

Editor's Introduction: The Way We Read Now

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To commemorate the fortieth anniversary of *Novel*, members of the editorial board organized a conference sponsored by Brown University and held on November 9–10, 2007. The conference was designed to bring scholars of the novel from various areas within the literary disciplines into conversation around theoretical issues common to novel studies rather than to any particular national literature or literary specialization. We called our conference “Theories of the Novel Now.”

If the novel in English does in fact suppress alternative narratives within the cultures that it permeates, as well as poetry and drama and the worlds they might conjure for us, then its dominance is not reflected in the institutions of literary studies. There is not a division of the Modern Language Association, a learned society, or a major scholarly journal (save ours and perhaps one other) devoted exclusively to the study of the novel across national languages and historical periods. To countermand the practice of reading novels in terms of problems specific to a national language, historical period, or social scientific approach—specific to anything, it would seem, except to the novel itself—the *Novel* editorial board invited a number of scholars who work in various areas of novel studies to organize panels on topics that would promote discussion of current theorizations of the novel. These panels turned out to be provocatively inconsistent in their levels of abstraction (e.g., “George Lukács;” “The Novel and Mass Culture;” “Outside, After, and Against Liberalism;” “Roberto Bolaño or the Commodification of Exile”) and were, as a single enterprise, sometimes in conflict with one another. These connections and disjunctions generated pretty heady conversation.

Energized by the dialogue, any number of participants urged us to capture the moment in print. On discovering that the journal could not afford to put out a single issue, or even a double issue, that ran hundreds of pages past the usual length, we took a page from nineteenth-century publishers who had to feed a popular appetite for very long novels and decided on a triple-decker: three separate issues of *Novel* (42.2, 42.3, and 43.1) to appear in relatively rapid succession under the

In addition to assistant editors Wendy Lee and Emily Steinlight, who proposed and oversaw the *Novel* conference in 2007, I would like to acknowledge those scholar-critics responsible for organizing sixteen of the twenty-four conference panels and inviting papers from more than half of the seventy-eight panelists contributing to this special series: Carlos J. Alonso, Columbia University; Nicholas Brown, University of Illinois, Chicago Circle; Rey Chow, Brown University; Nicholas Dames, Columbia University; Madhu Dubey, University of Illinois, Chicago Circle; Ian Duncan, University of California, Berkeley; Kate Flint, Rutgers University; Olakunle George, Brown University; Cora Kaplan, Queen Mary, University of London; Deidre Lynch, University of Toronto; Laura Marcus, University of Edinburgh; Sharon Marcus, Columbia University; Kathy Alexis Psomiades, Duke University; Priscilla Wald, Duke University; and Rebecca Walkowitz, Rutgers University.

titles *Theories of the Novel Now I, II, and III*, respectively. When no way of dividing the conference papers into three thematic or conceptual units presented itself, we settled on arranging the papers, twenty-seven per volume, in continuous alphabetical order by author. In an attempt to reintroduce some of the multiple continuities among various panels that made the whole so much more than the sum of its parts, we will attach an index to the end of 43.1. This index includes critical concepts, theorists, novelists, and novels wherever they may appear throughout the collection.

Along with a good two-thirds of the original conference papers, these issues include the texts of plenary talks by Franco Moretti and Roberto Schwarz—two very different but equally controversial demonstrations of how to read novels for the secret of their global reach and the transformations enabling their persistence through time and across cultural boundaries. The author of several highly influential studies of the novel that have moved steadily away from the canon as their primary object of knowledge, Moretti here makes the startling claim that we should take “the style of the dime novels as the basic object of study and [explain] James’s [*Ambassadors*] as an unlikely by-product”—because, as he puts it, “that’s how *history* has proceeded.” To follow this injunction, one has to overturn the traditional priority of “the formal” over “the quantitative” on the grounds that this priority runs counter not only to reading practices (to read James, we will have already read any number of dime novels like *Dashing Diamond Dick*) but also to the operations of the book market. The novel goes where the book market takes it, and the demands of the market consequently reshape the novel (witness the triple-decker). Unless I’m terribly mistaken in my reading of Moretti’s full-tilt-forward, headier-than-usual argument, novels not only follow the book market, they also make sense of the willy-nilly growth of the market itself. The novel holds onto the adventure story, Moretti suggests, because this premodern chronotope provides a model as well as the motor for the opportunistic expansion of capitalism.

Roberto Schwarz, the Brazilian theorist responsible for the influential concept of “misplaced ideas,” coaxes a theory of the novel from the formal inversions of a single story by the novelist Machado de Assis. Given its tight focus on a story specific to Brazil, Schwarz’s reading at first glance seems to carry on the same relationship with Moretti’s grand paradigm of the novel as Machado’s little story does with Livy’s *History of Rome*, to which the story parodically compares itself. That is to say, Schwarz momentarily recasts the European novel and the comprehensive principles Moretti draws from his prodigious knowledge of that form to serve as an example for the theory that Schwarz formulates on the basis of how “O punhal de Martinha” incorporates and supplements “the novel” writ large. But the joke allowing Machado’s apparently local story to rethink the European novel it so artfully tries and fails to imitate is short lived. Moretti has already gone a long way toward destabilizing the potential Eurocentrism of his paradigm so that it can expose what Schwarz calls “the hollowness of the canonical culture: the fact that something—the most important thing—has escaped it.” Nor is it all that much of a stretch to suggest that Schwarz may be reading the history of the European novel in Brazil as an adventure story in its own right when he describes it as “[a] deposi-

tory of how European culture has been transformed in the periphery”—thanks to the collision of universalism with localism.

With these strikingly different but nevertheless interdependent models in mind, let me pose the first question I feel any introduction to three special issues of conference papers titled *Theories of the Novel Now* really must address. Given our aim—to inventory and assess the present state of theories of the novel—and in view of the significant spectrum of novel specialists who took this goal as their own—what object of knowledge emerges from this rather substantial collection of papers? In the hope of establishing a basis for further discussion, let me offer some observations to suggest how far we have come in addressing the question of what the theory of the novel is now.

The Novel

On first reading these papers, I was impressed with a distinctive richness and complexity that contrasts with previous decades dominated successively by post-structuralism, new historicism, and identity politics/cultural studies. At a loss to pin a label on what struck me as a whole new texture of thought, though one composed of many familiar elements, I attributed this curious quality first to the conspicuous displacement of such attempts as E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* to come up with a formal morphology of the novel. Nor were there papers that sought to read the novel either as the bearer of progressive enlightenment and liberal morality (as in F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition*) or as the incipiently hegemonic expression of modern middle-class interests (which Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* would have us believe). This thoroughgoing abandonment of what were canonical theories of the novel until, say, twenty years ago is tantamount to saying that those earlier ways of reading the novel, as well as the novels they privilege, no longer qualify as theories and models of the novel form. They cannot say what the novel is because they fail to explain—to the satisfaction of the conference participants—what novels actually do.

Though perhaps unfairly singled out for obsolescence, the studies by Forster, Leavis, and Watt have something in common that conveniently illustrates my point: the titles of their major studies of the English novel equate the English novel with “the novel” itself and so force those who happen to be working on novels of another nation or group to identify their subject matter by means of such modifiers as American, French, Chinese, and so forth. To make matters worse, these classic studies more or less confirm the point Sir Walter Scott made two centuries ago, namely that the novel, as exemplified by the work of Jane Austen, achieves its generic purpose as its protagonist and the putative reader outgrow their craving for a “wild variety of incident.” Though “of rare occurrence among those who actually live or die” (230), this “wild variety of incident” was, in Scott's view, the childish stock and trade of “romance,” another name for the adventure story. Like Scott's readers, my generation of scholars was encouraged to ignore the adventure story in favor of the garden variety of realism characterizing what was in fact a minority of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. The novels Scott preferred were those whose protagonists and national readerships seemed to give up

wishing for alternative worlds and buckled down to normative living and prosaic reading. When feminism came along and provoked us out of such political complacency, it nevertheless ceded the dominant role to the canonical model of the novel in an effort to show how it excluded the woman's point of view, making it all but impossible for women to author a novel without reproducing the form of realism that Scott attributed to Austen. The fact that there are no feminist readings of such novelists as Austen and Eliot among the 80 papers that follow suggests that this kind of novel no longer defines the category "novel." From *Clueless* to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*, recent parodies of Austen's novels indeed suggest that the situation has quite reversed itself—by feeding a contemporary appetite for extravagant fabulation, her so-called reality now fills the very place to which Scott once relegated romance.

Today's scholars seem to share Moretti's social-historical assumption that the novel springs up wherever capitalism and print culture go—assuming different forms, embodying different norms, and promoting different interests in the name of a projected readership—as fiction penetrates new markets and tries to make a coherent world out of often recalcitrant local materials. As the novel spreads geographically, it generates any number of new and surprising forms. Schwarz's reading of Machado suggests that the novel also proliferates variations within a given nation—subgenres, if you will, invariably opposed but also strangely attached to whatever fictional form claims to be the norm-bearing variety of fiction. The British novel is also exemplary in that it has deflected the challenge of as many hyphenated variations of itself as the American novel, and these in turn generate further subdivisions. How does it change what we mean by "the novel" to acknowledge the novel's tendency to produce splinter groups rather than a unified and unifying tradition?

I attribute this shift in the novel's prototypical behavior as much to the breakdown of our habit of reading novels in relation to the phantom of national unity as to the history of the novel itself. From the moment novels first became aware of themselves as candidates, we see them jockeying for the position of "the novel"—in the opposition between Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and Henry Fielding's *Shamela*, for example, or in Jane Austen's disparagement of Ann Radcliffe's gothic style. To produce a barely coherent historical account of the "rise" of the British novel, Ian Watt openly discounts "most" of the novels written during the eighteenth century as unqualified to exemplify "the novel," and Leavis eliminates still more during the nineteenth century when so many more were written, first excluding even Dickens and the Brontës from the great tradition of the British novel and then including them as afterthoughts, as an "entertainment" in the first instance and a "curiosity" in the second. The point is not to deride these influential accounts of "the novel" but rather to insist that such signs of stress will necessarily appear in any informed attempt to offer either a definitive example of the novel or a theory of the novel capable of bringing unity of form and purpose to the field of novel studies.

Does this mean the novel was born to argue—its power resting not on its capacity to produce unity at the cost of alternative viewpoints but on its tendency to create conflict? After reading the papers in this triple-decker, one might well think so,

and it therefore behooves us to explore briefly the implications of this hypothesis. If the novel's "work" is indeed to create conflicts rather than to resolve them, then it follows that the novel spreads to and sends down roots in new territories because authors and readers there are good and ready to take issue if not with the British, American, or European novel, then with some other—older or newer, indigenous or imported—way of imagining the world, or even, as in Machado's case, with both. Perhaps the novel never seems to run out of gas but continues to speak for, tell the story of, or otherwise generate new variations of itself precisely because it works in much the same way Georg Simmel claims the law does. Rejecting any model of community that equates unity with unanimity, thus requiring the suppression of dissidents, Simmel contends that those cultural divisions that appear most entrenched are paradoxically the most likely to reach an accommodation that both preserves hostility and eliminates the need for violence. Provided, of course, that one side is not exterminated, "animosity actually develop[s] into the germ of future commonness" (26–27), he contends, inasmuch as conflict and unity achieve "full sociological meaning through [each] other" (35).

Whether or not this is the way nation-states actually work is not at issue. I am suggesting only that Simmel's model of cohesion through cultural conflict—or what might be called narrative violence—offers a reasonable way of understanding how novels produce credible imaginary worlds. Simmel's notion of the power of organized conflict explains why Watt and Leavis, in arriving at their respective definitions of "the novel," need only talk about very few of the novels actually produced in England over the course of two centuries. The novels they select—thanks in great part to critic-canonizers from Sir Walter Scott and Anna Lætitia Barbauld through Leavis and Watt themselves—are the novels that contenders have no choice but to authorize. In some corner of his mind, even Fielding knew that his satiric rendering of Richardson's sentimental novels was turning Richardson, of all people, into the novelist everyone else had to argue with. Once he decided to write a novel, however, Fielding evidently could not help himself. This is the power of the norm: not to increase in sheer numbers of instantiations but to achieve the form with which everyone else implicitly agrees to take issue in offering a more accurate or satisfying way of imagining the readership's relation to the real. If, according to this logic, we can no longer talk about the British novel as "the novel," then the British novel no longer offers the model about which other novelists, writing in English, must agree to disagree in order to imagine their relation to the world.

History

Whether topic or subtheme, "history" appears more frequently in this collection of papers than any other concept, except of course for "the novel" itself. What might loosely be classified as Marxist theories of the novel—most notably those of Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Benedict Anderson, Fredric Jameson, Lukács, and Moretti—continue to be essential to rethinking the novel's relationship to the historical circumstances that produce it. At the same time, a glance at the table of contents for this special issue suggests that in order to account for the milieu of

author, reader, and literary text, contributors found it necessary to focus on particular, often exceptional novels, authors, and readerships rather than on generic prototypes. Surely this phenomenon is brought on by the expansion and splintering of the novel's domain. The demise of the generic prototype exacts no less significant changes from Marxist historiography as well. As if "class" and "the novel" were interdependent concepts, a number of papers in this issue abandon "class" in the traditional European sense as the causal explanation for formal and generic change. Indeed, once we look at the novel as a narrative mechanism for setting up conflicts for which the literary tradition is supposed to provide and often conspicuously fails to formulate a resolution, none of the conventional nineteenth- or twentieth-century oppositions seem to offer up a thematic for reading a work of fiction. Like narratives of national becoming, narratives of class struggle reinforce established norms of inside and out, self and other, dominant and subordinate, oppressor and oppressed, and so forth—no matter on which side of the binary the novel ultimately comes down. We now read novels to see how such binaries demonstrate their own failure at the social, cognitive, and/or aesthetic levels.

Here I am talking about the drift of both our collective critical rethinking of the novel and contemporary fiction's sense of what the novel should be doing (see, for example, recent special issues of *Novel* titled "Ishiguro's Unknown Communities" and "The Form of Postcolonial African Fiction"). A number of essays in these three conference issues go so far as to claim that recent ways of reading novels challenge what we conventionally take to be a master narrative of any kind. For one thing, they feel free to consider the metonymic behavior of description as important as continuous narration, if not more so, in organizing an imaginary world. Instead of plots observing either a linear-progressive pattern or the logic of dialectic, something more like a network opens up possibilities for agency and outcome and is quite probably assuming the role of master narrative. Under these conditions, class tends to lose much of its oppositional edge as a category of narrative analysis. When it receives obligatory mention, as it often does in fiction and theory these days, class operates more like a "register" or "style" than the grand thematic of narrative conflict. Class in the traditional sense consequently becomes something else, relatively all encompassing and yet potentially unbounded, something that long ago took up residence in the novel as the social-historical backdrop against which the modern individual achieved self-containment.

By backdrop, I don't mean "society." I am referring instead to all those disavowed human elements that the novel must incorporate in order to give meaning and form to the individual but must then eject from a world made of individuals so readers can imagine that world as potentially whole, seamless, made all of characters, and rent only by conflicts that can be repaired, if not by marriage and the annihilation of one's enemy, then by some new adventure. Whether or not they have human rights, those human elements that we consider characters and that form communities do have the right to have rights. Those who remain nameless and faceless (say, the gypsies in *Emma*) can easily fall through the grid of a contractual society made of those who can claim such rights—those individuals and the members of their households.

As the novel works its way from one milieu into another, encountering more people and events than can be imagined in the world of Austen's *Highbury*, critical readers are coming to depend on novels to make sense of history rather than the other way around. In following the Jamesonian mandate "always historicize," the tendency now is to show how the novel calls attention to official history, not as the grounding for narrative events but as the institutional means of authorizing narratives that naturalize the dominant ideology. Behaving much like "the novel" in this respect, history as such is losing its cachet in novel studies as it comes to be understood as one of many narrative forms contending for world-making authority. Not surprisingly, this attitude toward history proper characterizes the work of such postcolonial theorists as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Anthony Appiah, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Like the novels they read, by and large these theorists consider theory, along with novels and autobiography, the means of access to alternative histories that do a better job of explaining how authors and readers, in a given place and time, understood both the limits of the world they had been handed and the difficulty of imagining it otherwise. From this it follows that a number of novels from such a place and time should tell us not only what a novel had to include in making the world seem comprehensible and comprehensive but also what the novel had to keep out and at bay in order for that world to seem at once coherent and convincing. In this respect, novels can be said to provide us with a truer history than history proper. This subtle reversal of the relationship that, ever since Defoe, "the novel" has carried on with "history" prompts a final observation.

Theory

If nothing else, the essays in this collection demonstrate a shift from the theory of the novel to the theory *in* the novel: the use of Lukács, for example, to call attention to the point at which the novel stalls the very dialectic it has set in motion or where, as I have suggested, novels thwart the fulfillment of narration as the purely symbolic resolution of problems that cannot be resolved in real life. These theories are subject to the same critical reconsideration as our traditional reading habits. Their vulnerability to such treatment is owing in some measure to the impact of cultural studies, which has, from the first, used Marxist theory as a stalking horse to snatch the novel away from literary studies. Class analysis made it possible for cultural studies, American studies, Victorian studies, and postcolonial studies, among others, to read novels "from the bottom up," for "alternative" histories and "resistant" subject positions, and in terms of "popular logics" and variant "publics." Much like the fates of feminism, poststructuralism, historicism, and psychoanalysis, the apparent decline of cultural studies is entirely a function of its success at becoming a reflex of critical reading. Let me explain.

Without openly acknowledging it, criticism and scholarship currently bring a double definition of theory to the reading of novels. First there is the notion that theory, presumably external to the novel in question, enables insightful explanations of a passage, character, theme, or some newly discovered narrative tic. This notion of theory—responsible for the flashes of brilliance throughout this

collection attributed to the likes of Benjamin, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, or Jameson—is what I call theory *in* the novel. This is theory infused with life by passages, characters, thematics, or narrative tics that recall it from the realm of theory proper and make it do the work of reading particular works of fiction. At precisely the moments at which theory is taken into a novel and used to read it, I am suggesting, that novel chiastically reads theory. We are, in other words, using the novel, in a second sense, as a way of reading virtually anything, or what can be culled from the novel *as* theory. Sometimes called “*discourse*” or simply “*culture*” and discussed as either the cause or an effect of a mass cultural personality capable of “*desire*” and “*anxiety*,” the novel in this sense tends to guide our thinking as we consider how a given novel reproduces and necessarily modifies the world-making strategies we attribute to “the novel.” For this reason, the relation of a particular novel to some theory of the novel is definitionally confusing. But this invertibility of generic model and local example is also extremely productive. When one uses a novel to read a novel—when, that is, a particular novel also serves as the model in terms of which we understand its particularity—it becomes impossible to distinguish that novel from a theory of the novel. In this event, “theory” and “novel” collapse into one another, and it falls on us to read fiction as both theory and novel at once—producing, I believe, the distinctive richness and complexity characterizing this collection as a whole.

Works Cited

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