

SOME NOTES ON THE CHARACTER OF THE AMERICAN HERO, OF THE AMERICAN NOVEL, AND THE NOVEL IN GENERAL

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1. Demands of Heroism and of Salvation

Unlike any other national literature, American literary tradition committed itself from the onset to the creation of a national voice. This specific purposefulness still survives in some traces that have become embedded in its narrative art. The degree to which the *cultural* or moral construction of the nation still runs as the underlying motive to contemporary novelistic art could be widely discussed; however, some aesthetical motives have become fossilized as imprints on its literary landscape, whether the monstrous ideological structures that so shaped it from its Puritanical origins have died or not. These features may well have survived as hollow fossils, petrified and beautiful while their living nucleus has already dissolved in air. Just like the whole bulk of the animal participates in its stone imprint, the force of the original beings whose footsteps shaped America from the depths of the Atlantic Ocean, still weighs on the traditional aesthetics, struggling to jump into content, from form.

Thus, the American author is still dreaming the Puritans' dream of wakefulness, but he ignores the reality to which he can relate his dream. He will not find it, for even the Pilgrim Fathers lacked it; they suffered from a *surplus self* that made space for the dream to intrude on their lives as if it were something real. Their personal identity was then attached to a transcendental mission that escaped their individuality, that went beyond them, such as was the making of

history and a nation, or obeying the mandates of their Christian God; and it would also trigger doubt, for their dream would simultaneously share its space with nightmare, with the conception of an evil God. The excess of self, ambition, strength, personality or ego broke the balance of forces that were keeping them at their European home, and had its physical correlation in the journey; it prevailed over a home-loving inertia and set them on the move.

The formation of the American narrator should be analyzed, therefore, within this wider context of the building up of the American individual, for the former had to stand up to its more general demands. By investigating these we soon discover that they were shaped in the fashion of a hero — of an American hero —, such as, for example, Captain John Smith's vision of life was. This can also be applied to the rendition of the Pilgrim individual, in accordance with their surplus self. Captain John Smith's claim, therefore, that moving to New England colonies was the only life worth living — moreover, that any other life was no life at all: «who would live at home idly (or think in himself any worth to live) only to eat, drink, and sleep, and so die?» — participates in the same spirit that shaped the original standpoint of the traditional narrator in American literature, since the latter makes himself present, still today, inside the American novel as if he did not have his status already assured, as if, were he not to appear so fully in the narrative by embodying both a moral and a voice, his identity and self would just dissolve into nothingness.

From this, we can already begin to guess that the anatomy of his heroism was a comprehensive one; indeed its halo had to shine through all the lenses of a complex life. Though the profile of the American hero did not coincide exactly with that of the artist or the narrator, he, undoubtedly, had to possess artistic gifts also. Insofar as he had to have his own defined voice, eloquence had a place among his qualities, as well as the ability, as a storyteller, to relate his individual experience to the sphere of the universal one, embodied in an audience.

But even more essential so as to delineate the characteristics of the American hero and narrator is to understand that these are not aesthetical-artistic issues, but are rather integrated within a wider problem in which the very self of the writer is at stake. The demands of the American individual also concern him privately. Because of this, the relationship between the American writer and his narrative voice, and consequently the link with his main character the hero, is a special one. It is not clear to what extent the American author is portraying himself as a hero in his presenting his main character. At least once in American history, the common identity between the writer and his hero was extremely significant: in conversion narratives, for instance, the values acknowledged by the character speaking were those of the writer himself, and it was in the latter's interest that they were so, since the issue at question was no other than after-life salvation. The long tradition of autobiographical writings that would stem from this genre still enforced a parallelism between the living writer and the fictional character; in doing so both found justification, the narrative as well as the life of the writer, since one became the best advocate of the other.

What we find in heroism is precisely the secular transformation of these mechanisms of religious salvation, since the values the hero embodies are in accordance with whatever salvation means for him. The specific feature we find at the foundations of Puritan America, however, lies in that religious salvation did not connect exclusively with an after-life sphere. The fact that Calvinism conceived of a direct relation —however indefinite, for there was a parallel belief in predestination— that extended between the godly and the earthly realms; the fact that enjoying success during one's lifetime (which took into account, particularly, bare *economic* attainment) was itself a proof of afterlife success; all this allows us to speak of secular heroism as such, with implications of social recognition and merit.

2. Empathy's Emergence and Aesthetic Implications — Mysticism — Resolution of the Surplus Self

The values that constituted the American individual, however, underwent a transformation in the 19th century, at the end of which he appeared converted into the full democratic hero. Drawing from the enlightened writings of the eighteenth century, Emerson, and especially Whitman, confirmed empathy as the main principle of the new democratic American self, bringing thus a shift in its constitution that would become instrumental in the development of American art in general, and literary art in particular. Just as the scope of the American individual's experience was then widened and enriched, in rendering its literary counterpart the American novel enjoyed a parallel widening of its own aesthetical possibilities to such an extent that the genre has not yet, today, become fully aware of them.

This can only be explained from empathy's quintessential feature. If, from an aesthetic point of view, empathy consists in the ability and the will to experience beauty in everything, from a moral point of view it could be defined as the ability and desire to sympathise with other human beings. But even more determinant for our issue is to notice how aesthetics, morality and politics (that is, beauty, virtue and right) come together in empathy and intermingle to the point of becoming a single and unique approach to life. Above all, empathy implicates a widening of what variety of reality (and, as we shall see, of imagination) the human being can take in.

Thus, unlike a Calvinistic creativity —which, we could say, tends to materialize in the economic management of reality—, empathy's creativity finds its place within the boundaries of the individual's internal experience; therefore, it needs not manifest itself in the form of an action whereby the individual's outward negotiation of reality is put forward. If, on the contrary, we were to express empathy's mechanisms in economic terms, we should describe it as a relationship where the demands for rational-instrumental distribution have dissolved. For the power of empathetic hero lies precisely in that he is able to exercise his

own inner subjectivity in order to apprehend all the beauty the world is to offer. In this attempt to measure up to the richness of reality's offerings, he undergoes a constant and straining evolution of his subjectivity, always attuned to the rhythm of the changing reality. In some way, this inner-evolution is self-induced, for he gives himself no moment of internal rest, no pause. Paradoxically however, this inner convulsion unfolds while the empathetic hero is, in a way, taking a pleasant, aimless stroll. His soul is in constant action, parallel to the movement of his eyes, while his feet are walking slowly. Such aimlessness is the token of his freedom, since the individual is only free once he can loose himself to the eventful forces of life and chance, certain of the fact that, no matter where these two travel companions shall take him, he will feel the same degree of happiness. For the empathetic individual, happiness is indivisible from the exercise of sympathy.

As said above, this image of a wandering soul, strolling aimlessly through the sphere of reality, contrasts radically with the Calvinist outlook; the latter involved both an aim (an underlying, fixed destiny that may or may not lead to salvation) and the duty, as Max Weber called it, to transform and organize the depraved world of reality through active and rational management, the only proof of their moral superiority. However, the essential factor in this distinction is that, unlike empathy's creativity, Calvinism's economics lacks the aesthetical dimension that it has sacrificed in favour of an economic or productive one. Definitely, it allowed no space for an aesthetical or emotional linkage with the world such as empathy is, given the fact it believed in each thing having its destiny fixed and in there being no point in clinging to this transient and corrupt world. Such idea lies at the basis of the Puritan individual having to «love the world with "weaned affections"», having to «be completely in it, but not of it», as Perry Miller acutely expressed it in one of his seminal works¹. However, we could trace a connection between these two economic or experiential outlooks on reality through an essential feature of Calvinism stemming, precisely, from its aforementioned detachment from the world: its respect for the world's variety. Such characteristic may be the one seed the empathetic individual grew out of, the trait maximized in the formation of the empathetic experience.

In this manner, only empathy could solve the original problem of the Pilgrim's surplus self. It has already been disentangled in Walt Whitman's *democratic* or empathetic hero. Until then, as previously explained, an excess of what one could call ego, personality or even subjectivity became attached to the imperious realization of a transcendent dream, to that great action that should match the individual's inner power. They gave to it the name of mission, and efforts and actions were devoted to it with unflagging faith. Now we shall occupy ourselves in analyzing how the Whitmanesque hero, on the contrary, devoted his surplus subjectivity in adopting the structure of mysticism and its corresponding dissolution of any instrumental, profit-oriented economic relationship with the world.

¹ P. Miller, *The New England Mind. The Seventeenth Century*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1965, p. 42.

Having taken, thus, the concept *surplus self* from Marx's economic terminology *surplus value* —«the amount by which the value of the product exceeds the value of its constituent elements»—, and having given it a moral or spiritual turn, it seems appropriate to resort to Max Weber's economical analysis of religion, now that we are about to explain the strategy whereby it was resolved. When the German sociologist, in his *Essays on Sociology*, comes to explore the relationship between the religious and the economical spheres, mysticism is presented together with the Puritan ethics as the two «constituent avenue[s] by which the tension between economics and religion has been escaped. This way»², he continues to say,

[...] is represented quite purely in the mystic's «benevolence», which does not at all enquire into the man to whom and for whom it sacrifices. Ultimately, mysticism is not interested in his person. Once and for all, the benevolent mystic gives his shirt when he is asked for his coat, by anybody who accidentally happens to come his way —and merely because he happens to come his way. Mysticism is a unique escape from this world in the form of an objectless devotion to anybody, not for man's sake but purely for devotion's sake, or, in Baudelaire's words, for the sake of «the soul's sacred prostitution»³.

Weber's contrast between Puritan capitalist ethics and the ethics of mysticism becomes relevant to the American specificity of this essay. In American culture, Emerson's philosophical system may stand as the transitory space between Calvinist doctrines, still preoccupied with the issue of salvation and election, and a universalistic outlook accomplished through empathy. In Emerson's outlook, the aesthetic realm has already attained a recognized space inside man's life; beauty is regarded as a value inside reality, and its contemplation is held as

² M. Weber, *Selections from Essays in Sociology, on Great Works of the Western World*, 58, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., Madrid, 1993, p. 217.

³ This paragraph allows us to relate our analysis of the modern American hero with the writings of pseudo-Marxist German critic Walter Benjamin, who, through his analysis of the European 19th century, described the emergence of a new urban species, such as the *flâneur*. Curiously enough, Benjamin's analysis also drew on Baudelaire's poetry, making constant and explicit reference to his soul's sacred prostitution, which Weber associated to that of the mystic, and Benjamin passed on to the *flâneur*. At present, and for the sake of the essay's later implications, a special feature of Benjamin's diagnosis of the 9th European, urban society, must be commented on and introduced. The emergence of city-types such as the *flâneur*, the collector, the dandy and the snob, all of which start to swarm the city centres by the middle of the 19th century, is inseparable from, and incomprehensible without, a general tendency in the modes of perception that is «free[ing] things» in general, and commodities in particular, «from the drudgery of being useful». The city's streets and the interior of the houses, together with the objects that dwell in them, are being thus «transfigured», and emerging qualities such as bare «newness», whose specificity is starting to be highly esteemed, or the «connoisseur value» that the collector projects upon things «by taking possession of them», are gradually replacing the use-value of things. See his essay «Paris, The Capital of the Nineteenth Century» in W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings 1935-1938*, III, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, 2002, pp. 32-50.

a possibility of salvation (meaning the possibility of fulfilling a life which was worth living), both for men and for the natural world. Whitman's empathetic hero, however, is already willing to see beauty in everything, destiny in chance and salvation in the realization of every individual life.

There are differences between Whitman's hero and the mystic, however, and these focus especially in the degree to which the former is willing—or better, unwilling—to «give his shirt when he is asked for his coat», as Max Weber expresses it. Empathy does not entail the unconditional or devotional surrender of the soul's element to the object of desire, so accentuated in the mystic, for finally empathy is no religious stance. The similarities between the two refer, rather, to the degree of benevolence that, indeed, both display towards what qualities they demand in an object, person or being before they allow it to intrude their souls. Such demands are nowhere to be found. The common process that underlies both approaches has to do with the fact that the inner realm of personal experience controls completely the individual's relationship with reality: while the mystic gives himself entirely to whoever asks for him, the Whitmanesque hero welcomes, in a similar way, whatever chance may bring him during his stroll along the *open road*—to use the title of one of Whitman's poems. Everything and everyone deserved being called out, spoken, named. That is to say, enter a poem.

And by referring to a poetical or a linguistic exercise, the essential difference between the prostitution of the mystic's and the empathetic's soul has been disclosed at another level. As a religious approach, mysticism's essential feature consists in the spiritual voiding of his self onto the object. Insofar as empathy relates to no religious stance, but rather to a moral, political, aesthetical phenomenon, we can understand how the figure of the individual is still central to it. Thus, it calls for an autonomous, wholesome soul on the part of the artist or the citizen, whose main virtue is not to become one with the object, but to allow it to participate in his art, his conception of the world or in his moral core. Benevolence has a bearing on the choice of the object, but does not involve, in any case, that he should forgo his voice. This voice is the writer's, which the mystic—if we keep ourselves within the bounds of Weber's definition—cannot and does not presume to have.

In any case, the aesthetical, moral and emotional exercise (or soul training) that both the mystic and the empathetic man must perform is of an astonishing potency. Walter Benjamin cleverly identified how the sacred prostitution of the *flâneur's* soul—which we must not forget, was realized in Baudelaire as the soul of the urban poet—, finally paralleled itself to the soul we must presume hidden in any object in the marketplace: «If goods were to have a soul», he says, «such a one as Marx sometimes speaks of in jest, then it would be the most delicate one to be found in souls' kingdom, for she would have to see in anyone the one buyer to whose hands and house she wishes to adjust herself»⁴.

⁴ W. Benjamin, «El *flâneur*», in *Poesía y capitalismo. Iluminaciones*, II, Taurus, Madrid, 1980, p. 71. The fragment hereby extracted is my own translation.

The figure of the prostitute emerges here as an emblem which, in its duality, bears the ambiguity of modernity: she is a «seller and sold in one»⁵. And indeed, many are the times when in *Song of Myself* Whitmans's heroic voice presents itself as a bearer of gifts. And other times he seems to be literally raped, as in section 28 of the poem:

On all sides prurient provokers stiffening my limbs,
Straining the udder of my heart for its withheld drip,
Behaving licentious toward me, taking no denial,
Depriving me of my best as for a purpose,
Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist

[...]

No consideration, no regard for my draining strength or my anger,
Fetching the rest of the herd around to enjoy them a while.

For the quest for the soul of the inorganic object demands that all the potency of subjectivity be brought into play. Mystic and emphatic man must force their souls to embrace the whole reality, to build up a moral, political and aesthetical system in which the changing diversity of the world can find its place.

And it is here and now, in this outburst of energy devoted to the permanent transformation of the inward sphere, when —as we have said— the surplus self is used up and the energy equation finally balanced. Not in the fulfilment of a mission, in the quest of the New Jerusalem, in the construction of new country or in the fighting of a war. The original disequilibrium of the Pilgrim Fathers involved the psychic or spiritual sphere, and it could only be overcome by carrying out a returning voyage to the same inner realm; and once there, by effecting a reorientation of the psychic energy. Once the human individual allows reality to enter these dynamics via, for example, the need to transform the world through action; once he conditions his happiness to making a dream come true, to fulfilling a mission... the obsessive mechanics of omnipotence, and its paranoid counterpoint, are triggered. Empathy, on the contrary, represents at least the effort to act continuously upon oneself before doing so upon the world.

3. An Art of Living and Writing

Empathy's dynamics can be related to the processes that underlie the artistic dimension to such an extent that the features that define the emphatic hero, as described two paragraphs above, could be transferred onto a definition of the narrator and the writer. Because once empathy permeated through the skin of the American hero and got hold of his core, it would necessarily pervade the literary sphere, and thus present itself in the literary trio consisting of the literary

⁵ W. Benjamin, «Paris, The Capital of the Nineteenth Century», p. 40.

hero, narrator and author. Though at different levels, the same empathy runs through each of them: it is active in the writer that opens up his mind in an attempt to assimilate what fraction of reality he will translate, later, into his writing. But it is also present in the emotional and intellectual bias he exercises upon himself when he develops the inner realm of the different characters, each a different apprehension of reality, even a different reality altogether.

Thus, the American hero —commonly the narrator himself, though others not— will be immersed in the search for new and still unexplored moral possibilities; he will commonly partake in a different set of values from those that seem to prevail in the environment around him. In the search for his own personal salvation, he no longer advances through the path Calvinism followed, nor looks for the same traces in the soil as Calvinism once did, but strolls through a different world altogether. His own idea of salvation takes after his empathetic values; hence, it is unrelated to any materialistic or economic standard that must be achieved. His individual history does not need to go from rags to riches, nor must his story end precisely at the moment in life he has established himself comfortably in society, for his evolution is never complete. His real victory consists, rather, in the ability to feel and experience an emotion for those characters, landscapes and reality he is coming across.

Furthermore, this moral approach will sometimes earn him the actual, *physical* salvation inside a novel. Nick Carraway and Ishmael's survival, for example —both of whom could incarnate the empathetic hero in contrast to Jay Gatsby and Ahab—, is indeed indistinguishable from their upholding the narrative voices. Both issues owe to the same empathetic quality, which manifests itself in the ability to draw one's sensibility up to the times. For the instant man ceases to make the effort of appreciating beauty as it is offered to him in the present, he is living inside a dream, and is doomed to perdition in the search for a false salvation. The mystic was able to do so, and was in constant transformation. The *flâneur* did so too, as he met new faces in the advancing crowd that thrust him forward; but Ahab and Gatsby live in the past of platonic love and of revenge, and they employ themselves thoroughly in the search for a past aesthetics, in the reproduction of the instant when they lost part of themselves. Carraway and Ishmael also lose part of themselves during life's journey, and are aware that they are doing so; but they also know that every new instant means something to win. Finally, their sensitiveness to the present allows them, thus, to narrate the story; they are survivors because time respects them as they respect time, and the same occurs with their relationships with the characters that people these novels. They also open to them and in doing so enable them to tell the story⁶.

⁶ In some way, *The Great Gatsby* shines with a special conscience of the opposition the book is presenting. Aware of the fact it is presenting the death of a myth, the novel ranges back to the tradition that begot it. In this way, the advice of the protagonist's father, which opens the novel, already implies its bereavement: «Whenever you feel like criticising anyone [...] just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had». If America is no

As regards the development of the work of art, empathy is concomitant with finding or experiencing beauty, and this is the only justification for something entering a novel. The American hero's empathy is that of the author for he has inherited the latter's openness to reality — the same sympathy the writer shows for the rest of the characters and for the hero himself. By participating in the author's qualities, the hero transcends the realm of the character opening thus the possibility that any character be the narrator of the story. This is an extremely Emersonian statement, and it extends the democratic principle to the novelistic context. It serves as an explanation for the roles of hero and narrator coinciding in so many cases. Indeed, the Emersonian, Whitmanesque hero enjoys his life with the freedom of him who is writing a novel, for his own integrity takes part of it, and is never jeopardized.

4. Other Transitions: from Reading to Writing, Interpretation to Narration, Allegory to Symbolism — The Mystic's Threshold — The Entry into Imagination

As we come to comprehend the development undergone by the American hero and narrator through empathy, we can relate it to other transitions. A hero who lives his life as if he were writing a novel, as has been said above, differs from *that* hero who lived it as if he were reading one, in the same degree as the empathetic individual differs from the mystic. Analysed independently, the latter pair can be thought of as symbols for the best possible writer and reader, respectively. The essential factor determining both distinctions is no other than the empathetic individual's ability not only to share the mystic's benevolence in his contact with the existing world (and thus, become, too, a perfect reader), but to extend it onto the realm of his own imagination. His exercise of acceptance involves imagination as well as of reality: finally, empathy is but an opening or a widening of what possibilities of beauty the human mind can find in his imagination; morality and politics will only amount to that in a novel. Only through empathy can the individual accomplish the miraculous construction of a fictitious, imaginary universe; a world of aesthetics vast and potent enough to bear a story. Only then will the writer evolve from the reader's chrysalis, the storyteller leave behind the hindering carcass of the interpreter⁷.

longer the land of equal opportunities, it lies on the backs of every single individual to give the same opportunities to all the people in this world to gain his or her sympathy. This is the new mission of the American hero.

⁷ The transition from interpretation to narration could be partly, though not completely connected with that other dichotomy which discriminates between allegory and symbol. American literary critic F. O. Matthiessen, in his classic work *American Renaissance, Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford University Press, London, Oxford, New York, 1968), finds the distinction crucial in separating between *The Faerie Queene*, *Mardi* and *The Marble Faun*, on the one hand, and *The Divine Comedy*, *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Moby Dick*, on the other

In principle, the interpreter activates imagination's machinery in order to force a determined significance upon the worldly object, whose meaning partakes of God. However, in the case of the mystic, the degree to which God does really participate in the phenomenon of devotion, as signified by Weber, is difficult to comprehend. Mysticism may be conceived of as the last level of interpretation, but the truth is that it is already at the threshold of extricating God from its understanding of the world, if it has not done so already. Though the concept of devotion still implies carrying out the process under the name of God (He is, ultimately, the holder of the meaning), in the end, reality is taken in just as it is. The mystic-reader thrusts imagination between himself and the object, but only to read the latter just as it is, for God partakes in it. The mystic becomes, in this sense, the perfect reader for he employs imagination in finding reasons why he should take joy in the world —book, but without changing it. Thus, his approach involves a harmonious reconciliation between imagination and reality, and it does so because there is no meaning involved, neither in God nor in reality. Since he does not care about the object, the mystic's approach to reality does not consist in devotion for devotion's sake, but rather in imagination for imagination's sake alone. Imagination must be at the base of his devotion; at the depths of the process, it has already totalized the process and become the only moving force.

Interpretation and narration are concepts that should stand, therefore, for different *modes of perception*, to use Walter Benjamin's term. Moreover, they can be pictured within a temporal frame or process, hence the choice of *transition* to explain the change involved from one to the other. The dichotomy should also be implanted in the context of the surplus self, with the latter being the energetic supply that underlies the transformation. What separates the Puritan vision of the world as a heap of God's traces that remit through interpretation to His volition and final providence; that is to say, what separates Benjamin Franklin's vision of society as a series of keys that, interpreted, will bring out the desired tune, society being but a straightforward puzzle one could easily solve by getting to know its rules, a closed system of meaning one could control, use and take advantage of—; what separates, in conclusion, a Puritan vision of the world from one dominated by empathy, is, precisely, that imagination has subverted the interpretative dynamics in which imagination itself was taking part. It reproduces the movement whereby a character appropriated the narrative voice to create his own world, his own novel. And it is in some way similar to the logics Marx diagnosed in capitalism, which carried inside the seeds of its own abolition. The same logic is also at the base of Walter Benjamin's objects that have lost their use value, and underlies the transition that extends from an allegorical

«with *The Scarlet Letter* somewhere between the two groups» (p. 249). As he did, I quote Huizinga's definition for both: «Symbolism expresses a mysterious connection between two ideas, allegory gives a visible form to the conception of such connection [...]. Allegory aids symbolic thought to express itself, but endangers it at the same time by substituting a figure for a living idea».

structure of meaning to the mystery of the symbol⁸, whose darkness is but chromatic reflection of imagination's tangled web of continuous excess, conceptual representation of the subversive dynamics of the surplus self, which sabotages meaning. The symbol anchors nowhere since the ship of imagination never rests. Like the empathetic man's soul, it is always at exerting itself, its development is never complete.

And it is at this point that the novel as a genre adopts the excessive dynamism of narration, once imagination takes over the reins of action in its hands. A specific kind of imagination associates most naturally with actions and events, and such is the case of empathetic imagination when, in its extreme implication, it reveals itself as aesthetically preoccupied with the *bare materiality* of the world, with things per se. At this point, the actions in a novel consist solely of imagination's aesthetical adventure, in an empathetic stroll where she has to pay no heed to other meaning structures, nor justify her advance in relation to them. The novel is then able to embody Whitman's *old cause*, to expose the freedom of pure action without plot — just like a dream, or the universe.

5. Prospective Value — Kafka — Amerika — Thomas Pynchon...

When Marx undertook his analysis of the capitalistic mode of production, that mode was in its infancy. Marx adopted an approach which gave his investigations prognostic value. Going back to the basic conditions of capitalist production, he presented them in a way which showed what could be expected of capitalism in the future. What could be expected, it emerged, was not only an increasingly harsh exploitation of the proletariat but, ultimately, the creation of conditions which would make it possible for capitalism to abolish itself.

Since the transformation of the superstructure proceeds far more slowly than that at the base, it has taken more than half a century for the change in the conditions of production to be manifested in all areas of culture. How this process has affected culture can only now be assessed, and these assessments must meet certain prognostic requirements. They do not, however, call for theses on the art of the proletariat after its seizure of power, and still less for any on the art of classless society. They call for

⁸ Two clear examples are to be found in what are, possibly, the most important American literary works of the 19th century, *Leaves of Grass* and *Moby Dick*. In section six of the poem, Whitman's voice responds to the children's question «What is the grass?» and he offers various possibilities of interpretation; and in giving all of them, by presenting all the analogies the grass brings to his mind, the context of interpretation dissolves in the poem by the very excess of its possibilities. Likewise, Melville's *Whale*, its whiteness, the *Pequod*, the Captain Ahab's madness and monomaniac struggle, together with nearly every single object the narrator draws attention to, are all motives propelled forward towards mystery, on the crest of the overflow waves of imagination.

theses defining the tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production⁹.

Now we become aware of how, in its attempt to analyze the characteristics of the American hero and narrator through history, this essay has presented a future state or possibility. The scheme of the empathetic novel and its corresponding hero as it has finally been described has not been yet embodied. Indeed, some of its defining features salute us from different places of the American tradition, as if the hero's different limbs had been scattered throughout; for an instant, our eyes and his shine with the glow of recognition amid a crowd of novels. Some present us the hero in its infant state, and take him by the hand; others accompany him in his difficult adolescence, and many are the cases when his early and later manhood is described. But all of them—even Walt Whitman's heroic representation, which despite not being a novel, possibly came closest to actualizing the empathetic ideal—, lag behind the model here proposed.

This fact does not cancel, however, the following truth: the possibilities of empathy contain the forthcoming possibilities of the novel. As we have seen above, the dynamics of empathy lead to the entanglement of reality and imagination, since the empathetic individual makes the latter responsible for creating an aesthetical system where the surrounding world can find a place. Reality's apprehension, thus, necessarily involves the empowerment of imagination, and the artist's ultimate wish—insofar as it involves the complete satisfaction and of his creative constitution— would be to approach reality and the imaginary world through the same eyes. The process advances, therefore, towards the enrichment of the individual's life experience as a whole, as we saw in the mystic, since real and unreal possibilities become accepted. The constitutive structure of a surplus self results here in an assimilation of reality by imagination in which reality itself is transcended, but in its own name and out of a desire of the individual to respect it.

Thus, just as the empathetic artist allows reality to come inside him, he will also let his own imagination run free. And it may well occur that this journey ends up in a world completely different from reality, in a fictional construction where the latter is nowhere to be found, where even the most basic elements that may link it with reality, such as can be the laws of physics, have vanished. Indeed, in this case, Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy just melts away. Men and woman may then fly and leap outlandishly, grow or shrink to preposterous sizes, speak with animals, age instantly... and yet, this would imply no evasion or negation of reality, not necessarily. Nor would it be magic, which involves only those particular instances where unreality is accepted in the general structure of reality. No. It would rather consist in developing a different world altogether, which construction denotes an active soul.

⁹ W. Benjamin, «The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version», in *Selected Writings, 1935-1938*, III, p. 101.

The name of Kafka arises at this point of the essay as a vital figure in analysis of empathetic imagination. Accordingly, it does so as a groundbreaking figure in this tradition, as he who developed an aesthetics of unreality in a world that advanced by its own laws. Even the rhythm in which Kafka narrates events contributes to enfold them in a specific rareness; the logic of space, time and causality that governs the behaviour of the characters seems to proceed through secret passages, whose mystery persists though its connections be closed. However, the strangeness of his fictitious world would not imply, again, a contradiction with a desire to experience reality aesthetically, morally, politically, and thus accept it. On the contrary, it would stand as a token of empathy on his part —the same empathy that his heroes share. For they are shaped in the manner of this universe, as individuals that tolerate this intermediary world that is somewhere, or nowhere, between dream and reality. The narrator simply follows the dictates of Kafka's personal imagination and develops an aesthetics of unreality that the heroes accept, obey and adopt. According to the characters never question what strangeness —inherent in that world— they come across. If they did otherwise, the narratives would simply not evolve. Kafka's novels consist in an unending series of actions narrated either by the characters' or the narrative voice. In fear that the story dissolves into irony, none of them allow themselves to laugh.

In the case of the Czech author, the link plotted early in the essay between the writer, the hero and the fictional world is represented by their names containing the letter «k». This curious game achieved its perfect completion the moment Kafka came up with the suitable realm for him to place his personal aesthetic and this occurred in no other than his novel *Amerika*. By adopting this mysterious «k», the nation Whitman sang became the fictional space of strangeness, unreality and imagination, but also the space of empathy —all of which it had always been. The bare fact that Kafka wrote a novel called *Amerika* set in the United States no longer appears as a coincidence but rather as a touchstone for interpretation. This view is reinforced by the content of the novel itself, which depicts the very transition explained in this essay.

Admittedly written in the manner of David Copperfield, *Amerika* covers the journey of a German youth just arrived in the United States in his search for fortune. By the end of his wanderings, however, Karl Roseman —so is his name— registers in *The Great Theatre of Oklahoma* (notice the «k»), the greatest theatre in the world, the wealthiest, the most powerful, a symbol of the United States. And in this decision, as in Carraway returning west, there is a change involved. Indeed, the Kafkaesque hero enlists in this theatre only as a means to get a job, but the description the narrator carries out of this specific theatre conveys other implications. It is no coincidence that the institution shall accept every single person who asks for a job in it, men, women and children of all ages; that the roles assigned to them consist precisely in being just who they are, and behaving as such. In his essay on Kafka, *On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death*, Walter Benjamin describes how

[...] everybody is hired by the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma. What the standards for admission are cannot be determined. Dramatic talent, the most obvious criterion, seems to be of no importance. But this can be expressed in another way: all that is expected of the applicants is the ability to play themselves¹⁰.

One cannot even be sure as to whether the people actually enter the company as actors or not; nor is it made clear that the company is really a theatre, or if there is any sort of payment involved, and of what kind. What we know for sure is that every single applicant is accepted, and that once the recruitment has ended, the new *workers* are invited to a huge banquet before they get on the train bound to Oklahoma. These, though, are details of no importance. The essential point is that there are infinite cabins for the people to register in, matching everyone's profile. Furthermore, one does not need to tell the truth when he or she gives the personal and professional details asked for, since the theatre will accept everyone with his or her illusions, fears, insecurities and needs to dream or lie (their role inside the theatre, in this case, will simply be that of persons who need to dream and lie). The remarkable characteristic of this institution lies in the fact that it has assimilated the mystic's dynamics and translated it into the professional context of economy. We had heard several times on earlier pages how characters referred constantly to the difficulties they were finding when they tried to get a job; now we see how the two men at the theatre's contracting office embrace the mystic's outlook, make it their own, and are ready to contract everyone.

The same occurs with the theatre's aesthetics, which, according to Walter Benjamin's interpretation, corresponds exactly with that of reality. Indeed, the fictitious world of the theatre is reality itself, and this is so because the work of art that the Great Theatre of Oklahoma is developing is so vast and potent that it aims at integrating the whole existing world, the whole reality. Does it sound as a policy of *imperialism*? Except for one detail: we must bring into awareness how, in doing so, however, the real world remains unchanged: employees only have to be themselves; they are bought or hired but at the same time asked to be just who they are, or pretend to be. Walter Benjamin claims that in being offered the possibility of fulfilling an exercise of imitation whose object is just themselves, these people have found their final shelter and salvation¹¹. On the same line, we could interpret they are bought to be *preserved*. This abstract scheme, which may be related with Benjamin's analysis of collectorship, also connects with the Gnostic vision of the present God as He who, literally *bought* the world to an earlier and altogether different, mischievous god. But, moreover, it encloses the aims of empathy as we have already described it:

¹⁰ W. Benjamin, «Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death», in *Selected Writings 1931-34*, II, part. 2005, p. 804.

¹¹ W. Benjamin, *loc. cit.*

Kafka's United States have finally allowed mysticism to take over their Catholic inheritance or fortune; at this point, money has become a valid mediator between the individual and reality, just like empathetic imagination, insofar as it is a way to apprehend the world which does not entail changing it in turn.

We see, therefore, how the United States that appear in Kafka's novels become a fictional space that no longer participates in the logics and aesthetics of reality, for they have their own. This also occurs in the work of another writer who may owe much to the Czech author. Indeed, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is in some ways a Kafkesque novel: like many of the latter's works, it only opens up once the series of events that will determine the life of the hero have already occurred. Because of this, the fact that Oedipa Maas receives the letter appointing her executrix of a will might well be regarded as a punishment or condemnation, for she must bring order inside a world that has already been formed long ago before she came into it. Also, when she recalls the phone-call she received from the deceased tycoon Pierce Inverarity (who, like the Great Theatre of Oklahoma, seems to have taken over the whole reality), she remembers hearing him use many different voices before the one she recognized —«his Lamont Cranston voice»—, just like K, the protagonist in *The Castle*, heard myriads of different voices on the phone in his attempt to speak to the higher instances of the castle; which voices, at the same time, gave shape to a single voice.

As happens in Kafka's novels to some extent, Pynchon's works also advance towards the achievement of a novelistic art that consists in pure action, utterance, in a succession of events pushed by imagination. Oedipa's wanderings through San Francisco's nightlife in chapter five possibly contain the climax of these aesthetics inside this novel; however, the truth is that all through *The Crying of Lot 49* Oedipa Maas is driven from one place to another, advancing along Californian roads, in a journey that is elliptical both in time and space and without history. What she sees in each of the places she stops, what she hears from the mouths she comes across, are only more events, which Pynchon's imagination accumulates. The moments she is allowed to take a pause, which normally occur between her travels, she can only express her inability to comprehend. Oedipa is being witness not so much to the construction of a plot as to the materialization of an entire world; thus, her actions consist solely in encountering it. Her heroism deals with empathy alone, not with the making of sense or coming up with meaning. In narrating actions, she describes a world. At the end of the novel, the crying of lot forty-nine remains untold because the imagination that has shaped the book has exceeded the structure of a plot, and by the last page, world and plot cannot be equated.

Another feature that enables us to establish a link between Kafka and post-modern, American writer consists in that the bureaucratic, judicial-structure that Kafka presents in his novels —symbols for an evasive and authoritarian power inside which characters get lost— would be apt to generate in his characters the same phenomena of conspiracy and paranoia that travel

Pynchon's novels. The fact that Kafka never implies such possibility contains the basic difference between them. Kafka's vision of the world did not pivot around the distinction between imagination and reality, since his understanding of salvation, unlike Puritanical America's, was compatible with madness. Should we recall Benjamin's «Letter to Gershom Scholem», where one may read: «Of this much Kafka was sure: first, that to help, one must be a fool; and second, that only a fool's help is real help»¹². This is the reason why, while Kafka's narratives lack laughter, Pynchon's already include crying. The latter's heroes have been said to remain at the level of caricature, but they are further more humanized than Kafka's, which—as Walter Benjamin said in his essay on the Czech writer—take after Chinese conception of the sage as the man who exists «without character»¹³. Indeed, Pynchon's titanic imagination develops an aesthetics of unreality (which he associates with the unofficial spheres of society, as we shall see); furthermore, his heroes are open to it, as is Oedipa Maas, but the problem is that Pynchon's characters cannot avoid doubting the actuality of what reality they are experiencing. The narrator's development of an aesthetics of unreality, therefore—such as Slothrop's journey along the sewage, or Oedipa's unforgettable encounter with the children in nightclothes in Golden Gate Park—is always mediated by the possibility of hallucination. In Thomas Pynchon's fictional world belief and disbelief, truth and falsity, paranoia or the reality principle are still relevant. Maybe it is so because it is still relevant in ours.

Indeed, Pynchon has found the Puritans' paranoid frame of mind—obsessed as it was with the real essence of the providential God themselves had created—most appropriate to reflect on the experience of an individual citizen in contemporary society. We have said that his novels can and will not impose a plot structure on the world he presents, and this seems to be his claim for the United States. It also holds for his idea of civilization. The fact that his novels attach an aesthetics of unreality to the unofficial spheres of society may convey a harsh criticism against a system of civilization where power structures can mediate the individual's perception of *reality*, and make it coincide with the limited, *plotted*, manipulated, official vision of the world. After reading through Oedipa's odyssey through San Francisco, one cannot avoid relating the mechanisms of empathetic imagination to those of social and political acceptance as they are involved in the United States; to the strategy, that is to say, whereby the infinitely complex social variety that exists in its society—ranging through all the thinkable adjectives—can become integrated and be accepted by every single one of its citizens, and by society as a whole.

Thomas Pynchon's drawing on the Puritan frame of mind leads us to the following scenario: It seems as if, immediately after Walt Whitman's death, simultaneous with the very closing of his eyes, the Puritan imaginary construction that he and Emerson had helped dissolve, found a perfect substitute in the

¹² W. Benjamin, «Letter to Gershom Scholem», in *Selected Writings 1935-1938*, III, p. 327.

¹³ W. Benjamin, *loc. cit.*, p. 801.

power structure of emerging Capitalism, whereby the object of the Puritan paranoid distress became embodied, then, in something real. Face to face with this possibility, one must question whether the years, the scarce seventy years that formed Walt Whitman's lifetime, which spanned almost until the end of the century, constitute really the only moment in American history when the individual was allowed to be free; free from God, free from the Devil or from whatever hides behind a system of civilization. Or if, on the contrary, this contrast in the general approach to the world must be explained only by resorting to the anxious American surplus self, which projects its own devils upon whatever has at hand, and which only Whitman had the moral strength to defeat and silence down by embracing mysticism.

This question also underlies Oedipa's concern. In the very fact of posing Pynchon responds to it: however exuberant, his imagination is still determined by the fossilized remains of the Puritan concern for imagination and unreality. Despite being a novelist —and possibly the one to allow the excessive dynamism of imagination to unfold the most—, this original Puritan dread is still present in his narratives. Of course, it is transformed, but the very transformation prevents the symptom from disappearing. It no longer reveals itself as a fearful Puritan doubt concerning the real or unreal status of their own conception of history and comprehension of the world, but rather, it manifests in Pynchon's discomfort towards a particular *something* in his novels, towards the mere possibility of their close-to-unbearable imaginative excess. An urge for reality extends at every level of Pynchon's works: in his use of historical sources, of real names, situations, and places... and yet, this drive remains unsolved, as if suspended. The phenomenon of paranoia as it appears to take hold of his characters could give expression to the author's uneasiness towards the imaginary essence of his works; it could be a manifestation of his reticence to recognize entirely the energy of his own imagination even when it has accomplished a magnificent feat. Just like Oedipa, he is baffled by the excess and at the nature of the event which is something independent from the fact one is, or not, their creator. The characters' amazement at what events they are seeing, at what extraordinary and unbelievable world they are discovering, extends parallel at the level of the author that has invented it.

Thus, we observe a disequilibrium in Pynchon, as if he had developed his aesthetics of unreality with a power parallel to Whitman's, but not with the latter's empathetic imagination, nor with Kafka's. This is determinant to our issue for it precludes the door the novel of the future will have to open. Any advance along this path will also imply a moral stance: approving of a world that, possibly is no longer Whitman's. Led by empathy, the author, narrator and hero of the twenty-first century will explore the whole realm of possibility, covering both reality and imagination; writer, narrator and hero will face aesthetical options that go beyond those presented by reality, by the order of society or those allowed by science. Like the mystic before eventful chance, they will face, assimilate and write these possibilities in their novels, and do so undisturbed.