


Comparative Literature, Ancient Rome, and the Crisis of Modern European History

Lucia Boldrini

*Goldsmiths University of London*

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**Lucia Boldrini,**

**"Comparative Literature, Ancient Rome, and the Crisis of Modern European History"**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Comparative Literature, Ancient Rome, and the Crisis of Modern European History" Lucia Boldrini considers Edward Said's and Jacques Derrida's arguments about the centrality of *romania* to the European philological tradition and the contemporary understanding of literature and discusses in this light a selection of twentieth-century novels set at the time when literature, empire, Europe, Latinity, and Christianity were coming together: Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Horia's *God Was Born in Exile*, and Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*. Linking the Roman past to the present of historical destruction and colonialism, these novels also establish a relationship between the old protagonist and a child or youth, representative of absolute innocence and authenticity, who finally walks away, dissolves or dies. In their interrupted state, these youths cannot become the future and can only presage utopia. Having held up the image of a different future and a different historical time, the novels show that only in the acknowledgment of historical contingencies can one recognize a responsibility towards generations past and yet to come, and towards those who are not "us."

**Lucia BOLDRINI**

### **Comparative Literature, Ancient Rome, and the Crisis of Modern European History**

The history of comparative literature is deemed generally to be linked to the rise of European nineteenth-century nationalisms and national literatures and, as a consequence, to European imperialism. If this is so, then one of the central questions that European comparative literature must face concerns the very idea of Europe, how this is constructed in literature and in literary studies at different key moments of European intellectual history (see, e.g., Dainotto; Gasché; Bemong, Truwant, Vermeulen). In this article I discuss the particular perspective found in a small selection of twentieth-century novels set during the height of the Roman Empire and written by European authors who had lived through World War I, the European descent into totalitarianism, and World War II (arguably, consequences of the same nationalisms which formed the initial context for the development of comparative literature), or written from the margins of what had until recently been the largest modern European empire: the British. These novels can be read as more or less direct reflections on the history of Europe, its imperialisms, its historical crises, its construction of an idea of civilization; on the construction of "Europe" and on the utopia of a different future.

Hermann Broch narrates in his 1945 *Der Tod des Vergil* — translated in the same year by Jean Starr Untermeyer as *The Death of Virgil* — the last hours of the life of the epic poet Virgil, who arrives at the port of Brundisium from Greece, accompanying the emperor Augustus. Virgil, close to death ("death's signet was graved upon his brow" [3]), has decided to burn the *Aeneid* for he now sees the poem "as an obstruction to perception" (284): "the deeper loneliness of art and ... the beauty that cannot be articulated ... made [artists] blind, blind to the world, blind to the divine quality in the world and in fellow-man" (117). However, he is dissuaded from carrying out his plan by the emperor and his envoys. The last pages show his descent into death as his thoughts dissolve in a "universal fusion beyond fate" (400) and merge with the rest of creation. Marguerite Yourcenar's 1951 *Mémoires d'Hadrien* — translated by Grace Frick as *Memoirs of Hadrian* in 1954 — is emperor Hadrian's first-person account of his reign, his philosophy, his life and loves as he feels approaching death. Early in the novel, Hadrian writes: "Like a traveler sailing the Archipelago who sees the luminous mists lift toward evening, and little by little makes out the shore, I begin to discern the profile of my death" (16). His last words are: "Let us try, if we can, to enter into death with open eyes..." (247; ellipsis in original). The narrative is addressed as a letter to the young Mark Antony, who will one day himself become emperor. Vintila Horia's 1960 *Dieu est né en exil* — translated by Arthur Lytton Sells as *God Was Born in Exile* in 1961 — is narrated in the first person by the poet Ovid in exile on the Black Sea. As in David Malouf's 1978 *An Imaginary Life* and Marin Mincu's 1997 *Diario di Ovidio* — both also written in the first person — the poet expresses his increasing admiration for the local people and for their simpler, nobler system of values than that of the materialist Romans: "the Empire itself, and therefore Augustus himself, had provoked this moral collapse ... the empire rotted from within, undermined ... by the wealth that flowed into Rome" (17). In Horia's novel, Ovid hears of the birth of a child in Palestine, under a star and recognizes in him the true god. Horia thus turns Ovid into a convert to Christianity before Christianity making him rival Virgil's prefiguring of Christ's arrival in his fourth Eclogue. Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* — also narrated by Ovid, exiled from Rome and relegated to the border outpost of Tomis — is often read as a postcolonial novel that allegorizes the Australian poet's relationship with the British metropolitan center. As in Horia's novel, this glittering, cynical poet undergoes a series of changes or metamorphoses. Initially pining for Rome and its sophisticated culture, he learns to overcome his hostility towards the local people and their "barbarous" tongue and to recognize their greater authenticity, but when he discovers a wild Child that had been raised by wolves in the forest and captures him with the intention of teaching him to speak and to be human, he realizes that he needs to go further and that he has to learn from the Child another language, silent, based not on symbolization and arbitrary conventions, but on an intuitive identity with things. Ovid's eventual death in the grasslands of the north is the poet's final transformation, perhaps a literal metamorphosis like the ones described in Ovid's great poem.

One of the features shared by these novels is what I call the heterobiographical form (see Boldrini, *Autobiographies*): narration in the first person by a character whom we recognize as a having existed

historically, but that we know to have been written by another. While Broch's novel does not conform exactly to the heterobiographical first-person narrative, its interior monologue remains constantly very close to the mind of its protagonist and can thus be seen to share important similarities with the other texts. The tension established within the "double I" of the narrative — in the simplest form, between the historical author located in the present and the historical character-narrator who lived in the past, but also between the historical individual and the fictionalized character — draws attention to the desire, even need, to retrace those historical links, pursue origins and roots, investigate, understand, and bridge the distance between then and now and between the subjects in play. At the same time, it also leads to the recognition that that gap cannot be filled and that the distance cannot be bridged. I will return to the form and its implications later. First, however, I turn to the context of debates on the status of comparative literature, with its emphasis on national literatures and on the direct relationship between literature and (national) identity, and its redefinition of the notion of literature itself. Given the history of European nationalisms, this link is an "original sin" that associates comparative literature with wars, colonialism, aggression, conquest, and marks it as a peculiarly European and Eurocentric discipline allied with a tradition that relies on, or explicitly declares, the intellectual superiority of Europe and that is thus inadequate to deal with the literary expressions of today's postcolonial, multicultural, and global world (on a recent discussion of comparative literature's nation approach and Eurocentrism, see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári).

In *Culture and Imperialism*, commenting on scholars and philologists such as Curtius, Auerbach, Spitzer, Vossler, and De Sanctis, Edward W. Said writes that "when most European thinkers celebrated humanity or culture, they were principally celebrating ideas and values ascribed to their own national culture, or Europe as distinct from the Orient, Africa, and even the Americas" (51). However, the idea of comparative literature — at least until World War II — was informed by "a more generous cultural vision" that "took nationalism to be a transitory, finally secondary matter: what mattered far more was the concert of peoples and spirits" (Said 51). This generated an idea of comparative literature as a discipline that "could furnish a transnational, even trans-human perspective on literary performance," expressing "universality" and "understanding," but also symbolizing the "crisis-free serenity of an almost ideal realm" (Said 52). According to Said, even in the concept of *Weltliteratur*, which should transcend the limitations of Europe, "Europe led the way and was the main subject of interest" (52). Indeed, "it is most specifically Romania that makes intelligible and provides a center for the enormous grouping of literatures produced worldwide; Romania underpins Europe" (Said 52). So, if "To speak of comparative literature therefore was to speak of the interaction of world literatures with one another," nevertheless "the field was epistemologically organized as a sort of hierarchy, with Europe and its Latin Christian literatures at its center and top" (Said 52; see also Beecroft <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/2>>). Said also points out that "When Auerbach, in a justly famous essay entitled 'Philologie der *Weltliteratur*,' written after World War Two, takes note of how many 'other' literary languages and literatures seemed to have emerged (as if from nowhere: he makes no mention of either colonialism or decolonization), he expresses more anguish and fear than pleasure at the prospect of what he seems so reluctant to acknowledge. Romania is under threat" (52-53).

For Jacques Derrida, the concept of "literature" is a Latin one: "*Literature* is a Latin word." Even when it "travels, emigrates, works, and is translated," even as "The Latin filiation is exported and bastardized beyond its boundaries and affinities," we continue to recognize in the word the "Latin root, in the constraining hospitality or the violent reception of a latinity" that grants us the presupposition that we can understand each other: "There is no thought, no experience, no history of literature as such and under this name, no world literature ... that must not first inherit what this latinity assumes," receives, contains, assimilates (Derrida 20-21). Specifying that literature would have to be distinguished from other concepts such as techniques, arts, epic, Greek poetry, *belles lettres*, etc., Derrida continues: "And to take account of the latinity in the modern institution of literature ... is not only to take account of Christendom as the Roman Church, of Roman law and the Roman concept of the State, indeed of Europe, although this history has counted greatly in the institution and the constitution of literature, in its relation to religion and politics" (21), it is also to take account of what this concept contemplates and makes possible, of what, outside of the European concept of literature, is or is not permissible, making it also "a question of life or violent death," for example for authors like

Salman Rushdie (against whom a *fatwa* had been issued some years previously) or writers in Derrida's native Algeria (22). In pursuing "this question concerning the Latin-Europeanness of literature" (22), Derrida then turns to Ernst Robert Curtius and his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* of 1948 contesting Curtius's notion that European literature begins with Homer. In fact, Derrida argues, "In Greece there is still no project, no social institution, no right, no concept, nor even a word corresponding to what we call, *strictu sensu*, literature" (23). Further, in words that recall Said's, Derrida writes that "The Weimarian-Roman [Curtius] sought to be between the two wars tells us something about the latinity and the history of literary nationalism: in passing, he also names Rome, Roman citizenship, and, more broadly, the *romania* to which ... literature owes so much, both according to the *romanesque* and the *romantic*" (24). Curtius "links literary experience to a juridical institution, to acquired rights, and this from the outset in the Roman figure of citizenship, of *civitas*" (24). Curtius's words, quoted by Derrida, are: "One acquires the rights of citizenship in the country of European literature only when one has spent many years in each of its provinces and has frequently moved about from one to another. One is a European when one has become a *civis romanus*" (*European Literature* 12; Curtius qtd. in Derrida 24) Remarking on the separation of European philologies since Goethe's time, Curtius observes that in academic teaching, the modern national literatures which developed "after the awakening of nationalities under the pressure of the Napoleonic superstate" (Curtius 13; Derrida 25) have undermined the possibility of inhabiting European literature as a whole. Yet, the specialization of philologists since the mid-nineteenth century has produced a wealth of material that will permit "a new universalization" (Curtius 13; Derrida 25).

Given this emphasis on the Roman origins of the institution of literature and on the pre-eminence of *romania*, it makes sense to focus on novels written at a time when the history of Europe appeared to head for total collapse and that locate their subjects at the time when that configuration of relations — literature, empire, Europe, Latinity, Christianity — was coming together, with the Roman empire at the height of its strength coinciding with the birth of Christianity (and, therefore, with the seeds of its demise) and to study these novels to see how they explore that earlier historical phase in order to reflect on the present moment.

The novels can be read in many ways: as investigations of the relationships between art and political power, of the role of writers and intellectuals in the modern world, as depictions of how power, however enlightened, can descend into despotic totalitarianism, and what art can do when confronted with such conditions. They share common structures, themes, concerns, and images. In all of them the boundaries between the human and the animal, the social and the natural, are loosened. They all employ methods of writing inspired by delirium, madness, or non-rational forms of thought (on this, see Boldrini, *Autobiographies*). While, as indicated above, they all focus on the last years, months, or hours of the life of the protagonist, a young man or child is present in all of them. In various fashions, the authors of these novels locate explicitly their narration at a time suspended between different moments, between ages, between modes of thought, between different types of certainty, as if to wait for something that is as yet unknown, and is no longer what has just gone by. Horia's Ovid says: "I am going to reread Virgil, who had had certain presentiments. The Empire is expanding in order to give place to something else, something greater and better. What is happening in the world at this moment is the preparation for a new metamorphosis of man" (85); "Something unexpected will happen, something that has already begun to happen, I don't know what or where" (133). Malouf writes in the Afterword to *An Imaginary Life* that "It was partly to break into a field of more open possibilities that I set my narrative in a remote place about which almost nothing is known, and in an age, the dawn of the Christian era, in which mysterious forces were felt to be at work and thinking had not yet settled into a rational mode" (154). In her "Reflections on the Composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian*" Yourcenar notes that already in 1927 she had heavily underscored these words by Flaubert: "Just when the gods had ceased to be, and the Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone" (269). This is what Hannah Arendt, writing about Broch, calls "the no longer and the not yet ... the turning point in history, the crisis between the no longer of antiquity and the not yet of Christianity" ("The Achievement" 482). These are moments when one can still conceive of the promise of a utopian future of unity and reconciliation alongside the awareness that we cannot know what the promise is, but that whatever it will be, it will not be utopia.

All of the novels combine historical specificity — both of the present of writing and of the historical past — with the conscious need to bridge or assess that distance between then and now, between the subjects in play (as Yourcenar writes: "It took me years to learn how to calculate exactly the distances between the emperor and myself" [271]), but also the distance between the world before and after the culmination of the crisis of European history in World War II. Yourcenar's words encapsulate this perfectly: just after discovering an earlier draft of the novel, she re-reads the copy of the *Historia Augusta* she bought when she started planning her book. In the light of "The fact of having lived in a world which is toppling around us," she comments that "Everything that the world, and I, had gone through in the interval now served to enrich these chronicles of an earlier age, and threw upon that imperial existence certain other lights and other shades" (274). Her decision to start "re-making" (274) this book and to write it "in the first person ... in order to dispense with any intermediary" (275) locates the novel precisely in the heterobiographical space of the "double I," of the relationship between the then and the now. The need to construct the future requires the ceaseless working out and working through of the relationship, of the links and the gaps between the past and the present; at the same time, it requires the awareness of the inexorability of that distance. Further emphasizing the "obvious parallel to the present" (Arendt, "Achievement" 472) of the Roman past, in another review of Broch's novel Arendt defines "the kind of bridge with which Virgil tries to span the abyss of empty space between the no longer and the not yet," an abyss that "is very real" and that "has become deeper and more frightful every single year from the fateful year of 1914 onward, until the death factories erected in the heart of Europe definitely cut the already outworn thread with which we still might have been tied to a historical entity of more than two thousand years; ... we are already living in the 'empty space,' confronted with a reality which no preconceived traditional idea of the world and man can possibly illuminate" ("No Longer" 122).

Frequent passages in the books link past and present, supporting and making even more explicit the obvious point that these novels, set two millennia earlier, are in fact also about the present of writing or the immediate past of war and destruction. When Ovid introduces himself in *An Imaginary Life*, he addresses his readers directly, locating them at the end-point of a bi-millennial cycle (like that of Yeats's poem "The Second Coming") whose beginning he is now witnessing: "I am the poet Ovid — born on the cusp ... between two cycles of time, the millennium of the old gods, that shudders to its end, and a new era that will come to its crisis at some far point in the future I can barely conceive of and where you, reader, sit in a lighted room" (19). In *The Death of Virgil*, the Roman poet becomes aware "of the people's profound capacity for evil in all its ramifications, their possibilities for human degradation in becoming a mob, and their reversion therewith to the anti-human, brought to pass by the hollowing out of existence ... so that nothing remained but the dangerous isolated life of self, a sad, sheer exteriority, pregnant with evil, pregnant with death, pregnant with a mysterious, infernal ending" (14). Horia's Ovid observes that "The wars we wage everywhere are but proof of this moral disintegration. We carry death with us like an epidemic, and we call massacres 'victories' and burials 'triumphs.' And nothing can be done to arrest the progress of evil" (133). In *Memoirs of Hadrian* the emperor remarks that "For these professionals [administrators of the empire], with their firm belief in the beneficence of our authority and in the mission of Rome to govern the world, Roman patriotism assumed brutal forms to which I was not yet accustomed" (50).

While passages like the ones above can be read existentially as referring to a general human capacity for evil, how can one not read them in terms of the "profound capacity for evil in all its ramifications," of crowds becoming mobs, of massacres on an increasingly larger scale treated as victories, of a people asserting the superiority of its race or state and its right to such supremacy, of the chillingly rational, efficient administration of war and concentration camps Europe had just experienced? Hadrian's words also imply a reflection on the corrupting nature of power: even the ruler who starts with an honorable view of the exercise of power may end by embracing brutal means to preserve it. Thus he declares his opposition to policies based on war, and yet admits to being intoxicated by participating in successful military enterprises (55); he recognizes the atrocity of war yet declares that no chief of state can accept the presence of organized enemies established at his gates so that war is "almost justified" (66), and, as general and commander, he had to be "inexorable" (this includes dismissing some incompetent officers and having the worst executed) (67); he acknowledges that the traces of Roman crimes in Greece were everywhere visible (72), yet by the

end he is happy to destroy Jerusalem to crush the Jewish people who refused the supremacy of Rome in the name of what is for him an absurd and totalitarian single god, with no possibility of compromise with different faiths and customs (197-200).

Significantly, most of Virgil's quotations from the *Aeneid* in *The Death of Virgil* come from those books in which Aeneas receives prophecies about his future (Books III, VI, VIII; the major ones are listed in the "Sources" section published at the end of the novel [424-25]). This suggests that Broch's story of Virgil too, set in the past, refers also to our present and the intervening years, just as the prophecies received by Aeneas were also about the present of Virgil and Augustus and the intervening years, or as the wars and destruction Aeneas experienced were also the civil war and destruction that Virgil's Rome had recently come through. Hadrian too refers to the prophecy in Book VIII of the *Aeneid*: "Our Rome is no longer the village of the days of Evander, big with a future which has already partly passed by" (Yourcenar 100). He continues that "other Romes will come, whose forms I see but dimly, but whom I shall have helped to mold" (101). Of course Hadrian cannot explicitly be thinking of fascism's rhetoric of re-establishing the Roman imperial ideal, but from our perspective of modern readers we cannot escape that association. This is reinforced by Hadrian's reflection that the Rome of the future "would compose for herself from the words State, Citizenry, and Republic a surer immortality" (101) and he also notes that the coins he had issued bore the words *Humanitas, Libertas, Felicitas* (101). These triads of words are likely to recall, for the modern reader, the French Revolutionary concepts of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* by which the new state — which also made ample use of Roman symbols and imagery such as the fasces — would be led. Despite the assumed eternity of Rome, Hadrian is aware that the empire would inevitably decay into barbarism: "I admitted that it was indeed vain to hope for an eternity for Athens and for Rome which is accorded neither to objects nor men ... other hordes would come, and other false prophets" (204). In words which acquire a deeper sense if we recall what Derrida defines as "the constraining hospitality or the violent reception of a latinity" that continues to determine the possible forms of our modern thinking, Hadrian admits that "the seeds of error and of ruin contained even in what is good would ... increase to monstrous proportions in the course of centuries" (204). The Emperor's words are increasingly disillusioned: "the human race had need, perhaps, of a periodical bloodbath and descent into the grave. I could see the return of barbaric codes, of implacable gods, of unquestioned despotism of savage chieftains, a world broken up into enemy states and eternally prey to insecurity ... the human species in growing older would doubtless add new refinements of horror" (205). How can one not read these words — the "increased refinements of horror" Hadrian presages — written in the mid-twentieth-century as referring to the recent past and not just to the barbarian invasions of the Dark Ages?

Another aspect is striking in its recurrence and this is what I turn to now: the relationship between the old man who narrates (or whose interior monologue we are immersed in) and a child or youth. The figure of a youth or child is present in all the novels and acquires a strong narrative and symbolic function. In *Memoirs of Hadrian*, this role is taken to an extent by Mark Antony as addressee of the letter/novel and later by Lucius, but the most important representative is Antinous, Hadrian's young lover from Bithynia in Asia Minor: perfect and beautiful, he became the subject of a religious cult that lasted for many centuries. In *God Was Born in Exile*, there are the little girl Dokia (who, as the daughter of a Roman centurion and of a Getic woman, promises a political future of unity and reconciliation between enemy populations) and the Child/Christ who, as Ovid hears from a friend who had traveled to Palestine, was born in exile among the poor in a hostile place and promises a new divine hope for humanity. In *An Imaginary Life* there is the wild Child raised by the wolves, separate from society and civilization, without language, who is captured so that Ovid may teach him human language and make him human and who eventually walks off in the spring light, arguably able to overcome the taint of civilization as Ovid lies down and dies: "And so we come to it, the place ... the point on the earth's surface where I disappear. It is spring. It is summer. I am three years old. I am sixty. The Child is there ... glittering in the late sunlight ... The fullness is in the Child's moving away from me, in his stepping so lightly, so joyfully, naked, into his own distance at last as he fades in and out of the dazzle of light ... He is walking on the water's light ... moving slowly away now into the deepest distance, above the earth, above the water, on air" (150-52). For Virgil one can of course think of the prophecy of the Fourth Eclogue, but in *The Death of Virgil* the role is taken up especially by Lysanias, a Greek youth whom Virgil talks to for part of his last, delirious night and who is a

fantasy of purity, of "civilization" and of Athens, as well as a fantasy of Virgil's own younger child-self at Mantua — "And you came along with me ... From Epirus, from Greece ... yet yours is the speech of Mantua" (45; second ellipsis in the original) — before the fall into adulthood and into the world. The poet, unable to avoid this fall, sees his own childhood as being less pure, a sham even: "childhood, which even now disclosed itself as a childish sham-holiness ... weakest in his childish play at being a god" (34). In passages echoed in the last pages of Malouf's novel, quoted above, the boy Lysanias too is transformed into an almost unsubstantial being at the end of *The Death of Virgil*: "floating between the immensities ... the longer this [floating calm] lasted ... the more evanescent became the evaporating boyish figure, more and more evanescent, nakeder and nakeder, drawn into the starry brightness ... oh, transparent! Not quite here but yet at hand" (390); "the day had blossomed, a blossom in itself, and it unfolded to a gracious enchantment, resting in its own light ... Had the journey ended? ... he floated, he stepped over the waters, and surrounding him was the stillness of morning, a spring morning of no season ... in a single breath of never-ending springtime" (393-94).

The encounter of the old man and the youth may be taken to symbolize the continuity of life or the passing on of a symbolic inheritance, the handing down of a knowledge through the generations (most evident in *Memoirs of Hadrian*, if we think that the book is a letter to the young Mark, transmitting to him the teachings of the older, experienced Hadrian); or it could suggest the demise of a decaying, diseased world (Europe, if we read it as referring to the present) and the advent of a new cycle (at its most evident in the birth of the child Christ in *God Was Born in Exile*). However, Arendt's words suggest something different: "For the decline of the old, the birth of the new, is not necessarily an affair of continuity; between the generations, between those who for some reason or other still belong to the old and those who either feel the catastrophe in their very bones or have already grown up with it, the chain is broken and an 'empty space,' a kind of historical no man's land, comes to the surface which can be described only in terms of 'no longer and not yet'" ("No Longer" 121). While we may take note that the space of *An Imaginary Life* too can be seen as making tangible such "no man's land" — "It is the desolateness of this place that day after day fills my mind with its perspectives.... We are at the ends of the earth ... The country lies open on every side ... with a view to infinity ... But I am describing a state of mind, no place. I am in exile here" (15-16) — the more important point here is that, in light of Arendt's words, Virgil — like Ovid in Malouf's novel and in Horia's, perhaps like Hadrian in Yourcenar's, too — would belong to the generation of those who have experienced the catastrophe in their bones, and who therefore already represent the possibility of the new. But if this is so, how, then, should we read the figure of the child or young man?

In *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Antinous commits suicide for reasons not fully explained. The suicide is seen as a sacrifice to the Emperor, to ensure his greatness, but I would argue that it can also be seen as the event that prevents the youth from ever falling into adulthood, into ageing, into the necessities of compromise with the world, and that it is necessary to preserve an ideal of purity the world does not allow. In *An Imaginary Life* Ovid becomes aware that the Child's entry into the social world of human beings would come at the cost of his innocence and his authenticity. In the end Ovid's choice — arguably an entirely coherent one for him in poetic and philosophical terms (see Boldrini, *Autobiographies* 38-48) — is to leave Tomis and go beyond the boundaries of civilization, beyond the world of human social relations and of language. No longer the Child's teacher, he finally lets himself be guided by the Child, who finally moves on, away from him, remaining forever a Child, not a Man. Similarly, Lysanias in Broch's novel, can be taken as the fantasy of youth before the fall into adulthood: he too, at the end, floats away, still a Boy, never a Man. In their interrupted state, can these children be productive of utopia, what Ernst Cassirer called a world "forever in the making ... a symbolic construct designed to portray and to bring into being a new future for mankind" (61-62)? And what should we make of this location of the utopia in a past that cannot be recovered and to which we may be tempted to allocate the status of a Golden Age, but which, in fact, we know to have been as violent as the present? As Hadrian remarks: "Our epoch, the faults and limitations of which I knew better than anyone else, would perhaps be considered one day, by contrast, as one of the golden ages of man" (205).

These youths, frozen in time, disappear, walk away, dissolve, or die before the old man's end. Thus they are not real children who can go on to build a future — except for *God Was Born in Exile*, which is a Christian novel and therefore does see the Child as harbinger of an actual transformation



that "will restore to mankind the freshness of a new beginning" (133). But if the child represents ideal authenticity, an absolute innocence, truth, and also the promise of a different future, and yet cannot at the same time become it (because becoming is what this child cannot do: the child is), then the child can presage not a historical future, but only a utopia (in its double sense of a beautiful/no place) that cannot by definition come true. These old men turning to the young would then be not a simple passing on, a handing over of the world, nor a simple allegory of the old replaced by the new or of hope for the future. There would be, instead, the acknowledgement that — after the destruction and historical horrors "that the world had gone through in the interval" — we can dream of the figure of the child or youth and hold it as an ideal, but we can only continue to live in a world of history and of inevitable death, decay, of horrors which will recur and of compromises that are the nature of everyday social life.

This brings me back to the questions which Said posed about comparative literature and its difficulty in addressing both a humanistic, transcendent subject (literature, the human soul) and a historical one whose particular conditions and determinations we struggle to recognize and accept. And it brings me back to the questions posed by Derrida about the ways in which our sense of "literature" is determined by its past: not just the past we are used to think of in relation to comparative literature and in relation to the idea itself of Europe (the Romantic moment, or, going further back and following Curtius, the Latin Middle Ages), but a past that shaped the forms, laid the foundations, and established the boundaries of our modern thinking: a past of which the current thinking on the limits, deaths, and crises of comparative literature needs to be aware. What these novels highlight through their simultaneous adoption of history and transcendence, of utopia and its impossibility, their investigation of the relationships, gaps, and bridges between the historical past and the present, is their awareness of the pitfalls of the ideal modern concept that the precursors of Auerbach and Curtius had held firm: that the "concert of peoples and spirits that transcended the shabby political realm of bureaucracy, armies, custom barriers, and xenophobia" enabled an ideal "transnational, even trans-human perspective on literary performance" (Said 51). This ideal has been revealed to have degenerated, in Hadrian's words again, into "brutal forms" and "increased refinements of horror" or, in Virgil's, into a "profound capacity for evil" that has reversed "to the anti-human."

And yet, the child holds out its promise. In foregrounding all this, these novels reveal a responsibility towards history and towards literature that in the post-War and postcolonial world a literature that looks to the past in order to be grounded in the present must take upon itself. What they show, I argue, is finally a recognition that after having held the image of the ideal of a different future and of a different historical time, there comes again the acknowledgment that the individual's responsibilities and choices are located in a particular historical moment and must respond to it. This does not mean disowning a sense of humanity bound by more than particular and material circumstances. Rather, it means that it is only in the acknowledgement of historical contingencies that one can recognize a duty and a responsibility towards the future and the past, towards generations past and to come, and towards those who are not "us."

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Author's profile: Lucia Boldrini teaches English and comparative literature at Goldsmiths University of London. Her interests in scholarship include comparative literature, fictional biographies and autobiographies of historical individuals, and modernism and the Middle Ages. In addition to numerous articles, Boldrini's book publications include *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction* (2012) and *Joyce, Dante, and the Poetics of Literary Relations: Language and Meaning in Finnegans Wake* (2001). E-mail: <[l.boldrini@gold.ac.uk](mailto:l.boldrini@gold.ac.uk)>