

Introduction



The evolution of the novel is an astonishing success story. From its humble beginnings onward, it has shown an unparalleled ability to adapt, innovate, spread, and prevail. At almost every turn, it has found the most intelligent, effective ways to reassert its place in the broader culture.

Its birth and rise, however, are still subject to debate. There is a widespread view that the novel emerged relatively late in history, as a literary expression of modernity. Just as the Enlightenment swept away obsolete dogmas, the novel replaced archaic narrative modes. Whereas the older kinds of narratives—sometimes called romances—looked at life through distorting lenses and portrayed idealized, implausible characters, the novel, we are told, turned its attention to the ordinary lives of real people in the real world. Some even claim that this important change was triggered by a single author who, in a flash of genius, brought the first true (that is, modern) novel into being. As Copernicus revolutionized cosmology, so Miguel de Cervantes, Mme de Lafayette, Daniel Defoe, or Samuel Richardson—depending on who is making the claim—single-handedly began a new era in the history of narrative prose.

This would make the novel a modern genre: polemical, rebellious, realistic, and born from a single great pen. And to some extent, it is. Samuel Richardson's influential *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) certainly challenged earlier narrative methods, offering moment-by-moment portrayals of lived experience. It is also true that some novelists—François Rabelais and Laurence Sterne, for instance—adopted a rebellious stance; that novels often aimed to describe social life realistically; and that, like any human endeavor, the genre's development frequently depended on exceptional individual talent.

EARLY CHOICES . . .

Yet in the last twenty years, the idea that the novel is a typically modern genre has been disputed. Margaret Doody's *The True Story of the Novel*

(1996) and Didier Souiller and Wladimir Troubetzkoy's chapter on the novel in their *Littérature comparée* (1997) showed that long prose narratives, far from being a recent European invention, have much deeper roots. Franco Moretti's comprehensive collection *Il Romanzo* (2001) and its partial English translation *The Novel* (2006–2007) demonstrated that the rise of the novel from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century was not so much the invention of a genre as a European acceleration of its growth, which then prompted a global expansion. Indeed, if we take early Japanese and Chinese fiction into consideration—*The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu (eleventh century), *Water Margin* (fourteenth century), *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong (fourteenth century), *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en (sixteenth century), and *The Story of the Stone* by Cao Xueqin (eighteenth century)—it becomes clear that the genre's roots are not confined to a single geographic space. Steven Moore's *The Novel: An Alternative History. Beginnings to 1600* examines the worldwide wealth of narratives that, from ancient Egypt to ancient China and Japan, made the rise of the novel possible.

Agreeing with this approach, the present book aims to show that the “European acceleration” of the novel (to use Franco Moretti's phrase) began as a long-term rivalry between various kinds—various subgenres—of prose narrative. Just as in present-day bookstores customers walk between shelves marked “literature,” “Westerns,” “mystery novels,” or “science fiction,” sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers were used to distinguishing between ancient Greek novels, late medieval chivalric stories, pastorals, picaresque stories, and novellas. Each kind of story portrayed a different aspect of the human condition—heroically chaste love in the ancient Greek novel, individual valor in chivalric tales, gentle sentiments in the pastoral, deceit in the picaresque, and sudden, surprising action in novellas. Each type handled form and content in its own way. Most importantly, these subgenres formed two large groups, one of which promoted a celebratory, idealist view of human life and behavior, while the other developed a derogatory, anti-idealist attitude. Idealist narratives, such as the ancient Greek and chivalric novels, featured uplifting characters and deeds, while the anti-idealist ones, like picaresque stories and many novellas, deplored or satirized unusually bad people and actions.

In the eyes of the late sixteenth-century public, the most successful celebratory, idealist novels had been written long before, between the first and the fourth centuries, by Greek colonists established on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. In the *Ethiopian Story* by Heliodorus, rediscovered at the end of the fifteenth century and translated into French, Italian, Spanish, English, and German, the two young protagonists, Chariclea and Theagenes, fall in love at Apollo's shrine at Delphi. After taking

a pledge of chastity, they flee Greece and go through a multitude of ordeals, including shipwrecks, kidnapping by bandits, separation, and the lustful advances of unscrupulous rulers. Eventually, they reach the sacred realm of Ethiopia, where Chariclea turns out to be none other than the long-lost daughter of the Ethiopian king.

Ancient Greek novels, little read or discussed in late antiquity, were remembered and imitated in the Byzantine Empire, but not in medieval western Europe, where the public favored a different kind of idealist narrative, the chivalric stories in which brave knights and proud ladies struggle to keep their love alive in adversity. Unlike the perfect protagonists of ancient Greek novels, medieval characters can be absentminded or have trouble mastering their urges. They might forget their pledges, and their love—Tristan and Isolde’s, for example, or Lancelot and Guinevere’s—is sometimes adulterous. Still, provided the knight fights valiantly, his unreliability, carelessness, and even adultery may be forgiven in the end. Steeped in archaic, pagan beliefs (from *paganus*: “villager”), chivalric stories remain very close to old legends, sagas, and fairy tales, and, like them, are full of sorcerers, prophets, talking animals, charmed objects, and enchanted cities.

Renaissance writers, who worshipped antiquity and in principle looked down on medieval art and literature, were nonetheless partial to such flights of fancy. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian poets reworked chivalric stories into a new genre, the “fantasy epic.” Luigi Pulci’s *Morgante* (1483), Matteo Maria Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato* (1495), and Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (1532) are about the intricate adventures of medieval knights frolicking in a fairy-tale environment that is never supposed to seem fully real or plausible. At the same time, late chivalric narratives in prose continued to flourish as a distinct group of idealist, celebratory stories, the most successful being *Amadis of Gaul* (published in 1508, but written earlier), the tale of a perfect knight whose love, eloquence, and heroic feats stirred the imaginations of European readers until late in the eighteenth century.

In search of the best possible idealist narratives, late sixteenth-century writers felt they must choose between late chivalric stories in prose and the newly rediscovered ancient Greek novels, between *Amadis of Gaul* and the *Ethiopian Story*. Discerning people saw the latter as the true model of the genre. Cervantes, for one, agreed and emulated it in his last work, *Persiles and Sigismunda* (1617), which he considered his greatest literary achievement. He was not the only writer to take this path: imitations of the ancient Greek novel thrived in much of Europe from the end of the sixteenth through the first half of the seventeenth century, and were read fervently until the end of the eighteenth. Among them were Mary Wroth’s *Urania* (1621), Gomberville’s *Polexandre* (1632–1637),

Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus (1649–1653) by Madeleine de Scudéry, *Aramena* (1669–1673) by Anton Ulrich, and *Oroonoko* (1688) by Aphra Behn.

Equally important for the sixteenth-century public was another, more recent species of idealist narrative: the pastoral novels that flourished in Italy and Spain and later conquered England and France. The first Spanish pastoral, Jorge de Montemayor's *Diana* (1559), was very popular in the late sixteenth century, and was one of Shakespeare's sources. In the early 1580s, Sir Philip Sidney finished his *Old Arcadia*, though it was not published until much later. And at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Honoré d'Urfé's five-volume *Astrea* (1607–1627) became the longest, most complex specimen of the pastoral.

Ancient Greek novels, medieval chivalric stories, and pastorals all transported their readers into a realm quite different from everyday reality, and consequently required a drastic suspension of disbelief. Nicolas Boileau, a seventeenth-century French critic, marveled to see the beautiful young heroine of Madeleine de Scudéry's long-winded *Artamène* fall over and over again into the hands of evil brigands, and yet always manage to keep her chastity intact. Similar objections had been raised against *Amadis of Gaul* and the *Diana*. They didn't matter, though, since these novels were *meant* to offer a lofty, implausible view of the world.

Later writers and critics would assume that these inspiring but unbelievable narratives had been rendered obsolete in the eighteenth century by modern, realist novels. Early modern writers and readers knew better. Idealist, celebratory novels had never been the only fictional diet. The oldest satiric narratives—Petronius's *Satyricon* (first century) and the medieval *Roman de Renart* (twelfth century)—were not widely available, but there were other anti-idealist comic fictions to satisfy the public appetite for satire. Many of the Italian Renaissance novellas of Giovanni Boccaccio and Matteo Bandello were particularly sharp on human imperfection, while the then recent Spanish picaresque stories, *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554, anonymous) and Quevedo's *El Buscón* (1626), described thieves and vagabonds devoid of any scruples or decency. Several of Cervantes's novellas and comic theatrical interludes, as well as the main character of *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), are indebted to these “derogatory” narratives. The public also loved poignant anti-idealist stories, which presented human failings in a compassionate rather than sarcastic mode: tragic Italian novellas by Boccaccio, Bandello, and Cinzio, and Spanish novellas by Cervantes and María de Zayas all bemoaned people's inability to master their passions.

Another significant difference between early modern prose subgenres was that some portrayed the “world at large,” while others aimed straight at the “heart of the matter.” A good novel was not only expected to be

faithful to the type it exemplified, whether celebratory (Heliodoran, chivalric, or pastoral) or derogatory (comic or picaresque), but it also had to link together a large number of episodes, all with similar causes and outcomes: thus the worldview it offered was both ample, since the characters were taken on a long ride, and somewhat monotonous, since they always encountered the same kinds of obstacles and had the same kinds of adventures. Ancient Greek novels and their imitations worked this way, as did comic and picaresque stories. Novellas, however, whether serious, tragic, or comic, cut down the number of episodes and went straight to the heart of the conflict. Since unity of action was the novella's strong point, they were often adapted by playwrights—Shakespeare used stories by Bandello and Cinzio for *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*.

Finally, although prose narratives were expected to show clearly whether they belonged to the idealist or the anti-idealist subgenre, a certain amount of variety was always welcome. Authors of Heliodorus-like novels never forgot to include some episodes about despicable characters, while those writing picaresque novels learned to embed loftier stories in them. As for the shorter, more focused novella, Boccaccio, Marguerite de Navarre, Bandello, and Cervantes published theirs in large collections, with comic and tragic stories side by side. In a culture that favored easily identifiable narrative species, these amalgamations provided a balance.

. . . AND WHAT HAPPENED LATER

While the early period should *not* be seen as mere preparation for a genuine rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, its achievements did play a major role in the subsequent history of the genre. Samuel Richardson, a self-taught writer, realized that the best features of the older narrative subgenres could be mixed together. The sublime heroes and multiple adventures of the ancient Greek novel, the humble social origins of picaresque characters, and the dramatic events of the novella could all be combined into a single narrative—as inspiring as an old romance, as close to everyday life as a comic story, and as striking as a novella. In Richardson's *Pamela*, the main character is a young woman whose virtue and resistance in the face of danger seem to come straight out of an ancient Greek novel. Yet she leads a modest, plausible life in provincial England. What's more, her heart-wrenching situation, as a servant pursued by an undeserving master, would fit well in a Renaissance novella. By mingling these features, Richardson could uplift his readers without carrying them off into a fully implausible realm, he could tell a story as compelling as a novella and as extended as a picaresque novel, and, most importantly for his time, he could show the moral equality of people regardless of their social position.

Richardson's new, more plausible idealism was an immediate and lasting success. His *Pamela* and *Clarissa* became required reading for novelists well into the nineteenth century. Yet his innovations did not remain unchallenged. Significantly, his best-known competitor, Henry Fielding, defended the older anti-idealist approach, particularly its comic version. *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749) reject the representation of idealized behavior in favor of satire. Richardson and Fielding each thought only one kind of novel—his kind—should prevail. Under the influence of Richardson's moderate idealism and Fielding's ironic skepticism, people began to understand the novel as a long prose narrative whose well-constructed plot stays close to everyday life and whose characters have both virtues and faults.

Two generations later, Walter Scott, followed by Honoré de Balzac, assigned the novel a new task: it should represent not only moral physiognomies but also the historical and social texture of the characters' world. In the 1842 foreword to his *Human Comedy*, a vast fictional panorama of early nineteenth-century French society, Balzac asked writers to emulate natural science by studying each social species and its behavior. He expected the novel to become the most reliable instrument for understanding society and the individual's place in it. Balzac's manifesto was not just a symptom of the genre's new self-assurance; it also formulated a conqueror's project. Whereas early modern narrative subgenres had each addressed a specific facet of life, the nineteenth-century social and historical novel aspired to provide full, systematic coverage of humankind. Not unlike Napoleon Bonaparte, whose explicit aim was to conquer Europe and make Paris its capital, Balzac hoped to establish a new empire of literature, with the novel at its center.

And just as Europe did move toward unification, though much later and quite differently from the way Napoleon had planned it, so the novel gradually became the most influential literary genre, though not exactly along the lines envisaged by Balzac. With all its success, the social and historical novel had plenty of rivals and detractors. Gothic novelists, who had been around for a while, idealists such as Alessandro Manzoni and Victor Hugo, painters of intimacy such as Jane Austen and Adalbert Stifter, skeptics like Stendhal and, later, Gustave Flaubert, and satirists like William Makepeace Thackeray all challenged the imperial designs of social realism. At the same time, the great novels of George Eliot, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Theodor Fontane, Benito Pérez Galdós, and José Maria de Eça de Queirós imagined a variety of syntheses between the admirable and pitiful aspects of the human condition.

In an equally important development, the Romantics deemed the social novel unduly prosaic, unable to transport its readers beyond the borders of everyday reality. Some of the most important nineteenth-century

philosophers, including Hegel, Schelling, and Schopenhauer, also felt that despite its success with the reading public, the novel was a pedestrian and uninspiring genre. Something was missing, something that—unlike historical and social realism—poetry, music, and some older narratives knew how to convey.

In answer to this challenge, the novel started a new adventure. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the growing cult of artistic beauty encouraged writers to infuse their prose with a new poetic fervor. Hoping to induce a special rapture in their readers, they switched from storytelling to exploring the innermost recesses of the human psyche. It remains an open question whether James Joyce's ever-surprising linguistic games, Thomas Mann's or Marcel Proust's masterfully convoluted sentences, and William Faulkner's lyricism really do represent the way the mind works. It is undeniable, though, that the modernist novel, with its sophisticated techniques, was able to go beyond popular success and secure the respect of cultural elites.

THE OLD AND THE NEW, TRUTH AND LIES, POETRY AND PROSE

One reason why the novel's early development was not always properly understood is that for so long there were no written rules meant to govern prose narrative. From the Renaissance onward, epic, drama, and poetry were subject to complex sets of norms derived from Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Italian and French tragedy obeyed severe constraints concerning the unity of action, the setting of the play, its decorum, and its verisimilitude. A wealth of theoretical treatises debated the ways in which these rules had to be followed. By contrast, prose narratives were blissfully ignored by literary critics and theorists until well into the eighteenth century. Prefaces or afterwords, in discussing the art of the novel, never went beyond a few statements, often vague, claiming to value verisimilitude even, or especially, when there was none to be found in the novel itself.

The lack of a written statute, far from hindering the development of the genre, allowed its practitioners to focus on concrete ways to please the public. Just as English and American judges do not simply obey statutes, custom, and precedent, but must consider the peculiarities of each case when ruling, for a long time novelists took a pragmatic approach, feeling free to imitate existing forms or to innovate. Indeed, before the eighteenth century, when each narrative subgenre met a specific need for its readers, making them either dream, cry, laugh, or meditate, many writers moved freely from one kind of prose narrative to another, occasionally inventing new ways to tell their stories.

No playwright of the time would have enjoyed such freedom. Lope de Vega, Cervantes's contemporary, whose tragedies did not follow Aristotle's advice closely enough, had to justify his misdemeanors in writing. He managed to appease his Spanish critics, but, soon after, the overzealous French Academy publicly censured Pierre Corneille, who had dared to follow the Spanish model in his early plays. In one of his essays on drama, Corneille wistfully contrasts the freedom enjoyed by the novel with the constraints placed on playwrights. Every Italian, Spanish, or French playwright of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was well aware that Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the first practitioners of their trade, had provided immortal models for the genre. And when the value of the ancient models began to be questioned at the end of the seventeenth century, critics on both sides of the debate unanimously emphasized the difference between the ancients and moderns. "First we had the good old masters, now the bad new ones," complained the partisans of the ancients. "First the bad old masters, now us," boasted the supporters of the moderns.

The existence of an established set of rules for drama enhanced historical awareness, whereas novelists did not have to dwell on their genre's past. Early modern prose writers did express strong judgments, but these rarely involved clear-cut distinctions between the old and the new. Novelists were practically oriented: they thought about the history of their trade in terms of their immediate objectives. Far from rejecting the old in favor of the new, Cervantes, like many of his contemporaries, championed *newly* discovered *old* novels—such as the *Ethiopian Story*, recently made available again—over late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century chivalric stories, that is, over relatively *recent* prose narrative based on *older* medieval romances. His criterion was plausibility rather than antiquity: he loved the *Ethiopian Story* because to him it appeared *true to life*, whereas *Amadis of Gaul* and other chivalric stories seemed *packed with lies*.

By the mid-eighteenth century, most writers came to find both chivalric stories and long novels inspired by the ancient Greek model profoundly unconvincing. These narratives described unlikely situations; they overused the imagination, exaggerated the passions, and featured implausibly flawless characters. They *all* lied by idealizing life too much. Few eighteenth-century writers would accept that the earlier idealist subgenres satisfied an important human need—to escape the authority of the here and now—*precisely* because of their implausibility. Authors like Marivaux, Richardson, Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and Sterne aimed to reorient the novel toward the here and now; they presented this retreat of imagination as a triumph of common sense and a mark of artistic progress. They wanted to remind their readers that we live in this universe

and not in another, more beautiful and generous one. “Truth,” which for Cervantes just a century and a half before had meant the uplifting idealism of the ancient Greek novel, now came to designate conformity with empirical observation. And since older idealist subgenres were being rejected, the opposition between “truth” and “lies” was mapped onto the distinction between “new, modern” and “old, obsolete.”

A third distinction—between “poetic” and “prosaic”—soon emerged as a major preoccupation. Romantics deplored the constraints the social and historical novel could put on a writer’s freedom: they believed the power of art depended on individual genius rather than existing professional techniques or rules, and emphasized natural, unfettered creativity. They held Shakespeare in high regard, as well as oral poetry, folktales, ancient and medieval epic, and chivalric romances. Compared to the poetic energy released by these works, the social novel’s obsession with the real seemed quite reductive. Even Hegel, who was no friend of the Romantics, declared in his *Aesthetics* that, while ancient and medieval epic dealt with heroes, the novel, as “the epic of a prosaic era,” could describe the lives of commoners. Accordingly, critics assumed that the only real, “prosaic” novels had been written in the last few centuries. Both Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, with its ironic rejection of chivalric stories, and Mme de Lafayette’s *Princess of Clèves* (1678), a tragic novella about human weakness, were retroactively granted the status of the “first modern novels,” and the novel was deemed the modern genre par excellence.

Still, the opposition between the “old lies” of ancient Greek and chivalric stories and the newly discovered “truth” of the modern novel should not be overestimated. The difference is primarily one of scale. The *Ethiopian Story* and *Yvain* (ca. 1170) by Chrétien de Troyes may require a more drastic suspension of disbelief than the novels of Richardson and Charles Dickens, but those novels’ readers must nonetheless make allowances for a considerable number of incredible characters and events. Fielding, for one, couldn’t bring himself to believe the story of Pamela, as his parody, *Shamela* (1741), testifies. In Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838), not only does the plot rest on the most improbable series of coincidences, but Oliver’s language, his impeccable grammar, sounds shockingly artificial. Readers nevertheless accept these “lies,” just as they tolerate the barely credible sequence of misfortunes that destroy Tess’s life in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891).

Nor is the supposedly sharp opposition between the poetic transports of the older novel and the prosaic concerns of the modern very convincing. Chivalric stories, poetic as they are, highlight the faults of the great knights: forgetfulness in *Yvain*, absentmindedness in *Perceval* (ca. 1180), garrulousness in *Erec and Enide* (ca. 1170), dishonesty in *Tristan* (early thirteenth century). Conversely, seven centuries later, virtually all realist

writers entered into a secret pact with the Romantic imagination. Balzac and Dickens in particular are masters of exaggeration. Their novels thrill their readers, and to call them prosaic is a blatant simplification.

Among the distinctions made between old and new, the only one that really makes sense is the difference between the epic and the novel. There is no question that the *Iliad* (eighth century BC) and the *Ethiopian Story* belong to different literary genres. So different, I might add, that there is no compelling reason to link them genetically or to see the novel as the epic of the modern era. The epic has not been “replaced” by the novel. Instead of asserting, as many critics have done, that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel represents the modern, bourgeois, prosaic incarnation of the epic, it would be more accurate to say that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel is the newer, sometimes bourgeois and prosaic incarnation of the *novel*.

HISTORIES OF THE GENRE

The present book aligns itself with the recent scholarship that studies the novel from its ancient Greek form to twentieth-century modernism. Yet it also draws on older approaches to the subject.

Some of the great nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians of the novel did trace its development back a long way. Their books, which are monuments of erudition and common sense, often assume, under the influence of Darwinian theory, that literary genres evolve and morph into one another through internal mutations, not unlike biological species. Erwin Rohde¹ was the first “natural” historian of ancient narrative prose and saw the Greek novel as the product of crossbreeding among the late epic, travel stories, and biography. His views need not be taken literally, but his insights about the competition between narrative species, and their possible fusion, converge with one of the arguments I make in this book—that early modern narrative culture emphasized the differences between subgenres, while later forms of the novel are the result of multiple attempts to blend these subgenres together.

The greatest achievements of the *natural history of the novel* were its large temporal scale and its attention to generic diversity. The wealth of material in Ernest Albert Baker’s ten-volume *History of the English Novel*,² and the accuracy of many of its assessments of narrative subgenres and their evolution, make it an abiding source of knowledge. The same is true of the older book by Felix Bobertag, *Geschichte des Romans*

¹ Author of *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1876).

² London: Witherby, 1924–1936.

und der ihm verwandten Dichtungsgattungen in Deutschland,³ of Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo's *Orígenes de la novela*,⁴ and of Henri Coulet's *Le Roman jusqu'à la Révolution*.⁵ The natural historians' willingness to explore long stretches of time is particularly helpful, and yet their vast empirical knowledge can itself sometimes become a burden: these histories do not always pay enough attention to literary art, or to the web of connections between literature and its social and intellectual milieu, and they tend to forgo complex conceptual frameworks.

These shortcomings were later corrected by literary historians who gave special attention to historical environment, to the evolution of formal devices, and to abstract concepts that can help make sense of the novel's evolution.

One of the most influential *social and intellectual histories* is Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*.⁶ Watt's book focuses on a few English novels written in the first half of the eighteenth century, yet its powerful insights make it required reading. According to Watt, the writings of Daniel Defoe and Richardson, the creators, in his view, of the modern, realist novel, cannot be understood without reference to the social and intellectual context of Britain in the early eighteenth century. This was a time when writers ceased to depend on wealthy protectors and began to make a living from the sales of their books, bought and read by an ever-larger public. It was also a time when individualism was gaining ground in everyday life, in religious beliefs, and in philosophy, and when scientific advances were lending philosophical empiricism a renewed prestige. The works of Defoe and Richardson, Watt argues, are part and parcel of a larger movement that includes the rise of the market economy, individualist ethics, and a modern theory of knowledge.

Economic themes are indeed always present in Defoe's novels, whose characters endlessly count up their material gains, whether they earned them by solitary, honest work, as in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), or by the most squalid means, as in *Moll Flanders* (1722). These themes resonate with Protestant ethics as well as with economic individualism, and they indicate that writers who could no longer count on the generosity of aristocratic patrons were responsive to the issues that interested their new, middle-class readers. Watt also notices that Defoe's and Richardson's characters pay considerable attention to tangible details, as though their own credibility might depend on how accurate these details are. This

³ Breslau: A. Gosohorsky, 1876.

⁴ Madrid: Bailly- Ballière, 1905–1915.

⁵ Paris: Armand Colin, 1967.

⁶ Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957.

technique, which Watt calls “formal realism,” aims to provide authentic accounts of concrete individual experiences, and thus has clear affinities with John Locke’s empiricism and with modern science more generally.

Watt argues convincingly that innovations in literary technique depend on changes in the social structure, such as the rise of the market economy and the new status of writers and readers, as well as on the evolution of the religious and intellectual superstructure—in this case, Protestant ethics and empiricism. Yet he tends to overstate his thesis. He blurs, for instance, the differences between Defoe’s prose and Richardson’s. It is true that their works were published in the same half century, but Richardson’s *Pamela*—with all its faults—can indeed be considered a major innovation, whereas Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, though extraordinarily powerful, exploit well-established narrative formulas: *Crusoe* the spiritual autobiography and *Moll Flanders* the picaresque novel.

Moreover, because the links are quite striking between Defoe’s and Richardson’s works and the crucial historical forces of the time, Watt presents their realism as the only productive trend in the history of the modern English novel. Fielding, who opposed formal realism and criticized Richardson’s method and vision severely, makes only a minor contribution, in Watt’s view, to the novel’s development. This is the main danger in overplaying social and cultural explanations for artistic phenomena, especially when such explanations fit only one set of facts, such as the link between formal realism and the rise of commercial capitalist society. Since over time commercial capitalism prevailed over its older rivals, it is tempting to assume that in literature too, formal realism was the only successful trend. But in fact, the growth of the market economy, the spread of literacy, and the joint success of Protestant ethics and empiricism did *not* entail the supremacy of formal realism. Instead, it allowed more than one literary formula to compete, thus letting Fielding’s satiric approach exercise its own influence on the evolution of the novel. Fielding’s work, echoed in Walter Scott and Dickens, was a direct source of inspiration for many nineteenth-century writers, including Jane Austen, Stendhal, and Thackeray.

Perhaps, then, narrative techniques enjoy a certain independence from social and intellectual factors. The Russian formalists certainly thought so and viewed the novel’s emergence as a matter of more or less ahistorical technical innovation. For Viktor Shklovsky, the quintessential novel was Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which pokes fun at everything narrative had always relied on: character, plot, motivation, love, conversation, and reflection.

Less extreme than his formalist friends, the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin devised a *history of narrative techniques* indebted not only to

formalism but also to Hegel and to late nineteenth-century thinkers, such as Wilhelm Dilthey, who attempted to integrate the history of artistic forms within a more general history of the human spirit. Bakhtin's essay "The Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the novel"⁷ illustrates this kind of historical thinking. Familiar with Erwin Rohde's work, Bakhtin understood that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel had a pre-history that encompassed not only a great deal of narrative prose written before Rabelais, whose *Gargantua* (1534) and *Pantagruel* (1532) Bakhtin considered the foundation of the modern novel, but also biographical and philosophical writings such as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (late first century) and Plato's *Dialogues* (fifth to fourth century BC).

Examining formal features, Bakhtin noticed that the action in ancient Greek novels takes place in an abstract space and time, that the characters never change or evolve, and that episodes do not follow one another according to the laws of causality. Convinced that these features betrayed a lack of formal skill, Bakhtin argued that they were finally outgrown only when nineteenth-century realist writers learned to represent time and space in a rich, concrete fashion, and to master the portrayal of psychological growth and the causal sequencing of episodes.

Bakhtin's formal description of ancient Greek novels is accurate. Yet while grasping the *formal features* of these novels, Bakhtin neglects the *inner logic* of their narrative universe. In representational arts, form is usually intimately related to content, an essential part of what makes it intelligible and meaningful, so it is not enough to argue that in ancient Greek novels time and space are abstract, psychology is rigid, and events occur arbitrarily. In order to deem these novels unsatisfactory, you would need to reflect on the reasons behind their formal qualities and show that those qualities do not help impart the intended message. But Bakhtin seldom addresses the issue of the meaning conveyed by the techniques he describes.

Nor does Bakhtin's history of narrative methods pay much attention to the environment—social, intellectual, and artistic—from which nineteenth-century social realism arose. He never asks why the concrete detail and psychological verisimilitude of nineteenth-century novels eventually replaced what he sees as the abstraction and implausibility of older works. By failing to address this question, he makes the history of narrative techniques into a mere inventory of formal features. Artistic *will to form* may well manifest the freedom of the human spirit, as many nineteenth-century German historians of culture argued. But it is equally true, as Ian Watt has shown, that this spirit does not concoct artistic

⁷ In his *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (1937–1938; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84–258.

forms in a vacuum, without any ties to the reality of social and intellectual life.

In order to explain the evolution of novelistic techniques, Bakhtin does formulate a hypothesis linking the earlier novel with its social environment. He argues that in medieval and early modern Europe, a *feudal ideology* that neglected spatial and temporal categories clashed with an *anti-ideological, popular creed* more sensitive to the real conditions of life. As products of the feudal ideology, ancient Greek novels and medieval chivalric stories treated space and time abstractly, whereas folk literature, farce, parody, and satire embodied the popular creed and prepared the way for works like Rabelais's *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, which expressed the comic, concrete point of view. In the end, Bakhtin suggests, the popular creed conquered the novel, giving it a new, anticonventional direction that encouraged the rise of modern social realism.

While Bakhtin's speculations about ideology do capture the difference between the idealizing and comic approaches in medieval and early modern narratives, his sociological notions do not stand scrutiny. It is hard to believe a truly feudal ideology would have minimized spatial categories, given that few social arrangements were more dependent on territorial considerations: the foundation of the feudal system was local military defense in the form of fortified castles closely surrounded by villages. Temporal categories were equally crucial for feudalism, as most social positions were hereditary, reinforcing a sense of tradition and respect for chronological records. Besides, it is counterintuitive to attribute the complexity, erudition, and rhetorical brio of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* or *Don Quixote* to a popular antifeudal ideology. Although Rabelais and Cervantes did rely on an age-old comic tradition, their books are the products of a sophisticated humanist culture whose connections with populism remain elusive.

A history that takes account only of formal artistic devices simply does not have the means to describe the relation between literature and society, let alone the reasons why the fictional worlds created by novelists fired their readers' imaginations. A fourth type of historical analysis, the *reflective history of the novel*, takes on this task, focusing on the internal development of the genre and its links with the life of the human spirit. Georg Lukács's early essay *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*⁸ is an influential example.

Lukács assumes that in order to understand its historical development, one must examine the novel's *concept*—the way it portrays the world—and its growth and maturation. In Lukács's view, narratives examine

⁸ Trans. Anna Bostock (1916; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

the links between human beings *as individuals* and the society in which they live. This kind of representation, he continues, is difficult to achieve, given the tension between individual aspirations and the constraints imposed by the outside world. Like many German-trained scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the young Lukács romanticized the ancient Greek city-state, which he imagined as the most perfect and best integrated of all forms of civilization. The dominant narrative genre of that period, Lukács argues, was the epic poem, Homer's *Iliad*, for example, which described the actions of heroic men in a world whose greatness they fully understood and accepted.

Later, at a historical moment Lukács does not define very clearly, when the meaning of the surrounding world became doubtful and hard to capture in a single, powerful insight, the epic gave way to the novel, a genre that specializes in depicting an imperfect universe and a set of characters who do not quite fit within it. According to Lukács, these characters do not entirely accept the legitimacy of their world—they do not *inhabit* it in the full sense of the term, and their lives acquire meaning only by reference to a different, ideal world toward which they can aspire. Yet obviously, this ideal world has no reality outside the protagonist's longings. Lukács calls these yearning characters "problematic heroes." The most famous of them is Don Quixote, the hidalgo whose ideal of a knight-errant generously fighting to defend orphans, widows, and persecuted ladies exists only in his deranged mind. Later on, Lukács adds, the main characters of Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* (1797–1799) and Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) would be of the same type.

The idea of a "problematic hero" and the tension between his ideals and reality generates a dialectical movement involving three moments. First, when the hero's ideal world is narrower, more restricted, than the real one, and when he remains blind to the gap between the two worlds, Lukács calls the resulting situation *abstract idealism*. Don Quixote is the best example. The ideal he believes in applies to only a small number of real human interactions—those involving charity, generosity, and self-sacrifice—and so his attempts to implement it cannot but fail. Conversely, when the ideal imagined by the main character is wider and more elaborate than the surrounding world, the clash between them leads to what Lukács terms *romantic disillusion*. In such cases, the character is well aware of the gap between the ideal and the real, but lacks the power and the means to bridge it. Lukács uses the protagonist of Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* (1859) to illustrate this second kind of situation—a Russian dreamer who lies in bed day after day and never does anything. In the third dialectical moment, the problematic hero, while remaining devoted to his ideal, manages to achieve a lasting *reconciliation* with the surrounding reality: this is what happens in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's*

Apprenticeship (1795–1796), and many more examples can be found in the nineteenth-century bildungsroman.

Lukács bases his theory of the novel on abstract concepts rather than masses of empirical data, which gives him the courage to propose new, capacious categories that address deep human concerns, and to choose his examples without reference to the usual chronological criteria—the three books he uses to illustrate the dialectics of the novel, *Don Quixote*, *Oblomov*, and *Wilhelm Meister*, form an unexpected sequence. Yet despite Lukács's wish to escape strict chronology, his views are actually confined within narrow temporal limits. The dialectic of the problematic hero, while highly pertinent for novels published from the end of the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, cannot explain all those written earlier or later. Apart from *Don Quixote*, Lukács never considers a novel written before *Wilhelm Meister*. He also pays little attention to the role of individual talent. For instance, neither abstract idealism, nor romantic disillusion, nor a synthesis of the two can fully explain the complex relations between Leo Tolstoy's characters and their environment. Claiming that Tolstoy's novels represent a return to an older kind of epic, Lukács fails to notice the Russian novelist's innovations. By overemphasizing impersonal dialectical patterns, he neglects the unpredictable contributions of individual writers.

THE PRESENT WORK: CORE ASSUMPTIONS AND GOALS

In the present work, somewhat as in natural histories of the novel though certainly in much less detail, I sketch out a comprehensive overview of the genre's development. From the history of narrative techniques, I have borrowed the habit of examining the craft of the novel and its formal methods. As do social historians of literature, I look at the evolution of literary genres from a wider cultural perspective. Most importantly, I owe a great deal to the reflective history of the novel. My book aims to understand the changing lives of the genre, their secret pact with permanence, and the dialogue engaged in by novelists over the centuries. I do not draw a definite temporal line separating a "before" from an "after," a line behind which the novel's past would be, as Constantin Fasolt puts it in *The Limits of History*,⁹ *absent* and *immutable*—in other words, dead and buried. Approaching early novels as living literature rather than ossified historical evidence, this book hopes to recapture their appeal.

Following Lukács's example, I use concepts that apply directly to human experience, concepts meant to capture the resonance of literary works beyond the period in which they were written. That is why, like

⁹ Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

him, I look at long stretches of time and at the often surprising interaction between periods. The difference is that instead of placing the whole history of the novel under a single illuminating concept, as he did, I use a family of concepts, relating them when possible to the natural history of the genre. My speculations, in other words, will be somewhat less abstruse and closer to historical practice than the young Lukács's.

As for terminology, the distinction between *romance* and *novel* does capture something important, but I will avoid relying on it here. *Romance* comes from the French *roman*, which initially designated medieval narratives written in *roman*—that is, vernacular French, a Romance language. In French, the term was applied to the ancient Greek novels as soon as they were rediscovered in the sixteenth century, as well as to other early modern long narratives, pastoral, heroic, or allegorical. Later, the term was extended to the more recent forms that in English are called *novels*. In German, the word *Roman* has a similarly wide scope. The Italian term *romanzo* applies not only to all ancient, medieval, and modern long prose narratives, but also to the Renaissance fantasy epic poems by Pulci, Boiardo, and Ariosto. When Torquato Tasso, in his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1567–1570), discusses the difference between ancient epic and the more recent *romanzo*, he does not refer to early novels but to these Renaissance epic poems. In English, the difference between *romance* and *novel* has something to do with subject matter, a *romance* being a story mainly concerned with love, but it also involves a chronological distinction, in which *novel* has usually been reserved for prose narratives written in the eighteenth century or later. Recently, however, classics scholars have extended the term *novel* to ancient Greek and Latin prose narratives. This change suggests a new awareness of the genre's long chronological continuity. To increase the confusion, the Italian, Spanish, and French cognates of the term *novel* are *novella* and *nouvelle*, designating a shorter prose narrative with a simpler plot. Since the term *short story* usually refers to very brief narratives, the Italian and Spanish term was adopted in English to describe longer *novellas*.

My use of the word “idealist” here has little to do with the philosophical sense of the term. It refers to narratives that draw an idealized picture of human existence.



Four core beliefs give this book its direction.

First, *narratives are about human beings, the ideals and norms that guide their lives, the passions that drive them, and the action they take.* Since characters and their ideals form the true, living center of narrative genres, novels propose substantial hypotheses about human life and imagine fictional worlds governed by them. These hypotheses describe

distinct human types, their relation to ideals, their patterns of behavior, and their links to the community in which they live. The novel ponders the meaning of life and of human interactions, just as epic and tragedy did before it. But whereas epic heroes belong completely to their cities and tragic characters are crushed by fate, most characters in novels are independent of the surrounding world and ready to fight against its pressures and uncertainties. By separating the protagonists from their environment, the novel, as the young Lukács saw, was the first genre to consider individuality one of the highest goods and to reflect on the individual's connections with the life of the community.

The novel asks whether moral ideals do or do not belong to the human world. If we assume they do, we need to understand why so many human beings fail to follow them. And, on the other hand, if moral ideals have nothing to do with our world, we must explain why their normative power seems so self-evident to virtually everybody. We need to reflect, in other words, on the difference between what human beings *ought to do* and what they *do*. The novel examines this difference with regard to *individual* compliance. It asks whether, in order to uphold ideals in a world that does not guarantee their supremacy, individuals must simply resist the world, act to change it, or concentrate on overcoming their own failings. As the young Lukács knew, the novel asks whether human beings can ever be morally reconciled with the world in which they are born, and *feel at home* in it.

Second, *novels portray individuals in different ways, as strong souls, sensitive hearts, or enigmatic psyches*. Strong souls are able to act in harmony with the moral ideal, an ideal that is very much part of their world and resonates, so to speak, outside and around them. They hear and follow it without hesitation. The characters in ancient Greek novels behave like this, and so, for the most part, do the knights-errant who populate medieval romances. Later, Richardson's Pamela and Clarissa will be examples of the *sensitive heart*: able to look inward, alert to their own tender feelings, they aspire to act in accordance with moral ideals but are not always successful. The protagonists in Renaissance and early modern novellas behave this way, as do those of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sentimental novels. However, when characters cannot gain access to their own innermost recesses, when their understanding of themselves and of moral requirements becomes blurred, they exemplify the *enigmatic psyche*. Such characters can already be found in early modern novellas like Mme de Lafayette's, but they become prevalent only much later, in Henry James, Proust, and Faulkner.

These three types can be idealized and portrayed as exemplary, as in the instances just mentioned, or they can be modified in two respects. Some novels evoke a lesser perfection: skewed souls in several chivalric

novels, hesitant hearts in the pastoral, and incautious psyches in Theodor Fontane's and Thomas Hardy's late nineteenth-century novels. Some novels go further, developing fully anti-idealist types: scoundrels instead of strong souls, cold hearts instead of sensitive ones, and wholly incomprehensible psyches rather than merely enigmatic ones.

Third, *while literary and, more generally, artistic genres are linked to the social and intellectual life of their time, they also enjoy a qualified autonomy*. They do not reflect the world in which they were made in every detail. Just as, in a given geographic area, the growth of a species of plant or flower is made possible by the ecological balance of the region as a whole rather than by a specific turn of a river or by a sudden solar eclipse, the success of a certain kind of writing is most often influenced by the general cultural climate rather than by this or that historical personality or event. The number of distinct early modern subgenres certainly has something to do with feudal society's organization: priests, friars, lords, knights, merchants, craftsmen, and peasants were each subject to specific ideals, norms, privileges, and often laws; mobility was limited—a knight could be promoted to the rank of lord of the manor, a penitent sinner could become a hermit, but usually your station in life was fixed from birth. It is not by chance, then, that from the eighteenth century onward, the gradual increase in social mobility and equality coincided with a propensity to blend the older narrative subgenres into a single, flexible genre—the modern novel. Still, while suggesting various links between the development of the novel and its historical context, this book will refrain from always attaching each subgenre to a single social group, or each work to a particular turn of social or intellectual history.

Fourth, *although individual decisions play an important role in the evolution of literature, the history of the novel does not consist in great writers relentlessly pushing the genre forward*. The great talents of the early period—Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Rabelais, Sidney, Cervantes, Mme de Lafayette, Defoe—did not create or change the genre all by themselves. Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Chaucer were superb tellers of preexisting stories; Boccaccio, Cervantes, and Sidney were stunning experimenters and inventors; Rabelais loved to play the eccentric outsider; Mme de Lafayette and Defoe honed and refined available narrative formulas. Geniuses do what they choose to do extremely well, but they do not always choose to create or transform a genre.

Since artistic and literary distinctions are approximate rather than sharply defined, at each step I propose a few *ideal types* and concentrate on a few examples, hoping to tempt the reader to discover or revisit them. I have tried to ensure that the works analyzed here are those widely recognized as some of the best achievements of the genre, but inevitably my

choices also reflect my own taste and preferences. There are important authors whose works, unfortunately, I have not been able to discuss in detail. Rather than providing a complete inventory of authors and titles, this book aims to describe the major types of novel and the forces that have shaped their history.