Literature and the Meaning of Life: An Atypical European Education

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Once upon a time there was a Greek, an Englishman, a German, and a Spaniard. They decided they would each write a novel that would do its best to explain the human condition. The Greek said, I think I'm going to write about a man who's tossed about on the seas after a war and when he finally returns home, no one—not even his wife—recognizes him. The Englishman said, I'm going to write about a young, indecisive prince who can't decide whether life is worth it. The Spaniard said, I'm going to write about a prevaricating farmer who believes he's a knight and sets out on his rickety horse for a series of madcap adventures. The German said, I'm going to write about a young man who falls passionately in love with someone else's wife and dies of love in the end.

If we look at things schematically, that's more or less how Homer created the epic, Shakespeare the drama, and Cervantes the novel of wanderlust, while Goethe cultivated the soil of romanticism. It could be a joke, but it's the history of European literature. And the strange thing is, these characters after whom every modern and postmodern narrative follows are themselves deeply modern: marginalized anti-heroes. Today we recognize them and meet them in the light of their popularity, their interpretations, their corruption, but who are they and what do they do? What do the people around them think of them? And what do they think o themselves? What image does literature give us about the dreams and quests of Europeans and their ancestors?

Let's take Odysseus as an example. Before he reaches Ithaka he washes up on the island of the Phaeacians naked and in despair. He resembles the contemporary refugees whose shipwrecked lives have been arriving for months on the shores of Greece. In the eyes of Nausicaa and her companions, he seems terrifying. "Like some hill-kept lion,

who advances, though he is rained on and blown by the wind, and both eyes kindle; he goes out after cattle or sheep, or it may be deer in the wilderness, and his belly is urgent upon him to get inside of a close steading and go for the

sheepflocks. So Odysseus was ready to face young girls." Urgency—what a prophetic word! And how contemporary it sounds today, in light of the refugee crisis. Even mythical Odysseus can only assume his position as hero once he has washed and put on clean clothes.

But Hamlet, too, seems bizarre in the eyes of Claudius and Gertrude. And Don Quixote, too, is a madman to the villagers he encounters: when they ask him why he's wandering around in armor during peacetime, he presents himself as a "wandering knight," an ambassador of God on erth. And Goethe's Wether is crazy, too, crazy with love, and sends his servant to Lotte's house merely so he can have someone close by who, he says, "has been close to her, too."

The rest of the characters in these books who encounter these paradeigmatic heroes as lovers, rivals, servants, friends, or random passersby, consider them mad, dangerous, or fools. They think the way we have been taught to think when we encounter something unreal, exaggerated, or foreign: Odysseus is a filthy shipwrecked sailor. Hamlet sees ghosts. Don Quixote is walking on clouds. And Werther is ruled by an unhealthy passion.

What literature does is incorporate the Other in all its quirks and peculiarities into the social body. It allows for difference, and often even proclaims it to be genius. It considers difference a sign of courage: the hero is who he chooses to be. Or he fights for his freedom, his ideas, or his aesthetic, as does Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Fiction teaches us to think creatively around the issue of difference, to think in a way no school ever taught us, and perhaps not even any university. Analysis, anthropological studies, psychoanalysis, sociology all offer theoretical descriptions for what a novel teaches by example and by identification. "The imitation of an action," is what Aristotle called tragedy. It would be difficult for one to think up a more ground-breaking mode of understanding the mind and the heart. Guilt, jealousy, despair, violence, anxiety, irrationality, the fear of death—nothing that is human is foreign to literature. So the more education falls into decline because of a lack of imagination as well as of funds, the more the literature of Europe is called upon to serve as another form of education. As the

only truly revolutionary European education that has remained to us in an era of fear, impoverished self-awareness and solidarity, and return to isolationist nationalisms.

The educational dimension of literature is not what they taught us in school: locate the adjectives in the paragraph; divide the text into chapters. When we read the emblematic works of the European tradition we begin to trace the outlines of a coded, radical understanding of the Other. Unconsciously we begin to accept that the Other is always a mystery and that easy characterizations lead nowhere. Imagine if Odysseus were nothing more than a filthy, shipwrecked man. And think just how much we learn from his arrival on the island of the Phaeacians about the actual shipwrecked individuals who are appearing every day on Europe's shores.

If we put aside for a moment the treatment of the refugee crisis in the mass media, if we forget the shipwrecked men of literature—from Odysseus and Robinson Crusoe to Michel Tournier's Friday—we'll remain trapped in the stereotypes according to which refugees are a homogenous mass of people who have come to tyrranize the West. Literature transforms the porridge cooked by news agencies—orchestrated fear and orchestrated pity—into individualities. It tells us: the Other is not what it seems.

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We have a neighbor in Athens I've known ever since I was a child. He lives with his wife in a small house and took care of his garden. I know he never went to school and for decades I placed him with great ease in the category of the retired farmer. The other day when I was walking by he treated me to some grapes from his vines and we started talking. With the social unease that is often caused by repeated gifts, I promised to bring him a book of mine in return—deep down I assumed he would leave it on the table on the veranda and forget about it. But he started to rattle off to me a list of all the philosophical books he had read. He reminded me of that wise carpenter from Calabria, Antonio Porchia, who wrote

one of the most moving and memorable books of European thought. “Don’t get in the way of your eyes,” Porchia writes in that, his only book. “Let your eyes see.”

And while I was remembering Porchia and listening to our neighbor Nikitas, I was thinking that I, too, am getting in the way of my eyes, just like we all do: a conversation on a human level can momentarily clear away the terrible mist of apathy and certainty inside of us. “I might not understand everything I read,” Nikitas told me, “but I keep going, because I know something inside me is changing.”

Something inside me is changing: I held onto that phrase because it captures the transformative and rejuvenating process of education. Let’s imagine European literature to be an enormous school, in the classrooms and libraries of which only questions get taught: what is the good life? Why do we hurt those we love? What can a person be driven to by extreme ambition or fear? How are we to deal with addiction, poverty, desperation, the tendency to flee?

Literature also hastens a widening of experience—how many adventures and turns of fate’s wheel will we ourselves get to live in the course of one short lifetime? Through reading, we have before us an entire gallery of passions and encounters, romances and defeats, revivals and deaths. And what really is experience, anyhow? As Emmanuel Levinas says, “it is that which is only able to receive a meaning without being able to provide it.”

We learn from the lives of others. We also learn from the responses of those who observe the lives of others. If we were all Nausicaa’s servants we too might step back in fear at the sight of Odysseus, thus losing out on the opportunity to come into contact with a true hero. It would be good for us to remember that in real life, too, where the transformative experience of art hasn’t yet intervened: if the narrative convinces you, if you identify with the characters, you begin bit by bit to doubt everything you’ve been served up by television, about the news itself. The spasmodic characterizations, the rhetoric, the reduction of thought, the orchestration of fear, all the sicknesses of contemporary life that transform people into passive masses are overcome by a remedy as old as the world itself: the narration of imagined adventures that remind us, without didacticism or

moralizing, of all we need to know in order to live our lives with passion and perseverence.

Kant has shown that space and time are subjective matters, but literature remains the best way for us to understand the subjectivity of consciousness in our flesh and bones. Let us recall Anna Segher's *Transit*: one could say that nothing really happens in this gripping novel, or rather that everything happens so slowly that it seems like water torture. European refuges, stranded at the port or Marseilles, during World War II, dreaming of a visa that will take them far away, to Mexico or Martinique. And it is precisely that hypnotic rhythm of the narration that turns us all into refugees, men and women living aimlessly, waiting for our papers to be issued at the port: the repetition, the denials, the torment of bureaucracy, the visits to the embassies teach us more about the deceleration of time and the narrowing of space than philosophy and physics put together.

When we read a novel we find ourselves in other bodies and breathe with their lungs. Absorbed in the process of reading, we rarely think about what an incredible phenomenon this is—a foreign life becoming entirely our own, through our willingness to believe in a text. Literature achieves the communion of which religious systems dream, and it makes us better people—a feat that religions can't boast of, particularly today. If we believe in literature in the same way others believe in a Manichean conception of the world, there are great chances we will be saved. I am entirely serious: if Europeans were addicted to the novel the way they are addicted to television today we would be living a different life. In great literature the sky is brighter, people more comprehensible in their motiations, love pierces your heart even when you're not in love. Life in a novel wants to say to you: this is how I would be if you took me seriously.

As I'm writing this, I realize I'm using a prosyletizing, almost messianic language. We all do this when we love something deeply and want to share our love. So please permit me to speak in a more metaphysical manner about literature as the childish nature of humankind, as a kind of gratitude for existence.

When I was fifteen or sixteen, I took French lessons from a distant aunt, in order to pass the exams for the Sorbonne at the French Institute. Among the things we

studied was Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. It was difficult for me to follow the narrator, his associations, his continual shifts in thematic direction. Later, one day, I understood that all this was a result of flights of fancy: the narrator had tasted a madelaine, and "the whole of Combray sprang into being" from his cup of tea. His memories of his childhood in Combray, Sundays in his aunt's room, the streets of the town, the church, the gardens, the details of the plates and silverware, his first love—all that flowed from a single taste. And that's precisely how we remember soemthing we tasted, and that taste carries along with it, in ideal conditions, the entire environment of the memory. I was already a glutton, and I liked that equation: I eat, therefore I remember.

This thought was so exciting to me that on my first trip to Paris, a few months later, I ducked into a supermarket and bought a package of madelaines, the pre-packaged kind, not even from the bakery. I went back to the house where I was staying, and made sure I was alone. I shut myself in the kitchen, made tea and sat down at the table reading that crucial passage and simultaneously tasting the madeleine, dipped in the tea, as Proust had suggested. I was seeking a religious experience from that golden yellow little cake in the shape of a shell. And I was of course engaging in magical thinking: I was expecting a vision to appear before me and reveal forgotten aspects of my past. Not the bread with butter and sugar I used to eat at my own aunt's house, no: the madeleine of Aunt Leonie. The unfamiliar taste of a non-existent aunt.

For many years I didn't tell anyone about my misfortune: my unbelievable naïvete, my metaphysical belief that what happened to the narrator would happen to me, from osmosis, though we didn't share the same culinary memories. At some point I shared the story with my husband. "There was nothing stupid about it," he said. "You wanted to become a writer and you were experimenting with modes of identification.

His interpretation was a relief to me. If I hadn't been simply a naïve teenager, then perhaps I truly was testing the limits of belief, the limits we instinctually shift every time we read a text in order to identify more completely with the narrator. I was Swan, I was his aunt, I was the madeleine, too. Seen from that perspective,

it isn't that strange that in my first novel fruits and vegetables have voices and speak.

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Except for the act of love, literature may be the only way we have to simulate the process of identifying with another, with his history, his story. Let's push it a little further: would we fall in love with the same passion and abandon if we hadn't read *The Sorrows of Young Werther, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary*? If we hadn't been deeply affected by Catherine's confession in *Wuthering Heights*? "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being." The novel creates a simulation of experience in which we would like to live, with all our hearts. Literature teaches us to face not just life but death. That's right, death. Even there where utter darkness reigns, fiction can lift a few veils and let us see what that great unknown looks like, that think that we do not know and can never really imagine.

In the best case scenario, philosophy offers terms for a theoretical conversation about serenity (*Gelassenheit*) and examines the soon-to-die who admits that he isn't the center of the universe (Heidegger), while theology speaks of a "peaceful heart" (Meister Eckhart. Then literature comes along with its radical indeterminacy and oppers us an almost experiential analysis of the Unknown.

In Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Ilych enters the black sack of death and sees the light only when he is able to come to terms with human fate. But that happens gradually. The self-sufficient and ambitious judge Ivan Ilych Golovin first has to feel pain and despair on his deathbed: "When I cease to exist, what will continue to exist? There will be nothing. Where will I be when I no longer exist? Is this what death is?"

Tolstoy, in a third-person narration, seonds this heartbreaking revolution, the death of each one of us: "In the depth of his heart he knew he was dying, but not only was he not accustomed to the thought, he simply did not and could not

grasp it.

The syllogism he had learnt from Kiesewetter's Logic: "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal," had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. […] What did Caius know of the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had been so fond of? Had Caius kissed his mother's hand like that, and did the silk of her dress rustle so for Caius? Had he rioted like that at school when the pastry was bad? Had Caius been in love like that? Could Caius preside at a session as he did?"

With this masterful description of deathbed agony, Tolstoy teaches us how to give ourselves over to what is happening, even if that thing that is happening is death: "He fell through the hole and there at the bottom was a light. Suddenly some force struck him in the chest and side, making it still harder to breathe, and he fell through the hole and there at the bottom was a light. What had happened to him was like the sensation one sometimes experiences in a railway carriage when one thinks one is going backwards while one is really going forwards and suddenly becomes aware of the real direction. […]He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. 'Where is it? What death?' There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was light. 'So that's what it is!' he suddenly exclaimed aloud. 'What joy!'"

Ivan Ilych is transformed at the very end of his life into an Epicurean philosopher—we all know these things from Epicurus but with Tolstoy we don't just know it, we feel it. Who else has spoken to us of death so sincerely and at the same time comfortingly, taking us by the hand and putting us in the black sack of nonexistence? What Hegel says, that man is the beginning through which the Logos of the world reaches his self-consciousness, we understand and share in—we live it experientally—through Tolstoy.

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I began this talk with a joke because the nature of human questions about the meaning of life has something bittersweet to it, something that suits the typology

of the joke. When we read literature we familiarize ourselves with that great existential joke, the “indifferent sympathy” James Joyce urges on us. Indifferent sympathy means to sympathize, but at the same time to maintain a distance, to protect yourself. To read with a critical disposition (to laugh at the joke, that is) doesn’t mean that you’re not also suffering from the human fate. One can live with the mind and the heart at once, with fire and ice.

We assume that anything we know about despair and self-undermining we learned from Camus, Virginia Woolf and Kafka. In reality what changed was the manner, not the topic. The elusiveness and fluidity of existence are not connected to the postmodern condition as much as we would like to believe. Man has been suffering and wondering about his fate since the beginning of the world. Let’s remember that joke again. The heroes who brought up both us and European civilization also committed terrible acts: they killed their fathers (Oedipus), their children (Medea), they were torn limb from limb by Maenads (Pentheus in Euripides’s *Bacchai*), they sent themselves into exile and suffered in order to found a new empire (Aeneas), they descended into hell (Dante).

At school we learned addition and subtraction, we memorized poems, learned the names of famous writers, generals, the dates of battles, but we never learned to laugh at that fundamental existential joke. We made do with the conclusion that life is something you learn about through living, and through suffering. But that’s not all there is to life: there are also all of our experiences, the great palimpsest of human experience.

Seghers says it wonderfully in *Transit*: “As a little boy I often went on school trips. The trips were a lot of fun, but then the next day our teacher assigned us a composition on the subject, ‘Our school trip.’ And when we came back from summer vacations we always had to write a composition: ‘How I spent my vaction.’ And even after Christmas, there was a composition: ‘Christmas.’ And in the end it seemed to me tht I experienced the school trips, Christmas, the vacations, only so tht I could write a composition about them. And all those writers who were in the concentration camp with e, who escaped with me, it

seemed to me that we lived through these most terrible stretches in our lives just so we could write about them: the camps, the war, escape, and flight."

In this sense we have already fought all the wars, we have been exiled and have fallen in love, have stolen and had fun and suffered, we've killed and been killed and been resurrected. Literature reflects the adventures that are sleeping within us, it shakes us violently, it reminds us of all the things we thought we didn't know, though we were carrying them with us all along, when we looked with apathy at the clouds passing outside the classroom window.