories surpass them. This has always happened, but in modern times the dislocation and dispossession have multiplied. To the crisis of collective transcendencies corresponds a strengthening of objective transcendencies, that is the dependence of individuals on powers, opinions, and superpersonal mechanisms. Transforming history into an experience lived through by the masses, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars inaugurated a typical characteristic of modernity. In the following two centuries, the great conflicts with obligatory conscription, world economic cycles, and the changes in habits would confirm the content of that experience, showing that the ether in which small worlds of individuals are immersed exceeds the individuals, avoids their control and constitutes the sole true Event. 19<sup>th</sup> century culture – from Hegel to Tolstoy, from Marx to Durkheim – would identify in many ways the discovery that superpersonal

life, incarnated in history and in society is the true objective transcendence, the secularized form of the divine.

Therefore the epoch in which the absolute value of every individual is affirmed is the same in which the power of the great anonymous forces clearly emerges, in planetary wars or economic crises, in market mechanisms or changes in the *Zeitgeist*. The antithesis between the nominal weight of single people and their objective irrelevance is displayed in the conflict between the mimetic forms of singularity (the autobiography, the poem, the novel, photography, cinema) and the linguistic games that reduce personal experiences to the order of concepts, or numbers (human sciences, statistics), which evens everything out. But the contradiction, in truth, is implicit in every discipline. Modern narrative, in fact, refines the artistic representation of singularity in the same period in which the form of the novel-essay was developed; the development of the technique that more than any other gives voice to the fragmentation of psychic life, the flux of consciousness, is simultaneous with the massive eruption of the philosophical reflection into the story; he who smashes the traditional form of the novel, introducing within it a philosophy of history expounded in a heavily conceptual form is Tolstoy, the same writer who, one decade later, would expand the introspection of Anna Karenina towards the interior monologue.

##### 5. *Democracy and the novel*

In the fourth decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while Balzac was elaborating the project of the *Comédie humaine*, Quetelet published *Sur l'homme et le développement de ses facultés*, Comte published the *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42), and Tocqueville was working on *Democracy in America* (1835 e 1840). For Tocqueville, the *proprium* of democracy, that what makes it irresistible, is not the joy of participating in a continuous, emancipated manner, conscious of collective life, but the creation of small spheres of well being and autonomy around single individuals, the division of the communal world into *petites sociétés* placed on a level of formal equivalence, and inside of which each individual or each microgroup can pursue its own private aims, delegating the participation in public life to representatives or mechanisms of superpersonal powers. Democratic nations are formed by small worlds that subjectively perceive themselves as free and autonomous, but which objectively are all alike, both because the equality of conditions and the rise in reciprocal dependence evens out behaviors and habits, and because the content of desires and aims that individuals and *petites sociétés* pursue is infinitely specific.

To understand the nature of democracy it is necessary to go beyond the idealised representation that modern democracies give of themselves, the rhetoric of collective, emancipated participation, enthusiastic about the life of the *polis*. What truly distinguishes this form of life, which has made it attractive to millions of European peasants who lived in substantially feudal conditions until the first half of the 20th century, or for the masses of the Third World, or for the inhabitants of totalitarian states, is not democratic participation or universal suffrage. If one goes outside of the self-

representation of liberal democracy, you can immediately see that these are essential values only in states of exception. In ordinary conditions, liberal democracy is a fragile system and deprived by the action of economic powers external to the politics of the states that declare their own sovereignty, by the asymmetries in the access to mass communications, by the resistance that bureaucratic mechanisms oppose to political decisions. More than their own emphatic self-representation, what makes 'democracy' desirable is the palpable capacity to construct small spheres of autonomy, security, material well being around individuals and families. 'Progress' has a Tocquevillian aspect: it allows private people to exist for themselves, to pursue their own goals. However irrelevant in relation to the whole, however marginal and transitory, the subjective desires and aims are attributed an absolute importance: no culture has ever given so much weight to ordinary individuals. Let us call sacred that which one cannot transcend or negotiate: in this sense, individual life represents the unique horizon of sacredness that modern culture still recognizes. If it is true, as suggested by a philosophy of history which emerged from the culture of German idealism, that modern individualism is born on the basis of Christian theology, by means of which every person represents an infinite value, being created in the image and likeness of God, it is just as true that the cultural unconscious of the modern world represses this genealogy and transforms life *ohne Eigenschaften*, and without theological help, into an absolute value. The juridical consequence of a similar process is the ascension of the rights of man, the political consequence is democracy, the philosophical consequence is relativism, the cultural consequence is the multiplication of traces that ordinary lives feel authorized to leave. The novel has been, for a long time, one of the principal multipliers of human traces, maybe the principal one: of signs concerning external life caught in the medium of language, and of signs concerning internal life, the narrative being the sole linguistic game where others enter as subjects, and not as objects of the discourse<sup>16</sup>. In this sense, our genre seems to be consequence and symptom of democracy as an explosion of differences. But it is not only this.

The novel narrates any thing in any way: it is the genre that represents the particular, the individual, and the plurality of worlds and desires. It would seem like a vague definition, but instead it contains the essential, above all if it is understood in a dynamic, that is, an historical way. Behind the process leading to this anarchy an extraordinary transformation is hidden: modern narrative in prose is born from the demolition of that ladder of beings to whom the ancient and classicist system of genres implicitly referred through the rule of the division of styles. The ease with which the average reader identifies with the worlds of characters completely different between themselves, adapting his own horizon of values every time to perpetually new horizons, signifies that all individuals have attained the democratic right to leave traces and become interesting.

At the same time it also means that the aims inciting the heroes of the modern novel have lost every objective and substantial value. If the

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<sup>16</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds. Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

noble genres of ancient and classicist literature, the epic, the tragedy, communicated a precise idea of the good life, a rigid idea of what was just or wrong, dignified or unworthy, noble or ignoble, the novel transmits an image of the world constitutively relativistic. In the fourth book of *War and Peace*, Pierre Bezukhov, prisoner of the French, reflects on the significance of the experiences that he has had in recent years, and concludes:

he had discovered that...the man who suffered in his bed of roses suffered because a petal was crushed, he suffered exactly as he suffered now, falling asleep on the bare and humid earth, freezing one side of his body and warming up the other<sup>17</sup>.

*War and Peace* is the aesthetic correlative of these considerations: a novel in which the passions of Natasha Rostova on the day of her first ball coexist, on a level of substantial equality, with the reflections of Andrey Bolkonsky, on the meaning of life, or the thoughts of Napoleon. The very existence of a genre that allows the desires of others to be shared without judging their intrinsic significance is eloquent: in the modern novel, individuals act for private aims within a private world, clashing and intersecting with other individuals to satisfy their own desires, and in this way they create a plot. This ideological space is built on the maxim that Thomas Buddenbrook applied to his life: “every human activity has only a symbolic significance”.<sup>18</sup> Therefore no longer does an absolute ladder of ideals, aims and conflicts exist to call on, “one can be a Caesar even in a modest city in the Baltic”<sup>19</sup>; the destiny of a Lübeck businessman merits the same interest that other cultures would have reserved for the destiny of a prince, because the content of worlds and individual desires is infinitely specific. Each reader is more attracted by certain desires and certain worlds than by others, and yet what is truly universal is not the content of desires and worlds, but the form of desiring something in a small world inhabited by other individuals who in their turn desire something else.. *What unites human beings is the desire to satisfy specific desires within a particular world to which they belong: this existential grammar is the sole thing that everyone can share.* The genre that guarantees the right to leave traces for all individuals reveals, at the end, that all modern lives, despite their superficial differences, repeat the same pattern. In this pattern the form of desire counts more than its contents. Even more importantly, it provides a space for average individuals, whatever their aims. The novel projects an Tocquevillian image of the present state of things. It depicts a world divided into niches within an uncontrolled whole in which each niche is subjectively singular in its objective seriality, absolute in its absolute relativity. “My name is Walter Siti, like everyone” opens the novel that in Italy has defined our time<sup>20</sup>. After a few sentence Siti continues, “I am the West because I can concern myself with unimportant things and treat as unimportant the forces I cannot control.” Because while Western democracies are shaken by populisms, I can post a photo of my cat on Facebook. On the other had, many of us would not give away for anything our hard won right to concern ourselves with unimportant things. The

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<sup>17</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, VI, iii, xi.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks. Verfall einer Familie*, Hrsg. von E. Heftrich unter Mitarbeit von S. Stachorski und H. Lehnert, VI, 7 (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2002), p. 397.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, V, 4, pp. 302-03.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Siti, *Troppi paradisi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006, p. 3).

political attempts to overturn this condition have all failed. The history of the last two centuries have shown this to be the case—two centuries that conclude in an imprecise point in the eighties, after which a situation re-emerges, as if an inevitable destiny, that was described 150 years ago by an aristocrat whose family was justly wiped out by the French Revolution.