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Anonymous or something

The close tie between the novel and urban life seems to be coming to an end. 19th and 20th century novels contained all the details necessary to reconstruct traditional urban anonymity. But novels about urban anonymity in the 21st century have yet to be written.

THE NOVEL IS A LITERARY GENRE closely bound up with urban experience and with the metropolitan imaginary. To a certain extent, the modern novel arose parallel to the rise of cities. There is an obvious historical reason for this connection: whereas poetry was traditionally associated with idealised worlds, the task of the novel was to descend into the world of reality and no setting is more complete than the city for an account of the complex idiotic plots that unfold in reality. Because of this simple correlation, the tradition of the novel comes to mind as the ideal tool for reconstructing the ups and downs of life (in the city) in all its forms. However, the close tie between the novel and urban life seems to be coming to an end. Slowly but steadily, both novels and urban life are showing new urges that are opening a gap between them.

While the novel is shifting towards the autobiographical register, in cities the perimeter of anonymity is growing. This double twist is relentlessly increasing

the distance between literature and the city, but in both spheres, nevertheless, it could respond to the same concern: a sense of guilt before history, or, at least, a definite estrangement from our own forms of progress and well-being. In fact, when novels refer to one's own life story, what shows itself is a certain need to express one's personal exoneration from collective bungling. Similarly, the profile of the growing urban anonymity, far from being merely the result of dissolving individuals in the sublime magnitude of the megalopolis, reflects an explicit departure from the rules of the game. The autobiographical novel, in this new scenario, is no longer so much a story set in the city as a communal location as the narration of a singularity poorly matched to the social, political and cultural scenario to be found in the city.

At the same time, urban anonymity is no longer just the straightforward outcome of the demographic growth that has multiplied us like clones of deactivated

citizens; on the contrary, underlying today's urban anonymity is the refusal to reproduce as equals. Perhaps from this desire to stop existing as the dawn of a new subjectivity narratives suitable for another type of literature can be thought up. The history of the novel of the 19th and 20th centuries contains the details and examples needed for an accurate reconstruction of traditional urban anonymity. The prosaic literary portraits of worldly life, from the gloom of the Industrial Revolution to the nocturnality of post-modern bars, contain a constant, mannered succession of references to the trials and tribulations of conventional anonymity. This hardly needs illustrating through quotations; suffice it to say that in this literary history of urban anonymity we can make out at least two very different stories. On one hand, the concept of anonymity as an anomaly; on the other, the definition of anonymity as a paradigm of the social contract.

From anomalous space to disciplined space

The growth of cities in the 19th century under the wing of industry fulfilled a promise of material and personal well-being which nevertheless could not conceal their dark side. Alongside economic growth, the fact is that industrialisation at the same time led to the emergence of an unforeseen public space that had nothing to do with the spotless cafés where customers were entertained by plumed chorus girls. The public space of the first industrialised cities very soon became the dumping ground for all the leftovers of capital gain reduced to social flotsam: poverty, prostitution, barricades and, especially, the anonymous crowd. Not surprisingly, this very process brought to life an enormous array of literary characters, thereby guaranteeing

the novel an excellent future. For the first time, modernity clashed with the barbarians on their own ground, and this novelty had yet to be exploited with all its risks, such as consumers of these same novels deciding to stay at home and have breakfast in the sun.

In fact, until that time the bourgeois public space had been the quintessential scenario in which the more well-to-do classes showed themselves off, but this protocol social gymnastics were beginning to look like a thing of the past. From that moment on, public space came to be identified with the anomalous and unsettling, a sort of setting for moral and political deviation and, above all, a scenario taken over by an anonymous mass made up of scattered and potentially dangerous subjects. Faced with this situation, the bourgeoisie decided to retreat into a made-to-measure world inside their private refuge, a task in which they received effective complicity from the rapid growth of the decorative arts. Public space, reduced to the condition of an anomalous externality, became stigmatised as the domain of anonymous forces that were to come under fire from all the government nets and control measures available. Seen in this light, it was not by chance that this moment coincided with a speeding up of scientific investigation for the establishment of a system of identification for legal purposes. Inside the anomalous space of the anonymous, the necessary tools had to be introduced to correct it through recognition mechanisms that would cushion its size and its unpredictable behaviour. That same tension between anonymous, multitudinous anomaly, on one hand, and the unstoppable development of surveillance and identification measures, on the other, has characterised conventional management of public space ever since.

The masses in the public space came under fire from such an enormous number of control and identification networks, of varying fortune and efficacy, that eventually a change came about in the very concept of urban anonymity. Whereas in its original version being anonymous meant the same as being anomalous, anonymity soon became a byword for what was beaten into uniformity through silencing and discipline. One can easily guess that this change held little hope for great developments in literature, at least in the first instance, as it is perfectly feasible to turn it about: all that is needed is to raise the new anti-heroes of fiction to the altars of tedium, boredom and despair in the face of the monotony of anonymous, silent well-being. The urban anonymity of mature modernity is no longer the potential danger; on the contrary, it follows the rule of not making any noise that might disturb the growth rate. These were the long years of the rhetoric of prosperity, of faith in technology and of retirement schemes; a scenario which, while short in literary resources, nevertheless has that rich reverse side of weariness at the perpetual peace which is irremediably unable ever to customise what is fair and fitting.

Characters in urban novels under this heading struggle in vain to carve themselves a life story or, to put it another way, to emerge from the anonymity they find themselves in. The urban and social geography of the cities in which their efforts unfold is regulated by protocols that favour vagueness and ignorance of unique identities. In each place and at each moment they all know in advance how they must behave and what is expected of them. The patina of anonymity somehow becomes the best guarantee for keeping the rules of the social contract intact. The literary plot in this way has a very precise

possible horizon: to aim at a unique biography and, above all, to narrate the inevitable failure of that same attempt. There is no room outside the anonymity now conceived as the most suitable way of being and living in the city. That very anonymity is the best guarantee for the aesthetic profile of the city as a universal form in keeping with the rules; an organised place in which various social actors move about in orderly fashion.

Invisible transmogrifying “lazarillos”

The novels about the new urban anonymity have not yet been written. As I said in my introduction, the novel is veering towards the autobiographical, and the new anonymity is no longer a response to the difficulty of constructing one's life story so much as to the very desire not even to want it.

The urban anonymity agreed upon for the sake of peace in society is cracking up. Whereas until recently we were witnessing a performance of the urban as though it were a perfectly planned and already composed choreography, today we find a proliferation of unforeseen actions, movements in disagreement with what is foreseen and parasitical actions in regulated space. Somehow, the struggle implicit in these modern and post-modern efforts to forge a future and design a life of one's own distinguishable from the magma of disciplined anonymity seems to be worn out, and in its place we hear the murmur of a powerful tiny activity that is equally anonymous but tinged with mischief, gifted with minor skills for subsistence and for satisfying all sorts of necessities, whether material or rooted in a new economy of desires. A legion of *lazarillos* is flooding a public space reformulated as a region of imagination, turning it into a space for play, a corner for fleeting encounters, instead of

wheeling and dealing and informal trading, an improvised shelter or a space for leisure outside the dominant logic of consumption. All of this mischievous, clandestine activity does not yet provide material for literature, so much as indexes of inequalities and, above all, a sign of the new anonymity's power of antagonism.

According to the pre-modern picaresque novel, the *lazarillo* is someone who sees to his subsistence without complying with the dominant social and moral codes.

To that end, in contrast to the gentry's obsession with social climbing, the rogue deserts in face of this temptation and concentrates exclusively on putting all his ingenuity into satisfying his immediate needs. This involves clear-sighted skill in everything he does and an enormous ability to go unnoticed, to escape the identification networks that might correct him and return him to the rule. In this way the *lazarillo* exercises a methodical and stubbornly invisible anonymity, but at the same time his anonymity has an enormous transmogrifying power through the laws of *prägnanz* and is perfectly able to suggest new ways of being and living in the city. If social space, over and above its established communal organisation, also consists of a torrent of spontaneous and ungovernable events, the new anonymity is the starting point from which those same events spring which, if they were examined and listened to, would reveal other possible worlds.

This antagonism latent in urban anonymity, which may be scarce and limited to the exercise of underground know-how for escaping from the expected, therefore rests on its intrinsic negativity. It is an anonymous force precisely because

it does not take the form of a possible new social agent. There is no community pulse capable of holding together the motley urban *lazarillos*. Although they may be legion, they do not aspire to come together in a collective anxious to join in established social dialogue as such. Their strength lies in preserving their anonymity, so that they remain just something vague, not reducible to recognition as anything precise. Hardly anything, barely a warning.

A few days after submitting this note to the editors I came across Manuel Asensi's magnificent work "La subalternidad borrosa", which introduces the Spanish translation of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's classic *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Barcelona, MACBA, 2009). In this text, Asensi goes over the debate raised by Spivak's book on the figure of the subaltern and his inability to "make himself heard". After a consummate critical weighing up, the author suggests a correction so that the subaltern is identified as someone who remains in the *unlivable* and totally precarious space in which he cannot speak or, especially, reverse his situation.

The model for this subaltern subject "carried to the limits of mortality" is embodied in the *Lazarillo de Tormes*. There is no possible comparison between Asensi's careful analysis and the rough overview I have undertaken. However, if my praise of the picaresque as a paradigm of the sphere of anonymous events in social space took the *Lazarillo* as its model, this must be interpreted precisely as a sign of the wisdom and of the scale of the possibilities arising from Manuel Asensi's accurate intuition ||