

# Death of readers

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Luis Goytisolo

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Fast and complex, extravagantly imagined, intricately constructed and beautifully written, Luis Goytisolo's *Antigonia* (reviewed in the TLS, December 14, 2012) feels like the novel to end all novels. That's how it feels to its reader, at least. Its author makes no such megalomaniac claims but, for other reasons entirely, he does believe that the novel has had its day.

"What we understand as the novel today", he writes, rather than being an "autonomous genre", with its own unchanging character and conventions, must be regarded as an "alluvial product", the "residue left by the evolution of a series of now disappeared genres: epics, chansons de geste, legends, chivalric romances . . .". The novel arose in the Christian West. Goytisolo reminds us, at a time when, even as classical learning was being rediscovered in the name of a new and liberating humanism, the influence of the Bible remained pervasive. (More, even, perhaps, than previously, given the Gutenberg Revolution and the fact that, in northern Europe, the Reformation was devolving devotional reading in the vernacular to ordinary believers.) Through the Enlightenment and beyond, the Bible was vital in shaping the imagination, stocking it with stories and similes and populating it with characters. Even for those who had ceased believing, that centrality went unquestioned. The Good Book was a presence in all the other books that people read.

Including, argues Goytisolo, those works of fiction they were coming to enjoy, marked out from their narrative forebears by the sense of immediacy, of familiarity they brought. No longer was the narrative "a mere succession of actions, deeds and words". Rather, readers saw situations unfolding as if they were witnessing them for themselves. So strong was the scrip-

ture influence on storytelling, that it established the story's very architecture. Goytisolo identifies two main forms of narrative. First, the "Old Testament" type, which places its protagonist at the mercy of "a mythic event or an immovable reality"; some "plan" which imposes an irresistible order on individuals. Whatever they may try to do to establish their independence can have only a symbolic value.

The "New Testament" type, by contrast, "centres more on the mission or the task the protagonist undertakes, a task as hard as it is unavoidable if he wants to achieve his goal".

It's easy enough to see why the pioneering picaresque novella *Lazarillo de Tormes*, published in the 1550s, would be a New Testament-style text; appreciating why *Hamlet* is as well perhaps requires more thought. Compare it with *Macbeth*, though, and it becomes clearer. Where the Prince's notorious delay underscores the freedom of action he enjoys, Macbeth's ambition is driven by forces beyond his control. Balzac's characters are governed by the workings of an external destiny in *La Comédie humaine* in a way that Dante's in *The Divine Comedy* (a New Testament-style work,

despite an obvious overarching order) never are. Tolstoy, too, writes in the New Testament register: his characters make their own way in the world, while Dostoevsky's do not. The lives of Faulkner's characters, Goytisolo argues, are overlain by the workings of a "second reality"

which drives and shapes their actions: its principal manifestation is, he says, "the past".

We're not a million miles here from the notion of open and closed texts, as articulated in one way or another by literary critics as various as Roland Barthes and John Bayley. Goytisolo would acknowledge the force of Bayley's claim that "Tolstoy gives us life" whilst "Proust gives us a vision of it", but wouldn't accept the implicit value judgement. His admission for Old Testament-type authors like Proust, Faulkner and Kafka is evident – though his own fiction follows the New Testament model, as he makes clear.

If the Bible shaped the novel, the classic novels of the nineteenth century in their turn did much to mould the emerging modern mind. But by 1900 structure was coming to the fore. Previously, says Goytisolo, the idea had scarcely been recognized in its own right. Another aspect of plotting, it was the author's way of facilitating a natural flow, a sense that successive events took place within a single scheme. In the modern novel, as in the twentieth-century skyscraper, structure became central: the author's design dictating the arrangement of narrative content. For Goytisolo, the great novelists have been the unacknowledged architects of the modern world. Manhat-tan "began to be" in the work of John Dos Passos. The twentieth century as a whole was built in our imagination by great novelists, from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Musil, from Hemingway to Joyce.

What makes the present plight of the novel so critical in Goytisolo's eyes? It's not, he insists, that the genre's possibilities have been exhausted: rather, that it finds itself increasingly adrift. The novel could coexist comfortably with cinema and even rub along with

television for several decades, but has been struggling to hold its own in the digital age. With uniplex TV channels vying with online entertainments, computer games and all sorts of electronic gizmos for our attention, the novel is pushed to the margins: who has time? Who, more importantly in the long run, has the time to become a novel reader in the first place, given the cultural equipment that role traditionally required? The Bible, basic history, philosophy, a smattering of science, some classical learning, and the commanding heights of modern literature: no longer can such things be taken for granted, even among the "educated". The writer who hopes to offer anything more than sophisticated literary entertainment can no longer even count on being read. The death of readers is, slowly but inevitably, going to lead to a death of writers, and the drying up of the genre as a whole.

Just the jeremiad an eighty-something author might produce? Goytisolo makes his complaint more in sorrow than in anger – and most of all, it seems, in stoic resignation. Given the distinct resemblance of his commentary to so many conservative denunciations of the "three-minute culture", however, we may wonder whether this is an adequate response. He himself has just convinced us that the advent of the genre represented a revolution, and elegantly traced its evolution ever since. No disrespect to *Le Chanson de Roland* or *El Cid* but, great as those epics are, readers haven't generally found a newer style of work like *Don Quixote* such a disappointment. There's the hint of a contradiction here: shouldn't those of us who love literature be embracing change, welcoming creative innovation from wherever it may come? If the novel is dead, long live whatever will be written next.