

# Introduction: In This World

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**T**he death of the novel, like the not unrelated deaths of God and the author, appears to be an event that is always happening; a sign of life, perhaps. This life is a metaphor, of course, a form of fiction itself, but it is also an instrument, a way of seeing. One of its virtues is that it invites us to consider both the practice and the theory of the novel, allows us to ask what novels do, and how they have been thought about over time.

We know what *a* novel is, but can we say the same about *the* novel? The definite article implies a rather reckless conceptual confidence, even when we drop an adjective into the mix: the novel, the Russian novel, the picaresque novel. We have only to attempt a definition to start thinking of exceptions to our own rule. E. M. Forster, lecturing in Cambridge on the English novel, settled for the broadest remit he could envisage: “any fictitious prose work,” adding only a stipulation of length (“over 50,000 words”).<sup>1</sup> This generous category is still too narrow, since it excludes the novel in verse (from *Don Juan* and *Eugene Onegin* to *The Golden Gate*), and we may not think length is a real issue. I would not, in theory, discount the possibility of the very brief novel. Augusto Monterroso’s one sentence tale – “when he (or she) awoke the dinosaur was still there”<sup>2</sup> – is most easily described as the shortest of short stories, but in certain readings it might well grow into a novel. Applying the same principle in reverse, Italo Calvino thought Robert Musil’s immense, unfinished *The Man without Qualities* might in some senses be too short.

These thoughts are not meant to lead us to a frivolous abandonment of classification but to a cautious awareness of what a classification is. The fact that there may be no definition of the novel that will not fail us at some point does not mean we cannot talk about novels, and indeed some classifications may help us most where they are weakest, closest to running out of persuasive steam. Wittgenstein’s thought about the “indistinct picture” is helpful here. “Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need?”<sup>3</sup> The interesting question, we might say, is not what the novel is but what work the word novel does when we use it, or what reasons we may give for using it or not.

Dictionaries are helpful here as long as we take them as starting points, first stages in a collaborative process. Here is part of what the entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster*, respectively, say a novel is:

A long fictional prose narrative . . . typically representing character and action with some degree of realism and complexity.

An invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting.

The terms are all fairly bland, of course, but they become a little stricter if we think of what they may be meant to exclude. What do we make of “realism,” “complexity,” “imaginatively”? Does “realism” mean notional fidelity to a non-fictional material world? If so, it covers many nineteenth-century novels admirably, but will not take us very far into times before or after that date. If it means “a disposition of mind,”<sup>4</sup> as J. P. Stern says, then it can comprehend all kinds of unrealistic fictions, as long as they grapple in some way with the real. Similarly, if novels are supposed to be complex in their form and content, then some very remarkable works of mock simplicity are excluded. Ironic simulations of directness may take us further into complexity than many elaborate acts of would-be direct mimesis. And what sort of writing is “imaginatively” meant to outlaw? It cannot just mean the same as the already used “invented.” Presumably the sense is something like: with the effect of enabling the reader to believe in the truth of what is not true.

Here is an example of a (very funny) novelistic negotiation with the real:

There are a set of religious, or rather moral writers, who teach that virtue is the certain road to happiness, and vice to misery, in this world. A very wholesome and comfortable doctrine, and to which we have but one objection, namely, that it is not true.

This is Henry Fielding’s narrator in the opening chapter of Book XV of *Tom Jones*. He has three more books to go, around one hundred and fifty ample pages, and by the time he ends the novel, he will have amply rewarded his virtuous hero, and consigned all his vicious characters to misery. Why would he celebrate what he sees as untruth in this way? There are many reasons, and one of them will simply be that this is a novel. Novels need readers, and readers have ideas about what they want. Why would he make life unpleasant for them, bother them with the truth? Behind this comic, opportunistic logic is another line of thought, of course. Fielding’s avoidance of the truth asks us to think about our various distances from it. It is not that he does not believe in virtue. He just cannot see any direct connection “in this world” between virtue and reward: he thinks we need a novelist and a fictional plot for that. And when he says finally of his hero and heroine that “as there are not to be found a worthier man and woman, than this fond couple, so neither can any be imagined more happy,”<sup>5</sup> we believe him, but we also

know he is talking about luck rather than moral causality. And about the work of the imagination.

Jane Austen, in many ways a disciple of Fielding as well as a sort of counter-agent to him, takes up this practice with great subtlety and wit. She pictures her readers as seeing how few pages are left in their copy of *Northanger Abbey*, and looking forward to the happy end, even though the characters themselves do not have any such opportunity. Their “anxiety . . . can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.”<sup>6</sup> “Hastening together” may make us think twice about our optimism. Austen does offer us an unqualified happy end in *Emma*, writing of “the perfect happiness of the union”<sup>7</sup> between the heroine and Mr. Knightley. But more often she likes to slip in a small remembrance of reality’s habit of darkening the picture. In *Persuasion* she reminds us that Anne Elliot is marrying a naval officer, which means that “the dread of a future war . . . could dim her sunshine,” and she has to “pay the tax of quick alarm.”<sup>8</sup> And Austen’s phrasing in *Mansfield Park*, apparently unequivocal, leaves a lot of room for readerly defections: “the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be.”<sup>9</sup> Must? Whose imperative is this? In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen describes her method with great analytic precision. Speaking of her readers in the third person she says, “I have united for their case what they must divide for mine.”<sup>10</sup> The author’s role in this view is to resolve discrepancies while allowing the readers to see, if they so choose, what the resolution costs.

**M**any novels, ironically or not, modify reality for the sake of their readers’ happiness, but many also proceed in the opposite direction. For every utopia there is a dystopia waiting somewhere. This second direction often feels more truthful, because the truth is indeed often disappointing, but it is still a modification, a stylization. A fine passage in Nabokov’s *Pnin* offers an intriguing counterpart to Fielding’s concession to the wholesome doctrine. Nabokov’s narrator, having set up his hero for an unfortunate adventure – he is on the wrong train, he will arrive too late for the lecture he is supposed to give – rescues him from it completely, and then complains about the way things have turned out. The result is a brilliant parody of what we often (want to) think realism is:

Some people – and I am one of them – hate happy ends. We feel cheated. Harm is the norm. Doom should not jam. The avalanche stopping in its tracks a few feet above the cowering village behaves not only unnaturally but unethically. Had I been reading about this mild old man, instead of writing about him, I would have preferred him to discover, upon his arrival to Cremona, that his lecture was not this Friday but the next. Actually, however, he not only arrived safely but was in time for dinner.<sup>11</sup>

*Don Quixote* is full of games with what is supposed to be reality, and none is more comically, or in a way more desperately haunting than the so-called adventure of the lions. After so many exploits that are cruel jokes or rest on extravagant misperceptions, Cervantes provides Quixote with all the appurtenances of a real adventure, only to take them away again on the strangest of principles: in reality, they would not have to be there.

Quixote and Sancho encounter a man driving a wagon with caged lions on it. The lions have been sent from Oran as presents for the king of Spain. Quixote asks if they are big, and the man says they are the biggest lions ever brought from Africa; and they are hungry because they have not eaten all day. This is music to Quixote's ears, and he asks the man to open the cages so that he can fight the lions. After much discussion the man agrees to do this. Quixote dismounts, and stands facing the cages, armed only with sword and shield. The narrator inserts a rhapsodic declaration of praise for Quixote's valor at this point, attributing it to "the author of this true history."<sup>12</sup> Quixote is a "paragon of all the brave men in the world... the glory and honor of all Spanish knights," a "most valiant Manchegan."<sup>13</sup> We read this for what it is, a strategic delaying of the comic conclusion of the exploit, but we do note that, however crazy Quixote is in taking on the lions, he is not imagining them, or bending reality in any way, so that his courage, even if it is reckless and pointless, is entirely genuine.

The driver opens the first cage, that of the male lion "of extraordinary size and fearsome and hideous aspect."<sup>14</sup> The lion stretches and yawns, licks his paws and washes his face. He then puts his head out of the cage, and looks around "with eyes like coals, a sight and a vision that could frighten temerity itself."<sup>15</sup> Quixote waits attentively. The narrator decides to allegorize (and moralize) his account of what happens next:

These are the extremes to which Don Quixote's unprecedented madness took him. But the magnanimous lion, more courteous than arrogant, took no notice of either childishness or bravado, and after looking in both directions... he turned his back, and showed his hindquarters to Don Quixote, and with great placidity and calm went back inside the cage.<sup>16</sup>

Quixote asks the driver to hit the lion and make him come out, but the man won't do it. It's too dangerous, he says, and Quixote should not "tempt fortune a second time."<sup>17</sup> The nonadventure, the real adventure that refused to be one, is over.

The narrator's anthropomorphizing of the lion – as if the courtly creature of the wild belonged to a fable about comparative civilizations, or as if the narrator himself could not resist a comment on the way supposed acts of chivalry cause unnecessary disruptions of a peaceable world – blinds us for a moment to what is going on. Quixote has faced a hungry lion and... the lion has turned away. This is where the chivalric romance wakes up and finds it was a novel all along. The lion

is a surrogate for unarranged reality. It could just as easily have mauled Quixote as ignored him. Reality in this view is not hostile to human desire, just seriously indifferent to it, random recalcitrance itself. This is how the world, the pictured reality, so often appears in novels. It does not oppose desire, it just gets in the way. It does not end happily, it does not end at all. It fails to provide a proper epic opponent, a Hector for every Achilles; and it mangles the dream logic of the romance, where all promises, including promises of nightmare, are religiously kept.

**G**eorg Lukács seems to be speaking a very different language when he says, “The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God,” and “Dostoevsky did not write novels,”<sup>18</sup> but the distance may not be as great as it looks. Cervantes and the dictionaries do leave God out of the picture, and suggest that the worlds of the novel (the one it lives in and the one it presents) are zones of contingency, places where Providence has no jurisdiction. This is not true of all novels – nothing is true of all novels – but it is true of huge numbers of them, from *The Tale of Genji* to *The Portrait of a Lady*. Two important assumptions can be found at the heart of these godless works: that the world is what it is, and that reality, whether social, material, political, or psychological, is by its nature resistant to human wishes. Their model would be a form of probability, we might say, tinged with despair. Their maxim is not that “harm is the norm” but that harm can never be securely banished. This would be the “meaning” of the deaths of Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary: sad, appropriate, and plausible, but no solution to any kind of problem. In a different register, this is also the “meaning” of the last sentence of *Middlemarch*:

But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.<sup>19</sup>

“Incalculably,” “partly,” and “half” are a little worrying, but we can still, if we wish, believe in “the growing good of the world,” and trust that “things are not so ill with [us] as they might have been.” The novel, meanwhile, is unmistakably confessing its failure to have definitively shown us any such thing.

This swath of “realistic” works makes a large contribution to our sense of what a novel is, but it does not delimit it. We can understand Lukács’s claim about Dostoevsky as a trope rather than an edict, as a hyperbolic suggestion that the modern novel is not what the older novel was. Dostoevsky wrote about “the new world,” Lukács said. We might think he resurrected the old world, or discovered its secret modernity, but the effect would be the same. Most of his characters believe they have abandoned God rather than the other way around. They got rid of Him because He does not exist. Dostoevsky the novelist (as distinct from Dostoevsky

the person) does not say they are wrong, only that they may be missing a whole dimension of life. The secular form of this shifted interest, as we find it in Conrad and Kafka, is the replacement of the implied question the novel is asking. The great nineteenth-century novels sought our assent, they said the world is like this, is it not? The great twentieth-century novels – and we can include the works of Proust, Woolf, Mann, and others in this grouping – ask us to speculate and report on our findings. They say, what if the world were like this? The twentieth century was in this sense much closer to the eighteenth than to the nineteenth.

Another lesson we can take from Lukács is that the epic of a world abandoned by God is still an epic: the subtitle of his book refers to “the forms,” in the plural, “of great epic literature.” The categories can both overlap and exclude each other, depending on our particular critical needs. And this is where we must think a little about our words. The word *novel* comes from the French *nouvelle*, originally a piece of news, and then a shortish fiction. A *novella* ought perhaps linguistically to have been a short novel, but turns out to mean a long short story, such are the travels of usage. The word for novel in French (and in Russian) is *roman*, which also means *romance*. The Italian grouping is the same: *romanzo*. These differences are not a problem, they are opportunities for thought, but they do mean that you have to speak English to make firm distinctions between romances and novels – to separate (as I did earlier in this essay) fantastic late medieval fictions from works that stay close to the mundane, or to focus (as many theories of American literature do) on visions of possibility rather than defeats by the way things are. And conversely, to say in French that an action is like something out of a novel is much closer to calling it a fairy-tale than saying it resembles a moment in *La Princesse de Clèves*. Dictionary relatives for *roman* include dream, utopia, phantasmagoria, and chimera. English-speaking habits encourage distinctions; French ones keep reminding us that fiction is fiction. It is good to remember both that borders exist and that they can fade.

Keeping both possibilities in mind, I want to suggest that if all fictions remain caught up in the facts they elude or seek to mirror, novels do this in a concentrated way. They may correct, invert, or replace the real or go out of their way to reproduce its minute details but the engagement with the missing or magnified referent will always be a part of the reader’s experience. This is as true of the novels of Ursula Le Guin as those of Tolstoy. The engagement can be obvious or all but unnoticed; it is only when it is absent that we may want to start thinking of another descriptive term. And we need to remember precisely what Anglo-American pragmatism so often wants us to forget: that reality includes fears, hopes, desires, and recurring nightmares as well as material objects. I realize I am coming close to Forster’s capacious nondefinition, but perhaps some of my examples will have reduced the vagueness of the profile. Fielding’s “in this world” is also a good reminder of our location. And we may want to find aspects of the novel, to borrow

Forster's term, in epics and romances and fairy-tales, just as many novels will have elements of those other genres in them, too.

**T**he essays in this volume of *Dædalus* do not survey or summarize the fate of the novel, but they do offer remarkable insights into the behavior of a versatile literary form, glimpses of where and what it has been and where it may go. We learn from Simon Goldhill that the novel is much older than scholars used to think; from Jonathan Greenberg that a recent attempt not to write a novel (or to write a nonnovel) happily failed in the end. Nancy Armstrong and Wai Chee Dimock trace in different ways the intriguing shift of a dominant pattern in novels: from those that celebrate the resourceful individual to those that attend closely to our traumas and disabilities. Sharon Cameron and Garrett Stewart follow the movements of language in individual novels to startling conclusions: the death of value and the inescapability of word-play, even when no one seems to be dying or playing. Rey Chow and Austin Sarfan show us surprising connections between the novel and the television serial, and Eric Hayot wonders whether video games, like many novels, are condemned to their violent happy ends. Daphne Brooks shows how a novel can become an opera that in turn begets an unfinished cultural narrative full of racial mythologies. Ruth Yeazell reports and reflects on many years of reading the novels of Henry James with undergraduate students, showing how certain imaginations of life prolong themselves in lived reality, and Robyn Creswell, bringing us up to date, or at least to this side of the events in Tahrir Square, shows how the novel in Arabic uses poetry as its foil and secret companion. For Franco Moretti, the theory of the novel diverges in novelistic ways from the theory of tragedy, and Lorrie Moore, a novelist and a short story writer, suggests that the novel, however faithful it tries to be to the etymology of its name, cannot shake off its sense of history, and does not really try. The reappearances of certain writers in these essays, especially Henry James and Richard Powers, are accidents in the sense that they were not part of any original editorial plan, but they are also signs, representative indications of how novelists think inside their novels. It was Henry James who, one hundred and twenty-one years ago, dared to wonder why anyone would want to bother with, or be bothered by, fictitious works of any kind, "mere unsupported and unguaranteed history, the *inexpensive* thing, written in the air, the record of what, in any particular case, has *not* been."<sup>20</sup>

#### FURTHER READING

- Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Cary Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
- Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- Margaret Doody, *The True History of the Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).
- René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).
- Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013).
- Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971).
- Guido Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017).
- Michael McKeon, *Origins of the English Novel, 1600 – 1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
- Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture* and *Volume 2: Forms and Themes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Augusto Monterroso, *Complete Works and Other Stories*, trans. Edith Grossman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 42.
- <sup>3</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 34.
- <sup>4</sup> J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 52.



- <sup>5</sup> Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* (Harmondsworth, United Kingdom: Penguin, 1966), 874.
- <sup>6</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 250.
- <sup>7</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 484.
- <sup>8</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, 273.
- <sup>9</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 473.
- <sup>10</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, 247.
- <sup>11</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation of a Beheading* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 25–26.
- <sup>12</sup> Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Ecco, 2003), 563.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, 564.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1971), 88, 152.
- <sup>19</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 613.
- <sup>20</sup> Henry James, “The Future of the Novel,” in *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Morris Shapira (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 181.