

On Modernity, Ideology, and the Novel

MH editors

Although since its emergence as a dominant genre in the 18th and 19th centuries the novel has held an important place in artistic expression and in the cultural landscape, with the huge political upheavals and cultural disintegration of the 20th century, the novel has come to be recognised as perhaps the most significant literary art form to measure and critique the ongoing and increasingly fundamentalist tendencies of modern political, religious, and cultural thought. In contrast, while popular and academic theory have addressed and engaged with political, religious, and cultural realities, they have often assumed a reactive stance and have tended to slip into ideological frameworks. Ideology, on this ground, must be understood in terms of dogma: that is, as a spotlight that touches an aspect of life (whether political, religious, or cultural) but which leaves the fullness of everyday life unaddressed. Unlike a tradition of thought—a landscape of meaning with a capacity for newness and difference—an ideological approach to human existence frames ideas within a closed and preconceived system of meaning. This approach is not only problematic in its practical manifestations—as Nietzsche states, a system of thought is always already inadequate in the face of life—but it also does not allow for a theoretical space in which to engage with the rich possibilities that lie outside ideological thinking. As recognisably limited as ideological thinking is, however, many dismissals or attempts to critique ideology unfortunately partake of the same closed and prejudicial way of thinking. Instead of seeking to clarify and address the problematic grounds of ideology, these critical approaches work to combat the façade or perceived effect of ideology, and as a result do not address or challenge anything essential, but rather all too often reinforce what they seek to critique by laying siege to a way of thinking that does not actually need the rest of the world to exist. Indeed, the impulse towards ideology may be inherent in any theoretical mode of thought that neglects the particular and the concrete—that is, the non-generalisable, non-equatable persons and matters in daily life.

In the art of the novel, however, we have a tradition of representation and presentation of human reality that cannot forget or forgo the particular and the concrete, a tradition that lies over against ideology and abstract theory. We understand the art of the novel to be a prosaic exploration of the edifying and idolatrous aspects of culture and thought (whether political, religious, or philosophical); on this ground, the novel is seen in stark contrast to the abstract dimensions of theory. Indeed, we hold that the treatment of ideas and tradition in novels is part of an essentially different mode of engagement than that of theory. For while theory necessarily tends toward abstraction, the novel cannot forget the concrete; and while theory may obscure difference by way of general insight, the novel remains, with its emphasis on the particular, an antidote to (ideological) systems of thought, whatever their content. If ideological and dogmatic forms of thought struggle to apprehend the realities of existence, the novel, with its emphasis on particular stories and concrete situations, inherently resists both absolute meaning and the idolatrous temptations of ideology which obscure or frame reality rather than clarify it. Therefore, the novel provides an essential critique of theory and ideology while it approaches everyday human life and meaning in a manner akin to the impulses of what we may

call a 'modern' way of thinking, a thinking that is understood as an open and attentive stance towards the concrete and the particular.

This 'modern' way of thinking has not always been apparent in 'Modernity.' Despite the renewed interest in being present to the concrete and the particular, the 20th and 21st centuries have undergone such massive public traumatic upheavals saturated in poisonous ideology that it is tempting to dismiss any way of thinking that appears ideological. However, a blanket dismissal of ideology (whether religious, political, or philosophical) is mistaken fundamentally; for as potentially destructive as an ideology is, a process of understanding must precede any critical engagement or thoughtful combatting. This is important to note because the roots of ideology are often grounded in an erring response to real human experiences and struggles. To dismiss ideology root and branch is to disregard the concrete context of its origin, and thus to mistake and forget how experience and struggle give rise, however well or poorly, to meaning-making. We might put it this way: ideology always arises from some idea that appears to clarify the rush of life at a moment in time. This idea almost always takes the form of a *revealed or received truth*—that is, it takes the form of a compelling 'insight' that is able to ground and structure the life of a certain place and time. That this idea may be finally in error, that it may give rise to an unethical stance in life, becomes clear only when it is understood—not when it is blindly affirmed or rejected. To speak to an (apparent) truth that is conditioned by time and enters everyday life in a vivid way requires patience and a mode of 'interrogative meditation' (Kundera) that the novel—with its prosaic world of characters and washrooms—embodies.

Modernity has also involved an acute recognition of time, as with increasing speed novelty is forced on us. Although this clear sense of time rushing past may prompt us to try to defy time, to stay history and mortality in some kind of reactive attempt to keep whole, it may also encourage us to reflect on what we understand by lived time (mortal time, everyday time) and deepen our awareness of how time is at the heart of our being together. In this sense, we need our sense of time to be healed, not glossed over. For recognising time as the fabric of our personal and communal being prompts us to be present to ourselves and others as limited, concrete beings. In this light, to attempt to step outside of time is an attempt to forget an essential part of our human condition—nevertheless, this is exactly what ideology often tries to do, despite the fact that if the 'insight' (the *revealed or received truth*) at the heart of ideology is not tested in time, it has no human reality. Given the flesh of time and place, the contents of ideological thinking become clear (both in character and teleological sense). It is hard to be rigid or cruel when we face another person in time; on the contrary, their affective mortality prompts recognition and compassion. Here, too, the novel aids us, for novels not only give us the concrete and the particular, but also embody, through the 'evening-out' nature of prose, the incarnate passing of time—that integral dimension of our lives where we confront the past and future in the present and seek meaning.

The Polish novelist and essayist Witold Gombrowicz, writing in his (public) *Diary* in 1966, asserts that 'Novels, those volatile fairy tales, become significant only when the world unveiled by them becomes something real to us. Dostoevsky will remain a fairy tale for someone who does not grasp him in his naked reality. Kafka, Valéry, Dante, surrealism, dadaism, anything at

all in art, everything in art, has the right to exist only insofar as it pertains to reality, to some new, sometimes shocking, reality which it makes accessible, alive, palpable' (681). Gombrowicz's vehement affirmation of the capacity of the novel not to merely reflect on reality but to address and *become a part of our lived time* is striking; he distills the spirit behind this issue of *Modern Horizons*. For focusing on the novel in the way we are doing here may be considered an attentiveness to a certain genre or form; however, to stay at this register of thought would be mistaken, as the novel is more than merely genre or form—it is rather a certain essential vision that expresses and gives rise to a way of being in the world, with one's own person, and with others. Thus, as we see in our various essays, the question of the novel is inseparable from the question of ideas and events that give meaning to our lives, and how we experience and remember these in time. In this sense, the novel is more than an art form—it is a mode of engagement with the world that, understood aright, gives critical depth to the struggles and blessings of life and depicts the limits in the shadows of which we live.