

A Warm Mind-Shake

Scritti in onore di Paolo Bertinetti

*a cura del Dipartimento
di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne
dell'Università degli Studi di Torino*

Trauben

*Volume pubblicato con il contributo del Dipartimento
di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne
dell'Università degli Studi di Torino*

© 2014 Edizioni Trauben
via Plana 1 - Torino
www.trauben.it

ISBN 978 88 66980483

THE “COMING-OF-AGE STORY”.
NARRATIVES ABOUT GROWING UP
AFTER THE *BILDUNGSROMAN*

Paola Carmagnani

In common usage, contemporary works of fiction about growing up are nowadays referred to as “coming of age stories”, a general label which doesn’t identify any common structural features and which often gets muddled with the notion of *Bildungsroman*, as if they were synonymous.

When we speak of *Bildungsroman* though, we are referring to a specific narrative form which appeared in Europe at the end of the 18th century and completely disappeared during the second half of 19th century, as Franco Moretti has compellingly explained. How, then, do we narrate the experience of growing up outside the well-known model of *Bildungsroman*? Is there another, recurrent form which has asserted itself in literary practice? I believe there is and think we could use the label of “coming-of-age story” to identify it, on the condition that we offer an exhaustive description of its specific structural features.

The origins of that narrative pattern which we will call “coming-of-age story” can be traced back to the same decades that saw the flourishing of the *Bildungsroman*, within a rival paradigm presented by adventure narratives. For various reasons, adventure narratives were an important part of the British and American literary traditions. Therefore, they will be the epicenter from which the new pattern of the coming-of-age story will radiate outward, taking root in other literatures.

The young *Bildungsroman* hero gradually accumulates his experience, seizing the opportunities that modern life presents him, and learns to shape his identity according to what the world can offer. Every narrative episode, even the most ordinary everyday encounter, has the potential to become a relevant experience: nothing is crucially important, and nothing is absolutely neutral in a narrative world which recedes from the polarization of values and seeks its meaning in the shades of compromise.

In the adventure chronotope instead, heroes are brutally torn from their quiet, everyday lives and transported into a world of here and now, good and evil, life and death. It is a structure shaped on the model of ritual initiation, where heroes must set their goals and focus their energy on the crucial moment of trial, radically determining their immediate destiny. The *Bildungsroman* is the novel of self-consciousness. It deals with the relationship between man and culture and describes how to develop an identity capable of coming to terms with the ways of the world. In this model, everything revolves around the so-called principle of reality and one of the main reasons for its disappearance has been precisely due to its structural inability to cope with trauma and the unconscious. In adventure novels instead, the initiation structure virtually allows a place for these material. Indefinitely suspended, death is ever present, and just below the surface of the hero's restlessness the shadow of an inner journey appears. Between the end of 19th century and the early 20th century then, a reworking of the traditional adventure paradigm gave rise to a new narrative pattern, which was in fact founded on the revelation of those dark places hidden within the traditional initiation structure. Heroes acquired a new, complex inner being and their initiation was no longer a mere consecration of their very heroic, innate and unchangeable nature: the adventure became a narrative about growing up, by putting the hero's uncertain identity to the test and leading him through unknown, forgotten places deep within himself. Venturing outside the boundaries of self-consciousness, this new coming-of-age pattern manages, however, to keep its dangerous unconscious material at bay within the traditionally realistic structures of memory and narration, and I do believe that one of the main reasons for its long-lasting effectiveness lies in this structural double-bond. One of the critical turning points in the development of the coming-of-age story can indeed be found in Joseph Conrad's narratives, calling into question the traditional notions of language and narration without engaging, though, in modernist narrative disruption.

In Conrad's renowned *Heart of Darkness* (1902), where darkness is no longer the colonial symbol of an exotic otherness but the very colour of the human soul, one of the coming-of-age story's most significant references can be found. Young Marlow's "inconclusive experiences" (21) bring him to confront his own hidden drives and inner strength in a world which seems to keep him "away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion" (30). The older Marlow,

who narrates the story, never imposes upon it a retrospective sense capable of tying the different episodes into a reassuringly solid narrative structure. “Do you see the story?”, asks Marlow, “Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream — making a vain attempt” (50). All the most typical situations of exotic adventure novels are here, but they have become a succession of traumas: material fragments of a meaningless reality whose hidden truth cannot be told — “unspeakable rites” (83), “unspeakable secrets” (101), as the glamour fades away into “an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory” (113). Adventure has turned into a path of initiation winding through the dark night of consciousness but, as in traditional adventure stories, this path keeps the form of a physical journey, whose diachronical structure prevents narrative disruption. The inner adventure then, manages to keep the old promise of summing up a sort of meaning, however elusive it may be, and at the farthest point of navigation the whisper of Marlow’s own heart of darkness resounds within the impenetrable darkness of Kurtz’s cry — “The horror! The horror!” (112). Utterly at odds with the *Bildungsroman* cognitive model, this sudden and crucial acquisition of knowledge happens without any cumulative and rational reasoning. It doesn’t derive from any previous experience. On the contrary, in this very revelation lies the only uncertain meaning of the entire adventure: “It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me — and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough too — and pitiful — not extraordinary in any way — not very clear either” (21). As I will show, this compression of meaning within the model of an epiphany will be one of the key features of all coming-of-age stories.

In the further development of the coming of age story, the exploration of the inner darkness narrated by Conrad will acquire a new, essential, feature: innocence, as a specific viewpoint from which to observe it. Of course, innocence was another notion utterly alien to the *Bildungsroman* world, whose system of values was entirely focused on the cultural dynamics of transaction. Adventure instead, offered its young readers an enchanted world, whose coloured shades were safely grounded in a reassuringly black and white value system. A reworking of the adventure paradigm could therefore operate not only on the level of its hidden places, but also on its innocent surface. Another one of Conrad’s narratives, published in the same volume with *Heart of Darkness*, presents a rel-

evant example of this second kind of reworking. Significantly called *Youth*, the story repeats the journey's structure, but it excludes any traumatic perception from it: an endless series of shipwrecks are joyfully perceived by young Marlow as "the deuce of an adventure", an exulting experience he "would not have given up [...] for worlds" (16). Here, the innocent adventure romance is the very symbol of youth: "Youth! All youth! The silly, charming, beautiful youth" (33), which fades away dissolving its illusions in the disenchantment of maturity. Contrary to *Heart of Darkness*, the focus is not on what we learn on our way towards adulthood, but on what we lose:

By all that's wonderful it is the sea — or is it youth alone? Who can tell? But you here — you all had something out of life: money, love — whatever one gets on shore — and, tell me, wasn't that the best time, that time when we were young at sea; young and had nothing, on the sea that gives nothing, except hard knocks — and sometimes a chance to feel your strength? — that only — what you all regret? (39)

At the end of the journey, there is not the horror of an impenetrable darkness, but the last dream of youth, the enchanting vision of the legendary East: "I opened my young eyes on it. I came upon it from a tussle with the sea — and I was young — and I saw it looking at me" (38). As this vision does not derive from any rational elaboration of the experience accumulated during the journey, it also resists the following disenchantment of maturity. Toil, deception, success, love: old Marlow's weary eyes have seen it all, but somehow they are "looking still, looking always, looking anxiously for something out of life, that while it is expected is already gone — has passed unseen, in a sigh, in a flash — together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions" (39).

In those very same years, in the United States, the hero of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* possessed another feature which will be definitively integrated into the coming-of-age pattern: a youth which more specifically identifies with adolescence. That is, a liminal phase which stands between childhood and adulthood, offering a tangible symbolic sign of the tension between innocence and awareness, enchantment and disenchantment that founds the coming-of-age narrative. Twain's novel contains Huck's own narration of his journey on the Mississippi River, describing with the same matter-of-fact tone all the adventure's practical devices in addition to an inner world made of trauma, fear and loneliness.

At the end of the story Huck will be safely brought back to the comfortable world of civilization, but he's already bound for another adventure, dreaming to escape to the Indian Districts. Coming-of-age stories indeed, never lead their heroes into maturity. The end of the adventure leaves them on the threshold of an open gate, and what lies ahead doesn't really matter. Work, money, love, failures and all the social negotiations of adult life are an unfillable blank. If sometimes, through the figure of an adult narrator, maturity does appear, it is nothing more than a grey background against which the bright memory of his one, crucial adventure stands out.

The narrative pattern set in the last decades of 19th century by the reworking of adventure stories was catalysed fifty years later by that sequence of historical events which since the end of World War II have in fact appeared to the western consciousness as a traumatic fall from innocence. I will focus here on two of the most canonical coming-of-age stories of these decades: J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), because they develop the same structural elements along opposing lines, trying to answer the same crucial question: Is there any innocence which can redeem death and evil? Through its symbolic narrative, Golding's novel makes explicit reference to its historical context, placing its young heroes in the midst of a nuclear war, whose distant echoes punctually resound over the desert island of their adventure. Salinger's novel, instead, narrates an utterly intimate experience, in which the same collective traumas implicitly resound. In Golding's novel the obvious, explicit literary references are the Victorian adventure tradition and Conrad's reworking of it. Within the American tradition, Salinger's novel transposes Mark Twain's journey on the Mississippi into a gloomy New York City, giving voice to another adolescent hero who is a direct heir of Huckleberry Finn. In both novels, the heroes pathway out of their childhood is marked by an original trauma situated outside the time of the story - the unacceptable death of Holden's wonderful little brother in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and the airplane crash that took Golding's boys on the desert island, tearing them from family and civilization. From this founding event, the narration takes the form of a whirling fall, developing the original trauma through a sequence of trials that drag the heroes into the dark depths of life and death.

The nature of this fall, however, is entirely different. In Salinger's novel it is indeed a fall from Eden, where the hero keeps looking back to his lost, meaningful childhood, desperately trying to preserve its fading innocence:

I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around – nobody big, I mean – except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff – I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from nowhere and *catch* them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be (180).

Like Peter Pan, another crucial benchmark of the coming-of-age story, Holden doesn't want to grow up, because growing up would mean to accept life as a *phoney* and meaningless arrangement whose only, painful truth is death. The Museum of Natural History, with its big glass cases where “everything always stayed right where it was” (127), and Central Park where he used to play, should be redeeming places where time could be stopped. But Eden's doors are closed and there's nothing but an empty bleakness precipitating him further down. Holden's fall from innocence is indeed a tragic escape from life itself: the clock in the stomach of Peter Pan's crocodile keeps on ticking and death is actually the only way to reach Neverland's shores. Before he hits bottom however, innocence will save him, proving that there is a powerful truth which can somehow redeem life's inevitable march towards loss and death. In the name of love, Holden's wise little sister, Phoebe, will in fact become “the catcher in the rye”: she forces him to stop running away and brings him back into the world. For a short moment of absolute grace, it seems that time could indeed be stopped – Central Park is restored to its lost enchantment, the children on the carousel keep going round and round and a purifying rain washes the pain away:

I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going round and round. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going round and round, in her blue coat and all. Gosh, I wish you could've been there (219).

We obviously don't know what Holden did after he went home, nor what he will do after that – "That stuff doesn't interest me too much right now" (220). What we do know though, is that the redeeming epiphany of love's truth has been a passing moment of grace soon to be swallowed up by time, flowing again, and endlessly projecting every moment we live into an unreachable past: "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" (220).

If Salinger's story focuses on what's lost in the process of growing up, in Golding's novel there's no innocent Eden to regret and the narrative focuses instead on what is to be learnt. The beautiful island, which seemed to promise the enchantment of old adventure novels, rapidly turns into a place of nightmares, showing that evil is part of human nature and that children are innocent only in so far as they don't know it yet. Closely scrutinized by an impersonal narrator's eye which moves back and forth from inside to outside the characters, Golding's lost boys experience an initiation through their hidden drives and deepest fears. At the core of it stands the iconic image of the Lord of the Flies, the monstrous pig head impaled on a stick which has by now been impressed into the collective imagination as powerfully as Conrad's image of the heart of darkness. At the end of the story, the grown-ups will eventually come to rescue the lost boys and Ralph, the last appointed victim of the childrens' violence, finally weeps "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart" (225). The knowledge acquired by Ralph at the very end of the story had been formulated before by the uncanny voice of the Lord of the Flies:

'Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!' said the head. (...) 'You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?' (158)

Before Ralph, Simon had been the only boy who had accepted to listen to the dark truth: he had looked at the pig's grinning head, standing on its stick with half-shut eyes, "dim with the infinite cynicism of adult life" (151), and had given in to the "ancient, inescapable recognition" of man's inner evil (152). His fall is a necessary fall towards knowledge: inside the Lord of the Flies' mouth and then down the hill, towards the beach where the boys are entranced in their celebration for the killing of an imaginary beast. Simon runs to save them, by telling them the truth; but they cannot listen. Simon's fall is a black version of the catcher's vi-

sion: in the rye field, the children are playing a deadly game, which ends up killing the one who wanted to save them. As Salinger's catcher though, Simon's death brings a light within the darkness. Simon acknowledges evil but he doesn't resign himself to its power, and in Golding's novel this is the only possible innocence. In the darkest core of the novel then, the island of terrors is suddenly illuminated with a bright phosphorescent light, transfiguring Simon's dead body into a silver shape, tearing it from the material nature of blood and flesh and gently carrying it towards the open sea. In Salinger's novel the catcher's innocence could find a tangible way into the world through love, however fragile its redeeming force might be. Here, Simon's innocence is projected out of life, where there's no place for it. If, in spite of everything, there is still some hope, it lies in Ralph's closing revelation: he will grow up aware of the darkness but, maybe, he won't resign himself to it and he will still be capable of seeing it with his eyes wide-open, untainted by "the infinite cynicism of adult life" (151). Once again though, we don't know.

In the following decades, the pattern of the coming-of-age story will take firm root in the narrative practice, spreading into specific fictional genres - namely thrillers and fantasy - and into countless cinematic texts. It has also managed to cross the boundaries of British and American literature, colonizing other cultural areas. The main reason of its long-lasting appeal, I believe, lies in its structural capacity of balancing on the edge of disenchantment, on that thin line where life's darkness can still be observed through an innocent gaze, producing meaning and giving us back some redeeming vision that we have lost on the way.

Works cited list

- CONRAD, J. *Heart of Darkness*, London, Penguin, 1995.
CONRAD, J. *Youth and The End of the Tether*, London, Penguin, 1975.
MORETTI, F. "Un'inutile nostalgia di me stesso'. La crisi del romanzo di formazione europeo, 1898-1914", *Il romanzo di formazione*, Torino, Einaudi, 1999, pp. 257-273.
GOLDING, W. *Lord of the Flies*, London, Boston, Faber & Faber, 1954.
SALINGER, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*, London, Penguin, 1958.
TWIN, M. *Huckleberry Finn*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1884.