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Moral Education and Literature: The Contribution of Utopias and Tales

Abstract: Since the beginning of Western culture utopias and tales have been involved within moral education. The contribution aims to make clear that this kind of literature is suitable from the pedagogical point of view principally because of the symbolic communicative style. It is important to be aware of the difference between ancient and modern utopias too.

Keywords: education, pedagogy, utopia, modernity, symbol, freedom

Utopian texts play a major part not only in literature but also in pedagogy. Throughout the centuries, moral education in particular has been promulgated through narrative communication, including utopian stories. There must be a specific reason for this. I aim to show:

- 1) on one hand, that narrative communication is fully coherent with the symbolic communication which is essential in moral education;
- 2) on the other, that utopia, in going beyond actual situations, is perfectly suited to the task of education, providing a challenge for the future;
- 3) that in truth, the utopian literary genre partly changes with the modern age, bringing consequences from the educational point of view.

I would like to analyse these three topics in order to meet today's educational challenges.

1. Narration, moral education and symbolic communication

From the historical perspective, it is indisputable that narrative communication stands at the beginning of moral education. In fact, in terms of Western culture (I will deal with this because it is my specialist research field), the most ancient document related to educational practice is *The Iliad* which contains some verses concerning Achilles' education (IX, 565–566; XI, 1093–1094); consequently, the historical root of moral education lies in the epic. Subsequently the moral apologue came into being, for example the tale of Hercules at the crossroads, which is still well-known in the modern age. Its subject is Hercules (the hero renowned for his physical strength) facing the choice between "Vice" and "Virtue", which is described as a challenge of moral strength. Even from the lexical point of view, the relationship between virtue and vigour is clear. In fact, the second word comes from the Latin *vigor* which is related to the word *vis* ("strength"); the first comes from the Latin *virtus* which is derived from the word *vir* ("hero"): *vir* is such because of *vis*. We find the same association of ideas in the ancient Greek idiom in relation to *areté* ("virtue"), *héros* ("hero") and *róme* ("strength"); thus every hero is defined as such because of the connection between their physical and moral strength. The heir to the narrative-pedagogical literary genre is the modern Bildungsroman whose ancient precursors are romanticized biographies like Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.

There is another kind of storytelling within moral education: the fable, which uses animals to describe human conduct. Aesop is the most ancient fabulist followed by Phaedrus, and there have been many other authors active throughout the whole Western tradition. Narrative communication is very close to ancient mythological tales. In fact, it is characterised by its symbolic register, going beyond the descriptive approach: it is for this reason that it is useful from the moral point of view. Both an-

cient and modern stories are concerned with the recurring topics of moral heroes' challenges, the fight between good and evil, the difficulty in choosing good, the victory of good over evil, the tests to achieve adulthood, and so on.

There is a third type of narrative communication that is well-suited to moral education: the historical tale. This kind of communication is deep-rooted within our cultural tradition, starting from Greek civilisation. Since Herodotus we have had many historical works at our disposal which embody the Latin statement *Historia magistra vitae*, "History is life's teacher". Plutarch is the typical case of the morally engaged historian: he aims to prove the equal value of Greek and Roman civilisations by putting Greek and Roman biographies side by side. The most important historical narration in Western culture is surely the Bible. "Salvation history" is clearly morally connoted, as Clement of Alexandria already showed in publishing *The Educator*. At the beginning of the Patristic Age this author's aim was to make clear that God leads mankind through history to meet Him. Once again, this type of communication embraces the symbolic register because events are interpreted as having not only one, but many meanings. Literal and spiritual meanings sit side by side, the latter being divided into three levels: allegorical, moral and anagogical. The medieval monk Augustine of Dacia composed two well-known verses to express this (1929: 256):

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria
moralis quid agas, quid speres anagogia*

(the literal meaning teaches the facts, the allegorical one what you must believe,
the moral one what you must do, the anagogical one what you must hope for).

The three narrative registers I have set out are different to each other, but they do have something in common: symbolic interpretation. Why is

the symbolic approach so important to human communication and education? Ernst Cassirer expresses it well:

no animal progresses to the characteristic transformation of the grasping movement into the indicative gesture. Even among the most highly developed animals, 'clutching at the distance', as pointing with the hand has been called, has never gone beyond the first, incomplete beginnings. This simple genetic fact suggests that 'clutching at the distance' involves a factor of general spiritual significance. It is one of the first steps by which the perceiving and desiring I removes a perceived and desired content from himself and so forms it into a 'object', an 'object' content. (...) Sensory-physical grasping becomes sensory interpretation, which in turn conceals within it the first impulse toward the higher functions of signification manifested in language and thought.¹

Symbolic knowledge is such because it goes beyond perceptible knowledge, even if it starts from it. For this reason, the notion of mentally "catching" something is frequently present in its translation into concepts (the Latin word *conceptum* comes from *capio*, "to catch" in the same way that the German word *Begriff* comes from *greifen*). Just as conceptual knowledge turns sensory perception into intellectual ideas, so utopia turns actual situations into future projects: both are essential to mankind because both are related to the uniquely human freedom "to go beyond", i.e. to be open to transcendence.

2. Utopia and pedagogical literature

Utopia and pedagogy have been connected since their very beginnings. When was pedagogy born? Many answers are available. I think that

¹ E. Cassirer, *The philosophy of symbolic forms*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1953, t. I, p. 181.

the best is: in the Platonic dialogues. In fact, each science is such because of the proper study subject. For this reason, pedagogy as a science needs to recognise the proper meaning of education. That is why I link pedagogy to Platonic thought. In fact, within his *Republic*, Plato wonders about the essence of education. He finds the answer through the “allegory of the cave”, the well-known story told to distinguish between “education” (*paideía*) and “lack of education” (*apaideusía*).² Consequently – in light of the tale – we can assume that, according to Plato, to be educated means to be able both to discriminate between appearances and truth, and to embrace everything within the Idea of Good. Aristotle (Plato’s most important disciple) also indirectly gives a specific meaning to education. In fact, he says that human beings should not only live, but live well. In this we see the Aristotelian description of the “human task” (*érgon*)³: education is the way that leads to the achievement of that aim.

It is interesting to note that the “allegory of the cave” is situated in a utopia, perhaps the most ancient in Western culture. Plato is aware of the utopian features of his work, which is dedicated to imagining the perfect political community. In the dialogue Socrates has a conversation partner. At a certain point he asks the philosopher about the town they are discussing. Socrates’ answer is very profound: “I understand (...) you mean the city whose establishment we have described, the city whose home is in the ideal; for I think that it can be found nowhere on earth (...) perhaps there is a pattern [*parádeigma*] of it laid up in heaven for him who wishes to contemplate it and so beholding to constitute himself [*eautòn katoikízein*, “to build oneself”]. But it makes no difference whether it exists now or ever will come into being (...)”⁴ Through his master, Plato says that, in order to educate the human being, it is necessary to look at something non-material, i.e. something which does not exist in the world. Why? Because the essence of humanity is freedom and freedom does not exist as a material thing. For this reason, Plato refers to an *ou-tópos* (“not-place”),

² Plato, *Republic*, VII, 514a.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 5, 1140a 25-30.

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, IX, 592a-b.

which corresponds to the non-material identity of freedom as a spiritual reality, beyond time and space. This is a pedagogical idea.

I previously emphasised the relationship between pedagogical communication and symbolic narration: the “allegory of the cave” is a clear example of this. In fact, Plato tells his allegories not to destroy the knowledge of the power belonging to the *lógos* but to deepen it, going beyond strictly argumentative thought. Within his *Republic*, Plato divides knowledge into two parts and four levels: representation/*eikasía* and trust/*pístis* (sensible knowledge); and thought/*diánoia* and intelligence/*nóesis* (super-sensible knowledge).⁵ Plato stresses that the highest level deals with “hypotheses” (*hupóthesis*), i.e. underpinnings able to make thoughts arise (*hupo-títhemi*). In other words, noetic knowledge – unlike dianoetic knowledge – does not rely on argument, but on the intuition which gives rise to the not-hypothetical knowledge concerning the original reality; not on discursive reason (*diánoia* as *dià-nous*, “to think something through”), but on symbolic reason (*súbolon*, from *sumbállo/sun-bállo*, “to put together”). This is exactly the kind of narration which relates to allegory. As previously mentioned, allegory as *muthos* means to go beyond discursive *lógos*: it is an intuitive way of thinking. In the “allegory of the cave” the word *exaíphnes*⁶ (“suddenly”; the moment when the prisoner described in the tale becomes free) is related to intuitive knowledge because it identifies that something unexpected happens, whereas, in discursive reason, conclusions are predictable because of the premise/consequence relation. The word *exaíphnes* is also utilised by Plato in his *Letter VII*, when he says that knowledge of the truth “is born suddenly”.⁷ The same thing happens each time intuition overtakes thought and moves aside the veil of ignorance.

What I have explained here makes clear the type of communication that deals with moral education. It is a form of communication that goes beyond strict descriptive reason. Aristotle is very effective when he

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, VI, 509d-511e.

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, VII, 515c.

⁷ Plato, *Letter VII*, 341d.

speaks about different levels of exactness corresponding to different levels of knowledge: “Mathematical accuracy is not to be demanded in everything, but only in things which do not contain matter. Hence this method is not that of natural science”.⁸ Aristotle is not a utopian writer, but he offers the best explanation of the kind of reason that supports the utopian narrative.

As the Platonic text quoted above clearly states, what moral education and utopian literature have in common is that they both go beyond factual knowledge and improve concrete action. That is why Rousseau considers Plato’s *Republic* as a pedagogical treatise: “If you wish to know what is meant by public education, read Plato’s *Republic*. Those who merely judge books by their titles take this for a treatise on politics, but it is the finest treatise on education ever written”.⁹ I quote the French author not by chance: in fact, the most important pedagogical utopia belongs to him.

3. Rousseau’s pedagogical utopia

Rousseau – principally in his Bildungsroman *Emile* – addresses a subject very close to that of Plato. In fact, the Greek philosopher had to face sophists’ idea of knowledge, which was inferior on account of its instrumentality. The sophistic attitude was that human education is related to the transfer of useful competences – providing only technique without soul. In short, it was something completely without reference to the moral identity of the human being. Plato claimed that to learn virtue was unlike learning material competences because the deep identity of virtue is related to the good, not to the useful. This is why Plato referred to virtue as the contemplation of truth in the *hyperuranion*. Rousseau faced the

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, II, 3, 995a 15-20. Within *Nicomachean Ethics*, he also says: “we must not look for equal exactness in all departments of study, but only such as belongs to the subject matter of each, and in such a degree as is appropriate to the particular line of enquiry” (I, 7, 1098a 25-30).

⁹ J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile*, book I.

same problem because of the Enlightenment idea of knowledge, which was identified only from an instrumental point of view. In fact, Enlightenment authors shared the idea of Francis Bacon that knowledge and power are the same thing.¹⁰ That is why the aim of knowledge – according to the Enlightenment authors who were followers of Bacon’s philosophy – is pragmatic and functional.

Rousseau realised the distance between that idea of knowledge and the freedom particular to the human being. In fact, to be free means to be able to go beyond what is useful as Aristotle had already clearly stated by writing that “nature always does only what is useful”.¹¹ Mankind, however, is original because it is able to go beyond what is useful, for example through the fine arts. This is why Rousseau is a supporter of the “myth of the noble savage”. Within his book *Discourse on the origin of inequality* he says: “As an unbroken courser erects his mane, paws the ground, and rages at the bare sight of the bit, while a trained horse patiently suffers both whip and spur, just so the barbarian will never reach his neck to the yoke which civilized man carries without murmuring but prefers the most stormy liberty to a calm subjection”.¹² The same idea can be found in *Emile*: “Civilised man is born and dies a slave. The infant is bound up in swaddling clothes, the corpse is nailed down in his coffin. All his life long man is imprisoned by our institutions”.¹³ Why is there this kind of slavery? Like other Enlightenment authors, Rousseau charges the *ancien regime*, but – according to him – this does not solve the problem, because – unlike other Enlightenment authors – Rousseau thinks that the social system is structurally bad due to widespread greed: “It is through the hustle of commerce and the arts, through the greedy self-interest of profit, and through softness and love of amenities that personal services are replaced by money payments. (...) Make gifts of money, and you will not be

¹⁰ See F. Bacon, *Novum organum or true suggestions for the interpretation of nature*, book I: aphorisms, 3.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Generation of animals*, II, 5, 741b 5.

¹² J.-J. Rousseau, *Discourse on the origin of inequality*, second part.

¹³ J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile*, book I.

long without chains”.¹⁴ Here is the challenge according to Rousseau: to make the human being able first of all to choose what is good and only then to learn useful competences. *Emile*, like Plato’s *Republic*, imagines a supernatural model – the “nature state” – in order to make people morally good through education. Like Plato’s Idea of Good, Rousseau’s “nature state” is also outside of space and time. Rousseau is aware of this utopian situation. Within his *Discourse on the origin of inequality* he says: “For it is by no means a light undertaking to distinguish properly between what is original and what is artificial in the actual nature of man, or to form a true idea of a state which no longer exists, perhaps never did exist, and probably never will exist”.¹⁵ If the “nature state” were the primitive condition, it would still be possible to encounter it today!

Rousseau refers to the “nature state” as the “original state”. This is a reference appropriate to education. It goes beyond what is described and studied in an objective way. Within this attitude we can recognise a new perspective, different from the one common to Enlightenment authors. Obviously, in Rousseau’s thought, we can find many references to Enlightenment culture (for example, the “profession of faith of the Savoyard Vicar” in his *Emile*), but he is able to recognise the problems of the Enlightenment from a cultural point of view, especially the faith placed in description and functionality, which corresponds to a technical civilisation: *Emile* is educated in the country in order to make him able to recognise first of all what is good, and only afterwards what is useful. Rousseau says, “Life is not breath, but action”¹⁶ and “Life is the trade I would teach him”.¹⁷ In these statements we can see Rousseau’s youthful passion for the ancient moral authors, Plutarch in particular.¹⁸

¹⁴ J.-J. Rousseau, *The social contract*, chapter XV.

¹⁵ J.-J. Rousseau, *Discourse on the origin of inequality*, Preface.

¹⁶ J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile*, book I.

¹⁷ J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile*, book I.

¹⁸ J.-J. Rousseau, *The confessions*, book one: “My romance reading concluded with the summer of 1719, the following winter was differently employed. My mother’s library being quite exhausted, we had recourse to that part of her father’s which had devolved to us; here we happily found some valuable books, which was

Obviously Rousseau's doctrine about the perfection of nature is incompatible with the Christian doctrine of original sin; nonetheless, and without any confusion, we can also recognise that Rousseau's critique of modernity – as an ideological and functional civilisation – is close to the Christian one and remains useful today because it allows us to recognise the limits of the purely descriptive approach in pedagogy and to accept today's educational challenges.

by no means extraordinary, having been selected by a minister that truly deserved that title, in whom learning (which was the rage of the times) was but a secondary commendation, his taste and good sense being most conspicuous. The history of the Church and Empire by Le Sueur, Bossuett's Discourses on Universal History, Plutarch's Lives, the history of Venice by Nani, Ovid's Metamorphoses, La Bruyere, Fontenelle's World, his Dialogues of the Dead, and a few volumes of Moliere, were soon ranged in my father's closet, where, during the hours he was employed in his business, I daily read them, with an avidity and taste uncommon, perhaps unprecedented at my age. Plutarch presently became my greatest favorite. The satisfaction I derived from repeated readings I gave this author, extinguished my passion for romances, and I shortly preferred Agesilaus, Brutus, and Aristides, to Orondates, Artemenes, and Juba. These interesting studies, seconded by the conversations they frequently occasioned with my father, produced that republican spirit and love of liberty, that haughty and invincible turn of mind, which rendered me impatient of restraint or servitude, and became the torment of my life, as I continually found myself in situations incompatible with these sentiments. Incessantly occupied with Rome and Athens, conversing, if I may so express myself with their illustrious heroes; born the citizen of a republic, of a father whose ruling passion was a love of his country, I was fired with these examples; could fancy myself a Greek or Roman, and readily give into the character of the personage whose life I read; transported by the recital of any extraordinary instance of fortitude or intrepidity, animation flashed from my eyes, and gave my voice additional strength and energy. One day, at table, while relating the fortitude of Scoevola, they were terrified at seeing me start from my seat and hold my hand over a hot chafing-dish, to represent more forcibly the action of that determined Roman".

4. Modern utopias, moral narrations and today's educational challenges

Modernity is full of utopias from the pedagogical point of view, but they do not all share a common direction. Most modern utopias are coherent with the modern age as characterised by the new idea of "method". In fact, in the ancient world, the Greek word *méthodos* meant the concrete way to learn about the world. For this reason, ancient philosophers were aware of the plurality of methods as previously quoted in Aristotle. This idea is well expressed through the Alexandrian Mouseion founded by Demetrius of Phalerum, Theophrastus' disciple, who in turn had been Aristotle's disciple. In fact, the first handbooks were published under the auspices of the Mouseion: *Elementes* by Euclid about geometry; *Art of Grammar* by Dionysius Thrax about grammar; and *Almagest* by Ptolemy about astronomy, among others. This happened because of the plural identity of the school.

By the beginning of the modern era, the word "method" had changed in meaning, becoming strictly singular. In fact, modern authors are convinced they have found the right way to study nature using a scientific method based on empirical evidence, experimental verification and mathematical language. This is why they aim to find the "natural laws" ruling the world. There was a pronounced "knowledge reformation" related to the new techno-functional attitude that is well expressed by Francis Bacon's statement: "Knowledge and human power are synonymous, since the ignorance of the cause frustrates the effect; for nature is only subdued by submission, and that which in contemplative philosophy corresponds with the cause in practical science becomes the rule".¹⁹ The Baconian attitude is far removed from the Aristotelian primacy of *theoría* – above all in its regard of knowledge as being valuable in itself, irrespective of its usefulness or otherwise. From now on, only what is useful is good, and social philosophy also expresses the aim of technically manipulating politics.

¹⁹ F. Bacon, *Novum organum or true suggestions for the interpretation of nature*, book I: aphorisms, 3.

The turning point in modern utopias is clear. First of all, they are very attentive to technical powers, as both *New Atlantis* by Bacon and *The City of the Sun* by Campanella clearly show. In *New Atlantis*, Bacon describes "Salomon's House", where young people are educated. The aim of the institution is to impart the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire to the effecting of all things possible. This kind of knowledge is very far removed from the classical tradition, because it deals with the preparation of instruments suitable for all sorts of technical enterprises. The same approach is evident in *The City of the Sun* where the citizen who has found out new arts and very useful secrets is honoured. Even if there are also fine arts in the "ideal city", primacy is given to the mathematical and technical knowledge, as is confirmed by the reverence shown to Pythagoras by the inhabitants of the town.

Rousseau's utopia stands against this trend inspired by the primacy of the technical viewpoint. Within the modern age, the anomaly is represented by Thomas More's *Utopia*, whose aim is principally moral due to his strong Catholic identity. In fact, Utopian citizens

do not place happiness in all sorts of pleasures, but only in those that in themselves are good and honest. There is a party among them who place happiness in bare virtue; others think that our natures are conducted by virtue to happiness, as that which is the chief good of man. They define virtue as living according to Nature, and think that we are made by God for that end; they believe that a man then follows the dictates of Nature when he pursues or avoids things according to the direction of reason. They say that the first dictate of reason is the kindling in us a love and reverence for the Divine Majesty, to whom we owe both all that we have and, all that we can ever hope for.²⁰

²⁰ T. More, *Utopia*, "Of the travelling of the Utopians".

The Christian root of the text is clear. Nevertheless, in More's utopian society, mechanical competence is appreciated just as it is in other modern utopias, and "sometimes a mechanic that so employs his leisure hours as to make a considerable advancement in learning is eased from being a tradesman and ranked among their learned men".²¹ But the true aim of More's utopia is to promote spiritual and moral growth, not technical progress.

Unfortunately, throughout the modern age the tendency towards functionality prevails in utopias, which are generally related to the uncritical celebration of technical power. In particular, this attitude is clear in positivistic culture and, as happened under twentieth century totalitarianism, is related increasingly to the use of the school as an institution of conformity. This is the "dark side" of utopian literature, corrupted by ideologies, because they became separated from their former moral aims and were put under the rule of enemies of human freedom, with no regard for human dignity. Today we are facing an ambiguous situation: on the one hand, human liberty is continuously evoked; on the other, the diffuse tendency towards consumerism is morally noxious. What can we say with regard to narration in general, and utopias in particular, from the pedagogical point of view, drawing together all aspects of this review?

The narrative style is essential to anthropology. Both Ricoeur, from a philosophical point of view, and von Balthasar, from a theological one, draw attention to the "narrative" side of human identity, i.e. the fact that human identity is continuously composed by self-comprehension through narration. We cannot stop narrating and we cannot give up utopias because this would mean deleting symbolic knowledge in favour of the merely descriptive and functional. But we must be also aware that going beyond the functional-descriptive approach means above all encountering the moral and spiritual identity of the person. It is not enough to be learned from the point of view of usefulness, nowadays well-expressed in the idea of "competence"; it is not only necessary to be educated in order to "learn something": it is essential to be educated in order

²¹ T. More, *Utopia*, "On their trades, and manner of life".

to “become someone”. The Platonic distinction between those who are educated and those who are not, accepted by Aristotle’s saying that to live – for a human being – means to “live well”, i.e. morally well, is the main challenge for us too. It is strictly connected to the Christian idea of “personal dignity”, which recognises that each human being “is desirable by itself” (*autòn airéton estin*)²² because – as the Second Vatican Council stated – the human creature is “the only creature on earth which God willed for itself” (*propter seipsam*).²³ Today we must also be aware that to educate someone means to lead them to choose only what is morally good, not to passively accept everything that is capable of attracting their attention. For this reason, today it is still important to have educational narratives (including utopias in the ancient tradition) that include a knowledge which is not only descriptive and technical, but also (and particularly) symbolic, providing wisdom and openness to transcendence.

²² Clement of Alexandria, *Christ. The Educator*, I, 7.

²³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 24.

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