THE QUEST FOR VALUES: TRADITIONAL SOURCES IN TWO LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVELS OF ADVENTURE

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As a concept, value expresses the central tenets of economic thought, affecting the theoretical image of wealth and its literary representation. Reasoning about value constitutes the very core of rhetorical and discursive formations; it argues about places and significations within the realm of quantities. This essay concerns a number of discourses on value, which are historically distinct in their objects and aims. Notwithstanding their diversity, they converge on the same cognitive substance and, above all, on the same link with the economic assets of society. In late nineteenth-century novels of adventure, the quest for treasure is regarded as an undertaking aimed at the possession of quantities of value. The final discovery brings about a catharsis through the treasure’s exchange value. The concept of value directs the writer’s imaginative itinerary toward the material world of goods and of their circulation. In so doing, it connects the literary image of treasure to the contemporary economic theories and views.

In the field of cultural relations, the concept of value is of primary importance, from both an ideological and an economic perspective. It makes concise statements concerning material interests, the schemata and procedures of the social distribution of goods; it does so by placing them in a conceptual framework inspired by economic theory and moral philosophy. As a concept, value expresses the central tenets of economic thought, affecting the theoretical image of wealth. Moreover, being an ideological component of one thread of social relations, the concept of value immediately refers to the specific context in which the writer operates and elaborates his own system of representation.

Reasoning about value constitutes the very core of rhetorical formations, propositions and discursive units; it plays its main role in assigning to any object a place and a signification in the realm of quantities. Although theoretical thinking covers several disciplines (e.g., economics, philosophy, religion, literature), the concept of value descends directly from
cultural and productive formations. It refers to these formations, with a view to clarifying the origin of the idea of value, determining how it exists within the object, explaining and defining its measurability. My investigation concerns a number of discursive formations, which are clearly distinct in their object: the beautiful, the useful, personal and collective wealth. Notwithstanding their diversity, these formations converge on the same cognitive substance, that is, value in its widest sense.

From the pre-industrial period up to the present, defining value has always meant providing a description and an account of the dual function of the objects of exchange. On the one hand, these definitions are marked by the same interest in the utility of those objects, by the internal and distinctive properties of their material bodies; on the other, they are marked by a quantitative proportion, by what is common to different objects, thus being reduced to a single monetary measure. In economic thought from Aristotle onwards, the investigation of value follows a twofold direction: use and exchange. The mystery of value arises from this enigmatic duplicity by which the object is described.

In the ninth chapter of the *Politics*, Aristotle presents value as a reflection of necessity and need. Wealth, as it is used for survival, is necessary both to the individual and to the community; to condemn it, he writes, means to refuse the very principle of existence (1992: 80-84). Nevertheless, he cannot ignore the contradiction between the finiteness of need and the boundlessness of accumulation, between the physiological alternation of desires, and the satisfying but artificial expansion of value: contradictions which spring in the first place from the absence of any boundary in nature itself.

To explain his thesis, Aristotle recalls the myth of Midas (1992: 82), and uses it as an instance of the incompatibility between the two types of value. In repudiating the gift from Dionysus, the king recognises that wealth is not exchangeable for the satisfaction of needs, and acknowledges the natural groundlessness of monetary equivalences. Midas’ gilded kingdom is but an accumulation of indistinguishable quantities, a kingdom of identities from which the singleness of objects has been erased. Since any object, in this context, is debased to the level of a golden and ghostly picture, the king is unable to benefit from the wealth he accumulates more and more abundantly. Because everything is transformed into gold, any exchange creates further exchange, *ad infinitum*, but prevents any use being made of the objects with which the king comes into tactile contact. Whenever something presents itself as an object of exchange, it is converted into a quantitative value, so that it is no longer suitable for and susceptible to