THE WAY
— OF —
THE WORLD

The *Bildungsroman* in European Culture

FRANCO MORETTI

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The *Bildungsroman* as Symbolic Form

Nothing I had, and yet profusion:
The lust for truth, the pleasure in illusion.
Give back the passions unabated,
That deepest joy, alive with pain,
Love's power and the strength of hatred,
Give back my youth to me again. (Goethe, *Faust*.)

Achilles, Hector, Ulysses: the hero of the classical epic is a mature man, an adult. Aeneas, carrying away a father by now too old, and a son still too young, is the perfect embodiment of the symbolic relevance of the 'middle' stage of life. This paradigm will last a long time (*'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita...'*), but with the first enigmatic hero of modern times, it falls apart. According to the text, Hamlet is thirty years old: far from young by Renaissance standards. But *our* culture, in choosing Hamlet as its first symbolic hero, has 'forgotten' his age, or rather has had to alter it, and picture the Prince of Denmark as a young man.

The decisive thrust in this sense was made by Goethe; and it takes shape, symptomatically, precisely in the work that codifies the new paradigm and sees *youth* as the most meaningful part of life: *Wilhelm Meister*. This novel marks simultaneously the birth of the *Bildungsroman* (the form which will dominate or, more precisely, make possible the Golden Century of Western narrative)[1], and of a new hero: Wilhelm Meister, followed by Elizabeth Bennet and Julien Sorel, Rastignac and Frédéric Moreau and Bel-Ami, Waverley and David Copperfield, Renzo Tramaglino, Eugene Onegin, Bazarov, Dorothea Brooke ...

Youth is both a necessary and sufficient definition of these heroes. Aeschylus's Orestes was also young, but his youth was incidental and subordinate to other much more meaningful characteristics — such as being the son of Agamemnon, for instance. But at the end of the eighteenth century the priorities are reversed, and what makes Wilhelm Meister and his successors representative and interesting is, to a large extent, youth as such. Youth, or rather the European novel's numerous versions of youth, becomes for our modern culture the age which holds the 'meaning of life': it is the first gift Mephisto offers Faust. In this study I hope to illuminate the causes, features and consequences of this symbolic shift.

I

In 'stable communities', that is in status or 'traditional' societies, writes Karl Mannheim, ' "Being Young" is a question of biological differentiation'.[2] Here, to be young simply means not yet being an adult. Each individual's youth faithfully repeats that of his forebears, introducing him to a role that lives on unchanged: it is a 'pre-scribed' youth, which, to quote Mannheim again, knows no 'entelechy'. It has no culture that distinguishes it and emphasizes its worth. It is, we might say, an 'invisible' and 'insignificant' youth.

But when status society starts to collapse, the countryside is abandoned for the city, and the world of work changes at an incredible and incessant pace, the colourless and uneventful socialization of 'old' youth becomes increasingly implausible: it becomes a *problem*, one that makes youth itself problematic. Already in Meister's case, 'apprenticeship' is no longer the slow and predictable progress towards one's father's work, but rather an uncertain exploration of social space, which the nineteenth century — through travel and adventure, wandering and getting lost, 'Bohême' and 'parvenir' — will underline countless times. It is a necessary exploration: in dismantling the continuity between generations, as is well known, the new and destabilizing forces of capitalism impose a hitherto unknown *mobility*. But it is also a yearned for exploration, since the selfsame process gives rise to unexpected hopes, thereby generating an *interiority* not only fuller than before, but also — as Hegel clearly saw, even though he deplored it — perennially dissatisfied and restless.

Mobility and interiority. Modern youth, to be sure, is many

other things as well: the growing influence of education, the strengthening of bonds within generations, a new relationship with nature, youth's 'spiritualization' — these features are just as important in its 'real' development. Yet the *Bildungsroman* discards them as irrelevant, abstracting from 'real' youth a 'symbolic' one, epitomized, we have said, in mobility and interiority.[3] Why this choice?

Because, I think, at the turn of the eighteenth century much more than just a rethinking of youth was at stake. Virtually without notice, in the dreams and nightmares of the so called 'double revolution', Europe plunges into modernity, but without possessing a *culture* of modernity. If youth, therefore, achieves its symbolic centrality, and the 'great narrative' of the *Bildungsroman* comes into being, this is because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to *modernity*.

The *Bildungsroman* as the 'symbolic form' of modernity: for Cassirer, and Panofsky, through such a form 'a particular spiritual content [here, a specific image of modernity] is connected to a specific material sign [here, youth] and intimately identified with it'.[4] 'A specific image of modernity': the image conveyed precisely by the 'youthful' attributes of mobility and inner restlessness. Modernity as a bewitching and risky process full of 'great expectations' and 'lost illusions'. Modernity as — in Marx's words — a 'permanent revolution' that perceives the experience piled up in tradition as a useless dead-weight, and therefore can no longer feel represented by maturity, and still less by old age.

In this first respect youth is 'chosen' as the new epoch's 'specific material sign', and it is chosen over the multitude of other possible signs, because of its ability to *accentuate* modernity's dynamism and instability.[5] Youth is, so to speak, modernity's 'essence', the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past. And, to be sure, it was impossible to cope with the times without acknowledging their revolutionary impetus: a symbolic form incapable of doing so would have been perfectly *useless*. But if it had been able to do *only this*, on the other hand, it would have run the risk of *destroying itself as form* — precisely what happened, according to a long-standing critical tradition, to Goethe's other great attempt at representing modernity: *Faust*. If, in other words, inner dissatisfaction and mobility make novelistic youth 'symbolic' of modernity, they also force it to share in the 'formlessness' of the new epoch, in its protean elusiveness. To become a 'form', youth must be endowed with a very different, almost opposite feature to those already mentioned: the very

simple and slightly philistine notion that youth 'does not last forever'. Youth is brief, or at any rate circumscribed, and this enables, or rather *forces* the *a priori* establishment of a formal constraint on the portrayal of modernity. Only by curbing its intrinsically boundless dynamism, only by agreeing to betray to a certain extent its very essence, only thus, it seems, can modernity be *represented.* Only thus, we may add, can it be 'made human'; can it become an integral part of our emotional and intellectual system, instead of the hostile force bombarding it from without with that 'excess of stimuli' which — from Simmel to Freud to Benjamin — has always been seen as modernity's most typical threat.[6]

And yet — dynamism and limits, restlessness and the 'sense of an ending': built as it is on such sharp contrasts, the structure of the *Bildungsroman* will of necessity be *intrinsically contradictory.* A fact which poses extremely interesting problems for aesthetics — the novel as the form 'most open to dangers' of the young Lukács — and even more interesting ones for the history of culture. But before discussing these, let us try to retrace the internal logic of this formal contradiction.

II

'Youth does not last forever.' What constitutes it as symbolic form is no longer a 'spatial' determination, as in the case of Renaissance perspective, but rather a *temporal* one. This is not surprising, since the nineteenth century, under the pressure of modernity, had first of all to reorganize its conception of *change* — which too often, from the time of the French Revolution, had appeared as a meaningless and thus threatening reality ('Je n'y comprends rien,' wrote De Maistre in 1796, 'c'est le grand mot du jour'). This accounts for the centrality of *history* in nineteenth-century culture and, with Darwin, science as well; and for the centrality of *narrative* within the domain of literature. Narrative and history, in fact, do not retreat before the onslaught of events, but demonstrate the possibility of giving them order and meaning. Furthermore, they suggest that reality's meaning is now to be grasped solely in its historico-diachronic dimension. Not only are there no 'meaningless' events; there can now be meaning only *through* events.

Thus, although there exist countless differences (starting with 'stylistic' ones) among the various kinds of *Bildungsroman*, I shall

organize this study around *plot differences*: the most pertinent, in my opinion, for capturing the rhetorical and ideological essence of a historico-narrative culture. Plot differences or, more exactly, differences in the ways in which plot generates meaning. Following basically Lotman's conceptualization, we can express this difference as a variation in the weight of two principles of textual organization: the 'classification' principle and the 'transformation' principle. While both are always present in a narrative work, these two principles usually carry an uneven weight, and are actually inversely proportional: as we shall see, the prevalence of one rhetorical strategy over the other, especially in an extreme form, implies very different value choices and even opposite attitudes to modernity.

When classification is strongest — as in the English 'family romance' and in the classical *Bildungsroman* — narrative transformations have meaning in so far as they lead to a particularly marked ending: one that establishes a classification different from the initial one but nonetheless perfectly clear and stable — definitive, in both senses this term has in English. This teleological rhetoric — the meaning of events lies in their *finality* — is the narrative equivalent of Hegelian thought, with which it shares a strong *normative* vocation: events acquire meaning when they led to *one* ending, and one only.

Under the classification principle, in other words, a story is more meaningful the more truly it manages to *suppress itself as story*. Under the transformation principle — as in the trend represented by Stendhal and Pushkin, or in that from Balzac to Flaubert — the opposite is true: what makes a story meaningful is its narrativity, its being an open-ended process. Meaning is the result not of a fulfilled teleology, but rather, as for Darwin, of the total rejection of such a solution. The ending, the privileged narrative moment of taxonomic mentality, becomes the most *meaningless* one here: *Onegin*'s destroyed last chapter, Stendhal's insolently arbitrary closures, or the *Comédie Humaine*'s perennially postponed endings are instances of a narrative logic according to which a story's meaning resides precisely in the impossibility of 'fixing' it.

The oppositions between the two models can obviously go on *ad infinitum*. Thus, on the side of classification we have the novel of marriage, seen as the definitive and classifying act par excellence: at the end of the *Bildungsroman*'s development, marriage will even be disembodied into an abstract principle by Eliot's Daniel Deronda who marries not so much a woman, as a rigidly

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normative culture. On the side of transformations, we have the novel of adultery: a relationship inconceivable within the Anglo-Germanic traditions (where it is either totally absent, or appears as the sinister and merely destructive force of *Elective Affinities* or *Wuthering Heights*), it becomes here, by contrast, the natural habitat of an existence devoted to instability. And in the end adultery too becomes a disembodied abstraction with Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau who, in perfect parallelism with Daniel Deronda, no longer commits adultery with a woman, but with the immaterial principle of indetermination.

An equally sharp contrast appears when we view these differing narrative rhetorics in terms of the history of ideas. Here, the classical *Bildungsroman* plot posits 'happiness' as the highest value, but only to the detriment and eventual annulment of 'freedom' — while Stendhal, for his part, follows just as radically the opposite course. Similarly, Balzac's fascination with mobility and metamorphoses ends up dismantling the very notion of personal identity — whereas in England, the centrality of the latter value generates an equally inevitable repugnance to change.

Moreover, it is clear that the two models express opposite attitudes towards modernity: caged and exorcised by the principle of classification, it is exasperated and made hypnotic by that of transformation. And it is especially clear that the full development of the antithesis implies a split in the image of youth itself. Where the classification principle prevails — where it is emphasized, as in Goethe and in the English novelists, that youth 'must come to an end' — youth is subordinated to the idea of 'maturity': like the story, it has meaning only *in so far as* it leads to a stable and 'final' identity. Where the transformation principle prevails and youthful dynamism is emphasized, as in the French novelists, youth cannot or does not want to give way to maturity: the young hero senses in fact in such a 'conclusion' a sort of betrayal, which would *deprive* his youth of its meaning rather than enrich it.

Maturity and youth are therefore inversely proportional: the culture that emphasizes the first devalues the second, and vice versa. At the opposite poles of this split lie Eliot's *Felix Holt* and *Daniel Deronda*, and Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. In Eliot's novels, the hero is so mature from the very start as to dissociate himself suspiciously from anything connected with youthful restlessness: the 'sense of an ending' has suffocated any appeal youth may have had. In Flaubert, on the other hand, Frédéric Moreau is so mesmerized by the potentialities inherent in his youth that he abhors any determination as an intolerable loss of

meaning: his prophetic and narcissistic youth, which would like to go on without end, will abolish maturity and collapse overnight into a benumbed old age.

With perfect symmetry, the excessive development of one principle eliminates the opposite one: but in so doing, *it is the Bildungsroman itself that disappears* — Eliot's and Flaubert's being the last masterpieces of the genre. However paradoxical it may seem, this symbolic form could indeed exist, not despite but *by virtue of its contradictory nature*. It could exist because within it — within each single work and within the genre as a whole — *both* principles were simultaneously active, however unbalanced and uneven their strength. It could exist: better still, it *had* to exist. For the contradiction between conflicting evaluations of modernity and youth, or between opposing values and symbolic relationships, is not a flaw — or perhaps it is *also* a flaw — but it is above all the paradoxical *functional principle* of a large part of modern culture. Let us recall the values mentioned above — freedom and happiness, identity and change, security and metamorphoses: although antagonistic, they are *all equally important* for modern Western mentality. Our world calls for their *coexistence*, however difficult; and it therefore also calls for a cultural mechanism capable of representing, exploring and testing that coexistence.

A particularly 'strong' attempt to control this contradictory coexistence and to 'make it work' is to be found, once again, in *Faust*. Here, amidst the many souls of modern culture — amidst the desire for happiness ('Stop, thou art so beautiful ...') and the freedom of *streben* that 'sweeps us ever onward'; amidst the irrepressible identity of the protagonist and his countless historical transformations — here Goethe suggests the possibility of an all-embracing *synthesis*. Yet this synthesis has never managed to dispel our doubts — the doubt that Gretchen's tragedy, and that of Philemon and Baucis, can never be erased; that the bet has been lost; that Faust's salvation is a sham: that synthesis, in other words, is an ideal no longer attainable. And so, in the same decades as *Faust*, the enormous and unconscious collective enterprise of the *Bildungsroman* bears witness to a different solution to modern culture's contradictory nature. Far less ambitious than synthesis, this other solution is *compromise*: which is also, not surprisingly, the novel's most celebrated theme.

An extraordinary symbolic stalemate thereby develops, in which Goethe does not cancel Stendhal, nor Balzac Dickens, nor Flaubert Eliot. Each culture and each individual will have their preferences, as is obvious: but they will never be considered

exclusive. In this purgatorial world we do not find — to refer to Lukács' early essay on Kierkegaard — the tragic logic of the 'either/or', but rather the more compromising one of the 'as well as'. And in all likelihood it was *precisely this predisposition to compromise* that allowed the *Bildungsroman* to emerge victorious from that veritable 'struggle for existence' between various narrative forms that took place at the turn of the eighteenth century: historical novel and epistolary novel, lyric, allegorical, satirical, 'romantic' novel, *Künstlerroman* ... As in Darwin, the fate of these forms hung on their respective 'purity': that is to say, the more they remained bound to a rigid, original structure, the more difficult their survival. And vice versa: the more a form was capable of flexibility and compromise, the better it could prosper in the maelstrom without synthesis of modern history. And the most bastard of these forms became — the dominant genre of Western narrative: for the gods of modernity, unlike those of *King Lear*, do indeed stand up for bastards.

All this compels us to re-examine the current notion of 'modern ideology' or 'bourgeois culture', or as you like it. The success of the *Bildungsroman* suggests in fact that the truly central ideologies of our world are not in the least — contrary to widespread certainties; more widespread still, incidentally, in deconstructionist thought — intolerant, normative, monologic, to be wholly submitted to or rejected. Quite the opposite: they are pliant and precarious, 'weak' and 'impure'. When we remember that the *Bildungsroman* — the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization — is also the *most contradictory* of modern symbolic forms, we realize that in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the *interiorization of contradiction*. The next step being not to 'solve' the contradiction, but rather to learn next step being not to 'solve' the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival.

III

Let us begin with a question: how is it that we have Freudian interpretations of tragedy and myth, of fairy-tale and comedy — yet nothing comparable for the novel? For the same reason, I believe, that we have no solid Freudian analysis of youth: because the *raison d'être* of psychoanalysis lies in *breaking up* the psyche into its opposing 'forces' — whereas youth and the novel have the opposite task of fusing, or at least bringing together, the

conflicting features of individual personality. Because, in other words, psychoanalysis always looks *beyond* the Ego — whereas the *Bildungsroman* attempts to *build* the Ego, and make it the indisputable centre of its own structure.[7]

The Ego's centrality is connected, of course, to the theme of socialization — this being, to a large extent, the 'proper functioning' of the Ego thanks to that particularly effective compromise, the Freudian 'reality principle'. But this then compels us to question the *Bildungsroman*'s attitude towards an idea very embarrassing for modern culture — the idea of 'normality'. Once again, we may begin with a contrast. As is well known, a large part of twentieth-century thought — from Freud, let us say, to Foucault — has defined normality against *its opposite*: against pathology, emargination, repression. Normality is seen not as a meaning-ful, but rather as an unmarked entity. The self-defensive result of a 'negation' process, normality's meaning is to be found *outside itself*: in what it excludes, not in what it includes.

Leaving aside the most elementary form of the *Bildungsroman* (the English tradition of the 'insipid' hero — a term which is the culinary equivalent of 'unmarked', and was used by Richardson for *Tom Jones* and by Scott for *Waverley*, and which also applies to *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*), it is quite clear that the novel has followed a strategy opposed to the one we have described. It has accustomed us to looking at normality *from within* rather than from the stance of its exceptions; and it has produced a phenomenology that makes normality interesting and meaningful *as* normality. If the *Bildungsroman*'s initial option is always explicitly anti-heroic and prosaic — the hero is Wilhelm Meister, not Faust; Julien Sorel and Dorothea Brooke, not Napoleon or Saint Theresa (and so on to Flaubert, and then to Joyce) — these characters are still, though certainly all 'normal' in their own ways, far from unmarked or meaningless in themselves.

An internally articulated, interesting and lively normality — normality as the expulsion of all marked features, as a true semantic void. Theoretically, the two concepts are irreconcilable: if one is true, the other is false, and vice versa. Historically, however, this opposition becomes a sort of division of labour: a division of space and time. Normality as 'negation', as Foucault has shown, is the product of a double threat: the crisis of a socio-cultural order, and the violent reorganization of power. Its time is that of crisis and genesis. Its space, surrounded by peculiarly strong social institutions, is the purely negative area of the 'un-

enclosed'. Its desire is to be like everyone else and thus to go by unnoticed.

Its literary expression, we may add, is nineteenth-century mass narrative: the literature of states of exception, of extreme ills and extreme remedies. But precisely: mass narrative (which, not by chance, has received ample treatment from Freudian criticism) — not the novel. Only rarely does the novel explore the spatio-temporal confines of the given world: it usually stays 'in the middle', where it discovers, or perhaps creates, the typically modern feeling and enjoyment of 'everyday life' and 'ordinary administration'. Everyday life: an anthropocentric space where all social activities lose their exacting objectivity and converge in the domain of 'personality'. Ordinary administration: a time of 'lived experience' and individual growth — a time filled with 'opportunities', but which excludes by definition both the crisis and genesis of a culture.[8]

Just think of the historical course of the *Bildungsroman*: it originates with Goethe and Jane Austen who, as we shall see, write as if to show that the double revolution of the eighteenth century could have been avoided. It continues with Stendhal's heroes, who are born 'too late' to take part in the revolutionary-Napoleonic epic. It withers away with 1848 in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (the revolution that was not a revolution) and with the English thirties in Eliot's *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* (the 'Reforms' that did not keep their promises). It is a constant elusion of historical turning points and breaks: an elusion of tragedy and hence, as Lukács wrote in *Soul and Forms*, of the very idea that societies and individuals acquire their full meaning in a 'moment of truth'.[9]

An elusion, we may conclude, of whatever may endanger the Ego's equilibrium, making its compromises impossible — and a gravitation, in contrast, to those modes of existence that allow the Ego to manifest itself fully.[10] In this sense — and all the more so if we continue to believe that moments and occasions of truth, despite everything, do still exist — the novel must strike us as a *weak* form. This is indeed the case, and this weakness — which, of course, is ours as well — goes together with the other features we have noted: its contradictory, hybrid and compromising nature. But the point is that such features are also intrinsic to that way of existence — everyday, normal, half-unaware and decidedly unheroic — that Western culture has tried incessantly to protect and expand, and has endowed with an ever-growing significance: till it has entrusted to it what we keep calling, for lack of anything

better, the 'meaning of life'. And as few things have helped shape this value as much as our novelistic tradition, then the novel's weakness should strike us perhaps as being far from innocent.

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