

THOMAS PAVEL

*Forms of insubordination in the novella**

Thomas Pavel (1941) è un teorico e critico della letteratura. Dal 1998 insegna Lingue e letterature romanze e Letterature comparate all'Università di Chicago. Nel 2010-2011 è stato *associé de recherches* presso il Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Institute for Advanced Study). Si è occupato di linguistica strutturale, per poi rivolgersi allo studio del *novel* e all'evoluzione della rappresentazione finzionale del romanzo.

È autore di *Mondes de la fiction* (1986, traduzione italiana Einaudi), *Le Mirage linguistique* (1988), *L'Art de l'éloignement* (1996), *La Pensée du roman* (2003), *Comment écouter la littérature* (2006) e *The Lives of the Novel* (2013).

In a beautiful quote highlighted by Sergio Perosa, Nadine Gordimer writes: "short-story writers are subject at the same time to both a stricter technical discipline and a wider freedom than the novelist" (Perosa 2013: 228). Freedom allows short story writers to select whatever aspect of life they want, but technical discipline requires them to go to the heart of the matter.

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For this reason, novellas, not unlike drama, need *unity of action* (Claudio Vicentini). As Paolo Amalfitano showed, while novels (be they idealist, pastoral, and picaresque, I'd add) reinforce their point by means of repetitious episodes, novellas concentrate instead on a striking event or turn of events.

Unity of action bolsters the genre's *brevity*, a feature underscored by Boccaccio's novellas, which most often consist of just a couple of narrative moves: desire and fulfillment, offense and acceptance or revenge, crime and punishment, test and success. The unity of action also favors an *inductive* approach. In idealist and picaresque novels, a general idea is well grasped from the beginning, the various episodes repeatedly highlighting its presence. "Inner strength prevails over the blows of fate" the events in the *Ethiopian Story* tell us over and over again. Each episode of Defoe's *Moll Flanders* makes clear that "Necessity is the mother of vice" or that "Once acquired, evil habits rule supreme". In novellas, a single uncommon situation or turn of events stuns the spectators, pressing them to infer a truth about human behavior.

Equally important, in novellas the divide between the individual and his surrounding world is not an initial datum that shapes the course of action – as is the case in both idealist and picaresque novels – but it rather *results* from the conflict between the main character (or characters) and their social milieu. Because in early novellas characters are "flat" types (the faithful young woman, the frivolous young man, the jealous husband, the unfaithful wife, the monk in love, a.s.o.) rather than complicated individuals, their actions fit quite well everyday moral psychology (and the moral syllogisms described by Antonia Fonyi 2013: 162-163), at least at the beginning of the story. Once they face a major *challenge*, however, these characters react in the *least* expected fashion, achieving what Gianni Iotti has called "the shocking interpolation of the ordinary and

the extraordinary" (Iotti 2013: 136). The conflict turns out to be unusual, astounding, even scandalous, such that the ordeals of virtuous characters, as well as the transgressions of the imperfect ones, are conspicuously at odds with the society's routine way of operating. They are exemplary, memorable, because of their exceptional nature. Most often, the character's decisive action is one of *insubordination*.

In early novellas, the breakdown of social intercourse comes from usual, well-known forms of insubordination to generally accepted moral and social norms. Insubordination here may be caused by excessive pride and self-love, as when royalty, clergy, and financiers abuse their power or when proud individuals have an exaggerated sense of honor. Even more frequently, novellas depict the force of erotic attraction. It challenges law and custom (e.g. in cases of seduction or rape of unattached young women, or of attraction across class-barriers), it defies parental authority (when young people marry in defiance of their families), it breaks religious vows (nuns or friars falling in love) and it undermines existing matrimonial bonds (leading to adultery, real or rumored, or to efforts to seduce married men or women). Since, in a balancing act, novellas sometimes portray praiseworthy resistance to unlawfulness and lust, in the end and not unlike oral folktales, they draw concise, effective portraits of a remarkably diverse range of behavior. Regarding gender and class distinctions, for instance, with the exception of stories of abused virgins, which put the blame on men's corruption, and comic stories which most often depict women as lewd creatures, novellas tend to distribute merit and guilt evenly, portraying virtuous as well as dishonest high and low-born men and women.

Yet, verisimilitude is *not* a major requirement in novellas, be they comic, serious, or tragic. In Peronella's story (*The Decameron*, VII, 2), the setting (a quiet, secluded street in Naples), the

characters (a poor mason, his pretty wife Peronella, her young lover Giannello) and the motivation (lust) are certainly believable, as is the commonplace form of insubordination in this story – the adulterous encounters between Giannello and Peronella while her husband is at work. The way the lovers react, however, when the mason unexpectedly comes back, is both striking and implausible. (Their reaction is too well known to need to be retold.) The farcical event – adultery committed under the nose of a credulous husband – is designed to elicit in the reader a sense of complicity with the transgressors and, perhaps, some disapproval of their feat. The implausible event successfully evokes the pleasure of insubordination.

Novellas that portray an exaggerated *subordination* to social rule are no less surprising (Zatti 2013). In Boccaccio's *Decameron* X, 10, the nobleman Gualtieri marries Griselda, the daughter of a peasant, but several years later, wanting to test her constancy, he pretends to have killed their two children and decided to marry a woman of higher birth. Griselda humbly accepts her husband's decisions. Moved by her strength and patience, Gualtieri reassures Griselda that she is his only love and brings back the children. Not only is this story implausible and makes no perceptible effort to mitigate its implausibility, but, I would add, nowadays the very emphasis on the excessive subordination of a low born woman makes it difficult to digest. Yet, as Aarne-Thompson's index of folktales brought to date by Hans Jörg Uther testifies, this story is told all over the world (Uther 2004; Griselda's story is type 887, p. 511). Meek acceptance of social hierarchy needs to be unusually striking in order to sustain a novella.

But the seductive power of most novellas consists in the strangeness and sometimes complexity of *defiant* behavior. And in the best known cases, novellas narrating the triumph of virtue under challenge emphasize the illegality of the *challenge*.

Thus, in *Bandello* (I, 21), Ulrico, a Hungarian nobleman who has just married his beloved, decides to go to the King's court to gain a reputation. But because the couple lacks the means to sustain the lady's rank at court, the wife stays home to administer their modest wealth. At court, two Hungarian noblemen, learning that Ulrico's wife lives alone at her castle, bet that one of them will succeed in seducing her. They try, but the lady, pretending to give in, entraps them, imprisons them, and forces them to spin wool for a living. The surprise here comes not from the lady's virtue, which is well established from the very beginning, but from the ingenious way in which she takes the two men prisoners and compels them to perform a job reputedly reserved for women. The brainless challengers become the laughing stock of the Hungarian court.

In a more serious, almost tragic, tone, *Cinzio V*, 2, narrates the story of a lord who defies the laws of marriage and is in turn defied by a subordinate. Locrino, an honest Byzantine merchant, is imprisoned by a powerful lord for not agreeing to share his wife Dorotea with him. As Dorotea manages to free her husband and the couple runs away, conjugal love proves to be stronger than a hostile world. Triggered by a *just defiance of worldly power*, the adventures that follow include a small scale confrontation with Fortune itself. During their journey, Locrino, persuaded that his wife has died, wants to kill himself, but since Dorotea turns out to be alive, the couple returns home and lives happily ever after under the protection of the emperor Constantine.

Belonging to the same thematic field, *Romeo and Julia's* story (*Bandello*, II, 9) stages a couple whose love is at the same time *legitimate*, since it is blessed by the sacrament of marriage, and *defiant* because it rejects parental authority. Notably, the tragic outcome (Romeo, to the difference of Locrino, commits suicide before his beloved Julia wakes up from her sleep, while

Julia, discovering Romeo's dead body puts an end to her life) is not caused by the intervention of the defied authority, but by Chance, as if the novella wanted to imply that those who, like Romeo and Julia, flee from established authority -- be it just or unjust -- deliver themselves into the hands of blind Fortune.

This is to say that, whereas novellas don't aim at complete credibility, their effort to stay close to actual life and their unity of action grant them considerable *revealing* power. Actions that might perhaps never be taken (a husband giving his wife the heart of her lover to eat -- Boccaccio, IV, 9 --, a woman enjoying her lover's favors while sticking her head in the vat in which her husband works -- Boccaccio, VII, 2 --) and situations that might perhaps never occur (a team of seducers hurrying towards a virtuous lady's castle, a brother marrying the woman who fell in love with his almost identical sister disguised as a man -- Bandello, II, 36) are so skillfully placed in a believable environment, linked to the common stock of passions and desires, and effectively emphasized as unique, that these actions end up by revealing something memorable, even truthful, about the way in which human being challenge the established authority of rulers, norms, and customs.

With the passage of time, novellas tended to become longer and more complex. Flat characters were replaced by more complex individuals, and rudimentary forms of insubordination give way to more intricate situations. In Cinzio III, 7, Iago (to use the names Shakespeare bestowed on Cinzio's characters) does not openly rebel against his commander. His insubordination takes the form of a convoluted, secret plot: Iago must stay friends with the Moor and Cassio, he needs to force his own wife, Emilia, to spy on Desdemona, and, jumping on the opportunities offered by chance, he must instantly distort their meaning. Insubordination here turns into outright subversion.

Similarly, the stories of Oronte and Orbecchia (Cinzio, II, 2) and of Iuristes and Epitia (Cinzio, VIII, 5) involve mischief executed under the mask of forgiveness. In Cinzio II, 2, Oronte, prince of Armenia, who is the favorite courtier of Sulmone, king of Persia, courts and marries the king's daughter, Orbecchia, without her father's approval. The insubordinate couple runs away to Armenia. Nine years later, pretending to pardon them, Sulmone invites his daughter, her husband Oronte, and their children to the Persian court. After secretly slaughtering Oronte and his children, Sulmone offers the mutilated bodies to Orbecchia, who takes revenge by stabbing her father and then kills herself. The frenzy of murders, although not unprovoked, defies all limits.

In Cinzio VIII, 5, Iuristes, the imperial judge in Innsbruck, promises beautiful Epitia, in a pact that defies the authority of law, to pardon her brother sentenced to death for rape if she consents to become the judge's mistress. She does, but at Iuristes' orders, her brother is executed anyway. Law is applied, but treacherously. The young woman lodges a complaint to the Emperor, who after compelling Iuristes to marry her, sentences the dishonest judge to death. But Epitia, who is now Iuristes' legitimate wife, has become a *de facto* ally of her former persecutor, persuades the Emperor to pardon him. As repulsive as Iuristes' lie and betrayal may be, the laws of Innsbruck do condemn Epitia's brother to death, while Iuristes' seduction of the young woman is – according to the ideas of the time – fully redeemed by marriage.

Redemptive marriage is a central issue in several novellas by Cervantes, in particular the idealist ones. Cervantes criticizes sometimes prefer the novellas portraying social vices and prejudices (*The Jealous Husband of Estramadura*, carefully examined by Antonio Gargano, and *Riconete and Cortadillo*) and the satirical ones (*The Glass Bachelor*, *The Dialogue of Dogs*). While

few can resist the picaresque charm of *The Little Gipsy Girl* and *The Illustrious Inn Servant*, readers often tend to find novellas that are closer to idealist novels (*The Generous Lover*, *The English Spanish Lady*, *The Force of Blood*) less interesting. I would like to argue that these novellas, as well as the secondary plot involving Lucinda, Cardenio, Dorothea, and Fernando in the first part of *Don Quixote*, are particularly interesting because they detach the theme of false marriage promises from the narrow context of power-abuse evident in Eptia and Iuriste's story. Cervantes' topic is the way in which erotic desire avoids and defies long-term commitment. Do marriage promises made by young men under the spell of burning desire lose their binding force once lust is satisfied? Such promises drastically affects a young woman's standing in life since in the society Cervantes portrays, a woman's honor depends on her ability to resist male intemperance. Loss of virginity and pregnancy signal her failure to stand firm. But since ideal love is assumed to be an irresistible force that leads to permanent union, a man inflamed by desire can indeed commit or pretend to commit himself to the woman he loves. Since, moreover, before Counter-Reformation, marriage was defined as an exchange of pledges between two individuals rather than a sacrament celebrated publicly, a marriage oath taken in private was assumed to be as valid as a written contract. In such a context, male inconstancy had extremely serious consequences.

We all remember, in the first part of *Don Quixote*, the novel-like adventures of Lucinda, Cardenio, Dorothea, and Fernando. Don Fernando, the son of a powerful duke, falls in love with Dorothea, the beautiful daughter of a wealthy farmer, solemnly promises to marry her, but after satisfying his lust, he abandons her. He now woos Lucinda, a beautiful young woman who not only secretly promised to marry her beloved Cardenio but – as the text discreetly suggests – has already consummated her alli-

ance with him. Fernando maneuvers to separate Lucinda from Cardenio and almost succeeds in marrying her. But she runs away and, in the end, benevolent fate brings the four lovers together. Dorothea, Lucinda and Cardenio openly express their ardent belief in love, fidelity to promises, and marriage. Embarrassed to realize that he is the only fickle person in this group, Fernando lets himself be domesticated and returns to Dorothea.

Similarly, in *The Two Young Women*, the young female characters force a forgetful seducer to marry his first beloved, while the second one betroths his brother. *The Force of the Blood* is even more revealing. Kidnapped and raped by the young Rodolpho, the beautiful Leocadia secretly takes away a silver cross from his room. She gives birth to a child and when, much later, the parents of Rodolpho, seeing the crucifix, understand her secret, they make sure that the two young people marry.

True, from the point of view of moral psychology, these stories are only moderately successful. The fickle male characters follow their instincts, abandon their victims, and when, in the end, they are led to do the honorable thing, they don't seem to realize how harmful their behavior has been. Morality triumphs, but the outcome is caused by the intervention of other actors rather than the inner growth of the seducer.

Yet, what seem to be superficial moral reflection, in fact hides a deep anthropological insight. Most probably, Cervantes was interested in an issue that Giambattista Vico would clearly formulate a century later in his *New Science* (Vico 1744: 114-115, 120, 122), where he examines the way in which all nations discovered both religion and solemn marriages (1744: 114-115). For, Vico argues, once the sense of a provident divinity becomes prevalent, sexual unions that take place without religious celebration are universally "branded as false" and, in his terms, "bestial" (1744: 116). Although for *our* contemporaries this issue has ceased to be vital, for Cervantes and *his* contemporaries

ies “false” sexual unions revealed the extraordinary fragility of human bonds, if not even of civil life itself, given that without marital bonds humanity would, to borrow Vico’s terms again,

revert to the ancient great forest through which in their nefarious feral wanderings once roamed the foul beasts of Orpheus, among whom bestial venery was practiced by sons with mothers and by fathers with daughters (Vico 1744: 117).

Thus, in spite of its frivolous look, the insubordination of fickle male depicted in Cervantes’ novellas is extremely serious, since it threatens the very existence of civilized humanity. At the same time, it cannot be punished with utmost severity, because, in order for humanity to survive, the “false” sexual unions need to be converted into genuine marriages. Incidentally, this is also the reason why, in Cinzio VIII, 5, Epitia, now Iuristes’ wife, pleads for his life and persuades the emperor to pardon him.

Societal adherence to the solemnity of marriage fails, however, to abolish a wholly different range of crimes, examined in Maria de Zayas’ powerful *Novelas Amorosas y ejemplares* - *Amorous and Exemplary Novels*, 1637 and *Desengaños Amorosos* - *Disenchantments of Love*, 1647, whose topic is violent, amoral male behavior in a society that has no means and probably no interest in prohibiting it. Never before de Zayas’ stories was domestic violence, that is, the kind of bestial behavior that persists *in spite of* civilized, solemn marriage, so fiercely indicted, nor was the indictment of sexual injustice expressed so persuasively.

As a consequence of gender asymmetry, in earlier novellas effective power belongs to men, whose insubordination to the rules of chastity, regrettable as it is, threatens society less than women’s. The fault lines of such a system become visible in the cases of seduction before marriage and jealousy after marriage, as so many of Boccaccio, Marguerite de Navarre, Bandello,

Cinzio and Cervantes' stories testify. In these stories, characters who fail to respect the norms governing sex and marriage are scolded – and sometimes punished – *in the very name of these norms*, whose validity no one would think of calling into question. The cruelty of jealous husbands, for instance, provides memorable examples of passion leading to murder (e.g. Sir Guillaume de Roussillon in Boccaccio, *Decameron* IV, 8 and the Moor of Venice in Cinzio III, 7), but each time the emphasis falls on the criminal hybris of the individual character in question, rather than on entrenched gender injustice. These stories never cast doubt on the institutional framework that makes possible, even endorses, male mistrust of women and violence against them. Gualtieri (*Decameron* X, 10) who suspects his wife Griselda of being unworthy of him but finally changes his mind is never censored, because in the *Decameron*, as in all cultures that appreciate Griselda's story, the reestablishment of marital links is a praiseworthy assertion of social norms. Moreover, the seduction of a young woman counts as an offense only when it fails to lead to marriage, as underscored by the above examples from Cinzio and Cervantes.

In Zayas's novellas, in contrast, the very norms that guide gender relations are under attack. Legitimate unions, far from helping bring violence under control, favor its outbursts. In the *Disenchantments of Love*, seduction fails to lead to marriage, jealousy reaches a horrific climax, and the sense of personal honor, which in Cervantes functions as a check on male inconstancy, provides justification for the most vicious acts. In Zayas's world, the excesses of *honra* ("honor", understood as concern for one's reputation), which still have a comic resonance in Cervantes' *The Jealous Husband of Estramadura*, acquire an unbounded power to harm.

Because Zayas' evil doers often escape punishment, some of her stories end on a profound pessimistic note. In Italian tragic novellas, by virtue of what is called "poetic justice", the final

catastrophe either persuades the guilty side to recognize its fault, as in Bandello's story of Romeo and Juliet, whose death brings peace to the families of the Montagues and Capulets, or leads to the punishment of the villains, as in Cinzio's story of the Moor of Venice, where the Moor and the scheming ensign are executed or tortured to death. Poetic justice is often absent from Zayas' stories. In "The Most Infamous Revenge" (*Disenchantments of Love*, 2), don Carlos, a wealthy young nobleman, seduces the noble but poor Octavia. When don Carlos' father arranges for his son to marry the well-off Camila, he doesn't hesitate to abandon Octavia, of whom he has by then grown weary. Learning what happened, Octavia's brother don Juan decides to take revenge on don Carlos by seducing his wife. But since Camila rejects don Juan's courtship, he cross-dresses as a woman, gets into Camila's room, puts a dagger at her breast, and rapes her. Although don Carlos knows that his wife is innocent, he administers her a poison that makes her body swell up monstrously and, after many months of suffering, kills her. Both don Juan and don Carlos run away unpunished.

Fathers can be as cruel as husbands. In "Love for the Sake of Conquest" (*Disenchantments*, 6) the beautiful fourteen-year old Laurela is the victim of an elaborate seduction scheme devised by don Esteban, a family friend who, after persuading her to elope with him, abandons her in the church where he claimed they would be married. Laurela's uncle and father refuse to listen to her, lock her up and murder her in a pre-arranged accident. No hint of the father and the uncle's punishment or remorse mitigates the bleak atmosphere of the tale.

Blind cruelty is the prerogative of all-powerful men, but they are not the only ones to take advantage of women's inferior position. Powerless women know how to influence and maneuver their masters. In "Too Late Undeceived" (*Disenchantments of Love*, 4), don Martin falls desperately in love with an unknown

woman. When later he finds out who she is, they marry. But a female slave falsely informs don Martin that his wife has an affair with her cousin. Don Martin burns the cousin alive and locks his wife in a kennel, forcing her to drink from the dead man's skull and eat only scraps from the master's table. As a reward, the slave becomes don Martin's mistress. Two years later, falling gravely ill, she admits that she had lied. Don Martin stabs his mistress to death and rushes to free his wife, who has just died of a broken heart. In "The Ravages of Vice" (*Disenchantments of Love*, 10), unmarried Florentina initiates a long term love-relationship with don Dionis, her sister's husband. Hoping to win him for herself, Florentina arranges for a servant to accuse her sister of adultery. In a fit of rage, don Dionis kills his wife and no less than eleven servants. He then commits suicide, not without first trying to kill Florentina.

In Zayas' world, love can act in two equally ugly ways. It may either slyly aim at winning the other person's favors (and, as don Carlos, don Esteban, and Florentina's stories entail, lust drives men as well as women), or generate the urge to master the other's person body, this impulse being presented as specifically male. Fathers and husbands share a manic fear that their daughters' or wives' body would be penetrated by another man, an occurrence which, in their mind, forever stains the woman making her unworthy to live, even though the penetration might have been the result of force or the woman's consent might have been granted under the false impression that sexual union would lead to marriage. Blinded by the fear that their women might have been polluted, fathers and husbands cannot think in terms of innocence or guilt, they ignore the woman's soul, mind, or "I", and rush to dispose of her defiled body as secretly and efficiently as possible.

Can one still speak of insubordination in this context? Or we already find what Riccardo Castellana aptly called "the

empty core of an enigma" (Castellana 2013: 200)? Zayas depicts an unstable universe, governed by wild impulses and archaic phobias. Individual hybris meets no obstacle, couples are volatile, loyalty absent, and marriage brings insecurity to men and murderous tyranny to women. Insubordination, here, acquires a new meaning. Solemn marriage fails to eliminate bestiality (in Vico's sense) and the wilderness of nature never fully disappears from civil society. It is a deeply troubling topic on which, much later, Schopenhauer will have a lot to say.

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