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THE CITIZEN'S VOICE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS AND LITERATURE
by Michael Keren
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Death of the Novel?

In *Shakespeare's Politics*, Allan Bloom writes that "the civilizing and unifying function of the peoples' books, which was carried out in Greece by Homer, Italy by Dante, France by Racine and Moliere, and Germany by Goethe, seems to be dying a rapid death."[1] To Bloom, the failure of modern societies to return to single great books of biblical or Shakespearean stature leads to the vulgarization of public life and the atomization of society, "for a civilized people is held together by its common understanding of what is virtuous and vicious, noble and base."[2] I would like to agree with Bloom on the civilizing function of books without sharing his pessimism about their demise. Although it is not easy to derive a solid political theory from novels, whose analysis often leads to more remote venues than political theory tolerates, the twentieth- century novels discussed here serve as building blocks of a model of civil society.

This does not imply that these novels are *bildungsromane*,[3] that is, novels intended to convey an educational message. If anything, most of the novelists

discussed here defy the conveyance of didactic messages and refrain from judgment of what is "virtuous and vicious, noble and base." The role these eight novels play as building blocks of the civil society model stems rather from the position the characters take in relation to the forces dominating the state and market in the twentieth century. They form a buffer against an overpowering discourse that places ideology, technology, and organization at center stage. All eight characters take part in that discourse but at the same time bring up facets of a model citizen who is conscious of his or her limitations, is aware of the need for social communication, seeks authenticity, refuses total political domination, uses reason, takes responsibility over acts committed by the state, views history as the product of human action rather than of messianic intervention, and maintains a degree of common decency in mass society.

The eight characters provide us with the discursive dimension between the market and the state sought by civil society theorists. They do so mainly by illuminating the world's imperfections, seen from their private sphere, in contrast to the loud promise of messianic redemption by the grand forces of the twentieth century. Hans Castorp reminds us that, even when humans use the power of science to play God, they remain mortal; Joseph K. makes us realize our helplessness in the face of bureaucracy; John the Savage embodies the search for authenticity in the modern industrial state; Winston Smith attempts to hold onto his memory when confronted by hegemonic political forces; Ralph is the voice of reason within the organic community; Meursault demands that we take responsibility for the atrocities of the age; Ida Ramundo reminds us there is no messiah at the end of the road; and Chauncey Gardiner demonstrates the high cost of mass society.

The vitality of these messages in today's world raises the possibility that they may not have been lost, as Bloom contends, with the alleged defeat of the novel by the power of electronic mass media; the announcement of the death of the novel may have been premature.

The argument that the novel is alive can be found in such works as Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*, where she defends the novel as a literary genre that has a strong impact on public life. In 1995, amidst criticism of the novel as reflecting the moral stand of a hegemony-seeking bourgeoisie, Nussbaum claimed that it still was the central morally serious yet popularly engaging fictional form of modern culture. She attributes this role to the

novel's ability to present persistent forms of human need and desire in very concrete settings that sensitize readers to situations differing from their own:

[The novel] constructs a paradigm of a style of ethical reasoning that is context-specific without being relativistic, in which we get potentially universizable concrete prescriptions by bringing a general idea of human flourishing to bear on a concrete situation, which we are invited to enter through the imagination. This is a valuable form of public reasoning, both within a single culture and across cultures. For the most part, the genre fosters it to a greater degree than classical tragic dramas, short stories, or lyric poems.[4]

Nussbaum admits that people cannot learn everything they need to learn as citizens simply by reading novels situated in a distant time and place, but the genre generally constructs empathy and compassion in ways highly relevant to citizenship. This theory of literary imagination as public imagination, and of the novel as a building block in the construction of citizenship, leaves many questions open: What about the apparent decline in the reading of books? Isn't the "public" watching television rather than reading novels? Hasn't the mass production and advertisement of "airport literature" led writers to avoid individual moral statements and to become disseminators of socially accepted conventions? Are the readers still sensitized to human needs and desires or have the mass media diminished such sensitivies? Is it legitimate to talk about novels as expressions of the human condition when there exists no cross-cultural agreement on that condition? And even when we read novels with empathy and compassion, isn't the world too complex to prevent their transference to other contexts, or to all contexts?

It is tempting to answer these questions by referring to book stores in Paris, New York, Delhi, Beijing, Prague, or Tel-Aviv, especially those open in the late evening hours, where one gets a different impression regarding the decline of the reading public, or children's sections in public libraries all over the world, where books are handled with reverence, or discussion groups and other activities initiated by bookstore chains like Barnes & Noble or Chapters, increasingly turning into centers of family and public outings, or virtual bookstores on the Internet, or statistics indicating a significant increase in book sales in recent years. But this would miss the point, just

as studies announcing the death of the novel by reference to the high consumption of television or the impact of the Internet do. The question is not how many people, or what strata of the population, read novels, or how the consumption of novels compares to the consumption of other media, but where are conceptions relevant to the formation of citizenship derived from. And novels may still be playing an important role in this regard.

In a study titled *The Death of Literature*, Alvin Kernan viewed the novel as the product of the print culture whose demise can be expected in a television era. Although he admitted that there is no question of reading or printed materials disappearing, Kernan saw a contradiction between literature and television:

> At the deepest level the worldview of television is fundamentally at odds with the worldview of literature based on the printed book. As television watching increases, therefore, and more and more people derive, quite unconsciously, their sense of reality and their existential situation in it from television, the assumptions about the world that have been identified with literature will become less and less plausible, and in time will become downright incredible.[5]

To Kernan, the printed book with its intricacy of structure, complexity of meaning, irony, ambiguity, multivalency, and indeterminacy embodies the assumptions of an earlier humanism about such matters as truth, imagination, language, and history, while television creates a radically different way of seeing and interpreting the world:

> Visual images not words, simple open meanings not complex and hidden, transience not permanence, episodes not structures, theatre not truth. Literature's ability to coexist with television, which many take for granted, seems less likely when we consider that as readers turn into viewers, as the skill of reading diminishes, and as the world as seen through a television screen feels more and looks more pictorial and immediate, belief in a word-based literature will inevitably diminish.[6]

Although this notion is widespread, it has not been proven that people are giving up the means by which they confront the world and make sense of it. The means of communication may be changing but not the need, which existed long before print culture and can be expected to exist long after its transformation into different cultural modes, to derive meaning about the world, and negotiate one's existence, as perceived in any given time, with others. It has become commonplace to lament the mixture of "high" and "popular" culture," caused by twentieth-century urbanization and democratization, as a decline of civilization into a normless mass, but this lament has been highly exaggerated. Young people attracted to rock concerts rather than to Shakespearean dramas, or people who prefer to receive quick, instant information from television or the Internet rather than from a lecture in a book club, are not necessarily changing from humanists into savages lacking a sense of truth, imagination, language, and history. As William Gamson has shown in a study on the consumption of political messages on television, people are much less passive and stupid than media researchers have assumed and are conducting elaborate and complex negotiations with the contents presented in the mass media.[7]

Despite their cultural and political differentiation, today's members of mass society do not differ from the idealized citizens of the past in their need to formulate conceptions of public significance and, just like them, they do not develop these conceptions only as actors in the market or as subjects of the state. Nor can they be seen to be influenced merely by the mass media they consume. The individual who steps into a government office develops awareness about the way individuals are treated there, and about the dissonance between the actual and desired treatment – residing at the core of political theory – as part of a complex process in which novels can be assumed to take part by virtue of their adherence to the private sphere. Novels reflect individual thoughts and feelings in a personalized way which mass media, especially radio call-in shows and television talk shows, imitate but, as has often been revealed, really only appear to.[8]

Even a person who is rather conditioned in his or her responses to public affairs by such genres as daytime soap operas cannot entirely avoid the presence of novels. This is because of the convergence that characterizes today's media structures; the novel, the movie, the T-shirt, the theme ride, the video game, etc., are all converging into one media world.[9] The novel may

be affected by the convergence, but so is the soap opera, which adopts forms and themes derived from novels, such as the narrative, the moral imperative, or the need to make individual choices at critical moments. In fact, the novel, like other traditional media, seems to have more power than commonly realized to reinvent itself and become a factor in the public sphere.

The taxi driver complaining about the "red tape" involved in applying for a cab license does not have to be tested for his acquaintance with Kafka in order to be classified as a citizen engaged in a public discourse whose parameters were largely defined by the novelist. Kafka did not invent modern bureaucracy and was not the first to express fear of its power and awareness of its flaws. More people are exposed to bureaucratic maneuvering on television police and hospital dramas than have read *The Trial.* But Kafka's books inspired the thinking of whole generations about bureaucracy, including, one may assume, creators of television dramas.

As little as we know about the process of inspiration, influential books in the public domain were often those that cater to a third dimension of public life independent of commercial and political interests. The notion of "big brother" in George Orwell's *1984,* for instance, has great influence on the thinking of many, not only because Orwell provided a convenient language to describe the modern political condition, but because he penetrated that condition in a depth that other media have so far rarely matched. How the notion of "big brother," with its varied meanings and interpretations, is diffused through culture, or cultures, and becomes a component of the public consciousness is of course hard to trace; the formation of the public consciousness remains as much a secret as the formation of the individual mind. But *1984,* or for that matter, some of the other novels we discussed, became quite famous among the millions who read the books, or saw the movies, or read about them in newspapers and magazines, or heard something about them, or use expressions derived from them.

As I noted before, the diffusion of novels within and across media systems and cultures in relation to other literary genres and media is hard to trace, but a closer investigation of the diffusion of conceptions derived from novels may reveal their persistent role in maintaining a standard of civility in society. In a world in which much human interaction takes place within bureaucratic and legal structures, in which many media professionals, intellectuals, educators, and other communicators have given up on their

traditional promise to provide a rational flow of information in society, and in which "enlightenment" has become a bad word concealing suppressive and exclusionist motives, novels remain among the few means by which notions of global citizenship are promoted.

This contention calls for a revival of Jürgen Habermas's widely criticized notion of the "public sphere." In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he pointed to "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk."[10] The public sphere as the discursive arena of civil society emerged as part of the development of the European bourgeoisie. The liberalization of the market since the High Middle Ages, writes Habermas, has allowed the crystallization of civil society as a private realm, a process enhanced by new media, such as the newspaper and the literary salon, which allowed individuals to engage in issues beyond those desired by economic patrons, church patriarchs, and state leaders.

One of the main media that in Habermas's view enhances the public sphere is literary fiction. It is therefore no wonder it became a central target of his critics. Locating the private sphere mainly in the bourgeois household, Habermas emphasized literary fiction as the expression of the private consumed in public. In the intimate sphere of the conjugal family, he wrote, privatized individuals developed the conception of the person who is independent even from economic activity and is capable of purely human relations with others. The literary forms that expressed this conception was the letter – the expression of subjective feelings to an audience – and the novel which is an extension of the letter:

> On the one hand, the empathetic reader repeated within himself the private relationships displayed before him in literature; from his experience of real familiarity (*Intimität*), he gave life to the fictional one, and in the latter he prepared himself for the former. On the other hand, from the outset the familiarity (*Intimität*) whose vehicle was the written word, the subjectivity that had become fit to print, had in fact become the literature appealing to a wide public of readers. The privatized individuals coming together to form a public also reflected critically and in public on what they had read, thus contributing to the process of enlightenment which they together promoted.[11]

In Habermas's theory, the demise of the public sphere in the late nineteenth century is strongly tied to the decline of the reading public. He laments the replacement of the "public sphere in the world of letters" by a "pseudo-public or sham-private world of cultural consumption."[12] While admitting that systems of mass distribution of books, such as paperback editions and book clubs, expose pupils, students, and others to the literary treasures previously open only to the few, he relates the modern culture of book consumption to the destruction of the public sphere. Consumerism does not go hand in hand with genuine literary critique, and the broadening of the reading public to include almost all strata of the population is no reason to rejoice, as it does not reflect the actual prevalence of book reading.

If in the past, the reading of novels and the writing of letters were preconditions for participation in the public sphere, he believes that since the late nineteenth century this is no longer so. The mass media cannot replace the literary public sphere as the world fashioned by them is a public sphere in appearance only. Even when the mass media adopt traditional literary terms (e.g., the "news story"), they blur the relationship between the private and public realms by portraying in public a fake intimacy:

> The original relationship of the domain of interiority to the public sphere in the world of letters is reversed. An inner life oriented toward a public audience tends to give way to reifications related to the inner life.[13]

The apparent decline of the novel as a source of public discourse did not seem to worry critics who treated the novel as a major component of the exclusionist culture dominating the public sphere. George Yúdice used particularly harsh words:

> The public sphere celebrated by Habermas, in which there was "no authority beside that of the better argument" was founded, as he himself recognizes, on the authority of patriarchy (and we should add class privilege, racism, and colonialism). That is, the "public" presupposed a sphere of privacy rooted in the patriarchal conjugal family. On this account, the novel emerged as the aesthetic form that publicly represented subjectivity as "the innermost core of

the private." This grounding for the public/private divide had, of course, changed. And the novel, an art form rooted in bourgeois institutions, is no longer the form through which the hegemonic totality of the social formation is inscribed in the constitution of the subjectivity. On the contrary, the novel, like autobiography and the diary, is used by subaltern groups to construct particular rather than overarching hegemonic identities.[14]

Having abolished the possibility that novels address the entire social formation, Yúdice goes on to search for "an aesthetic dimension that can contribute to change across the terrain of the social formation."[15] He believes this search could be successful if the aesthetic were understood "outside of the dominant accounts of autonomy in which it has been straitjacketed throughout modernity,"[16] that is, if literature and other forms of art are conceived as means in the formation of group identity and ethos. He falls short of explaining why aesthetic forms could not be conceived as means in the formation of a universal identity and ethos.

In a study on American fiction, religion, and the public sphere, Robert Detweiler hinted at that possibility by claiming that the novel, although rooted in bourgeois institutions, never was the unadulterated voice or efficient instrument of hegemony but rather criticized its own social-political conditions from the very start. Moreover, even novelists engaged in "counter discourses"[17] participate through their involvement in the politics and economics of commercial publishing in creating and producing a majority discourse. It is hard not to agree with Detweiler's conclusion that "the language of postbourgeois theory about the public realm is not adequate to treat the complications of the relationship of literary (and dramatic and cinematic) fiction to public discourse."[18]

Along the same lines, Nicholas Garnham, in a book that is otherwise critical of Habermas, writes:

If we accept that the economic system is indeed global in scope and at the same time crucially determining over large areas of social action, the Enlightenment project of democracy requires us to make a Pascalian bet on universal rationality. For without it the

project is unrealizable, and we will remain in large part enslaved to a system outside our control.[19]

Struggling with the question of whether the Enlightenment project is possible at all, Garnham transfers the question from the realm of the polemic to that of the empirical:

Only history will show whether the project is in fact realizable. The possibility of arriving at a rationally grounded consensus can only be demonstrated in practice by entering into a concrete and historically specific process of rational debate with other human beings on the assumption that the system world is at least partially subjectable to rational control, that it is in the ultimate interest of most human beings so to control it, that other human beings can be led both to a rational recognition of that interest within a common discourse space and to consensual agreement as to the appropriate cooperative courses of action to follow.[20]

These words serve as an important reminder that recent intellectual notions emphasizing ethnic, cultural, and gender distinctions need not nullify the Pascalian wager, and that the urge to maintain the Enlightenment project, whether or not the term is capitalized, can be motivated by a genuine quest for autonomy from the power of the state and the forces of the market. Such temporary and tentative removal of the claim that the public sphere is related, in principle, to a domineering wish allows a self-confident renewal of the search for universal rationality and a consideration of the novel carrying with it greater self-confidence than the "Death of Literature" theory has allowed so far.

In considering the contribution of the novel to universal, rational public discourse, we must be careful not to romanticize it. Most novels sold in bookstores do not differ from other means of communication in their adherence to the rules of the market. Novels, like other media, are often shallow and boring, too long or too short, and written in accordance with passing literary fashions. Novels may fake what seems like intimate privacy no less than radio and television do. The very reluctance of many to read novels

is of course a hindrance to their impact, and movies or television broadcasts occasionally send very effective messages that books cannot compete with.

What differentiates novels from other media, however, is the fact that some of them are unmatched in the discreet yet deep penetration they provide into another individual's private sphere. When we hold a novel that caught our attention in our hands, in an armchair or in bed, when we spend several hours reading it, we have a unique experience in which an intimate dialogue, matched perhaps only by poetry, takes place between two strangers, who would in most cases remain strangers. Novels endow us with a form of enlightenment unmatched even by face-to-face communication. It is not that a face-to-face meeting with Thomas Mann could not be enlightening – it definitely was to those who met him during his lifetime – but it is through our meeting with Hans Castorp that the private sphere of the writer becomes part of our consciousness.

The role of novels in our lives may have a deeper cognitive function than we used to believe. In his excellent study on the development of information technologies mentioned before, Wade Rowland compares the cognitive skills involved in reading books and watching television. Reading books – and to some extent watching cinema – involves literacy, imagination, and interpretive skills, while television asks only that the viewer show up and it will do the rest; even laughter is supplied. Civility and erudition are not effective, for aggressive confrontation is preferred. This is related to the different areas of the brain affected by the respective media:

Whereas a book, for example, engages us through our intellect, television acts directly on our neuromuscular system. Each rapid-fire edit, each "jolt" provided by TV, sets up in our bodies what is known in clinical psychology as an "orientation response." This subliminal reaction, which can be monitored with the appropriate equipment, prepares us to either examine the object or event or withdraw from it. Clinical observation has determined that it takes, on average, about half a second for an individual to absorb the nature of the "occurrence" and decide how to react. In making that response decision, the tension of the "orientation response" is resolved. Television, De Kerckhove and others have argued, is designed to deny its audience that half-second response time and

the subsequent resolution, and thus to maintain a high level of tension in which rational thought is suppressed.[21]

This points at the capacity of television to communicate directly through the body rather than the intellect, which affects the messages conveyed by each medium. Many studies have shown how unsubtle and unsophisticated television images are. In one study, the sophisticated treatment of human destiny in novels is compared to the simple moralism in the mass media. Wilna Meijer expresses the concern of cultural pessimists over the decline of reading and sees its consequence mainly to the abandonment of the sense of tragedy in human affairs. Through art, she writes, we gain insight into human beings – not by general abstraction, but because art imitates the human condition in concrete, ever-varying webs of circumstances. Ethical, practical understanding feeds on concrete detailed stories rather than on general principles and rules. Her main example of ethical understanding based on concrete stories are Greek tragedies whose readers learn about the many ways in which human beings, despite their good intentions, get entangled in unforeseen situations. Moralizing, on the other hand, reduces such situations to simple causal relations between intention and result, based on apriori generalizations. She therefore concludes, after Kundera, that the novel comes closer to human and humane truth than the mass media since it prompts its readers "to suspend judgement, to discover things are ever more complex than they appeared at first sight, and to accept that ambiguity may have the final say." [22]

Rather than catering to cultural pessimists, the distinction between the cognitive processes related to novels and to television raises the possibility that even television edicts are at one point or another in need of the structural and substantive features found in novels. In *The Triumph of Narrative* Robert Fulford cites studies in various areas considering these features as functional to human development. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz believes that humans are symbolizing, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking animals possessed by a drive as pressing as more familiar biological needs to make sense out of experience and to give it form and order. Ethical philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says that humans create their sense of what matters, and how they should act, by referring consciously or unconsciously to the stories they have learned which constitute important dramatic resources. And language and

cognitive scientist Mark Turner argues that telling stories is not a luxury or a pastime but part of developing intelligence. Stories are the building blocks of human thought, they are the way the brain organizes itself.[23]

This is not to say of course that all novels or their characters affect us in similar fashion. Some characters speak to us more than others. Some attract us, others repel us and still others remain a placard. We may feel ambivalence towards them and the world they represent. But individuals, including many who declare they never have time to read books, have an image of literary figures they encountered either directly or indirectly through reviews, conversations, movie productions, etc. What makes these literary characters important is their residence in the public consciousness as private people. Whether romantic heroes serving the nation-state, ideological heroes encouraging commitment to collective goals, or twentieth-century characters attempting to cope with messianic politics, they do so as individuals whose private sphere is exposed to us to internalize and reflect upon. Novels mostly do not affect political action in any visible way, but they provide a handle for individuals to hold onto when they observe political processes and – as was the case in the twentieth century – are overwhelmed by them.

The political insights conveyed by the eight novels analyzed here are obviously not the only ones found in twentieth-century novels. Different insights may even be derived from those eight novels. The civil message underlying them is however worth noting if only because of the hope it entails. It is the hope that individualism may survive the hardest challenges. For the challenge posed to individualism in the twentieth century was unbearable. Not only did the forces of ideology, technology, and organization take over, while doing so they endowed themselves with a messianic promise for the transcendence of history, which hardly left any chance to Hans Castorp, Joseph K., John the Savage, Winston Smith, Ralph, Meursault, Ida Ramundo, and Chauncey Gardiner. And yet, the presence of these characters in our public consciousness, and the message of civility they convey, assure us that, as long as the political novel does not give in to other mass media, a touch of civility may continue to accompany us in the future.

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