



Passa Porta Seminar 2016

NEED & NECESSITY

The Political Novel in Our Times

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Who needs fiction? In the words of WH Auden, 'Poetry makes nothing happen.' When was the last time a novel changed the world? And changing the world perhaps lies at the heart of everyone in the arts and sciences: in any case, what else would one want to do with the world apart from want to change it? Let me quote Marx: 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it.' It is difficult to make a case for the *need* for the novel, unless it be a very fundamental need for narrative in humans; we understand the world through narrative, but many people, such as mathematicians, or astrophysicists, would justifiably disagree with this. A more cogent case can be put together for what the novel needs, or what is necessary for the novel form, but this would have as many answers as there are novelists in the world. Far better to talk about if and how need and necessity feature in the novel; in other words, need and necessity as subjects.

It has long been established that the rise of the novel was simultaneous with the rise of the bourgeoisie and early capitalist individualism. In fact, the novel can be seen as nascent capitalism's very own literary genre. I won't rehearse the well-known arguments here. Suffice it to mention a few of the writers who have written searchingly about the subject: Ian Watt, Franco Moretti, Peter Gay, Fredric Jameson, Lukács on Thomas Mann. Think of Jane Austen cataloguing, down to the last penny, what each of her men and women are worth, and what the economic bases of their marriages and alliances will be. Remind yourself of the centrality of money in Dickens and Balzac. Think of the finances of Charles Bovary's parents and Emma's father.

Think of how much we know about Dorothea, Lydgate, Will Ladislaw and Casaubon's economic circumstances; everything, really.

Then money slowly disappeared from the novel. As capitalism marched on capital began to be erased from fiction. The modernist moment in European fiction was a turn towards the interior, towards the mechanics and elasticities of form and language. In any creative work's triangulation between the author, the text and the world, modernism emphasised the text. What happened after that is unclear to me, and I'm setting out these ideas/hypotheses as a way of not only thinking aloud, but also as a kind of proposition to discuss further. What we have in our late-capitalist times is an apparently vast spectrum of fiction – historical, realist, mysteries/thrillers, fantasy, science fiction, novels about love, marriage, divorce, heartbreak, novels about migration and immigration, technology, the Internet, virtual reality, things, non-spaces such as airports and waiting rooms, novels about that seemingly endlessly fascinating thing, the self – but you'd have to look very hard to find, especially in the Anglo-American world, fiction that transparently acknowledges that increasingly (and dizzyingly) complex triangulation of labour, capital and product that lies at the foundation of all human lives. More importantly, alongside the disappearance of economics, let us also note the disappearance of work/labour. Why has the novel in English so inexorably converged on chitchats about relationships and navel-gazing?

All genres perform a social function. For example, early children's books perform the task of instilling the civilising process in children. The pastoral was caught up in the erasure of labour from agrarian and pastoral work for the pleasure of the reading landowning classes. The novel appeared at a time of the rise of the leisured, educated middle-classes, and was shaped by, as well as shaping, the ideologies and world-view of that class. But that class has disappeared and increased democratisation of the (Western) world has meant that the novel in the West is no longer read exclusively by the people of the originary class. The world has changed, the readership of the depicted world has changed, too. Therefore, the form too has changed; the novel is no longer the novel of Balzac or George Eliot or Woolf or Mann. Yet, history, especially literary history, the history of a form, is a tenacious thing, not so easily shaken off or erased. So, for example, we understand Woolf because we have read

George Eliot and we understand AS Byatt because we have read Woolf (and, therefore, George Eliot). What social function does the contemporary Anglophone novel encode? It would seem 1) helping us through heartbreak, betrayal, infidelity, divorce, 2) helping us understand terrorism. (This latter is what I call the 'Washington Foreign Policy Novel' – the slew of books that are all suddenly about Islamic radicalisation and its terrible depredations on the first world. It is as if the Foreign Office of the USA has, post-9/11, brought into being a new subgenre of the novel: think of the fashion for Pakistani English writing, which was a passing fad, then the fashion for Arab writers, also a passing fad, simply because these countries and regions were 'in the news'. Never mind the fact that Pakistani and pan-Arabic writing has flourished, and continues to do so, without its fashionable status in the Anglophone world.)

But, seriously, at a time when the world is only just waking up to the fact that the late strains of capitalism have possibly not created the best of all possible worlds, where is the novel form's awakening to this? There are the few odd books written about the great financial crashes, and the credit crunch, and the banking crises – an industry defined, it seems, by its regular-as-clockwork crises points – but I'm trying to get at something more fundamental than these symptomatic, if convulsive, expressions. I'm trying to get at some understanding of how economic orders shape both our inner and outer lives in the way Mann distilled the ethos of mercantile capitalism in the Buddenbrooks family. I'm trying to reach towards the way the personal is always, inevitably, inexorably, the political, in the way, say, the great forces of history leaves their imprint on individual lives. Read Jenny Erpenbeck to understand how brilliantly and profoundly this can be done.

It seems to be a perfectly logical fruition that the form that began as proto-capitalist individualism's chosen genre should explore individual lives to the exclusion of everything else. Remember the free-marketeer Margaret Thatcher's chilling words, 'There is no such thing as society, only individuals'? The form has reflected this kind of thinking in a dismayingly unquestioned way. What the novel now needs is to turn away from individuals in a vacuum and return to the individual as part of a bigger order, as part of history. Storytelling has had its day; now we need meaning. Where has the *engagé* novelist gone? But *engagé* is a different creature now because the rules of

engagement have changed while our understanding of the *engagé* intellectual has remained stuck in the time of Sartre and de Beauvoir: a creature in the front of picket lines, throwing stones at the ‘pigs’, protesting against Vietnam, distributing ‘Socialist Workers’ at a rally. This outdated and rather tarnished image – I’m actually rather fond of it – of the intellectual has persisted. It is interesting to ask the question ‘why’, just as it is interesting to see what answers can be returned to a related question: ‘Whose interest does it serve to have this image of the *engagé* intellectual as the dominant picture?’ I shall be asking a variant of this question slightly later.

Often, the domain I’m trying to nudge the restrictively individualistic novel to is termed the ‘political’, thereby turning the genre into the ‘political novel’. Here we begin to open a can of worms. Like the false but tenacious understanding of the term *engagé*, the ‘political novel’, too, summons up the sloganeering writer, shouting from the rooftops, relentlessly dividing the world into black and white, oppressors and oppressed, good and bad. S/he is little more than a hectoring partisan. Let me name ten random novels which I consider political. I defy anyone to tell me that these are hectoring, bullying, shouting, partisan works: *Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann. *The End of Days* by Jenny Erpenbeck. *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* by Heinrich Böll. *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth. *Double Negative* by Ivan Vladislavić. *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk. *Questions of Travel* by Michelle de Kretser. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by Mohammed Hanif. *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood. Each of these books tells a story, yes, but that is its basic appeal. Each of these books talks about individual lives but sees them in a larger matrix, sees the causation, as it were, of the particularities of those individual lives, the forces that have produced them. How did we get here, they all ask. An Indian writer recently remarked, ‘Fiction written with social causes in mind can be quite dull.’ I don’t know what she means by social causes but I’ll tell you what is actually dull: empty storytelling that does not allow us to see the matrix in which human lives are embedded, stories that have no context, no history, no meaning. Free-floating, unmoored novels, each as original, as distinct, as a match in a box of matches.

Which leads me to the question: in whose interest is it to have the political novel portrayed as a unidimensional, shouting thing, waving flags,

taking sides? What do we gain, and what lose, by resolutely refusing to call *The Master and Margarita*, or *Les Particules Élémentaires* political novels? It is not difficult to figure out how this particular consent has been manufactured. Lest anyone think that I'm advocating a full-blooded return to social, or even *socialist*, realism, let me defend myself. It may be obvious by now that my politics inhabit a different end of the spectrum from the politics of VS Naipaul and Michel Houellebecq but I find their work inspiring, their analysis of the complexities of how we got here profound, their views on intractably difficult subjects such as postcolonial societies, or democratic liberal states and their contradictions and dilemmas, or multicultural societies, compelling, scintillating and intelligent. I disagree with them sometimes – actually, a lot – but I am constantly engaged with, and by, their deep thinking about history and context. Their work is fully informed by the matrix that I outlined earlier.

The true costs of unbridled late capitalism haven't even begun to be counted. Because it is everywhere, because it can appropriate and devour anything, because it can erase, mislabel, miscategorise, make us forgetful and gently, subtly, yet lethally effectively demonise our efforts to remember, it is the moral duty of the writer to resist. It is a need, a necessity. Fiction must be a quarrel with the times, otherwise, why write?