

Introduction: The Prosaic Imaginary

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*"And what is the title of the book?" asked Don Quixote.
"The Life of Gines de Pasamonte," replied that hero.
"Is it finished?" asked Don Quixote.
"How can it be finished," replied the other, "if my life isn't? What is written begins with my birth and goes down to the point when I was sent to the galleys this last time."*

—Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

This exchange constitutes one of the classic statements of the novel's resistance to form: shaped like a life, the novel refuses to grant, or is incapable of granting, the end-directed structure of a destiny. The picaresque autobiography that Gines has written (it is so good, he says, "that Lazarillo de Tormes will have to look out" [Cervantes 176]) has the shape of a series of disconnected happenings, tied together only by the figure who embodies both the *I* of narration and the narrated hero. Its temporality is contingent and bounded at its end point by nothing more than a provisional decision to stop writing.

As it happens, Gines reappears in part 2 of Cervantes's novel in the guise of Master Peter the puppeteer. He is now, as perhaps he was before, an illusionist, a manipulator of flimsy simulacra of persons in improbable romances. The illusionism is stressed by the fact that Don Quixote takes the performance so seriously that he intervenes to save the puppet-hero from the Moors, while Gines implores him to recognize that the characters are only made of cardboard ("no son verdaderos moros, sino unas figurillas de pasta" [*Don Quijote* 1592]).

Gines is thus the creator of two kinds of narration, each of which forms one of the narrative poles of *Don Quixote*: the open-ended story that we know as the picaresque, characterized by its autobiographical structure and its fidelity to the world of mundane events, and the romance that casts the world as an illusory structure made up of destinies and noble sentiments. Georg Lukács's theorization of the novel as the ironic representation of a fallen world is predicated on a tension within the form between these two primordial modes.

That theorization sets up a very rough ontological division between the prosaic novel and the epic or its degraded but still elevated form, the romance (ideally assigned to the realm of verse, even if its medium is prose). Most of the canonical specifications of the novel (Ian Watts's "formal realism," for example) work with a similarly defining opposition. But it is surely the case that any such dichotomy simplifies the diversity of the novel's representational reach, the multiplicity of overlapping genres of which it is composed, and thus the multiplicity of modes of the real that it is capable of projecting. We tend to think of "the novel" as a genre, but it may be better to think of "the novel as genres," as a collection of forms

whose common core it is almost impossible to define (Pérez Firmat). Members of the family include the bildungsroman, the *Künstlerroman*, the *roman fleuve*, the thriller, the family saga, the Western, the romance, the novella, the picaresque novel, the epistolary novel, the Gothic novel, the novel of adultery, the domestic novel, the historical novel, the autobiographical novel, the realist novel, the naturalist novel, the stream-of-consciousness novel, the lyrical novel, the verse novel, the *nouveau roman*, the industrial novel, the psychological novel, the crime novel, the detective novel, the satirical novel, the roman à clef, the science fiction novel, the fantasy novel, the young adult novel, the adventure novel, and the nonfiction novel. Complicating this generic diversity of “the novel” is the multiplicity of nonaesthetic genres that the novel draws upon as its raw material and converts to more complex uses: the diary, the journal, the personal anecdote, the memoir, everyday conversation, the conduct book, the saga, the folk story, travel writing, historiographical narrative, the letter, the account book, the list, the spiritual autobiography, prayer, description, ekphrasis, the joke, the shaggy dog story, the riddle, the complaint, the tale (*récit*, *skaz*), the police report, the news story, the *fait divers*, the character sketch, the obituary, the meditation. . . . If any one novel may work within and across a number of distinct novelistic genres and may at the same time transform any number of such “primary” genres, then the scope for representational complexity is almost infinite.

However difficult we may find it to recognize and describe a common core of the novelistic, the concept nevertheless carries an intuitive (which is to say, historically formed) self-evidence. Some kinds of writing seem to be more prototypically novelistic than others. If the identification of the European novel as a distinct type of writing (even if it has a formal resemblance to earlier lengthy prose narratives in the Latin, Hellenic, Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese traditions) emerging at a particular, if extended, historical moment has any force, this is because we associate it with similarly extended social and epistemological changes bound up with the beginnings of modernity. More specifically, the genre that emerges in early modernity generates a distinctively novelistic mode of knowledge that is a function of some of the qualities of its medium (prose), its representation of “prosaic” worlds, and its increasingly widespread access to readers who live in such worlds.

This special issue of *Novel*, “Prosaic Imaginaries,” asks the question: what is the relationship between the novel’s prosaic subject matter and novel reading as an everyday activity? Both parts of this question make familiar assumptions about the novel (that it thematizes the mundane world, that its rise is associated with middle-class literacy and, increasingly, with mass literacy) that we want not so much to critique as to explore in greater depth and in their relation to each other. Thus we pose a set of corollary questions: How do the attention and imagining that are fostered by the extended form of the novel correspond to the attention and temporality of everyday life? How are the materiality and mobility of the book (typically a small and portable object) bound up with the kinds of object-worlds the novel imagines? And what kind of theory of the novel can best account for its prosaic quality? We talk about prosaic imaginaries in the plural because we take it as given that the novel form develops a plurality of ways of imagining the secular

universe. The concept of the imaginary also helps us to think about the mundane fantasies with which readers invest their activity.

The novel, we might say, is modally prosaic. But what do we mean by the prosaic, and how does it relate to formal narrative structures and to what we spoke of earlier as the novel's resistance to form? The terms *prose* and *verse*, the dichotomy around which so much theorization of the novel has been built, have related etymologies. *Verses* derives from the Latin *versus*, "a line or row, specifically a line of writing (so named from turning to begin another line)," from the verb *vertĕre*, to turn. *Prose* derives from the classical Latin *prosa*, short for *prosa oratio*, and corresponds as a feminine form to the earlier adjective *prōrsus*, "straightforward, straight, direct, contracted," from "*prōversus*, past participle of an otherwise unattested verb **prōvertere* to turn forwards" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Prose and verse are thus contrasted in one sense as written lines that either proceed to the edge of the page or turn, in spatially irregular lengths, at the ends of metrical units. But the sense of "straightforwardness" or "directness" also contrasts with a different sense of turning, that of the trope, the figure. Prose would be that form of writing that escapes both the figure and the metrical patterning of verse.

Now, it should go without saying that the notion that prose escapes the figure (that it is literal speech) cannot be taken literally. Nor is prose a simple, more primitive state of writing that would precede the more elaborated structures of verse. Historically, prose is not necessarily an antecedent function (it is often a late cultural development), and it is no less artful, no less formally complex in its configuration than verse. It has historically been associated with nonfictional genres (the epistle, history, theological and philosophical discourse). Of course, we think of everyday speech as taking place in prose rather than in verse, even if this knowledge may come as a revelation to some of us. But it is not a technically distinctive category. Rather, "prose" is above all a medium that has become associated with one of the levels of decorum at which it may be used: the low style, or *sermo humilis*, of which, as we know, the New Testament (and particularly the Gospels) is the great exemplar in the European literary tradition.

Although they are oriented to a redemptive end, the narrative structure of the four Gospels is internally episodic. They are composed as strings of anecdotes ("and it came to pass that . . .") that form cumulative illustrations of an unvarying truth. It is that episodic structure, that sense of an undirected passage through a world of inns and stables, that informs the novelistic tradition as it develops from *Lazarillo de Tormes* and the novels of Cervantes and Daniel Defoe before it then begins to model its plots on the shaped structure of a human destiny. At the same time, the model of *sermo humilis* opens the way to the vernacular plain style of seventeenth-century empiricism and to the relational linguistic model that underpins the eighteenth-century novel (Cohen xxiv), a model of networks of relations among people whose lives are, definitionally for the genre, not extraordinary, not marvelous, not subsumed within a transcendental order. The characters of the novel are of middling or low degree, and they are, in principle, members of the "same" secular world as its readers. No magi visit the inns and stables of the novelistic world.

If “the novel” is a collection of many related prose genres (with the exception of those that, stretching the definition of the genre to the limit, are written in verse), it is nevertheless those prototypical “modally prosaic” forms, whose subject matter is the mundane, the lowly, the ordinary, that we associate most centrally with the European novel and that form what we think of as a novelistic mode of knowledge. Where the picaresque novel gives it the basic formal structure of a biologically developing life on which adventures impinge, the bildungsroman transforms that structure into a biographical form that models the organic growth of an individual in a passage from unknowing to knowing, and it thereby gives the novel its pedagogical shape and function. The reader shares in the passage, receiving instruction and eventual wisdom along with the hero or heroine. The novel of adultery removes that shared experience of coming to knowledge, juxtaposing the blindness of the few central characters with the reader’s insight. The historical novel displaces knowledge from a range of characters across the social spectrum to a reader who views the historical world from an impossibly godlike perspective or from a series of more possible perspectives impossibly linked.

Novelistic knowledge is thus diversely generated in accordance with the narrative strategies peculiar to different genres of the novel. Beyond what we think of as the “core” genres, indeed, novelistic knowledge may not be at all prosaic. In the genres that lie closer to the “romance” pole, such as science fiction or the Gothic novel, it may take on the dimensions of the sublime or the transcendental. The ways in which everyday realities are imagined involve not merely characters but things, landscapes, entire projected worlds. The stuff of the everyday takes on quite distinct configurations in the sentimental or the realist or the modernist novel, and if we can speak of a “prosaic imaginary” of the novel, it is one that operates only at a high level of abstraction.

As it turned out, the essays that we solicited for this special issue all manifested a structure somewhat more complex than a simple description of the prosaic imaginings performed by their chosen texts. What they all in one way or another found was a series of variations on a pattern in which a particular generic structure is problematized by its reflexive thematization. Generic forms are represented metonymically in novelistic texts in a way that then illuminates the limits of those forms. At the same time, the category of the everyday turns out to be central to the ways in which each of these problematized generic forms is organized by its recursive metonyms.

In “Spatial Formalism and the Portable Interiors of the Eighteenth-Century Novel,” Julie Park explores the relation between interior spaces and psychological interiority in *Pamela*, positing that psychological inwardness might be located in physical spaces that move outside the closets of stately homes. Her figure for these alternative spaces is the detachable pockets that play so prominent a part in the novel and count among a series of portable domestic objects that map out a rather different history of subjectivity from the one that is usually told. Detachable pockets are closely related to two of the material embodiments of writing that they parallel in their mobility but that they also frequently contain and conceal: the novel as a book—an object that is held close to the body but that can also detach the reader from her immediate surroundings and transport her to an intimate space inside her

own head—and letters, which both figure the (epistolary) novel as a whole and act as detachable objects of desire, metonyms of Pamela's body that nevertheless circulate beyond her constrained world.

Moving forward more than a century, Vanessa Smith's "Toy Stories" reads a scene of intense emotional fury in the early pages of *The Mill on the Floss* as a prelude to an argument that in nineteenth-century novels everyday objects such as children's toys, at once prosaic and imaginatively used, are made to bear a complex burden of violence and reparation. Yet where toys have been noticed by critics, she argues, it is with recourse to familiar Freudian paradigms of the uncanny or as relics of unresolved mourning. Her essay argues instead, with particular reference to *The Mill on the Floss* and to Melanie Klein's theories of destructive and reparative play, that the novel's toy stories figure the stifling enclosure of the world of childhood, a world without exit or development. In its focus on "the intensity of childhood envy, defiance and grief," its "strangely perspectiveless conception of life," the toy story fractures the coherence of the bildungsroman, the novel of maturation that imposes a teleology and an emotional catharsis on that self-enclosed intensity that nevertheless lies at the heart of so much of the Victorian novel and that perhaps prefigures key modernist novelistic strategies.

John Plotz's "Overtones and Empty Rooms: Willa Cather's Semidetached Modernism" draws on his current work concerning the forms of partial absorption that structure everyday reading, a partiality that he sets up as a tension between operatic immersion and the flickering attention that characterizes the ordinary. That tension is then complicated, through a set of readings of the late Thomas Hardy and of Cather's *Künstlerroman*, *The Song of the Lark*, by the folding of those categories into each other within what Plotz calls the "poetical revelation . . . within an everyday life." In exploring the transition from Hardy to Cather, Plotz simultaneously explores the "odd limbo" between novelistic realism and modernism and the morphological questions raised by British naturalism: questions of literary history and of representation but also questions of the history of readerly perception and attention. The state of partial absorption that Plotz explores is what allows the work of art to fuse the world of its imagined objects with the world in which that imagining occurs. It is at once a general property of fiction and a specifically late nineteenth-century characteristic of that late-realist moment. Working against a naturalist reduction of the imaginary to the real, it is the condition of possibility for a "prosaic aesthetic experience" posited on the simultaneity of enchantment and disenchantment.

Maud Ellmann's "Everyday War: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf in World War II" argues that aerial bombardment during World War II transformed war into a diffuse presence rather than a self-contained or isolatable event. Taking up Lukács's contention that it is the experience of mass warfare after the French Revolution that gives real form to the concepts of history and world, Ellmann posits that this experience of a new kind of total warfare makes impossible the idea of a historical novel distinct from the repetitions of the everyday. To vary Carl von Clausewitz's famous aphorism, the everyday has now become a continuation of war by other means. The ubiquity of wireless communication means war is not just reported but perpetrated on the air, through the medial dissemination of the news

and propaganda. War is both *in* the air and *on* the air. Violence and the communication of violence occupy the same airspace. In Warner's wartime writing, as in Woolf's novel *Between the Acts*, war as climax gives way to war as climate. Both authors demystify the heroics of war by dispensing with the hero and the event, substituting atmosphere for the conventional crescendo of the plot. Both writers focus on life "between the acts." Both writers experiment with new forms of eventless narrative that undo the dichotomy of history and the everyday.

Naomi Milthorpe's "Things and Nothings: Henry Green and the Late Modernist Banal" examines a similar provocation by the late-modern eventless narrative of the criterion of interest (the "interesting"), which emerges through novelistic treatment of the meaningless and the banal. Green declared that the novel should be concerned with the "everyday mishaps of ordinary life" (Breit 29). It is unsurprising, then, that the prosaic dominates his 1939 novel *Party Going*, which combines an experimental prose style with banal subject matter. The gerund form of its title suggests action, but "unresolved waiting" directs the plot. A group of people, stranded at a train station that has been shut down by fog, wait with their luggage, order drinks, and lose and find various members of their party. In its attention to the bathetic quotidian, Green's one-day novel animates twentieth-century anxieties about time, leisure, and subjective experience, manifested in the novel's fretful leveling of objects and experiences using the repeated vague signifier *things*. *Party Going's* multiplied and contingent "things" are exemplary of modernist concerns with everyday boredom, a subject matter that is repeated in a formal structure of repetition, literary difficulty, and the everyday banal.

Finally, Melissa Hardie's "Novel Circulations: *Old Acquaintance*, *Rich and Famous*, *La flor de mi secreto*" approaches questions of the status of the literary novel indirectly through its role in forming and provoking relations between (predominantly) women characters in three movies. Vincent Sherman's 1943 *Old Acquaintance* pits the meager output of the celebrated writer Katherine "Kit" Marlowe (Bette Davis) against the stream of popular novels competitively written by her friend Millie Drake (Miriam Hopkins). This contest of literary style and production is revised in George Cukor's 1981 *Rich and Famous*, and again in Pedro Almodóvar's 1995 *La flor de mi secreto*, where friction between literary styles and markets is subdued through the genre's focus on affective rather than taste-making practices. Hardie focuses in particular on *Rich and Famous's* nuanced representation of "publication anxiety" (whose symptoms are both writer's block and excessive publication). Bringing the three films into productive association requires a historicized understanding of the evolution of arguments about literary quality that center on the novel, arguments that became the prosaic material of interpersonal conflict within the women's film.

Collectively and individually, these essays give us very different answers to our question about the relationship between the novel's prosaic subject matter and novel reading as an everyday activity. Perhaps, too, that question was loaded, and we might have explored in greater depth the sheer diversity of representational modes to which the novel lends itself. Yet the prosaic imaginary has been formative of the European literary tradition and of the world literatures to which it has, by

way of Euro-American political and cultural hegemony, contributed. The essays collected here demonstrate some of the complexities of that imaginary.

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