

# Education, subjectivity, literature

Elena Madrussan

## 1. Starting from the need for shape

It's hard to say something more than what has already been said about utility or uselessness of literature. Rather, it still seems relevant to consider this problem in relation to subject and school. In particular, their relationship with Art needs a reflection upon the reason why the common idea that the value of a work depends on its utility is so pervasive. And why this idea coincides with work's spendibility, its exploitable functionality, its productivity, and, therefore, its commodification. If these are the criteria, probably literature is one of the most "useless" form of art<sup>1</sup>.

It may seem expectable today to affirm that this negative change comes from the crisis of humanist culture and from reductionist conceptions of learning. Both are deep-rooted ideas. Nevertheless, this statement would require long periods of analysis and radical rethinking, even in the pedagogical field. At least, because an idea of learning as possibility to acquire and store more or less useful competencies not only says nothing about literature as art or about its extraordinary formative meaning, but above all doesn't answer the formative request for meaning which pervades the student, the teacher, and, perhaps, the school too.

So, what we are trying to do here, is to start from a different and, for some aspect, more direct perspective. It is really about asking ourselves what is happening – or may happen – to a student when he/she reads a novel.

The first example that springs to mind is the *Bildungsroman*. Here it may seem easy for any young reader to feel the existential proximity to the restless protagonists, which are challenged by situations of life. In this context, in fact, as Franco Moretti writes, a sort of interior storm, made of intense relations and spectral solitudes, fear of explicit conflict and mixed feelings, overlaps with the normality of everyday life. The fascinating and engaging thing about *Bildung-*

<sup>1</sup> For some interesting comment on this current problem in university education, see P. Bertinetti, *Sull'inutilità degli studi letterari in generale. E di quelli di anglistica in particolare*, in VV.AA., *Per le vie del mondo*, Torino, Trauben, 2009, pp. 7-11.

*sroman* – if and when it fascinates and engages –, is «its contradictory, bastard, conciliatory nature»<sup>2</sup>. In short, in the *Bildungsroman* is easier to obtain a less strong difference between the episodes which are told “there” and the situations which are experienced “here”. In this case more than in others, this difference is not seen as reduction of the semantic and allusive power of text in the staggering simplification of synopsis and in the effort of a schematic analysis<sup>3</sup>.

However, according to many experts, the process of identification with the character can have some disadvantages. Above all, for example, the final exclusion from one’s own range of interests and self-representational horizon of too distant texts – from an historical or stylistic point of view. Hence the risk that Kirillov’s cry, Castorp’s suffering courage, Madame Bovary’s obstinate passions, Dorian Gray’s tragic demonism or Pavese’s “absurd vice” are equally fiercely unapproachable. For very different reasons and contexts, in fact, they do not present, apparently, any familiar destiny, but the wonderful literary transcription of an existential, religious, psychological, social problem. In such cases, the events narrated are rationally understood, scrupulously learnt and properly codified into the correct historical-critical and filological-literary criteria. Nevertheless, they are not considered outside the symbolic and fictional field of the novel and, therefore, they are not transposed to the critical comprehension of human condition.

It is instead in that ambivalent place of distance/proximity from the page, that acts one of the most important literature functions. It involves, in particular, an idea of education as critical-cultural opportunity: education as exercise of intelligence, which considers culture as the main instrument of interpretation of present, personality, relational dynamism with the other and the world. From this pedagogical point of view, the “interest” for the reader is formed by the openness towards a new knowledge which *becomes* a new horizon of sense: a different horizon of interpretation of reality. This directly concerns the reader because involves his/her autonomous capacity to “extract” from the text problems and questions which are to be interpreted and correlated with each other.

It is difficult not to consider the special charm or strangeness of reading a novel. In fact the cultural question about the relationship between education and literature cannot underestimate this aspect, but personal preferences need to be accepted and attributed to a critical-explorative reflection able to work on what determines the effects of literature. It is thus a question of a critical surveillance which *precedes* the direct approach to the text and which involves a stronger awareness of the relation that the subject creates with it.

<sup>2</sup> F. Moretti, *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987), it. tr. Il romanzo di formazione, Torino, Einaudi, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Concerning this relationship between subjectivity, literary text and end of humanistic formation see F. Papi, *Requiem umanistico*, in «Paideutika. Quaderni di formazione e cultura», n. 9, V, 2009, pp. 7-12.

When education is considered as «lived experience of men as culture»<sup>4</sup>, i.e. as process of critical appropriation of knowledge, seen as cultural event, two essential moments should be taken into account. On one hand, the expansion of relational periods of conceptual elaboration. On the other hand, the willing to consider the non-solvable problem of the educational event, which determines the relation between subject and text. In essence, this is the dinamism between «existential disorder» and «request for reason»<sup>5</sup>. In other words, it is not the acquisition of a bland and repeatable content or of an unarmed catalogue of knowledge, but it is the hard construction of a horizon of meaning<sup>6</sup>.

The formative knot of literary experience can thus become significant again only starting from a reconsideration of the relation between subject and text.

## 2. A methodological point of view

From the methodological point of view, every text can be considered, above all, as *medium* between author and reader. It corresponds to a specific declination of the relevant and unavoidable relationship between life and culture. In fact, all narrative elements of the plot – events, characters, storylines, environments, situations, details – give back an example of the meaning of that tension. As Enrico Testa writes, «rich and fruitful is the idea that the character, outside every mirror effect» is «the place of a comment and of an interpretation of real life which is realized by producing a possible life: [...] a mosaic of fiction in which the cognitive *intention* takes precedence over the imitative one»<sup>7</sup>.

In this context, real or imaginary traces and fragments of life in the course of the story deploy inexhaustible questioning solicitations. So that the text can be considered: *a*) as a *sign* of what is written – a path which is guided by the narration itself –; *b*) as a *meaning* of what is written – as *Bedeutung* which reaches the reader through the writing; *c*) as, finally, *what the text hints* – the other meaning of the text *between the lines*.

According to these three different levels of resonance, literary fiction suggests always different and renewable interpretive paradigms. Literature becomes thus an *explorative* and *cognitive* exercise, and education becomes a *practice of seeking meanings*.

<sup>4</sup> A. Erbetta, *Luoghi di crisi. Per una pedagogia come critica della pedagogia*, Torino, il Segnalibro, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> G.M. Bertin, *Disordine esistenziale e istanza della ragione. Tragico e Comico. Violenza ed Eros*, Bologna, Cappelli, 1981. The meaningful lesson of Bertin about aesthetics and education is the aim of my recent essay: *Appuntamento con il senso. Costruzione della personalità ed esperienza estetica in Giovanni Maria Bertin*, in M. Contini, M. Fabbri (Eds), *Il futuro ricordato*, Livorno, ETS, 2014, pp. 419-432.

<sup>6</sup> P. Bertolini, *L'essere pedagogico. Ragioni e limiti di una pedagogia fenomenologicamente fondata*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> E. Testa, *Eroi e figuranti. Il personaggio nel romanzo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2009, p. 4, *passim*.

The text as *medium* – bridge, space of encounter and relation – becomes, therefore, *possibility*. If we look carefully at the dynamic interweaving between reader and text, we can see that the relationship between interpretative and existential levels lives in a space of reciprocity. In this space the text, in its artistic objectification, draws the subject's attention to its own, singular, existential eversion. Here reality and fiction are alternated and confused, just like the reader in his/her everyday life. For this reason, we might add that there is no conventional learning which can be a formative experience without a change of the approach to literature (from the paradigm of a knowledge accumulation to the paradigm of understanding). Indeed: a phenomenological understanding intended as "adoption", as "feeling in him/herself". So that the education for understanding allows to *learn* the textual content and its implied suggestions. Also, this kind of *analytical-cognitive moment* makes of textual contents as many contents of the self-educational path, even when they are denied. Ricœur writes that "narrative literature, between all poetical works, shapes the practical effectiveness through paradigms and wastes"<sup>8</sup>. From this point of view the apparent obvious experiences such as identification, distance, or, more problematically, indifference to the text, are not simple psychological or personality reactions, but they are real opportunities for self-knowledge, in which the text becomes a questioning pretext. If literature, this way, is an exemplar *exercise for self-knowledge*, then the text becomes a real self-explorative tool. So much so that we can conceive an education for *self-revelation*<sup>9</sup>.

And more: if it is true that research for meanings and self-revelation emerge directly from the text reading, it is also true that this takes root in the writing event. An event which, in the same time, knows how to betray the expectations of every new reading. Even in its complexity, which has been masterfully studied, in Italy, by Carlo Sini<sup>10</sup>, *the writing process* becomes a revealing "communication track".

Hence the idea that (with and beyond) canonical *Bildungsroman*, narrative contents can be employed in *experiential*, *planning* or *reflexive* perspective. These three directions feed the relationship between subject and text by a movement of formative and mutual involvement.

The many different declinations of experiential perspective (contingency – as in Camus or Nizan novels – feelings – as in the nineteenth century of Flaubert, Balzac, Emily Brontë –, tricks of illusion and lies – as in Dostoevskij and Pirandello, even if in different ways –, or evocative dimension of imagination – as Rodari and Buzzati in Italy), refer anyway to a listening of the tex-

<sup>8</sup> P. Ricœur, *Temps et récit. Tome I* (1983), it. tr. *Tempo e racconto*, vol. I, Milano, Jaca Book, 1986, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> I've investigated these educational processes in *Briciole di pedagogia. Cinque note critiche per un'educazione come inquietudine*, Roma, Anicia, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> By Carlo Sini see at least *Il silenzio e la parola*, Genova, Marietti, 1989 and *Etica della scrittura*, Milano, il Saggiatore, 1992.

tual content by the reader and to a reinterpretation of narrated experiences in his/her *own* lived experience. Here the flow of experiences acts in accordance with a constant reference page-life, which seems to correspond to Blanchot's «intimacy» with the work. Only here, in fact, a really significant relationship between pedagogy and literature can fully establish itself.

Secondly, being a representation of world, the novel becomes a tool of knowledge and imaginative genesis. After all, literature itself offers many brilliant examples in this sense. In the great novels of Tolstoj and Dostoevskij, relations between many characters – which are the real matrix of the planning dimension of existence – are articulated in very complex plots and end up structuring the shape-of-life of every one of them. But the same happens, in other ways, in Rilke's or Sartre's novels, where the planning dimension is connected to the fundamental function of choice. Or, in an existential horizon pervaded by the *condition humaine*, the hidden and ambivalent sides of human existence will be raised by Kafka's visionary nature, Pessoa's disquiet, Camus' absurdity, Moravia's indifference.

Thirdly, the dimension of *reflexivity* is offered to the reader by the need for *shaping* contingent experience – fragmented and ordinary or divided and desiring whatever it is. This concerns particularly most recent novels, where the literary content is, in a certain sense, the movement of thought. This movement, developed in the written word or divided in narrative sequences, becomes a real barycentre of literary experience, increasingly involved in the possible-self.

Finally, the educational point of view goes beyond the forms of literary *representation* of experiential, planning and reflexive dimensions. The most interesting formative aspect, in fact, is the *query* for meaning suggested by the text. In this sense, literature becomes *reflexive questioning exercise*, which means *existential exercise*, where education is the search for self-form. The “exit” from the text is, then, a pedagogical time, which ceases to be analytical descriptive analysis to become *deconstructive-formative* ability.

### 3. *Distances, havens, directions*

A formative emancipation from the text, which puts our reflexivity into the questioning plot, could result, then, from the act of looking at ourselves reading. It is almost like if the distance which separates the subject from the novel is nothing other than the most efficient way of grasping meanings. In this framework, unlike the previous ones, the seductive action of the tale begins when the literary fiction is fully perceived. In such a strong proximity between subject and word, the narration ceases to be a foreign cultural representation of the world. It leaves thus the technical stylistic exercise in order to be questioned in its pedagogical scope: the reader expresses his own query for meaning through the close connection with the text into the individual experience.

In the self-formative path the literary writing remains one of the richest semantic spaces. Spaces of disquiet, of course. At least according to Blanchot, who affirms that «the man speaks through the work, but the work gives a voice to the human part which doesn't speak, to the unmentionable, to the inhuman, to what is without truth, without justice, without rights, the place where the man cannot recognise himself»<sup>11</sup>.

Moreover: the implied and inexorable contradiction of the relationship between reader and text, in the distance which joins and divides them in the same time, describes each time again the movement to what 'falls outside' the expectation, «as if the discretion of the reading, which makes it innocent and irresponsible for what the text produces, were, precisely for this reason, closer to the completed work, to the absence of its own creation»<sup>12</sup>.

However: is it not perhaps in the distance, in the radical self-deployment, in the crisis and in the self-disquiet that education becomes fundamental experience? Is it not by clashing reassuring spaces already put in place that the subject can really build his existential project?<sup>13</sup>

Of course, this is the difficult and critical task of the teacher. Cambi asserts that «teaching means to-let-learn, to-bring-face-to-face (notions, rules, etc.) and to-let-internalise. It means to produce (in other people) knowledge/competences/abilities, but it means also to produce reflexive capabilities of detachment from reality in order to give life to *otherness*, and make transcendent judgment and alternative path possible»<sup>14</sup>. If this is true, it is also true that this intentional and relational otherness should be cultivated well beyond any institutional task. In order to ensure, like this, that the continuous critical, intellectual and existential path of the teacher is incisively and successfully provided with texts, pictures, existential landscapes.

After all, even close to the dominant models, we should perhaps recognise some of the most interesting pages of Jérôme Bruner. For example the ones he dedicated to the relationship between identity and modern novel in one of his *Essays for the Left Hand*<sup>15</sup>. In that circumstance he analysed the problem of the crisis and complexity of character-building giving some essential novels as examples: *The stranger* by Camus, *The big Gatsby* by Fitzgerald, *The secret sharer* by Conrad and *The death of a Nobody* by Romain. Through widespread references – from Erikson to Jung, from Greek myth to Gothic sculpture – Bruner suggests, of course, the need for a deep and wide cultural awareness, because this is exactly one

<sup>11</sup> M. Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (1955), it. tr. *Lo spazio letterario*, Torino, Einaudi, 1975, p. 202.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> A. Erbetta, *Luoghi di crisi*, cit.; E. Madruzzan, *L'inquietudine educativa*, in A. Mariani (Ed), *Venticinque saggi di pedagogia*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2011, pp. 97-108.

<sup>14</sup> F. Cambi, *Metateoria pedagogica. Struttura, funzione, modelli*, Bologna, Clueb, 2006, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> J. Bruner, *On Knowing. Essays for the Left Hand* (1964), it. tr. *Il conoscere. Saggi per la mano sinistra*, Roma, Armando Armando, 1968.

of the elements which feed the understanding of present time and generate a vital energy to make for change. So much so that it justifies some essential questions: is it not thanks to *teacher's* ability and determination to understand that the student is led to a deeper reflexivity in respect of fundamental problems of subjective existence? And is it not indispensable, exactly for this reason, a new courage to affirm without detours the unavoidable richness of Art<sup>16</sup>?

Therefore this refers to sensibility and cultural curiosity, as in the famous lesson by Adorno: «art cannot jump over the shadow of irrationality, that is to say over the need to close eyes and ears to the fact that, being in opposition to society, it still constitutes a moment of that». Because «even in the most sublimated work of art lies an 'it should be otherwise'»<sup>17</sup>.

After all, no student, properly incited, is really unwilling to pay attention to the voice of the «vicar artist», who has chosen not to «let himself getting stupid, falling asleep, being an accomplice», and therefore to consider totally uninteresting the «work which refuses to play the game of the false humanity, of the social consensus for degradation of men»<sup>18</sup>.

Hence some reasons to ask ourselves if the school, for its part, can really loose this difficult, extreme and extraordinary richness. And, finally, what would be (or is) the cost.

### References

- Th. Adorno, *Noten zur Literature* (1969), it. tr. *Note per la letteratura* Torino, Einaudi, 2012.
- G.M. Bertin, *Disordine esistenziale e istanza della ragione*, Bologna, Cappelli, 1981.
- P. Bertinetti, *Sull'inutilità degli studi letterari in generale. E di quelli di anglistica in particolare*, in VV. AA., *Per le vie del mondo*, Torino, Trauben, 2009, pp. 7-11.
- P. Bertolini, *L'esistere pedagogico. Ragioni e limiti di una pedagogia fenomenologicamente fondata*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1988.
- M. Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (1955), it. tr. *Lo spazio letterario*, Torino, Einaudi, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> Concerning the urgent need for giving back to the school and its teachers and passion for knowledge, well in advance of the very recent "discoveries" of some *à la page* psychoanalysts, enough to think of Riccardo Massa's studies (at least *Le tecniche e i corpi*, Milano, Unicopli, 1986 and *Cambiare la scuola. Educare o istruire?*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1997) and of Paolo Mottana's ones (as the work *L'immaginario della scuola*, Milano, Mimesis, 2009 and *Che ne è del cambiamento? Da una scuola ascetica ad un'esperienza erotica/eretica del sapere*, in «Paideutika. Quaderni di formazione e cultura», *La scuola in frantumi*, n. 11, 2010, pp. 26-38).

<sup>17</sup> Th. Adorno, *Noten zur Literature* (1969), it. tr. *Note per la letteratura* Torino, Einaudi, 2012, p. 159, *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55, *passim*.

- Id., *Le livre à venir* (1959) *Il libro a venire*, it. tr. Torino, Einaudi, 1969.
- J. Bruner, *On Knowing. Essays for the Left Hand* (1964), it. tr. *Il conoscere. Saggi per la mano sinistra*, Roma, Armando Armando, 1968.
- F. Cambi, *Metateoria pedagogica. Struttura, funzione, modelli*, Bologna, Clueb, 2006.
- J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (1967), it. tr. *La scrittura e la differenza*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990.
- A. Erbetta, *Luoghi di crisi. Per una pedagogia come critica della pedagogia*, Torino, il Segnalibro, 1994.
- Ph. Forest, *Pour une poétique du témoignage*, interview by G. Bosco, in «Paideutika. Quaderni di formazione e cultura», n. 10, V, 2009.
- H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), it. tr. *Verità e metodo*, Milano, Bompiani, 1983.
- Id., *Persuasività della letteratura*, Bologna, Transeuropa, 1988.
- E. Madrussan, *La parola nuda. Scritture di confessione e pedagogia del disvelamento*, Torino, Tirrenia Stampatori, 2003.
- Id., *Le pagine e la vita. Studi di fenomenologia pedagogica*, Torino, Tirrenia Stampatori, 2008.
- Id., *Briciole di pedagogia. Cinque note critiche per un'educazione come inquietudine*, Roma, Anicia, 2012.
- Id., *Appuntamento con il senso. Costruzione della personalità ed esperienza estetica in Giovanni Maria Bertin*, in M. Contini, M. Fabbri (Eds), *Il futuro ricordato*, Livorno, ETS, 2014, pp. 419-432.
- R. Massa, *Le tecniche e i corpi*, Milano, Unicopli, 1986.
- Id., *Cambiare la scuola. Educare o istruire?*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1997.
- L. Mittner, *La letteratura tedesca del Novecento*, Torino, Einaudi, 1960.
- F. Moretti, *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987), it. tr. *Il romanzo di formazione*, Torino, Einaudi, 1999.
- P. Mottana, *L'immaginario della scuola*, Milano, Mimesis, 2009.
- Id., *Che ne è del cambiamento? Da una scuola ascetica ad un'esperienza erotica/eretica del sapere*, in «Paideutika. Quaderni di formazione e cultura», *La scuola in frantumi*, n. 11, 2010, pp. 26-38.
- F. Papi, *Requiem umanistico*, in «Paideutika. Quaderni di formazione e cultura», n. 9, V, 2009, pp. 7-12.
- Id., *Letteratura e letteratura* in «Paideutika. Quaderni di formazione e cultura», n. 10, V, 2009, pp. 27-34.
- P. Ricœur, *Temps et récit. Tome I* (1983), it. tr. *Tempo e racconto*, vol. I, Milano, Jaca Book, 1986.
- Id., *Soi même comme un autre* (1990), it. tr. *Sé come un altro*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2005.
- C. Sini, *Il silenzio e la parola*, Genova, Marietti, 1989.
- Id., *Etica della scrittura*, Milano, il Saggiatore, 1992.
- E. Testa, *Eroi e figuranti. Il personaggio nel romanzo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2009.