



The Novel (in Theory)

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Abstract

In a moment in which many critics are speaking of a new formalism, the recent appearance of three major anthologies of new and classic novel criticism bespeaks an unprecedented upsurge of interest in once-unfashionable questions of genre. And though these new books leave it unclear whether the novel *is* in fact a genre, they show that novel *theory* is: a genre defined at its core by an orientation toward totality. This essay examines the image of the canon of novel theory that emerges from Michael McKeon's *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* and Dorothy J. Hale's, *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900–2000* before moving to a longer consideration of Franco Moretti's massive two-volume collection *The Novel*. The essay explores how the conclusions of the ambitious founding texts of Western novel theory (by writers like Mikhail Bakhtin and Georg Lukács, in particular) are revisited and revised in Moretti's collection, with its vast historical reach and its collection of materials from a large number of languages. These anthologies, despite their differences, suggest that the novel (as it is portrayed in novel theory at least) remains the paradigmatic form of modernity – and that novel criticism remains a crucial critical name for the ambition to come to grips with the contours of an increasingly globalized cultural scene.

In a moment in which many critics are speaking of a new formalism, the recent appearance of three major anthologies of new and classic novel criticism appears to bespeak an upsurge of interest in once-unfashionable questions of genre. And yet one conclusion to be drawn from Michael McKeon's *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, Dorothy J. Hale's *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900–2000*, and Franco Moretti's *The Novel* (divided into volumes subtitled *History*, *Geography*, *Culture*, and *Forms and Themes*) is that the novel is not in fact a genre, if we want that term to designate a set of stable thematic preoccupations, habits of address, or social functions. While it's clearly true that we can group texts together as novels because they share certain features – 'long narrative prose fiction' is the usual checklist – it's equally obvious that such a grouping will have little in common with more coherent genres like passion plays or *feuilletons* or ballads. 'The novel' names instead a certain formal possibility. But it has yet to be definitively demonstrated

that any category encompassing *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *A Season of Migration to the North* and *Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, *Clarissa* and *The Castle*, can be meaningfully understood as one consistent kind of thing.

Novel theory has dealt with – and, sometimes, denied – this fact in various ways. Critics with a positivist bent tend to define the novel as anything satisfying the four cardinal requirements; the resultant big-tent approach produces a criticism rediscovering with a certain reliability the variety and multiplicity (Richardson *and* Kafka!) of this minimally defined form. Moretti's two volumes of new criticism, which cover thousands of years and countless languages and national traditions, exemplify this approach, and whatever doubts one has about whether all of its essays are about the same type of literary object, the sheer grandeur of the results constitutes a compelling justification of the positivist method. Still, the most influential and powerful theorists of the form have taken a very different tack – generating a vision of the form based on a few exemplars, and then generalizing this into a theory of 'the' novel. Many of the big names assembled in McKeon's and Hale's collections of classic novel theory make their cases based on a limited Western canon; the resultant vision of the novel as the genre par excellence of cognitive mapping is perhaps best summed up in Adorno's remark (not, as it happens, collected in any of these volumes) that 'the novel's true impulse [is] the attempt to decipher the riddle of external life' (32). This idea of the novel as modernity's pre-eminent sense-making form reaches its apotheosis in Marxist criticism, but it informs this speculative – we might, given its relative dearth of interest in most actually existing narrative forms, almost call it metaphysical – tradition much more broadly.

These two approaches should by rights be at odds: the more items welcomed under the positivist umbrella, the more unlikely appear the claims of the speculative tradition: what are the chances that simply because a text is written in prose and deals with imaginary people and is too long to be read in one sitting, that text is also, necessarily, in the business of mapping the shape of the world – and in a way that epics or revenge tragedies or nautical melodramas, say, aren't? And yet, while the two traditions of novel theory depart on questions of method, they meet up again under the aegis of a certain critical mood. If the metaphysicians insist that the novel is the form bent on mapping the whole of human society, the positivists honor the injunction to totality in a more straightforward way through their dizzying assembly of examples: where the former tradition thematizes the totalizing imperative, the latter performs it at the level of practice. The convergence of these models leads to the conclusion that if the novel isn't a genre, novel theory decidedly is. Whatever the differences in the way its practitioners construe their object, novel theory is a critical genre animated by a phantasm of totality, and in most of its versions features certain recurrent themes: an orientation

toward the big picture, a restless will to compare and to relativize. Whether such epistemological ambition shows up in novel theory as something novels themselves embody or as something they enjoin on us is not always clear; indeed, there is a persistent hesitation in much novel theory about whether the novel is a symptom or a diagnosis of modern complexity. But the disagreement is ultimately less notable than the shared thematic obsession with the whole.

It is this orientation toward Everything that emerges most forcefully from these three collections. McKeon and Hale's anthologies assemble major novel criticism from across the twentieth century, while Moretti's anthology collects new essays from an astounding number of countries and languages. The global appetite of Moretti's volumes makes clear how comparatively provincial was the body of work that inspired earlier thought about 'the' novel, but it also makes the power and ambition of those canonical formulations emerge with all the more force; rather than prompting us to dismiss those earlier efforts at mapping the novel as too restricted, Moretti's volume helps us see that the mandate to cast the widest net was always inherent in the genre of novel theory. These three anthologies suggest how little we still know about the global varieties of literary form. But in the process they demonstrate that novel theory has been and remains a placeholder for a critical injunction to think that totality.

'Whoever says heterogeneity thinks of Bakhtin', writes Mieke Bal in her essay in Moretti's collection (2:605). What more Bakhtinian form than the anthology – a gathering of voices and styles, each implicitly commenting on every other? At first glance, one might suspect Michael McKeon and Dorothy Hale of having put together stealthily un-Bakhtinian anthologies: these volumes assemble a wide variety of essays, but each is equally notable for the partisan vigor of the editors' own contributions in contextualizing essays threaded through the volumes. This editorial decision doesn't, of course, suppress the heteroglossic messiness inherent in the genre of the anthology, but it does lend a monologic edge to these books. Each editor has more to say than any one of their contributors, and each emerges as a very particular voice – if not quite an omniscient narrator, then an engagingly opinionated guide. The refusal of these editors to keep quiet on the sidelines makes each of these collections into two books: both *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* and *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900–2000* are at once very useful collections and sustained reflections on the tradition itself.

McKeon's collection's most immediately striking feature is its willingness to wander far afield from literary criticism in order to illuminate novel theory's grounding assumptions. Lévi-Strauss and Freud are at the core of two early sections, 'The Novel as Displacement I: Structuralism' and 'The Novel as Displacement II: Psychoanalysis'. For McKeon, these fields share

a 'devolutionary model' (71) – a sense of the novel as a belated, fragmentary version of a prior wholeness represented by myth or psychic content. Structural anthropology's opposition of the coherence of myth to the episodic nature of secular history emerges as parallel in its broad outlines to psychoanalysis' opposition of the dense reality of the dream-thought to the narrative elaboration of the dream. The key here is 'in its broad outlines': the homology between these schema can easily founder on the difference between the individual who dreams and the culture that mythologizes. And the applicability of either to the literary can at first seem only tangential: although Lévi-Strauss and Freud both mention the novel, it is of course not the primary object of their analysis. But McKeon's inclusion of these thinkers points out the readiness with which the novel serves as a touchstone in arguments concerned with other issues. His introductory essays are particularly good at isolating such broad conceptual rhymes between widely different thinkers, and they cumulatively make the case for the novel as (in theory, at least) the paradigmatic form of modernity.

The powerfully synthetic nature of McKeon's commentary is most notable in the introductions to the three selections of what he terms 'Grand Theory', represented by Bakhtin, Lukács, and (more eccentrically) Ortega y Gasset. In his discussion of Bakhtin, for example, McKeon notes that 'the more closely we enter into the terms of concrete language use, the more compatible Bakhtin's version of tradition and innovation becomes both with Lukács' dialectic of direct givenness and self-consciousness and with Ortega's dialectic of simple and oblique perspective' (319). In McKeon's account, these three grand theorists concur in a view of novelistic realism as defined by 'distance and mediation . . . they see [realism] as a dialectical amalgam of empirical objectivity and self-conscious reflexivity' (356). As presented here, each theorist understands that dialectic as operating in a different medium – for Lukács it is the hero's psychology that conveys the novel's self-awareness, for Ortega the play of perspectives on the narrated events, and for Bakhtin the interillumination of languages and styles. But the larger agreement is most crucial for McKeon. These three very different writers, he argues, evince a 'basic compatibility' (355) – each devoted to a vision of history as divided between modernity and tradition, and to a vision of the novel as the literary testament to that division.

As with McKeon's assimilation of Lévi-Strauss and Freud, such synthesis is possible only at a high level of abstraction. McKeon makes clear in his introduction his commitment to dialectical method, which he defines as a 'technique of discovery that proceeds by dividing wholes into parts and by disclosing wholes within parts' (xvii). As the rhythm of the sentence implies, this method favors balance as a conceptual value; McKeon disparages what he sees as poststructuralism's overemphasis on historical rupture and discontinuity (xviii), and his affinity for his grand theorists evidently derives from the fact that they see the novel as doubled – defined by formal techniques of self-distancing that mirror the larger,

all-important historical division between tradition and modernity. Accordingly, some of McKeon's most insightful remarks come in his discussion of free indirect discourse, the formal feature that could be said most succinctly to represent the novel's doubleness: in McKeon's introductory essay on 'Subjectivity, Character, Development', free indirect discourse emerges as the definitive novelistic discovery, embodying a self-distancing at once perspectival, psychological, and linguistic. Though he recognizes the potential crudity of the division between tradition and modernity, McKeon argues that 'historical diachrony requires a two-part differential (whether conceived as tradition-modernity, ancient-modern, B.C.-A.D., past-present, or the like) to be methodologically functional' (806), and he is dubious about the attempt to subdivide modernity by adding a post-modern supplement. His argument against such subdivision issues in a compellingly capacious definition of the epistemological function of realism. The realist novel in McKeon's account does much of the work of self-reflection and self-critique that recent critics tend to attribute solely to a postmodern or postcolonial turn; as he strikingly puts it in his discussion of *lo real maravilloso* in the introduction to his section on the colonial and postcolonial novel, 'in the end, even "marvelous realism" may seem to approach the status of a tautology' (858).

In this case McKeon's dialectical method joins what other critics have put asunder. Elsewhere his complementary penchant for 'dividing wholes into parts' results in the surprising editorial decision to divide the work of individual theorists between distinct categories. Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* shows up in the section on genre, but is also excerpted in 'The Novel as Displacement I: Structuralism' because of Frye's reliance on a devolutionary vision of literary change, and Marthe Robert's *Origins of the Novel* appears first as genre theory and then as psychoanalytic criticism. Benjamin's essay on mechanical reproduction earns him a slot as a theorist of film and fiction, but he also figures as a 'structuralist' because of 'The Storyteller's' nostalgic vision of the loss of community. Henry James appears as an analyst of the novel's relation to photography, but not, surprisingly, as a theorist of character. These decisions are justified in McKeon's tightly argued introductions, but their idiosyncrasy means that many readers will find it necessary to read those introductions straight through first in order to work out the logic of the volume. Those who do will encounter an extended essay that is itself intricately narrative in conception. The 'grand theorists' are followed by a selection of 'revisionists' who develop the insights of the big three in various directions (McKeon includes here an essay of his own usefully distilling some of the main arguments of his *Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*) and sections on gender, character, realism, film and photography, modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. The conceptual architecture becomes ever more complex – McKeon traces, for example, how the dialectic of realism and romance is replayed in accounts of the American novel's relation to

European fiction, how modernism is best understood as a 'realism of mind' (733), and how accounts of the postcolonial novel replay in accelerated form the evolution of the metropolitan novel. Partisans of particular critics may balk at seeing their ideas incorporated into this impressively woven conceptual braid. But if this anthology's insistence on its schema can be unwieldy, it is also valuably defamiliarizing. McKeon's arrangement continually forces us to interrogate our ingrained critical habits. In an environment in which theorists' names become bywords for static positions, the decision to abandon the obvious groupings – to disperse single theorists across multiple categories and make very different critics rub shoulders – lets us perceive these writers afresh, in all their multiple intellectual affiliations and occasional self-contradiction.

The differences in McKeon's and Hale's collections begin with what constitutes the tradition of novel theory itself. The volumes agree on a handful of critics – James, Frye, Bakhtin, Lukács, Benjamin, Ian Watt, Fredric Jameson, Nancy Armstrong, and Franco Moretti. But these names aside, these very long books have no overlap with one another. Hale's *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900–2000* includes a number of narratological theorists – Roland Barthes, Vladimir Propp, Victor Shklovsky, Tzvetan Todorov – whom McKeon explicitly excludes on the grounds of his collection's orientation toward explicitly historical arguments. There is also a greater emphasis in Hale on prominent living critics like Peter Brooks, Barbara Johnson, D. A. Miller, J. Hillis Miller, and Eve Sedgwick. The collections pose intriguing questions to one another. McKeon's unexpected inclusions are illuminating, but Hale's volume makes one wonder about his exclusions: if Freud can be made into a historically oriented theorist of the novel, why not Barthes? Wouldn't René Girard, whose influential notion of triangular desire is explicitly keyed to a theory of modernity, be a good candidate for Grand Theorist number four (and wouldn't including such authors, partial though their perspective may be, make sense in an avowedly dialectical project)? McKeon's volume prompts similar questions about Hale's: aren't Dorrit Cohn and Ann Banfield, both included by McKeon but neglected by Hale, more central to novel studies than Barbara Johnson, as exciting as her readings of individual novels can be? And there are important critics – Erich Auerbach, Leo Bersani, Gérard Genette, Raymond Williams – you won't find in either volume.

Such exclusions are of course inevitable. And despite their differences, these volumes provoke similar questions about the ways specialization may have affected literary criticism's ability to account for its object. McKeon prompts such thoughts both through the scope of his selections – a scope that implicitly claims novel theory can be conducted far beyond the precincts of literary criticism – and through his own method, which proceeds by revealing the partialities of successive schools of thought.

Hale's volume, although it draws more contributors from the ranks of literature departments, is similarly attentive to the fact that 'the theory of the novel can be practiced under other names' (2). Her introductions are sharp about moments when critical schools – deconstruction in particular – invoke the novel as illustrative of a broad theory of language without engaging the form's specificity. Her introductions arrive at such questions, to be sure, via a different route than McKeon. Where McKeon's anthology places contributors in unpredictable configurations, Hale's proceeds according to more expected divisions – with sections on Marxism, reader reception, formalism, structuralism, the Chicago school, and so on. Where McKeon's interest is more in the shape of the critics' arguments than on their institutional or political affiliations, Hale's selections come with biographical headnotes, and her introductions helpfully sketch the contributors' career trajectories. And where McKeon's characteristic critical gesture is abstraction, Hale's is close reading. She opens the volume by recounting that she asks her students

to read theoretical texts as they would literary texts – as both paradigmatic and problematic, limpidly clear in some paragraphs and excruciatingly opaque in other passages, redundant about some issues and silent about others. (1)

Her passionately argued introductions model this searching style of reading.

Some of Hale's most excited and exciting readings are elicited by texts she clearly disagrees with. Her previous book, *Social Formalism: the Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present*, is energized by a similar dynamic. That study lovingly examined James's New York Edition prefaces even as it appeared to fault them for founding a mystified tradition of novel criticism. In *The Novel*, Hale accuses Eve Sedgwick of being 'awfully essentializing' about gay male identity while applauding her 'dazzling conceptual complexity' (564) and praises Barbara Johnson's lucidity while taking her to task for suggesting that 'politics are play' (202–3). As it happens, neither of these negative assessments seems to me to stick: when Sedgwick claims that gay identities are 'tuned most durably to the note of shame' (618) – one of the phrases attracting Hale's censure – the figure seems chosen precisely to find a nonessentializing language to describe an observable feature of queer life; and when Johnson compares the search for stable meaning in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* first to an 'endless fishing expedition' and then to Penelope's endless labor of deferral (270), it's not clear that these activities are supposed to sound like 'play'. But Hale's ardently opinionated readings invite such counter-interpretations. Her insight into the narrative patterns of critical arguments and her intuition that theoretical claims are staked through imagery lead to many apt pronouncements. The claim that deconstruction understands 'the reading experience as a psychological journey through philosophical terrain' (197) captures precisely the emotional core of much deconstructive criticism. Similarly, Hale's argument that for Marxists the novel is

at once a bad guy – the debased scion of more authentically human literary genres produced by better, less alienated societies in the past – and a golden key, a privileged site for the unveiling of ideological processes that work with insidious invisibility in other realms of modern culture (346)

may overstate Marxists' investment in precapitalist modes of production, but it nicely describes the ambivalent romance critics like Jameson have conducted with the novel.

Hale's essays heat up most where she tangles with specific critics, but larger patterns emerge here as well. One persistent theme Hale identifies in novel theory is a preoccupation with what she terms 'the referential lure' – the sense that 'the novel's extraordinary mimeticism is at once seductive and unsettling' (8). As Hale traces this anxiety in critics from Shklovsky to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., it becomes clear how many theorists have believed that the critic's first duty is to steel herself against fiction's fundamental premises. Hale doesn't deny the value of such self-alienation for critical thinking, but her introductions question the haste with which critics dismiss the appeal of reference – as if the notion that fiction depicts something happening, and to someone, could be simply put aside rather than thought through as the basis of any (even critical) engagement. Hale suggests that identifying the referential lure doesn't banish its appeal, and she is incisive about its persistence in the most sophisticated accounts of the novel. Thus she points out the way Gates on the one hand exalts the self-undoing qualities of Zora Neale Hurston's narrative voice – but on the other can seem as referentially duped as anyone when he celebrates Janie's story of self-empowerment as an expression of 'the' African American voice (457). And Hale is brilliantly perceptive about the ways James takes an almost malicious pleasure in dismissing his most engaging characters as *ficelles* or narrative conveniences – only to speak of them in the next clause as beings with a fully achieved alterity, capable of pushing claims on James's artistic attention and warping the shape of the stories they inhabit.

As these examples suggest, Hale is particularly interested in uncovering the affective tonalities of different critical positions. We've seen how she asks what is really 'playful' about deconstruction's commitment to the play of the signifier. In the introduction to her section on psychoanalysis, Hale notes that Shoshana Felman so insistently associates interpretation with haunting and substitution that she might be said to theorize the uncanny as the 'affect of rhetoric' itself (283). And in her discussion of Seymour Chatman, Hale notes that a normative impulse creeps into Chatman's prose when he 'describes covert narrators in invidious terms' – as, for example, shadowy, lurking, devious presences (195): even a purely descriptive narratology turns out to be fueled by an ethical ambition to expose narratorial designs on characters' autonomy. This sensitivity to the emotional coloration of critical methods makes Hale alert to contradictions

in literary criticism's self-conception. She is quick to note when critics fail to theorize the ground of their own insights, offering accounts of the text that their own theory explicitly forbids, or when they hedge about whether they're describing the effects a text has on any reader or on a specialized, critically enlightened one (her discussion of the neo-Aristotelians is acute on this distinction). Hale's repeated findings of such conceptual hesitations make one wonder whether she hasn't specified another doubleness at the heart of novel-theory to augment those McKeon identifies – that of the novel's status as the privileged object of popular and professional reading. The novel, this collection reminds us, is still the most likely way to pass the time on a long bus ride *and* the default way to mount a theory of narrative, or of language, or of modernity. This double identity is palpable in the contributions to Moretti's massive volumes, with their widely varying styles, investments, and levels of agreement about what novels are and what they do.

The cover of *The Novel, Vol. 1, History, Geography and Culture* is illustrated with Picasso's image of Sancho Panza and Don Quixote under a whimsically drawn sun. Volume 2, subtitled *Forms and Themes*, is adorned with a drawing from Dino Battaglia's 1967 comic-strip version of *Moby-Dick*, Ahab viewed from behind as he gazes on the whiteness of the whale. The referential lure is irresistible: are these portraits of the editor? I'm not suggesting that Moretti's attempt to remake literary study is delusional or monomaniacal – simply that his critical inventiveness and rhetorical energy have a way of getting people to play along with his most improbable schemes in a manner more than mildly reminiscent of these novelistic forebears. Moretti is the most methodologically provocative voice in novel theory today. He has proposed Darwin as a resource for literary history ('On Literary Evolution'), suggested that maps are more useful to critics than demonstrations of semiotic instability (*The Atlas of the European Novel and Graphs, Maps, Trees*), and told literary critics that they read too closely to really see the object of their analysis ('Conjectures on World Literature'). These heretical opinions have been delivered in prose of considerable charismatic authority. The following lines from the end of 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature' – an essay arguing that critics squander their attention on a tiny fraction of the literature the world has produced – sound like a speech designed to rally a weary, potentially mutinous, crew. You can almost hear the waves lapping the hull of the good ship *MLA*:

Fantastic opportunity, this uncharted expanse of literature; with room for the most varied approaches, and for a truly *collective* effort, like literary history has never seen. Great chance, great challenge (what will knowledge indeed mean, if our archive becomes ten times larger, or a hundred), which calls for a maximum of methodological boldness: since no one knows what knowledge will mean in literary studies ten years from now, our best chance lies in the radical diversity of intellectual positions, and in their completely candid,

outspoken competition. Anarchy. Not diplomacy, not compromises, not winks at every powerful academic lobby, not taboos. Anarchy. (227)

The charm of such sentences lies in the way they temper an ambition worthy of Ahab with Quijotean whimsy, as if Moretti doesn't want us to be quite sure how seriously we are meant to take his vision of intellectual chaos. Typically, he manages to disparage much of what literary critics currently do even as he pleads for us to join him in the effort to hunt down the real quarry (are *we* really the team he seeks?). *The Novel* is his most ambitious project yet, two massive volumes of new essays (the English edition is boiled down from five volumes published in Italy from 2001 to 2003) that promise to chart the novel as a global and transhistorical form – what Moretti calls an 'anthropological force' (1:ix). It offers an opportunity to ask how many of Moretti's guild are, so to speak, on board: is this more than an extraordinarily rich collection of essays? Does it instantiate some of the methodological changes Moretti has long been calling for?

Moretti has claimed not that critics don't read enough but that we simply *can't* – that we need to find alternatives to the reading list to incorporate the noncanonical, the untranslated, and the out-of-print into our accounts of the literary. Two of the more striking solutions to the problem he has proposed are a greater reliance on other critics' work and a willingness to engage in statistical analyses of book titles, publication histories, and library circulation records. On the evidence of *The Novel*, very few have taken him up on the suggestion to consult other critics in lieu of performing first-hand analyses. Many of the best essays here – including Moretti's own on 'seriousness' as a stylistic and socio-political value – are based not on the 'distant reading' he has advocated but on the close engagement with texts the writers clearly know well. And though he has disparaged analyses of individual texts, many of the most insightful (and readable) of the selections are just that – Ann Banfield making something new of Mrs. Dalloway's confusion of the Armenians and the Albanians, Massimo Fusillo explaining why it makes sense to categorize the opening of Heliodorus's *Aethiopika* as 'Jamesian' (2:131), Paolo Tortonese walking us through the labyrinths of Eugene Sue's *Mysteries of Paris*. Moretti's proposal to pay more attention to publishing data, echoing as it does recent emphasis in the discipline on book history, does slightly better. A series of pieces here offer statistical profiles on book markets in Italy, Spain, India, Nigeria, Japan, the U.S., and the U.K. But their authors are notably modest about what the charts and tables can tell us in the absence of actually reading some of the texts in question. (The author of the piece on Japanese markets, Jonathan Zwicker, is given room elsewhere in the collection to incorporate his findings into an essay meditating on the cultural meanings of Japanese book formats and genre categories – and the essay is rewarding precisely because it presents its impressive statistical research in terms of longstanding questions about the ideology of form.)

Moretti doesn't give much guidance on the question of his volumes' methodological orientation. Readers accustomed to his manifestos will be surprised to find him so reticent on this point. Aside from his essay on the novel's 'Serious Century', Moretti offers only a brief two-page introduction to the project describing the volumes' ambition 'to make the literary field longer, larger and deeper' (1:x) – and the provocative nature of *The Novel* lies less in specific methodological innovations than in its scope. The collection's geographical and historical sweep takes in the ancient Greek novel, medieval French romance, prose fiction in premodern China, the picaresque, the supernatural, and modern African, Arabic, Asian, and Latin American fiction, among many other topics. Hale and McKeon's anthologies show that the vast majority of novel theory treats the form as paradigmatic of Western modernity (with the notable exception of Bakhtin, who developed his almost mystical definition of the 'novelistic' in examining Hellenistic prose fiction, and thus seemed to partake equally of what I've termed the positivist and speculative traditions – perhaps one explanation for his continued popularity). Accordingly, the first question raised by Moretti's volume is that of generic coherence. Does satisfying the standard check-list of requirements make all of these different kinds of text nonetheless recognizably the same kind of thing? The possibility of a reified sense of generic identity lurks in Moretti's introduction, where the very giddiness induced by *The Novel's* analytic ambition seems to migrate to the description of the form itself.

A history that begins in the Hellenistic world and continues today. A geography that overlaps with the advent of world literature. A morphology that ranges euphorically from war stories, pornography, and melodrama, to syntactic labyrinths, metaphoric prose, and broken plot lines. (1:ix–x)

But does 'euphoria' really tell us something about the shape of narrative fiction – or is it instead the defining affect of Moretti's project? These sentences impart an entrepreneurial vigor to 'the novel' that better describes the super-genre of global comprehension Moretti has compellingly identified in *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* than the form, of, say, the erotic fiction of the Ming dynasty or *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Moretti's certainty that we can know what we talk about when we talk about the novel rubs many people the wrong way. His methodological provocations often invoke the social and physical sciences, and his gestures of positivist confidence have been much criticized.¹ But the appeal to the authority of science – some would say the scientism – in Moretti's work is more than a way to castigate the impressionism of much literary study: it is also a commitment to collective forms of research. Moretti is devoted to the idea that literary studies should be beholden to a Popperian principle of falsifiability, and he is admirably willing to qualify or abandon his pronouncements when critics point out lapses. This openness to dissent

is apparent here. Moretti claims in his own piece here that ‘terminology does not matter, only concepts do’ (1:366) – but he includes several excellent essays that take problems of nomenclature as a starting point. Intriguingly, at either end of its historical stretch, the unity of ‘the novel’ unravels. Thomas Hägg’s ‘The Ancient Greek Novel’ argues that an overly coherent idea of genre has ‘vitiating much modern scholarship’ on ancient fiction (1:155). He claims that the fragmentary evidence suggests not a unitary genre but several different forms (sentimental love stories, adventure tales, hero narratives of Oriental derivation, travel stories) that only late in the Hellenistic period converge into something that made the precursors look like variations on a single form; by the end of Hägg’s essay the words ‘genre’ and ‘the Greek novel’ have acquired quotation marks (1:154). Andrew Plaks, by contrast, concludes in ‘The Novel in Premodern China’ that we can indeed speak of the novel in China. Even as he points to differences between the Chinese and Western novel (while its Western counterpart was incubated by a culture of chapbooks, the Chinese novel was born fully formed with the appearance of two masterworks, *Three Kingdoms* and *Saga of the Watermargin Heroes*, around the turn of the sixteenth century), Plaks illustrates intriguing congruencies, including a ‘rethinking of the relation between individual fulfillment and the social order’ (1:194) and a shared trajectory from heroic to mundane protagonists (1:204). But at the far end of the first volume’s historical swath, Eileen Julien’s ‘The Extroverted African Novel’ comes to a different conclusion about the portability of Western generic concepts. Julien claims that what gets read in the first world as ‘the African novel’ are narratives designed to enter debates on underdevelopment, primitivism, and postcoloniality. (These are fictions – like Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat* – tailor-made for Fredric Jameson’s notorious claim that Third World novels should be understood as national allegories.) Against such ‘extroverted’ texts Julien calls attention to a host of popular genres – detective fiction, romance, thrillers – ‘produced locally for particular niches’ and operating below the level of the nation (1:683). Julien suggests that looking for ‘the’ African novel can be a tool for simply not perceiving much of the continent’s fictional narrative.

If these essays ask us to rethink the cultural politics of what counts as a novel, others ask similarly searching questions about well-worn topics in novel theory like fiction, prose, realism, and epic. Catherine Gallagher’s ‘The Rise of Fictionality’ extends her important work on this topic, developing a set of original insights about the peculiar ontology of fictional characters and the provisional – but intense – emotional investment they solicit in readers; Michal Peled Ginsburg and Lorri Nandrea sensitively excavate the ambiguities of the idea of ‘prose’ in a modernity that exalts commonsense but ‘still cannot think of *prosaic* but as a pejorative term’ (2:247); Fredric Jameson continues to nuance the doubleness of his Marxist readings identified by Hale: his indictment of the ‘the antipoliticality of

the realist novel as such' modulates beautifully into an argument that the 'providential drifts at work' in realism bespeak a collective imagination (2:114, 112). And Fusillo's 'Epic, Novel' is a witty deconstruction of the opposition that serves as the founding 'critical myth' of novel theory (2:32): in the end, Fusillo suggests, even *The Odyssey* is so contaminated with the novelistic qualities of eros, domesticity, and comedy that *The Iliad* may be the only pure example of epic in existence. The signal diacritic marker by which novel theory has known 'the novel' seems to evaporate before our eyes.

Not all the essays ask such far-reaching questions about what novels are, or whether they exist outside the act of their naming. But even the more traditional exercises in literary history are given an unusual resonance by their placement here alongside each other. Several essays map daunting geographical or historical tracts: Gerald Martin canvasses the Latin American novel, arguing that the historical peculiarities of the continent make it logical to speak of such a unified object; Ato Quayson explores magical realism's elaboration of a 'structure of (absurdist) feeling with respect to history' (1:749); and perhaps the most wide-angled essay in the collection, Michael Denning's 'The Novelists International', proposes a tradition of 'proletarian' or 'committed' literature uniting writers as far-flung as Gabriel García Márquez, Naguib Mahfouz, José Saramago, Richard Wright, Patrícia Galvão, Cesare Pavese, Jorge Amado, C. L. R. James, John Dos Passos, and Maxim Gorky. Linked by a connection to international socialism and by common aesthetic challenges (how to create works about a collective subject in a form designed to exalt bourgeois individualism), these writers, Denning claims, were part of 'the first self-conscious attempt to create a world literature' (1:704). The essay not only makes notions of independent national traditions seem quaint, it also suggests a repressed history of revolutionary aspiration behind currently modish cosmopolitan fiction. And Margaret Cohen and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's neo-Bakhtinian essays taxonomize the chronotopes of the sea and the road respectively, offering compelling if rare instances of Moretti's vision of a literary history bypassing individual texts by focusing on small, replicable thematic units.

Even in such a huge collection, some topics are scanted. Zwicker's account of the novel's place in the Japanese book market is joined by Daniel Coug nas overview of the welter of popular genres surrounding the eighteenth-century French and English novel and Henry Zhao's analysis of the trouble Chinese fiction had earning acceptance in a generic hierarchy dominated by historiography, but such attention to neighboring forms and illegitimate genres becomes more intermittent as the historical timeline moves forward. Moretti's opening salvo notwithstanding, there is surprisingly little in *The Novel* about romance, horror, children's literature, pornography, science fiction, detective, or serial fiction – to say nothing of the films, plays, *telenovelas*, and comic books that have inspired novels

or taken over some of their cultural function. In a brief coda to his essay on providential narrative, Jameson mentions that realism's mappings of collective destiny now takes place in films like Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*. The comment is rich with implications for topics the anthology does not pursue: if realism was the literary mode of bourgeois ascendance and magical realism that of uneven development, our globalized moment appears to be finding its aesthetic reflection in film and TV plots conveying intimations of interdependence even across staggeringly abrupt chasms of inequality – from Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* to Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven*, David Cronenberg's *Eastern Promises* and HBO's *The Wire*. But acknowledging this continuity would mean recognizing that the work of the novel has passed into other forms – and analyzing it would involve either renaming the object of study the 'novelistic' or abandoning the nominal anchor of 'the novel' altogether. Such analyses would necessarily exclude themselves even from Moretti's capacious parameters, and would open on the kind of cultural studies in which he does not seem particularly interested; but many of the most intriguing essays here point in such directions.²

It is a merit of this collection, as Bakhtin claimed it was a merit of the novel (whatever that is exactly) that it encourages its reader to think beyond its own presuppositions. *The Novel's* essays collectively undermine the plausibility of its title's definite article, and in doing so they make us see how selective was the archive consulted by the powerful theorists assembled by McKeon and Hale. But the net effect is far from discouraging about the future of novel theory, which emerges here as, if nothing else, a way to catalyze vibrant critical work. And whether you emerge from Moretti's volumes convinced that any one essay achieves the global vision he has espoused – it is part of his point that no *single* essay could – the very shape of the collection makes a powerful point about the desirability of that planetary horizon. This is all the more true in a moment when a period- and nation-specific historicism has become the default mode of literary criticism, and too easily occupies the rhetorical high ground as the sole route to political insight. These volumes are starkly and surprisingly illustrative of questions of cultural power – most of all when they demonstrate that the struggles over what gets recognized *as* a novel are linked to issues of global inequality. In some quarters Moretti's project is spoken of as a kind of literary critical version of the G8 Summit – as if his brief for critical distance guaranteed depoliticization and a flattening of local differences. But the accusation misrepresents the spirit and the letter of these volumes. Far from reducing disparate narrative forms to some bland globalized standard, the crazy-quilt unevenness of *The Novel's* texture testifies at once to the urgency and to the difficulty of cobbling together such a total perspective. In the jerky adjustments of scale, tempo, style, and method we undergo in moving from close readings to graphs, from thematic inventories to formal analyses, from philological nuance to broad

assertion, the collection's readers keep bumping up against the unassimilable. Structured by a totalizing ambition that borders on the hubristic, *The Novel* nonetheless keeps detaining us in the details. This may not have been Moretti's intention; and his volumes may not have remade the study of the novel. But they are splendid instantiations of the Bakhtinian injunction to deprovincialize at the heart of novel theory, even (especially) if we can no longer be sure what the object of that theory is.

Short Biography

David Kurnick is an Assistant Professor of English at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, where he teaches in nineteenth-century literature, the history of the novel, and sexuality studies. He is working on a book about the aftereffects of failed dramatic ambition on the formal innovations of major novelists, including Thackeray, George Eliot, Henry James, and James Joyce, to be entitled *Empty Houses: Frustrated Dramatists and the Novel of Interiority*. His essays have appeared in *Victorian Studies*, *ELH*, and *The Henry James Review*.

Notes

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¹ For a sampling of the controversy around his work, see Arac, Apter, Prendergast, and Spivak. Moretti responds to some of his critics in 'More Conjectures'. For a collection that approaches some similar terrain to Moretti's *The Novel* but which frontally problematizes its key term, see Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner's important *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*. The editors 'project a form of novel studies that would take as its object the semantic and social contests through which *the* novel keeps hold of its definite article and stakes a claim to cultural capital' (2) – a task sensitively carried out in many of the selections. See in particular the meta-critical essay on novel theory by Homer Brown and Clifford Siskin's epilogue on 'The Rise of Novelism'.

² Perhaps inevitably in a work originally composed in so many languages, there are number of mistakes and awkward translations. I'm guessing that what is translated here as 'the costume novel' refers to the novel of manners (1:478). Huck Finn is weirdly described as an 'emarginated boy', which probably does not have to do with his position on the river (1:552). Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby appears as a vaguely subcontinental Mrs. Jellabee (2:111) and Austen's Lydia Bennet as an Italianate Lidia (1:372), while Eliot's Dorothea Brooke and Woolf's Sally Seton both get their names mildly misspelled (2:374, 381). Alessandro Portelli chides James Baldwin for calling Stowe's Uncle Tom 'wooly-haired', reminding us that 'nowhere in the book is [Tom] described as having white hair' (1:805). But of course Baldwin has not misrepresented Stowe; Portelli has misunderstood an English idiom. (Portelli's prominence here as an analyst of American literature – he has three essays – is a little bewildering). And Cervantes did not write in Catalan (1:178). Distracting though these errors can become, they have a way of pointing beyond themselves to the collaborative ambition of the volumes.

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