

— [INTRODUCTION] —

Who was the first storyteller? A lonely hunter consoling his fellows on a cold northern evening far from home? A mother calming a frightened child with tales of gods and demigods? A lover telling his intended of fantastic exploits, designed to foster his courtship? The reader can multiply the number of possibilities, but we will never know the answer, for the impulse to tell stories is as old as the development of speech, far older than the invention of writing. It has deep psychological springs we do not fully comprehend, but the need to make up characters, and to place them in worlds that are parallel to our own or are perhaps wildly at variance with it, is part of the history of all peoples, cultures, and countries; there is no known human group that has not told tales.

Oral cultures are great sources for students of the theory of fiction. Researchers have established that in those that still exist, the storyteller (or bard) is highly revered for the ability to relate from memory a number of verse narratives of enormous length, told within the regularities of meter and conventional figures of language that aid the memory, containing the stories of characters known to listeners who share in a common folklore and myth. These stories, about familiar characters in recognizable situations, do not engage their audience in the mysteries of an unresolved plot, for the listeners know the story already, have heard it told before, and are often as familiar with its events as they are with events in their own lives. Then why do they listen? Beyond the story itself, the audience concerns itself with the voice and manner of the teller of the tale; the texture and density of the story's material; the fit of the characters with the audience's expectations about how human beings, gods, demigods, and mythic heroes behave in a world something like their own. For such people—as for ourselves—fictions have an extraordinary explanatory power; they make clear why, for instance, there are seasons, why there is an underworld for the spirits of dead ancestors, why there is one royal line of descent and not another.

We begin this collection of essays on the theory of fiction with a discus-

sion of so-called primitive origins because we believe that the impulse to tell tales and listen to them is akin to the impulse in “literate” cultures to write stories and read them, and as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has shown us in *The Savage Mind*, the science of primitive peoples is as sophisticated in its own purposes as the science in literate cultures; so too are the fictions. Tribal members in oral cultures may or may not engage in detailed discussions of the nature and forms of their fictions, but clearly they do make judgments about the adequacy of the telling of stories, and the act of judgment is, after all, an act of criticism. Questions of judgment and interpretation, in fact, inform human discourse everywhere.

While we do not suggest that the theory of fiction claims much attention from tribal scholars, we do note that the interpretation of works of literature, and in particular of fictional creation, is part of the written record of all literate cultures. It has constituted an extremely large and important part of literature since the times of the ancient Hebrews and Greeks, with its beginnings in Midrashic texts and in the writings of Plato and the sophists and, ultimately, in the most important literary critical text of Western antiquity, the *Poetics* of Aristotle.

The study of literature and literary theory — by which we mean the use of social-science, philosophical, rhetorical, linguistic, and structural analysis as means of interpreting texts — has, therefore, a long tradition in Western intellectual history, one employed quite heavily during certain periods and certainly appearing during the past century as a principal form of literate intellectual activity. In its forms of analysis, literary theory has been defined to a great extent by the kinds of texts to which it has been applied. In the *Poetics* Aristotle was concerned primarily with discussing the epic poem and the two dominant modes of drama, comedy and tragedy. For the most part, these were the most important forms, along with lyric poetry, written by the ancient Greek authors that Aristotle studied. The fictions about which Aristotle could have written were therefore composed in verse or dialogue, and the forms were not the prose fictional genres that dominate our time: the novel, the novella, and the short story.

Historians of literature have argued at length about which prose fictions might qualify as the first novels. There were certainly prominent examples of lengthy prose fictions in the ancient world, with *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius and Petronius’s *Satyricon* coming to mind. But while these are extended narratives in prose, they do not, for most critics, fulfill the criteria for defining a novel formally in terms of the development of plot and character. Both tales are products of the Roman Empire and were followed by more

than a millennium in which the long fictional forms consisted mainly of verse epics and romances whose subject matter was the conventional material of shared folklore and myth. Indeed, with some exceptions such as the Icelandic sagas and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, extended prose fictions did not begin to flourish in England and on the European continent until the sixteenth century, in the writings of Thomas Nashe and John Lyly in England, François Rabelais in France, and Miguel de Cervantes in Spain. Some critics have called Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, published during the early years of the seventeenth century, the first European novel, but although the adventures of the man of La Mancha have been extraordinarily influential on later forms of prose fiction, Cervantes did not found a tradition in which the writers who came after him self-consciously thought of themselves as writing "novels." Rather, Cervantes's book summed up and parodied the tradition of medieval and Renaissance romance, with all its chivalric and courtly conventions. The self-conscious establishment of a tradition of novel writing did not come about with any lasting force until more than a century later, in an increasingly mercantile and industrial Europe where the middle classes were rapidly expanding. The rising literacy that always accompanies trade and technology created an expanded reading public hungry for stories of people like themselves, in prose like that of the newspapers, journals, and scientific treatises that had come to dominate the new technology of print. For the middle classes, poetry was identified with the aristocracy, except for such didactic verse as they sang in church.

England in the first half of the eighteenth century was a country dominated increasingly by trade and a mercantile class who used their great prosperity to purchase for themselves the perquisites hitherto reserved for the landed aristocracy. The earliest British novels dramatized the rise of this new class. In addition, the development of a literate population, helped by the technology of print, made it possible for the first time for writers to earn a living through the sale of their printed works rather than through receiving patronage from a wealthy person of noble birth.

This new technology created a veritable writing industry in London, producing not only great masses of publications for science and various trades but also the first newspapers, biographies, "confessions" of famous criminals, travel books, and ostensibly "true" accounts of how successful individuals found ways to thrive in the developing bourgeois culture. The works of Daniel Defoe are representative of this tendency; the ones we still read today were written as serious parodies of the forms developed in the popular press: *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722),

and *Moll Flanders* (1722). All are written in a “nonliterary” prose of great lucidity and apparent functional utility. *Moll Flanders* and *Crusoe* are often called the great precursors of the British novel and are taught in courses on that genre. The other great precursor of this period, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1728), uses the form of the travel tale to parody the society of England by placing it in various guises in exotic fictional settings.

While the works of Defoe and Swift are surely wonderful exercises of the fictional imagination, they were not written by authors working self-consciously in a new literary form. Not until two decades after the appearance of Lemuel Gulliver’s *Travels into Several Remote Regions of the World* did the works of two writers, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, announce the development of a new form. Richardson’s epistolary novels, *Pamela* (1741) and *Clarissa* (1747–1748), caught the imagination of England and much of Europe because of their sympathetic and extended treatment of character and their fashionable excesses of feeling. Fielding’s work as a novelist began with a parody of Richardson’s *Pamela* in a travesty called *Shamela* (1741). Having found his gift for comedy, Fielding then produced two of the best early novels in British literature: *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749), in each of which, but especially in the latter, he wrote justifications of his use of the new form. Calling his books comic epics in prose and rationalizing his procedures through reference to the works of classic Greek and Roman authors, Fielding more than anyone else wrote the first essays on the theory of fiction in British literature.

Although the tradition of the novel was established quite quickly and has ultimately come to dominate the common conception of literature for the reading public, no corresponding tradition of writings on the theory of fiction arose to follow Fielding’s lead in that area. Works on literary theory continued to concentrate, as they had since Aristotle, on poetry and drama, and the main practitioners in the eighteenth century were primarily poets, such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope. The one major exception to that rule, Samuel Johnson—that extraordinary man of letters who worked in many forms, including the novel—wrote little about fiction in his theoretical writings.

Well into the nineteenth century, the novel remained for critics the stepchild among literary forms, popular with the mass reading public but not considered *serious* in the way of the lyric or the long poem. Major British critics continued to be poets, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, but again neither had much to say about the novel. In France and Russia, however, critics including Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve and

Vassarion Belinsky and the novelists Honoré de Balzac and Stendhal (Marie Henri Beyle) did begin to write seriously about fiction. Nonetheless, the first writer to develop an extensive and lasting body of writing in English on the theory of fiction was the novelist Henry James, who — in a lengthy series of essays written over more than four decades and in the prefaces he wrote to the New York Edition (1907–1909) of his collected works — practically invented the field, along with many of the terms and concepts still most frequently used by people who write about fiction. Indeed, for instance, the Jamesian dictum about the importance of the single point of view, as well as his belief that authors should not “intrude” by “telling” but should dramatize action, became an almost tyrannical force in critical theory and novelistic practice during the first half of the twentieth century — as Wayne Booth demonstrates in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961).

It may well be, however, that the most important example set by James’s writings on fictional theory, as well as by his own work as an artist, is to show that the writing of fiction is not simply a form of entertainment but a serious art form, to be ranked with the lyric, the epic, and the drama and to be taken just as seriously by its practitioners. James’s monastic commitment to writing, along with his belief that the exercise of craft is a form of moral commitment — a belief he learned from Gustave Flaubert and Ivan Turgenev — was so powerful that the theory of fiction has been dominated ever since by an emphasis on craft with less thought in general given to subject matter. It seems only fitting, then, to begin our collection of essays with James’s “The Art of Fiction” (1884), an essay that reads like a manifesto for the position just summarized.

The nineteenth century has come to seem the great age of narrative, particularly in the realistic novel. Even though the theory of fiction in England had to await the advent of James, by the time of his death in 1916, fiction had come to be seen as the central act of literary creation — the area of real artistic commitment. In his early essays, for instance, Ezra Pound claimed that it was again time for poets to take their craft as seriously as the novelists take theirs. While for a time poet-critics such as Pound and T. S. Eliot continued to dominate literary theory — both of them strongly influenced by the *example* of James as an artist — from the 1920s on, major contributions were made to the theory of fiction by both scholars and practitioners.

As a result, a study of recent contributions made to the theory of fiction indicates the field to be a microcosm of both the concerns of literary theory and the general study of literature — particularly because the entire field of

literature has become more and more a part of the academic enterprise. As, for instance, the study of poetry moved away from a concern with the poet's biography and the poem's subject matter, so did the study of fiction focus more on the ways the novel or story is constructed rather than on how facts of the author's life relate to details in the fiction.

While readers of this collection may wish to seek analogies between the concerns expressed in these essays and those expressed throughout the previous century in the study of poetry, drama, language, and rhetoric, the editors wish to focus the remainder of this introduction on the central concerns of the theory of fiction and on how they have evolved since the time of James.

Genre

A number of the following essays treat an issue that has occupied many writers on fiction: that of defining the nature of each of the fictional genres. The first issue lies in deciding which works fall under the purview of the theory of fiction, as distinct from theories of poetry and drama. Most writers draw the line between works written in prose and those written in verse — which is certainly the case with most of the essays in this collection. Still, some critics have claimed that Homer's *Iliad* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* are, for instance, almost “perfect” novels, even though they are both long poems in the epic or romance traditions. Major theorists like Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin see the lines of fictional tradition as running from the epic to the novel; their major task then becomes to show how the two forms differ. For Bakhtin the fact that one form is written in verse, the other in prose, seems almost incidental. For other critics this distinction is crucial. Does the final distinction here become a cultural one, for example, between historical cultures that use one form of discourse rather than another? Is there a difference in the way the world appears through the lenses of prose and verse?

Making distinctions among the prose fictional forms of the novel, novella, and short story has also occupied recent critics. Are these distinctions simply ones of length between forms of up to 15,000 words, up to 50,000 words, or more than 50,000 words? Do these arbitrary word lengths impose formal constraints on authors, so that novels, novellas, and short stories differ in their basic characters? The short story is in fact an older form, attracting critical attention at least as early as the 1840s, in Edgar Allan Poe's classical essay on his countryman Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told*

Tales, whereas the novella did not emerge as a self-consciously viable form until the latter part of the nineteenth century. What does the actual word limit of the various forms mean to a writer when composing a work of fiction? What advantages does each form give writers that they cannot take advantage of in the others?

Narrative Voice and Point of View

Since the time of Henry James the related matters of narrative voice and point of view have played a major role in the discussion of fiction. It is important to remember that both concepts are metaphoric, that the figure of point of view has to do with how the action is seen or experienced and that the figurative narrative voice is really silent and requires us to suppose from the words on the page how that voice might sound if someone were actually speaking them. Although they are figurative concepts, these notions have long had a powerful explanatory power for critics and readers, enabling us to understand that all narrative is written from a certain perspective and that one major fictional device is working to make the reader share in the experience from that perspective.

Henry James codified the concept of point of view by insisting that the narrative voice be purified of the kind of authorial commentary that he claimed interfered with the narrative flow. Moral judgments were to become implicit rather than explicit, and a single narrative perspective was to be carried through the story — either that of a character in the tale or that of a narrator whose voice was to become the flexible instrument that sustained a distance between the author and the fictional matter. Authors were not to demean their tasks by pretending that novels were merely “made up” and that they could cavalierly intervene anytime they wished to make a comment. The author was to become invisible, to be — as in James Joyce’s famous formulation in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* — “like the God of the creation, who remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.”

Such extraordinary narrative purity remained an ideal throughout much of the twentieth century, motivating the work of writers such as Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf. So strongly did this concept take hold of critics that it was not seriously challenged until Booth’s *Rhetoric of Fiction*, mentioned earlier, which pointed out that not only had some of the greatest novels never striven for such purity but that in

no work of fiction did the author *ever* disappear; judgments were always present in the narrative tone and in all the various kinds of irony available to the narrator and the “implied author.” Booth’s influence has not only opened up earlier novels for our greater appreciation but also made more accessible to us a whole host of “postmodern” novels that make no attempt to hide the fact that they were written — that, in fact, make a fetish of their artificiality. Our collection includes several essays that focus on the varied narrative dimensions of fiction, a field that has received increasing attention from critics. The concerns include feminist narratology, the African American strategy of “signifying,” and the computer-generated uses of hypertext.

Plot

Discussions of plot have become much more sophisticated in recent criticism. Instead of simply seeing plot as a succession of events taking place in a narrative, critics have now begun to make important distinctions. They understand that major differences exist among the story embedded in the narrative, the actual narrative sequence (which is frequently *not* in the story’s chronological order), and the various tensions between the two orders that authors have always self-consciously exploited.

In addition, there are many different types of plots, ranging from idyllic love stories to stories of war, murder, and mayhem to stories of ritual and religion to stories that are primarily intellectual discussions of ideas. And to advance the many different kinds of plots, novelists employ many devices, including “flashes” forward and backward, involutions of temporal sequence, and telling the story more than once from the points of view of different characters, as in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Gérard Genette has established a critical method with his structuralist analysis of temporal strategies within narrative, and Peter Brooks has argued for reestablishing the centrality of plot to any narrative.

Character

What exactly is a character? Is it simply that entity which, for the most part, retains the same name from the beginning to the end of the work of fiction? Are fictional characters obliged to obey the same rules of human behavior as living people of flesh and blood? If so, then why, for instance, do we identify with the characters in novels such as George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, in which animals speak and act like human beings?

What constitutes a good character? To borrow terminology from E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, can we claim that "rounded" characters are more vivid and memorable than "flat" ones? Forster himself makes no such claim, but some of his followers have misread him in suggesting that he did. Can we really say that Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina (a rounded character) is more memorable than Herman Melville's Captain Ahab (a flat one)—to take two tragic characters as examples? Hardly. But the question does point out that fictional characters are defined not so much by what they are as by how they are used. The functions to which characters are put determine whether we will see only one side of them or experience their many-sidedness. Captain Ahab's obsession is what defines him and controls the monomaniacal nature of the quest for *Moby-Dick*. To see him much outside of this defining obsession would soften him too much and would allow the momentum of the quest to flag. Anna Karenina's role, on the other hand, demands that we see her much more completely within a set of social situations and in many moods, for her fate is tied up with the mores of a large society, and she does not assume the dominant role in it that Captain Ahab does in his. But with all their differences, both characters rank among the most memorable in the history of fiction.

The problem is made to seem even more complex when we consider comic characters, who are more often flat (Don Quixote) than round (Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*), and characters in more recent fiction who are frequently both serious and comic, round and flat (e.g., the nameless narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*).

And what, then, do we think of the arguments made by post-World War II practitioners of the French *nouveau roman* such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, who recently claimed that the notion of character was passé, and that a new conception of the novel would have to be developed in which character no longer played a role as we know it? In such a new novel, the writer could only record phenomena. What, then, is character: a speaking voice, a thinking mind, a feeling of spirit? The essays here trace the development of this continuing argument.

Fiction and Reality

The relationship of fictional worlds to those inhabited by readers has long been a subject for discussion in the theory of fiction. Are novels primarily representations of reality, or are they all "made up"? How obliged are novelists to make what happens in their texts compare with what might have

happened had the same events occurred in the real world? Is verisimilitude, for instance, an obligation for a writer?

Lionel Trilling once claimed that realism is the basic drive behind all fictional creation, that the lives of individuals in society have provided the stuff out of which novels have always been made. Other writers have identified realism more closely with certain periods of history (the nineteenth century) than with others (the twentieth century). Even, however, in modernist novels as different as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* one of the main thematic problems in each concerns the relatedness of fictional events to those of a specific moment in history, a single day (June 16, 1904), as in *Ulysses*, or a more lengthy period (from the 1830s to the 1930s), as in *Absalom, Absalom!*

But can we think of fictional reality in the same terms we use in thinking about history or about our own lives? Lives in fiction are surely more carefully determined than those that are lived by people who read books. Few lives conform to a satisfying plot or reveal an understandable meaning. Novels do not have to end in death the way all lives and most biographies do. Nonetheless we do not find fictional characters to be well portrayed or developed unless some event or early action in the novel has prepared us for what happens to them later. In this way novels are predictable and predetermined in ways unlike the randomness we all experience when living in a contingent world.

It seems, then, that we demand that novels and stories be plausible within the terms of their own fictional world, and that such plausibility be measured not against whether that universe is truly a "represented" world but whether it is analogous to our own — that if some things happen, then other things will follow, just as they might were we living in a universe constructed like the one in that made-up world. This, it seems to us, is as true about works of fiction written in the great age of realism of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Stendhal, or Fyodor Dostoyevsky as it is of the more contrived but still essentially realistic novels of Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, and Gabriel García Márquez — as well as works using fantastic worlds, which often provide far more "realistic" or everyday details of their world than many avant-garde fictions. The latter part of the twentieth century saw the development of new forms such as the documentary novel, which forces us to establish the border between fact and fiction; magical realism, which mingles realism and the fantastic; and science fiction and fantasy, which often posit an alternative universe.

Time and Space

Prose fiction is a temporal medium. It takes time for the reader of a novel to absorb its words, assimilate its concepts, and perceive its various elements. Characters are developed, and plots unfold in time. Like a symphony, a novel frequently shifts from one moment to the next, and the development of a given passage depends on other passages that have preceded it.

Novelists have often manipulated a story's temporal unfolding by telling a tale out of chronological order, and in that way exploiting the tension among story, narrative, and plot—a tension that we mentioned earlier. Even in fictions characterized primarily by straightforward, continuous chronology, the time of reading is almost always at variance with the time the plot takes to unfold: almost all novels cover a longer period of time than the number of hours even a slow reader might take to finish the book. (The occasional novel that tries to match reading and narrative time exactly goes therefore against the reader's expectations.) Exploitation of this tension becomes yet another device through which authors define the rhythms of their narratives.

Another concern of recent critics (e.g., Joseph Frank) has been to describe the ways in which certain novels attempt to use spatial means to achieve certain effects. As applied to fiction, space is even more metaphoric than the concept of time. Painting and sculpture are spatial forms, and because they exist in space (as does an unopened book), they can be experienced “all at once” in a single and instantaneous visual perception. A painting (as distinguished from one's understanding of it) does not unfold in time; it is all there at every moment, and its parts are not sequential but physically connected.

Many modernist novels have demanded that readers experience them all at once—an obviously impossible demand, given the temporal nature of the reading experience. But like a cubist painting, whose various elements are related simply by contiguity, novels like *Ulysses* or Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* can be understood only when they are perceived “all at once,” for the various elements unfold not chronologically but in a fashion that seems at first to be almost random. It is often said that you cannot read such novels for the first time unless you have already read them. In other words, you must have their facts and their stories in your head (as you would when looking at a painting) before you can understand them as their narratives unfold. All students of fiction must therefore come to terms with the dif-

ferent conceptions of time conveyed in a nineteenth-century novel (like Dickens's *Great Expectations* or Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), with its emphasis on historical continuity, and the more fragmented modernist novel as it breaks with seemingly old-fashioned concepts such as causality and relatedness.

We hope this discussion of certain major topics in the theory of fiction will prove helpful to students, teachers, and scholars alike. Those topics and many others like them — metaphor, myth, setting, symbolism — are raised in much greater detail in the collection of texts that follow.

As prose fiction has developed from the early experiments of Cervantes's parodies, Richardson's epistolary works, and Hawthorne's sketches to the sophisticated experiments of modernism and postmodernism, literary criticism has also evolved. It has become more sophisticated as the result of efforts by critics to explain how fictions work their magic. The essays that follow, drawn from the past 120 years, and displaying that growth and change, are essential to any study of fiction at the beginning of our new century.