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The School and Its Many Pasts

edited by Juri Meda, Lucia Paciaroni and Roberto Sani

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The School and Its Many Pasts

III: Collective Memories of School

edited by Juri Meda and Roberto Sani

Dystopian Schools between Reality and Narrative Fiction

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1. “Educated words”

The massive educational-training apparatus set up in Italy during the Fascist period showed, with disconcerting and dramatic power, how the school, that is far from being a protected and safe place from the point of view of the transmission of educational models, could actually prove to be a very effective tool for anchoring propaganda and a vehicle for the spread of power and its ideas by totalitarian regimes.

Borrowing this awareness from the realities of twentieth-century dictatorships, science fiction-dystopian narratives¹, both when they speak directly about schools and, more generally, educational institutions, and when they are silent about them, take it for granted that the protagonists of the stories have been formed within a particular system to which they are expected to conform², but from which, contrary to the regime’s expectations, they often dissociate themselves. With outcomes that are not always positive.

Orwell in the novel 1984³, first published in 1949, highlights already how the promotion of ignorance or, at the very least, the polarization of knowledge, can prove to be one of the educational priorities of authoritarian regimes, whatever their ideology of reference. In his need to reflect, and make people reflect, on the consequences of totalitarianism⁴, the author narrates about how the doctrine of Soving – the form of socialism that rules in the state of Oceania – requires that words also be “educated”⁵ in order to prevent them from being misused. The process also involves revising the meaning of key words such as war, freedom, and ignorance, which in the context of the novel, take on an oxymoronic meaning, as opposed to the one conventionally used. The slogans that

¹ See, in this regard: A. Aldridge, *The Scientific World View in Dystopia*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1984; M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1994; G. Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016; W. Grandi, *Gli ingranaggi sognati. Scienza, fantasia e tecnologia nelle narrazioni per l’infanzia e l’adolescenza*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2017.

² M. Colin, *I bambini di Mussolini. Letteratura, libri, letture per l’infanzia sotto il fascismo*, Brescia, Editrice La Scuola, 2012.

³ G. Orwell, *1984*, London, Martin Seeker & Warburg, 1949.

⁴ M. Ceretta (ed.), *G. Orwell. Antistalinismo e critica del totalitarismo. L’utopia negativa*, Firenze, Olschki, 2006.

⁵ D. Montino, *Le parole educate. Libri e quaderni tra fascismo e Repubblica*, Milano, Selene, 2005.

stand out on the facade of the Ministry of Truth (Miniver in Newspeak) – *War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength*⁶ – represent the Party's actual manifesto.

While it is simple enough to understand, though terrifying, how subverting the concept of war and freedom means for the Socing to keep the population in a condition of closure and total subservience, it is through the third concept, ignorance, that the Party makes explicit and enforces its position of absolute supremacy over a population progressively stripped of basic human prerogatives.

To this end, even the school, that boys and girls left at age nine⁷ and then took specific courses at different ages of their life, is called upon to deplete cultural resources.

All ambiguities and shades of meaning had been purged out of them. So far as it could be achieved, a Newspeak word of this class was simply a staccato sound expressing ONE clearly understood concept. It would have been quite impossible to use the A vocabulary for literary purposes or for political or philosophical discussion. It was intended only to express simple, purposive thoughts, usually involving concrete objects or physical actions⁸.

Even the vocabulary of Newspeak, therefore, is constituted in such a way as to make any form of thought other than that of the Party impossible. And from this point of view, the banning of metaphorical language represents the height of the repressive boycott against critical thought and any form of divergence. More insidious still, if possible, is the continuous process of revision and purging: from the texts of words and concepts deemed alien to Socing; from the history of actual events in favor of regime propaganda.

A few years after the publication of George Orwell's *1984*, Ray Bradbury reiterates in another novel, *Fahrenheit 451*⁹, the horror that dictatorial-dystopian regimes hold toward the past, and thus history, by telling of an unspecified future in which books are burned in the public squares and the population is "acculturated" through continuous, relentless and alienating television broadcasting. Yet even that dystopian world has a school system, articulated in the orders and grades we know, designed to provide power for the Government. A school system not intended to provide an adequate education for every citizen, but to ensure their homogenization and interchangeability. In a cynically lucid passage, Captain Beatty explains to Montag: «Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy»¹⁰. The ruthlessness of this statement is corroborated by the recognition that «Heredity and environment are funny things. You can't rid yourselves of all the odd ducks in just a few years. The home environment can undo a lot you try to do at school. That's why we've lowered the kindergarten age year after year until now we're almost snatching them from the cradle»¹¹.

⁶ G. Orwell, *1984*, cit., p. 130.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

⁹ R. Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1953.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Once again, it is emphasized that schools are a necessary educational institution for totalitarian regimes because they are completely subservient to their needs and malleable in the face of their requirements. This circumstance, present in both narrative fiction and historical reality, should lead, at least democratic nations, or so-called democratic nations, to protect education from possible and deleterious incursions of power within the mechanisms that regulate educational institutions and the content they are supposed to convey. Yet we know well that those incursions, at different levels, operate, more or less deliberately and more or less blatantly, within the school, wherever it is located.

And so, returning to *Fahrenheit 451*, in Montag – the oxymoronic fireman that is trained to burn books – only needs to note with Commander Beatty that:

Discipline relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped, English and spelling gradually neglected, finally almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, pleasure lies all about after work. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts?¹²

And if anyone disagrees or appears interested in something as eccentric as reading, the strategies in place in the school need to be adopted even more vigorously. The captain, therefore, continues his harangue by showing what the government's own philosophy of education is:

Give the people contests they win by remembering the words to more popular songs or the names of state capitals or how much corn Iowa grew last year. Cram them full of noncombustible data, chock them so damned full of "facts" they feel stuffed, but absolutely "brilliant" with information. Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving. And they'll be happy!¹³

People, Bradbury continues, have adapted to the new educational practices to such an extent that «the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord¹⁴». This observation, so fitting even for a society such as that of modern-day Italy, in which people read less and less and worse, should lead one to reflect on how schools should be an antidote against the abandonment of reading and not, on the contrary, a poison for the pleasure of reading.

2. *Where Dystopia and Utopia converge*

The fear that reading will become obsolete and that schools can help make this a reality permeates other "dystopian" novels, primarily *The Telling* by Ursula K. Le Guin¹⁵.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 53. See in this regard also M.C. Locchi, *Fahrenheit 451 e il dibattito sui limiti alla libertà di espressione*, «Anamorphosis: rivista internazionale de direito e literatura», vol. 2, n. 1, 2016, pp. 33-52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁵ U.K. Le Guin, *The Telling*, San Diego, Harcourt, 2000.

In the novel, the author narrates the events that occurred on Aka, a remote planet in time and space on which a despotic and obtuse technocratic¹⁶ regime prevails.

The government of this world, to gain technological power and intellectual freedom, had outlawed the past. [...] To this government who had declared they would be free of tradition, custom, and history, all old habits, ways, modes, manners, ideas, pieties were sources of pestilence, rotten corpses to be burned or buried. The writing that had preserved them was to be erased¹⁷.

All texts written in the old fonts, in the name of Science, have been destroyed or, says Sutti, the protagonist, «if it exists, I don't know what it is, because the Ministry doesn't allow access to it. So all I was able to work on is modern aural literature. All written to Corporation specifications. It tends to be very standardised»¹⁸.

In Aka, therefore, there is a school system in which children «were educated as producer-consumers»¹⁹. Needless to say, that «Akan government was obsessive in its detestation of “deviance”»²⁰ and especially for those who secretly continued to practice the ancient cult of Narration. A cult that involves attending clandestine schools, learning the forbidden language and gaining access to a now-forgotten alphabet. All at the risk of one's freedom and sometimes one's existence.

Compared to Orwellian narratives²¹, *The Telling* seems to provide new life to the dystopian genre and point to original directions of meaning in adding to the plot the utopian twist that, already hinted at in Bradbury, becomes dominant in literature aimed at *Young Adults* in the first two decades of the 21st century.

Series such as Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies*²², James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*²³, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*²⁴, Veronica Roth's *Divergent*²⁵ and Lauren Oliver's *Delirium*²⁶, to name few of the best-known examples, pick up the baton passed on by Le Guin and turn dystopian regimes into an opportunity, though a dramatic and terrible one, to establish a new civilization.

¹⁶ For further study: A. Aldridge, *The Scientific World View in Dystopia*, cit.

¹⁷ K. Le Guin, *The Telling*, cit., p. 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²¹ The Orwellian adjective is used here to define those dystopian narratives characterized by a negative, tragically unresolved ending.

²² Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series consists of four volumes *Uglies*, *Pretties*, *Specials*, *Extras* published by Simon Pulse (New York) between 2005-2007.

²³ James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* series consists of three volumes *The Maze Runner*, *The Scorch Trials* and *The Death Cure* published by Delacorte Press (New York) between 2009-2011.

²⁴ Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* series consists of three volumes *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire* and *Mokinjay* published by Scholastic (New York) between 2008-2011.

²⁵ Veronica Roth's *The Divergent* series consists of three volumes *Divergent*, *Insurgent* and *Allegiant* published by Katherine Tegen Books (New York) between 2011-2013.

²⁶ Lauren Oliver's *The Delirium* series consists of three volumes *Delirium*, *Pandemonium* and *Requiem* published by HarperCollins (New York) between 2011-2013.

Suspended between science fiction and fantasy²⁷, those series, in fact, advance the claim that only from the disruption of the status quo can a better world be born. And they do so by telling how the rebellious teenagers, that are considered “deviants” because they do not conform to the system and “different” because they do not conform to expectations, both physically and behaviorally, take it upon themselves to denounce, overturn, and subvert the rules imposed by an adult world fossilized in its own desire for self-preservation and self-reproduction.

In Scott Westfield’s *Uglies*²⁸ quadrilogy, for example, the story is told of a world in which boys and girls can be *Uglies*, or “normal”, until the age of fifteen; then they are subjected by law to extreme cosmetic surgery that corrects every flaw and makes them *Pretties*. Along with the physique, however, their minds are also manipulated, flattened, emptied of thoughts, feelings, desires.

The utopia manifested by the civilization of the New-Pretties in which all differences – physical and mental – are to be erased, hides under the veil of perfect equality, the dramatic dystopia of self-annihilation, homogenization, and stultification aimed at the anesthesia of all creative and critical capacity²⁹.

The *Pretties* turn out, in fact, to be frozen in an eternal pursuit of pleasure and detached from any temptation of political and social participation. Leaving adults, who have discovered a way to stretch their existence almost to eternity, free field to continue to hold power, wealth, authority. To do so, however, they need an institution that educationally supports the choices of those who govern: schools.

Even in the world of the *Uglies*, as is the case in the other Young Adult dystopian novel series, the school remains at all times, an indispensable institution and a fundamental point of reference. The term school is used on an interminable series of occasions³⁰, sometimes simply to mention that that institution also exists within the world the author is describing; others to emphasize characteristics peculiar to a particular educational system.

In the saga written by Scott Westerfield, the school has the overriding function of preparing schoolchildren for the future of perfection that society arranges for anyone who has turned sixteen³¹ and to do so, it inevitably distorts history and alters its contents.

²⁷ For further study: S. Albertazzi, *La letteratura fantastica*, Bari, Laterza, 1993; W. Grandi, *Infanzia e mondi fantastici*, Bologna, BUP, 2007; R. Giovannoli, *La scienza della fantascienza*, Milano, Bompiani, 2015; G. De Turris, S. Fusco, *Le meraviglie dell'impossibile. Fantascienza: miti e simboli*, Milano-Udine, Mimesi Edizioni, 2016; W. Grandi, *Gli ingranaggi sognati*, cit.

²⁸ Interestingly, only the first three volumes have been translated in Italy and the series has been given the title: *Beauty* instead of *Uglies*.

²⁹ A. Antoniazzi, *Contaminazioni. Letteratura per ragazzi e crossmedialità*, Roma, Carocci, 2012, p. 134. My translation.

³⁰ In this regard, it would be interesting to prepare quantitative research on the presence of the word school within narrative dystopias and activate comparative and interpretive strategies to better understand the phenomenon.

³¹ Interestingly, sixteen years of age represents a threshold that is chorally considered valid when taking into account that it also represents the end of compulsory schooling in Italy.

Thinking about the past of the society prior to the New-Pretties, Shay, a friend of the protagonist Tally, recites (recited) what she learned in school:

«Everyone judged everyone else based on their appearance. People who were taller got better jobs, and people even voted for some politicians just because they weren't quite as ugly as everybody else. Blah, blah, blah».

«Yeah, and people killed one another over stuff like having different skin color». Tally shook her head. No matter how many times they repeated it at school, she'd never really quite believed that one.

«So what if people look more alike now? It's the only way to make people equal»³².

Scholastic indoctrination is pervasive and obstinate, and its effectiveness manifests itself on many levels, including in terms of self-awareness and one's projection into a future that those in power have already planned. In this sense, another dialogue between Tally and Shay becomes as symptomatic as ever:

«I'm serious, Tally», Shay said once they were out in the water. «Your nose isn't ugly. I like your eyes, too».

«My eyes? Now you're totally crazy. They're way too close together».

«Who says?»

«Biology says».

Shay splashed a handful of water at her. «You don't believe all that crap, do you, that there's only one way to look, and everyone's programmed to agree on it?»

«It's not about believing, Shay. You just know it. You've seen pretties. They look... wonderful».

«They all look the same».

«I used to think that too. But when Peris and I would go into town, we'd see a lot of them, and we realized that pretties do look different. They look like themselves. It's just a lot more subtle, because they're not all freaks».

«We're not freaks, Tally. We're normal. We may not be gorgeous, but at least we're not hyped-up Barbie dolls»³³.

The idea of the doll, or at least the idea of a society pushing young girls toward an ideal of aesthetic perfection, accompanied by the idea of subservience and powerlessness harkens back to another dystopian novel, Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours*³⁴.

Just as in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*³⁵, from which it takes its cue, O'Neill's novel refers, inevitably, to dystopian narratives of a feminist matrix³⁶. Mirella Billi, in this regard argues, that «Dystopian veins, always present in women's discourse, with the reassertion of repressive policies or even fundamentalist societies, turn into

³² S. Westerfeld, *Uglies*, New York, Simon Pulse, 2005, p. 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.36.

³⁴ Louise O'Neill, *Only Ever Yours*, London, Quercus Editions Ltd, 2014.

³⁵ M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1985.

³⁶ C.M. Adden, U.K. Le Guin, *Beyond Genre: Fiction for Children and Adults*, New York-London, Routledge, 2005; S. Bernardo (ed.), *Ursula K. Le Guin: A Critical Companion*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2006; D.E. Robert, *Race, Gender, and Genetic Technologies: A New Reproductive Dystopia?*, «Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society», vol. 34, n. 4, 2009, pp. 783-804; R. Onnis, A.C. Palladino, M. Spinelli, *Fantascienza femminista: immaginare il genere nella cultura italiana contemporanea*, Firenze, Franco Cesati, 2022.

real dystopias, which describe realities that are concretely possible or even exist³⁷». The choice to dwell, on this occasion, on Louise O'Neill's work relates to the fact that her protagonist, Isabel, spelled with a lowercase initial, is a teenager and is about to turn sixteen. The age of sixteen represents, as we have seen, a kind of age-threshold beyond which it becomes difficult, at least in young adult narratives, to be able to reprogram one's existence independently, without wearing the habitus of expectations that societies seem to pour on adults.

Only Ever Yours is set in a dystopian future in which, following a natural cataclysm, the survivors have established a highly hierarchical society in which women have been disenfranchised and enslaved. Even their names are written all in lowercase letters since capital letters are reserved for authorities and men.

Gender discrimination occurs at the very moment of birth when the girls are taken to the School. There, for sixteen years, the girls study with the goal to be part of one of the three categories provided for adult women: *companion*, *concubine* and *chastity* (a kind of lay nuns dedicated to the care and training of new eves). Needless to say, that the School trains them to be pretty. The School trains them to be good. The School trains them to always be willing. All their lives, the eves have been waiting. The Penelope short stories – devoted, submissive and perpetually expectant – are thus trained (not instructed or educated) for the exclusive “use and consumption” of men. And it is caste-ruth on the eve of their 16th birthday that reveals to the pupils the School's true purpose:

«Your Ceremony is mere months away. It is imperative that the correct choices are made and that each of you is placed within the appropriate third. All the theoretical knowledge that you have been taught during your sixteen years in School must now be put into practice».

She pauses, knowing we are hanging on her every word.

«Another element is to be added to your timetable. You will be introduced to the ten Inheritants that were born the same year that you were designed, the very men for whom you were created»³⁸.

At that point a real selection process begins – similar to a beauty contest, but much more degrading – in which the eve must try to win the most coveted role, that of *companion* or, at least, that of achieving *concubine* status in some lord's harem. Of course, those who score the lowest are destined for the neglected role of *chastity*.

As in *Huglies*, however, in *Only Ever Yours* something in the educational process does not work out as society had planned, and Isabel tries to rebel against the status quo, aware that, perhaps for her, the happy ending is an unplanned option.

While O'Neill's novel focuses on denouncing the plight of women by shifting educational and social responsibilities to the repressive and possessive behaviors of a society ruled exclusively by male power, dystopian sagas aimed generally at young readers, placing emphasis on other aspects that do not concern gender discrimination. Or, at least, they do not focus only on those.

³⁷ M. Billi, *Utopia al femminile: eutopie, distopie e fantasie compensatorie*, in L. De Michelis, G. Iannaccaro, A. Vescovi (edd.), *Il fascino inquieto dell'utopia*, Milano, Ledizioni, 2014, pp. 143-159.

³⁸ O'Neill, *Only Ever Yours*, cit., p. 125.

In those sagas, in fact, discrimination occurs predominantly by social strata, religious affiliations and/or mere geographical location. And the various governments present in those narratives, all authoritarian and short-sighted in the face of the needs of the people, particularly of the younger generation, see the school as the best tool for the transmission and reiteration of their dictates. Thus, for example, in Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games*, each of the Districts that make up Panem has its own school system suitably adapted to direct education toward specific models of society and to train schoolchildren for the life they will have to lead once they become adults.

As for District Twelve, it is the protagonist of the saga herself, Katniss Everdeen, who describes the programs that the school offers.

In school, they tell us the Capitol was built in a place once called the Rockies. District 12 was in a region known as Appalachia. Even hundreds of years ago, they mined coal here. Which is why our miners have to dig so deep. Somehow it all comes back to coal at school. Besides basic reading and math most of our instruction is coal-related. Except for the weekly lecture on the history of Panem. It's mostly a lot of blather about what we owe the Capitol. I know there must be more than they're telling us, an actual account of what happened during the rebellion. But I don't spend much time thinking about it. Whatever the truth is, I don't see how it will help me get food on the table³⁹.

Different, but with the same expected outcomes, is the school system present in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series. In that closed, asphyxiated world, always the same, children from the different factions – *Abnegation*, *Amity*, *Candor*, *Dauntless* and *Erudite* – are educated together and together they learn the general rules of society and the codes of behavior of each group. It is not until the students turn sixteen that they are tested to determine the faction best suited to them. It is the children, however, who decide which faction will be their destination during the Ceremony of Choice. Only then do the factions take charge of completing each new adept's education. Those who do not complete initiation become stateless and live outcasts in the peripheries.

3. *It's better to go to school*

The examples of novels, graphic-novels, films, video games and other dystopian narratives for young adults could go on and on. In most of those stories, school represents a coercive institution that aims to homogenize, standardize, and plagiarize students rather than set them free. Yet, upon closer inspection, perhaps it is through school that Tally, Isabel, Katniss, Beatrix, and the other protagonists of the dystopian narratives we are analyzing, learn to look at their own reality with a different gaze and can make subversive choices vis-à-vis an obtuse and self-referential authority.

School, then, even when enslaved to an authoritarian power, deprived of critical approach and imbued with propaganda and regime rhetoric, is preferable to mere lack of

³⁹ S. Collins, *Hunger Games*, New York, Scholastic, 2008, p. 71.

education. Indeed, that institution, even when it presents dystopian traits, provides the basic tools so that the protagonists can break free from the known, the usual and those educational cages that seek to repress their every personal drive. Sometimes all it takes is a dash of curiosity, the reading of a few forbidden texts or, simply the perception of a few out-of-tune elements within the proposed content to ignite the spark of change. Indeed, even the most obscurantist school offers its pupils the minimum tools so that they can cultivate secretly their own curiosities.

It is the protagonists of the novels, with their doubts, perplexities, and weaknesses, who show the way out of the impasse by revealing that, in order to save oneself, human beings need to identify the boundaries of the cage within which they are locked and, subsequently, if possible, to unhinge it. The sentence uttered by Beatrice Prior, the protagonist of the series written by Veronica Roth, «I am not Abnegation. I am not Dauntless. I am Divergent. And I can't be controlled»⁴⁰ then becomes a veritable manifesto for those who find the courage to rebel against the *status quo*, ready to suffer the consequences.

If the school represents, in spite of everything, an indispensable point of reference for attempting to break free from dystopias, it is because the silence of educational institutions, characteristic of so many narratives, that the interpretations become more interesting, and the questions more pressing. The existential situation of the protagonists, both in historical reality and in narrative fiction, is undoubtedly extremely more complex when power, or some catastrophe, prevents boys and girls from going to school. It is at that juncture that the young protagonists, in order to extricate themselves from the terrible situations in which they are immersed, must draw on all their resources and, in the best of cases, rely on the school memories of those who retain some reminiscence of them. Often, on these occasions, it is books that are the emancipating tool par excellence: hated by dictatorships, burned in public squares to preserve citizens from knowledge that could set them free and make them yearn for a better world, they are a fundamental presence in dystopian literature and particularly in that aimed at young adults.

If in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* the book becomes a tale that is reiterated and preserved for posterity through the spoken word, it is in Beatrice Masini's *Bambini nel bosco*⁴¹ (Children in the Woods) that that becomes a unique and unrepeatable opportunity for the little protagonists to recognize their humanity. Awakened without memory after an unspecified catastrophe, the boys and girls find themselves divided into bands within an impassable enclosure. From the loudspeaker, a voice continually repeats the rules to be followed, including, «Do not ask [...] things you cannot know»⁴².

The arrival of a new child triggers curiosity and distrust, especially because he always brings with him a very precious secret object that well hidden from the guardians' view. It is the most forbidden of all objects: a book. None of the children can read, or at least they do not remember being able to, so Tom, secretly, in the woods, reads to them. As if

⁴⁰ V. Roth, *Divergent*, New York, Katherine Tegen Books, 2011, p. 442.

⁴¹ B. Masini, *Bambini nel bosco*, Milano, Fanucci, 2014.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

by magic, the stories awaken the children's memory. And with memory also awakened words, numbers, curiosity, the desire for freedom, and nothing can ever be the same again.

The book, therefore, does not represent for Tom and his friends a mere opportunity for knowledge, but a real tool for emancipation and intellectual awakening. In another dystopian novel, *Anna* by Nicolò Ammaniti⁴³, the protagonist always carries with her an object intended to make up for the lack of school. This time it is not a book, but a pinned notebook.

A devastating pandemic – prophetically dated 2020 – has eradicated the adult population and with it the possibility of institutionally transmitting knowledge along with specific skills. Anna and little Astor's mother, aware that she had very little time, found in a simple notebook with a hard, brown cover the tool to deliver a future for her children. In that notebook are pinned, almost like a miniature school, "THE IMPORTANT THINGS". On the first page, under that almost shouted title, there is, written in round, precise handwriting, a kind of will whose bequest concerns, for the heirs, the very possibility of survival.

My beloved children, I love you so much. Before long your mother will be gone and you will have to fend for yourselves. You are good and smart and I am sure you will make it. I leave with you in this notebook directions that will help you cope with life and avoid dangers. Keep it carefully and every time you have a doubt open it and read it. Anna, you must teach Astor to read as well, so he can consult it on his own. Some of the advice you will find will not be useful in the world you will live in. The rules will change and I can only imagine them. You will be the ones to correct them and learn from mistakes. The important thing is that you always use your head. Your mother is leaving because of a virus that has spread all over the world. These are the things I know about the virus, and I tell them to you like this, without lies. Because you don't deserve them⁴⁴.

The notebook contains instructions on how to use things, directions on how to prevent illness or, in case, to cure oneself, but also suggestions on how to pay attention to the world around us, to read and interpret its signs; to use creativity as an existential strategy.

The mother, then, leaves an implicit signal in the notebook: the last pages of the book are completely blank. Those blank pages are a real encouragement, representing a signal that the story continues and that Anna will write her own future from there on.

Anna [...] continued scrolling through the notebook and came to the last pages that were still empty. She stared at the horizon with the wind tousling her hair.

What if I wrote something in it too?

It was a kind of revelation. Before that moment she had never even dared to imagine such a thing. That was the notebook of Important Things that mother had given to her before she left. And that I will give to Astor⁴⁵.

⁴³ N. Ammaniti, *Anna*, Torino, Einaudi, 2015 (ebook). My translation.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pos. 342.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pos. 2319.

The schoolbook has, therefore, achieved its primary goal: to transmit knowledge in such a way that generation after generation can spread, expand and, at best, propel towards a better future.

Ultimately, one cannot fail to consider how schooling, even within despotic systems—real or fictional—is a concept that can be developed in a multiplicity of different ways and forms. Sometimes it is constrictive, sometimes oppressive, sometimes seemingly useless, but in any case it remains a necessary tool for any possible change within human societies. It is no coincidence that Malala Yousafzai⁴⁶ who has experienced firsthand the devastating effects of real dystopian power, said in her speech at the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize:

This award is not just for me. It is for those forgotten children who want an education. It is for those frightened children who want peace. It is for those voiceless children who want change. I am here to stand up for their rights, to raise their voice... it is not time to pity them. It is time to take action so it becomes the last time that we see a child deprived of education⁴⁷.

And the conclusion of her speech, delivered with the courage of one who knows what it means to lose the chance to continue cultivating one's dreams and desires through school, sounds like an ideal conclusion to this paper.

Though I appear as one girl, one person, who is 5 foot 2 inches tall, if you include my high heels (it means I am 5 foot only), I am not a lone voice, I am many.

I am Malala. But I am also Shazia.

I am Kainat.

I am Kainat Soomro.

I am Mezon.

I am Amina. I am those 66 million girls who are deprived of education. And today I am not raising my voice, it is the voice of those 66 million girl.

[...]

Dear sisters and brothers, dear fellow children, we must work... not wait.

Not just the politicians and the world leaders, we all need to contribute. Me. You.

We. It is our duty.

Let us become the first generation that decides to be the last that sees empty classrooms, lost childhoods and wasted potentials.

Let this be the last time that a girl or a boy spends their childhood in a factory.

Let this be the last time that a girl is forced into early child marriage.

Let this be the last time that a child loses life in war.

Let this be the last time that we see a child out of school.

Let this end with us.

Let's begin this ending... together... today... right here, right now. Let's begin this ending now⁴⁸.

Starting with school.

⁴⁶ Pakistani activist attacked for advocating for women's right to school.

⁴⁷ M. Yousafzai, *Nobel Lecture, December 10, 2014*, https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/yousafzai-lecture_en.pdf (last access: 10.02.2023).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

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The School and Its Many Pasts

History is not memory; both, however, affect the way we perceive the past. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on memory in order to critically analyze shared narratives of the past and their implications. Memory studies not only allow us to expand our knowledge about the past, but also help us to define the way in which today's people, social groups and public bodies look at it and interpret or re-interpret it. In this sense, school memory is not only of interest as a gateway to the school's past but also as a tool to understand what they know or believe they know about the school of the past and how much what they know corresponds to reality or is influenced by prejudices and stereotypes deeply rooted in common sense. These volumes aim to address these complex issues and broaden the perspective from which the schooling phenomenon is analyzed to better understand the school and its many pasts.

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