

Homo Legens

FAR FROM CONTRADICTING those who speak of the decline of reading, the vast quantities of new titles available today, with print-runs stretching into the millions, seem rather to confirm them in their conviction. For one thing, compared to the growth in the global population of potential book-readers, the expansion of industrial book-production is almost insignificant. Moreover, so the argument runs, this is not merely a quantitative matter. Within the configuration of the contemporary life-world, books occupy a less and less determinant position; the other mass media have irreversibly displaced them as social institutions for the creation and moulding of public opinion. In short, according to this line of thinking, reading is increasingly a thing of the past, and with it the type of civilization that has revolved around it.

There is no shortage of evidence for such views. For example, books have been expelled from politics; in order to participate in it, one no longer needs to be 'well read'—on the contrary, that would constitute an obstacle, a defect to be compensated for by other mediatic virtues. The figure of the politician-ideologue belongs very much to the past. In other spheres, emotional release no longer occurs while reading romance novels, but in front of the TV or cinema screen; scientific information reaches a general audience much more effectively through television programmes than through popularizations in book form; even a large portion of poetic production seems to have returned to its old imbrication with music. Everything would seem to indicate that while people will of course continue to read, it will be as a merely secondary procedure, an occasional accompaniment to other mediums for communication.

Nevertheless, it is worth asking: when we speak of the decline of books and reading, what is it that we are actually lamenting? Is it merely the narrowing of reading's field of relevance, its loss of social importance as the means for consciousness to gain access to the world? I think not. What we are lamenting is something perhaps harder to grasp than that, but more radical: the possible extinction of an entire species—*Homo legens*, the human who reads.

Who is *Homo legens*? Not simply a human being who among other things reads, but one whose direct and intimate experience of the world—always mediated by the indirect experience transmitted by the customs of the community—unfolds through another indirect experience of the world: that which he or she acquires through the solitary reading of books.

The existence of this species is, of course, well documented. Its appearance can be traced to the ancient world. But its generalization in mature form is a recent phenomenon, dating back to the sixteenth century. The books that had been handed down, both religious and those of the classical pagan tradition, began to be examined with patience and passion; these texts were joined, in steadily increasing numbers, by new books designed to at once satisfy and foment a demand for reading that appeared to be limitless. This notably attracted the paternalist attentions of the Spanish Crown, concerned for the psychic-religious health of its subjects: in 1531 it banned the export of 'romances' and 'vain histories' to the Indies, since they 'render indistinct in the minds of readers the boundary between the real and the imaginary'. One of the most salient examples of *Homo legens* also dates from this epoch, though he belongs of course to the realm of literary fiction: Don Quixote, whose excessively close contact with chivalresque novels leads him to try to save the earthly realm from its present condition by reconstructing it in imaginary form. *Homo legens* acquires a broader presence from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards. It reaches its apogee during the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, in the age of so-called 'empathetic' reading. It is only at this moment that the Kantian postulate for the behaviour that should characterize the enlightened individual—to decide for oneself, under no tutelage and on the basis of one's own judgement—becomes genuinely possible.

However, there are indications that the spread of *Homo legens* did not take place only to promote the realization of cultural possibilities; other forces, less well disposed or even hostile to life, were also in play. For *Homo legens* is a modality of the modern, singular individual in its prototypical form. Shorn of the traditional identity of his communitarian ancestors, the singular individual is nonetheless condemned to search out a concrete configuration for his co-existence with others. Indeed, within the formation of *Homo legens* we can discern a spontaneous response by society to the emerging conditions of capitalist modernity, and especially to the massification of the social subject: the collective individual. This massification implies a loss of community—the *Heimatslosigkeit* of which Heidegger spoke—in which singular individuals are left exposed to the elements; they lack a social body, a shared place and myth, that would allow them to situate themselves in face of the enigma of existence.

We should not be surprised that, in the history of the Western world, *Homo legens* should have consolidated its presence especially in the parts of Europe that experienced the Protestant cultural revolution; or that the generalization of the species in Catholic Europe, the Mediterranean and the Americas met with difficulties which continue to this day. It was Protestantism that paved the way for the formation of the abstract, singular individual that we find above all in those places where capitalist

modernity imposed itself in the most thoroughgoing manner. Yet *Homo legens* both collaborates with and paradoxically contradicts the process of pulverization of the traditional social subject. For it is sceptical regarding the concreteness that modern capitalist society claims to be able to give to the masses of private property-owners, as a substitute for the concreteness possessed by life in the lost communities; it sees how illusory is the identity promised by the national community. Compared to the latter, it prefers the virtual community imagined with the author of the book it reads.

This is not the only ambivalence of *Homo legens*. Its formation is part of the compartmentalization of time that takes place under capitalist modernity: on the one hand there is the time of production or labour, on the other that of leisure or recuperation. With the activities required for getting a livelihood or accumulating wealth concentrated exclusively in the former, all activities aimed at breaking the automatism of production routines and at cultivating creativity are relegated to the latter. *Homo legens* respects more than anyone else the modern separation of the two types of time. But this respect becomes a way of exalting the special function of art, festivities and play. *Homo legens* exaggerates this separation to such an extreme that it distances itself from others, tucking itself away in a remote corner; in doing this, however, it introduces the greatest confusion between the work of reading and the enjoyment of it, between the consumption of the written word and its production.

An expression of the processes that have constructed the modern individual, yet at the same time of a revolt against them; compliant with the modern separation of the time of routine from the time of freedom, yet at the same time a transgressor of that divide, *Homo legens* is both a document of modern barbarism and a document of the latter's culture. Is it truly an endangered species, then? This question should, in my opinion, be preceded by another, which will allow us to clarify the problem: is the negative destiny of books really a sign of the disappearance of *Homo legens*, or does it merely indicate a dethronement, a loss of power, of a certain usage of the book? In effect, what is being destabilized, amid the reconfiguration of reading that new communications media have entailed, is the traditional canonization of books; a usage that for centuries has served the hierarchies that reign over modern capitalist society. Today, society has begun to use books in a different way: disordered, chaotic, alien to the 'instruction manuals' and canons imposed by national education systems since the nineteenth century. This phenomenon could easily accelerate a plunge into barbarism—but it could equally promote a creative, democratic re-reading of the cultural heritage. It is this ambivalent situation itself that the alarmists present as proof of the decline of *Homo legens*.

However, *Homo legens* is not an endangered species, nor will it be for some time to come. Its existence depends on the persistence of the type

of singular individual established by capitalist modernity. The continuation of that modernity, even though it be shaken by crises which radically put it into question, seems still to be assured by the plentiful resources that can be devoted to its survival. Moreover, even if the abstract individual of modern, mass society is eventually replaced by another, new type of concrete social individual, neither archaic nor regressive, *Homo legens* will persist; as a mutant, if you will, but faithful to the art of eliciting, from the decipherment of a text, glimpses of the multiplicity of possible worlds.

This is an edited extract from an essay first published in Bolívar Echeverría, *Vuelta de siglo*, Mexico City 2006.