

ON SOME FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE

Legend has it, and if it is not true it is still a good story, that Stalin once asked how many divisions the Pope had. Subsequent events have proved to us that while divisions are indeed important in certain circumstances, they are not everything. There are non-material forces, which cannot be measured precisely, but which nonetheless carry *weight*.

We are surrounded by intangible powers, and not just those spiritual values explored by the world's great religions. The power of square roots is also an intangible power: their rigid laws have survived for centuries, outliving not just Stalin's decrees but even the Pope's. And among these powers I would include that of the literary tradition; that is to say, the power of that network of texts which humanity has produced and still produces not for practical ends (such as records, commentaries on laws and scientific formulae, minutes of meetings or train schedules) but, rather, for its own sake, for humanity's own enjoyment—and which are read for pleasure, spiritual edification, broadening of knowledge, or maybe just to pass the time, without anyone forcing us to read them (apart from when we are obliged to do so at school or in the university).

True, literary objects are only partly intangible, since they usually come to us on paper. But at one stage they came to us through the voice of someone who was calling on an oral tradition, or written on stone, while today we are talking about the future of e-books, which apparently will allow us to read a collection of jokes or Dante's *Divine Comedy* on a liquid-crystal screen. Let me say at once that I do not intend to dwell this evening on the vexed question of the electronic book. I belong, of course, to those who prefer to read a novel or poem in the paper medium of books, whose dog-eared and crumpled pages I will even remember, though I am told that there is now a generation of digital hackers who, not having ever read a book in their lives, have now enjoyed *Don Quixote* for the first time thanks to the e-book. A clear gain for their minds but at a terrible cost for their eyesight. If future generations come to have a good (psychological and physical) relationship with the e-book, the power of *Don Quixote* will remain intact.

What use is this intangible power we call literature? The obvious reply is the one I have already made, namely, that it is consumed for its own sake and therefore does not have to serve any purpose. But such a disembodied view of the pleasure of literature risks reducing it to the status of jogging or doing crossword puzzles—both of which primarily serve some purpose, the former the health of the body, the latter the expansion of one's vocabulary. What I intend to discuss is therefore a series of roles that literature plays in both our individual and our social lives.

Above all, literature keeps language alive as our collective heritage. By definition language goes its own way; no decree from on high, emanating either from politicians or from the academy, can stop its progress and divert it toward situations that they claim are for the best. The Fascists tried to make Italians say *mescita* instead of *bar*, *coda di gallo* instead of *cocktail*, *rete* instead of *goal*, *auto pubblica* instead of *taxi*, and our language paid no attention. Then it suggested a lexical monstrosity, an unacceptable archaism like

autista instead of *chauffeur*, and the language accepted it. Maybe because it avoided a sound unknown to Italian. It kept *taxi*, but gradually, at least in the spoken language, turned this into *tassi*.

Language goes where it wants to but is sensitive to the suggestions of literature. Without Dante there would have been no unified Italian language. When, in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (*On Vernacular Eloquence*), Dante analyzes and condemns the various Italian dialects and decides to forge a new "illustrious vernacular," nobody would have put money on such an act of arrogance, and yet with *The Divine Comedy* he won his bet. It is true that Dante's vernacular took several centuries to become the language spoken by all of us, but if it has succeeded it is because the community of those who believed in literature continued to be inspired by Dante's model. And if that model had not existed, then the idea of political unity might not have made any headway. Perhaps that is why Bossi does not speak an "illustrious vernacular."

Twenty years of Fascist talk of "Rome's fated hills" and "ineluctable destinies," of "unavoidable events" and "plows tracing furrows in the ground," have in the end left no trace in contemporary Italian, whereas traces have been left by certain virtuoso experiments of futurist prose, which were unacceptable at the time. And while I often hear people complain about the victory of a middle Italian that has been popularized by television, let us not forget that the appeal to a middle Italian, in its noblest form, came through the plain and perfectly acceptable prose of Manzoni, and later of Svevo or Moravia.

By helping to create language, literature creates a sense of identity and community. I spoke initially of Dante, but we might also think of what Greek civilization would have been like without Homer, German identity without Luther's translation of the Bible, the Russian language without Pushkin, or Indian civilization without its foundation epics.

And literature keeps the individual's language alive as well. These days many lament the birth of a new "telegraphese," which

is being foisted on us through e-mail and mobile-phone text messages, where one can even say "I love you" with short-message symbols; but let us not forget that the youngsters who send messages in this new form of shorthand are, at least in part, the same young people who crowd those new cathedrals of the book, the multistory bookstores, and who, even when they flick through a book without buying it, come into contact with cultivated and elaborate literary styles to which their parents, and certainly their grandparents, had never been exposed.

Although there are more of them compared with the readers of previous generations, these young people clearly are a minority of the six billion inhabitants of this planet; nor am I idealistic enough to believe that literature can offer relief to the vast number of people who lack basic food and medicine. But I would like to make one point: the wretches who roam around aimlessly in gangs and kill people by throwing stones from a highway bridge or setting fire to a child—whoever these people are—turn out this way not because they have been corrupted by computer "new-speak" (they don't even have access to a computer) but rather because they are excluded from the universe of literature and from those places where, through education and discussion, they might be reached by a glimmer from the world of values that stems from and sends us back again to books.

Reading works of literature forces on us an exercise of fidelity and respect, albeit within a certain freedom of interpretation. There is a dangerous critical heresy, typical of our time, according to which we can do anything we like with a work of literature, reading into it whatever our most uncontrolled impulses dictate to us. This is not true. Literary works encourage freedom of interpretation, because they offer us a discourse that has many layers of reading and place before us the ambiguities of language and of real life. But in order to play this game, which allows every generation to read literary works in a different way, we must be

moved by a profound respect for what I have called elsewhere the intention of the text.

On one hand the world seems to be a "closed" book, allowing of only one reading. If, for example, there is a law governing planetary gravitation, then it is either the right one or the wrong one. Compared with that, the universe of a book seems to us to be an open universe. But let us try to approach a narrative work with common sense and compare the assumptions we can make about it with those we can make about the world. As far as the world is concerned, we find that the laws of universal gravitation are those established by Newton, or that it is true that Napoléon died on Saint Helena on 5 May 1821. And yet, if we keep an open mind, we will always be prepared to revise our convictions the day science formulates the great laws of the cosmos differently, or a historian discovers unpublished documents proving that Napoléon died on a Bonapartist ship as he attempted to escape. On the other hand, as far as the world of books is concerned, propositions like "Sherlock Holmes was a bachelor," "Little Red Riding-Hood is eaten by the wolf and then freed by the woodcutter," or "Anna Karenina commits suicide" will remain true for eternity, and no one will ever be able to refute them. There are people who deny that Jesus was the son of God, others who doubt his historical existence, others who claim he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and still others who believe that the Messiah is yet to come, and however we might think about such questions, we treat these opinions with respect. But there is little respect for those who claim that Hamlet married Ophelia, or that Superman is not Clark Kent.

Literary texts explicitly provide us with much that we will never cast doubt on, but also, unlike the real world, they flag with supreme authority what we are to take as important in them, and what we must *not* take as a point of departure for freewheeling interpretations.

At the end of chapter 35 of *The Red and the Black*, Julien Sorel goes to the church and shoots at Madame de Rênal. After

observing that Julien's arm was trembling, Stendhal tells us that the protagonist fires a first shot and misses his target. Then he fires again, and the woman falls. We might claim that his trembling arm and the fact that his first shot missed prove that Julien did not go to the church with firm homicidal intentions, but, rather, was drawn there by a passionate, if vaguely intentioned, impulse. Another interpretation can be placed beside this one, namely, that Julien had originally intended to kill, but that he was a coward. The text allows for both interpretations.

Some people have wondered where the first bullet went—an intriguing question for Stendhal aficionados. Just as devotees of Joyce go to Dublin to seek out the chemist shop where Bloom bought a lemon-shaped bar of soap (and in order to satisfy these literary pilgrims, that chemist's, which really does exist, has begun to produce that kind of soap again), in the same way one can imagine Stendhal fans trying to find both Verrières and the church in the real world, and then scrutinizing every pillar to find the bullet hole. This would be a rather amusing instance of a literary devotee's obsession. But let us suppose that a critic wanted to base his entire interpretation of the novel on the fate of that missing bullet. In times like ours this is not impossible. There are people who have based their entire reading of Poe's "Purloined Letter" on the position of the letter with regard to the mantel-piece. But while Poe makes the position of the letter explicitly relevant, Stendhal tells us that nothing more is known about that first bullet and thus excludes it from the realm of fictitious speculation. If we wish to remain faithful to Stendhal's text, that bullet is lost forever, and where it ended up is ultimately irrelevant in the context of the narrative. On the other hand, what remains unsaid in Stendhal's *Armance* regarding the protagonist's potential impotence pushes the reader toward frenetic hypotheses in order to complete what the story does not tell us explicitly. Similarly, in Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) a phrase like "the unfortunate woman responded" does not tell us the lengths

to which Gertrude has gone in her sin with Egidio, but the dark halo of hypotheses stirred up in the reader is part of the fascination of this highly chaste and elliptical passage.

At the beginning of *The Three Musketeers* it is said that D'Artagnan arrived at Meung on a fourteen-year-old nag on the first Monday of April, 1625. If you have a good program on your computer, you can immediately establish that that Monday was the 7th of April. A juicy tidbit of trivia for devotees of Dumas. Can one base an overinterpretation of the novel on this detail? I would say no, because the text does not make that detail relevant. Over the course of the novel it becomes clear that D'Artagnan's arrival on a Monday was not particularly important—whereas the fact that it was in April is quite relevant (one must remember that in order to hide the fact that his splendid shoulder strap was embroidered only on the front, Porthos was wearing a long cloak of crimson velvet, which the season did not justify—so much so that the musketeer had to pretend that he had a cold).

All this may seem quite obvious to many people, but such obvious (if often forgotten) points remind us that the world of literature inspires the certainty that there are some unquestionable assumptions, and that literature therefore offers us a model, however fictitious, of truth. This literal truth impinges on what are often called hermeneutic truths: because whenever someone tries to tell us that D'Artagnan was motivated by a homosexual passion for Porthos, that Manzoni's Innominato was driven to evil by an overwhelming Oedipus complex, that the Nun of Monza was corrupted by Communism, as certain politicians today might wish to suggest, or that Panurge acts the way he does out of hatred for nascent capitalism, we can always reply that it is not possible to find in the texts referred to any statement, suggestion, or insinuation that allows us to go along with such interpretative drift. The world of literature is a universe in which it is possible to establish whether a reader has a sense of reality or is the victim of his own hallucinations.

Characters migrate. We can make true statements about literary characters because what happens to them is recorded in a text, and a text is like a musical score. It is true that Anna Karenina commits suicide in the same sense that it is true that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is in C minor (and not in F major, like the Sixth) and begins with "G, G, G, E-flat." But certain literary characters—not all of them by any means—leave the text that gave birth to them and migrate to a zone in the universe we find very difficult to delimit. Narrative characters migrate, when they are lucky, from text to text, and it is not that those who do not migrate are ontologically different from their more fortunate brethren; it is just that they have not had the luck to do so, and we do not encounter them again.

Both mythical characters and those from "secular" narratives have migrated from text to text (and through adaptations into different mediums, from book to film or to ballet, or from oral tradition to book): Ulysses, Jason, King Arthur or Parsifal, Alice, Pinocchio, D'Artagnan. Now, when we talk about such characters are we referring to a particular score? Let's take the case of Little Red Riding-Hood. The most famous scores, Perrault's and the Grimms', display profound differences. In the former the little girl is eaten by the wolf and the story finishes there, inspiring severe moralistic reflections on the risks of not being careful. In the latter the huntsman arrives, kills the wolf, and restores the child and her grandmother to life. Happy ending.

Now let us imagine a mother telling the tale to her children and stopping when the wolf devours Little Red Riding-Hood. The children would protest and demand the "true" story, in which Little Red Riding-Hood comes back to life, and it would be pointless for the mother to claim that she was a strict textual philologist. Children know the "true" story, in which Little Red Riding-Hood really does revive, and this story is closer to the Grimms' version than to Perrault's. Yet it does not coincide

exactly with the Grimms' score, because it omits a whole series of minor details—on which the Grimms and Perrault disagree in any case (for instance, what kind of gifts Little Red Riding-Hood is bringing to her grandmother)—details children are more than willing to compromise on, because they concern a character who is much more schematic, more fluctuating in the tradition, and who appears in various scores, many of them oral.

Thus Little Red Riding-Hood, D'Artagnan, Ulysses, or Madame Bovary become individuals with a life apart from their original scores, and even those who have never read the archetypal score can claim to make true statements about them. Even before reading *Oedipus Rex* I had learned that Oedipus marries Jocasta. However fluctuating, these scores are not unverifiable: anyone who claimed that Madame Bovary reconciles with Charles and lives happily ever after with him in the end would meet with the disapproval of people of sound common sense, who share a set of assumptions regarding Emma's character.

Where exactly are these fluctuating individuals? That depends on the format of our ontology, whether it also has room for square roots, the Etruscan language, and two different ideas on the Most Holy Trinity—the Roman one, which holds that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son ("ex Patre Filioque procedit"), and the Byzantine one, which has it that the Spirit proceeds only from the Father. But this region has a very imprecise status and contains entities of varying substance, for even the Patriarch of Constantinople (who is ready to fight the Pope over the "Filioque" question) would agree with the Pope (at least I hope he would) in saying that it is true that Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street, and that Clark Kent is the same person as Superman.

Nevertheless, it has been written in countless novels or poems that—I'm inventing examples at random here—Hasdrubal kills Corinna or Theophrastus is madly in love with Theodolinda, and yet no one believes that true statements can be made on these

matters, because these ill-starred characters have never left their native text or managed to become part of our collective memory. Why is the fact that Hamlet does not marry Ophelia any more true than the fact that Theophrastus married Theodolinda? What is that part of our world where Hamlet and Ophelia live but not poor old Theophrastus?

Certain characters have become somehow true for the collective imagination because over the course of centuries we have made emotional investments in them. We all make emotional investments in any number of fantasies, which we dwell on either with open eyes or half-awake. We can be moved by thinking about the death of someone we love, or experience physical reactions when imagining ourselves having an erotic relationship with that person. Similarly, we can be moved by Emma Bovary's fate through a process of identification or projection, or, as happened to several generations, be drawn toward suicide by the misfortunes of young Werther or Jacopo Ortis. However, if someone were to ask us if the person whose death we imagined was really dead, we would reply no, that it was a totally private fantasy of our own. Whereas if someone asks us whether Werther really did kill himself, we reply yes, and the fantasy we are talking about here is not private, it is a real fact on which the entire community of readers agrees. So much so that anyone who killed himself just because he had imagined (being well aware that this was simply the product of his imagination) that his loved one was dead would be judged by us to be mad, while somehow or other we try to justify someone killing himself because of Werther's suicide, knowing full well that the latter was a fictional character.

We will have to find a space in the universe where these characters live and shape our behavior to such an extent that we choose them as role models for our life, and for the life of others, so that we are clear about what we mean when we say that someone has an Oedipus complex or a Gargantuan appetite, that someone behaves quixotically, is as jealous as Othello, doubts like

Hamlet, is an incurable Don Juan, or is a Scrooge. And in literature this happens not only with characters but also with situations and objects. Why do the women who come and go, talking of Michelangelo, Montale's sharp shards of bottles stuck in the wall in the dazzling sun, Gozzano's good things of bad taste, Eliot's fear that is shown us in a handful of dust, Leopardi's hedge, Petrarch's clear cool waters, Dante's bestial meal, become obsessive metaphors, ready to tell us over and over again who we are, what we want, where we are going, or what we are not and what we don't want?

These literary entities are here among us. They were not there from the beginning of time as (perhaps) square roots and Pythagoras's theorem were, but now that they have been created by literature and nourished by our emotional investment in them, they do exist and we have to come to terms with them. Let us even say, to avoid ontological and metaphysical discussions, that they exist like a cultural habitus, a social disposition. But even the universal taboo of incest is a cultural habitus, an idea, a disposition, and yet it has had the power to shape the destinies of human societies.

However, as some people today claim, even the most enduring literary characters risk becoming evanescent, mobile, and shifting, losing that fixity which forced us to acknowledge their destinies. We have now entered the era of electronic hypertext, which allows us not only to travel through a textual labyrinth (be it an entire encyclopedia or the complete works of Shakespeare) without necessarily "unraveling" all the information it contains but to penetrate it like a knitting needle going into a ball of wool. Thanks to hypertext, the phenomenon of free creative writing has become a reality. On the Internet you can find programs that let you write stories as a group, joining in narratives whose denouement one can change *ad infinitum*. And if you can do this with a text that you are jointly creating with a group of virtual

friends, why not do the same with already existing literary texts, buying programs that allow you to change the great narratives that have obsessed us for millennia?

Just imagine that you are avidly reading *War and Peace*, wondering whether Natasha will finally give in to Anatoly's blandishments, whether that wonderful Prince Andrej will really die, whether Pierre will have the courage to shoot Napoléon, and now at last you can re-create your own Tolstoy, conferring a long, happy life on Andrej, and making Pierre the liberator of Europe. You could even reconcile Emma Bovary with poor Charles and make her a happy and fulfilled mother, or decide that Little Red Riding-Hood goes into the woods and meets Pinocchio, or rather, that she gets kidnapped by her stepmother, given the name Cinderella, and made to work for Scarlett O'Hara; or that she meets a magic helper named Vladimir J. Propp in the woods, who gives her a magic ring that allows her to discover, at the foot of the Thugs' sacred banyan tree, the Aleph, that point from which the whole universe can be seen. Anna Karenina doesn't die beneath the train because Russian narrow-gauge railways, under Putin's government, are less efficient than their submarines, while away in the distance, on the other side of Alice's looking-glass, is Jorge Luis Borges reminding Funes the Memorious not to forget to return *War and Peace* to the Library of Babel . . .

Would this be so bad? No, in fact, it has already been done by literature, from Mallarmé's notion of *Le Livre* to the surrealists' exquisite corpses to Queneau's *One Hundred Million Million Poems* and the unbound books of the second avant-garde. And then there are the jam sessions of jazz music. Yet the fact that the jam session exists, where every evening a variation on a particular musical theme is played, does not prevent or discourage us from going to concert halls, where every evening Chopin's Sonata in B-flat Minor, op. 35, will finish in the same way.

Some say that by playing with hypertexts we escape two forms of oppression: having to follow sequences already decided

on by others, and being condemned to the social division between those who write and those who read. This seems silly to me, but certainly playing creatively with hypertexts—changing old stories and helping create new ones—can be an enthralling activity, a fine exercise to be practiced at school, a new form of writing very much akin to the jam session. I believe it can be good and even educational to try to modify stories that already exist, just as it would be interesting to transcribe Chopin for the mandolin: it would help to sharpen the musical brain, and to understand why the timbre of the piano was such an integral element of the Sonata in B-flat Minor. It can be educational for one's visual taste and for the exploration of forms to experiment with collages by putting together fragments of *The Marriage of the Virgin*, of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and the latest Pokémon story. This is essentially what great artists have always done.

But these games cannot replace the true educational function of literature, an educational function that is not simply limited to the transmission of moral ideas, whether good or bad, or to the formation of an aesthetic sense.

Jurij Lotman, in his *Culture and Explosion*, takes up Chekhov's famous advice, namely, that if a story or play mentions or shows a shotgun hanging on the wall, then before the end that gun has to go off. Lotman suggests that the real question is not whether the gun will actually be fired or not. The very fact that we do not know whether it will be fired confers significance on the plot. Reading a story means being seized by a tension, a thrill. Discovering at the end whether the gun has gone off or not involves more than a simple piece of information. It is the discovery that things happen, and have always happened, in a particular way, no matter what the reader wants. The reader must accept this frustration, and through it sense the power of Destiny. If you could decide on characters' destinies it would be like going to the desk of a travel agent who says: "So where do you want to find the whale, in Samoa or in the Aleutian Islands? And when? And

do you want to be the one who kills it or let Queequeg do it?" Whereas the real lesson of *Moby-Dick* is that the whale goes wherever it wants.

Think of Victor Hugo's description of the battle of Waterloo in *Les Misérables*. Unlike Stendhal's description of the battle through the eyes of Fabrizio del'Dongo, who is in the midst of it and does not know what is going on, Hugo describes it through the eyes of God, seeing it from above. He is aware that if Napoléon had known that there was a steep descent beyond the crest of the Mont-Saint-Jean plateau (but his guide had not told him so), General Milhaud's cuirassiers would not have perished at the feet of the English army; and that if the little shepherd guiding Bülow had suggested a different route, the Prussian army would not have arrived in time to decide the outcome of the battle.

With a hypertextual structure we could rewrite the battle of Waterloo, making Grouchy's French arrive instead of Blücher's Germans. There are war games that allow you to do such things, and I'm sure they are great fun. But the tragic grandeur of those pages by Hugo resides in the notion that things go the way they do, and often in spite of what we want. The beauty of *War and Peace* lies in the fact that Prince Andrej's agony ends with his death, however sorry it makes us. The painful wonder that every reading of the great tragedies evokes in us comes from the fact that their heroes, who could have escaped an atrocious fate, through weakness or blindness fail to realize where they are heading, and plunge into an abyss they have often dug with their own hands. In any case, that is the sense conveyed by Hugo when, after showing us other opportunities Napoléon could have seized at Waterloo, he writes, "Was it possible for Napoléon to win that battle? We reply no. Why? Because of Wellington? Because of Blücher? No. Because of God."

This is what all the great narratives tell us, even if they replace God with notions of fate or the inexorable laws of life. The function of "unchangeable" stories is precisely this: against all our

desires to change destiny, they make tangible the impossibility of changing it. And in so doing, no matter what story they are telling, they are also telling our own story, and that is why we read them and love them. We need their severe, "repressive" lesson. Hypertextual narrative has much to teach us about freedom and creativity. That is all well and good, but it is not everything. Stories that are "already made" also teach us how to die.

I believe that one of the principal functions of literature lies in these lessons about fate and death. Perhaps there are others, but for the moment none spring to mind.