

## THE CRISIS IN FICTION AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

by Gonzalo Contreras\*

Modern times have placed the novel in crisis. A few decades ago its imminent demise was predicted. Even if the arguments in favour of this are somewhat confused, it seems that the genre cannot resist both the possibility and the new trends of the times. Obviously novels continue to be written: it is the use of fiction as a way of representing the contemporary world that would seem to be in question. The novel has undertaken this role and has moved in different directions. This search, which is its *raison d'être*, has taken various forms which can now be evaluated.

Perhaps now more than ever writers are questioning the sense itself of writing. In this case we are not talking about the essential search that is involved in every creative work, but more a questioning that reflects the state of lethargy in novel writing today. If the theme of the novel in crisis seems to have been overcome by the fact that novels keep on being written and read, this does not avoid the fact that the genre cannot shake itself out of a state of insecurity which has dogged it for a number of years and which will become sharper by the end of the century. There is pessimism about it:

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the deeper we look into this modern idea of uncertainty the more we find a general feeling that foresees the genre's disappearance before the advance of technology as if there were a logical connection between the two events. Someone has already spoken of "the crisis in fiction" but this is too abstract and euphemistic a concept: what we really want to say is "why is it not worth writing novels today?". This question makes things clearer and better expresses a real fact that a good number of readers will understand and with which a large body of writers would agree.

"We have reached a point in the Modern Age where it is difficult to accept the idea of a work of fiction" Roland Barthes said once. Today there are writers who, without having a gun put to their head, would write something like: "So Isabel went to the window". This solitary and innocent phrase is, however, overwhelmed by the needs of the narrative, needs that smack of the word "novel", of something that feebly tries to imitate life, that is not reality but hopelessly tries to be and which is also definitely not fantasy. The single idea of breathing life into a character and working with an objective and within a framework can be repugnant to some people. Varieties in narrative, plot, story line, all seem to be wearing away. As Nabokov says, fiction began when a little shepherd, who was fed up, shouted "A wolf's coming" and there wasn't any wolf. Today apparently the writer is convinced that nobody believes in the wolf, or maybe that he is the only one who is afraid of it.

People look askance at anything novelish: however there is no similar questioning of the poetic, as if poetry were inherent in the nature of man, and the novel was nothing more than an artificial art form, liable to expire depending on the trend of the times, similar to opera in the world of music. Without a doubt it is the quality of the genre that works against it. If poetry has gained the right to a certain artistic exemption, the novel finds itself constrained in having to comply with certain expectations: if it goes too far it destroys its objectives, and so it seems to be condemned to live with the trivialities appropriate to its style. Facing this bundle of contradictions, why therefore go to the trouble of writing a novel? This question has haunted the minds of many writers more than once. The answers are many but we shall deal with two. The first is that whoever writes a story once is going to find it difficult to resist the temptation to write one again, especially if the first one was a failure. This, of course, has nothing to do with an impetus from society: it is a private reason, that is related to the "pathos" of those who have opted for the written word and which, for them, cannot be given up. This reason alone is enough to ensure the survival of the novel, at least in so far as the act of writing is concerned.

The second reason, which is really important, is that today the direction of the writer's work is to find meaning in the act of writing itself, parting from the premise that writing a novel is not a "natural" exercise, and even less an optimistic one. In other words, each novel that is written is an intent to save the genre as a species. Out of this feeling of being on the defensive come the best literary works of today. A good novel the moment it appears inevitably makes an impression: if it does not, it continues to swell the mountain of evidence which is being accumulated to show that the novel is going to disappear and strengthens the arguments of the prophets of doom. The point of departure of today's novel is to find a justification for itself, not just a desire to tell a story, as in the past. Nowadays there are neither good nor bad stories as far as novel writing goes.

In other words, nobody today throws themselves into a story with such confident resolve as Balzac used to do. Balzac represents the omnipotence of the writer and the omnipotence of literature within society. There are many people today who still miss this state of affairs in literature, this climax, which lasted only for a moment, and which is related to the beginnings of the modern novel. Balzac did not think of his public when he took up his pen. The link between his work and the reader is direct: there are no intermediaries. Reality, unique and unequivocal, appears in the novel to the satisfaction of the reader: it is a subject of such simplicity that every written word is devoured. There is no other window onto the fictitious other than the novel and the theatre and both of them treat reality similarly. It was Flaubert who first worried about the idea of "literary reality", of giving the novel its own character, of investigating the way in which "one can express life" through the text. We can say that Balzac did not "think" about the novel while Flaubert did: he was therefore the first to state what methods were to be used in developing narrative. If Balzac only considered the story and its solution, Flaubert outlined the problems of expression. In this sense, he was the first to uphold the ideas of care and the caution which the writer of today assumes in writing his fiction.

Why care and caution? Because the writer feels himself facing an extremely critical or sceptical reader. And this is not criticism due to an excess of interest but rather through scepticism, which makes matters worse. This gives rise to the paradox that although the reader expects nothing from the novel he asks everything from it. It is a sensation similar to that of the person in love when he sees how his love begins to wither away, a sense of disdain which he wants to hold onto so as not to experience frustration. Facing this, the relevance of the work to the contemporary world, its commitment to defining realities and the "importance of the theme" can all be

seen at times as more unsettling considerations for the writer to take into account than literary quality or imagination and act as if they alone could assure the effectiveness of his work. As in love, subservience repels. Never before has a writer been so captive to a kill-joy reader. And why is this reader such a kill-joy? The reasons are many: an arrogant sense of practicality, a lack of confidence in Art, a misunderstood Cartesian pride that says "Don't tell stories to me", a high tech environment that gives the reader the impression that by the act of reading he is going through some archaic ritual. But more than this. The problem is above all a state of mind.

On the other hand, it is true to say that life marches on more quickly than the conscience of the writer. Literature seems to be an insufficient answer, it takes too long, it seems to drag its "literary bundle" along with it; all this junk style which contributes to the novel is a component both futile and banal, inoffensive from beginning to end, a reply that turns its nose up at reality. This does not mean that the aspirations of literature are to adjust itself to reality: on the contrary the task of literature is to surpass reality, by whatever means it can, but never to fall below it.

"I write without the encouragement of society" the writer argues: "you don't represent it or define it" argues the reader. And without a doubt this clash of interests exists.

Almost twenty years ago, Maurice Blanchot predicted the disappearance of the novel as such. He is still right. In "L'Infini", a magazine published by Ediciones Gallimard, Alain Nadaud confesses to having escaped from "the physical and moral desert, in many ways novelesque itself, into which I fell in the seventies". The article deals with two French intellectuals who have burnt their boats vis-à-vis narrative. Obviously, as far as the novel is concerned, there still exists this type of uneasiness as to its destiny.

The novel had reacted and searched for new paths to cover. It stuck to principles of aesthetics, hoping to find "the answer" in the mechanics of language, in one of the most arduous and, at the same time, most tedious fights of all, and which produced the most boring novels in history. The "new Novel" is the most worn-out expression for this type of fiction.

In those days, one could shoot a novel off at any part of the planet but the important target was Paris, and its oppressive intellectuality that controlled the art of the time. The reasons behind this attack on language in search of an answer to the novel (a gesture doomed to failure because the search itself was a question and not an answer) were not due merely to experimentation or an eagerness to find new ways of expression. This was the effect not the cause. The fact remained that the novel could not recover

from the shock that the measures it had taken had shown that it was still unable to relate to the world as a whole or define the problem of man, as the novels in the past had done. The labyrinth of language in which the novel found itself was nothing more than an expression of this problem. It became difficult to resign oneself to the fact that the novel could not recount the problem of modern man. All the novels of Cortazar, who dragged hundreds along the same route demonstrate this. This experimenting with language represented nothing more than an ambition to stick to the ideas prevalent at the time and obscurity of language was the result of his frustration. "Rayuela" by Cortazar begins to show signs of decomposition, novelistically speaking, but continues to be a very valuable piece of work in showing the intellectual preoccupations of the era.

Perplexity as to the true purpose of fiction is an established fact. The immense arsenal of books and articles together with the legions of theorists who meet to discuss the case are the symptom of this vocational malaise. They try to extend limits by exhausting resources when in fact they have simply lost direction. The loss of reputation which the virtues of novel writing have suffered as a result is such that, finding this door closed, discovering a new vocation for the novel is a worry that has produced a fatal impasse in the European novel in particular.

As we have said, the reasons are other ones. The crisis in the novel is nothing more than the crisis in thinking and values in the second half of this century. Reality has become incomprehensible, indefinable, multiple and contradictory. Doris Lessing expresses it very neatly in "This Small Personal Voice": "the great men of the nineteenth century had neither religion, politics nor aesthetic principles in common. But what they did have was an idea of ethical judgement....sharing certain values".

If there is one thing which distinguishes our literature today it is the manifest confusion as to rules and the uncertainty of values it seems that words cannot be used simply and naturally. All great words like love, hate, life, death, loyalty and treachery now signify the opposite and have various shades of somewhat dubious meaning. Words have become so inadequate to express the richness of our experience that even the simplest phrase overheard on a bus sounds as if it has been formed by words shouted from a cliff top.

Human ethics which were behind the intentions of every novelist until existentialism arrived have gone to the wall. Apparently the novel of today is condemned to be only partially aware of realities and to personify modern day subjectivity. Its attempt to understand reality is only fragmentary: in the best of cases it may overcome this in the case

of a particular work by using its own means of expression in formal terms. Certainly the same novel might have demolished the narrative world of fiction and maybe it would have been good that it did so. However it would then take a traumatic look at itself and self-destruct. What is therefore happening today?.

Today it is stimulating to find that there no formal current of thought that dominates the world of fiction. The strong tendencies that tended to dominate the work of artists or that at least were established as unavoidable reference points, have ceased to exist, certainly in literature, resulting in a sensation of confusion. It can be argued that fiction has won the right to variety, individuality and controversy. Today the most diverse forms and styles coexist, from the markedly poetic to the inevitable prosaic, from the use of melodrama to structural experiment. What is happening is that the novel as a genre has widened its frontiers, swallowing up practically every other literary form. It might have lost form and outline but it has increased in range.

It is enough to take a look at the spectrum of novel writing today to verify how heterogenous the genre has become and what a wide range of voices is represented.

“I have the feeling that this century has never been told” says Ceslaw Milosz. And he is still right. Maybe it is the sum of all those partial novels which tell it, something like Borges says, that all books written are known as “the book”.

As we have already said, this fragmentation of the world and its visions can be considered liberating. One consequence of this may be the vitality which is exhibited today in novel writing coming from the edge of the developed world, or rather more specifically, from the fringes of the old cultures of Europe. Portuguese, South African, Czech, Latin-American, Japanese, Arabian novels are beginning to get world wide attention. In each and every case these novels are intensely focused on the realities of their countries. The very fact that they have been talked about is already a phenomenon. Powerful local literature read by an huge local public. It is happening in Argentina (Soriano, Asis, Martini, Ghiardinelli), in Mexico (Jose Agustín, Carlos Monsivais, Angeles Mastrete, Eliana Poniatowska) and in Japan (Matsubara, Abe, Endo, Ohe). Even if many of these names are still unknown to us, taken together they form the bulk of the literary consumption in their respective countries.

Does this mean that autonomous cultures have become the literary centre of things? Definitely not. Nowadays less than ever before if we think of the effect of global communications. We are simply talking about a

literary attitude not about national literatures. It would be very dangerous to assert that, as the desire to write literature is universal.

Maybe the "boom" in Latin-American literature has been the first to put this European entropy in check. Confronting the profound exhaustion that existentialism showed, an existentialism which had led the way up to the end of the fifties, the liberating imagination of fiction from Latin America gave literature a vital and powerful injection. Nevertheless this first advance of Latin American literature ended in disfiguring several of its characteristics. It was a literary version of Latin America that began to be produced, a product for export only to a public that already had some idea, albeit a mythical one, of what was Latin America. For some time this type of literature had to continue playing up to the image that it had constructed of itself. Today the new generation is trying to forget the picturesque temptations of the "boom" days, which did not make the break with "criollismo" as had been predicted, but was in fact its crowning glory.

Today things are more complicated as Latin American literature is no longer the pampered child of Europe. The literary centres have moved. One of the most important is in the countries of East and Central Europe. Milosz, Seifert, Canetti and the case of Kundera are examples of this. This literature which is found in the countries on the borders of old Europe has not always conquered through mere literary qualities and here Kundera continues to be the case: without a doubt a large part of the fascination which Kundera exercises over intellectuals in the West lies in the subject matter of his works. Revised ideological ideas, "political courage" which is so much in fashion today, the situation of the intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain- all these are extra ingredients, when one has actually lived them oneself, for constructing a good novel, if you can look at them with the eyes of an European whose circumstances leave nothing to be desired. Kundera has good motives for writing and this is an enormous strength in an over-civilised world which lacks such great motives.

Nadine Gordimer, South African, Nobel Prize winner and a writer quite unjustly not known in our country, is another case of isolated novelists on the periphery who have emerged almost spontaneously through their own work. Without a doubt, nobody has known how to dissect South Africa in such a lucid way as Gordimer. This leads us to say that no one can dissect a society better than a writer and that maybe for societies that are still evolving this role is a decisive one. Nadine Gordimer's work, for example "Burger's Daughter" and "The Conservationist" (both Tusquets Press), shows us a South Africa devoid of the picturesque and its ideological complacency, obstinately real. This South Africa is sullen and menacing, its white

minority living a precarious reality like a nervous smile, its smug farms in the Transvaal with their dusty streets criss-crossed by Japanese motor cycles, its desert full of waste. With this fantastic material, Gordimer has written masterpieces of novels in a prose both knowledgeable and real.

The Portuguese writer Jose Saramago is a similar case. Obviously in the case of Portugal we are not talking about a literary beginning when one considers Eca de Queiroz, Camoens and Fernando Pessoa.

"The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis" is one of the most brilliant novels produced as an appendage to that literature. As we know, Ricardo Reis is the name of one of the many lyrical voices that Fernando Pessoa uses, who in an unusual case of spreading himself about, managed to reproduce himself in almost twenty people. Saramago makes Ricardo Reis the hero of his novel, a spectator at once passive and pensive of the events happening in Portugal and the rest of Europe in 1936. The novel is a tour de force: practically nothing happens except the two trivial affairs of this lonely repatriated doctor and his sad and constant meanderings around a Lisbon that is a portrayal of the times. The person who speaks to Ricardo Reis is the same Fernando Pessoa, who, having recently died, has received permission to return to the world of the living and talk with his literary creation. Obviously the great quality and originality of the book does not lie in this literary ruse but in the depth, sharpness and simplicity of Reis' observations, the profound human individuality that Saramago brings to such a grotesque literary figure as Ricardo Reis, a sort of phantom of literature. But there is more. Saramago succeeds in virtually adopting the voice of Pessoa as if it were another Portuguese voice, one that was not Pessoa's. What surprises us about Gordimer and Saramago, and what they want to show, is a profound and introspective attitude which, if it exists, could be called South African or Portuguese. It would appear that in both cases, outside the scope of the novels, there is a desperate search for identity without which literary work cannot be produced. The works of the new generation of Japanese writers, Isako Matsubura, Ohe or Ende seem to revolve around and personify the difficult transition period that Japan has had to confront since World War 2, as if, through their literary efforts alone, History really would be "tale related by an idiot".

The new American literature on the other hand presents a similar absorption with thinking. Dominated by the current of thought known as "minimalist", the young American writers have decided to take the American novel no further than what they can see under their noses. In a way this new minimalism is related to the traditional realism of the American novel, from Hemingway to Salinger, but in this case taken to extremes. Novels



about the trivia of every day life, every day life which in the case of Bret Easton Ellis ("Less than Zero") becomes horrifying. Jay McInerney, Peter Cameron and Jill Eisenstadt are other names. The particular circumstances they write about, their own concerns, the minimal spaces that they use, all these are symptomatic of this type of objective novel.

This characteristic has its balance in the literature that is being produced in Europe today. To verify this, up to a point we need only take certain examples. Perhaps "The Name of the Rose", by Umberto Eco, "Flaubert's Parrot", by English author Julian Barnes and "Perfume" by Patrick Susskind are the books that have been the most read, commented on and known in European fiction today. When one talks about books that have sold the most, it is just that: the remark does not pretend to say that categorically they are the best as far as quality goes, neither that they might not be. The characteristics these three books have in common can also make one think that a common train of thought runs through them. In this case we are talking about three cases of extemporary novels, "literary" in the most rigorous sense of the term, novels of style, and, in a certain way, classics. In Europe, apparently, the process has got under way to re-evaluate the virtues of narrative.

The success of Umberto Eco's "The Name of the Rose" might mean that the theorists on novel writing can do better than the novelists themselves. Eco proposed to write a novel with all the ingredients necessary to satisfy the genre and, without a doubt, he succeeded. In "The Name of the Rose" Eco succeeds in cooking up a story of political suspense and manufactures a perfect plot as far as dramatic progression is concerned. Unintelligible language, a fundamental story line and an ending. This novel, easily digested and made lighter by the use of suspense in an investigation which reads like a detective story, has made the European reader turn innocently to fiction once again. Even if no one can assert that it will stand the test of time, basically because of its minimum compromise with reality and its obvious eagerness to seduce, "The Name of the Rose" could be a symptom of the return to fiction.

The case of "Flaubert's Parrot" is similar. It is difficult to say that it is a novel, but having said that, almost everything is fitted within the confines of the novel itself. "Flaubert's Parrot" is a kind of university thesis, erudite and ingenious, full of British irony and intelligence, which revolves around the person and work of a hermit of Rouen. Starting with Flaubert and a supposed biographical study of the man which an amateur Flaubert enthusiast is putting together, Barnes expands the book to include the most profound and imaginative digressions on the human race in aspects so varied and diverse that it

becomes difficult to summarise. “Flaubert’s Parrot” is a refined intellectual exploit, which gives the reader pleasure of the same kind.

The work of the German Patrick Suskind shot to fame with his first book “Perfume”. Taking a simple argument of great originality, it relates how a kind of monstrous human, who has the capacity of smell to such an astonishing degree that he can distinguish between all the smells given off by every living thing on earth, has, nevertheless, a major defect: he cannot give off any smell himself. This apprentice to a sorcerer, who works with perfume, dedicates all his powers to finding out the secret of a human’s smell. The story, a powerful and irreducible work of fiction, is set in the sixteenth century and covers most of the Europe of those times. Without a doubt, Suskind has constructed an interesting and original novel, a literary challenge raised to perfection, by bringing a person and an idea together dealing with the same theme for two hundred pages. The novel is easy to read and brings the pleasure of constant discovery and astonishment.

The three novels we have mentioned have one thing in common: the three are practically literary exercises, undoubtedly very neat, but comply with their objectives: they are anchored firmly in conventional fiction.

Because of that, therefore, can we confirm that narrative qualities are in the process of being revalued? It is difficult to state that nothing is happening in this field. However it is a fact that European editors have begun to dust off old authors whose strength lies exactly in their narrative skills. It is as if the critics and the readers alike are rediscovering writers like the Austrian Joseph Roth, the North American Djuna Barnes and the Englishman Wilkie Collins, among others. History had passed them by when the editors, sensing the winds of the times, brought them to the fore again. Does this shifting of literary tastes check the theory of a crisis in literature?

There is not just one answer. As we have said before, literature today offers numerous and diverse answers to the problem of the novel without necessarily being contradictory. This brief revision of authors who are worth the attention of readers today shows that. It would appear in any case that European fiction, which historically has decided the destiny of the novel, and the works which are being produced on the peripheries of the Continent, are going in different directions. While the first has rescued the tradition of “telling a story”, the latter has discovered its strength in relating its own history. □