HUMANITIES AND THE CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH NOVEL GENRE

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Abstract: The paper looks at how cultural meaning is put together in fiction and how this is conveyed to readers. Conventionally, the documenting of either human life or, lately, lifestyle has always been phrased in terms of the celebrated 'humanities' idea. I use the reading of public narratives (mainly, of the contemporary English novel) to contextualize the cultural agency of aesthetic texts. Everything is done in a manner that discloses more about the social mandate of the genre than it does about any actual novel I mention. The recording of human experience boils down to notions of agency, reading of social reality, cultural practice, representation, etc. The fictionalizing of humanities points at a cultural imagery which conditions the audience to buy into the complex and self-reflexive narrative routine of 20th century public discourses.

Keywords: contemporary English novel, humanities, cultural reading, agency, representation

Alongside what is commonly thought to be its main aesthetic purpose, narrative fiction performs cultural and social tasks. Storytelling is embedded in circumstances most of the times unthinkingly considered by readers. Whether or not this is true, the reasonable doubt is that countless hackneyed, middle-of-the-road stories (films, video games, and TV series) not only carry meaning but also serve to police mainstream values and beliefs. Although most of them are conspicuously trite, they report on cultural and social issues. Possibly, these public narratives provide answers to some of the questions they themselves ask. Of course, these assumptions point at a rather notorious brand of functionalist reading. Broadly speaking, it is commonly circumscribed either to Marxist accounts of culture or to pragmatist contextualising of aesthetics. In-between the two, my approach to the English novel canon discloses more about the social mandate of the genre than it does about any actual novel I mention.

Various angles on the matter of the social services performed by the novel genre have been documented. To take one's pick means also to take one's place in, essentially, the honoured, yet marginal debate on rationality and/in narration. From the predicament of educating and entertaining to the commercial one in progress, they all seem to be figments of collective imagination. Creative writings tap into these shared values and beliefs and whatever is known as 'humanities' provides a compelling account of culture as well as a contextualising procedure of aesthetics. The recording of human experience boils down to notions of agency, reading of social reality, cultural practice, representation, etc. The fictionalizing of humanities points at a cultural imagery which conditions the audience to buy into the complex and self-reflexive representation routine of 20th century public discourses.

The current condition of the debate on agency in literary studies is best described by widespread disregard. One way or another, most sides involved in the debate showcase "the twentieth-century novel as a public form" (Morrison and Watkins, 2007: 1). In the face of widespread cultural conditioning, notions of free-will, transgression, etc. fuel the fictional activity. The argument is rooted in the mimetic assumptions exhibited by the narrative mode of knowing the world, as it is promoted by the novel genre. The approach is bound to cause the assessment of agency representation as if some alleged events had actually happened to all extents and purposes. Accordingly, fictions are bound to feature the faculty of an agent or,

generally, of acting. Surprisingly enough, these notions which secure significance are largely neglected in literary studies.

Occasionally, the "ideas of agency in theory and fiction" (Livingston, 1991) are openly scrutinized. However, the topic is generally thought to be way too straightforward to deserve further attention. Instead, resources are poured into more sophisticated language games and, by and large, into representation concerns, deemed more suitable for academic investigation. Indeed, the somewhat candid discourse of agency assessment in literary criticism is not free from peril. My own attempt at tracking down similar instances of action-taking imagery in contemporary English novels rests upon self-evidence. I hope to avoid instances of trivial self-evidence considering that they generally foster debate on a metaphysical scale. Free will, self-governance, principles of human conduct, etc. are at the core of moral philosophy. Such outlining of daily experience in (realist) fiction is likely to be readily admitted by the average readership. For the most part, the issues under scrutiny have always been stated in the terms of philosophical language: "we are purposive agents; but we – adult humans in a broadly modern world—are more than that. We are reflective about our motivation" (Bratman, 2007: 21). The comprehension of such knowledge is narrative, obviously long-winded and over-simplifying. Essentially, it is a popularizing tale that rests on the anthropocentric (Knappett and Malafouris, 2008) wording of aesthetic statements.

A folk understanding of humanities is unmistakably celebrated by public narratives (literature included). The writers' literary competence to digest the common experiences and cultural constructs of humankind amounts to a meta-language that mirrors plot development. Storytelling engenders confidence in the historically-verified message and rhetoric of humanities. This is a frame of reference that complements the anecdotal knowledge of narration in novels and in various forms of reporting on social reality. As a matter of principle, the turn to considering instrumentality (embodied by discourse) and action (impersonated by characters) is meant to increase the availability as well as the appeal of both creative and critical writing. The cultural imagery assembled by the fictionalizing of humanities in 20th century English novels fuses together reflexiveness with purposiveness. These two cultural tropes assemble a meta-language that stages mostly a popular, and sometimes an academic understanding of humanities. This is to be read in the fictional invention of mainstream creative writing. A number of English 20th century novels play along with this wish to revivify the reception of agency in humanities as well as of humanities at large. Most of them have already gained wide currency in the second half of the last century. They are part and parcel of popular culture for the most obvious reason for their (several) cinematic adaptations. The other, less conspicuous, reasons have everything to do with the already-mentioned meta-language of fictionalizing our sense of cultural and social reality in terms of action or instrumentality. An arbitrary selection of the 20th century English novel canon ultimately serves the purpose of creating a mutually shared understanding of the British social environment.

Although impossible to speak about one specific type of fiction, the late 20th century English novel expresses a sense of collusion between writers and readers with respect to the fictionalizing of humanities. The underhand scheming inferred in literary discourses is the culturally proficient address delivered by authors who stage easily identifiable circumstances and characters as if they were side-effects of what really matters: the cultural policy of the

novel genre which paraphrases their understanding of humanities. These novels feature authors and narrative voices that meta-culturally act together with interested readers to enforce this policy. Namely, they work in order to boost the confidence in the current appeal of the novel genre. Most of the times, the readership is trained by authors to grasp this meaning that secures the survival of the somewhat endangered novelistic species. The recording of the 20th century's human experiences results in the totalizing narrative of an ideological plot that simultaneously addresses reflection on and production of literature.

Although self-absorbed, the aesthetic discourse is obviously down to earth. Everybody works to come up with a story off the beaten track or, at least, is summoned to – as the story of John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, goes. Even if one can safely argue that this is canonical literature, it is also safe to state that the reader is not dealing with highbrow fiction – the textbook example is the mentioned 20th century dystopian fiction (Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*). The novel genre is aware of likely reader-response and discriminates between audiences as shown in the choice of means and message – for example, Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's parrot* obviously targets only at a literarily informed readership. As a matter of principle, the narrative is commonsensical, always socially engaged and accommodating conflicting interpretation – the football fixtures craze of *Fever Pitch* by Nick Hornby best describes U.K. under Margaret Thatcher. The chosen topic is easily identifiable, making cultural sense – Ian McEwan's *Atonement* conveys national readings of historic events. The feminist thesis of *Passion* by Jeanette Winterson is packaged in an effective fairy-tale rhetoric.

The agency of humanities in narrative fiction relies on an ideology of self-reflection that spills into narration, character delineation, plot curve, etc. Its purpose is to provide a most common framework for assisting people in understanding the world they live in. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has developed into a popular lexicon, irrespective of its story proper. The meta-language took over the plot and its cultural reading of social reality amounts to the conventional language of totalitarianism indictment nowadays. Alongside the iconic 'big brother,' there are 'controlled insanity,' 'protective stupidity,' 'mental cheating,' etc. These have grown into almost (cultural) collocations – combinations of words that are now in regular public use. This is also the case of the very book's title that works as a common noun and has adjectival usage too. The habitual juxtaposition in language of these particular words George Orwell first coined is a distinguishing feat. The folk comprehension of social and cultural meanings is dramatized in the plot.

Fiction has always discursively resorted to something else but eventfulness proper (Hühn, 2010). The unfolding of events is complemented by an explicit but, mostly implicit, comprehension routine driven by the already-mentioned reflexiveness and purposiveness. The widely accepted benchmark for testing storytelling is the realist convention that is the originator of a socially-informed meta-language meant to assemble experiential knowledge. The address delivered by most narrative voices verges on ideological turn of phrase. In order to avoid overtly biased reporting on social reality, the novel genre packages notions of agency representation in what turns out to be a significantly political and historical frame of humanities. This is the less contentious choice narrators make in order to frame their one-sided discourse on notions of independent/autonomous/opportunist action embodied in fictional agents and instrumentality.

To a large extent, the dispute over rationality in storytelling points at a 19th century inbuilt conflict (Olsen and Pettersson, 2005: 1) that resulted in the 20th century literary studies. The science of reading literature is featured itself in fictional discourse. Coherence, consistency and good sense are placed in the background of the rhetoric by means of which stories are told to the reading public. Yet, they all point at the diffuse cultural conceptualising of the first-hand account fetish, of re-telling prior happenings. An entire procedural rhetoric that consists in inductive reasoning and professionalized vocabulary surfaces. This is favoured instead of the naïve belief in the faithful delivery of truth. The paradigm shift from oral heritage to a specialized language is consequential for fictional invention. Conceivably, it set the time bomb which literature and literature-reading now face. Readers in humanities are "savagely parodied in academic novels… This is all revenge for our perceived pretentiousness, for the impenetrability of our verbiage, […] and for our apparent contempt for reality" (Gottschall, 2008: 1).

Conclusively, the texts and the literatures that populate the social environment we live in do not seem to need academic mediation in order to reach their audience. The influential public narratives that shape readers' lives are usually performed and explained by professionals who do not have much, if anything, to do with the classic understanding of humanities. Instead, the media pundits of the day talk to the audience, imparting wisdom by examples from social intercourse, political sciences and folk psychology. They seem to have a better understanding of human agency and, rather surprisingly, of its actual narrative representation. Notions pertaining to reasoning, planning ahead and generally free will are narrative devices which place literary texts in revealingly larger cultural contexts.

The disputed matter mainly lies with their communication means of academic and fictional writing. They come across as feigning superiority to ordinary life, although being supposed to document habitual behaviour in the first place. This is one of the triggers that originally put in motion the inordinate reflection on writing and, essentially, on language all readers of literature witnessed to in the second half of the 20th century. The fictional discourse considers the purposiveness of the behaviour displayed by (fictitious) agents. For instance, Huxley's narrative voices and characters (the dissenting ones – John the Savage, Bernard Marx or Helmholtz Watson) in *Brave New World* are on a quest to assess human identity against the arrested development of the dystopian "proper standard of infantile decorum" (Huxley, 2004: 195). They contend that being human is mostly the long-established cultural negotiation of one's (and everybody else's) understanding of the body and of its (working) life. Human action is narratively codified in the growing-old narrative, irrespective of highbrow philosophical inquiry. Roughly the same self-comforting celebration of normalcy is obvious in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Since Bakhtin (Bostad, Brandist, Evensen, Faber, 2004), game-playing has been conceived of in the terms of a politicized cultural practice, which stands for social disruption. Most of the times, the games played on the island are tantamount to a warning sign of violence. The viciousness of a self-aware childish behaviour embraced by children is plain to see in the account of their acting together. The fictional rhetoric is informative of the social reality readers experience on a daily basis. They are likely to find for themselves that the under-age characters display the behaviour witnessed back home, in England. Tracking down their understanding of propriety (Englishness) opens up a debate on moral philosophy in the popular terms of folk wisdom.

Particularly in fiction and theory, the documenting of human agency represents a compelling cultural reading of social environment. When disrupted it leads to the sense of estrangement that relegates traditional humanities to their peripheral condition of the present. For instance, in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's parrot*, the unfolding of the action and the narrative coherence are somewhat disregarded in favour of the sheer verbosity that details the various anecdotes portraying the ambiguous designation of reader-writer in the novel. Namely, George Braithwaite is shown to be both, and Gustave Flaubert (possibly, Julian Barnes too) frames his own self-awareness in cultural terms. To a large extent, the meta-language of the authorial discourse plays a part in posturing the narrator, the characters and even the readers. These three items of the address are fictionalized themselves. This is narrative competence at its worst/best. Essentially, the meta-language reflects on the competence to tell apart author from narrator. The talkative nature of the narrator may very well be read as an associated speech which advertises the exploits of the 19th century French writer. The protagonist works his way up through competing discourses and reaches the probable status of authorial voice, in an otherwise rather confusing locutionary setting. In other words, meta-fiction suffuses the plot. But there is definitely something more to it. To put it shortly, public discourses, whether fictional or not, seem to be steeped into the narrative of folk heritage. Such (mis)construal of reality is highly indebted to the prevailing worldview of what it means to act as "linked strictly to consciousness and intentionality" (Knappett and Malafouris, 2008: IX).

The rhetorical devices of this narrative help readers gain insight into socially-sanctioned notions of agency at work in reading and writing. The story told is best summarized by the traditional understanding of humanities. The narrative representation of human agency goes back to notions pertaining to experiential knowledge as well as to values and beliefs. The address of the narrator is doubled by the reflection on the plot, which spirals into a second layer of meaning. This technique actually quotes the interpretation commonly assigned to human constructs and practices. It turns out that the study of public narratives is the framework that re-enacts what it means to be human. The 'vernacular' of the inquiry is the celebrated academic pursuit of humanities. Relying on the popular comprehension of social intercourse amounts to the default rhetorical mode of the authorial voice-over which is the cultural rephrasing of the scientific inquiry into human experience.

To some extent, the writer who self-consciously assesses writing was an inherent prop of aesthetic writing. The contemporary English novel stayed on this beaten track of meta-fiction and fused the proper narrative address with the theoretical tools meant to map down storytelling. Together they contribute to the set-up of the cultural content audiences have come to take for granted. This has everything to do with the conceptual structuring of the otherwise experiential knowledge commonly claimed by storytelling. Literary criticism has always struggled with the abstract significance of anecdotal evidence. The academic industry of scrutinizing literature (and, in the process, of self-scrutinizing) is somewhat alive, if not actually kicking, but former glory is presently unattainable. For that matter, literature on its own is relegated to the script of current truly popular cultural communication such as cinematic, televisual or (digital) media entertainment.

The Passion is the minute elaboration on the feminist epiphany that 'biology is not destiny' that is the blueprint of the fictional address. Better yet, the novel is demonstrative of

the need for further action on behalf of the feminist agenda. Making use of the women liberation vernacular in storytelling shapes the unfolding of the plot. Oversimplifying statements which popularize folk psychology characterize the protagonists: "…I […] understood for the first time my own need for a little father that had led me this far" (Winterson, 1987: 12). The trademark of the novel is its meta-language, which puts forth a 'strictly speaking' manner of producing aesthetic discourse. The characters are apt to take literally what common speech means figuratively, apparently disregarding the humorous or ironic intent and, in fact, heightening such rhetoric. Actions are understood in the most basic and obvious way, which is concomitantly unimaginative but also proof of the proficient narration the reader indulges in. Fiction targets the rhetoric of humanities, possibly the paramount achievement of humankind in respect to the means for understanding ourselves and the world we live in. The said meta-language of *The Passion* suggests that aesthetic writing should be one of the main cultural agencies to commit itself to educating readers. Other statements elaborate on the contemporary reconfiguration of literary studies and, conceivably, of (new) humanities. Whenever the reflection on cultural products occurs, a major concern of critical discourse is the (un)voiced notion of humanities, which is claimed or used both by the narrative voice and the subject matter. Authors are bound to explicitly discuss or implicitly exemplify the purpose and meaning of their work.

John Fowles and his foundational writing make the point of humanities agency in fiction too. The widespread belief is that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novelistic breakthrough that fostered the reshuffling of the 20th century literary convention. It renewed the genre at a time when narrative fiction was literal storytelling, dependent on chronology, plot, character, causality, etc. The novel enhances the reputation of artistic communication as benefiting from and, simultaneously, amending the literary standard language. If *The Collector* adheres to the realist tradition, the relativist and ironic discourse of Fowles's later fiction engages in the acknowledged iconoclastic practice of, for instance, the French new novel. Essentially, what the authorial discourse implies prevails over what is actually stated. It is safe to say that fictional narratives help a simplified language of the academe to become generally known and accepted. The popularizing of academic judgements calls for an educational mind-set and rhetoric. The contemporary English novel provides plenty of examples that didactically prove the literariness of the aesthetic communication which conveys eventfulness. The prevailing statement of the novel in the second half of the 20th century is usually circumscribed to the use-value of truth and relativity of ideological position. Most of the times, this cultural context resulted in social escapism and political disengagement. The aesthetic text translates as such what was initially phrased mostly by philosophical post-structuralism. Everything boils down to a sceptical disposition that states "the limits of knowledge play an unavoidable role" (Williams, 2005: 1) in humankind's endeavours. The late 20th century's cultural paradigm of humanities is almost exclusively determined by the interplay between post-structuralism and postmodernism. Simplistically said, this resulted in the cultural policy of the novel genre, in its meta-language. The blatant way of fiction to voice such hidden yet public meaning has been quotativeness and irony. By quotativeness I do not mean exclusively the literal attribution of particular excerpts to other writers, in the unfolding of one's writing. Once more, the meta-language of narrative

development is readily available in novels. For example, it is to be found in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.

In opposition, there is the practice of derivative representation, resulting in the close resemblance to a source text, frequently acknowledged as such. Explicitly, the impersonation of the fashionable (at the narrated time) literary manner of Virginia Woolf the novel incorporates. The radical semiotics of language, which is the uncompromising statement of (post)structuralism, has debunked not only the one-dimensional theory of language but also effectively collapsed the social discourse of humanities advocating that informed readers cannot tell apart language from reality. This comprehensive convention of construing all public communications as if they were stories is tantamount to "identity formation through life stories or corporate narratives" (Heinen and Sommer, 2009: 2). Working as a means to an end, scheduled tasks, and generally goal-oriented practices are all exposed for being over-simplifying and even misleading rhetoric strategies. It follows that, there is tension between the fictional address proper and the meta-language of fiction.

The alternatives are mutually exclusive: either public narratives are formative and help agents to survive or they sophisticatedly preach philosophical perplexities. A third option would be the in-between practice of fictionalizing both options in order to ponder on their practicality. The knowledge that results from this political language of fiction determines social and cultural decisions. Factually, the reading public is prompted to disregard the relativistic opinion that 'language' and 'reality' are easily interchangeable.

Basically, the recording of human experiences is dealing in the literary comprehension of culture. The manner in which popular and highbrow culture permeates (literary) texts is within the mostly unspoken, yet widely acknowledged, scope of 20th century humanities. In the search for academic legitimation the bibliography of the field appropriates various areas of scientific discourse. For example, this interdisciplinary approach to humanities comes up with the label of nothing less than literary anthropology. In other words, "as culture has become - albeit only recently - the central concern of anthropology, literature as an integral feature of culture is bound to have an anthropological dimension of its own" (Iser, 2000: 159). Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* borders on such an anthropological dimension openly internalized by the fictional discourse. Furthermore, the literary text under scrutiny seems to be a mouthpiece of the late 20th century pop culture. The representation of social practice – which the novel itself is part and parcel of – explains the need catered for by the lad literature whose patriarch is Nick Hornby. Conclusively, the writer managed to acquire cult status because of the opportunity he seized to examine the issue of a patriarchal revival in his work whose manifesto is *Fever Pitch*. The novel summarizes a male oriented drive to reassert control over social intercourse, the traditional way. The plot struggles to achieve the ends of a patriarchal narrative in the aesthetic terms of the contemporary English novel. The book is acknowledged in the terms of a seminal breakthrough. It managed to provide the blueprint for later 'male-authored' storytelling, which makes out of masculinity a literary trope and, probably, for the commonsensical construal of gender-roles in late 20th century United Kingdom. However, similar attempts that contribute to and, covertly, benefit from such association are open to questions. It comes across that the tradition of particular academic disciplines (i.e., anthropology) is conveniently used in order to advance the agenda of a 20th century construal to humanities.

Explicitly, "narrative is quickly emerging as a paradigm which unites the fields of inquiry […] – *within* the humanities" (Heinen and Sommer, 2009: 2). Theorists argue that the interdisciplinary narrative research spills over into film studies, media studies, gender studies, and history besides literature and linguistics. Sociology, psychology and computing are also mentioned (Pettersson, 2005: 141). It turns out that it is feasible to argue that the drive to forge this new identity of the field has already been documented by the novel genre at the turn of the 20th century. Implicitly, what used to be a rather commonsensical reading of fiction is now deemed a cultural enterprise potentially able to bring back humanities in the limelight. Irrespective of academic pursuits to devise working methodologies and get results, the representation of humanities in fiction is showing a reactionary streak. Unequivocally, it is inclined or, at least, favourable to reaction against pop culture that indicts traditional humanities with dry academism at its worst. All in all, this seems to be a public relations exercise. Advertising the field in order to boost 'brand awareness' is a strategy that plays on the contrast with the study of (hard fact) sciences. This old angle is supplemented by the packaging of professionalised language, usually featured by academic texts, in a friendlier manner.

As a result, the user-friendliness of the discourse should lead to a more marketable genre that, otherwise, is plagued by accessibility issues. "Discussions of literature benefit from accountability and transparency. Fortunately, there is now an 'ethical turn' in literary studies that seems to mirror the literary turn in philosophy" (Levine, 2009: 11). The cross reference between various areas of academic inquiry seems to be beneficial, chiefly for the public appeal of humanities. Such an approach secures the ready availability of the critical text, next to creative writing and other narratives of the contemporary society.

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